
Neal McLeod, ed. *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2014. Vi, 416pp.

<http://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Catalog/mcleod-n.shtml>

There is poetic justice, to use a clichéd phrase, in the fact that just as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was beginning its closing events in Ottawa, blocks away on the campus of the University of Ottawa, *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, edited by Neal McLeod, was awarded the 2014 ACQL Gabrielle Roy Prize for excellence in English language Canadian criticism. While the border that divides Canada from the United States has been rightly described by Thomas King as “a line from someone else’s imagination” (Rooke 72), as a settler woman who has written about Indigenous literatures for close to twenty years, the reality is that the 49th parallel has led to false divisions between Indigenous literatures and cultures south and north of the border; some tribes literally straddle the border. Despite this, and while I am uncomfortable with the tendency to categorize Indigenous texts based on a Western version of imposed nationalism, I remain impressed by the thoughtful and innovative work done by writers situated on the north side of that artificial line, work that all too often get overlooked in American discussions of Indigenous literatures. For instance, while *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary Indian American Poetry* (2003) makes a compelling case for the need to rethink poetry as traditionally defined through the lens of Western genres, it does not enact the generic diversity or present the depth and breadth of perspectives that are integral to *Indigenous Poetics*. *Indigenous Poetics* builds upon a foundation of strong connections between writers and scholars—many of whom work in both worlds—who trust each other and listen attentively in order to find ways to articulate individually and collectively their visions of how and what an Indigenous poetics might look like. As with *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature* (1993), a book that I still return to regularly for its incisive and elegant exploration of Indigenous literatures, *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* promises to radically shift approaches to and understandings of Aboriginal poetries.

This book began, as McLeod explains in his “Preface” as a panel at the Ogamas Aboriginal Festival in Brandon, where the discussion of three poets—Louise Halfe, Randy Lundy, and Duncan Mercredi—provided the grounding for both a workshop on Indigenous poetics and the subsequent monograph which defies, in so many ways, the strictures of academic publication by incorporating a deeply compelling array of contributions that span four main sections: “The Poetics of Memory;” “The Poetics of Place;” “The Poetics of Performance,” and “The Poetics of Medicine.” As McLeod explains in his introduction, these sections reflect “an organic and contextualized understanding of Indigenous poetics” that is grounded in Indigenous beliefs and practices rather than relying on the “Anglo-mônîyâw interpretive matrix” (3). Paradoxically, the collection is comprised of essays, stories, poems, and interviews with contemporary Native writers that at first glance appear decidedly scholarly, complete with Notes and Bibliographies. Ultimately, however, the collection resists such strictures in form and theme through its inclusiveness by encouraging readers to look beyond the notion of a “text” and instead employ the Cree concept of aniskwâcimopicikêwin, which as McLeod

explains, means “the process of connecting stories together” to recognize the “constant play between orality” (8) and the works on the page, which are never fully represented when treated statically. As a result, I found myself repeatedly reading sections of this book out loud in an effort to experience the sheer beauty of the poems that are included and in order to relish the range of viewpoints and forms of expression in the collection.

Divided into four sections that attain balance by facilitating a constant flow between and among them, *Indigenous Poetics* models for readers, Native and non-Native, the diversity and specificity of this exciting field. The collection tangibly demonstrates the need to be attentive to the particular nuances of individual tribal languages, spoken and written, and the importance of acknowledging and understanding tribal storytelling practices, both historical and contemporary. In addition, the collection makes a compelling case for engaging with Indigenous pictographs and classical narratives, and recognizing that Indigenous poetics are shaped by carefully crafted and sustained relationships to space and place. As part of the collection’s mandate, McLeod includes several essays in the “Poetics of Performance” section that thoughtfully explore the intersection of Indigenous and dub poetics in Canada, developing the concept of “sound identities” and examining how Native and Caribbean Canadian poets employ precise and often shared language practices to “recover and reconstitute” their own distinctive voices (Gingell 273). The result is a book that enables readers to engage with issues thematically and couples creative and scholarly perspectives to encourage sustained conversations among and beyond the pages of this single monograph.

The depth and breadth of *Indigenous Poetics* is remarkable and a testament to the energy devoted to this project by the participants in the initial workshop, the editor, and Wilfred Laurier University Press. The book is comprised of longer essays by established and emerging Indigenous and settler scholars and creative writers, including Warren Cariou, Sam McKegney, Alyce Johnson, Susan Gingell, Jesse Rae Archibald-Barber, Tasha Beeds, Michèle Lacombe, Leanne Simpson, Gail McKay, David Newhouse, Lesley Belleau, Neal McLeod, and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, along with shorter pieces by contemporary poets including Marilyn Dumont, Daniel David Moses, Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy, Rosanna Deerchild, Lillian Allen, Lee Maracle, Gregory Scofield, Joanne Arnott, Duncan Mercredi, Janet Rogers, and Lindsay “Eekwol” Knight. Finally, the collection offers interviews with three key Indigenous poets, the late Marvin Francis, Armand Garnet Ruffo, and Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm that powerfully convey how these writers employ playful language to explore serious subjects with humour and joy. The essays, poems, and interviews often are infused with Indigenous words and phrases, and while Cree dominates, the movement between and among Indigenous and colonial languages enacts the flexibility and ingenuity that is integral to the spoken and written words of these scholars and writers who so skilfully “re-sound identities for themselves and their people” (Gingell 280).

The result is a collection that stories and sings its way into readers’ hearts and minds, offering an affective experience that is also rigorously intellectual. As Duncan Mercredi reminds readers at the end of his essay, part of the task of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been to gather “stories from the survivors of the residential school

experiment of indoctrination” (21). Those “emotional, gut-wrenching stories...were told in such a way that they would remain embedded in the memories of those hearing them for the first time. They were poetic” (21). Mercredi stresses the importance of retaining the power of these narratives through the poetic and urges readers to keep the “heart of the story” (21) alive by using Indigenous languages and cultivating oral traditions that put forward Native perspectives in all of their complexities. *Indigenous Poetics* enacts Mercredi’s call to action by bringing the aesthetic and political together into a single volume that is worth savouring and returning to, again and again.

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Works Cited

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