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**Cathy Covell Waegner, ed. *Mediating Indianness*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015.**

<http://msupress.org/books/book/?id=50-1D0-3473#.Ve5Ups4zDOo>

This collection grows out of a four-panel session at MESEA – The Society for **M**ulti-**E**thnic **S**tudies: **E**urope and the **A**mericas biennial conference held in Barcelona in 2012. Its goal is “to offer fresh insights into interpretation of pertinent cultural and historical phenomena, drawing from both sides of the Atlantic” (x). As the preface explains, “The unusual project team combines (Native) American and European (German, British, Romanian) scholars, an interdisciplinary group of both senior and junior academics from the fields of cultural and literary studies, anthropology, rhetoric, and creative writing” (x). The collection coheres around its eponymous idea of mediation, albeit loosely. The idea of mediation recurs throughout, and certainly we can recognize that Indianness as applies to the indigenous peoples of the Americas represents a concept introduced through contact and reinforced through colonialism that has never existed outside of multiple layers of mediation. In as much as this is true, the essays in this collection, indeed all of Native American Studies, could be read through the discourse of mediation, as cosmopolitan critics have been noting for years. This cosmopolitan thread certainly runs throughout the majority of the essays in this collection, though the term cosmopolitan remains largely absent. This is not a critique per se; it is clear that many of the authors in this collection opt out of cosmopolitanism as a structuring force in their work—though the absence of a discussion as to why seems notable for the collection as a whole. The unifying theme of mediation does feel a bit forced at times, shoehorned into introductions and conclusions but disappeared in the body of certain essays. These moments are noticeable, but they don’t entirely detract from the quality of all of those essays.

The scope of the subjects and disciplinary approaches in this collection is impressive, ranging from history, sculpture, biography, literature, postmodernism, orthography, hip-hop, film, photography, dance, ceremony, drama, painting, poetry, mixed genre artists, and documentary. Approaches favor the humanities, but also encompass the social sciences. If this striking breadth were not enough, the collection concludes with a free-form epistolary round table replied to by Gerald Vizenor. This concluding work fits the bill particularly considering the ways that Vizenor (who the preface calls “a grandmaster of Native American studies” and to whom the collection is dedicated) informs so many of the pieces herein (xi).

Billy J. Stratton’s essay, “You Have Liberty to Return to Your Own Country: Tecumseh, Myth, and the Rhetoric of Native Sovereignty,” begins the collection, and it does so on a strong note. This essay ostensibly studies a pair of sculptures depicting the death of Shawnee leader Tecumseh. However, its primary focus is in fact the “ways in which native American historical experience has been instrumentalized in the construction of national identity” (3). This essay examines a variety of historical records and documents to demonstrate the specific ways that the United States’ settler narratives wield the images of Native leaders to signify “not only the tragic, yet inevitable, vanquishing of native American peoples but also the broader conquest of the North American

wilderness” (3). This thesis, of course, is not groundbreaking; the equation of Native people with the land reverberates throughout the US’s rhetorical traditions and all scholars of Native American Studies understand that. However, Stratton’s writing is unrelenting on this front, refusing to let the settler state off the hook not only for its egregious crimes of the past but also for its failure to acknowledge the violence of itself in the past and present, the denial that those crimes of the past continue to the present. Stratton calls this a “farce [that] is only made possible by an American public’s unwillingness to acknowledge the violence and traumatic nature of collective history” (6). In contrast to such a farce, and alongside the ways it has concretized itself within American consciousness, Stratton examines the recorded words of Tecumseh himself, demonstrating that they “can be seen as efforts to articulate claims of tribal sovereignty, while also serving as some of the earliest vehicles of decolonization” (11). Stratton’s claims of primacy notwithstanding (and this claim does seem to require qualification), the wresting of the Shawnee leader’s words from the settler project stands out as an important anticolonial move. Stratton concludes, “The reclamation of native historical figures such as Tecumseh from the status of instrumental colonial signifier demands a renewed approach to historical narrative and the posting of alternate lines of critical inquiry” (20). Stratton notes that Native claims have often faced a greater scrutiny than those of settlers and their histories, which are far more likely to be taken at face value. Stratton urges an equal questioning of those settler narratives, including the “primary documents of American colonial history” (21). Stratton’s essay represents what this collection does best: it offers readings that seem to be interdisciplinary, but in fact demonstrate how disciplinary boundaries have never held up; it offers a new mode of reading across those supposed boundaries, of mediating them, I suppose, but more in simply ignoring them. These moments that cut across fence lines matter-of-factly rather than reactively offer Native American Studies as a series of intellectual acts that exist with or without colonial modes of framing.

A. Robert Lee’s pair of short essays, which are best read together as a linked dyad, take the form of creative meditations on the works they address, the fiction of Stephen Graham Jones and, to a lesser extent, D.L. Birchfield in the first, and Vizenor’s latest novel, *Blue Ravens*, in the second. Vizenor inspired as ever, Lee’s essays truck in postmodernism as a descriptive term for the works he addresses. We can think of Vizenor’s 1989 edited collection *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Novels* as a forerunner of such analyses. There, Vizenor posits, “Postmodernism liberates imagination and widens the audiences for tribal literatures, this new criticism rouses a comic world view, narrative discourse and language games on the past” (6). For Vizenor, postmodernism offers an alternative not only to literary or artistic modernism, but also to a brand of modernity driven by social science discourses that posit the indigenous as a form of premodern other. Vizenor contends, “The instrumental language of the social sciences are tragic or *hypotragic* modes that withhold communal discourse” (9). Vizenor goes on to baldly assert, “the trickster is postmodern” (9). Expanding such an idea places indigenous narrative traditions (by which I mean narrative modes stretching far into the past and continuing through the present and into the future, altered however they might be altered by their communities in the process of existing) as postmodern before that term came into being. Lee, then, rides Vizenor’s reclamation to

the work of Jones and Birchfield. Certainly, both authors craft playful narratives that mock reader expectations of linearity and gravity. But, of course, postmodernism has proven notoriously difficult to define, and perhaps nothing is less postmodern than identified texts that present themselves as “Native American literature” (*Ledfeather*, *The Bird is Gone: A Manifesto*, and *The Fast Red Road: A Plainsong*) to his “genre fiction” (*It Came from Del Rio*, *Zombie Bake Off*, and the utterly masterful *Demon Theory*, among others). Lee’s move in bringing back postmodernism, a strutting body we have largely moved on from, works to canonize the under-read authors. Birchfield’s *Field of Honor*, for example, needs to be read alongside *Catch-22* and *M.A.S.H.* It also must be read alongside *First Blood* and its novelistic and filmic spin-offs starring their “mixedblood” Native protagonist John Rambo (his father is Diné). The melding of popular culture influences, popular film and music as well as postmodern literary classics establishes each of these authors as part of the postmodern continuum.

Returning to the connection between trickster and postmodernism, Vizenor asserts “Silence and separation...are the antitheses of trickster discourse” (9). Trickster stories, operating in a comic mode, emphasize such connections as Jones’s and Birchfield’s texts do, connections between and across genres, connections of “high” and “low” art, of literature and pop culture. Moreover, they work against silence, the tragic vanished Indian stereotype, sure, but also the silencing of stories by Native authors that comes in readers’ expectations that they keep replicating the homing plots of the Native American Renaissance. Lee’s move from there into his second essay reveals the interconnection of his pieces, as he slyly reminds the reader that Vizenor, perhaps the most staunch advocate for the recognition of Native literature as postmodern, has placed his latest novel within a modernist milieu, further connecting the movements and modes across time and space, connecting Anishinaabe characters with the land of their colonial ancestors, another bridge between the seemingly disparate we will revisit in this review’s conclusion.

The collection moves from these interesting pieces to a string of others. Ellen Cushman’s examination of Cherokee writing serves both as an introductory history of Sequoia’s development thereof as well as the values and worldviews that the language embeds within itself. Cushman argues that “the instrumentality of the writing system itself acts as a decolonial rhetoric” (103). Her claims are bold, perhaps overly sweeping, but certainly worthy of being addressed by other scholars of the language (an ongoing robust engagement that is itself a decolonial statement). Chris LaLonde presents yet another very strong essay in his examination of hip-hop artist Quese IMC’s three-album oeuvre. LaLonde deftly weaves textual examination of song lyrics with analyses of rhythm, musical allusions and subversions in Quese’s choice and use of samples, and expansion of his music into film and art. In a refreshing move reminiscent of Cushman’s piece, LaLonde offers his essay with a brief introduction to his subject but without any need to justify it as important or worthy of academic pursuit. LaLonde’s essay, which begins with and incorporates many references to Native film, including the work of Sterlin Harjo serves as a well-placed transition to a series of essays engaging other films: Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* as examined by Christine Plicht and Chris Eyre’s movies, by Ludmila Martanovschi—each a tangible addition to the scholarship of these works.

Kimberly Blaeser offers a truly outstanding article, “Refraction and Helio-tropes: Native Photography and Visions of Light.” She begins with a brief survey of the ways that Native people have been written out of their contemporaneous presents in sepia-toned images of disappearing and victimry, what Blaeser terms “time-bound, romantic stereotypes of primitive warrior, noble savage, tragic half-breed...vanishing Indian (154). Building off of Chanette Romero’s concept of “visual sovereignty” (which Romero wields in relation to Victor Masayesva’s photography—also studied by Blaeser in this essay), Blaeser offers a diachronic reading of Native people *in* photographs as well as Native people taking them, reading acts of survivance not only into the latter but also the former. As both a scholar and a practitioner of photography, Blaeser renders her essay even stronger by including her own photography and artistic decision making. We see a similar attention to the visual in Kerstin Schmidt’s piece on Minda Martin’s documentary film *Free Land*. Schmidt focuses on a series of tropes within this film as emblemized by particular visual moments—an almost photographic sensibility in addressing moving pictures. A pair of essays examine Eric Gansworth’s generally under-studied work, Nicholle Dragone’s focuses on his dramas, while John Purdy’s devotes attention across Gansworth’s multi-genre oeuvre. Sally McBeth’s essay examining the Nuche (or Northern Ute) Bear Dances seems somewhat out of place not for its quality but only for its discipline, as the only anthropological piece in the collection.

About two-thirds of the way through the text, the reader encounters the Interlude, which comes in the form of a pair of creative pieces by Evaline Zuni Lucero and Jane Haladay. These works engage on a meta-conference level, speaking to the experiences of their respective authors (in concert) during, as well as in the enviroing time of the MESEA conference. Befitting an interlude, they serve as a break in the collection, but also as a reward for those who have read it, making many allusions to the essays that have come before as well as the issues including therein (both muse upon Columbus’s memorialization throughout the conference’s site of Barcelona, for example).

The collection concludes with a free-wheeling “two-year creative roundtable discussion” carried out via email between Blaeser, Haladay, Gordon Henry Jr., Molly McGlennen, and Jesse Peters, collectively labeling themselves members of the “Crow Commons.” Haladay, or perhaps her roundtable persona Jane explains, “we intend to rework methods that normally define conference panels by delivering an exposition of our exchanges leading up to the conference and our creative responses to these conversations; we foresee our roundtable as an evolving engagement with Anishinaabe poets in culturally specific formations of knowledge-building” (282). Molly continues, “We imagine the theory of the cultural commons and literary/ personal filiations/ affiliations to be our vision for a new kind of conferencing that is dynamic, collaborative, ongoing, teasing, personal, intellectual, and resonant with patterns in and the motion of the natural world” (282). No doubt there are those who will roll their eyes as such a structure, certain that this approach must be lacking in academic rigor (and probably at its core some new-agey drivel unbecoming intellectual pursuits). On the contrary, this collective work represents the traditional approach of the essay as Montaigne imagined it, a meditation on a theme by which the authors work through a particular issue: connection in literature (What does that look like? In what forms does it come? What and how does it mean to different

people?) As such, this essay does not seek a thesis, but rather riffs off of hypotheses and experiences. To conclude, Vizenor responds to the Crow Commons in prose and verse, drawing parallels between this collective and Anishinaabe stories of crows as well as between his writing, Anishinaabe narratives, and Haiku. This last piece teases a narrative thread of seemingly unlikely connections represented throughout these essays and works, as throughout the 2012 MESEA conference and the shared narratives leading up to and surrounding it, connections that stretch across continents and centuries as well as across genres and disciplines.

This collection lacks an index, demonstrating its participation in an unfortunate trend among some edited collections. We understand that such end pieces are expensive to produce, either in terms of the money or manpower it takes to do them well, but they are also invaluable addenda for academic research. Moreover, just as some of the essays integrate the framing concept of mediation more thoroughly than some others, it is also safe to say that some of the essays are significantly stronger than others. The overall quality is very good, but a small few seem like the work of scholars who are very new to Native American Studies, unengaged or unfamiliar with the canon of work in the field. That said, the majority of the pieces are quite strong. Indeed, despite the collection's shortcomings, one nonetheless appreciates its daring and scope. The essays demonstrate the diversity of Native American Studies as a field, and is one of few collections that reflects the breadth of work engaged in by its scholars.

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### **Works Cited**

- Vizenor, Gerald. *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Novels*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989.
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