
Geoff Hamilton. *A New Continent of Liberty: Eunomia in Native American Literature from Occom to Erdrich*. University of Virginia Press, 2019. 207 pp. ISBN: 9780813942452
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The critical framework that Geoff Hamilton sets up in the opening pages of his monograph, *A New Continent of Liberty* is an interesting one, from a heuristic standpoint. In “eunomia,” the Greek concept of an ideal, ecologically-balanced fusion of human law and natural/divine law, Hamilton puts forward a concept that allows him to chart two parallel literary histories—one “Indigenous” (comprised of major—i.e. anthologized—Native American writers from the past 200 years) and the other “Euro-American” (reflecting a conventional, white male canon of American literature). Hamilton’s sympathies here are quite clear. The Euro-American story is a familiar narrative of declension, where the American ideological commitment to “autonomy” (one might substitute here the idea of white male, liberal subjectivity) gradually disintegrates as it reveals its inability to manage its own contradictions. The parallel Indigenous literary history records a process of renewal in the wake of colonialism, culminating in a present moment where Native American writers have been able to re-assert a political, ecological, and spiritual vision that balances individual and collective needs. I realize that this overview description makes Hamilton’s book sound somewhat schematic. That is because it is, indeed, rather schematic. But there is value in this approach. Ultimately, what *A New Continent of Liberty* is trying to do is find a meaningful point of contact through which one might rescript a new, comprehensive “American” literary history, one that more accurately reflects the totality of voices that comprise it. In doing so, of course, Hamilton remains committed to a fairly conventional model of what constitutes literary history itself (the study of “major” authors and texts, tracing thematic through-lines across time with modest historical contextualization, etc.). This is the literary history of the undergraduate survey classroom, in other words. Recognizing those parameters allows readers to appreciate what Hamilton is able to achieve in the book (which does strike me as pedagogically useful in a number of ways) without being unduly critical of its tendency to tread rather lightly across other critical conversations.

The introduction to *A New Continent of Liberty* promises an account of the increasing pathologization and “dysnomia” in what other critics might label “settler colonial” literature and a “revitalized understanding of eunomia” in Indigenous writing. The bulk of Hamilton’s work seeks to illuminate this contrast through the analytical pairings of texts. In a series of chapters, Hamilton juxtaposes Thomas Jefferson and Samson Occom; Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Apess; Mark Twain and Sarah Winnemucca; Ernest Hemingway and Zitkala-Ša; Joseph Heller and N. Scott Momaday; and Don DeLillo, Louise Erdrich, and Gerald Vizenor. As one might imagine, some of these pairings allow for more detailed and specific comparative analysis than others. While Hamilton’s readings in Chapter 1 don’t break much significant new ground in their discrete discussions of texts, for example, it is useful to see Jefferson’s deployment of eighteenth-century aesthetic categories to support his political ideology (in *Notes on the State of Virginia*) read against Samson Occom’s challenging negotiation of the tensions between Indigenous communal integrity and the colonial order in his own writings. There are some arresting moments in this chapter, such as the point when Hamilton contrasts Occom’s subtly

subversive archiving of Algonquian words with Jefferson's very different type of imaginative taxonomy (one can imagine deploying this contrast to great effect in the classroom.) Hamilton's distinction between the detached "specular power" implied in Emerson's famous transparent eyeball trope and the critical-historical vision Apess presents in his "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man" is a similarly provocative and generative moment (47). At other times, though, the pairings developed in the book feel thinner, leading to chapters that read more like discrete reflections on texts than integrated analyses. The contrast between Twain and Winnemucca, for example, ultimately boils down to a distinction between Huck Finn's individualistic commitment to negative liberty and a Paiute emphasis on collective autonomy and integrity. The readings in this case come across as valid, then, but the payoff of the comparative argument remains fairly limited and generalized. In some other cases, one wishes that Hamilton had considered incorporating supplemental frameworks and critical conversations to help deepen the connections he establishes. In reading the discussion of Hemingway and Zitkala-Ša (which focuses attention on each writer's treatment of the impact of trauma), for example, I found myself wondering if a more developed discussion of contrasts between settler colonial and Indigenous *modernisms* (a subject of a fair amount of recent scholarship) might further enrich the story of *dysnomia* vs. *eunomia* driving the book. Perhaps making moves of this kind would have transformed this into a different kind of monograph and diluted the clear through-line around which Hamilton has structured his mediation. But I think the benefits of that type of complication of the argument would have outweighed the risks.

In the end, Hamilton argues that one of his major goals in writing *A New Continent of Liberty* was to cultivate increased dialogue regarding the distinctions between Euro-American and Indigenous "conceptions of autonomy" (179). In the introduction, he notes that he prefers that term "autonomy" to "sovereignty," viewing the former as both having an older pedigree and also better conveying the idea that "self-rule," in its most ideal form, entails the idea that the individual and communal self is "interwoven with the earth that sustains it" (5). What comments like this reveal, of course, is that co-existing with the literary historical argument of this book is a deeper political and philosophical one, which is much more congruent with the decolonial thrust of contemporary Indigenous studies scholarship than might first appear to be the case. Once or twice in the book, Hamilton mentions in passing that he is interested in developing a "dialectical framework for understanding American literary history" (2). The subtext of his overall literary historical argument supports this, as ultimately Hamilton seems to be presenting an Indigenous *nomos* (or, normative universe) as the type of antithetical ideology needed to sublimate and transform settler society to create a balanced and shared eunomic order. What the readings contained in the book also reveal, however (perhaps ironically at times), is that dialectical criticism must always wrestle with the danger of overgeneralization, and that dialectical transformation requires more than the mere juxtaposition of contradictions. In this regard, I find myself compelled by Hamilton's larger project, but also wondering if the conventional structures of literary history through which he is advancing it here end up being more restrictive than he would ultimately like. The fact that Hamilton ends his book by holding up Gerald Vizenor's particularly fluid (and dialectical) imagination as an example of how we might approach the

reformulation of the concept of self-rule suggests to me that he is aware, himself, of the need to develop new critical forms to carry on with the work he has ably begun.

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