

REVIEW ESSAY

Another Indian Looking Back

A Review Essay on Recent American Indian Poetry

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In a poem late in Sara Littlecrow-Russell's *The Secret Powers of Naming*, the speaker (implicitly the poet), dressed up for work, takes a lunch break. She sees a homeless man and gives him her Diet Coke money, but she doesn't "want to look at him." And "He doesn't want to look at me either." Or at least, so she supposes. Then she explains, in the poem's closing words, that "Neither of us wants to see another Indian looking back" (68). What can or dare an Indian or an Indian poet see, or want to see, or fear to see in the mirroring gaze of another Indian or of another Indian poet? Littlecrow-Russell, an Ojibwe and, as a young lawyer, a self-confessed new admittee to what she calls the "Sue Tribe" (61), fears seeing "Indian ruins" (5), "Americanus Worthless" (6). She also fears not seeing Indian ruins. She has something to lose, and she supposes that the homeless man, no matter how worthless in the eyes of others and even, to a degree, in her own shamed eyes, still has enough pride to feel his failure lit up by her lawyerly, lipsticked, and "starched white" (68) reflection. But even as she denies looking and spoofs her fear of looking, she must have looked, or she wouldn't see what she writes about. And she must have wanted to look.

Especially when, like Littlecrow-Russell, you are away from home and stumble on an unexpected reflection, then wanting to look and not wanting to look describe poles of possibility for Indian thinking, Indian vision, Indian poetry. Some poets, like Sherman Alexie and Adrian C. Louis, gaze steadily at the degradations of Indian life, mediating degradation with affection and humor. Others, such as

Simon Ortiz or Joy Harjo, gaze at the degradations but build on them to point their gaze at Indian people in other ways. Still others, like Jim Barnes, Carter Revard, and Louise Erdrich, gaze at Indians but gaze as variously in less specifically Indian directions. Yet more Indian poets, such as Luci Tapahonso and Kimberly Blaeser, fasten their eyes on Indians but without staring at suffering and degradation so much as they look lyrically, in calmly celebratory ways, at family and emotional connections and continuities.

In *National Monuments*, Heid E. Erdrich (Ojibwe), the most conspicuously literary and allusive of the poets considered here, ricochets many of her poems off other texts, whether articles from the daily news or earlier poets (national monuments, of a sort) from Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens to William Carlos Williams. In one series of poems, she spins variations on Williams's "To Elsie," the poem that famously begins "The pure products of America / go crazy" and then settles on Elsie, Williams's fifteen-year-old servant:

marriage
perhaps
with a dash of Indian blood

will throw up a girl so desolate
.....
that she'll be ...
.....
sent out at fifteen to work (53–54)

Unlike Williams, Erdrich has her Elsie reflect on her own desolation: "Like most girls, Elsie avoided the mirror." But then, in a restroom mirror, she catches her reflection reflecting itself in another mirror in an endless series and sees herself "Connected in all directions," not a pure product but "a walking picture of infinity" (25). Amid so many recursive possibilities, the doubleness of reflection, the double bind of looking and being looked at, dissipates into what, in the title of her poem, Erdrich calls "Infinite Progression." No longer constrained to her role as Williams's servant, Erdrich's Elsie eventually

imitates her boss. She finds one of Williams's prescription pads and, having seen Williams write poetry on them, in a moment of improvisation she too starts writing poetry on the prescription pad. Soon she has to buy more paper—a Big Chief tablet, of course, for Erdrich keeps an eye on popular culture as well as on elite literary culture—and she “writes, and writes, straddles a canon, makes a name” (37).

For Erdrich, then, in these and other poems, Indians have long since tired of playing barbarian to Euroamericans' desperate craving to define themselves as mirror images of a threatening Other. Indians do not need to be the solution to Euroamerican doubt. Indians “know what has become of you, who needed us. . . / But what was it we once solved?” and “Who asked the question?” (17). Erdrich wants to ask the questions, not just observe the likes of Robert Frost and his cohort asking and answering their own questions. She rewrites Frost's celebrated “The Gift Outright,” a classic of what many readers suppose to be American self-definition, especially since Frost recited his poem at John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration. Frost's poem begins “The land was ours before we were the land's” and then goes on to proclaim how “we” became the land's:

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright
 (The deed of gift was many deeds of war)
 To the land vaguely realizing westward,
 But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
 Such as she was, such as she would become. (316)

In her own poem, called “The Theft Outright,” Erdrich responds to Frost and to the dominant ways of thinking that Frost's poem so suggestively represents. Her “we,” it turns out, is not Frost's “we”:

We were the land's before we were.

 Such as we were we gave most things outright
 (the deed of theft was many deeds and leases and claim stakes . . .)

 The land, not the least vaguely, realizing in all four directions,
 still storied, art-filled, fully enhanced.
 Such as she is, such as she wills us to become. (31–32)

For Erdrich, as for Frost, the land is feminine. But for Erdrich the land is not the passive object of Euroamerican manipulation, not feminine in that colonialist sense. Instead, like Erdrich's Elsie, it has agency, and it has its agency not in Frost's past or future ("was" or "would") but instead in the ongoing present ("is," "wills").

Most of the poets considered in this essay take for granted the agency that Erdrich reinvents. As they look to the past or the present, they look without the fear of shamed recognition that haunts Littlecrow-Russell, or they look in denial of it. These are not poets who dwell on the failures of Indian people, as some readers have suggested that Alexie and Adrian Louis do. But their celebrations of heritage suggest their awareness of the demons that haunt writers like Alexie, Louis, and Littlecrow-Russell. They often find their antidote to those demons in critiques of popular touchstones, like Erdrich's spoof of the Land O'Lakes butter maiden, or in family, like Cheryl Savageau's and Kimberly Blaeser's anchoring of their poems in family objects and recollections. Or they center their thinking in the continuities and histories of ongoing Native languages, like the many Indian writers who reinflect their English writing with the familiar vocabulary of their Native language or who actually write in their Native language, like Philip Carroll Morgan and, especially, like Ofelia Zepeda, a Tohono O'odham linguist, who, with Ray Young Bear, stand out by integrating Native-language poetry with English-language poetry.

Such connections and continuities can also come in the *form* of the language and poetry, as when Blaeser turns to documentary. In a long poem called "Housing Conditions of One Hundred Fifty Chippewa Families" in *Apprenticed to Justice*, Blaeser, an Ojibwe from White Earth, draws on Sister M. Inez Hilger's *Chippewa Families: A Social Study of White Earth Reservation, 1938*. Blaeser begins with the concrete empiricism of a list of nouns—"wigwam / peaked lodge / bark house / tipi / log house / tar-paper shack / frame house / u.s. rehabilitation house"—documenting the dwellings that Hilger counted at White Earth but also documenting, staring back at and staring down, Hilger's version of a documentary gaze. Blaeser uses italics to signal Hilger's exact words:

you graphed
 photographed
 measured dimensions
 calculated cubic air space
 enumerated every construction detail—
23 with broken windows;
99 without foundations, buildings
resting on the ground;
98 with stove pipes for chimneys.
 house, dwelling, place, structure—
 home. Endaayaang.
 June to November
 the year my mother turned five,
 Mary Inez you walked these lands
 the fervor of your order tucked
 under one billowing black-sleeved arm,
 amassing details of crowded quarters,
 common-law marriages, miscegenation,
 illegitimate children, limited education,
 economic independence on the WPA and CCCs (79–80)

Blaeser does not oppose documentary. Instead, she proposes a competing model or epistemology of documentary. It is not about whether you notice empirical details. It is about how you notice them and which details you notice. The well-intentioned but naïve social scientist quantifies what she sees as loss or failure without seeing how a house looks to people who see it as home, as endaayaang. For Blaeser, then, the impersonal 1938 of Hilger's would-be empiricist title begs for translation into another, more personal empiricist vocabulary: it is the year Blaeser's mother turned five while living in what Hilger sees as a junkyard of "*SOCIAL PROBLEMS*." Hilger puzzles over the way the people actually like their homes and "*were quite unwilling to leave them*" (81), thus recording and making interpretable—as a good empiricist should—what she does not know how to interpret, what the light cast by her style of empiricism will not let her see.

In “What They Did by Lamplight,” Blaeser musters the understated, documentary lyricism of a verbal catalog. The poem consists of a list of what women did by lamplight in the homes that Hilger quantified—and as if to intensify the lyrical reification, the concreteness, Blaeser breaks the lines into the visual pattern of a lamp. Inside their homes, the women “Clean rice, hand stitch / make pies, roll jingles [for jingle skirts] / patch jeans, shake dice / clean fish, roll cigarettes / read from *The Farmer*. / Braid rugs, mend nets, tell stories / write letters, bead, cut quilt squares,” and so on through “laugh,” “depill sweaters,” “make soap,” “Change diapers, shuck corn,” “crochet doilies,” “dance together / nurse their babies,” and “remember their dead” (95). Blaeser takes up none of Littlecrow-Russell’s dance of should she or shouldn’t she look at other Indians or at Indians’ actual or potential reflections of each other. Writing about home, about what she knows, and not, like Littlecrow-Russell, about the cognitive ambush of an unexpected encounter, Blaeser cannot imagine not looking and cannot imagine fearing to look. For Blaeser, home is home, with a directness that her documentary form crafts as if it were self-evident. But if it were self-evident, then well-intentioned social scientists would never miscast the homes of the colonized—troubled though they might sometimes be—as the detritus of conquest.

Phillip Carroll Morgan’s *The Fork-in-the-Road Indian Poetry Store* has the general-store jumble of poems that its title suggests, but it also has an understated consistency, as many of the poems stand out for their readiness to experiment with poetic form. In “The Story of the Seeds,” Morgan begins with a two-column prologue. The left column sets the scene in primordial chaos when (in the opening words) “the earth was a muddy quagmire.” Meanwhile, the right column lifts the curtain to expose the poet’s nervous self-doubt: “*will my audience / scoff a woman / saying hmphh*” (82). The rest of the poem mirrors the prologue’s multiplicity by braiding three stories. The first story tells of a sixteenth-century southeastern Indian running in terror from the brutal onslaught of Hernando de Soto. At one point, he finds a moment of reassurance by drinking

water from the dipper gourd he carries tied to his sash. As he and his cousin flee, they carry the seeds of their heritage and their future, seeds of the dipper gourd, vine beans, squash, pumpkin, and corn. One night, he tells the second story, an ancient tale of the great flood and the prophet who survives it. In the third story, the poet (or his likeness) drives his pickup in the Oklahoma Choctaw present and listens to a coyote wail with jealousy over a dog that “took up the territory / around” the poet’s cabin (92). The poet, like the seed carrier, is a node of past, present, and future. “[M]y neighbor the wheat farmer,” he tells us,

*asked me why i grow gourds
which I cannot eat
raising an eyebrow i did not answer
why do you go to church i asked him?
to worship god he replied
that's why i grow gourds i said (94)*

Framed by the self-doubt in the prologue’s echo chamber, Morgan’s braiding of the present with the ancient past and the historical past passes the tire-kicking test that makes it, like his pickup or his dog, part of ordinary life.

Morgan’s play with form takes many forms. Sometimes he comments on his own poem in poetic footnotes. Suddenly, in the midst of a plainspoken poem called “Fried Rabbit,” a footnote interrupts the poem and itself takes a dramatically different form, still poetic but this time in rhymed and roughly metered lines (at first even in iambic pentameter) that themselves address form:

*if romance could be bought in packaged form
what would the price tag be on an approaching storm
that mellows the sky over a rabbit feast
after a solitary day of work and peace*

Whatever the price, he concludes, “i’ll pay i’ll go” (118).

Morgan has a way of finding the lyrical in the ordinary and transforming its form:

ochre hole of urine two
 feet deep in snowshoe
 rabbit tracks a pause
 to pee in winter's claws
 and hear a breeze cause
 laden trees to crack

then chase a grouse who
 flapped and fluttered flew
 the silence snapped raw
 drought of freezing air paws
 the frightened quarry through
 bright narcotic slack (31)

Part of the lyricism, sifted through the delicate rhyme stretched across the stanzas, comes in the parallel stretching of speculation. The poet does not know what happened. He may reasonably enough surmise, and perceptively, that the hole comes from rabbit urine—a wonderfully unlikely and mundane topic—but he does not know that the snowshoe hare listened to the breeze crack the trees (as the internal rhyme runs with the end-line rhyme and with the assonance of *deep* and *pee*), still less that the hare stopped purposefully to listen. He does not know that the rabbit chased a grouse, still less how the grouse responded—unless, unmentioned but in tune with the understatement of the poem and such nearly rhyming repetition as *pause* and *paws*, he sees those tracks too. Here documentary drops away and the description, ostensibly of the past, paints the poet's own imagination in the present.

As Morgan braids the past with the present and the quotidian or earthy with the lyrical, each reflecting the other, so Cheryl Savageau (Abenaki) ponders the call of the old ways and the easy appeal of the new in a poem called, simply enough, "Tradition." She remembers how her mother taught her a precise pattern for making apple pies. Now, twenty years later, they are making pies together again, and her mother is astonished at Savageau's careful deliberation. Impatiently, her mother gives up waiting for Savageau to finish

and, oblivious to the remembered pattern and “without ceremony,” she abruptly “dumps,” “spreads,” “mixes,” “and pours” everything “in a heap” and puts an end to it, an end to what Savageau had taken almost as sacred ceremony and tradition. “That’s the thing with tradition,” Savageau decides. “Even now, peeling apples for pie, / I’m looking over my own / shoulder, wondering” (61). Left to sort out the fate of tradition in a world that at once belittles, underestimates, and romanticizes Indians’ connection with the past, she finds no easy solution. She cannot gaze at tradition with any more assurance than Littlecrow-Russell can gaze at the unexpected fellow but fallen Indian. Her glance might yield recognition, but it might just as well reveal that she sees what she looks for or that she keeps herself from seeing her own reflection or her own future.

In another poem, “Side Pass,” Savageau goes to her father’s wake and sees again the boy she had a crush on when she was fifteen and he played basketball under her father’s coaching. She is amazed at how utterly unattractive she finds the once curly-haired heart-throb. And yet she inexplicably feels the aching tug of what her old boyfriend was so long ago and what she has now lost. She remembers her father teaching the boys how to look in one direction and pass in another. “I would fall in love again,” she concludes, “if it would save me from this grief” (96). She cannot look one way and pass the other way, but just to hazard the idea, even momentarily, is a means of working through and living on with the multiplicity of directions that tug at us across time and memory. Similarly, in “Heart,” she watches a bird fly through a cottage “from window to window / never staying in / never staying out” (136). The heart that is a home pumps in and out, over and over, like tradition and change, worth romanticizing, if at all, perhaps only in its impermeability to the romanticizing that Indians are pressured to impose on it.

In *Where Clouds Are Formed*, Ofelia Zepeda’s poetry somehow seems to escape the questions that haunt the other poets under discussion here. She writes of the desert, clouds, water, fog, rain. She writes of weather. In “The Place Where Clouds Are Formed,”

Every day it is the same.
 He comes home.
 He tells her about it.
 As he speaks, his breath condenses in front of his face.
 She goes about her business;
 every now and then she looks over.
 She doesn't hear his voice.
 She sees the soft fog that continues to form a halo. (3)

Subject verb, subject verb. Every day it is the same. Almost every line it is the same, at least for awhile: It is. He comes. He tells. He speaks. His breath condenses. She goes. He looks. Then, for a moment, she doesn't hear, but then again she sees. Zepeda's poems seem to have little use for the agonies of subject versus object that agitate or energize so many other Native American poets and, in other ways, so many poets in general. Her poems do not typically fear looking or even being looked at or worry over the oscillation between opposites. They do not worry over how the present sifts through tradition and the past. They watch the weather, the mist, the clouds. The children at the end of "The Place Where Clouds Are Formed" sit with their father in the warm cab of his truck surrounded by the cold as they wait for their school bus. We never see the school bus arrive and take them to the land of oscillating opposites. Instead, we see their breath condense on the cold windshield as they sit in the cocoon, the air pocket, of family closeness. And yet, much as clouds form, clouds also change. They change constantly. Many readers take Zepeda's poems as paeans to a lyrically lost past. But Zepeda is a linguist whose study of her Tohono O'odham language not only records the language's past but also tries to help shape its future. Her poems may seem to separate their slow, thoughtful rhythms from the chaos of contemporaneity, but the remarkable patience in their evocations of evanescent space and place are themselves an index of, a mirage against, the conflicts that Zepeda's colleague-poets record more directly.

In "Pain of Speaking," a character voiced by Zepeda laments that she does not know her grandmother's language. When she hears her grandmother's people talking, she thinks:

Sometimes just by the rhythm
 I know they are talking about me.
 Right in front of me!
 Having no voice in this language
 makes me invisible.
 It hurts.
 I scream!
 They look at me.
 Guilty. (63)

It seems that this speaker is—or thinks she is—guilty, but the fog of guilt settles on “them” as well as on “me.” When they look, the sense of panicky vulnerability, of each gaze exposed by its own gaze reflected back, echoes the panicky gaze that Littlecrow-Russell describes in her far different voice. Zepeda’s poetry links opposites through likeness as well as through difference. In that way it offers not only a metaphor for the continuities with an earlier era that readers often associate with her poems of the outdoors, the desert, the clouds, and the rain but also a metaphor for the shared questioning that ties together much of the vast range of contemporary American Indian poetry.

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