

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Excerpt from *The Red Land to the South: American Indian Writers and Indigenous Mexico*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5qb0j3xw>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 5(1)

Author

Cox, James H.

Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/T851019724

Copyright Information

Copyright 2013 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Excerpted from James H. Cox, *The Red Land to the South: American Indian Writers and Indigenous Mexico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

Reprinted with permission from University of Minnesota Press
(<http://www.upress.umn.edu/>).

American Indian Literature and Indigenous Mexico

THE PUBLICATION OF CHOCTAW AUTHOR Todd Downing's *The Mexican Earth* in late March 1940 inaugurated an exciting few weeks in American Indian literary history. Fans of Downing's detective novels set in Mexico could read Philip Ainsworth Means's lavish praise of his first book-length work of nonfiction in the *New York Times* March 31 issue, and a week later theater aficionados could attend the premiere of a new play from Cherokee dramatist Lynn Riggs. *A World Elsewhere*, a drama set in Mexico and completed by Riggs while there in 1937, opened April 8 at the San Diego Community Theater. One week later, Confederated Salish and Kootenai author D'Arcy McNickle, the most celebrated American Indian writer of the mid-twentieth century, traveled to Patzcuaro, Michoacan, Mexico, for the first Inter-American Congress on Indian Life / Congreso Indígenista Interamericano from April 14 to 24.¹ Though Osage writer John Joseph Mathews is not a major figure in this study, he attended the conference as well. He had been in Mexico since October 1939, when he arrived on a Guggenheim fellowship awarded for the project that became the memoir *Talking to the Moon* (1945).² During this brief moment in the early spring of 1940, the three American Indian authors at the center of this study and one of their prominent contemporaries all had their eyes on Mexico.

The Red Land to the South takes as its primary focus American Indian literature between 1920 and 1960, particularly novels, histories, and plays about Mexico and indigenous Mexican peoples, cultures, and histories. The forty years under consideration here remain underexamined in the field of American Indian studies and elusive of clear definition for scholars of American Indian writing. These four decades are part of a longer era of Native writing from 1900 to 1967 defined, in the words of Jace Weaver (Cherokee), by assimilation, apocalypticism, and reform

and by Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) as “the hyperassimilative post-allotment years.”³ Robert Warrior (Osage) describes a shorter period from 1925 to 1961 as “marked by a lack of associative cohesion,” or a lack of shared political commitment, among American Indian writers.⁴ These writers constitute, Warrior concludes, “a generation of free agents.”⁵ According to Sean Teuton (Cherokee), these free agents were writing during “a somewhat arid period for Native intellectuals.”⁶ Craig Womack (Muskogee Creek and Cherokee) includes “the Native novelists of the 1920s and 1930s” in a group of “earlier writers [that] were uncertain or hesitant about whether a Native voice, Native viewpoint, the narration of tribal life, or even a Native future was possible.”⁷ Leech Lake Ojibwe scholar Scott Richard Lyons asserts, “From the assimilation era until the civil rights movement, Native nationalism was basically dormant.”⁸ *The Red Land to the South* joins the conversation initiated by these scholars and others such as Chadwick Allen (2002), Louis Owens (1992), and Robert Dale Parker (2003) in an effort to define with precision and clarity the American Indian literary history of this era. By recovering Downing’s entire corpus, the two plays about Mexico by Riggs, and the place of indigenous Mexico in American Indian literary history, and in its attention to many other American Indian writers from the twentieth century’s middle decades, *The Red Land to the South* situates this era more securely in American Indian literary history.

The main organizing principle of *The Red Land to the South* is the political affinity for and historical interest in indigenous Mexico shared by some of the American Indian writers of this period. Mexico was a common destination and topic for American Indian as well as U.S. and British writers in the middle of the twentieth century.⁹ Indeed, Cecil Robinson argues that in U.S. literary history, “[Mexico] is an unavoidable presence, and as such it has been reflected in our literature from the earliest days of border contact.”¹⁰ Downing, Riggs, and McNickle, as well as Mathews, John Milton Oskison (Cherokee), and Will Rogers (Cherokee), all visited Mexico and wrote about it. The writing of Downing, Riggs, and McNickle, in particular, coheres in its contemplation of the revolutionary potential of the indigenous peoples of the settler-colonial nation on the other side of the United States’ almost two-thousand-mile-long southern border. Warrior observes of the early twentieth-century Society of American Indian generation of intellectuals that “their various writings are connected in content and context through their

associations with one another.”¹¹ The writings of Downing, McNickle, Oskison, Riggs, and Rogers are also connected in content and context through their focus on Mexico. Mexico is, for Downing, McNickle, and Riggs, a landscape resonant with exciting anticolonial possibilities that were to them much less visible, or nonexistent, in the United States.

These literary revolutions share an optimism about but map different paths to a more self-determined indigenous future. Downing sees indigenous Mexican revolution as a continuous process of patient vigilance punctuated by eras of violence, while Riggs represents it as an outburst of long-repressed indigenous anger. McNickle’s revolution is local but requires for success a journey into the heart of urban Mesoamerica. Within the reindigenized territory of an American Indian imaginary, McNickle asserts a direct correlation between intertribal diplomacy and the political and cultural health of American Indian communities. Oskison and Rogers share an explicitly politicized interest in Mexico with their contemporaries, but they do not incorporate indigenous people into the Mexico they represent. The literary and political vision of indigenous Mexico produced by Downing, Riggs, and McNickle, therefore, more clearly anticipates the literature and politics of the civil rights era, as well as the alliances during that era between American Indians and Chicana/os. In quincennial novels by Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor, this vision of Mexico as a shared homeland in which indigenous peoples could assert themselves far more forcefully than they could in the United States makes a dramatic return to American Indian literary history.

Comparative Indigeneities

The indigenous peoples of Mexico, who have been continuously fighting foreign occupation since May 1520 according to Downing, are the main actors in these literary revolutions, and Downing and other American Indian authors imagine them from the perspective of their own positions in indigenous spaces defined by tribal and U.S. national contexts. Definitions of indigeneity vary dramatically in the United States and Mexico and change from era to era and census to census. Many Native people in the United States, for example, have a legal indigenous identity. Discussions of this issue in the United States, such as Cherokee sociologist Eva Garroutte’s *Real Indians* (2003), often begin with a consideration of these legal definitions. Garroutte explains, “Both federal

and state governments formally classify certain groups as ‘recognized’ or ‘acknowledged’ Indian tribes and invest them with specific rights and responsibilities not shared by other groups.”¹² She observes that while the United States grants *de facto* recognition to many tribal nations, such as large ones with which it signed treaties, it forces other groups, such as many small ones in the east, to navigate the arcane federal recognition process. When the United States counts individual indigenous people, it does not always or exclusively use its own tribal-nation recognition process as a factor. Historian Nancy Shoemaker reports that in the United States “budgetary constraints on the 1920 census collection meant that the Census Bureau took no special care to enumerate Indians as it had with the 1890 through 1910 censuses and the 1930 census.”¹³ The result was an apparent decline in the American Indian population. When the federal government actually attempted to count American Indians, its methods changed throughout the twentieth century:

The most common standard applied today is some degree of “Indian blood.” Most government programs and services use one-quarter “Indian blood” to judge eligibility, and many Indian tribes have blood-quantum requirements for tribal enrollment. Before 1960 census enumerators classified race based on observation. When in doubt, the enumerator could fall back on a list of criteria: enrollment in a tribe or at an agency, community recognition as Indian, and the “degree of Indian blood.” Individuals of mixed parentage were to be classified as the race of the nonwhite parent. Since 1960 the Census Bureau has employed self-identification as the sole criterion: anyone who says they are Indian is Indian.¹⁴

The shift by the U.S. federal government to self-identification from either blood calculus or recognition by tribal nation and community has contributed significantly to an astonishing rise in the official American Indian population.

While budget anxiety, phenotype, and blood quantum documentation informed the number of American Indians counted in the United States in 1920, the 1921 census in Mexico asked people to identify as one of the following: “*indígena pura*,” “*indígena mezclada con blanca*,” “*blanca*,” or “*extranjeros sin distinción de razas*.”¹⁵ Mexico took this census during the early years of postrevolutionary *indigenismo*, an official discourse that

shaped national definitions of indigeneity in Mexico throughout the mid-twentieth century, which, along with the related discourse of *mestizaje*, receives a fully developed treatment in chapter 1. The 1921 census allowed the Mexican state to document two distinct populations: indigenous and mestizo, the people of both indigenous and Spanish ancestry that form the majority in Mexico. Sociologist Natividad Gutiérrez describes a perpetually antagonistic relationship between these two populations: “The mestizo culture is the cultural and linguistic model of national integration to be embraced by all indigenous peoples. Official encouragement to overcome Indian-ness and to adopt *mestizaje* is a source of the permanent tension and mutual distrust characterizing interethnic relations between the dominant majority and the Indian groups, the latter being exposed to every possible disadvantage derived from their marginalized situation. Indigenous sentiments of cultural rejection are intensified by the fact that mestizo culture benefits from the usurping of selected elements of the indigenous past.”¹⁶ Indigenous people in this context are defined by “low socio-economic status, subordination, inferiority, oppression, and cultural and linguistic dissimilarities vis-à-vis the mestizo,” while mestizos are defined by “the overcoming of the Indians’ sociocultural situation.”¹⁷ *Mestizaje* in the Mexican context, therefore, is a rejection of the indigenous. While this division between indigenous and mestizo was a dominant social force before and after the 1921 census, the Mexican government stopped counting mestizos after 1921.

Instead, until the year 2000, people could officially identify as indigenous in Mexico only if they spoke an indigenous language. The federal government did not account for ancestry or blood. Thus in 1940, when McNickle attended the Congreso Indígenista Interamericano and Downing published *The Mexican Earth*, about 3 million or 15 percent of the 20 million people in Mexico spoke an indigenous language.¹⁸ Mexico, therefore, was 15 percent indigenous. In the United States, the 1940 census had a category for “color or race.” Using the criteria outlined by Shoemaker, census employees counted 333,969 American Indians of a total of 132 million.¹⁹ The United States was officially in 1940 a quarter of 1 percent indigenous. Though McNickle, Riggs, and Downing did not simply draw their perception of Mexico from these numbers, the official statistics help to explain why indigenous Mexico represented for them indigenous strength, cultural cohesion, and potentially transformative political power.

Indigenous self-identification in both Mexico and the United States varies widely within and among tribal communities and nations. Gutiérrez sees evidence in Mexico for what she calls “microethnic identification,” intensely local identification with pueblos and their patron saints, as the norm for self-identified indigenous people throughout the twentieth century.²⁰ “Indians identify and designate themselves,” she asserts, “in a variety of ways expressing their place of origin and labor relationships. There exists a large vocabulary used by these individuals in order to avoid the word *Indio* as a source of identification. References are first to the place of origin—the coast, the highlands, the lowlands—which implies the linguistic region, and then concrete references are made to the town or pueblo of origin.”²¹ She adds that *paisano* and *compita*, indicating either a peasant or a relative, are common. One of her informants, the Nahuatl historian Luis Reyes García, says the people of his pueblo call themselves *macehual*, or “people who belong to the pueblo.” Non-Indians are *coyotl*, and indigenous people from other pueblos are *pilume*.²²

By comparison, anthropologist Circe Sturm, in *Blood Politics* (2002), and Garrouette, in *Real Indians*, take Cherokee Nation-specific and multi-tribal approaches, respectively, to documenting how American Indians define indigenous identities within or against U.S. national definitions. Following a successful petition for federal recognition, the burden of defining “Indian” shifts to the tribal nation. Garrouette explains, “Tribes have the exclusive right to create their own legal definitions of identity and to do so in any way they choose. [...] About two-thirds of all federally recognized tribes of the coterminous United States specify a minimum blood quantum in their legal citizenship criteria, with one-quarter blood degree being the most frequent minimum requirement.”²³ “However,” she adds, “many Indian people cannot meet the definitions of identity imposed by the federal government or even by their own tribes.”²⁴ In addition to blood quantum, some tribal nations base citizenship requirements on patrilineal or matrilineal descent or direct descent from an ancestor on a tribal roll. Garrouette describes the vagaries of these citizenship rules, including one particularly confounding legacy of the tribal rolls. Perhaps thousands of non-Indians found illegal ways to get their names recorded as citizens of a tribal nation. The descendants of these “non-Indian ‘Indians’” are also, legally, Indians.²⁵ After she outlines the role of federal and tribal-nation law in establishing legal indigenous identities, Garrouette describes contemporary American Indian views of how indigeneity is defined biologically

(especially as measured by blood quantum), culturally (shared thoughts and behaviors, for example, that manifest in a person's connection to the land, participation in ceremonies, and fluency in an indigenous language), and personally (especially as invented by "ethnic switchers" and Indian recruitment organizations).

Sturm examines the political implications of these identity contexts in her Cherokee Nation-specific work. In the twentieth century, the era under consideration in this study, "blood became central to Cherokee identity," Sturm explains, "not just as a racial, social, and cultural metaphor but as a documented biological possession."²⁶ Citizenship in the Cherokee Nation requires this documented possession of Cherokee blood quantum or what Sturm calls "blood belonging."²⁷ She adds, "Even though the Cherokee Nation requires some blood connection to an ancestor listed on the Dawes Rolls, it sets no minimum blood quantum for tribal membership, unlike most other Native-American nations."²⁸ In contrast to this Cherokee national definition of citizenship, "local systems of social classification are still shaped to a significant extent by criteria other than blood ancestry, causing Cherokees to question the almost exclusively blood-based definition of tribal identity."²⁹ Sturm discusses "five indexical markers of Cherokee identity other than blood ancestry: phenotype, social behavior, language, religious knowledge and participation, and community residence and participation."³⁰ These Cherokee local rather than Cherokee national markers of identity, especially language and community residence, correspond with several of the categories of identity at work in indigenous communities in Mexico.

Thus local community definitions of indigeneity in the United States and Mexico affirm but also frequently challenge indigeneity as it is defined by American Indian tribal-national, U.S., and Mexican governments. There are, however, regardless of the definition, many more indigenous people in Mexico than in the United States. According to the Mexican federal government, indigenous people comprised at least 10 percent of Mexico's approximately 110 million people in 2010. Half of these eleven million indigenous people speak an indigenous language. In comparison, according to the U.S. federal government, there are approximately five million American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States or 1.5 percent of the total population of 308 million. Approximately 1 percent of the five million people who identify as American Indian speak an indigenous language. According to these numbers, Mexico has twice as many indigenous

people and at least ten times the number of indigenous language speakers as the United States, and the indigenous population of Mexico represents a much larger percentage of the nation's total number of people. Indigenous Mexicans also represent a significant percentage of Mexican migrants to the United States, such as Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca who began in the 1940s to build, explains anthropologist Lynn Stephen, "migration networks" throughout the United States but primarily in the West.³¹

When American Indian writers in the mid-twentieth century visited Mexico, they likely saw "Indians" where indigenous Mexicans, *mestiza/os*, or nonindigenous Mexicans did not. Key components of the historical context might even have predisposed some American Indian writers to perceive an overflow of indigeneity in Mexico: the much higher percentage of indigenous people as part of the total Mexican population, the central role of *indigenismo* in the construction of a unified postrevolutionary Mexican national identity, the reform of Mexican federal Indian policy in the 1920s and 1930s, and the prominence in Mexico of *mestiza/os* who might have identified or have been identified as American Indian in the United States. These authors then optimistically, but at times inaccurately, represented this overflow of indigeneity to a U.S. audience as a powerful cultural and political force in Mexico. This lack of correspondence among textual and lived Mexicos, however, did not diminish the potential political value of these representations and narratives of revolution.

Indigenous Mexico in American Indian Histories

These representations and narratives of indigenous Mexico were, in fact, already part of some American Indian tribal-nation histories. Downing, Riggs, and McNickle reconstruct these already present cultural and historical bonds among indigenous people in Mexico and the United States, which Spanish, French, and English colonial and independent Mexican and U.S. settler-colonial literatures and histories obscure. These bonds are recorded in the oral and written histories of the Mexicas (Aztecs), Cherokees, and Choctaws, for example, and also delineated by many nonindigenous historians and anthropologists. Despite the borders established by settler-colonial nations in North America, many indigenous peoples in the United States continue to view Mexico as part of a large shared homeland. Some American Indian writers in the middle of the twentieth century draw upon and perpetuate this history for the next

generation of indigenous American people when they imagine Mexico as a space in which to contemplate the futures of their own tribal nations and, more broadly, all American Indians.³²

The Chicana/o civil rights movement gave the story of Mexica origins in Aztlán some prominence in U.S. social and political contexts.³³ In her study of Chicana/o indigenism, Sheila Marie Contreras observes, “Most scholars of the Mexica believe Aztlán, if an actual geographic space, was located in Mesoamerica, somewhere north of Mexico City. [. . .] For many others, the term has more mythical than geographic significance and is understood as symbol or metaphor, as an Edenic—to use a familiar Judeo-Christian term—place of origins.”³⁴ Anthropologist Carroll L. Riley identifies the entire region north and west of Mexico as Colhuacan and describes Aztlán, “The Place of Herons,” as an island, “a central place, containing seven magical caves, the natal place, the womb so to speak, of the Aztec people.”³⁵ As a cultural area, however, Riley argues that Aztlán encompasses much of the U.S. Southwest and the Mexican Northwest.³⁶ For information about the location of Aztlán, anthropologist Martha Menchaca looks to the first accounts of the Mexica homeland documented by Spanish chroniclers: “When the Aztec transmitted their accounts of Aztlán, they conceived it as reality and acknowledged it as their ancient past. They claimed that Aztlán was the place of their birth as a people. No one knew where Aztlán was located; they merely indicated to sixteenth-century cartographers that it was to the north of the Valley of Mexico.”³⁷ Historians Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman offer a more specific suggestion: “The origins of the Aztecs are apparently found on an island off the coast of the state of Nayarit, at Aztatlán or Aztlán, from which many tribes wandered southward.”³⁸ Accounts of Aztlán by Chicana/o writers of the civil rights era situate it in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and/or California.³⁹

The indeterminate location of Aztlán gives the site part of its political currency; American Indian as well as Chicana/o writers have some liberty to choose its location based on specific political goals. In *The Mexican Earth*, his history of indigenous Mexico, Downing situates Aztlán in the southwestern United States as part of his project of making legible a kinship among American Indians and, in Downing’s figuration, the more culturally and politically cohesive indigenous Mexicans: “Aztlan has been located in Canada, California, up and down the Rockies. While it is too nebulous a place ever to be identified with certainty, there is reason to believe that

the Aztecs crossed the Colorado and Gila Rivers and the deserts of Chihuahua to Culiacán in the present state of Sinaloa.⁴⁰ The Colorado River runs from Colorado through Utah and northern Arizona before forming the border between Nevada and California and emptying into the Gulf of California. The Gila River is a tributary of the Colorado that runs from New Mexico through southern Arizona. The account of this movement of indigenous American peoples between regions, later circumscribed by the borders of two different settler-colonial nations, allows Downing to foreground an indigenous history and geography. In this history and geography, there are no settler-colonial borders between indigenous peoples in the United States and Mexico. Effacing these borders is a step toward building a political and cultural program of anticolonial resistance for American Indians based on what Downing observes in an always revolutionary indigenous Mexico.

In addition to their first contact with Spanish rather than English colonizers, Cherokees have, in contrast to the Mexicas, accounts that they migrated from or through the land that is now Mexico.⁴¹ In his *History of the Cherokee Indians and Their Legends and Folk Lore* (1921), Cherokee historian Emmet Starr explains: “The Cherokees most probably preceded by several hundred years the Muskogees in their exodus from Mexico and swung in a wider circle, crossing the Mississippi River many miles north of the mouth of the Missouri River as indicated by the mounds. [. . .] The Muskogees were probably driven out of Mexico by the Aztecs, Toltecs or some other of the northwestern tribal invasions of the ninth or preceding centuries. This is evidenced by the customs and devices that were long retained by the Creeks.”⁴² Though Starr leaves room for doubt, he treats this account confidently as empirical history rather than legend or folklore. Contemporary Cherokee writer Robert Conley is less confident but still relates the story as significant to Cherokee history. He summarizes a story by Levi Gritts, who Conley identifies as a Nighthawk Keetowah Cherokee of Oklahoma, about Cherokee origins in South America and an eventual migration through Mexico. The tone of Conley’s commentary on the story is remarkably similar to Downing’s on the story of Aztlán: “It seems reasonable to say that the Cherokees likely came from South America and migrated north through Central America and Mexico, eventually stopping for a time in the northeast along with the other Iroquoian-speaking tribes there.”⁴³ Conley then makes his own investment in this particular story transparent: “At best, origins are obscure. We tend to believe what we want

to believe.”⁴⁴ For Conley, specifically, this history of nearly constant Cherokee migration helps him to recontextualize the forced migrations of the colonial and settler-colonial eras not as aberrations in Cherokee history but as variations on distinct Cherokee experiences.

Historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists describe in detail the bonds and migrations documented in these indigenous histories. In her discussion of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex, art historian Susan C. Power reviews the scholarship on and summarizes these bonds: “In addition to maize, some of the clearest cultural links between North America and Mesoamerica are flat-topped accretional mounds, the organization of major centers, tobacco, weaponry, metalwork, the Ball Game, cyclical renewal, and the extinguishing of fires.”⁴⁵ Power then catalogs the similarities in the form and content of indigenous art in both regions with a focus on feathered serpents and winged beings. She concludes: “Archaeology and oral traditions show that the worldview and belief systems of Mesoamerica and the eastern United States were quite close over a period of many centuries, perhaps millennia.”⁴⁶ Riley also explores “the idea of meaningful Mesoamerican influence in the Southwest” in *Becoming Aztlán: Mesoamerican Influence in the Greater Southwest, AD 1200–1500* (2005). The focus of his work is the three-hundred-year era of the title in which “a wave of new religious, ceremonial, and political ideas, as well as new artistic styles and new technology, swept up from Mexico.”⁴⁷ He traces evidence of these Mesoamerican influences in ceremonial platforms and ball courts, as well as town organization and construction techniques. Power’s and Riley’s scholarship maps an indigenous world from Mesoamerica through the U.S. Southeast and Southwest populated by a network of groups with economic, political, and cultural ties.

These histories likely shaped Cherokee views of Spanish Mexico as a safe haven from British and U.S. colonial violence. The story of the “Lost Cherokees,” as recorded by James Mooney, tells of a group of Cherokees that protested land cessions by leaving the Southeast for northern New Spain in 1721. Other Cherokees found them later living in a precolonial Cherokee world.⁴⁸ Historian Dianna Everett cites a report of Cherokees visiting one of New Spain’s northern provinces, Texas, in 1807 and establishing a settlement there in 1813.⁴⁹ The Cherokees that followed were attempting to move beyond the reach of the United States: “Over the winter of 1819–1820, the first Cherokees known to have settled permanently in Texas crossed the Red River into presumed Spanish territory. The leader

of this group was probably Duwali.”⁵⁰ Duwali, or Chief Bowls, remained in Spanish and then Mexican Texas. Richard Fields, who Everett argues was a “red” chief, led a delegation to Mexico City beginning in December 1822. Fields hoped to establish an alliance with Mexico, but he returned to Texas in June 1823 without an agreement.⁵¹ The Cherokees eventually signed a treaty with Texas in 1836, establishing a reservation with their “associate bands,” including the Choctaws. Texas did not immediately consider ratification of the treaty and then nullified it on December 16, 1837.⁵² Following the Texas revolution, a Republic of Texas militia attacked Duwali’s band, killed him, and drove the rest of the band to Indian Territory. While the Texas Cherokees negotiated with Mexico and the Republic of Texas, John Ross in the Cherokee Nation in Georgia also attempted to make arrangements with Mexico to reserve land for the Cherokees.⁵³ The famous inventor of the Cherokee syllabary, Sequoyah, also made a journey to Mexico at the end of his life in an attempt to find Cherokee relations living there.⁵⁴ Daniel F. Littlefield Jr. (Cherokee) describes a Cherokee delegation sent to Mexico in the early 1840s by the Old Settlers, under John Brown, and another larger delegation of Old Settler and Treaty Party Cherokees in 1845.⁵⁵

Several generations after Sequoyah and Brown, Mexico maintained its presence in the Cherokee political imaginary. When Cherokee citizens faced the allotment of their nation’s land in the late nineteenth century, some of them looked to Mexico as a possible sanctuary. From 1895 to 1908, Indian Territory and Oklahoma newspapers reported on various plans by Cherokees and groups from other tribal nations to emigrate to Mexico.⁵⁶ Conley describes one of the most prominent plans: “Bird Harris proposed that the Cherokee Nation go ahead and sell all of its land to the United States, use the money to purchase land in Mexico or South America, and then remove the entire Cherokee Nation once more, this time completely beyond the long and greedy reach of the United States.”⁵⁷ Conley connects Harris’s proposal to the movement led by Redbird Smith, a Keetowah Cherokee. The Keetowahs were “traditional Cherokees [. . .] devoted to the preservation of Cherokee culture and politically opposed to mixed-bloods in the tribal government.”⁵⁸ They were also abolitionists who later resisted allotment. Conley relates that when some Keetowahs decided to enroll on the lists used for allotments, Smith formed the Nighthawk Keetowah Society and continued to resist. In 1910, Redbird Smith, by then the chief of the Nighthawk Keetowahs, “went to Mexico with a document

dating from 1820 hoping to prove a claim to land under that government.”⁵⁹ The journey, an attempt to realize what Littlefield calls “the utopian dream of the Cherokee fullbloods,” was unsuccessful.⁶⁰ Yet the journey made clear again that for some Cherokees, Mexico was a place associated not only with precolonial histories but also with resistance to colonialism. Riggs’s own frequent visits to Mexico in the 1930s, and perhaps his long relationship with the Mexican dramatist Enrique Gasque-Molina (Ramon Naya), confirmed for him this view of Mexico.

The connections that Downing and McNickle make among indigenous U.S. and indigenous Mexican peoples are a product of their personal, political, and historical interests in the indigenous people of contemporary Mexico. The most common Choctaw explanation of their origins describes their emergence from the earth out of a mound called *Nanih Waiya* in what is now the state of Mississippi.⁶¹ However, Downing spends the first half of his eleven-page *Cultural Traits of the Choctaws* (1973) tracing the cultural influence of indigenous Mexico on the Choctaws. The Choctaws, like the Cherokees, had first contact with Hernando de Soto and the Spanish.⁶² Groups of Choctaws began arriving in Texas as early as 1814, while it was still a northern province of Spanish colonial Mexico. They continued to arrive after Mexican independence.⁶³ A little further north, Downing’s paternal grandmother reached Indian Territory in 1832, during the removal of the Choctaws from Mississippi.⁶⁴ Her family settled in the Choctaw Nation, which, before Texas independence, shared its southern border for two years, from 1834 to 1836, with Mexico. A century later, Downing experienced Mexico primarily as a visitor with political and intellectual interests. He was a tour guide in Mexico during the summers in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and his personal library of more than 1,500 volumes, which he donated to Southeastern Oklahoma State University, contains many volumes on Mexico as well as Latin America.

McNickle was involved with John Collier’s administration at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and he shared Collier’s interest in Mexico’s federal Indian policy as a model for the United States. Like Collier, he attended the first Inter-American Congress on Indian Life in Mexico in 1940. His journey to Mexico occurred in a busy season of conferences in the United States and Canada, during which activists and organizers held the discussions that led to the formation of the National Congress of American Indians in 1944. This influential intertribal organization, therefore, appears to have at least one root in Mexico. McNickle’s family history also includes

a flight from persecution across another settler-colonial national border between Canada and the United States. McNickle's maternal grandfather, Isidore Parenteau, participated in Louis Riel's resistance movement in 1885. He fled with his family to Montana after Canada executed Riel.⁶⁵ While several generations of Cherokees unsuccessfully negotiated for or otherwise sought sanctuary in Mexico, McNickle's family successfully found refuge among other indigenous peoples across another southern settler-colonial border.

A generation after Redbirth Smith traveled to Mexico in search of sanctuary for the Nighthawk Keetowahs, Downing, Riggs, and McNickle took the same journey. During and following those visits, they wrote about the indigenous Mexican past and contemporary indigenous Mexican life. They tended to emphasize the anticolonial histories of the Mexicas, Mayans, and Yaquis, rather than the Tlaxcaltecas, for example, who aligned with Cortés.⁶⁶ They rejected the anxiety of nonindigenous American authors from the United States and other nations about Mexico's perceived propensity for violence and narrate it as a desirable force of indigenous revolution. They saw in the indigenous worlds of Mexico the political, historical, and cultural materials that allowed them to contemplate a politically and culturally robust future for Native peoples and communities in the United States.

Literary Revolutions

The murder of two Mexican college students by deputy sheriffs in Ardmore, Oklahoma, on June 8, 1931, dramatically altered the life of Choctaw author Todd Downing, one of the most prolific and neglected American Indian novelists of the twentieth century and the focus of chapter 1. Downing immediately suspended the summer tours that he guided in Mexico and started a writing career that included ten novels. In a novel such as *The Cat Screams* (1934), Downing appropriates and refigures indigenismo—the official celebration of Mexico's indigenous history and culture—to reveal evidence of the modern indigenous people obscured by indigenismo discourse. These indigenous people persevere in a world in which two postcolonial settler governments, the United States and Mexico, are in conflict with each other, while maintaining the colonial practices of the European empires from which they secured their independence. In his novels, Downing makes three extraordinary

discoveries in the context of mid-twentieth-century American Indian literary history. He detects a persistent though enervated European colonial presence in Mexico and a more potent neocolonial invasion of Mexico by U.S. tourists, academics, smugglers, drug addicts, and criminal venture capitalists. Even more surprising in an era widely perceived by scholars as politically impotent, Downing identifies a contested yet enduring indigenous Mexican resistance to this neocolonial invasion and the oppressive Mexican state. Finally, Downing finds in this resistance a model for Choctaw self-determination that he puts into practice in a bilingual (Choctaw and English) education program that he helped to create in the early 1970s. His detective novels provide, within the American Indian novel tradition as it existed in the middle decades of the twentieth century, a consistently hopeful though not fully developed narrative of contemporary indigeneity.

Lynn Riggs, the celebrated Cherokee playwright of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, on which Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein based *Oklahoma!*, is, in addition to Downing, part of a productive and well-known group of Indian Territory-born writers who were publishing during the middle decades of the twentieth century. He set his plays *A World Elsewhere* (1947) and *The Year of Pilár* (1947) in the 1930s, when President Lázaro Cárdenas began a reform program called *agrarian cardenismo* that involved redistributing land from the hacendados to indigenous communities. In *A World Elsewhere*, General Gonzalo Fernandez Aguirre, a former hacendado, starts a counterrevolution and takes U.S. tourists hostage as indigenous service workers organize against him behind the scenes. In *The Year of Pilár*, an expatriate Yucatecan family returns to its home prior to the redistribution of its land, discovers its blood kinship with local Mayans, then must flee an armed indigenous revolution. Riggs dramatizes the possibility of and justifies indigenous revolution, but he is more reluctant than Downing to celebrate it. The menacing violence in these plays suggests some anxiety about social upheaval. However, when placed within the context of his entire career and read through the perspective of early twentieth-century Cherokee history in Indian Territory and Oklahoma, *World* and *Pilár* demonstrate that Riggs saw Mexico, like Downing, as a place where indigenous people could more forcefully assert themselves.

During a particularly difficult era for the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma, from statehood in 1907 until 1970, Downing also wrote *The Mexican Earth* (1940), a history of Mexico as an indigenous nation that interprets

optimistically Cárdenas's reforms and identifies, nearly half a century before anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, a México profundo at the center of Mexican national life. In chapter 3, I consider this work within the context of the diplomatic moments in nonfiction published in this period by Rogers, Standing Bear, and Mathews, and discuss the political implications of Downing's effort to map an indigenous-to-indigenous diplomatic relationship between tribal nations in the United States and indigenous communities in Mexico. Downing developed the views of indigenous Mexico presented in *The Mexican Earth* during the formative moments of the transnational and hemispheric political perspectives adopted by indigenous people in the next generation. He highlights the specific histories that define indigenous Mexican communities, but, similarly to Acoma Pueblo author Simon Ortiz, for example, he also encourages indigenous solidarity against colonial dominance by emphasizing diplomacy among all indigenous peoples who share the experience of originating and continuously residing in the Americas.⁶⁷ The diplomatic obligations of indigenous nations and communities with roots in a shared homeland, he indicates, provide the foundation for socially transformative international relations and a more promising indigenous American future.

Confederated Salish and Kootenai author D'Arcy McNickle's *Runner in the Sun*, the focus of chapter 4, foregrounds the kinship of indigenous U.S. and Mexican peoples and connects the maintenance of this relationship to the health of indigenous nations and communities. As the federal government was terminating its trust relationship with tribal nations and encouraging American Indians to move to urban centers in the early 1950s, McNickle crafted a narrative of migration that establishes the cultural and historical kinship of a cliff-dwelling community in the southwestern United States and Culhuacan in central Mexico. The novel is a handbook for rebuilding tribal nations during an era of attacks against them as well as a reimagined Inter-American Congress on Indian Life. In *Runner in the Sun*, the cliff dwellers face drought and political factionalizing, and they send a runner to their central Mexican homeland to find solutions to these crises. The runner returns with the knowledge to lead a new community on the plains below the cliffs. McNickle correlates the recognition of intertribal kinship to the peaceful establishment of new communities, imagines a model for international diplomacy that preserves the integrity of indigenous communities, and alludes to the potential of an indigenous American coalition to challenge the hemisphere's settler-colonial governments.

The move in chapter 5 from the early 1950s to the early 1990s produces a different lacuna in American Indian literary history than the more familiar one that runs from the 1920s to the 1960s, when N. Scott Momaday's 1968 novel *House Made of Dawn* inaugurated the Native American literary renaissance. By producing this gap, I suggest only that there are many literary histories still to recover and assess and that the field-wide production of a dominant literary history focused on the renaissance figures tends to impede this work.⁶⁸ In 1991, Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor published *Almanac of the Dead* and *The Heirs of Columbus*, respectively, in anticipation of the Columbian quincentennial. Indigenous Mexico figures prominently in both novels. Like Downing, Riggs, and McNickle, Silko and Vizenor see a Mexico that promises indigenous political strength, historical continuity, and cultural cohesion. Indeed, Sean Teuton's characterization of Red Power literature of the early renaissance era accurately describes the work on indigenous Mexico by Downing, Riggs, and McNickle: "During the era of Red Power, Native writers imagined a new narrative for Indian Country, and they did so neither by longing for an impossibly timeless past nor by disconnecting Indians' stories from the political realities of their lives. Instead, writers of the era struggled to better interpret a colonized world and then offered this new knowledge to empower the people."⁶⁹ These literary historical and political bonds among the earlier generation of writers, and two of the most celebrated American Indian renaissance authors, help to rehabilitate the reputation of this neglected era of American Indian literature.

Tribal Nations and Trans-Indianism in Greater Indian Territory

The Red Land to the South, in theory and practice, shifts constantly among distinct and overlapping territories and jurisdictions. It implements the tribal-nation specificity of Craig Womack and Daniel Justice in the chapters on Todd Downing and Lynn Riggs and in the readings of John Oskison and Will Rogers. Downing was born a citizen of the Choctaw Nation and Riggs, Oskison, and Rogers of the Cherokee Nation, and they witnessed the dissolution of their national governments. Their tribal-nation political and cultural identities remained important to them, however, and continued to inform their literary production. I will embed my readings of Downing and Riggs, Oskison, and Rogers, therefore, in Choctaw and Cherokee contexts, respectively, including those tribal nation-specific

contexts shaped by familial and local histories. I also rely on the tribal nation-specific work of anthropologists such as Valerie Lambert and Circe Sturm and historians such as Andrew Denson and Robert Conley. In the chapter on McNickle, I will focus primarily on his work within the broader pan- and intertribal American Indian literary contexts that Jace Weaver documents in such detail in his work and to which many other scholars gesture from a more specific tribal-nation base.

This study also shares with the work of scholars who identify as American Indian literary nationalists a concern for the politics of literature and literary criticism, particularly as those politics potentially influence contemporary efforts by tribal nations to practice self-government. Throughout *The Red Land to the South*, I follow the guidance of critics such as Justice, Weaver, and Womack, as well as Robert Warrior, who situate Native writing in those political contexts that are most urgent for Native peoples. In an assessment of the institutional history of the interpretation of American Indian writing, Crow Creek Sioux scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn observes that “the literatures themselves are rarely conceptualized as foundations for native political insight and action, and the result is that the study of their own literatures by tribal people becomes irrelevant to their lives.”⁷⁰ Downing’s, Riggs’s, and McNickle’s works are not only foundations for Native political insight and action; they are explicitly political in their narration of a revolutionary, anticolonial indigenous Mexico and an American Indian struggle—in McNickle’s novel a successful one—to maintain cohesive communities and nations. The works by Downing and Riggs in particular dramatize what Cook-Lynn calls a major feature of Native nationalism—retribution.

The pan- and intertribal contexts of American Indian political activity and U.S. and Mexican federal Indian and immigration policies, as documented by historians such as Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, Thomas Cowger, Daniel M. Cobb, Ben Fallaw, Donald Fixico, Alan Knight, Stephen E. Lewis, Rick López, and Mary Kay Vaughan, will also inform my readings. The making of Indian and immigration policy in the United States and Mexico diverges and converges throughout the four central decades of this study. In 1924, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Citizenship or Snyder Act. In that same year, it passed the National Origins Act and created the U.S. Border Patrol in response to illegal immigration and the smuggling of alcohol. Downing, Riggs, McNickle, and the other authors in this study were writing within this context and the

context of a U.S. national history shaped by the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936, the massive deportation and repatriation of Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans, and a Mexican national history of postrevolutionary nationalism that included indigenismo as well as land reform under President Lázaro Cárdenas.⁷¹ McNickle published his novel *Runner in the Sun* a decade into his work with the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) and during the era of termination and relocation in the United States in the 1950s. His work with the NCAI coincides in part with the federally sponsored guest worker or *bracero* program with Mexico, which ran from 1942 to 1964.

The Red Land to the South focuses primarily on the movement of American Indian minds and bodies across the U.S.-Mexican border, but it does so within the context of these other, often indigenous, removals and migrations. It is, therefore, a borderlands study, at least geographically. These authors see through that which is “vague and undetermined” in the Anzaldúan borderlands, or see through the “shifting mosaic of human spaces” in the fugitive landscapes of historian Samuel Truett’s borderlands, to a coherent indigenous world.⁷² This act of seeing is both historical recovery and political strategy, and it involves the derecognition of colonial and settler-colonial worlds and the borderlands that they produce. Their historical and political vision transforms Américo Paredes’s Greater Mexico, “all the areas inhabited by people of Mexican culture—not only within the present limits of the Republic of Mexico but in the United States as well—in a cultural rather than a political sense,” into both a Greater Indigenous Mexico and a Greater Indian Territory.⁷³

By mapping an indigenous American world that existed prior to the colonial era and that continues to span settler-colonial national borders, these authors produce an indigenous American transnational or transborder imaginary. This study thus participates in what Rachel Adams describes as the “‘transnational turn’ in American literary and cultural studies.”⁷⁴ Adams explains: “Many scholars have come to see the nation, which had long been the implicit organizing principle of much work in the field, as constrained by rigid borders and teleological narratives about the origin and destiny of the American people. Whereas once the ‘America’ of American studies could be assumed to lie within the geographical borders of the United States, this is no longer the case.” Instead, many American studies scholars have become “attentive to the significance of geography and place while seeking to avoid the limitations of an exclusively nation-based

paradigm.” “At its best,” she concludes, “[transnationalism] does not seek to ignore borders or to bypass the nation altogether, but to situate these terms within a broader global fabric.”⁷⁵ Adams uses the term “indigenous transnationalism” in her discussion of Silko and Thomas King “to describe these authors’ representation of the divisive, centrifugal forces of modernity that have dispersed North American Indians, but also of the drive to form coalitions across the boundaries of tribal nations and nation-states. In their work, such coalitions are not simply a reaction to the fractious power of the nation-state, but rather the resumption of alliances and networks of filiation that were severed by the conquest and its aftermath.”⁷⁶ This definition of indigenous transnationalism also accurately describes the work of the authors central to this study and therefore makes legible a literary and political link between the mid-twentieth century and the post-civil rights era. However, *The Red Land to the South* emphasizes tribal nations and other forms of indigenous community as major historical and political factors in the discussion. It makes an effort to consider the implications for American Indian literary history and politics of reading the “national” in “transnational” as referring to the tribal nation rather than the settler-colonial nation-states of the United States and Mexico and, in the case of Adams’s study, Canada.

The Red Land to the South also has an affiliation with *Mapping the Americas*, in which Shari Huhndorf considers the ways that “indigenous transnationalisms in particular extend existing American studies critiques of national identity and imperialism as they radically challenge the histories, geographies, and contemporary social relations that constitute America itself.”⁷⁷ Downing, Riggs, McNickle, and other writers in this study rigorously challenge these histories, geographies, and social relations in the generation preceding the renaissance. My interest is what these challenges suggest about the constitution of Native nations in the mid-twentieth century and in the indigenous futures these authors imagine. Therefore, while the transnationalism under my purview also “refers to alliances among tribes and the social structures and practices that transcend their boundaries, as well as processes on a global scale such as colonialism and capitalism,” I strive to maintain a focus on indigenous-to-indigenous relations.⁷⁸ These relations are transnational in the context of tribal nation to tribal nation, tribal nation to indigenous community, tribal nation to settler-colonial nation, or settler-colonial to settler-colonial nation. They are what Paul Lai and Lindsey Claire Smith call “alternative

contacts,” and they form the social component of an indigenous transnation, the aforementioned Greater Indigenous Mexico or Greater Indian Territory.⁷⁹

These relations are, as anthropologist Lynn Stephen explains, always more than transnational. Stephen uses “transborder” to describe the experience of indigenous Mexican immigrants to the United States beginning in the 1940s:

The borders they cross are ethnic, class, cultural, colonial, and state borders within Mexico as well as at the U.S.–Mexico border and in different regions of the United States. Regional systems of racial and ethnic hierarchies within the United States are different from those in Mexico and can also vary within the United States. Thus the ways that “Mexicans” and “Indians” have been codified in California and Oregon can differ from how they have been historically built into racial and ethnic hierarchies in New York or Florida. While crossing national borders is one kind of crossing undertaken by the subjects of this book, there are many others as well.⁸⁰

At times, indigenous Mexican immigrants also cross tribal-national borders or class and cultural borders between themselves and American Indians. The authors at the center of *The Red Land to the South* draw our attention to the indigenous American-specific histories of these border crossings and their potential contribution to political, cultural, and tribal-national revitalization efforts.

Downing culturally and McNickle and Vizenor narratively reconstitute these transnational and transborder experiences as tribal nation or tribal community-specific, and these contacts are at the moment they occur intertribal and trans-Indian but not pan-Indian. Robert Warrior explains a crucial difference between pan-Indianism and intertribalism in *The People and the Word* (2005). He uses as his example the Native prisoners at Fort Marion in the 1870s under the supervision of Richard Henry Pratt. Warrior views the interaction of the seventy-one prisoners—Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas, Comanches, and one Caddo—as an example of “the intertribal sociality that later helped produce American Indian powwow culture.”⁸¹ He elaborates, “People from different tribes at Fort Marion shared songs and their situation provided a forum for developing the ethic of respect for particularity and sameness that remains an ideal of

intertribal gatherings and organizations. Intertribalism, importantly, stands in marked contrast to Pan-Indianism, which seeks to blend and homogenize Native cultures.⁸² While Warrior indicates that intertribalism and pan-Indianism are incompatible, intertribalism and trans-Indianism, or the indigenous specific rejection of the borders of settler-colonial nations, work together to reject those nations as, for example, geographically, historically, or politically determinant of indigenous life.

The Red Land to the South contributes to the scholarship that documents Mexico's place in Chicana/o, U.S., and British cultural imaginaries and prepares the groundwork for various comparative studies. Historical, political, and cultural contexts shape the key distinctions among the views of Mexico held by American Indian writers, such as Riggs and Downing, and U.S. and British writers. D. H. Lawrence portrays indigenous Mexicans in his novel *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) as alien and repulsive; thus, their revolution is ominous. To Hart Crane and Graham Greene, indigenous Mexicans were unfathomable or a source of Mexican national evil and brutality.⁸³ Riggs and Downing, however, recognize a historical and cultural kinship with indigenous Mexicans. As denationalized citizens of the Cherokee and Choctaw nations, respectively, indigenous Mexican revolution held for them a promise of retribution or tribal-national revitalization. The politics of their representations of indigenous Mexico are coherent with the same representations in civil rights and post-civil rights era Chicana/o literature. The literary productions by Downing, Riggs, McNickle, Vizenor, and Silko are, in Ana Patricia Rodríguez's words, "fictions of solidarity."⁸⁴ These fictions privilege American Indian rather than indigenous Mexican subject positions, and writing them involved a process of appropriation. Yet these fictions of solidarity differ in historically and politically significant ways from Lawrence's fiction of an alien south or Kerouac's fiction of a "magic south" in *On the Road* (1957).⁸⁵ A comparative study of American Indian and Chicana/o fictions of indigenous Mexico would illuminate both literary histories and suggest other possibilities for political solidarity.

Instead, within the context of contemporary American Indian literary critical practice, *The Red Land to the South* assesses the pattern of narration and representation about indigenous Mexico only in the work of these American Indian writers. It offers several answers to the question posed by Womack in *Red on Red*: "How do Indians view Indians?"⁸⁶ Downing, Riggs, and McNickle view indigenous Mexicans as revolutionaries, while

Oskison and Rogers, for example, see a Mexican nation but appear not to see indigenous Mexicans at all. In the additional context of their depictions of historical and contemporary Cherokees, Choctaws, Osages, Salish, and American Indians more generally, these authors and the others under consideration in this study show a robust and prolific era of American Indian writing in which the real and imagined revolutions in Mexico speak with particular clarity to the next two generations of American Indian writers and intellectuals.

Renaissance Reconsidered

The surprising politics of the mid-twentieth-century writing by Downing, Riggs, and McNickle about Mexico, particularly in contrast to both their own work set in American Indian nations or the United States and the work of many other American Indian writers of the period, establishes an international route from these authors to the American Indian civil rights movement and literary renaissance of the next generation. A full accounting of the accomplishments of the writers of this interwar and early contemporary era forces a reconsideration of that renaissance as a movement that both emerged from a period of quiescence and dramatically redirected the course of American Indian literary history. In the decades between the progressive era and the first wave of the renaissance from 1968 to 1992, only McNickle has a secure place in the conversation, as a writer who serves as a bridge, though a very narrow one, between the two periods. *The Red Land to the South* begins to fill this lacuna in American Indian literary history by examining some of the astonishing amount of writing, much of it extraordinarily popular, by American Indians in this era.⁸⁷

One of the characteristics of this period, and perhaps one of the reasons for its marginal presence in American Indian literary studies, is the dominance of nonfiction, particularly history and biography.⁸⁸ There was not as much fiction, drama, or poetry by American Indian authors in the mid-twentieth century, but the authors who were publishing were popular and prolific. Mathews followed *Wah'kon-tah*, "a phenomenal success and [...] a featured selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club," with his novel *Sundown* (1934).⁸⁹ Oskison wrote numerous short stories and three novels. McNickle published two novels during his lifetime, while Downing published ten. Riggs wrote short stories, poems, at least eighteen one-act and full-length plays, and at least seven others that were produced but not

published. Phyllis Braunlich notes that critics discussed two of his plays, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931) and *Russet Mantle* (1936), as contenders for Pulitzer Prizes.⁹⁰ In addition to the posthumous publication of McNickle's novel *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978), Timothy B. Powell and Melinda Smith Mullikin have recovered Oskison's *The Singing Bird*, while Weaver has recovered Riggs's play *Out of Dust* (2003).

Ruth Muskrat Bronson, Ella Deloria, Downing, Sunshine Rider/Princess Atalie Unkalunt, Riggs, Rogers, and Luther Standing Bear represent an impressive group of American Indians with national reputations in writing, performance, and/or politics. Indeed, Rogers was one of the most popular writers and celebrities in the world in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹¹ He and the others also share the era with Nicholas Black Elk. His specific contributions to *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) only became clear more than fifty years after initial publication of the book, but the spiritual worldview associated with him has been influential both within and outside Native American communities since that time.⁹² Vine Deloria Jr. calls *Black Elk Speaks* "perhaps the only religious classic of this [the twentieth] century," and Arnold Krupat calls it "perhaps the single best-known Indian autobiography of all."⁹³ The public presence of American Indians in this period—in newspapers, on the radio, in film, on stage, in conversation with presidents—is comparable to the preceding and succeeding periods.⁹⁴

The Red Land to the South introduces to a contemporary audience some of the American Indian writers of this neglected interwar and early contemporary era. They are a diverse and prolific group with a broad range of political affiliations. However, the anticolonial spirit of some of their work, as they articulate it within an indigenous Mexican landscape, speaks across the generations to contemporary critics interested in the political projects to which American Indian literatures might contribute within tribal-nation contexts and on behalf of tribal-nation sovereignty. This study attends to the "refiguring of the period to take into account the multiplicity of voices" and thus joins a project that Warrior contends in *Tribal Secrets* "has become an obvious necessity in American Indian critical studies."⁹⁵ It attempts to move the authors' writing during this period from the margins to a more prominent place in the field. It argues, too, that these middle decades of the twentieth century constitute a major era of American Indian literary production on par with the eras that frame it. We cannot understand the accomplishments of either the preceding reform era or the succeeding American Indian literary renaissance without a

comprehensive view of the writers and writer-activists at work between 1920 and 1960. In particular, the continuities of intellectual and political purpose will appear surprising when viewed against conventional American Indian literary history.