

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Sovereign Bones: New Native American Writing, Vol II. Edited by Eric Gansworth.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7rz8550g>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 32(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Miranda, Deborah A.

Publication Date

2008-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

and the 1894 Constitution of the Choctaw Nation, to lesser-known efforts such as the constitutions of the San Carlos Apache, Laguna Pueblo, and the Klamath. Reference to traditional governance forms such as the chieftainships of the Metlakahla and the Oglala of Pine Ridge is also included.

Thus, contrary to received wisdom, Cohen and his BIA colleagues were cognizant of the pitfalls attending the IRA and its goals for “reorganizing” Indian tribes in the image of US constitutional democracy, and at least some nominal effort was made to acknowledge and accommodate the unique history and sociocultural circumstances of each tribe.

Although the “Basic Memorandum” might spark a reconsideration of Cohen’s legacy, Wilkins is quick to point out that this remains a potentiality that cannot be taken too far. For despite the terms of the memorandum, a “model” constitution was actually drafted by Cohen’s committee, and there exists evidence that this model was provided to at least some tribes during the constitution drafting process. Wilkins also explains that, for a few other tribes, a plan was in place for BIA officials to proffer complete drafts of entire constitutions, which would only later be submitted for review by the tribes to be governed by them.

So for now, at least, what impact the discovery and publication of Cohen’s “Basic Memorandum” will ultimately have for our understanding of Cohen’s legacy remains unknown, along with federal Indian law and policy in relation to it. Although this indeterminacy may characterize the document it brings to light, it is indisputable that Wilkin’s volume is a must-have for any serious scholar of Native American governance, federal Indian law, or the life and work of Felix Cohen.

Justin B. Richland

University of California, Irvine

Sovereign Bones: New Native American Writing, Vol II. Edited by Eric Gansworth. New York: Nation Books, 2007. 352 pages. \$17.95 paper.

I am sorry to say that reading the foreword by Oren Lyons tempted me to put aside the remaining three hundred-odd pages of this collection. Lyons pronounces that “language is the soul of a Nation. It provides the foundation for identity, and, with land in place, this provides a sense of family and security. It is the storehouse of indigenous knowledge” (xvi). His words are beautiful. His words are honorable. His words do not address anything I know about being Indian. The Esselen do not have our language; we do not have our land. Uh-oh, I thought. My storehouse is empty. This book has nothing to offer a straggly, scrappy, English-only speaking Mission Indian with no reservation and, evidently, no soul. I continued on anyway, reading essays in each direction that the four sections took me. I discovered that Eric Gansworth has done something brilliant: he has managed to put together a collection that actually represents the wide spectrum of contemporary Indian identities and Indian efforts to create and present those identities on our own terms.

The walls and shelves at my father's apartment, and those of other relatives his age, are often inhabited by Plains Indians in various stages of anguish or ferocity (usually involving running down monstrous buffalo while on horseback). Teepees nestle snugly in the snow of the Dakotas and beautiful Indian maidens swoon in white leather dresses with Victoria's Secret cleavage. This might make some sense if we were from a Plains tribe ourselves. But we are California Indians, Mission Indians, Chumash, Ohlone, Costanoan, Esselen Indians from the coast of Central and Southern California, where you didn't need a pony to chase down those majestic abalone or rolling acorns, and clothing was usually a decorative afterthought.

Why, then, do my older relatives collect this fetishized Indianness? Because, when they were younger, they hungered for representations of their ancestry—any representation—and the only thing available to them that was not a drunk or a whore were these fantasies of the master race. Even though they knew we didn't belong to the Souvenir Kitsch Tribe, something was better than the nothing of total erasure. Now, after the hard work of many, we no longer have to make that choice.

Hence, the authors in *Sovereign Bones* are mixed-bloods, full-bloods, urban Indians, rez Indians; some have no Native language whatsoever, others speak theirs fluently. Still others are learning their Native languages as adults, knowing full well that fluency will never come. These writers are professors, novelists, actors, musicians, playwrights, yo-yo champions, visual artists, doctors, performance artists, lawyers, guardians of traditional knowledge, activists, and deejays. *Sovereign Bones* asserts that diversity of the indigenous population in North America is breathtaking, and that in our differences lies our healing.

Gansworth gathered work from the expected "big names" such as Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Maurice Kenny, Simon Ortiz, and Joy Harjo, while also bringing to our attention younger voices with new (sometimes raw) passion. In part 1, "Repatriating Ourselves," "Creation Story" by Sara M. Ortiz gets my vote as embodying the in-your-face gutsiness that reclamation demands. "I am afraid as I am writing this," she tells us, "I am afraid of what may emerge. I am afraid that the words won't come out right and that, when you read this, you will not understand me. *I will write it anyway*" (69, italics added). Like a creation story for the entire collection, images of emergence fill this narrative, battling with images of destruction. "The doctor brought me into this world in a south side hospital delivery room," the narrator informs us, "but my mother was the one who fed me to the coyotes" (70). Her anger smolders throughout, then flares up: "in response to the question 'where is the movement now?': **we are the children of the movement**, and we are dying, we are killing ourselves in record numbers. *this is where your movement is now.*" Yet Ortiz ends with sunrise, the moment of rebirth: "Morning; it has come" (78, emphasis in original).

In part 2, "Speaking through Our Nation's Teeth," the delightfully flirtatious images created by Heid Erdrich wooed me. In "Wooden Heart, *Dopwin*, Language Table," Heid lets us in on her romance, her heart's desire, her life-changing relationship with the Language Table, a gathering of Ojibwe-language-loving students and teachers. Sometimes real, sometimes virtual,

the Language Table inspires Erdrich to muse, “think of Language Table as the modern-day equivalent of standing outside a girl’s lodge with a blanket, playing love songs on a bird-shaped flute. Now an indigenous boy must make his name in the Word Wars to show he would make a good father, one who would teach his children to speak their language” (110). Practicality and fantasy ride side-by-side in this essay, documenting the tremendous effort—and love—necessary to speak and retain our languages.

Part 3, “Snagging the Eye from Curtis,” deals explicitly with Native control of Native representations (thus pulling eyes away from non-Native stereotypes in favor of self-representative images) in several powerful pieces by Sherman Alexie, Susan Powers, and a knock-out essay by Diane Glancy, among others. Diane Fraher’s “It Won’t Play—There’s Not Enough Indians,” however, struck me as a quiet, stubborn thorn in Curtis’s camera lens. A brief account of her efforts to make the film “The Reawakening,” this essay lays out the bones of racism in Hollywood, particularly anti-Indian sentiments and stereotypes. Offered a “few [casting] suggestions on a pro bono basis,” Fraher realizes that none of those suggestions fit with her knowledge of the indigenous characters. “The illusion of how non-Natives saw us was intruding once again,” she says, “. . . it was obvious to me that she had become an expert on casting Natives by watching so many phony Indians in Hollywood films” (200). The bitterness in this essay is couched in humor and sarcasm; the realities of being Indian in a white-dominated industry are clear.

Part 4, “Rolling Those Sovereign Bones,” takes a gamble into the future as Native writers, artists, and musicians continue to do the complicated work of being Indian. Joy Harjo’s essay, “Comings and Goings in Indian Country: Spiraling from a Blog,” lifts her words right off the Internet, and James Thomas Stevens, in “E-Socials: Cultural Collaboration in the Age of the Electronic Inter-Tribal,” gleefully recounts his trading of traditional Mohawk work-songs for Samoan songs by using e-mail with a friend as a writing project. These two essays alone serve to point out to readers that much of Indian country is now, and will continue to be, in the virtual realm. Just as importantly, Janet McAdams’s essay “From Betty Creek: Writing the Indigenous Deep South” reminds us that mixed-blood Indians serve as crucial connections between past and future. Describing her stay at a writing retreat where the land “*used to be Cherokee*,” McAdams takes us on a bushwhacking journey through the dark and obscured history of being “part Creek” in the Deep South. She resurfaces to look around at the retreat, at the white writers who want to know how much Indian she is, then dives into her computer screen to Google the name of a Cherokee woman rumored to have stayed behind during Removal. Which part of her is Indian? McAdams offers her interrogator first a pinky finger, then a whole leg, thinking, “If this were an after-school special, I suppose I could thump my chest just over my heart and say, ‘Here! This part.’ But this is real life, which is inexact and messy” (294). This fine essay is a vivid snapshot of the collection as a whole, focusing on the dangers of difference, the desire for identity.

The phrase “differently abled” is sometimes used to describe the population commonly called “disabled.” An awkward politically correct construction, it nevertheless reminds us that everyone has abilities—just different abilities.

This strikes me as a particularly useful way to reverb racial identity. Native Americans, quite simply, can only flourish when we acknowledge that we are “differently Indianed.” Speaking his Native language works for Oren Lyons. Playing saxophone, singing, and writing poetry in English work for Joy Harjo. Both contribute to the survivance and thrivance of their individual nations, and it’s about damn time we accepted the tribal and experiential differences from which our strengths spring.

Genocide of the Mind, edited by MariJo Moore (2003), volume I of this set, worked to document both forced assimilation and indigenous resistance, revealing one of the biggest dangers: that in our effort to resist, we force ourselves into rigid categories that literally cut off and dismember parts of ourselves. *Sovereign Bones* takes the next step: asserting the right to both a collective Native community and identity *and* to individual, tribal identities—and beyond that, the right to be Native artists and writers who choose their own representations of self. Sovereign, right down to the bone.

Deborah A. Miranda

Washington and Lee University

Three Plays: The Indolent Boys, Children of the Sun, and the Moon in Two Windows. By N. Scott Momaday. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. 177 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning Kiowa author of *House Made of Dawn*, N. Scott Momaday has created another series of literary masterpieces to add to his opus: the two plays “The Indolent Boys” and “Children of the Sun” and the screenplay *The Moon in Two Windows*. In previous works, such as *House Made of Dawn*, *The Man Made of Words*, *In the Bear’s House*, *The Ancient Child*, and *The Names*, poetic language becomes a vehicle for cultural expression and storytelling. Similarly, in *Three Plays*, the expression of identity through storytelling and drama is Momaday’s cardinal preoccupation.

In “The Indolent Boys,” Momaday describes a tragedy that occurred in 1891 when three young boys ran away from the Kiowa Indian Boarding School at Anadarko, Oklahoma after the eldest boy had been whipped for fighting. The three boys froze to death during a terrible storm as they sought to return to their families. The Kiowas, enraged and grief-stricken, desired to obtain revenge and threatened war while the administrator responsible for administering punishment to the boys, the pugnacious Mr. Wherrit, hid in the rafters of the school and escaped. As Momaday indicates in his eloquent description of the play, this event is marked in the pictographic calendars of the Kiowas. “The Indolent Boys” relates to *The Moon in Two Windows* because both play and screenplay deal with genocidal boarding school policies often associated with Richard Henry Pratt, a haughty Eurocentrist who felt that the only way Native Americans could survive in a white world was to “kill the Indian and save the man.”

In “The Indolent Boys,” Barton Wherrit is a callous, self-centered man whose cowardice is revealed at the end of the play. In his report documenting