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The Dirt is Red Here: Art and Poetry from Native California
(review)

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Margaret Dubin, ed. *The Dirt is Red Here: Art and Poetry from Native California*. Berkeley CA: Heyday Books, 2002. xiv + 82 pp.

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Why is it that when we review books we only talk about the content of the book and not the book itself? When we read or teach a poem, we usually draw attention not simply to the thematic qualities of the poem but also to its formal elements—the way it sounds, how it's put together, the way it looks. In short, why *don't* we judge a book by its cover?

I raise this issue in regard to *The Dirt is Red Here* for two reasons. The first is largely inconsequential, but I think it bears mentioning here. The second I'll try to use as springboard for a less topical review of what actually comprises this anthology. To my first point: when I picked up *The Dirt is Red Here* for the very first time and opened the front cover, it fell apart in my hands. Literally, the binding completely came unglued, and pages tumbled to the floor. Normally, this wouldn't bother me, as I have dozens of books that are coming apart at the seams, but this particular incident disappointed because the book and its binding were new in every way. I mean, it had never been used as a coaster or a makeshift writing surface. I hadn't trashed the spine making illegal copies for my classes or cracking the spine to save my place when I went to answer the phone. It simply fell apart, and in my mind, new books shouldn't do that.

However, the real reason the poor binding disappointed is because *The Dirt is Red Here* is a beautiful book—a fact that I hope will serve as a moderately elegant segue into my second point. Comprised of poems, photographs, paintings and reproductions of sculptures, this collection of texts is so well done in terms of layout, graphics and document design, it is doubly painful that the binding was at variance with the quality of the internal aesthetics of the book. It feels lovingly put together, carefully laid out, meticulously planned. The poems and paintings work well together. The thick glossy pages feel good to the touch. The balance of text, image and white space suggests a keen eye and an artist's sensibility. In brief, when the cover is not falling off and the pages not coming unhinged, the book is a model of sophisticated design and printing and demands to be regarded as such.

And it is the art that sets this book apart from other similar anthologies. Of course, there are poems from some of my favorite poets, such as Janice Gould, Deborah Miranda, and Wendy Rose. So, I already have the poems reprinted by these folks. That being said, I did enjoy the work of Stephen Meadows. In fact, the first line of his poem "Grass Valley" provides the title of the collection itself. "Reweaving the World Ohlone," the final poem in the collection, serves as a kind of metonym for the book, making palpable connections between art, artisans, renewal, movement, beauty. I was also moved by Shaunna Oteka McCovey's provocative poem "I Still Eat All of My Meals with a Mussel Shell." Two poems woven into one bolded and italicized text, McCovey's piece moves like a Native L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poem, though it remains much more interesting and resonant than most from that genre, and I found myself going back to that poem as much as any other.

But it was the paintings and the photographs that kept arresting me. Well-known artists like Harry Fonseca and Frank Lapena sidle up alongside newcomers (for me) like Frank Tuttle, Bradley Marshall, and the photographer Lorencita Carpenter. Carpenter's photographs stood out among the other visual texts, first, because they are photographs and not paintings, installations, or regalia, but secondly, because their subject matter is not overtly "Native" whatever that may mean. I still don't know what her photo "Fresh" *is*, exactly, but I like it nonetheless.

I first came across Mike Rodriguez's work recently, on a trip to Sacramento, and I became an immediate fan. His copper etching "Untitled" is among the most beguiling texts in the book. Divided into four quadrants, the petroglyphic etchings merge abstract and figural gestures. It looks like parchment, windows, a book, tiles, a tapestry, stone. I was also taken by Fritz Scholder's work. His "Indian Kitsch" is perhaps my favorite in the entire collection. A photo collage from 1979, the piece tessellates eighteen photographs of the heads of Indian stereotypes. It's a disturbing amalgamation of dolls, statuettes, photographs and carvings. It recalls (or predicts) Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's "Paper Dolls," though it is quieter and less textual than Smith's. And, it will work its way into my classes immediately. Scholder's other pieces, including the abstract expressionist, "Indian Land," are no less political but altogether more aesthetically oriented, and they, too, are impossible to gloss over.

Even so, the artist whose work I kept coming back to is Rick Bartow. I've always admired his paintings, but for me, they stood out beyond anything else in the book. A cross between Smith, Scholder, Francis Bacon, and Paul Klee, Bartow's canvases simultaneously startle and appeal. The figures, whether foxes or bears or birds are both petroglyphic and simply graphic. There always seems to be more going on in them than mere representation, and the paintings' ground is both uncertain and structured—a reality that is always another reality. And yet not. And then there are the colors. I tend not to be moved by the wispy primary colored canvases in every gallery in Santa Fe, but Bartow problematizes the color schemes in his work. They are always in dialogue with the figures, instead of in service to them. His painting on the title page, "Coyote and the Dust Devil XVI" is marvelous.

For some time now, I have had a vision for a book about Native Oklahoma. It would collect stories, poems, essays, photos, paintings, and music about Oklahoma by Native artists and writers. The book would provide a series of unique lenses through which one could get varying perspectives on what makes Oklahoma Native realities fundamentally *Oklahoman*. So, beyond the binding issue, if I have any real complaints with *The Dirt is Red Here* it's that dirt is also red in Oklahoma; and I don't learn much about California. As a recent transplant, that is of major interest to me. But, I don't want to detract from the vision or the execution of this book, so I will end with an appropriately positive observation—the collection of texts assembled in this book is both an aesthetic and an ethic. It doesn't just show us how Native artists and writers see the world, it helps us see the world through these lenses that refocus our attention on what it is we are all trying to do here: communicate. And what this text ultimately communicates is that there are still California Indians in California. They are alive, well, and doing good work.

What's more, I eventually was given another copy of *The Dirt is Red Here*, and like the contributors to this important book—it's holding together and doing just fine.