

Contemporary Indigenous American Poetry

DEAN RADER

Scurrying Dashes of Ink

As I was completing this chapter in the early days of 2018, something remarkable was happening in the world of American letters: a first book of poems by an Indigenous woman was utterly altering the map of contemporary American poetry. That book was shortlisted for the National Book Award, was named a finalist for the prestigious Griffin Prize, and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. It also appeared on pretty much every “Best of the Year” list imaginable, including those of the *Washington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Lit Hub*. The same book appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*’s 100 Notable Books of 2017, was named a noted title for 2017 by the Academy of American Poets, and singled out in Dan Chiasson’s “Poetry I Was Grateful For in 2017” in the *New Yorker*. The book’s author even graced the cover of *Poets & Writers Magazine* as one of “Ten Writers Who Can Change the World.” I’m referring, of course, to Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Sioux) and her hugely successful *Whereas*, which, in addition to the many accolades, received more reviews (and more overwhelmingly positive reviews) than any book of poetry by a Native writer in recent history.

Why is this remarkable?

First, the mainstream American poetry community has never known, exactly, what to do with Indigenous poets or poetry. In general, the literary establishment withholds honors from Native writers until they have proven themselves “worthy.” Recently, Joy Harjo (Mvskoke) captured two major awards, including the 2015 Wallace Stevens Prize from the Academy of American Poets and the 2017 Ruth Lily Poetry Prize from the Poetry Foundation. Both awards are among the most lucrative (\$100,000 each) and the most prestigious. As significant as these honors are – and they do solidify

Harjo's spot in the canon of post-1945 American verse – they are both lifetime achievement awards. And, indeed, with the 2019 announcement of her position as Poet Laureate of the United States, Harjo has emerged as the most important Indigenous American poet of her generation. But Long Soldier's collection is her *first*. It is impossible to think of any debut book by a Native writer that has garnered so much attention so immediately.

The success of Long Soldier's book suggests we are at a major turning point in how readers, publishers, and cultural gatekeepers consider and evaluate Native poetics; her book is a bellwether. Indeed, as I write this, there are three different anthologies of contemporary American Indian poetry by three influential presses in the works.¹ What's more, Native poetry seems to be on the American literary radar like never before. In addition to Long Soldier, Tommy Pico's (Kumeyaay) *IRL* was among the most popular books of 2017, and recent collections by Orlando White (Diné-Naaneesh't'ézhi Tábaahí), Jennifer Elise Foerster (Mvskoke), Julian Talmantez Brolaski (Mescalero and Lipan Apache), Bojan Lewis (Navajo Nation-Naakai Dine'é) Elise Paschen (Osage), Heid Erdrich (Ojibwe Turtle Mountain), and Joan Naviyuk Kane (Inupiaq) have all been published with acclaim and received rave reviews. *The Kenyon Review* devoted an entire issue of its micro-reviews to Native poetry, Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d'Alene) became the first Indigenous poet to be invited to edit the venerable *Best American Poetry* series, and Natalie Diaz (Mojave) continues to be at the forefront of any conversation about race, class, and politics in American poetry. Most importantly, presses with cultural cache in the larger poetry and academic community – like Wave Books, Copper Canyon, Graywolf, University of Pittsburgh Press, Norton, and Tin House – that have not traditionally published Native poets are now not only signing but actively seeking them. This matters because it suggests that publishers are now willing to see Native poetry not simply as *story* or *culture* but as *art*. Finally, readers, critics, professors, and reviewers seem just as interested in *how* a poet writes, not just *what*. My only regret with this chapter is that I am writing it now and not in three or five years, when, I predict, the cartography of Indigenous American poetry will have changed more than in the previous twenty. But the future is the past. Let's see how we got here to see where we're going.

¹ *New Poets of Native Nations*, ed. Heid E. Erdrich appeared in 2018 from Graywolf Press; Joy Harjo and LeAnne Howe are working on an anthology of Native poetry for Norton, and Cindy Fuhrman and I have just completed an anthology of contemporary Indigenous poetry for Tupelo Press, entitled *Native Voices: Indigenous American Poetry, Craft and Conversation*, which appeared in April 2019.

What was Native poetry like in the 1980s and 1990s – around the time Layli Long Soldier was born? I tend to think of these decades as a time of solidification of Native poetry within the larger American literary canon. The 1980s saw important figures like Lance Henson (Cheyenne/Oglala Sioux) and Maurice Kenny (Mohawk) release their selected poems, perhaps signaling the end of a generation; for at the same time, we start seeing the groundbreaking work of a new generation, like Ray A. Young Bear (Meskwaki)'s *Winter of the Salamander: The Keeper of Importance* (1981), Louise Erdrich's (Ojibwe) *Jacklight* (1984), Simon Ortiz's (Acoma Pueblo) *From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which Is Our America* (1981), and Harjo's *She Had Some Horses* (1983). Around this time Native writers began to appear in major American anthologies, which meant the birth of canonized Native poems, most notably Harjo's "She Had Some Horses" and Erdrich's "Dear John Wayne." By the 1990s, it was obvious that the dynamite talent of American Indian writers was about to explode. Young Bear's *The Invisible Musician: Poems* appeared in 1990, and in 1990, Harjo's *In Mad Love and War* won the prestigious William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America, the first such award granted to a Native poet. Similarly, the 1990s gave birth both to influential first books, and to first books to be published by a major press for poets as diverse as Alexie, Young Bear, Janice Gould (Koyoonk'auwi (Concow)), Elizabeth Woody (Confederate Tribes of Warm Springs), Esther Belin (Diné), Gloria Bird (Spokane), Adrian C. Louis (Lovelock Paiute), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), and Linda Hogan (Chickasaw). Here we saw the emergence of the second generation of Native poets, many of whom were born in the 1950s and 1960s, went to graduate creative writing programs, and held (or hold) steady university teaching positions.

Similarly, Native poets began in this era to be associated with specific presses and publishers. Independent presses like Hanging Loose Press, White Pine, Thunder's Mouth, Greenfield Review Press, Coffee House Press, and West End Press were the only places many of the poets here could get book contracts. However, we all owe a great debt to the University of Arizona Press's Sun Tracks series, which established itself in the 1990s as the premiere publishing venue for Native poets and initiated one of the most significant projects in poetry publishing in the country, releasing – and keeping in print – canonical books by Ortiz, Louis, Woody, Belin, Wendy Rose (Hopi and Miwok) Luci Tapahonso (Diné), Carter Revard (Osage), Laura Tohe (Diné), and many others. The decade (and the millennium) ended with Native poets exploring not just local issues of land, family, and story, but also larger global and political concerns such as alcoholism, poverty, dislocation, colonialism, and the history of institutional racism.

I had hoped at this point in the chapter to make sharp and perhaps even brilliant distinctions between Indigenous poetry written and published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and the poetry produced in the 2000s. However, I find it impossible to make broad generalizations about the multigenerational poetry that I have been reading, teaching, and writing about for these past eighteen years. As the invited expert on this field, that makes me a little sad; but as a teacher and reader and writer, that makes me happy because it suggests that Native poets are expanding what it means to be “Native poets” in ways that are difficult to catalog and categorize. Robert Warrior (1995, 117) writes that “Perhaps the greatest lesson of Indian poetry is that ... it does not have to dress up in beads and feathers in order to be powerful.” By this, I believe Warrior means that Native poetry does not have to over-perform its Nativeness, that it does not have to rely on what some might see as stereotypical Indian themes, in order to be impactful (or “Indigenous”).

To be sure, Native poetry is still interested in taking on issues that affect Native communities and individuals, but to my mind, Indigenous American poetry in the 2000s and 2010s is experiencing what we might call a revolution of representation; that is, I think Native poets are reimagining how to represent Indigenous experiences, beliefs, ideologies, histories, and hopes. I say this because many Native poets seem just as interested in formal concerns as in thematic ones. In a 2017 interview, Diné poet Sherwin Bitsui talks repeatedly about how, for him, poetic creation is an ongoing process about, first and foremost, craft: “‘how do I compose this? What is the form for this particular piece?’ And somewhere in the midst of me trying to figure out what the form was, I said to myself ‘I want to create a poem that floods’” (Viñas 2007). Here, as in much of the interview, Bitsui articulates the act of poetic creation as a *formal* dilemma. Similarly, I am struck by the action he wants his poems to *do*, rather than what he wants the poems to *say*. Increasingly, I see a real emphasis on craft, aesthetics, syntax, and what I think of as lyric ambition.

This is significant because an enhanced focus on form often leads to an elevated sense of indeterminacy, which also means, for the reader, a more problematic process of interpretation. Put more simply, a more experimental, more aesthetically organized text is more likely to be – or create the fear of being – misread. One might say the same for a poem whose “theme” or subject matter falls outside the proscribed (or prescribed) areas of particular fields. Combine the two, and you get a new Native poetics – one that works hard and is not afraid to ask the reader to work hard as well.

One needs only to thumb through the *Harper's Anthology* in order to see what I mean. Almost every poem is left-justified, predictably lineated, and wholly vertical. There are a few prose poems but not many. One or two poets (Peter Blue Cloud in particular) experiment to some degree with form, but overall, most of the poems look like each other, and a good many of them sound like each other as well. One of Warrior's potentially unintended subtexts actually speaks to this. I think for many years, Native poets infused their poems with a notable sense of orality as a means of distinguishing themselves from European and European American poetry, which has, for the last 500 years, foregrounded itself as a genre that is first and foremost, *written* (as opposed to *spoken*). If anything distinguishes recent Native poetry from its past, it is a heightened interest in textuality, in written-ness. Note, for example, this short poem by Alexie, entitled "Survivorman":

Here's a fact: Some people want to live more
Than others do. Some can withstand any horror
While others will easily surrender
To thirst, hunger, and extremes of weather.
In Utah, one man carried another
Man on his back like a conjoined brother
And crossed twenty-five miles of desert
To safety. Can you imagine the hurt?
Do you think you could be that good and strong?
Yes, yes, you think, but you're probably wrong. (Alexie 2009)

First published in the *New Yorker* in 2009, "Survivorman" is a beguiling poem. The first thing I notice is Alexie's deployment of the rarely used heroic couplet. Few literary forms are more effete, more old-fashioned, and more European. It even feels strange for the *New Yorker*. It reminds me of a poem of Alexie's that ran in the *New Yorker* two years later, "The Facebook Sonnet," which adheres, rather strictly, to the conventions of a Shakespearean sonnet. Both poems fully embrace received forms, and both eschew overt Indigenous signifiers. Perhaps these details are what appealed to Paul Muldoon and the *New Yorker*. Regardless, they mark an interesting moment in Native poetry. Arguably America's most famous Native author – and perhaps the most famous living American Indian – lands two poems in America's most prestigious magazine, but neither poem intervenes in family dysfunction, reservation tragedies, or colonial transgressions in a way that readers *expect* from

Alexie's work – and perhaps also from Native poetry in general. When this poem appeared, I sent a link to it to a few friends, both writers and scholars. No one loved it. One in particular didn't care for the poem because it didn't "sound like Alexie," and another didn't know what to make of it because it seemed "a departure" for him. When I showed "The Facebook Sonnet" to some students who adore Alexie's fiction, they, too, balked. One asked why I thought Alexie had "sold out." It would appear that for some readers – perhaps many – sonnets, Facebook, and the *New Yorker* do not signify *Indian* with any real authenticity.

I want to challenge that assumption and make a case for Native poetry, in part because Native poetry is making a case for a new way of looking at itself. To explain, I'll quote Alexie quoting Harjo:

Joy Harjo, who's a Creek Indian poet and a jazz musician, was once asked by a white reporter why she played the saxophone, since it's not an Indian instrument.

And she said: "It is when I play it." (Fassler 2013)

The sonnet is not an Indian instrument, but it is when Alexie plays it. Heroic couplets are not, traditionally, Indian poetic forms, but they are when Alexie makes them. The ghazal, an ancient Middle Eastern form, is not traditionally considered part of Indian poetics, but it is when Natalie Diaz shreds it:

Santa Teresa, *torero*, sacrificed her body to the pale horns. A First Confession: the split fruit made my thighs buck under my red dress.

What hips! *Péndulos*. And breasts! Clocks adorning the dim hallways of kiss – there is chiming and hands beneath the red dress.

Men crouch, crotches tremulous in the creaking ribcage of a horse. Who hasn't beat the gates of Troy for a taste of Helen's red dress?

(Diaz 2012, 87)

These lines are from Diaz's excellent poem "Lorca's Red Dresses," a seductive ghazal that channels the erotic intensity of the famed Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. These very words written by, say, Rita Dove, would signify one thing, but they do different work by Diaz, especially when the reader gets to this poem near the end of her wonderful book *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Suddenly, Lorca becomes an Indian instrument, as does the Trojan Horse, the Trojan War, perhaps even all of the *Iliad*.

Some readers and critics are tempted to see Alexie's and Diaz's use of received Western forms as examples of appropriation and even a kind of poetic Stockholm Syndrome. But that limits art; it requires art to be *Indian* in

order to be Indian. It also overlooks another critical reality – *any* poem written in English is a text expressed in the language of the colonizer. Over the past decade or so, I have become particularly interested in poets who use English, the language of America, as non-American acts. Or, put another way, I am attracted to poets who mold, twist, slice, and stretch English for their own aesthetic (and poetic) purposes. After his family was murdered in Nazi Death camps, Paul Celan declared war on the German language – no postwar poet wrecked it more. Celan wanted to do to his language what the Nazis did to his family and his people. Hannah Arendt argued that there could be no poetry after the Holocaust; but what about the Indigenous holocaust? How do you make beauty out of terror? Can one make art out of the same language one successfully used to order and legislate the deaths of millions?

I am not sure that Diné poets Sherwin Bitsui and Orlando White are asking these precise questions, but I am not sure that they are *not*. White and Bitsui are writing some of the most interesting poetry being published today. Bitsui's *Shapeshift* (2003) and *Flood Song* (2009) and White's *Bone Light* (2009) and *LETTERS* (2017b) chart entirely new territory for Indigenous poetics. Unlike much Native poetry from the 1970s and 1980s that was largely about *telling*, that had as its core mission, understandability, White and Bitsui gravitate toward an ellipticism marked by brevity, elision, and interiority. In Bitsui's "Apparition," for example, blanks and clipped lines send the message that the world is, among other things, fragmented, indeterminate, absent:

I haven't _____
 since smoke dried to salt in the lakebed,
 since crude oil dripped from his parting slogan,
 the milk's sky behind it,
 birds chirping from its wig. (Bitsui 2003, 8)

Many of Bitsui's poems question how different values, concepts, and ideas are when experienced in Navajo as opposed to English. In fact, at times, English (and its poetic tradition) feels more like an enemy than a mode of connection: "Read this, / understand their language, / or sleep in a bottle of broken nails for the rest of your life" (Bitsui 2003, 59). The poet is speaking to the poet, but also to us. More than poetry is at stake here, but poetry is the means by which the *more than* gets delivered.

Bitsui ratchets things up in *Flood Song*, a series of interconnected and untitled poems that draw, equally it seems, from the Dinétah landscape and the legacies of surrealism. For example, in one poem, Bitsui begins

with a series of unanswerable questions, each one a little longer and less abstract but paradoxically more inscrutable:

*What land have you cast from the blotted-out region of your face?
 What nation stung by watermarks was filmed out of extinction and brought forth
 resembling frost?
 What offspring must jump through the eye of birth to be winked at when covered
 with brick sweat?
 What ache piled its planks on the corner pier, now crumbles onto motionless
 water, sniffed at by forest smoke?
 What makes this song a string of beads seized by cement cracks when the camera
 climbs through the basement window – winter clouds coiling through its
 speckled lens?
 What season cannot locate an eye in the dark of the sound of the sun gyrating
 into red ocher after I thought you noticed my language was half wren, half
 pigeon and, together, we spoke a wing pattern on the wall that was raised
 to keep “us” out, there where “calling” became “culling,” “distance”
 distanced, in a mere scrape of enamel on yellow teeth? (Bitsui 2009, 13)*

The macro level of this poem is beguiling, to say the least, but its micro elements (“land” – “nation” – “offspring” – “ache” – “song”) drill down to something concrete. Octavio Paz writes in one of his poems “I see without looking”; here, Bitsui asks us to look at that which the camera cannot capture, what we cannot see but only imagine. Or perceive. Or remember. What do we know through our unknowing? What do we intentionally mis-understand, the way we might mis-hear “calling” and “culling”? What I love about Bitsui’s work is how he simultaneously questions language and yet puts whatever faith he might have in it. Early in the book, he writes: “I step onto the gravel path of swans paved across lake scent, / wrap this blank page around the exclamation point slammed between us” (Bitsui 2009, 5). Blank page. Exclamation point. Everything eventually ends with the textual.

White also loves to go textual; however, he sees language as a means to an end – if not also an end in itself. For him, letters are works of art, little people, signs and symbols of liberation and confinement. In the opening piece of *Bone Light*, “To See Letters,” White makes an emotional connection with the alphabet as a means of populating his poetic landscape:

Everything I write requires this: Alphabet.

It was a notion I did not know when I was six years old. In kindergarten I was more interested in the image of a letter on a flash card. I noticed its shape distinguishing itself from its background. Then, with my eyes I tore the O in half. In that moment I felt language separate from its form. (2009, 13)

The rest of the book explores the ways in which letters become larger than what they embody, while at the same time reimagining letters completely stripped of their associations, enjoyed merely for their graphical beauty. The best of these is a series of poems on the letters “I” and “J,” which Gabriel Gomez praises in his review of the book: “The poems of *Bone Light* are unforced and unpatterned. They are stylistically risky and refreshingly non-committal to form and tradition, but engage the reader fully” (“Skeletal Allusions”). Gomez is correct, of course, but what he misses is White’s subtle dissection of the building blocks of the discourse, the language, the letters, the linguistic machinery, of Manifest Destiny.

LETTERS, not surprisingly, also traffics in the semiotics of letters. One sequence of poems writes the reader through the first segment of the alphabet with titles like “a,” “b,” “c,” “d,” and so on, up through “h” where the letter poems stop, at least for the time being, at a poem called “WHIT,” which acknowledges its letterness:

There’s a silence on paper that does not require ears only the reverberation
of a page turning –

She asks, *so how does it feel to be a letter?*
She waits for him to notice her. She is exclamation-like
but upended, her feet tiptoeing,
balletic in her black tutu;
scurrying dashes of ink calligraphic, as if quill pen
on parchment annotating solicitude.

(White 2017b, 37)

One of the things I admire in this poem is that it practices formally what it evokes thematically. There is a silence on this paper (or this page) (or this screen) in the lacunae, which is as balanced and energetic as the words. Notice also the high mix of play and inquiry. As White (2017a) muses on the role of form, composition, and spaces in his work:

Also, I think there is “compositional resistance” that allows the spaces between words to loosen up the authority of line break, of syntax. For me, the page in itself is a type of energy, an energy into which we enter. It balances the language. For me as an Indigenous person too, I see it as a type of resistance against English colonialism as well; that the spaces in-between are used to resist and release traditional rhythms and syntax. To see white space as a place of liberation, dissolving those boundaries between what is authoritative and what is not. And there are moments of silence as in the way [we] speak in *Diné* too, the use of apostrophes that

enact brief pauses within the language, and I transpose all these with how I use the white space on the page.

That political resistance can be enacted through form rather than message endows the aesthetic act with unusual potential and promise. One of the great paradoxes of the poem is that liberation comes for the poet not through words but through silence.

I would love so much to know – and I’m guessing White does as well – what it feels like to be a letter. My guess is, X is the happiest; Q the crankiest. A the most arrogant; W the most confused. But, this poem, likely a homage to “i,” the opposite of an exclamation point, makes me think that “i” may be one of the most underrated letters, along with “j” – the fraternal twin of “i.” But what, you might ask, do poems about *Is* and *Js* have to do with the colonial project or reservation policies or the low-level assault on Native families or even the oral tradition? Well, they have everything to do with the oral tradition – they are articulations of language, of telling, at its most fundamental. And beyond that, these poems also function as interventions within the language, the discourse, the *grammar* (to invoke Nietzsche and Long Soldier), of oppression. Power, as Warrior suggests above, does not have to come only through “theme” – it can also come through form, through the play of language itself, what it does (or does not say). In a poem’s syntactic and structural expressiveness – as well as its reticence – lives its ethics. Utterance – or lack thereof – is inherently political.²

I want to return to the notion of poetic form and linger for a bit on its relationship to language. A freedom to invent and reinvent form – and to let formal structures function as thematic structures – will likely be a key mechanism of Native poetry as it evolves into the next three decades. I also see an emboldened relationship to language (and what poets can do with and to it) beginning to be both a thematic and an ethic. Reading backward from 2018 to 1980, one uncovers more than just a formal evolution; one realizes how much of recent Indigenous poetry is vexed with representation. In the 1980s, poets were eager to show the world that American Indians were writing good poems and to remind readers that Native modes of telling and thinking were in concert with the poetic tradition. In the 1990s, poets felt more leeway to experiment with form and with the details of Indian life and Indian political concerns. LeAnne Howe’s (Choctaw) wonderful and hilarious series of

² In *Engaged Resistance*, I discuss these moves as forms of what I call “aesthetic activism.” See Rader (2011, 20, 118, *passim*).

Mascot/Noble Savage poems in *Evidence of Red* is a great example. In the 2000s, poets like Bitsui, White, and Janet McAdams (Creek) have revisited and redefined what it means to write *Indian* poetry.³ Increasingly, Native poets are challenging readers *not* to read their poems through a Nativist lens – or to make the Nativist lens one of many – a move that raises a number of issues only future poets and critics can resolve.

Two attempts to make sense of these issues can be found in the interrogationalist poetry of Long Soldier and even the glibly dark voice of Tommy Pico. In the case of Long Soldier, *Whereas* creates a fascinating intertext with the many treaties between the United States Government and Tribal Nations and the various proclamations and manifestoes of Native resistance, like the manifesto and proclamation authored as part of the Alcatraz occupation. But, even better, *Whereas* also happens to be one of the most innovative collections of poetry I've come across in a long time. Here, language is loaded, like a gun, or a treaty. It is a promise.

In 2009, the United States Congress officially “apologized” to Native Americans, by way of a congressional joint resolution, acknowledging “a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes.” The resolution employs the term *whereas* almost poetically, as both anaphora and volta, to enumerate a litany of statements, claims, and promises. Each *whereas* pushes the text along, giving it an incantatory quality. Long Soldier has issues, though, with *whereas*, and one of the aims of her work is to deconstruct that word. In fact, *whereas* functions as a kind of millstone for the book. Long Soldier grinds away at the term’s legal/contrary/proclamatory elements, stripping away both its denotative and connotative sense of authority, as in this powerful poem:

Whereas Native Peoples are [] people with a deep and abiding [] in the [],
 and for millennia Native Peoples have maintained a powerful
 [] connection to this land, as evidenced by their [] and legends;
 Whereas the Federal Government condemned the [], [], and [] of Native
 Peoples and endeavored to assimilate them by such policies as the redistri-
 bution of land under the Act of February 8, 1887 (25 U.S.C. 331; 24 Stat. 388,
 chapter 119) (commonly known as the “General Allotment Act”)
 (Long Soldier 2017, 83)

The elisions do a lot of work here. On one hand, they force the reader to participate in the authorship of federal documents about Native peoples

³ See McAdams’s stunning “Ghazal of the Body” and her excellent chapbook *Seven Boxes for the Country After* (2016).

while also implicating us in the colonial project. On the other hand, the blanks reinforce the *emptiness* of apologies, treaty speak, and so-called “official” documents. Perhaps most importantly, removing a concept from the apology allows the poet to protect it, to “cordon it / to safety away / from national re- / solution the threat / of re- / ductive [thinking]” (Long Soldier 2017).

Then, a few pages later, Long Soldier reassembles the missing words into a new “poem” in which the previously redacted concepts are free of legal jargon and at home with each other:

			[spiritual]
[belief]			[Creator]
			[spiritual]
			[customs]
			[traditions]
[beliefs]	[customs]		

(Long Soldier 2017, 85)

As floating signifiers, these ideas carry different semiotic weight. Buried within legalese, they are coopted into the discourse of colonialism. But here, as standalone words in a poem, they fly like flags.

What is especially compelling about Long Soldier is that she not only undermines language but also undermines form. In her review of *Whereas* for the *New York Times*, Natalie Diaz (2017, 20) makes a similar argument:

Long Soldier’s poems are radical in structure and constraint. The white spaces in her poems are not felt as absence but are generative, each as intentionally shaped and as sonic as her text ... Rather than subverting any particular structure, Long Soldier is leaping into new “not yet defined” spaces. “Whereas” challenges the making and maintenance of an empire by transforming the page to withstand the tension of an occupied body, country and, specifically, an occupied language.

Elsewhere, I have written about the importance of “compositional resistance” for Native poets.⁴ By this, I refer to how a poet composes her poem, the form it takes, how it looks on the page, how its typography expresses itself. As Diaz notes, *Whereas* is a masterful example of compositional resistance. Poems appear in squares, in columns, with blank spaces, in prose, in fragments, lineated, stripped down, oddly spaced, left justified, with shrinking fonts, huge spacings, both thick and dotted lines, and poems

⁴ Rader (2011, 210–12 and *passim*).

that read both vertically and horizontally. Almost no poem looks like another.

Tommy Pico's *IRL*, on the other hand, is one long, vertical poem (à la Pablo Neruda) that is all of a piece. There are rarely more than five or six words on a line, and the poem goes out of its way to de-poeticize language. *IRL* is narrated by "Teebs," who recounts his daily and nightly encounters in New York City as though he is emailing or texting us. Teebs/Pico collages his own rants with dialogue, often in italics, and blends these responses with ecstatic bursts of internet slang, samples of pop lyrics, stream of consciousness association, emoticons, and text shorthand. To wit:

Who r you trying
not to text talk To see u
flawless on Lake Sebago?
Who deserves
to be bombed
in selfies? What texture
of the grey audience puts
the "firm" in "affirming"?
*Hi, sorry, what's the wifi
password?* (Pico 2016, 39)

Pico's alter ego, Teebs, a gay man in his twenties or thirties, obsesses over men, language, identity, pop culture, social media, America, sex, and race. Race because Teebs, like, Pico, is Native American, or NDN, far from the Viejas reservation in Brooklyn. The most penetrating moments in the poem are those when Teebs punctures his seemingly random ramblings with razor sharp insights on Indigenous realities:

I don't want
to set you up for a *racial*
encounter, but NDNs
are reluctant to tell
our stories to strangers.
There is no such thing
as "Indian," but now
there's no turning back. (Pico 2016, 25)

and

Who dic-
tates
identity. Blood

quantum is an American
 invention whereby the “Indian
 problem” solves itself
 thru assimilation. *Soooo,*
yr like, half? My date asks. (Pico 2016, 40)

These passages remind me of the work of Esther Belin, who also negotiates being Indian and urban and the difficulties of finding self and community while also dealing with stereotypes about how people imagine, romanticize, and fetishize Native people. To me, the shape and tone of this poem and the overt attempts to make it as unpoetic as possible, are intentional strategies to de-couple the preciousness of “poetry” with the preciousness of “Indians.” Both are constructs. I wonder if Pico’s interest/disinterest in form and traditional poetic language is a kind of commentary on the degree to which we overly mystify both Indians and poetry. What if neither should really be “studied”? Just supported?

I would argue that even though *IRL* is designed to appear to be a little random and shapeless, Pico is highly aware of its textuality. The micro design of a poem might be a metaphor for larger notions of administrative or national design or even linguistic and cartographical design. Take, for instance, “In House” by Heid E. Erdrich (see fig. 21.1).

I reprint the entire poem to represent the full effect of its sense of document design. This is how it appears in *Cell Traffic: New and Selected Poems*. Earlier, I mention a ramped-up interest in textuality, and this is a good example. It not only participates in its own manuscript-ness, it also comments on its page-ness. So much of Indigenous poetry advances an oral dimension, a sense of having been *spoken* or *told*, that it seems unusual (and perhaps even antithetical to the aesthetic roots of Native poetics) to acknowledge an Indigenous poem’s debt to Western letters, letterforms, printing, and publishing. But beyond this, “In House” is smart, edgy, and artful. It’s knowledgeable about the often-labyrinthine world of academic publishing; it both mocks it and participates in it. It is also postmodernly playful without being too self-conscious or too arch. From a formal perspective, it is inventive but not over the top. The lines are crafted perfectly, even if the poem is not itself a lineated lyric. It’s self-referential (“This book would no doubt appeal to many, many listeners. / Perhaps readers would want to re-read it after hearing it?”) without being pompous. Earlier in the chapter I use a term “lyric ambition,” and I see much of this in “In House” and in Erdrich’s recent work, whether it is in her bilingual poems with Margaret Noodin, her poems about technology, or her poems about cells.

MANUSCRIPT TITLE: *Locomotive Signals*

- #1) A poem series that fills out document headings. Commentary w/o humor or irony.
- #2) Enhances various lists (Cultural, Diaspora, Gender) and offers a rare glimpse of urban life to educated young white people.
- #3) Technique: bloodless/inkless white space.
One controlled utterance that we used to call a long poem . . .
- #4) Played out in dramatic bits and turns.
- #5) Tone shifts for dramatic effect. Turns ugly and sexual, unexpectedly.
- #6) Composed of coherent sentences. Some play with line breaks—lots of build up for the slightest, slightest moment of poetry. Though serious and complex in subject, this book could be read in ten minutes.
The words just float
off
the page
and blow by
in wisps.
- #7) This book would no doubt appeal to many, many listeners. Perhaps readers would want to re-read it after hearing it?
- #8) Teaching it takes about twenty minutes.
- #9) The title *Locomotive Signals* never unloaded by this book-poem: Some loco. Some motive. No trains. No signals. No training or signaling. No.
- #10) Would I buy this book? Maybe. Depends on if the artist were a former student, gone off to grad school and corrupted.
- #11) Thus, even as I register my old fuddy-duddy complaints about the state of poetry (nice, complex old word-welded poetry),
- #12) *I recommend this manuscript* as likely a good bet for the press.
- #13) Minor edits needed. Revisit the gimmick of M-Fer-calling and blow-jobbery where pointless.

Figure 21.1 “In House” by Heid E. Erdrich. From *Cell Traffic: New and Selected Poems* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012, 87) by Heid E. Erdrich. Reproduced by permission.

In “Little Souvenirs from the DNA Trading Post,” phrases in all caps transition to standard font couplets, which break into lower-case italicized lines that scatter across the page, punctuated solely by ellipses. Fragment after fragment, font-fix and font-flag, the entire poem is a series of bad (or good) messages scrawled on postcards for the cellular tourist. This poem wants to lose, to confuse, the tourist-reader. It wants what language cannot but must do.

That level of ambition is also found in Allison Adele Hedge Coke’s (Metis and Huron) utterly beguiling *Blood Run*, a book-length poem that takes as its point of departure the Blood Run complex. Located in eastern South Dakota and Western Iowa, Blood Run is a series of 176 ceremonial mounds built by the Oneonta. The site is over 8,000 years old, but archeologists believe it saw its peak population between 1675 and 1705 when around 10,000 people occupied the area, which extends over 2,000 acres. *Blood Run*, the book, attempts to map a journey for which no map was ever made, just as it attempts to narrate a history for which there is no history. One way to accomplish this is to create an inclusive poetic system that connects everything to Blood Run – the cosmos, animals, humans, the elements, machinery, the sky, the dirt, the present, and past. It is all there. An additional – and far riskier – project is to tell the story of this history by letting everything tell its own story, its own history. It is a kind of oral history project/lyric poem mash-up. There are so many ways it could have gone wrong.

One could say the same for Hedge Coke’s book. It evinces a strong connection to Blood Run’s *terroir*, and its aesthetic scope transcends space, time, voice, and memory. Of the collection’s nearly seventy poems, almost all are persona poems spoken in the voices of a panoply of entities involved in the event of Blood Run: There is a poem spoken by corn, the moon, a deer, skeletons, looters, beaver, buffalo, a tractor, even the horizon:

Often, pasts of those
who traveled on becomes
something Memory
may not sustain.

Dissolving along
perceived parameters,
sensible tangents –
illusory.

(Coke 2006, 67)

The poem on the preceding page is entitled “Memory,” so one wonders if the two texts are intended to be not just metaphorically in conversation with

each other, but literally in dialogue. The beginning of “Memory” would suggest they are:

When disease rode trade blankets
wove away across oceans, rivers,
my People reeled. So many crossed
into the net world, my fullness ruptured,
poured as sores upon then-tainted
blistered skin. (Coke 2006, 66)

“Memory” closes with an ominous valediction – or is it an invitation?

In the end, all will dissipate, join me.

That notion of dissipation predicts those who are “dissolving” in “Horizon,” and both reference the thousands of souls who passed through Blood Run on the journey of life itself.

The notion of dissipation (there are those absences again, those silences, those empty spaces) is an interesting bookend to that of the “we’re still here” mantra that characterized so much of Native poetry from the previous century. I am not suggesting that the poets I discuss here are in favor of disappearance or dissipation or even self-absenting. On the contrary: I see Native poetry at the present as privileging the author, or at least putting the author, the poet, on the same level as readers, language, and the earth. Contemporary American Indigenous poetry is on the cusp and perhaps even is the cusp of new modes of being and new methods of representing. It is not that the map is shifting; it is that these poets are remaking the world itself.

References

- Alexie, Sherman. 2009. “Survivorman.” *New Yorker*. June 8. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/08/survivorman (accessed April 23, 2018).
- Bitsui, Sherwin. 2003. *Shapeshift*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
2009. *Flood Song*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon.
- Coke, Allison Adele Hedge. 2006. *Blood Run*. Cambridge: Salt Press.
- Diaz, Natalie. 2012. *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon.
2017. “A Native American Poet Excavates the Language of Occupation.” *New York Times Book Review*. August 6, 20.
- Erdrich, Heid E. 2012. *Cell Traffic: New and Selected Poems*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Erdrich, Louise. 1984. *Jacklight*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Fassler, Joe. 2013. “The Poem That Made Sherman Alexie ‘Drop Everything and Want to Be a Poet.’” *Atlantic*, October 16. www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/10/

- [the-poem-that-made-sherman-alexie-want-to-drop-everything-and-be-a-poet/280586/](#) (accessed April 23, 2018).
- Harjo, Joy. 1982. *She Had Some Horses*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
1990. *In Mad Love and War*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Long Soldier, Layli. 2017. *Whereas*. Minneapolis: Graywolf.
- McAdams, Janet. 2016. *Seven Boxes for the Country After*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.
- Ortiz, Simon J. 1981. *From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which Is Our America*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Pico, Tommy. 2016. *IRL*. New York: Birds.
- Rader, Dean. 2011. *Engaged Resistance: American Indian Art, Literature, and Film from Alcatraz to the NMAI*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Viñas, Biana. 2007. "The Motion of Poetic Landscape: An Interview with Sherwin Bitsui." *Hunger Mountain*: December 1. <http://hungermtn.org/motion-poetic-landscape-interview-sherwin-bitsui/> (accessed April 23, 2018).
- Warrior, Robert. 1995. *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- White, Orlando. 2009. *Bone Light*. Los Angeles: Red Hen.
- 2017a. Interview. *Taos Journal of International Poetry and Art*. www.taosjournalofpoetry.com/lettters/ (accessed April 23, 2018).
- 2017b. *LETTERS*. New York: Nightboat Books.
- Young Bear, Ray A. 1980. *Winter of the Salamander: The Keeper of Importance*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
1990. *The Invisible Musician: Poems*. Duluth, Minn: Holy Cow! Press.