



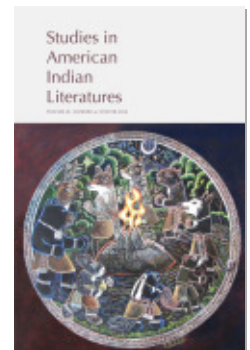
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Engaged Resistance: American Indian Art, Literature, and Film from Alcatraz to the NMAI by Dean Rader (review)

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Dean Rader. *Engaged Resistance: American Indian Art, Literature, and Film from Alcatraz to the NMAI*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2011.

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Dean Radar's *Engaged Resistance* is a terrifically appealing, accessible, and provocative book. Taking as its premise that "Native-produced texts like poetry, fiction, movies, paintings, and sculpture are fundamental products and processes of American Indian sovereignty," it approaches varieties of Native cultural expression as acts of "aesthetic activism" and puts them in dialogue to animate current critical debates. Careful to distinguish between the "compositional resistance" implicit in a work's materials, form, or genre and the "contextual resistance" explicit in overt statements of defiance, Radar provides—and tests—an effective vocabulary for speaking about the strategies through which contemporary Native authors and visual artists express resistance and tell stories of survival.

Throughout the book, Radar draws on his extensive experience in writing about American Indian poetry, in analyzing visual culture, and in teaching Native texts. Topics of individual chapters range from the art and rhetoric of Alcatraz to "postindian" films by Sherman Alexie, but the book is neither a sequential history nor a comprehensive survey. At times it invites the reader to look back (on public acts of resistance, canonical works in high and popular culture, neglected works, and institutional histories) and, in the process, to reconsider the value of existing critical paradigms. More often it looks at how Native art is produced and viewed in the present, whether in contemporary fiction, film, and poetry or in public spaces like roads, state capitols, or museums. The art that draws Radar's closest attention—such as Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith's map sequences, Jennifer Wynne Farmer and Valerie Red-Horse's film *Naturally Native*, poems by Esther Belin and LeAnne Howe, Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller," and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)—shares an aesthetic of open-endedness. In his work Radar likewise mixes genres, geographies, and scales of attention within and across chapters to encourage interdisciplinary analysis and further discussion rather than definitive interpretation. Thus he creates a book that can be read through pairings of chapters devoted to a single genre or in "just about any order: from the last chapter to the first,

or spiraling out from the middle.” If narrative design is “itself an act of resistance, a narrative refusal to capitulate to colonial or generic linearity and chronology,” as Radar claims, the design of *Engaged Resistance* suggests a similar potential for critical discourse.

As the subtitle indicates, the book begins and ends by investigating the places and institutions central to contemporary Native art and activism: Alcatraz and the NMAI. The first chapter, which focuses on the visual art, literature, and proclamatory discourses produced on and about Alcatraz during its Indian Occupation between 1969 and 1971, briskly sketches a historical sequence of events and then analyzes the rhetorics of the Alcatraz Proclamation, Manifesto, and Declaration. Here Radar establishes his characteristic method: to situate individual expressions of resistance in their physical, historical, and aesthetic contexts and then to read them from different angles, playing with a variety of critical tools. He explicates hybrid texts and objects that historians and other critics may have overlooked (such as newsletters, graffiti, or a stretched hide), arguing that all the utterances produced during the Occupation constitute a comprehensive project of symbolic action.

The book’s final chapter, on NMAI conception and reception, also collects evidence for art as an effective means of interdisciplinary and intertribal activism. The NMAI serves as a test for Radar’s notion of compositional resistance, and he makes a persuasive case for how the architecture and curated exhibits enact “museological procedures of everyday creativity.” Noting the museum’s location on Algonquin land, its appearance of having been carved by the elements, and its circular and open design, Radar prepares his reader to enter and to engage with the displays of living culture inside. He argues that the absences many visitors have objected to (especially of chronological markers and written histories of genocide and colonialism) are deliberate presences: acts of tribal affirmation and proof of survivance. While the symbolic power of Alcatraz may have waned, the NMAI remains a “living testament.” Reading the book’s first and last chapters together, as twins, brings out the book’s larger claim that the master text of history is being replaced by creative, place-centered acts of reoccupation.

A second, more sustained model for the book is the map. Mapping functions as trope and method throughout, sometimes foregrounded and often discussed as a self-conscious and ongoing critical process. If the study as a whole “poses and responds to a new constellation of ques-

tions about Native cultural productions,” mapping provides a concrete territorial counterpart and a more delicate and flexible tool. As figure and trope, the map is engaged by many of the artists discussed—and most explicitly, perhaps, by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. Radar’s second chapter, “Cartography as Sovereignty,” makes a strong case for the value of Quick-to-See Smith’s paintings among contemporary mainstream artists and Native painters. It also brings out the author’s impassioned response when standing face to face with this body of work, and such evidence of personal investment is one of this book’s great strengths.

Further evidence of Radar’s use of the map as methodology can be found in his “User’s Map” to “The New American Indian Novel.” As one of several chapters to take on literary texts as aesthetic products (others include close rereadings of Silko’s “Storyteller” and books by Belin, Joy Harjo, and Luci Tapahonso that combine poetry and prose), the “User’s Map” could stand alone as a critical or pedagogical guide. This chapter acknowledges existing critical models for interpreting Native texts, but it, too, resists dwelling in the past. Surveying a diverse set of novels by Debra Magpie Earling, Charles H. Red Corn, Louise Erdrich, LeAnne Howe, David Treuer, Craig Womack, and Sherman Alexie that neither reimagine nineteenth-century histories nor fit within older interpretive models that would define them as part of a “renaissance” or as cultural documents, the chapter claims that each of the authors discussed “take the past as their points of departure”—much as Radar himself does. Both these novels and this study insist that while the past may never be fully past, it need not determine the meaning of the present.

As my account of select chapters suggests, *Engaged Resistance* is deliberately and imaginatively organized (“taking a cue from Native structures” like webs, spirals, and twins) and expansive in scope. While an understanding of time and history as simultaneously sequential, circular, and mythic remain important to Radar, an understanding of places and boundaries as contested, fluid, and constitutive of identity is more critical. Some readers may find Radar’s reflections on methodology to be overly self-conscious at times, but the book is justifiably more concerned with how, where, and why we encounter and engage with Native art than it is about what individual works mean. Radar’s own excitement at viewing Quick-to-See Smith’s “Memory Map,” returning to puzzle over the Howe Chevrolet Indian in Clinton, Oklahoma, reading the signs created by William Heap of Birds, or meditating on

the experience of walking through the NMAI is palpable, and he demonstrates well how such individual acts of engagement add up to a more complete understanding of art's complexity and value. While *Engaged Resistance* works significantly toward revising traditional vocabularies and methods used to explicate Native literature and visual art, it also issues a more urgent—and, I think, irresistible—invitation to delve into what Radar terms a “poetics of entrance”: to read now, look ahead, and imagine how we as listeners, viewers, readers, teachers, and writers can create new types of open and informed conversations about Native cultural production.