Land, Place, and Nation: Toward an Indigenous American Poetics

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO MODERN AMERICAN POETRY

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The space between things is as much as the things space separates.

– Diane Glancy

Where we come from is also who we are.

– Gladys Cardiff

Published in 1993, poet and critic Kimberly Blaeser’s “Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center” issued a “call for an 'organic' native critical language” (56). Blaeser sought to reclaim Native literary studies from extrinsic literary interpretation; her essay marked the shift away from the focus on individual identity that dominated the field in response to the so-called Native American Renaissance of the 1970s and 80s, as she argued for a critical intervention alert for critical methods and voices that seem to arise out of the literature itself (this as opposed to critical approaches applied from an already established critical language or attempts to make the literature fit already established genres and categories of meaning). (Blaeser 1993, 53–4)

Named by Kenneth Lincoln in his 1983 eponymous critical study, the Native American Renaissance referred especially to a handful of novels that each featured a mixed-blood protagonist struggling to discover his place in the world. The first of these, N. Scott Momaday’s House Made of Dawn won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969; it was followed by James Welch’s Winter in the Blood (1974), Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony (1977), and Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine (1984). The critical response to these works focused on the genre of the novel and identity, attending in particular to the image of the mixed-blood as a symbol for the vexed relationship between tradition and modernity in the lives of the contemporary American Indian characters who populated these Renaissance-era works. As such, it dovetailed beautifully with Cold War narrative frames about individual struggle and triumph.
Blaeser’s article was followed by a handful of critical monographs, chief among them Robert Warrior’s influential 1994 study *Tribal Secrets*, which made the case for reading Indigenous writing within tribal frameworks rather than bringing to bear upon them more cosmopolitan and universalizing theoretical paradigms. Warrior drew upon Simon J. Ortiz’s 1981 essay, “Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism,” which noted that “The struggle to maintain life and the resistance against loss … illustrate a theme, national in character and scope, common to all American native people and to all people indigenous to lands which have suffered imperialism and colonialism” (Warrior 2005, 259). Literary nationalism, the rubric under which these newer theoretical interests accrue, thus holds that questions of sovereignty must figure in the way we read, define, contextualize, and understand Indigenous American writing.

At the center of literary nationalism, land abides as both key material concern and trope – land manifested as national boundary, as sovereign struggle, as well as a broader signifier of space, place, and location. Because nationalist readings – given the emphasis on the ways texts speak from, for, and back to tribal nations – have tended to be thematically driven, I am interested in the ways a nationalist reading methodology can be extended to accommodate poetry’s special concerns, among them its formal patterns and the lyric voice, which might seem to offer a reader unmediated access to the Indigenous subject. I am not suggesting that pan-Indian themes or formal strategies unite the widely diverse projects of the poets from six different Indigenous nations I discuss in the following pages: Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), Deborah Miranda (Esselen-Chumash), Gladys Cardiff (Eastern Band Cherokee), and Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Lakota). Rather, I consider how land – and specifically land theft as an historical constant – contextualizes the way absence and presence signify on the page, both thematically and formally. Given the history of more than two centuries of land theft, it is not surprising that place remains a persistent and immutable issue in Native-authored poetry. Writing about her own nation, Jodi Byrd explains: “There is a difference between recovered and having never lost in the first place that stands in breach still for those of us attempting to theorize the legacies of colonialism within indigenous worlds” (Byrd 2011, xi). Thus, Native poets bear witness in multiple ways to “what stands in breach”; they produce an array of what Hank Lazer calls “opposing poetics,” that is, “poetics that critique and contest assumptions and practices of more mainstream poetics” (Lazer 1996, 1–2). Dean Rader calls these practices “compositional resistance,” which is “an intentional reluctance to make a text conform to the formulaic expectations of its genre,” and he notes, “Almost every Native poet produces some sort of compositional resistance, either through line breaks, capitalization, closure, fragmentation, play with poetic traditions, bilingualism, and even genre shifting” (Rader 2011, 129).

Cherokee author Diane Glancy exemplifies this “compositional resistance” throughout her work, which includes poetry, fiction, memoir, essays, plays, and films. Glancy, the daughter of an Indigenous father and a white mother, frequently attends to questions of mixed heritage, and her poems might seem ideal candidates for a retrograde, Renaissance-era critique focused on hybrid subjects trapped between worlds. But the borders that preoccupy Glancy are equally – if not more so – of language and form, and her subjects are not merely acted upon: They exercise agency, not just to “drift” passively but to “redrift,” to regain old ground. She writes:

In the dryings after a flood, there are revisions. In new versions, there are redrifts and “transveillances” across cultures. There are reconstructions of the sentence. Which I hit when writing. Because the sentence constructs a way of thinking which does not include the transpositions, the fragmentations, the interjections, the disjunctions.

(Glancy 1999, 114)

Glancy, who is perhaps best known for her formally innovative work, is a master of the fragmentary; she crosses borders between and among literary genres. I begin, however, with one of her more formally conventional poems, “Without Title,” which is written in the form of a personal lyric and driven by a conceit: The speaking subject’s dispossessed Indian father, because he can no longer follow Cherokee hunting traditions, has been relegated to mere figurative hunting, that is, as a day worker in a meatpacking house:

*Without Title*

_for my father who lived without ceremony*

It’s hard you know without the buffalo, the shaman, the arrow, but my father went out each day to hunt as though he had them. He worked in the stockyards. All his life he brought us meat. No one marked his first kill, no one sang his buffalo song. Without a vision he had migrated to the city and went to work in the packing house. When he brought home his horns and hides my mother said, get rid of them. I remember the animal tracks of his car backing out the drive in snow and mud, the aerial on his old car waving like a bow string.
In his description of the “compositional resistance” of Native poetry, Dean Rader refers to the “bilingualism” increasingly to be found in the works of certain Native poets who code switch between English and their tribal language. While Glancy speaks neither Spanish nor Cherokee, I would yet argue that she has effected a complex multilingualism in “Columbus.” This is Glancy’s radically imaginative and layered version of what Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo call “reinventing the enemy’s language” (1998); what has been reinvented—and thrown back in the face of the enemy—is the infantilizing “Tonto-speak” (Hilden 1995, 53) accorded to the newly colonized Indigenous speaker. Glancy extends the joke even further, switching between Tonto-speak Spanish and Tonto-speak English and throwing in a handful of nonsense syllables, thus subverting the colonialist logic of Columbus’s “discovery of the New World” with wild silliness. She does not write back to the empire; she ridicules it.

In his book-length poem, from Sand Creek, Simon J. Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo) also reckons with the ways empire and its damages might be written down and written back to. Published in 1981 by Thunder’s Mouth Press and reprinted in 1999 by Arizona, from Sand Creek links the historical trauma of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre to the lives of the veterans in the nearby Fort Lyon, Colorado, Veterans Administration hospital, where Ortiz was hospitalized for alcoholism in 1974–5. from Sand Creek has an intricate and complicated structure; it is both a collection of closely tied verses and a book-length poem. It comprises extremely terse lyrics on each of the forty-two recto pages juxtaposed with prose epigraphs on each of the verso pages.

The first of these epigraphs sets up the situation of the project: “Passing through, one gets caught into things: this time it was the Veterans Administration Hospital, Ft. Lyons, Colorado, 1974–1975” (10). The epigraph not only frames the poem facing it, but locates the entire project: Fort Lyon—where Ortiz spent time as a veteran in recovery—and Sand Creek, site of the 1864 massacre of Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho people. “How to deal with history—that is the question,” Ortiz explains in a note to the new edition. These prose epigraphs are likewise arguably epigrams; the poem is both expansive and economical, both, as Dean Rader argues, lyric and epic (2003, 135–6).

The book’s frames are marked typographically: The lyrics appear in roman text, the epigraphs appear in italics, and there is front matter including an historical note and what I call the two “America verses,” which are printed in a weighty, sans serif boldface. That is to say, in addition to the book’s actual covers, there are two additional sets of frames enclosing the interior, the juxtaposed prose and verse sections that make up the heart of the book. Just as the language of from Sand Creek is intent upon delimiting Sand Creek through boundaries of historical trauma, pinning down in sharp and exacting detail
what happened in this particular place, so do the typographical frames of the book’s material presence serve to enclose and delimit its interior. The effect is twofold: Not only is it necessary to cross through instructive boundaries to enter the poem fully, these boundaries make the poem into a reliquary, a version of a monument that can be wrought on paper. There is a striking visual impact to the layout of this and each pair of pages. The carefully placed juxtaposition of prose epigraph and verse (which recurs forty-two times) is reminiscent of a vitrine, a display case for objects of significance.

[verso page]
Passing through, one gets caught into things: this time it was the Veterans Administration Hospital, Ft. Lyons, Colorado, 1974–75.

[recto page]
Grief
memorizes this grass.
Raw
courage,
   believe it,
red-eyed and urgent,
stalking Denver.
Like stone,
like steel,
the hone and sheer gone,
just the brute
and perceptive angle left.
Like courage,
   believe it,
left still;
the words from then
talk like that.

Believe it. (Ortiz 1999, 10–11)

The poem takes as self-evident that place and land are deeply connected to historical trauma. The first verse — with what Robert Warrior has called its “incredibly focused first image” (2009, 393) — subtly unsettles the more expected notion of trauma attaching to place. Rather, Ortiz constructs the inverse; it is not the grass bearing witness to grief, but grief itself encoding this place in its memory. His terse lineation, particularly as it is set in relief against its prose epigraph, and framing strategies draw out our gaze uncomfortably and intimately into the book’s heart. It is difficult to look away. The use of present tense here — “memorizes” — points to the site’s unique temporality. His refrain — “Believe it” — is insistent: Ortiz refuses to relegate to the past the events of Sand Creek, as so many things Indian are relegated to the past, closed off and over with, fit only as a locus for imperialist nostalgia.

These essential and historical connections between land and Indigenous body are also crucial in Linda Hogan’s 1993 collection, The Book of Medicines. In the opening poem, “The History of Red,” red is a multifaceted force connecting the flesh of the body with the flesh of the land. Red is blood; it is also “this yielding land / turned inside out” (1993, 9). The poem works its way through the various interconnected elements: earth, water, and finally fire. I have noted elsewhere that Hogan’s lineation is deceptively plain in style (2010, 226–35), suggesting that the relentlessly short line that drives The Book of Medicines has a cumulative effect, exacerbating the sense of witness borne to genocide and environmental wreckage. This effect seems evident in the penultimate stanza. Hogan writes:

Red is the human house
I come back to at night
swimming inside the cave of skin
that remembers bison.
In that round nation of blood
we are all burning,
red, inseparable fires
the living have crawled
and climbed through
in order to live
so nothing will be left
for death at the end. (Hogan 1993, 11)

Lineation wrought from phrases already designated by the syntax tends to produce language that is fluid and untroubling. Hogan builds upon this effect, moving from the seemingly straightforward “In that round nation of blood / we are all burning,” to the subtle friction in “red, inseparable fires” with its polysyllabic, slightly thorny adjective to the deeply unsettling “the living have crawled / and climbed through / in order to live.” These lines unsettle not only for the images they conjure — the desperation implicit in the verb “crawled” — but also for the way the first line break works on the line retroactively: In the first reading, the living have crawled the fires, the intransitive verb becomes transitive; in the second, the meaning shifts, not dramatically, but abruptly — “have crawled / and climbed through” (my emphasis). The following line — “in order to live” — registers as afterthought, its position a casual aside belaying the significance of the words.

Thematically, this stanza not only points to the remarkable chain of transformations that links body with home, nation, and the essential energy of the universe, but also, through the key image of the “cave of skin,” Hogan’s verse
simultaneously articulates the earth's bodily presence even as it makes the body into a part of an energized and fluid landscape. Skin figures as a site of exchange between earth and body, and this seeming permeability is essential to the functioning of the world she documents. It is what precludes separation, what enables full connection. Loss, grief, joy—all are experienced as shared phenomena. When violence is waged against the Indigenous body, it is also waged against the land. When land is broken open, the Indigenous body is broken.

In the prefatory author's note to her 1999 collection, *Indian Cartography*, Esselen-Chumash poet Deborah Miranda writes: "The worst legacy of all for California Indians whose ancestry emerged from the Missions was the basic loss of familial connections through a diasporic, desperate scattering of tribes without a landbase" (xii). Published six years after Hogan's *The Book of Medicines*, *Indian Cartography* is also deeply informed by the lived and essential relationship between place and Native body, in particular the moving poem “I Dreamt Your True Name,” an eroticly charged love letter from the land to the Indigenous body (or bodies) displaced from it. Here Miranda mines an eros that is as maternal and fecund as it is sensual:

Our past

 evolved in my belly:
 centuries of rain
 gave way to ripening.
 Between my legs valleys
deeled into rivers
 where you bathed
 in early mornings.
 (Miranda 1999, 94)

The poem is left-justified, with the first two stanzas written in an easeful plain style, its line breaks corresponding to the syntax. The suspension of the phrase “our past” over the break between stanzas one and two highlights and emphasizes that this is a poem about history. The restful quality of the language is enhanced by the long vowels toward the end of the stanza: “milkweed,” “weaving,” “flowed.” The poem’s first significant turn occurs in stanza three, when the land and its people are colonized:

We did not see
 evil coming in masks of
disease, murder, displacement.
 We became separated from
 one another.
 I could not find you.
 (Miranda 1999, 94–5)

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The “We” that marks this turn is simultaneously lover and loved, motherland and Indigene. The line that follows, with its abrupt break after the preposition “of,” disrupts the easy - I would argue even *loving* - cadences that have come before. Miranda unsettles the language further by ratcheting up the consonance:

Your bones
came back to me unbroken,
 scattered without ceremony.
 My body bore bright scars.
 (Miranda 1999, 95)

Ending with a plea for the lost one to return, the poem deploys a language that is both loving and fiercely insistent:

Follow it back to me.
 I want to feel your handprints
 on my skin, your teeth in my hair.
 I want the dark cloud of
 memory to open –
 release the perfect syllables
 of your birth.
 (Miranda 1999, 95)

Following the abrupt break after "dark cloud of," the word "memory" is deeply resonant, an emphasis paralleling the phrase “Our past” earlier in the poem. But where “Our past” is actual, literal, to be acknowledged, the looming, to-be-shared “dark cloud of memory” is considerably more powerful, promising rain, storm, change.

Like Miranda, Gladys Cardiff deploys the erotic as a way both to investigate colonization and to resist it. Her 1999 collection, *A Bare, Unpainted Table*, opens with an epigraph from a sixteenth century English traveler to the Americas: “These simple gentiles living only after the lawe of nature, may well bee lykened to a smoore and bare table unpainted, or a white paper unwritten upon” (5). This colonizing conception of the Indigenous body as “unpainted” or “unwritten upon” is the subject of “Prelude to Love,” an ekphrastic poem based on a “Victorian postcard [of a]

photo, a portrait. Long hair, black eyes –
 my gaze skips the rest.

Whose wouldn't? Except for a necklace, no,
 not a necklace, except for her earrings, she's naked.
 (Cardiff 1999, 7)
Although they approach the colonizing of Indigenous erotics from different perspectives, both Miranda and Cardiff deploy the erotic as a potent force for resisting colonization. While Miranda’s focus is on the essential and abiding bond between homeland and Indigenous body, Cardiff shows how tenaciously unsettling the seemingly captured Native body can be. Her subject is

standing under the arch of a mission window, looking out. Almost courteously, the arousals, almost Spenserian, to be so framed,

concealed in secret shadow farre from all men’s sight, space pulled up like a high-waisted Empire gown. (Cardiff 1999, 8)

It is, of course, not the gown itself that covers the subject’s “neither parts,” but imperial space writ large, covering the land and culture it finds with language and laws, and with missions. But the body is persistently unsettling, disruptive to the colonial logic that attempts to pose and fix it. Because the photograph and its frame are insufficient to contain their subject, it must be made “archival,” filed under the “legend: / Dangers of the Indian Country” (1999, 8).

Of the thirty-seven lines in “Prelude to Love,” six are indented, four strikingly so. Because so much of the poem appears in the more conventional left-justified lineation, the poem’s dispersed lines are particularly conspicuous and disruptive, especially the four indented all the way to the poem’s right boundary: “do they match?” — referring to the subject’s “black eyes” and “hoped-for, pleasurable, reassuring mouth” — “cropped” to mark the portion of the body left out of the photograph — “her neither parts” and “Dangers of the Indian Country,” as ultimate disruptors, the eroticized, dangerous Indigenous body, the one the colonizer looks to both for pleasure and reassurance against its dangers.

“Prelude to Love,” along with the epigraph about “unwritten upon” Natives, opens the first part of Cardiff’s two-part collection; the epigraph of its second half introduces poems characterized by subtle yet important formal differences from the first. Cited as a “Cherokee Sacred Formula,” the epigraph states: “May the paths from every direction recognize each other” (1999, 33). No dispersed lines appear in any of the Part II poems, and, while an array of subjects populate the book’s second half, themes of homecoming are especially visible, particularly in the handful of poems that close the volume. The final poem, “Two Plots: Qualla Boundary, Cherokee,” is set on the Eastern Band’s Reservation in Cherokee, North Carolina, as the speaker returns for a funeral and ponders “the two little cemeteries [that]

are fitted on either side of the road” (1999, 60). While there are literally two cemetery plots in the poem, “plot” is also a pun that points to two different stories, the one where “space allotted is carved and fitted” and the other where space

dissolves, yellow and overgrown.

In the shadows, crosses and headstones, dull bronze plaques, and inconspicuous flowers strewn like afterthoughts. (Cardiff 1999, 60)

As well, the two plots allude to the volume’s two stories, the rupture of colonization documented in the first half and the possibility of return driving the second – the “paths from every direction [that] recognize each other.” “Some things won’t fit in a photograph,” the speaker of “Two Plots” tells us, as she surveys the rich and familiar landscape around her, bringing the volume full circle, back to the opening poem, with its cropped photograph, its concealments, and its dangers. Stories that circulate out of context are necessarily incomplete, like a portrait of a table, which, from the wrong perspective, only seems bare and unpainted.

Finally, I come to the poet who, among the six I discuss, has most recently come into print, Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Lakota) whose chapbook, Chromosomes, appeared in 2010. Describing her discovery of the long poem after “labor[ing] over small poems and cautious line breaks,” Long Soldier says,

I learned I could write one single poem and extend it to its furthest outer limits, I could take it as far as I wanted and exhaust myself. How beautiful. Long poems allowed me to really explore and grow into a subject, to write in sections and experiment with form. (Long Soldier 2013, 4)

Her poem “He Sapa” is a long, formally complex poetic work engaged with language play, visual poetry, and field composition. It is also an extended meditation that begins with the mountain of the title, part of the contested Lakota homeland occupied by the United States, and “not a black hill, not Paha Sapa, by any name you call it” (2012), then moves through a series of linguistic associations — English and Lakota. Long Soldier literally extends the poem to “its furthest outer limits” on the page. Sections one and two sprawl from left to right margin. Four is right-justified, and five is left-justified, with a single line unfurling across the page. Poised in the poem’s center — section three — is a field of white space, boxed in by four lines of poetry, each of which is a variation on the line, “This is how you see me the space in which to place me.”
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53–4) and enable a full accounting of the historical and cultural currents – including the intricacies of literary form – that circulate through and around this fluid and heterogeneous locale, the poem.

NOTES

1. In a longer essay – or one intended for a different venue – I could also make the argument for a greater attention to formal concerns in all genres. Generic categories are meaningful but unstable, and larger claims about what poems are or do break down in the face of the particular. For the purposes of this chapter, I wish to make a space-clearing gesture and acknowledge the heightened attention given to a poem’s formal design, both by its maker and its reader.

2. This chapter in no way attempts to survey the amazing array of Native poets writing and publishing in 2014. My very small sample shows some generational range – Ortiz published his first book in 1977; Long Soldier’s first chapbook appeared in 2010 – and the poets hail from ancestral lands in the Southeast, Southwest, West Coast, and the Dakotas. A notable absence is the Mvskoke Creek poet Joy Harjo, whose therapeutic recastings of space infuse much of her poetry. In a more extensive treatment of this topic, I would also likely include work by Carter Revard (Osage), Luci Tapahonso (Diné), Kimberly Blaeser (Anishinaabe), Sherwin Bitsui (Diné), James Thomas Stevens (Akwesasne Mohawk), Allison Adele Hedge Coke (Huron/Eastern Tsalagi), and Karenne Wood (Monacan).

3. Eric Gary Anderson’s work on Native literature and genre (2003) is also useful here.

4. Imperialist nostalgia is a term coined by Renato Rosaldo in his essay of the same name to indicate “a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passage of what they themselves have transformed” (1989, 108).

5. This term was coined by poet-critic Jerry Harp who adapted it from “Mallarmé’s commentary on his ‘Un coup de dés,’ which employs this kind of spacing. In the commentary he writes, ‘I do not transgress the measure, only disperse it’” (e-mail message to author, October 9, 2013).

6. My use of “heterogeneous” is inflected by Chadwick Allen’s term “the heterogeneous local” (2002).

WORKS CITED


In my earlier work, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics*, I define counterpoetics as “poetic resistance to imperial, national, and other forms of homogeneous narratives” (Huang 2008, 9). In the context of the transpacific, poetic imagination “departs from its Romanticist, transcendentalist origin and spreads new roots in ‘articulation’ as a situated and contested social imaginary” (ibid.). In the current essay, I continue this line of thinking while trying to delineate a brief history of Asian American poetry.

Writing such a history with a focus on poets of Asian descent, it is easy but erroneous for us to forget the long Orientalist legacy in American poetry and its deep impact on Asian American writings. From Walt Whitman’s Asia-themed poems to the Imagism of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell, from Emerson’s fascination with Hindu religion to the mysticism of the Beat poets, the Orient has long haunted the American imagination. In this genealogy, perhaps no one can surpass Ernest Fenollosa in his seminal role of bridging the poetics of the East and the West. His posthumous essay, “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” edited and published by Pound, became a foundational text for American modernism. An avid follower of Emersonian Transcendentalism, Fenollosa claims that the Chinese character is so close to nature that one can see the magical workings of the universal grammar in the language. Inspired by Fenollosa, Pound proposed to treat things directly in poetry and “to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” (Pound 1954, 3). These principles of Imagism as much lie at the heart of poetic modernism as they smack of Orientalism, an ethnovraphic view of the East. This legacy, as Josephine Park shrewdly puts it, will influence Asian American poetry both as a burden and an opportunity (Park 2008, 4).

While these “blossoms from the East” were sweeping through the landscape of American modernism, Asian American poets had already appeared on the horizon. Among the earliest were Sadakichi Hartmann, who once