

**Indigenous Poetics: Reciprocity and Responsibility**

Neil McLeod, ed., *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2014. xii + 404 pp.

Winner of the 2014 ACQL Gabrielle Roy Prize for Literary Criticism, *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* is published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press as part of the Indigenous Studies Series edited by Deanna Reder of Simon Fraser University. According to the frontmatter, the Indigenous Studies Series aims to pursue “critical conversations about Indigenous epistemological frameworks” while encouraging “burgeoning scholarship” in Indigenous intellectual traditions within the Humanities. Keeping in mind the series’ objectives to encourage new directions in Indigenous studies, readers should not expect this volume to define Indigenous poetics in a narrow or prescriptive way. Instead, its twenty-eight chapters offer ground-breaking insights into Indigenous creative process in its capacity to accommodate Indigenous oralities, lived experiences, memories, and understandings of place.

*Indigenous Poetics in Canada* gathers together a wide range of contributors, from Indigenous poets and scholars to settler and non-Indigenous writers and academics. The essays are written in a broad range of styles, from the exegetical and lyrical to the autobiographical and conversational, while also displaying a range of tones (from analytical to intimate) and points-of-view (from introspective to retrospective). The fact that *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* accommodates a broad range of voices, styles, and tones seems appropriate to the larger message it conveys about Indigenous poetics as a capacious and resilient aesthetic and epistemological category. The sheer range of perspectives results in a volume that is multifaceted and insightful. It also carries with it a significant amount of readerly responsibility toward the text. I encourage readers to read *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* from cover to cover. If not, they risk missing some of what this book has to offer.

*Indigenous Poetics in Canada* is a rich and multilayered work whose chapters situate readers in relation to Indigenous poetics as a rhetorical, epistemological, and experiential category or concept. McLeod’s excellent introduction at once identifies the volume’s objectives and guides readers’ responses to them. First, McLeod broadens traditional notions of what counts as poetry to accommodate other forms including ancient picto-

graphs and stories. In doing so, he exposes the limited usefulness of the oral-written binary that has predominated in Western literary theory, suggesting instead that we see “the constant interplay between orality and written forms” (8). McLeod’s emphasis on the interplay between oral and written forms goes hand-in-hand with his larger objectives to speak back to and revise Western stadial approaches to cultural development that have variously privileged written texts and devalued oral forms of expression. Throughout the introduction, McLeod insists that Indigenous creative expression be recognized on its own complex terms: in conjunction with longstanding Indigenous notions of language, culture, custom, governance, and place; and in relation to Canada’s colonial history including the lived effects of dislocation, diaspora, and trauma (McLeod 5-6).

While sustaining meaningful links between textuality and orality, together with aesthetics and politics, McLeod also proposes fundamental correctives to preconceived notions prevailing in the world of literary and academic publishing about who counts as a poet or what counts as poetry. These notions include the refusal to see “Indigenous poetry as ‘poetry’” and “traditional storytellers as poets” (McLeod 4; see also Mercredi). They also include the tendency “to see Indigenous literatures as not meeting ... expectations of what poetry is supposed to be” (4). As McLeod admits, *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* does not aim to come up with “a reductionist definition” of Indigenous creative process. Rather, it embraces “an organic and contextualized understanding of Indigenous poetics” (3). “Context” and “understanding” are key words in this instance, signalling the mutual implication of politics and poetry as Indigenous poetics works to “hold on to an alternative consciousness, holding its own position” (12) in relation to dominant (English and French) languages and literatures.

Together with McLeod, numerous contributors approach poetic creation and reception in terms of reciprocity. For example, Sam McKegney views reciprocity between writers and readers as an “ethical alliance” (47). Tasha Beeds, in turn, argues that mutual “understanding,” “self-awareness,” and infinite “connections” result from the dynamic relationship between storytellers and listeners (63; see also Simpson, Rogers, and Maracle). Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Warren Cariou, and Daniel David Moses variously investigate Indigenous poetics in relation to decolonizing pedagogies and linguistic practices. (See also Sy, Johnson, Belleau, and McKay.) Su-san Gingell and Lillian Allen explore the intersections between Indigenous poetry and the dub poetry of African diasporic peoples. In doing so, they underscore that diaspora is a defining feature of contemporary Indigeneity. Far from privileging linguistic or theoretical

categories, however, Indigenous Poetics in Canada also attends to the experiential by considering a category of knowledge that McLeod terms “embodied understanding” (93) and which accommodates affective responses to poetry (see Rogers, whose essay is aptly subtitled “Story Poetry Lives Inside”), “whole-bodied response[s]” (Arnott 323), feminine and maternal responses (Deerchild, Sy), and others.

While reciprocity remains an important concept throughout Indigenous Poetics in Canada, it is rarely disconnected from the notion of responsibility. For instance, citing a phrase made popular by editor McLeod, that stories aim to “illustrate gently” (Newhouse 79), David Newhouse argues that learning to read means more than “learning the stories, although they are important. It means learning a set of values and learning that one lives within an ethical universe, where one is expected to behave with respect and responsibility” (79). The concept of poetics as a communal responsibility is significant in more than one way. First, it enacts a corrective to preconceptions that poetic writing is a solitary activity. Second, it extends beyond the pages of this book to implicate readers in the larger imperatives to abandon preconceptions about poetic forms, to broaden categories of knowledge, or to learn new sets of values. In this way, Indigenous Poetics in Canada calls into being the ethical community of readers that its chapters anticipate or envision.

It is important to note that contributors seem to be at different stages in their responses to the idea of Indigenous poetics. For example, in an interview with Rhiannon Johnson, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm admits that she is “sort of hung up on that whole concept of poetics and what does it mean in an Indigenous context. I suppose in a way it’s kind of our sense of the aesthetics of language and story” (Johnson 266). Lee Maracle, by contrast, investigates the didactic and historical value that inheres in theorizing Indigenous poetics. Reminding readers that Native social institutions are never “alienated from the family and social life of the community” (306), Maracle locates Indigenous “oral language art” (306) in traditional social customs, such as story-telling, and institutions, such as forms of education, that function as forms of “governance” meant to guide “social and personal conduct without the use of force” (306). Maracle takes key features of orality and performativity—such as “[v]oice, diction, tone, style, rhythm, and physical metaphor” (308)—and recasts them in terms of their capacity to apprehend the traditionally “sa-cred” spheres of “emotions, law, philosophy, and spirit” (Maracle 308). Taken together, these varying responses to Indigenous poetics go hand-in-hand with the volume’s larger pioneering objective to “creat[e] a space” in which to “speak” of it (McLeod 12-13).

As much as *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* rejects the Western hierarchy of written over oral texts, it also refuses to privilege any one voice or perspective over another. As a result, different responses to the idea of Indigenous poetics exist in equal relation to one another and are meant to be read accordingly.

McLeod closes his Preface by noting that he has refrained from writing a conclusion to the volume. He invites readers instead “[to] arrive at their own understandings, and to imagine the possibilities of Indigenous poetics for themselves” (x). McLeod concludes by observing that his father “always taught [him] ... to find the meaning of stories and words ultimately for [him]self” (x). The notion of making meaningful for oneself is central to this volume’s didacticism. Noteworthy in this context is the observation by Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair that “In-digenous poetics ... is an ongoing and lived praxis of which we can all be a part” (212). Perhaps the most striking feature of *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* is the tremendous amount of value it attaches to creative process as a communal means of healing. The cumulative effect of reading the essays gathered in *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* is exhilarating, thought-provoking and, above all, humbling.

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