

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Throwing Fire at the Sun, Water at the Moon. By Anita Endrezze.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2n12z204>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 25(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Heldrich, Philip

Publication Date

2001

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

tional Navajo healers were also very active in the first endeavors by Cornell University to establish a new health care delivery model at Many Farms, Arizona. Over the next decades, most new health facilities built on the Navajo Reservation have included a place or a room designated for use by traditional healers when consulting or treating patients. Since the 1960s, the tribal mental health program and substance abuse programs on the reservation have had on their staff at least one consultant or member who is a trained traditional healer. In addition, social scientists and health providers working on the Navajo Reservation have also expressed ideas similar to those advocated by Alvord. Despite these efforts, however, it appears, at least according to this book, that the incorporation of these ideas is yet to be realized. Why this is so is not clear.

What is new in Alvord's and Van Pelt's book, however, is that these recommendations are coming from a member of the tribe who also happens to be a physician. Alvord's next book may tell us if her recommendations were integrated into Dartmouth Medical School's curriculum and how her ideas changed her students' medical practices. Revisiting some of these ideas is also timely, especially with the increased national interest on issues such as health disparities among minorities and the need for culturally competent health care providers and/or culturally competent health care delivery systems.

Jennie R. Joe
University of Arizona

Throwing Fire at the Sun, Water at the Moon. By Anita Endrezze. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000. 203 pages. \$29.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

If any one concept could characterize Native American autobiographies of the twentieth century, perhaps the idea of recovery would suffice. From the Iktomi stories of Zitkala-Ša to Leslie Silko's *Storyteller*, Native American authors have sought to put into writing the vanishing myths, legends, and histories of their people that have significantly shaped their tribal and individual identities. Often this work has not been easy, as the oral tradition, to paraphrase N. Scott Momaday, is perhaps always one generation from extinction. In putting together *Throwing Fire at the Sun, Water at the Moon*, Anita Endrezze faced a similar challenge in recovering vanishing stories and piecing together the cultural knowledge of the Yaqui half of her mixed Euro-Native heritage. To do such work, she listened to family, traveled to Sonora, Mexico, read Spanish and Mexican colonial texts, and researched anthropological studies about the Yaqui. In this respect, *Throwing Fire* shows how to quilt together the past from the fragments that remain. Endrezze's text poses and tackles other challenges as well in what might be called a postmodern Native American autobiography that is many things: a recovery, a historical rewriting, and a decentered, even self-reflexive text.

While at times the self-reflexive commentary can seem disruptive and tangential, the text meets its own self-stated objectives: "This book, therefore, is history, myth, family anecdotes, poetry, and short stories, and they are all the same thing" (p. xv-xvi). Overcoming such a conflation may be the text's biggest challenge, though it is also Endrezze's most significant point about the constructed nature of narrative expression. Such commentary also provides readers direction about the various forms the text will take in moving largely chronologically from Yaqui creation stories to reworked old legends for a contemporary audience. "One story," Endrezze points out, "might be told three different ways, filtered by individual perceptions and by time" (p. xv). Colonized by the Spanish, then the Mexicans, the Yaqui's culture becomes a product of these multiple influences. Similarly, the text's bifurcated structure—stories of Endrezze's Yaqui cultural past along the Río Yaqui in Sonora, Mexico, in Part One and stories of her family after coming north to escape Mexican persecution in Part Two—provides further understanding of how acculturation and assimilation shape both cultural and self identity.

While the text will remind readers of Silko's *Storyteller* in its variety of forms, its self-reflexive construction also captures something of N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *The Names*. There is even a hint of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* in Part Two's short narrative pieces. However, Endrezze's work overcomes any anxiety of influence. The largely narrative poems in their varied forms are the product of a talented writer aware of the dynamic relationship between form and content, as in "The Flood," a poem in two parts juxtaposing Yaqui and Christian myth:

So no rain came.
 The Yaquis sent a swallow
 to Yuku. "Rain!" cried the swallow.
 "So it will be," said Yuku.
 But under the soft blue belly
 of the sky, there were claws
 of lightening, and the sky turned over
 and over. Wind skinned
 the swallow, and the tiny heart
 was like nothing you will ever
 gather in your dry palms. (p. 27)

Endrezze demonstrates that she is more than an emerging writer, bringing to *Throwing Fire* the strengths of such previous poetry in *The Humming of Stars and Bees and Waves* (Making Waves, 1998) and *at the helm of twilight* (Broken Moon, 1992), winner of both the 1992 Bumbershoot/Weyerhaeuser Award and the 1992 Governor's Writers Award for Washington State. Her poems employ strong images in nuanced language, as in "Dream-Walkers from the Flower World":

Some people love earth
 and dream flowering altars
 and candle-lit stars,
 the topography of turtle

backs as they migrate
 from the sea to lay eggs.
 Some men marry the moon,
 swim in cones of flashing fish

calling women secret names
 of great beauty,
 humming like bees
 in the snow. (p. 163)

While the text challenges the reader to examine the very nature of autobiography, there is no denying the great beauty of Endrezze's poems.

The prose passages are equally strong. They read at times like prose poems, lyrical with a reverence for the power of language to create myth and legend. Such prose pieces rest comfortably in the tradition of the storyteller to renew and translate the past to another generation. The various recurring episodes of "The Esperanza Sisters" exemplify the best of *Throwing Fire's* prose as in "The Red-Hearted Desert":

Mi madre taught me that the world was not always this way. In the old days, sticks grew in the desert with voices like the voices of old women. And there were giant scorpions and snakes, sierpes, who used to be people before they did bad things. In the old days, winds would come out of deep holes in the earth where the sierpes slept, dreaming of sucking small-breasted young girls and coiling around slim-waisted boys. (p. 101)

The prose commentary, as opposed to the stories, brings another dynamic to this text of varied approaches. The exploratory pieces such as "A Good Journey Home to Vicam" reflect the best of the prose passages because such moments read like an organic part of the text. However, at other times, the prose, or meta-prose, can seem intrusive, over-explaining the text's intentions. For example, in "La Morena as the Sad-Eyed Jaguar Priest," readers learn in a note that "The incident . . . did happen" (p. 127); or, in "The Walking Stone" near the end of the book, there is a comment about what is already obvious in the text by this point: "This is a modern version of an old story" (p. 170). Such declarations seem at times to compromise the text's concern with truth as a construction from multiple narratives. While the above examples are from Part Two, most of the meta-prose can be found in Part One, where the text seems at times to struggle against its developing style of employing multiple voices and narrative forms.

Of further interest are the black-and-white reprints of Endrezze's acrylic and watercolor paintings at the end of the text. Such works demonstrates Endrezze is not only adept with language but also with visual arts, as in the striking complexity and color of the paperback's cover art, *Tenku Ania*.

Throwing Fire is certainly an ambitious text. Endrezze builds from those groundbreaking Native American autobiographies preceding hers while taking the autobiography in a new, even postmodern direction. While the text

complicates truth, knowing, and the difficulties of constructing an identity from vanishing fragments, it clarifies as well. In this gestalt of story, legend, myth, and history, Endrezze shows that it is still possible to understand, retain, and pass on to the next generation a sense of cultural heritage, no matter how mixed, difficult to recover, or complexly wrought.

Philip Heldrich

Emporia State University

Where the Pavement Ends: Five Native American Plays. By William S. Yellow Robe Jr. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. 192 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

Where the Pavement Ends includes five of William Yellow Robe Jr.'s plays: *The Star Quilter*, *The Body Guards*, *Rez Politics*, *The Council*, and *Sneaky*. William Yellow Robe Jr., an enrolled member of the Assiniboine tribe of the Fort Peck Reservation in northeast Montana, is a prolific playwright and actor and artistic director of his own Wakiknabe Theatre Company. Four of his five plays included in the University of Oklahoma Press' American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series Volume 37 could best be described as gritty, realistic short plays relevant to the contemporary Native American reservation experience.

The Star Quilters, *The Body Guards*, *Rez Politics*, and *Sneaky* deal essentially with the issues of racism, alcoholism, dysfunctional family structures, and other problems associated with life on the rez, which as Yellow Robe's book title claims is "where the pavement ends." *The Star Quilter*, a one-act play that covers some thirty years of time, concerns the ongoing relationship of Mona Gray, Indian and maker of the star quilts, and LuAnne Jorgensen, a white woman who obtusely and ignorantly over the years exploits the saintly Mona Gray for her star quilts. Both characters are blatant stereotypes, caricatures actually, who, never changing over the years, express themselves in ordinary hackneyed dialogue. As a drama, *The Star Quilters* unimaginatively bludgeons an audience with the issue of racism on the rez.

The Body Guards concerns two men who watch over the body of a dead man, and this very short play realistically and simplistically reveals to an audience the bleakness and injustices that exist on the rez. *Rez Politics* is a short play in one act, a conversation without action between two ten-year-old boys, which deals with racism, specifically the conflict between white and black mixed-bloods. *Sneaky*, another short play, tells the story of three brothers who steal the body of their mother from a funeral home and take the body out to the Plains for a traditional Indian tree burial. All of these plays are naturalistic, slice-of-life dramas in which contemporary Indian Country societal issues, such as alcoholism, racism, poverty, and dysfunctional family problems, predominate.

Plays are meant to be performed rather than read, and Yellow Robe's plays have received, with the exception of *The Council*, mostly small-venue staged readings rather than full-scale productions, and Yellow Robe himself