

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Power of Horses and Other Stories. By Elizabeth Cook-Lynn.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/43v0m340>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Jonaitis, Monique Ramune

Publication Date

2007-03-01

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/>

the focus on the Convocation of American Indian Scholars, which Warrior rightly designates as deserving “a prominent place in the annals of Native intellectual history” (57). In a powerful quotation from “The Morality of Indian Hating” (76) Momaday is quoted as saying, “I believe that what most threatens the American Indian is sacrilege, the theft of the sacred. Inexorably the Indian people have been, and are being, deprived of the spiritual nourishment that has sustained them for many thousands of years” (179). The subtle suggestion in this chapter is that Momaday represents that deep spiritual voice not always heard in the political realms. With that, I heartily agree, and Momaday, so frequently misunderstood, deserves another look, and another, for his tremendous contributions to who we are and what we think today as American Indian intellectuals, writers, and artists. This chapter reminds me of discussions about James Baldwin’s work in relation to his political activism—sometimes we have warring expectations of public intellectuals, admiring a person’s subtlety of expression (poetic inspiration), on the one hand, and wanting to pull the person crudely into party-line political endorsement, on the other hand.

The book succeeds in what its author sets out to do, although some statements in the book beg for much more discussion. For example, Warrior states flatly that “intellectual leadership [is] so lacking in Native America.” His book’s premise is that such leadership needs “to arise from the juncture of history, critical judgment, and experience” (xxii). What should this leadership look like? What kind of leadership does he seek? What about the thousands of intellectuals working hard to protect their resources and communities? Over the past thirty-plus years, tribal college leaders have built up educational institutions that straighten out some of the kinks in the Indian educational pipeline. In addition to academic preparation they afford students, they serve communities by providing jobs, building fitness centers, serving the remedial needs of undereducated people, fostering spiritual revitalization and respect for tribal cultural knowledge, fostering the growth of writers, and so forth. Warrior seems to be looking for a type of intellectual not clearly spelled out. Nonetheless, I do believe this is an important book, one that challenges us to read Native nonfiction critically for the strengths demonstrated by its intellectuals in many varied realms over time.

Kathryn Shanley
University of Montana

The Power of Horses and Other Stories. By Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006. 144 pages. \$15.95 paper.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s prologue to *The Power of Horses and Other Stories* hauntingly situates her readers at Big Pipes in Crow-Creek-Sioux country where she surveys an unnamed eeriness in the eastern and southern directions toward Fort George and Iron Nation. A master of literary aesthetics, Cook-Lynn plunges into the genesis of her text when she writes almost apocalyptically of

the emptiness that spans before her. One might imagine that an atom has split and charred the landscape, scorching *maka* (earth). Yet throughout the fifteen short stories that follow, Cook-Lynn harnesses a literary prowess that evolves into both a palpable and ethereal testament to the survival of the Crow-Creek-Sioux people who have been “assaulted for centuries by a confused mixture of racial hatred and good intentions” (64). A pulsating and throbbing memorial, *The Power of Horses* carries to the surface what Gloria Bird calls a mythic edge or collapsed time (“Toward a Decolonization of the Mind and Text,” in *Reading Native American Women: Critical/Creative Representations*, 2005) whereby “the past is always the past, as it is always the present” (107). This theoretical concept of compressed time is an integral Native ontology that underpins the ever-present and vital issues in Indian Country: language revitalization, US hegemony, environmental degradation, access to the home(land), spiritual/religious oppression, and personal and collective autonomy.

What may have seemed a potentially dismal path to a hollow and barren landscape in Cook-Lynn’s prologue slowly morphs into a tender reflection of what Reid Gomez refers to as “reading across the land and . . . inside the language”; that is, the land is text (“The Storyteller’s Escape: Sovereignty and Worldview,” in *Reading Native American Women: Critical/Creative Representations*, 2005). Cook-Lynn softly reveals “the enemy’s language” (to borrow from Joy Harjo) as an enclosed, confined space of expression and transforms the rigidity of English by generously sprinkling Dakota terminologies and concepts, like sweet morsels, into her stories. Cook-Lynn saturates a handful of her short stories with underlying notions of Dakotanness that not only paint and color the texts but also infuse and give voice to both her human characters, as well as the (home)land. In “Mahpiyato,” for example, (*k*)*unchi* (old woman) interprets the land in much the same way as does a translator. When (*k*)*unchi* speaks to her grandchild in Dakota, the sky and river reveal themselves *in, through, and as* infinite shades of blue: *mahpiyato*. Hence, *mahpiyato*, as a term, a notion, an expression, and a story, reveals a much larger life that expands far beyond our selves.

Acts of reading, reflecting upon, and interpreting the land are textual rivers that stream through Cook-Lynn’s remaining stories and emphasize an already established truth among the Crow-Creek-Sioux, that *maka* is an umbilical cord to the Sioux self. This reciprocal relationship reveals much more than the obvious linkages to the land; it also shows what ensues when one’s relationship to the land is severed or threatened. Once again, one might equate this violent separation of self from *maka* with the likeness of atomic fission. Cook-Lynn magnifies the aftermath and fallout by vigilantly invoking the echoes of historical memory, for example, the Catholic Fathers’ tongue-lashings and rebukes, Andrew Jacksonian terrorism, the US Calvary’s encroaching hooves, the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, and hydropower dams drowning Native lands, to expose and reinforce the integral Native issue of homeland security and self-autonomy or security of self. In “Loss of Sky” Cook-Lynn chronicles a young Sioux’s escape from an oppressive Dominican regime in Indian boarding school and his disappearance overseas as an American soldier. She recounts the irony of his civil service to the United States, a military power that does

not recognize him as a citizen in his *own* homeland: Crow-Creek-Sioux, United States of America. The intergenerational grief in this story reminds us that since time immemorial it has been imperative that this young Sioux man's deceased bones "mingle with the bones of his grandfathers" (11). Instead, his bones remain painfully separated from the homeland. Likewise, Cook-Lynn's textual river reveals how environmental degradation and religious domination, as well, impose upon this reciprocal land-based relationship. "The Clearest Blue Day," for instance, emerges as a backdrop for a striking parallel and analogy drawn between imposing fundamentalist Catholic priests looking to "save souls" and the outpouring hydropower plant that floods Native land. Consequently, the hydropower plant, already an eyesore, has now become a "heart sore" to those who have had intimate knowledge of the river's "every bend and turn, every fluvial characteristic" (60).

In overcoming the seriousness of Cook-Lynn's stories, she acknowledges and accentuates Native ontologies when she colorfully conveys the impact and aftermath of both US imperialism and religious oppression by comically illuminating "success stories" of personal and collective autonomy. For Cook-Lynn it is not necessarily the loudest voices that get to be heard but rather the quietest. Reminiscent of Brazilian author and pedagogue, Paulo Freire, and his push to "detach from the oppressor" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "A Visit from Reverend Tileston" is a comical ten-page anecdote of one family's resistance through silence toward three traveling soul saviors. The clergymen who have come to "spread the Gospel" forcibly impose "fire and brimstone" biblical passages and church songs onto the community. To show just how relentless and unwavering the Catholic priest and his nuns are, Cook-Lynn throws in some comic relief, such that even the dog tries to "detach from the oppressor" when he begins to howl and whine.

Cook-Lynn's strategically placed allusions to messianic fervor and US hegemony speckle her text in much the same way as do the Dakota terms and concepts, especially when she tackles intergenerational memory and its by-product: fear. In "The Power of Horses," Cook-Lynn craftily adds a cryptic touch when a daughter helping her mother boil beets worriedly peers through the kitchen window to observe cautiously a white man and her father speaking in the yard. Her "nameless fear" alerts her of the white man's impending proposition for her father (75). What happens next leaves the reader wondering if the beet juice that seeps into the ground is a prelude to the encroaching fallout from the "Indian problem," an analogy to past atrocities, or both, when Cook-Lynn describes, "The girl watched the red beet juice stain the dry, parched earth in which there was no resistance, and she stepped away from the redness of the water, which gushed like strokes of a painter's brush, suddenly black and ominous, as it sank into the ground" (75). In subsequent stories, fear is the origin as well as aftermath of proclaimed Christian doctrine. Cook-Lynn's seventh story, "Cure," highlights a diseased man's hypervigilance toward his deteriorating health. The colonizer's fear-based religion holds him hostage, physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally when the man implements a rigorous routine based on anxiety, an anxiety that augments his desperation for and susceptibility to dogmatic teachings. Like clockwork, his

routinely sung church hymns eventually become “bargaining chips” between him and the imposed Christian deity. Cook-Lynn unabashedly reveals manipulative aspects of religious dogma when she writes that “because he had some notion of how frail and tenuous his existence was, he sang the song. . . . You see, he couldn’t take the chance of *not* singing it” (55).

The Power of Horses and Other Stories adds fuel to the continuing recovery efforts of Native American and First Nations people. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s work reflects what Linda Tuhiwai Smith terms as “twenty-five indigenous projects” in *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999). Instead of perpetuating what Paula Gunn Allen cautions as a “progressive fallacy,” a nontruth that “allows American Indians victim status only” (5), Cook-Lynn uses remembering, revitalizing, writing, restoring, and returning (to name a few) as tools to convey Crow-Creek-Sioux survivance. Although Cook-Lynn’s Sioux characters may fall victim to the many forms of oppression, as well as temporarily succumb to intergenerational grief, it is through this process of recovery that the Dakotapi (The People) triumphantly emerge as autonomous individuals and as an autonomous indigenous nation. *The Power of Horses and Other Stories* beckons readers to see, feel, and hear the pulse of a living people, like the man “whose feet had touched this sacred ground *as long ago as memory and imagination could distinguish*” (65, italics added). Moreover, just as the Dakotapi ceremonial dancers move “in and out of the line like feeding and discharging tributaries, converging and separating along the course of the major stream” (65), so too do Dakotapi bear witness and survive.

Monique Ramune Jonaitis

University of California, Davis

To Remain an Indian: Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education. By K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty. New York: Teachers College Press, 2006. 213 pages. \$70.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

In the mid-1920s, the Institute for Government Research funded an investigation into claims of corruption and mismanagement within the Office of Indian Affairs. The resulting Meriam Report produced a blistering critique of a range of governmental services but became best known for its severe indictment of Indian boarding schools. In *To Remain an Indian* the authors claim that the Meriam Report also put forth an often overlooked yet unprecedented possibility: “He who wants to remain an Indian and live according to his old culture should be aided in doing so” (65). While the Meriam Report did not attempt to challenge existing federal policies of assimilation, it made a radical suggestion for its time: that Native people had the right to choose how they wished to live.

Throughout *To Remain an Indian*, Lomawaima and McCarty outline how such choice played out in the rhetoric of policy, in practice, and in the lived experience of Native people. This three-tiered approach points out the gaps and inconsistencies between rhetorical ideals and their translation