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**Velroy and the Madischie Mafia.** By Sy Hoahwah. Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 2009. 64 pages. \$12.95 paper.

Like many younger Native American poets, Sy Hoahwah's work exists in the contemporary space of mixed-blood, multicultural Native America. That is to say, it is complexly Native and American in its language, themes, and images. Elements of the traditional story, an adapted warrior ethos, and a multifaceted spiritual engagement are all in evidence in his poems, as are the superhero fantasy, tough-guy, hip-hop, and gangster constructions of American masculinity and libidinous youth. Much of the work in this collection is concerned with mingling such images into a coherent cultural and spiritual world, and it succeeds in ways that are honest and original.

The collection opens with "Madischie Mafia," a poem exemplifying many of the previously listed images and themes. It presents a series of young characters partying and dancing at a club in which

Velroy de-jays the séance-turtables,  
spinning black water,  
scratching out full moons  
with red and blue curves of hip hop

for a roomful of revelers whose "bodies are a collection of sunrise songs in reverse" (2). The club music and atmosphere are imagined as a darkly colorful contemporary ceremony in which the frenzy and swagger of youth is presented in mystical, traditional tones. We see Corey, who "wears her cat-eye contacts / and no panties" while taking ecstasy in the bathroom; Dee, who is a mixed blood who

couldn't enroll into any tribe  
but he can grass dance, bump and grind,  
and do the Jerry Lewis.  
Black girls love him;

and Stoney, who "has four wives, Indian way," wields "ghost medicine," and "sells peyote and coke to the white boys" (2). The last stanza returns to the narrator, revealing him to be a gangster "with a southern accent" who boasts about killing:

It was with a shotgun.  
It was powwow season,  
I fancy danced (2)

This mix of lively comic and desperately dark images prepares us to enter Hoahwah's portrayal of contemporary Comanche culture with an appropriately flexible set of expectations.

Hoahwah's collection immediately invites comparisons to poets like Sherman Alexie and Tiffany Midge. Like them, Hoahwah deals with Native American culture chiefly at the points where it intersects, satirizes, and complicates contemporary American culture with a darkly humorous and biting ironic sensibility. However, on the whole, Hoahwah's tone is less sharply ironic, comedic, or confrontational than Alexie's and Midge's. Hoahwah seems more interested in the subtle cultural critique that is possible through the juxtaposition of dissonant images. This allows him to exploit the surprising nature of such images for readers still harboring ideas of imagined Indians, while for many Native readers the images will seem spot-on. Both groups find space for engagement with Hoahwah's rich, clever imagery and intertwined poetic narratives. The most important point of divergence between Hoahwah's work and that of poets like Alexie and Midge is his nuanced use of the supernatural as a medium for cultural experience. Alexie and Midge often invite the world of ancestors and history into their work with jarring irony and poignant comment. Hoahwah's poetry does this at times as well, but for the most part he delves much more deeply into the intersections and interstices of the spiritual and the mundane.

When he establishes his setting, it is often with language that is, by turns, haunting and suggestive:

What can be said for Comanche County—a crow's call  
streaking through dreary country  
with a little gray sky locked to its side. (3)

This image from "Comanche County" moves between "gray sky" and sunlight and "laughter" creating "a wedding in the trees" and back to "dilapidated pumpkin patches" that are "like dropped corpses along Steel Bridge Road" as "[a] meth lab sings, hollers / from the vortex of woods and echoes" (3). The poem describes various places in the county with darkly surreal and mystical language, culminating in its description of Madischie, where

boys are lured to the railroad tracks;  
the stars  
songs,  
marijuana

even as the speaker proclaims the town his "shelter" where "Blood and Budweiser flowed" and "Boys neither go to heaven or hell / but into ghost stories" (5). These are very real boys, recognizable to anyone, but their path

“into ghost stories” is suggestive of their reckless youth and their connection to something beyond the train tracks where they convene.

Given that the book’s title announces its themes of gangland violence and underworld exploits, Hoahwah doesn’t resist depicting the violence of the place, but doesn’t generally do so in a confrontational manner. Instead, the violence occurs as part of the larger fabric of mystery and foreboding that surrounds the poems. In the poem “White Clay” the central character, Stoney, is a dealer selling “drugs in the woods / near a haunted spot” (25). After selling his stash of peyote, Stoney is attacked from behind by a skeletal spirit. Stoney throws off the skeleton and terrifies his friends, but the spirit returns to proclaim that Stoney “will be hard to hit” and “bullets will never kill [him]” as long as he carries a ball of white clay and paints himself with it before battle (25). By the end of the poem, Stoney and his gang pick a fight with some Mexican gangsters in a Wal-Mart, and Stoney uses the power from his warrior’s vision to charge into the fight,

killing the one called Taco Tom  
and the Walmart door greeter.  
After that Stoney became famous. (25)

As the book progresses, the poems move toward exploring how these young lives are implicated in a wider cultural and spiritual heritage. The poem “Red River” exemplifies this as it shifts from beginning stanzas that focus on describing the river that “makes a noisy entrance into Texas / like tumbling file cabinets” (42). In the river, Velroy faces a standoff with a “gruesome brotherhood: Blue Corpse, Smallpox, and the Creeper, cruel 300 lb. nymphs” who “tried to strip his body of Carbon-14 atoms” (42). Velroy defeats each with a mixture of pop-culture martial-arts fighting and trickster techniques. He “drop-kicked Blue Corpse in the windpipe,” tricked Creeper

with his own taboo.  
[b]y passing wolf’s milk and tequila  
through a hole in an oak tree,

making him vomit and turn into a tree, and he defeated Smallpox in a hip-hop “dance-off”: “While Smallpox was doing a head spin, / Velroy pulled the cardboard out from under him,” causing him to fall into a creek and drown (43). These strange, over-the-top battle scenes are at once hyperbolically comic in their detail and serious in their depiction of Velroy’s struggle with powerful forces. The poem reminds us that “Snake Woman sits in the deep” of the river, still menacing, and “members of the Black Knife Society” are approaching on horseback (43). At the poem’s end, we see Velroy’s ultimate defeat in terms that are more pop nihilistic than tragic:

At the Red River  
Ute chief cuts my guitar strings  
Ute women love Punk. (44)

This final gesture of the poem suggests a literal defeat for Velroy and a symbolic one in which his pop culture outlaw/warrior figure is bested by the destructive punk gesture of cutting the guitar strings, thus silencing and disarming him. By the end of the collection, most of the characters who began the book in poses of youthful rebellion have either sacrificed something essential or become sacrifices. In the final poem, the speaker recalls the former power the Madischie gangsters had, recognizes their losses, and waits for some understanding to move forward: "But in the dark, at night, I quietly listen / for our language, hungry to answer" (58).

It is this kind of deep sense of loss and hope for redemption that makes Hoahwah's poems hold together as more than a series of ironic and darkly comic contemporary Indian vignettes. He takes us deeply into the place of Comanche County and Madischie, and develops the complicated personal and spiritual worlds that coexist there. Hoahwah's ability to handle the power of the supernatural as a substantial force in the world without making it fantastic is impressive. His work does more than just present a fresh view of contemporary Comanche culture, though it does that well. These poems show that deeply complex imagery and carefully developed character and cultural context can operate with humor, irony, and violence to present contemporary Native American lives in rich, engaging ways.

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