

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Earthworks Rising: Mound Building in Native Literature and Arts

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7wt857wm>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 47(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Caldwell, Robert B.

Publication Date

2024-12-01

DOI

10.17953/A3.34846

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/>

Earthworks Rising: Mound Building in Native Literature and Arts. By Chadwick Allen. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 395 pages. \$140.00 cloth; \$34.95 paper; \$34.95 ebook.

No reader can walk away from Chadwick Allen's (Chickasaw descent) *Earthworks Rising* without new insights into how Native experiences influence contemporary Indigenous literature. The book examines relationships between monumental earthworks and Native creative expression. Earthworks are not simply archaeological relics of the past, but nodes within expansive Indigenous networks that link the past to the present and future. Armed with numerous examples of analog and digital visual arts, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, performance, and even texts from museum exhibits, Allen confronts the long-standing history of settler engagements with North America's "mounds" from a fresh perspective that ideologically liberates the earthworks as a site of creation and Native futurity.

Until now, almost all literature available on mounds has been from an archaeological perspective. The introduction approaches this backstory as a given, providing readers a curt overview of nineteenth-century Euro-American fascination with the mounds.

The introduction quickly moves from the often-cited works of the settler imaginary to less well-known Indigenous ontologies, preparing the reader for the depth of what is to come. The bulk of the book is divided into three parts, each with a coda followed by an overall conclusion. Each part of the book's triptych focuses on different facets of Indigenous cosmology including sky above, water, earth, and the subterranean cardinal directions.

Allen introduces readers to a breadth of contemporary literature about monumental earthworks sprawling across what is now the Midwestern, Southeastern, and interior Eastern United States. Most of the earthworks discussed were created by Indigenous ancestors from approximately 800–1500 CE. They are known variously as sites or cities within the "Mississippian" culture, kingdoms, or civilization and linked with intensive corn (maize) agriculture. Cahokia is one of the best-known of these sites. Rising above the banks of the Mississippi River, opposite present-day Saint Louis, Missouri, Cahokia was an ancient city of fifteen thousand or more people. "Monks Mound," the largest platform-mound complex, towers some thirty meters high over the grassy and sparsely wooded landscape surrounding it. Other earthwork-city complexes discussed are much older and defy anthropologists' preconceived ideas regarding earthworks. For example, Poverty Point was constructed prior to maize agriculture. The book advances theory for the field of Indigenous Studies by exposing readers to various cosmologies and in utilizing twenty-first-century methods, such as Dan Million's *intense dreaming*.

Earthworks Rising is a kind of archeology of selected sites of literature, visual art, and popular images. The center of the book contains twenty color plates, from

photos richly illustrating Serpent Mound from above to scenes from John Egan's circa-1850 panoramas to the book cover of Hedge Coke's *Blood Run* and Alyssa Hinton's mixed-media works. In addition, half-tone photographs are featured throughout the book. Allen's focus is primarily on poetry, performance, contemporary nonfiction, and museology, but the book does not pretend to be exhaustive. Instead, Allen offers representative examples taken from both personal knowledge and research. The experiential portion extends from his own encounter, "Walking the Mounds" (chapter three), to the lived awareness of those he features. In this way, the book offers several vignettes and snapshots of important literary and artistic works. In the fifth chapter, "Secured Vaults," we are introduced to Phillip Carroll Morgan's *Anompolichi: The Word Master* and its sequel. Morgan's work features Cahokia not as a standalone monument but as a large and vibrant city within a deeply interconnected continent, in contrast to the "arid scenarios of Ancient America offered by archeologists . . ." (188). Through a round-about way, readers learn an alternate perspective on *Nanib Waiya* ("leaning mound"), the Choctaw *ishki chito* (great mother) mound, and the nearby natural hill with cave. Most translate it to leaning mound, but Allen, drawing on Ian Skrodin's fictional work, posits that only the homonymous *Nanib Waya* ("fruitful hill")—like a swollen belly and navel—makes cosmological sense.

Readers are introduced to how museums and Native Nations' newly embrace monumental earthworks, a phenomenon that has been growing since the 1970s. For example, Allen's explanation of the Chickasaw Cultural Center's sky bridge and reconstructed platform mound built in 2010 mirrors his discussion of *Anompa* (language) used to describe the mounds historically. In addition, the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City, which opened in 2021, is curvilinear. Its design is circular and consciously breathes the deep cultural connections regarding seasons, cycle of life, and the ancestral mounds that did the same. In this way, it is more than a simulacra: it is a contemporary earthwork rising above the banks of the Oklahoma River across from downtown and visible from all of the major highways that crisscross the city. The book captures a stunning color photograph of the winter solstice sunset aligning with a tunnel at the Cultural Center (Plate 19).

While the main focus of the monograph is earthworks, Allen also touches on a number of important, sometimes controversial, and often unexamined topics. Jimmy Durham, now widely derided as an ethnic fraud, is featured, despite being widely known as a "Pretendian." Allen's refreshingly frank self-reflexive narrative—including his prior collaborations with Durham—plays a major part in chapter two. Revisiting Alice Walker's imagined burial mound in *Meridian*, Allen notes the turn toward an Afro-Indigenous reading of blood, land, and memory in the South, but expands the scope to a view from the perspective of mounds. Sometimes discussion of the monumental earthworks turns to legend and lore that evokes fear, concern, and trepidation. These lesser-known cautionary tales about ancient hierarchical (and often evil) earthworks builders continue to circulate in some Native communities; Allen also offers readers a window into those worlds.

The book is a page-turner, despite its heft. It effortlessly weaves lived experience, theory, and poetry into the kind of book that, with each read, reveals a new layer.

Academics and students of American Indian and Indigenous studies, anyone interested in themes of cultural heritage, and those already captivated by monumental earthworks will all want to read this book. But it should also appeal to landscape architects, philosophers, and younger Native activists focused on #LandBack, repatriation, and reclaiming elements of shared patrimony, including those active in the creation of new earthworks and new Indigenous land art. It pairs well with recent comparative and transnational studies such as Tim Pauketar's *Gods of Thunder* (2023). The book also serves as a great companion to recent projects such as *Nanih Bvlbancha* in New Orleans and Jeffrey Gibson's monumental sculpture *Because Once You Enter My House, It Becomes Our House*. In this light, the book offers a wider conceptual framework for both Native and non-Native peoples to understand these modes of resurgence.

Robert B. Caldwell Jr.

University at Buffalo, State University of New York