
Book Review

Joy Harjo, LeAnne Howe, and Jennifer Elise Foerster (eds.), *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020), xxix + 458 pp., \$19.95 (pbk), ISBN 9780393356809.

You sometimes hear it said that Christopher Columbus called the Indigenous people he encountered on his first voyage *Indios* because he thought they were a people more natural and closer to God than Europeans—in *Dios*. It is a charming children's story and completely untrue. He called those indigenes *Indios* because he thought he had reached the Indies, that is to say the islands off the coast of Asia. In fact, those who continue to mark Columbus Day (increasingly giving way to Indigenous Peoples' Day) celebrate a man who didn't know where was going, didn't know where he was when he was there, and died thinking he had been somewhere else.

In her eloquent and useful introduction, editor Joy Harjo takes up the issue of Columbus and nomenclature. She rightly points out there is no such thing as a 'Native American' or an 'American Indian'. There is therefore no 'Native American literature'. Rather, indigenes are best identified by tribal national identity. Hence the subtitle of the volume, referencing 'Native Nations Poetry'.

This edited collection is a monumental achievement, including 161 poets representing more than ninety tribal national traditions. Recognizing that the book will find itself in the hands of a non-Native readership, largely unfamiliar with Native literature and poetry, the editors add the anthologized works to the American literary canon. The imprimatur of a Norton Anthology (with whom Harjo and Gloria Bird have already published *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*) aids this process. Pieces range from selections from tribal nations' oral traditions with ancient origins to young poets, like Tanaya Winder, Jake Skeets, and Lara Mann. Those already acquainted with Native literature will see many familiar names like Gerald Vizenor, Ray Young Bear, Sherman Alexie, Zitkala-Sa, Chrystos, and Diane Burns. The oldest published poem dates from 1678, by Eleazar, a Native of unknown tribal origin who attended Harvard's Indian College.

Harjo, currently serving a rare third term as United States Poet Laureate (the only other so honored was Robert Pinsky), is as the recognition would imply a master at the craft herself. Her introduction reminds me of Lawrence Durrell. Though only ten pages long, it takes much longer to read than its length would imply. One wants to linger over the elegance of her prose, reread every sentence, feel it in one's mouth and chew each word. The executive associate editor LeAnne Howe is herself a renowned poet. Her 'Outroduction' is an evocative, highly personal essay. In it, she recounts how her ancestors wrote poetry on scraps of paper and as marginalia in books (unable to afford paper). It is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson, who wrote her own work on similar fragments.

Native literatures, like Native cultures generally, are rooted in the land. For this reason, the editors arrange their various sections in broad geographic regions (though not so-called 'culture areas' per se). These are 'Northeast and Midwest', 'Plains and Mountains', 'Pacific Northwest, Alaska, and Pacific Islands', and 'Southeast'. Each has a brief introduction, as well, to orient the reader. They follow 'the Muscogean directional path, which begins East to North and continues to the West and then to the South', returning to the East in a circle (p. 7). According to Harjo, 'Each tribal nation is very different in orientation, ritual, and practices' (p. 7). Though rooted in land, selections herein range from traditional orature, to reservation communities, to the contemporary urban experience, representing the range of Native identities over the more than 500 years since the advent of European contact and colonization. These poems are cultural products, but they are also works of surpassing individual artistic accomplishment.

Even at 400-plus pages, the editors acknowledge limits of 'space, resources, and language', forcing them to exclude many worthy poets they would have liked to include (p. 10). Any anthology must be selective and requires choices. Further, they state that they have no wish 'to arbitrate identity, though in such a project we are confronted with the task' (p. 4). They have limited authors collected to enrolled citizens of federally recognized tribes and those 'known to work directly within their respective communities', recognizing the right of tribal nations to decide their own membership (p. 4). It is a safe and conventional choice—that is nonetheless a choice, which they acknowledge may not be popular. They cite or thank Joseph Bruchac, Lisa Brooks, and Allison Hedge Coke. Yet none of these would meet their selection criterion. They also include Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) and Indigenous peoples of Guam and American Samoa, who have no federal recognition. Even within their choice parameters, there are notable exclusions, including Maurice Kenny, Nora Naranjo Morse, John Rollin Ridge, and William S. Yellow Robe, Jr., while including some others not primarily known as poets. And in the section on the 'Northeast and Midwest', there are no New England poets included, other than probably the aforementioned Eleazar (although we do not know), even from federally recognized tribal nations.

No anthology, even one of this length and breadth can please everyone. The editors are generous in acknowledging their forebears. The book begins with a blessing from N. Scott Momaday, the author of the first major work of the Native American Renaissance in literature and the former poet laureate of Oklahoma. This entire volume is a blessing.

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