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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2rs1v8h6>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 8(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

1984-03-01

DOI

10.17953

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Songs From This Earth on Turtle's Back: Contemporary American Indian Poetry. Edited, with an Introduction, by Joseph Bruchac. Greenfield Center, NY: The Greenfield Review Press, 1983. 300 pp. \$9.95 Paper.

Because there are many anthologies of "Indian Poetry" which are collections of chants or songs—sometimes collected decades ago by ethnologists or retranslated by non-Indians—many people in Europe and America think that American Indian literature is a purely oral tradition. The oral heritage is powerful and still helps propel American Indian literature. Forms like the Iroquois *Gai'wi-io* and the Navajo Nightway Chant are still relevant to existing cultures and influence the most contemporary American Indian poets. These works, however, are frequently inaccurately presented in anthologies, though Native Americans themselves are beginning to collect them and present them accurately in context.

Joseph Bruchac, the editor of *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back*, has collected, as his subtitle says, contemporary American Indian poetry. These works, all rendered in English, show that a written, contemporary, identifiably American Indian poetry exists. The varied work being produced by the new generations of American Indian poets, while often experimental in form and frequently sharing the free verse and other forms used by non-Indian poets, is still informed by the broad traditions and values of American Indian cultures. These poets share traditions of respect for Earth, and they see themselves as a part of creation, not its lords. They respect their cultures, and they respect language. These strong American Indian influences over theme and language, as well as individual talent, are creating some of the best contemporary American poetry.

Other anthologies have, of course, attempted to collect the same kinds of contemporary American Indian poetry. Duane Niatum's *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* (Harper and Row, 1975) and Geary Hobson's *The Remembered Earth* (University of New Mexico Press, 2nd Printing, 1980) are similar collections. Most of the better-known poets in *Songs from This Earth* . . . are represented in Kenneth Rosen's *Voices of the Rainbow* (Seaver Books, 1975) and a few of the same poems are collected in both anthologies. *Voices of the Rainbow* presents larger selections of poems by only

21 poets. *Songs from This Earth . . .*, on the other hand, includes fewer poems per author but introduces the reader to over twice as many poets.

Songs from This Earth . . . is a well-produced anthology which adds some touches missing from other collections. Each poet's work is introduced with a picture of the author and the introductions to each poet's section are usually written by the poets themselves. These introductions accomplish several things: they personalize the poems and they give an accurate sense of the poet's tradition and aims in his or her work. In addition these introductions give a sense of the diversity of contemporary American Indian poetry and contemporary American Indian experience. It is particularly encouraging to note that so many of these poets exhibit the "connections" of other contemporary poets: academic posts; grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, private foundations, and Poets in the Schools programs; previous books; anthologies; awards and so on. While there is never really *enough* of this sort of thing, the frequency with which it is mentioned shows that contemporary American Indian poetry is receiving support and that there is a network of connections among these poets, their institutions, their journals and their presses. In fact, *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back* was itself partially supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts.

But the range of poets whose work is included here is wider than that. Among the 52 poets in *Songs from This Earth . . .* are several whose poems appear here first, some who have no academic connection, some who live "on the res." Alongside the familiar names of Momaday, Niatum, Silko—and their necessarily familiar poems which are included in many of the anthologies—are names like Mary Goose, a new Mesquakie-Chippewa poet whose five poems published here show great promise.

The forms in the collection are as varied as any contemporary poetry might be. Jim Barnes, who has published in the mainstream poetry journals and edits *The Chariton Review*, offers "Concomly's Skull." In its tight, slant-rhymed, eight-syllable lines with five accents in each line to further "tighten" the line, nature comments on Concomly's reburial:

An unexpected hail. Hell
on dogs and birds. The sky can't hold
its wrath or praise long enough for all
this pomp and circumstance to mold
ancestral flesh onto his skull.
The eyes stay empty. The sky grows full.

Other forms used by the poets in this volume are derived from the oral literature of Native Americans. William Oandasán provides a sampling from his manuscript, *Round Valley Songs*,* which is made up of four 48-line songs, each with 12 four-line verses. As with many traditional songs each verse can be rearranged and the lines within each verse can be rearranged to create new songs. One verse, for example, that reappears in the two samples in Bruchac's collection is

long ago black bears
sang around our lodge fires
tonight they dance
alive through our dreams.

The themes are equally varied. Diane Burns has a hilarious poem, "Big Fun," about an Anishinabe named Modene at the *rancheria fiesta* and another bitterly sarcastic poem, "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question" which includes these questions:

Your great grandmother, huh?
An Indian Princess, huh?
Hair down to there?
Let me guess. Cherokee?

This poem concludes with the lines,

This ain't no stoic look.
This is my face.

Geary Hobson has poems side by side, one about driving to the stomp-dance grounds in a pickup, the other about meeting an ex-Young Socialist from his college days. Maurice Kenny uses

**Round Valley Songs* is being nominated for a 1984 Lamont Prize, a 1984 Push Cart prize and a 1985 American Book Award.

nature cycles in "Corn-Planter" to show adjustment and assimilation. After eight years of failing to make a living planting corn,

The ninth spring I make chicken-feather
headdresses,
plastic tom-toms and beaded belts.
I grow rich,
buy an old Ford,
drive to Chicago,
and get drunk
on Welfare checks.

Other poems treat historical incidents or figures from American Indian history. Duane Niatum's "Chief Leschi of the Nisqually" tells of Leschi's vision in jail just before he decides to "eat little and speak less before he hangs."

Contemporary life is presented with the interpretation, with the comparison, of the older culture. Leslie Silko's "Toe'osh: A Laguna Coyote Story" uses the familiar figure of Trickster Coyote to enrich her story of how politicians bribed the Laguna Pueblos with hams and turkeys and the Lagunas stayed home on election day "and ate turkey/ and laughed." Mah-do-ge Tohee uses the coyote as a comparison in "agnes," naming his trickster character after the myth:

Today, coyote's a bourbon indian
living in some ghetto
outside of pearl's harbor
beachfront.

One of the clearest examples of this translation of contemporary life through the signs of the older American Indian culture comes from Norman H. Russell, a one-eighth Cherokee who has taught at several colleges and universities. In his "The Cherokee Dean," the speaker imagines that automobiles are horses, that a condominium development is "a cliff of stone houses," that the janitor bringing the mail is "a runner from a distant village." Even his professional duties are translated:

i had to fire a professor
now he must stand in the shadows
he cannot come to the circle in the night

Finally, since the refrigerator is empty, the speaker decides there are no tracks in the snow; "the deer have formed their snow circle/ two hills beyond."

Songs from This Earth On Turtle's Back is at once a good introduction to contemporary American Indian poetry and a true sample of its variety. It is another worthy contribution to the field from Joseph Bruchac's Greenfield Review Press.

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A Nation Within. Edited by Ralph Salisbury. Hamilton, New Zealand: Outrigger Publishers, 1983. (*Pacific Quarterly Moana*, vol. 8, no. 1.) 108 pp. [For prices write to Box 13049 Hamilton, New Zealand or 814 Broadway, New York, NY 10003.] Paper.

Readers interested in American Indian poetry had a bountiful year in 1983. From Greenfield Review Press in New York *Songs From This Earth on Turtle's Back* included fifty-two American Indian writers and the Institute of American Indian Arts Press in Santa Fe, New Mexico produced *The Clouds Threw This Light* featuring seventy-seven poets. However, more exciting than the sheer bulk of available poetry is that the output of American Indian literature has not been limited to United States presses. *A Nation Within** was published in New Zealand, demonstrating the significance of American Indian writers in the world literary community. Ralph Salisbury has selected thirty-six representative American Indian authors for this collection of poetry and fiction. Some readers may be disappointed by the exclusion of Leslie Silko, Ray Young Bear, Simon Ortiz, or other contemporary writers, but Salisbury has provided a balance between well-known and less well-known authors, introducing many fine writers to international readers and featuring familiar names such as Maurice Kenny, Wendy Rose, William Oandasan, Paula Gunn Allen and Joseph Bruchac. He has also included Mayan writer Victor Dionicio Montejo.

*Title provided by Wendy Rose. [Ed.]