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Skylark Meets Meadowlark: Reimagining the Bird in British Romantic Literature and Contemporary Native American Literature. By Thomas C. Gannon.

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The Seminole “voices” referred to by the authors have their echoes in other tribes, though the Florida Seminoles have their own uniqueness and innovative ways of survival. It’s a good book for getting a basic overall sense of the rapid changes in the Florida Seminole tribe during the 1970 to 2000 period.

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Skylark Meets Meadowlark: Reimagining the Bird in British Romantic Literature and Contemporary Native American Literature. By Thomas C. Gannon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 436 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

Most cultures have special relationships with birds. The bald eagle is our national bird, and all fifty states have official state birds. The most common is the northern cardinal—seven states claim it; but relevant to the title of this book is that the western meadowlark represents six states. Eagles, hawks, and falcons are favored mascots among schools and sports teams, though ravens, blue jays, orioles, cardinals, penguins, thrashers, and ducks, among others, are also present. Some teams use mythical birds such as the thunderbird. The human-bird relationship is no less prevalent around the world, for example, the rooster as a Chinese zodiac sign, Horus as the falcon-headed god of ancient Egypt, the Roman eagle, the dove that returned to Noah’s ark with an olive branch, and the birds that the Dugum Dani of New Guinea emulate in their personal decoration.

Gannon chooses the skylark in British Romantic literature for his title—Wordsworth’s “To a Skylark” (1805) and Shelley’s “Ode to Skylark” (1820) among others—and the meadowlark—as in the Osage poet Carter Revard’s “Driving in Oklahoma” (1972–73)—but this is misleading. The book is about many more birds than just these two; eagles and crows figure much more prominently in his argument, both symbolically and real.

Following the preface, the volume is divided into five chapters and an epilogue: “Birds of a Feather: Avians, Indigenes, Animal Rights, and Ecology”; “Wandering Voices: The Avian Other from Cowper to Wordsworth”; “Blithe Spirit and Immortal Bird: The Avian Other from Wordsworth to Clare”; “The Eagle and the Crow: Avian Returns in Native American Literature”; “A Beatitude of Birds: Contemporary Native Poetry”; and “Epilogue: The Avian Speaks Back.”

Gannon has written two distinct books. The first three chapters, and especially chapters 2 and 3, are written in a ponderous academic style that I found difficult to slog through. The semiautobiographical first chapter sets

the stage and tone wherein Gannon defines and discusses terms such as *ecocentrism*, *ecocriticism* (for example, Cheryll Glotfelty's "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" [21; see also 26–27]), *ecofeminism*, *environmentalism*, and *deep ecology*. This is a complex and intricate chapter, and one may need a literary scorecard to keep the players and their ideas straight in one's mind. He then moves on to the British Romantic poets in chapters 2 and 3 with more of the discussion focused on Wordsworth's poetry than any of the other British poets. "British Romanticism can be viewed as an ideology of the Self and the Same that is ultimately dependent on attempts to assimilate, to colonize various aspects of the Other and the repressed—that is, women 'savages,' children, the 'mad,' and the landscape itself" (59). Read them if you like (or can), but because this review is for the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, the main body focuses on chapters 4 and 5 and the epilogue.

Gannon is a birdwatcher and bird lover for whom the loon has an "other-worldly laugh" and for whom, as for the British Romantics, though not in the same way, birds are the Other in many ways and on numerous levels (6). But Gannon, and the contemporary Native American poets and writers he cites such as N. Scott Momaday, Joseph Bruchac, Carter Revard, Lance Henson, Maurice Kenney, Duane Niatum, Simon Ortiz, Paula Gunn Allen, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, and Sherman Alexie, wants us to move forward, back to an earlier time when birds were not the Other apart from us but the Other as part of us. Once upon a time, birds talked to us, especially the meadowlark, crow, eagle, owl, and magpie, and some may still do so if we can only hear them. But bird-speak diminishes as bird populations decline and Western culture dominates and destroys the birds and the ecosystem. Native Americans are losing their ability to understand birds, and non-Native peoples, those in control, are afraid of the natural world or don't give a damn about it. Ortiz notes that writing poetry is learned "by watching the animals," so if there are no animals to watch, there can be no poetry, or at least none about animals and the natural world (296). Even more pointedly, for Harjo, "the truth issues from that place where 'there are no words and sounds'" (298). One must go beyond just talking to the animals and also listen to the animals. As Harjo notes, "We [or at least a few poets] once again understand the talk of animals," to which Gannon adds, "This promise reflects an ongoing faith that such talk still greatly matters" (239).

Some of the best discussions in the book are those comparing the British Romantics with American Indian writers. For example, "Wordsworth's and Shelley's responses to the skylark are radically different from the Lakota perception of the meadowlark"; the former focus on the bird's soaring flight, the Lakota focus on its nesting behavior and its speaking with humans (234).

As a Native American (Lakota), Gannon seems to accept uncritically Native pronouncements such as Luther Standing Bear's "I know of no species of plant, bird, or animal that were [sic] exterminated until the coming of the white man" (12). Standing Bear may not have known, but many archaeologists believe ancient Native Americans were a critical factor in the extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna—mammoth, mastodon, and bison antiquus—through overhunting. Ancestral Puebloans overexploited the twelfth-century environment at Chaco Canyon so that the land became temporarily uninhabitable, and at Mesa Verde they depleted the large mammals during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Professed love and respect for nature, for Mother Earth, are not sufficient, and Native peoples, by virtue of being human, make some of the same mistakes all human populations make, albeit perhaps not to the same degree. In the same context, although Gannon has little regard for Shepard Krech III's *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999), one wonders what his reaction might be to Krech's *Spirits of the Air: Birds and American Indians of the South* (2009) in which Krech discusses, among other things, the overhunting of bird species by some of the Indians of the Southeast.

Gannon cites several writers who note that through close observation, Native Americans named virtually every visible species of animal and plant that modern taxonomists would recognize (224). True, but it goes deeper than this and to the heart of his thesis about the singular importance of birds. Ancestral Pueblo murals found in the American Southwest depict birds more often than any other animal, including humans. The birds most commonly depicted, and therefore the most common life forms, are macaws and parrots, birds that were not indigenous to the Southwest (except for the thick-billed parrot in southern Arizona). I would argue that the importance of birds exceeds what Gannon believes, which only further reinforces his argument. Birds are family, as Gannon notes in several places—close family, as some Native American poets would have it. This leads to "bird-speak" poems, which are actually authentic in that some species, notably crows, magpies, macaws, parrots, and (for the Lakota and other Native peoples) meadowlarks, owls, loons, and eagles, do speak, both in their languages and ours (my macaw, Chip, greets me each morning with "Good morning. How are you?") and then proceeds to discuss other topics (271). Again, as Gannon and his host of Native poets urge, we must listen to the animals.

Buy and read this book, especially the last two chapters and the epilogue. Also read the Native poetry and other works cited in full. You'll not look at and hear our world in the same way. The birds deserve no less.

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