

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humour and Irony in Native Women's Poetry. By Jennifer Andrews.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7m35w28n>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 37(1)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

McGlennen, Molly

### Publication Date

2013

### DOI

10.17953

### 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/>

its geographical focus, but also its range of sources. Like Carpenter's reading of the historical record, Estrada demonstrates the elasticity of evidence by showing that historical and contemporary writers read and represent queer indigenous people through the lens of their culture and subject position. Examining Ramón A. Gutiérrez's critique of Will Roscoe's scholarship, in which Gutiérrez contends that Roscoe idealizes two-spirit history by imposing a white "gay liberationist" agenda "onto Native American pasts," Estrada shows the danger of relying on a single set of data (171). Tracing the sources of this scholarly debate, Estrada suggests that Gutiérrez's interpretation of two-spirit histories comes from "privileging . . . texts written by Spanish conquistadors and priests" (171). Estrada finds that readings of Mesoamerican sexual histories commonly "rely on the earliest Spanish Empire documents of the 1500s, 1600s, and 1700s [that] represent two-spirit sexuality as either rampant or heavily suppressed sin" (174). Suggesting that contemporary scholars must pay attention to the narratives "contemporary indigenous peoples [have about] their own two-spirit histories and cultures" (175), Estrada ultimately calls for two-spirit studies to forward a pan-American understanding of indigenous genders and sexualities.

Though *Gender and Sexuality in Indigenous North America 1400–1850* has some methodological weaknesses, as a whole it is a valuable resource for libraries and for scholars in the field. The collection is a fine addition to current conversations in the field about gender and sexuality, in particular because of the text's intervention into ongoing scholarly conversations about gender and sexuality and its attention to several lesser-known indigenous narratives.

*Lisa Tatonetti*

Kansas State University

**In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humour and Irony in Native Women's Poetry.** By Jennifer Andrews. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. 320 pages. \$55.00 cloth.

In her introduction Jennifer Andrews states clearly that "despite its popularity . . . Native poetry has not garnered the same sustained critical and popular attention as novels" and goes on to underscore the crucial importance poetry plays not only in the field of literary criticism but, more importantly, in the lives of North American indigenous peoples (32). Indeed, nearly a decade ago in their 2003 essay collection *Speak to Me Words*, editors Dean Rader and Janice Gould emphasized the lack of critical attention to Native American poetry despite the growing field of Native American literary criticism. Since

then the genre has gained more attention from scholars, but perhaps not as much as we critics and poets would want.

The jacket illustration immediately sets a comic tone. Mohawk artist Shelley Niro's 2001 painting *Losing My Stuff* renders Sky Woman falling to the water-covered sphere below—toting sunglasses and purse. From the outset Andrews indicates the ways in which contemporary Native artists employ humor and irony as “vehicle for reflection and change,” using Sky Woman's telling narrative as a frame through which she urgently centers her reader's attention on indigenous women's continued and powerful significance both within and beyond their nation and its own historical narrative. In her examination of eight contemporary North American Native female poets as “conduits for examining issues central to [the poets'] lives and identities” (21), Andrews understands the humor and irony, complicating in various ways how we might understand the poetry of Joy Harjo, Louise Halfe, Kimberly Blaeser, Marilyn Dumont, Diance Glancy, Jeannette Armstrong, Wendy Rose, and Marie Annharte Baker.

While the thematic organization of the book effectively deepens the author's exploration of the poetic treatment of subjects ranging from the spiritual transformations to indigenous notions of space, the most compelling and perhaps most telling moments occur when Andrews explores the relationship between poetry and other artistic media with which the writers engage. Instead of adhering to a strictly literary analysis, Andrews interestingly risks trying to understand what occurs in those “liminal spaces” (184), whether she considers the meeting of poetry and photography (as in Andrews's readings of Glancy's “The West Pole,” Blaeser's “Trailing You,” Halfe's “Blue Marrow,” and Dumont's “A Really Good Brown Girl”), or how poetry transforms when it meets music and/or oral performance (as in Andrews's discussion of Harjo's music career and Armstrong's recorded spoken word). For example, Andrews notes on the aural recording of two versions of Armstrong's poem, “Threads of Old Memory” and “Threads of Old Memory Dub”:

The recordings themselves transform the published poems into another format, one that closely resembles what Armstrong has previously described as the alterna(rra)tives concept of oratory, which melds together argumentation and narrative with the practice of spirituality” (103).

While Andrews's close reading of a number of poems provides helpful insight in the difficult task of unpacking and decoding the various and complex ways in which Native women's poetry is working, Andrews's analysis of Native women's poetry is at its best when it seeks out the locations where poetry moves off the page and into other realms of creative expression, often political. The book is strongest when the author moves into lived spaces of indigenous women's cultural production. Andrews looks to an array of theory and

theorists to unpack Native women's poetry, from Sigmund Freud to Ward Churchill, and from Craig Womack to Doreen Massey.

Most of the time the range of critical analysis underscores Andrews's thorough research and precise framing of the poetry, but at times it feels a little unfocused. Because her entry into a poem is often initiated by thematic approaches, it becomes difficult at times to understand her broader stakes in Native American literary criticism and the types of claims she is making in that conversation. Andrews herself reflects on her "outsider" approach to the literature and calls upon Trinh T. Minh-ha's term as "merely speaking nearby" (never on behalf of) the Native poets she is studying. The author's generous reflexivity seems to hold back analysis at certain moments. Still, Andrews's meticulous examination of the eight women's poetry and heartfelt commitment to their work, stemming from personal interviews with the poets, is clear.

Andrews successfully highlights the many ways in which Native poets are remapping colonial narratives through irreverent and ironic means, creating what she sees as "alterna(rra)atives" which "fundamentally destabilize definitions of race and gender" (16) while propping up indigenous notions of home/lands, spiritualities, and even the English language. In one of my favorite chapters, "Histories, Memories, and the Nation," Andrews examines a series of Louise Halfe's poems from *Bear Bones & Feathers* that Halfe profanely calls "ledders to the poop," poems that correspond with the pope and, more broadly, the Roman Catholic Church. Underscoring Halfe's play with re-coded "rez" English and use of Cree language, Andrews effectively examines this series of poems as a subversive counter-narrative Halfe produces by mocking the paternal and genocidal decrees of Christian colonial efforts in the Americas.

Andrews is to be applauded for highlighting Native women's vigorous and often satirical opposition to the ways in which national memory and progressivist history render indigenous peoples contemporarily insignificant, taxidermied props in Anglo-America's social evolution. Even though at times it is obscure how Andrews might connect her own analysis to the broader conversations around Native American literary criticism, *In the Belly of a Laughing God* plays an important role in continuing our creation of critical examinations of Native American poetry, providing powerful evidence that contemporary Native American women's poetry is flourishing.

Molly McGlennen  
Vassar College