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American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

From the Belly of My Beauty. By Esther G. Belin.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7rm8x5p9>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 24(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

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Publication Date

2000-06-01

DOI

10.17953

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From the Belly of My Beauty. By Esther G. Belin. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999. 85 pages. \$14.95 paper.

Esther G. Belin's first book of poetry, *From the Belly of My Beauty*, sings and shouts with startling variety, wit, formal innovation, and bold, clear expression. Winner of the 2000 American Book Award, Belin's work reflects the diversity of her experience as a female urban Diné child with strong ties to her reservation, extended family, and natural surroundings. She writes of these ties frayed, nevertheless, by language, distance, and assimilation. But the stories that emerge from the lyrics, essays, and narrative verses are not simply personal stories since approximately half of the Native peoples in North America live in urban areas. In addition, given that Belin's work convincingly parallels relocation and urban assimilation with removal and re-education (boarding schools), her words often create an iterative mirror of Native experience. Based in this experience, her public themes, such as removal and oppression, merge in a cycle with her private reading and reinvention of her body/mind and its potential to reintegrate, recover, and heal. The book is a song of survival.

Part of the delight of reading this book is in listening to its song and wordplay. In her conscious attempt to "reinvent the enemy's language" (Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language* [New York: Norton], 1997), Belin uses clear, hard-hitting lines, striking imagery, and clever page design with mastery and purpose, pulling the signs of written English outside its cultural boundaries into another world. For instance, in "Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe," the opening poem set in blues, lyric form, Coyote gets on a bus and travels to California, creating the stanzas as he goes. For instance, in Winslow, Arizona, Coyote sees and sings about a Navajo woman who "replaces her soul with a worn picture of George Washington on a dollar bill" (p. 4). This long line comes at the end of a stanza at variance with the shorter lines that lead up to it, placing the emphasis on "soul," a double entendre on the origin of the blues form and the destruction of a soul by material, Euro-American culture, symbolized by the political father of all colonists. The form, the image, and the function coalesce skillfully without losing the emotional power of the song.

In other works Belin is playing with what passes for written communication in English. For instance, her alter-ego persona, Ruby, a character who has her own section, represents the southern direction and the woman's red color of life and death. This section is full of lyrical moments and innovative language. For example, in "Ruby in Me #1," Belin plays with enrollment numbers and percentages, mocking the government and its tidy and untidy construction and destruction of tribal identity through blood quantum fractions and alcohol. Ruby is "1/4 Navajo / 1/4 . . . / 1/4 . . . / 1/4 . . . / 100 if you can stand / it" (p. 39). Ruby is one-hundred-proof, something more powerful than the sum of the parts or the "minority status" the numbers confer (p. 39).

All boundaries, concepts, and artificial modes of colonial oppression are suspect here. Belin's work shows the reader through witty parody how the colonial worldview creates the seemingly exhaustive categories into which we

must all fall. In some instances she uses boxes to check as if on forms, fragments that do not add up to or include the person, the other, who may be boxed in geographically, politically, economically, socially, or spiritually. The checklist becomes a refrain, stark, empty, and ironic. In "On Relocation" she satirizes colonialism's geographical and racial boundaries by ending the poem: "Check one: / Diné / Other," written on the page as a checklist (p. 12). "Other" than whom, the poem questions, and what Eurocentric manipulation of technical language determines the standard by which "other" is determined, removed, oppressed, or ignored.

In a more personal political poem, "Ruby Hikes," Belin uses the same checklist structure as a refrain, which the persona Ruby sings inwardly as she connects her "Third World Belly" sensually and spiritually to a rock, "a woman hill," through a sensation located in (you choose) her "collection / memory / heart / back pocket" (p. 37). Ruby's connection to the earth is simultaneously fragmented, alienated, tentative, and deeply emotional, and yet the reader knows from the repetition of this motif that any classification in Belin's poetic world is open-ended and non-exclusive. In this way she opens the language of oppression to the language of possibility.

The poem "Night Travel" from the third, introspective section exemplifies Belin's theme of conflicted emotions caused by her connection to two worlds, urban Los Angeles and the home of her grandparents in New Mexico. Coming back to the city alone at night the speaker finds healing in the "brown / indigenous and immigrant haze" (p. 56), through memories of her childhood, and from within where "the darkness of roads . . . pollutes [her] breath." Yet she still sees the "white dawning" (p. 57). The sign of the new day, the rebirth, is white, fraught with irony but not fear. The darkness of the road and the brown haze of the population are the comforts, the familiar.

Belin explains in the essay "Voice Inside" that returning to the reservation as an adult shows her the pain of alcoholic destruction as well as the endless freedom of the landscape. She sees how the urban world has reached the children of the reservation, and she sees that the choices and struggles of her people, urban or rural, are not much different from the choices that she has made and the struggles she has had in creating and defining herself from the inside out. In such pieces as "First Bite," she expresses most poignantly, without contradiction, her loss of the Diné language along with her responsibility of writing for a wider audience in English, the pain of retelling the stories of Native peoples, and the importance of her refusal to be silenced.

Her autobiographical essays from the last section, alternating fonts and all capitals for some of the paragraphs and stanzas are somewhat reminiscent of N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, in which the page design creates a dialogue between memory and an outsider's clinical observation. However, in her more succinct lyric poems, the same themes, such as oppression and recovery, place her alongside other young poets with strong, original voices such as Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan), Janice Gould (Maidu), Armand Ruffo (Ojibwe), and Gregory Scofield (Métis). For example, in "Directional Memory" the speaker wanders on the beach, cautiously aware of the "six million dollar" homes in the background and that she is walking on

“private property,” but she remembers as she turns back to the east that “L.A. has sacred mountains” and that this too is Native land (p. 9). This healing perception counters the Euro-American concept of ownership as she journeys in the four directions of the circle.

The formal structure of Belin’s book is divided into four parts, connecting the traditional Diné worldview of the cardinal directions with the movement of her artistic interpretation of experience. The themes develop from the urban blues of the first poems that alternate lyric and narrative patterns to the culminating poetic essay “In the Cycle of the Whirl,” in which she recapitulates the particulars of her life and memories in light of what they mean to her as a writer. As she closes the volume, she looks toward the future of her life and writing, knowing that it will be centered in tribal experience. Conflating images from Navajo history of removal and traditional stories, she sees her path as “A Long Walk, perhaps battling new giants” (p. 84). In the larger cycle of life and death she sees her writing as “emergenc(y),” a new beginning in which she feeds the “hunger” of her writing from her “journey home” with all that implies for her as a Diné (p. 85). Thus two major themes of her writing converge, the return of the urban Native to her homeland and the recovery from oppression, in a statement of clear purpose. Her writing is born in the formation and expression of self and the body, but a self that is collective, with many voices that can be heard through her. Thus the ending of the volume sends the reader back to the beginning to hear the voices again, a journey worth taking.

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Indians in the United States and Canada: A Comparative History. By Roger L. Nichols. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 383 pages. \$19.95 paper.

Analyzing thousands of documents over hundreds of years in the space of less than four hundred pages would seem a daunting task, particularly when the aim is to provide an understanding of the relationship between Indians and non-Indians in Canada and the United States of America. The sheer complexity of such a comparison, in which the author had to take into account differences in demography, history, and culture, is compounded by the difficulties in obtaining documents that allow for comparison. As a result, it took Nichols nearly fifteen years to complete this book but his perseverance paid off. His intimate knowledge of the historiography of both countries is impeccable and the wait allowed him access to considerable work that was carried out in the field of aboriginal studies both in the United States of America as well as in Canada over the past decade-and-a-half. Readers may disagree with some of his conclusions, but they cannot argue that he failed to access a specific piece of archival data or was unaware of some contemporary material. Nichols has produced a fine piece of scholarship and one that students will find useful and informative. The book is a first in providing a historical account of Indian-white relations in both countries.