UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work. Edited by Jacquelyn Kilpatrick.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8c12j8gt

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(2)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Schweninger, Lee

Publication Date
2005-03-01

DOI
10.17953

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Wisconsin developed nationalist movements that were similar and whether Native nationalism is ever anything but a reaction to external policy. The conclusion of *Kahnawa'ke* will be read with interest. Here, Reid examines the work of Tiaiake Gerald Alfred and finds that Alfred's work does not adequately address internal factional rivalries. I was not persuaded by the assertion. Alfred is a member of the Kahnawa'ke Mohawk and a political scientist at the University of Victoria. His books, *Heeding the Voices of our Ancestors*: *Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise of Native Nationalism* and *Peace, Power, Righteousness*: *An Indigenous Manifesto,* lend critical insight to anyone studying Kahnawa'ke culture and history.

John C. Mohawk
State University of New York, Buffalo

Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work. Edited by Jacquelyn Kilpatrick. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. 257 pages. $39.95 cloth.

As the title and subtitle *Louis Owens: Literary Reflections on His Life and Work* suggest, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick's collection of essays is both a critical appraisal of the works of Owens and a commemoration of his life. The collection offers an important addition to Owens scholarship, especially since—with the exception of a special edition of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* (1998) and the commemorative issue of *Southwestern American Literature* (2003)—Owens has received relatively little critical attention.

This dearth of critical attention is especially troubling in that Owens, as the essays in this collection make eminently clear, is easily one of the most important and prolific of Native American fiction writers and critics to emerge in the past fifteen or so years. (His first novel, *Wolfsong*, came out in 1991, almost fifteen years after he first drafted it.) Louis Owens, who died in July of 2002, is the author of five novels, two works of autobiographical/critical nonfiction, two critical books on John Steinbeck, and another critical work on American Indian novels, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*. The essays in Kilpatrick's collection are devoted primarily to his novels (at least one essay on each but *Bone Game*) and his two autobiographical/critical essay collections, *Mixedblood Messages* and *I Hear the Train*. Although there is no immediately apparent theme that unites the collection, the essays do successfully present a case for the complexities of Owens's thought and the need for yet more scholarship. They demonstrate the important links between Owens's life, politics, and friendships and his writings. The collection also includes a poem for Owens by Neil Harrison, an interview, and responses to Owens's essay collections.

In the interview, A. Robert Lee asks Owens about his childhood and young adulthood, focusing primarily on the author's life up to the point when he wrote *Wolfsong*. Although the interview focuses on his early life, as the editor comments, Owens's "responses resonate insightfully throughout the

whole of his too-brief existence" (15). This interview thus serves as an introduction to both the man and the author in that much of what Owens divulges about his early days is reflected in his novels and nonfiction. He has written about his mother, for example, "perhaps elliptically" (23), and certainly about his brother, his work for the Forest Service, and his being "huntsman, forester, firefighter, and wilderness ranger" (36).

In "Taking Back the Bones," Kilpatrick sets Owens's fiction in what she calls a "'post'-colonial" context, arguing for example that "Owens is touching on what must be a deep-seated fear of all colonized people, the fear of truly losing one's cultural heritage" (76). At the same time, however, she acknowledges that, as Owens himself insists in his writing, the United States is not postcolonial. Her essay is thus finally more a discussion of Indian characters' searches for identity in contact or frontier zones between Indian cultural spaces and the space of the dominant culture.

Like Kilpatrick, Elvira Pulitano views Owens through a postcolonial lens, and questions the appropriateness of such an approach. She maintains that reading through and across contact zones is of critical importance: "Crucial to Owens is the idea of dialogue within and between people in order to expose boundaries that shape and constitute different cultural and personal worlds." That is, Owens presents "cross reading and cross cultural communication as ways of opening up ideas while exploring other cultural positions" (80). Pulitano suggests that in *Mixedblood Messages* Owens challenges formal genre distinctions as he crosses boundaries in his own work, fusing personal or autobiographical reflections, theory, literary and film criticism, and eco-criticism in a single text. One of Pulitano's important contributions to Owens criticism and to Native American literary criticism in general is her implication that Owens deserves a place among Native American theorists such as Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Robert Warrior—writer-scholars who theorize a specifically Native American critical approach.

After these two essays on Owens's nonfiction, several essays offer readings of the novels. Susan Bernardin presents *Dark River* as Owens's summa, but as in his other novels, she argues, "Owens displaces characters who enlist in forms of imaginative and . . . geographical motion to answer questions about identity, home, and belonging" (103). With a delightful reading of a lighted beer sign that "features a lone white man in stasis, forever paddling a canoe" (107), Bernardin suggests that the "'end' of *Dark River* is an end in motion, demonstrating the ceaseless impulse to create and renew the world through story" (116). Also writing about *Dark River*, Gretchen Ronnow acknowledges that myth is one of the main structural features of the novel, and she discusses the importance of myth in the account of the evil twins, especially of Monster and Monster Slayer. Despite the centrality of myth, however, she asserts, Owens's novel describes "the ultimate uselessness of myth in holding a culture together and the inability of myth to contain or to satisfy the individuating Self" (139). But the very act of storytelling, of recounting such myths, suggests that through language "we are able to glimpse the transcendent possibilities" (139).

In her analysis of *Nightland*—"the Cherokee ritual term for West, home of Thunder and home of the dead" (119)—Linda Lizut Helstern offers a slightly revised essay from a 1998 *SAIL* article, arguing that Owens reconfigures the mythic West . . . as postcontact Indian Country inhabited by a cultural mix of Anglos, mixedbloods, fullbloods, animals, and ghosts" (119). She argues that Owens challenges the simple view of the Western genre by refusing stereotypes and by complicating issues of race, gender, and sexuality that the national myth of the West established and perpetuates. Reading both *Nightland* and *Wolfsong*, Renny Christopher considers Owens's work from "the critical perspective of working-class studies" to suggest that in his autobiography and in at least these two novels Owens presents "an oppositional working-class consciousness that rejects bourgeois values as destructive" (170).

In his essay "Wolfsong and Pacific Refrains," John Purdy mixes criticism with personal anecdote to suggest that Owens's fiction generally, but *Wolfsong* in particular, is deceptively simple to read. Deceptively so, because although the novel has a relatively straightforward plot, "It presents a refinement, a personally productive extension and response to critical discourse about Native literatures and peoples current with its writing and with sociological debates about economics and environment" (178). What is particularly enlightening in Purdy's essay is the contention that Owens's voice intermingles with the voices of the most read and criticized of Native American writers: McNickle, Silko, Vizenor, Momaday, and Welch, for example. Despite all it shares with other, earlier works by Native American authors, however, *Wolfsong* remains an original contribution and it elaborates on and extends the concerns raised elsewhere.

In "Not the Call of the Wild," David Brande pursues the idea of wilderness in *Wolfsong* and *Mixedblood Messages*, arguing that Owens explores the very concept of "wilderness" as a Western construct and challenges that construct because it simultaneously writes the Native American out of the land and out of history. The Western concept of wilderness, argues Brande, "overwrites tribal history" (203). In *Wolfsong* Tom Joseph yearns "for participation in an epistemological order that has been thoroughly displaced" (202). Brande stresses the differences between Native American and non-Native connections to the land without falling into the trap of overgeneralizing or creating an easy (and false) dualism as he adroitly warns against the tendency of some critics "to debunk romanticized notions about Native religious/environmental practices" (209).

Paul Beckman Taylor investigates violence in *The Sharpest Sight*, suggesting how it is that for Native Americans in general and Owens characters in particular "ludic violence," game, and wordplay mediate "between positive and negative violence" (216). Noteworthy, suggests Taylor, is that Owens conjoins cultural myths of sacrifice and crosses cultural boundaries that ultimately nourish civilizations. It is through story that Owens "rescues the mixed cultural knowledge and wisdom of the dead" (222).

In the final essay of the collection, Jesse Peters tells a story of a fishing trip he took with Louis Owens, and he intersperses this account with commentary on Owens's own collection, *I Hear the Train*. Peters comments that perhaps

what ties the narratives together is the contention that "we must remain in a constant state of reflection, invention, and refraction as we try desperately to understand ourselves" (226). And like Peters's essay itself, *I Hear the Train* "is a self-reflexive work in which we see the hunter engaged in the necessary and dangerous hunt for the self" (238).

In addition to providing mostly new scholarship and hence new insights into the writings of an important but somewhat critically neglected Native American author, what all of these essays convey is the contributors' deep respect for Louis Owens the man and Louis Owens the author. As Lee writes in the introduction to his interview, Owens "bequeaths a legacy to honor. It will take us time, and intelligence, to see fully what has been lost and yet what, unquestionably, remains" (21–22). And this collection opens doors to such understanding and may well open doors to future scholarship on Owens, scholarship that will indeed help us more fully understand his life and works.

And at the same time that the collection asks us to consider and reconsider Owens's opus, it asks us to reconsider Native American literature as a whole. What is the place of postcolonial theory in Native American studies? What is the role of genre and crossing genre boundaries? What are the legitimate crossovers between politics, autobiography, and fiction? What is "new" in the context of Native American literature? The contributors to this collection ask these questions of Owens the writer, of themselves, of Native American scholarship in general, and of Owens's readers.

At the end of his account of a fishing trip taken with Owens, Peters offers this literal account of the end of a fishing trip. Owens has just caught a large trout:

> Louis's audience stands up, and we gather our gear. "You sure you don't want to keep that one?" I ask.
>
> I see a red flash between Louis's hands as the big trout darts away. He stands up and joins us as we start the walk back to the truck.
>
> "Maybe tomorrow." (242)

Lee Schweninger
University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Ojibwa Warrior: Dennis Banks and the Rise of the American Indian Movement. By Dennis Banks with Richard Erdoes. University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. 362 pages. $29.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Ojibwa Warrior is a compelling and detailed autobiography of one of the most influential American Indian leaders in the twenty-first century. The story of American Indian activist Dennis Banks is examined from his birth on the Leech Lake Reservation in Minnesota to his current life once again back at Leech Lake more than sixty years later. No matter how one feels about Dennis Banks and the American Indian Movement (AIM) that he founded,