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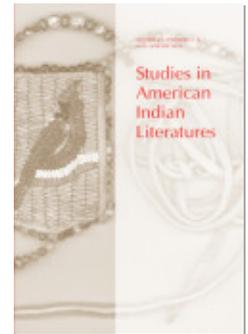
(So Many) Opportunities for Teaching Native Nonfiction

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## (So Many) Opportunities for Teaching Native Nonfiction

CHADWICK ALLEN

Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton, editors. *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers*. U of Washington P, 2019. ISBN: 978-0-2957-4576-3. 280 pp.

One reason I was anxiously awaiting publication of *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers* is that I have long wanted to center contemporary nonfiction in an undergraduate course or graduate seminar (or both). Beyond a general interest in the diverse genres taken up by Native authors (and the fascinating things they do with those genres), my desire is fueled by the plentitude of works available to teach—short and long essays in print and online, single-authored collections, omnibus anthologies—as well as by a growing sense of historical urgency in the need to hear (and heed) these voices. *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* represents the latest opportunity.

In my vision for creating syllabi for such courses, I employ an expansive definition of *contemporary* that includes all nonfiction writing by Indigenous North American authors published since the 1960s. (As an instructor based in the States, I am likely to draw more heavily from authors affiliated with American Indian and Alaska Native nations than from those affiliated with First Nations across the northern border, although one could develop syllabi with a Canadian emphasis. Indeed, *note to self*: conduct more research on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit nonfiction from Canada.) And I employ an equally expansive definition of *literary nonfiction*, one that can encompass highly crafted, short- and long-form prose on any topic of interest to Native writers. That means I include works designated *creative nonfiction* and examples of the *lyric essay*, but I don't limit my choices to those categories—categories, one

might note, that remain ambiguous, unstable, and contested in fruitful ways. Works typically designated *poetry* or *fiction* are not included on my syllabi, but works in prose (or primarily in prose) that can be designated *mixed-genre* or *multi-genre* are up for consideration. Why create arbitrary exclusions? Similarly, works typically designated *journalism* (reporting and commentary for newspapers, news magazines, or similar online venues) or *scholarship* (essays in peer-reviewed academic journals, academic books published by university presses or the scholarly side of commercial houses) are likely not included. Here, too, however, I leave room for the possibility of including works reasonably classified as *mixed-genre* or *multi-genre* since the conventions for both journalism and scholarship have always been flexible and they constantly evolve, especially as these forms are adapted for outlets within Native communities and for outlets online. I leave room, as well, for works of scholarship reasonably classified as *public-facing*.

The relatively high profile of well-reviewed and award-winning Native nonfiction published since the early 2000s make the syllabi I am imagining seem not only possible but especially relevant at both undergraduate and graduate levels. In particular, I am thinking of books like Thomas King's widely celebrated and already widely taught *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, published in 2005; Paul Chaat Smith's erudite and droll *Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong*, published in 2009; LeAnne Howe's adventurous and at times both naughty and hilarious *Choctalking on Other Realities*, published in 2013 (one of Howe's tales of international travel that goes productively awry is titled "I Fuck Up in Japan"); Deborah Miranda's innovative, urgent, and often moving *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*, also published in 2013; and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's compelling call-to-action *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, published in 2017. These five single-authored works of literary nonfiction alone could structure an undergraduate course or form the basis for a graduate seminar. And yet there's so much more to add to potential syllabi and recommended lists for further reading.<sup>1</sup>

One could anchor syllabi *back in the day* of the socially- and politically-tumultuous 1960s and 1970s with one or more of the following: N. Scott Momaday's classic work of mixed-genre juxtaposition *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, published in 1969; Momaday's similarly mixed-genre memoir *The Names*, published in 1976; as well as Momaday's seminal meditation

on the intersections of identity, imagination, storytelling, language, and land, “The Man Made of Words,” which originally appeared in 1970 (although it has been reprinted many times since) in *Indian Voices: The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars*, edited and introduced by Rupert Costo and published by the Native-run Indian Historian Press.<sup>2</sup> A substantial volume of Momaday’s essays was published in 1997, also under the title *The Man Made of Words*, and this collection includes nonfiction and mixed-genre works focused on a range of compelling topics—from the ongoing significance of the oral tradition to reflections on Indigenous art to the need for the US to develop a land ethic—across Momaday’s long career up to that point.<sup>3</sup> Other authors who could represent the 1960s and 1970s include Vine Deloria, Jr.—another prolific writer of nonfiction and arguably the most important Native intellectual of the twentieth century—beginning with his breakout exposé of dominant discourses *Custer Died for Your Sins, An Indian Manifesto*, published in 1969, and continuing with *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf*, published in 1970; *God Is Red*, published in 1973; and *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence*, published in 1974, not to mention a long list of often humorous and always politically challenging essays published in tribal, popular, and scholarly periodicals. Gerald Vizenor’s early works of nonfiction provide interesting alternatives or additions, including *The Everlasting Sky: New Voices from the People Named the Chippewa* from 1972, *Tribal Scenes and Ceremonies* from 1976, and *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade* from 1978.

One might point students to Native-controlled periodicals as places to look for relevant works of nonfiction from these decades, such as the scholarly journal *The Indian Historian*, which began publication in California in 1964, or the activist newspaper *Akwesasne Notes*, which began publication in upstate New York in 1968. A great deal of nonfiction was published in both Native- and non-Native outlets to support (and at times to question) the activism of the National Indian Youth Council, Indians of All Tribes, the American Indian Movement, and other organizations associated with the era of Red Power.<sup>4</sup> Finally, one might point students to various multi-genre anthologies of Native writing that were assembled in these decades by both commercial and scholarly presses such as *The Way*, edited by Shirley Hill Witt and Stan Steiner, published in 1972, and *The Remembered Earth*, edited by

Geary Hobson, first published in 1979 and then reprinted over the next decades.

The 1980s and 1990s could be represented on syllabi by a wide variety of Native nonfiction, but perhaps especially by a wealth of memoir and other forms of life writing. A go-to source is the 1987 anthology edited by Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*. Standouts among its eighteen selections include Joy Harjo’s “Ordinary Spirit,” Linda Hogan’s “The Two Lives,” Diane Glancy’s “Two Dresses,” Simon Ortiz’s “The Language We Know,” Joseph Bruchac’s “Notes of a Translator’s Son,” Mary TallMountain’s “You Can Go Home Again: A Sequence,” and, one of my personal favorites, Gerald Vizenor’s “Crows Written on the Poplars: Autocritical Autobiographies,” with its meditation on the death of a red squirrel.<sup>5</sup> Another favorite, Wendy Rose’s formally innovative and emotionally searing “Neon Scars,” should be required reading—not only for every student of contemporary Native literature but for every writer hoping to produce work grounded in experiences of personal and familial trauma. (I first read “Neon Scars” as I entered graduate school; three decades later, it remains a compelling touchstone.) Swann and Krupat edited a follow-up volume published in 2000, *Here First*, with contributions by Roberta Hill, Kim Blaeser, Hanay Geiogamah, Louis Owens, LeAnne Howe, Anita Endrezze, Gordon Henry, Luci Tapahonso, Greg Sarris, Elizabeth Woody, Anna Lee Walters, and other Native writers. Book-length works from these decades include Janet Campbell Hale’s powerful ruminations about life on the plateau, brought together in 1993 as *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter*, and Carter Revard’s memoir of life in northern Oklahoma, presented as collected essays in 1998 under the title *Family Matters, Tribal Affairs*.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond multiple forms of life writing, the 1980s and 1990s could be represented by the provocative work of Native humorists. In the US there is Jim Northrup’s 1997 debut collection *The Rez Road Follies: Canoes, Casinos, Computers, and Birch Bark Baskets*, and in Canada there is Drew Hayden Taylor’s 1998 debut collection *Funny, You Don’t Look Like One*, quickly followed in 1999 by *Further Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway: Funny, You Don’t Look Like One Two*. These decades also saw the production of high-quality Native journalism, in a range of venues, such as the well-known work of Tim Giago, initially for *The Lakota Times*, the first independently-owned Native American weekly

newspaper, and then for the nationally-focused *Indian Country Today*. Giago is one of the journalists for whom I would make an exception on a syllabus of Native nonfiction.<sup>7</sup> His early newspaper writing was collected in 1984 as *Notes from Indian Country*.

But there's more. The prolific decades of the 1980s and 1990s could be represented by master essayists who are also innovative scholars or controversial public intellectuals (and sometimes both). Key essays include Simon Ortiz's generative "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism," first published in 1981 (and often reprinted), and Jack Forbes's less-well-remembered but equally incisive "Colonialism and Native American Literature: Analysis," published in 1987. A number of significant book-length contributions were made in this era by Native women, including M. Annette Jaimes, whose unflinching edited collection *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* was published in 1992; Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, whose wonderfully strident *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* was published in 1996, immediately causing a stir in both academic and nonacademic circles; Leslie Marmon Silko, whose beautifully-constructed, poignant nonfiction was collected in 1996 as *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*; Paula Gunn Allen, whose irreverent and sometimes rowdy essays were collected in 1998 as *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Cannons*; and Winona LaDuke, whose vital *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* was published in 1999. In addition, a diverse array of politically-charged nonfiction was produced leading up to and throughout the Columbus quincentennial observations and protests, including, for instance, *Without Discovery: A Native Response to Columbus*, edited by Ray Gonzalez and published in 1992.<sup>8</sup> Any and all of these would make fine additions to a nonfiction syllabus.

Another reason I was anxiously awaiting *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* is that I had been hearing about its coming publication for several years. Full disclosure: one of the volume's editors, the accomplished Cowlitz writer and rising literary star Elissa Washuta, became a colleague when I accepted a position at the University of Washington in 2015. Washuta earned an MFA in creative writing from the UW Department of English, and she was then employed as an academic advisor in the UW Depart-

ment of American Indian Studies; we met during my campus interview. A couple years later, Washuta accepted a tenure-track position in creative writing in the Department of English at my previous employer, The Ohio State University. You could say we made a protracted, cross-country, cross-institution exchange. (I know: *small world*.) In addition, I happen also to have known the Editor-in-Chief at the University of Washington Press, Larin McLaughlin, for a number of years (she, too, has a connection to Ohio State that intersects my move to Washington, much too complicated to describe here), and, like Washuta, McLaughlin had been teasing me with the promise of *Shapes*' publication for some time.

Which brings me to the volume itself. *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* is comprised of a substantial introduction written by Washuta and her co-editor, the non-Native scholar Theresa Warburton, currently an assistant professor of English at Western Washington University, followed by twenty-seven essays written by twenty-two Native authors. A few authors make multiple contributions, and Washuta performs double duty by providing a (terrific) single-authored essay along with her co-authored introduction. Some authors featured in the collection are likely to be known or even well-known to potential readers (e.g., Ernestine Hayes, Stephen Graham Jones, Adrienne Keene, Deborah Miranda, Tiffany Midge, Terese Marie Mailhot, Billy-Ray Bellcourt, Eden Robinson, Kim TallBear), while others are more likely to seem new or relatively new (e.g., Chip Livingston, Bojan Louis, Sasha LaPointe, Ruby Hansen Murray, Natanya Ann Pulley, Michael Wasson, Laura Da', Siku Alloodoo, Toni Jensen, Byron F. Aspaas, Joan Naviyuk Kane, Alicia Elliott). The overall quality of the work is high, so favorites are difficult to choose. For me, though, a list of standouts would minimally include Stephen Graham Jones's "Letter to a Just-Starting-Out Indian Writer—and Maybe to Myself," Deborah Miranda's "Tuolumne," Adrienne Keene's "To the Man Who Gave Me Cancer," Kim TallBear's "Critical Poly 100s," Elissa Washuta's "Apocalypse Logic" (as noted above, it's pretty terrific), and Toni Jensen's "Women in the Fracklands: On Water, Land, Bodies, and Standing Rock."

Nearly all the essays are reprints of previous publications, which I must confess I found a surprise; when I was anticipating its arrival, I assumed *Shapes* would present mostly if not exclusively new material. The number of reprints may disappoint some readers. A second con-

fession: I also assumed *Shapes* would either present works by mostly unknown or lesser-known Native writers (exciting “new” voices that would help point readers toward possible futures of the genre), or present a representative range of works by a more-or-less balanced mix of established, rising, and as-yet-unknown stars (“classic” works by some of our best writers of nonfiction juxtaposed with works by relatively “new” and perhaps “younger” voices with the potential to shake things up). The actual lineup presented in *Shapes* conforms to neither of these scenarios exactly (for instance, there are no recognizably “classic” works among the reprints). The editors are in no way obligated, of course, to meet my personal assumptions (or to fulfill my pedagogical desires); that said, it would be helpful if their rationale for selecting specific authors and specific pieces were made more explicit.<sup>9</sup> Many choices appear to be based in the editors’ personal connections to the featured authors. This is fair enough, I suppose, although selection based on a logic of proximity or on the serendipity of acquaintance (however fortuitous) is neither especially inspiring for readers nor especially useful as a model for future editors. (Second *note to self*: try to get out more and meet more up-and-coming Native writers.)

Gentle ribbing (and genuine envy) aside, the logic animating Washuta and Warburton’s provocative introduction, “Exquisite Vessels,” is clearly discernible—and immediately enticing. “Exquisite Vessels” (the phrasing is very pleasant to say out loud) evokes the material forms through which generations of Native artists, storytellers, and intellectuals have conveyed meaning across space and time—that is, through baskets, canoes, other containers, human bodies, the pages of books. The editors have conceived their collection within the structural and symbolic potential, specifically, of *baskets*, a form of vessel central to many Native traditions and one that is both utilitarian and aesthetically accomplished. And they have arranged the volume’s twenty-seven essays into four sections, each marked by a term central to the ancient and ongoing art of basketmaking: *Technique* (“for craft essays”), *Coiling* (“for essays that appear seamless”), *Plaiting* (“for fragmented essays with a single source”), and *Twining* (“for essays that bring together material from different sources”) (17). As a structuring image for a collection of nonfiction, basketmaking is appropriately complex. It can indicate all the necessary stages of selecting, gathering, and preparing materials that must occur *before* the skilled application of specific techniques for

fabrication. Moreover, baskets can be produced in all manner of shapes and sizes, and at all levels of conceptual design—from austere plainness to intricate patterning and elaborate decoration. It is a particular power of baskets to bear necessary burdens while embodying unbounded beauty.

Basketmaking is potentially powerful as a heuristic, too, since Washuta and Warburton encourage readers to focus less on the *content* of the Native nonfiction they have selected and more on the potential of the “shapes” and innovative “forms” of these works to contribute to meaning. Drawing on the scholarship of Joanne Barker and Teresia Teaiwa, Washuta and Warburton write: “this attention to form (the telling) and how it shapes the content (the material) enables a move away from a focus on a static idea of ‘Native information’ and, instead, emphasizes the dynamic process of ‘Native in formation’” (5). More than clever wordplay (which I admit I find appealing), the editors contend that the privileging of innovative form over expected content is not simply aesthetic or academic, but significantly political, intersecting contemporary Native activism that is increasingly marked as explicitly anticolonial: “This shift destabilizes the colonial demand for factual information about Native life in favor of a framework that insists upon an understanding of indigeneity as a dynamic, creative, and intentional form which shapes the content that is garnered through its exploration” (5). This is inspiring (and, if taken seriously, *demanding*) framing for reading the collection: it invites readers to pay close attention to the formal moves performed by individual authors as well as to the composite innovations performed by the volume as a whole.

Now I come to a more delicate section of my review. For although I find other parts of the introduction similarly well written and engaging, I also find that these aspects of Washuta and Warburton’s framing raise some questions for me. This is partly because the editors appear to be unfamiliar with—or perhaps uninterested in—the kind of overview of Native nonfiction published since the 1960s that I provide at the beginning of this essay. (Admittedly, my overview is necessarily cursory. What it lacks in true comprehensiveness, I hope it makes up for in enthusiasm, suggesting what might be possible.) Washuta and Warburton’s brief account asks readers to imagine that little has been written, read, or discussed that moves beyond the heyday of “early Native nonfiction writing” produced in the nineteenth century, that is, works by Native

authors such as William Apress and Sarah Winnemucca, along with the recent uptick in scholarship written in response to these important texts. Surprisingly, the editors dismiss works of nonfiction produced since the turn of the twentieth century as (mere) “autobiographical writing.” This is a genre the editors associate neither with exciting developments in Native self-representation, nor with adventures in formal experimentation, but rather with a slavish devotion to “content” (something of a dirty word here), a devotion, moreover, the editors describe as willingly acquiescing to the needs of an outdated “ethnographic method” of non-Native reading that serves primarily non-Native interests (12, 13). I went over this section of the introduction several times, wanting to give the editors the benefit of the doubt. Although I am sympathetic to the general thrust of their argument, as a longtime student (and longtime fan) of Native “autobiographical writing” produced across the twentieth and now early-twenty-first centuries, I find these claims difficult to support. (My earlier comment about Wendy Rose’s “Neon Scars” represents but one example of what I consider a wealth of counterevidence.)

Other questions raised for me concern the editors’ characterization of the current state of Native literary studies, broadly defined. They are correct that investigations of nonfiction remain inadequate—we should all be producing more and better scholarship on works of Native nonfiction from every era, including but certainly not limited to the nineteenth century, on their own and in conversation with works produced in other genres and in other media. That said, even though I know I’m biased, I find the selection of scholarly sources Washuta and Warburton spotlight somewhat limited, and thus I find their brief overview somewhat skewed. It’s possible that I’m overly optimistic, but my sense of the field does not align with the editors’ characterization that there is a “prolific undercurrent in the interpretation and discussion of Native nonfiction writing: the expectation that Native peoples remain as *subjects spoken about* rather than as the *subjects speaking*” (13). I think those of us working in the field would agree that such an undercurrent may have been prominent among nearly all potential readers before the 1970s. And I think we would agree that such an expectation remains extant among some contemporary non-Native and especially non-academic readers, and perhaps among some contemporary scholars working outside Native American and Indigenous studies. At the same time, I think most of us would agree that those scholars actually working *within* the field

of Native American and Indigenous studies since the 1970s—certainly since the 1990s—have built their (our) careers by arguing explicitly and often forcefully *against* such an expectation. The one example Washuta and Warburton provide of misguided scholarship actually expressing this outdated expectation is a brief statement by the non-Native scholar Arnold Krupat, quoted from the introduction to an anthology he edited in 1994 (it’s hard to believe, but that’s *twenty-seven years ago*), and even this example feels rather like the presentation of a strawman, meant for easy overturning, rather than confrontation with a genuine ideological adversary. A broader review of contemporary articles and books written about Native American literatures (including Krupat’s own scholarship, however much one might disagree with his specific arguments), demonstrates a consistent interest in listening to and amplifying Native voices across genres, including across diverse offerings of nonfiction, not only lyric essays and life writing but also works that are explicitly activist and explicitly engaged with contemporary tribal, national, and international politics.<sup>10</sup>

As an aside, it is interesting to note (and it would be important to point out to students) that in his article published way back in 1987 (that’s *thirty-four years ago*), Jack Forbes identified works of nonfiction, including writing published in tribal newspapers and pan-tribal journals, as *essential components* of contemporary Native literature. Forbes argues that one “impact of colonialism and the resultant struggle for liberation is that a great percentage of literature produced will be of a practical nature, concerned with problem-solving, political agitation, political theory, philosophy, strategy, and tactics. Poetry and fiction may well be of this nature, along with songs, plays, et cetera, but the ordinary form used would be non-fiction” (20).<sup>11</sup> Forbes’s account supports the underlying argument of Washuta and Warburton’s introduction—the vitality of nonfiction and its importance to the contemporary moment. In our own contemporary moment, one immediately thinks of the “practical” and “problem-solving” nonfiction produced by Native authors in support of Idle No More, #NoDAPL, and other activist movements and events.

Finally, I am intrigued by Washuta and Warburton’s extended discussion of the limitations of “autobiographical form”—they argue that it “emphasizes content over craft”—along with their contention that

“Native autobiography has become a metonym for Native nonfiction” (13). I wonder whether that is indeed the case. And I wonder why this generation of authors (and editors) might feel a need to place so much distance between their own writing based in personal, familial, and tribal experience and that of their literary elders. The extended discussion along with the contention set up two principal expectations for *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* (at least for this reader). The first expectation is that many if not all of the selected works will forego “autobiographical form” altogether or at least move beyond conventional understandings of “autobiography” in some discernible way. The second expectation is that all of the selected works will be strikingly innovative in terms of their formal choices, and that such explicit experimentations with literary form will affect how the essays produce and convey meaning. Indeed, Washuta and Warburton repeatedly describe their selections for *Shapes* as examples of “form-conscious Native nonfiction” (10, 11, 12).

The phrasing here is more than intriguing. I proudly consider myself a form *nerd* (the alternative term form *geek* sounds to me like someone who enjoys filling out forms, which I am not), and I am drawn to the idea of “form-conscious” Native writing in any genre (all those amazing examples of form-conscious Native poems, stories, and novels). That said, the repeated dismissal of “autobiographical form,” coupled with the repeated emphasis that the newly collected essays are exceptionally “form-conscious,” can suggest that the editors consider Native writers of nonfiction from previous years and decades to have been uniformly less conscious about form—or completely unselfconscious in this regard. These, too, are claims (the more accurate word is perhaps *implications*) I find less than persuasive. And, more importantly, the repeated dismissal coupled with the repeated emphasis sets a bar for the new collection that is too high. For as interesting, arresting, and accomplished as the individual selections in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* are, as a group they do not meet expectations of moving completely beyond “autobiographical form” and of being exceptionally “form-conscious.” I use the adverb *exceptionally* here in response to the editors’ evocative section headings—*Technique*, *Coiling*, *Plaiting*, *Twining*—and to the enticing descriptions they give for these headings, which, to my mind, establish *additional expectations* that the essays assembled under any particu-

lar heading will be immediately distinguishable from those assembled under the others, and in terms of formal qualities that are specific and easily described.

Despite the editors' focus on an asserted distance from "autobiographical form," I was not surprised to discover that the essays presented in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* are based in their authors' lived experiences—often in incredibly detailed and moving terms—and thus that every selection can be characterized as participating in or drawing from the established conventions of autobiographical writing in some way. Deborah Miranda's exquisite contribution "Tuolumne," which opens *Coiling*, is exemplary in this respect (and this is the essay Washuta and Warburton point to in their introduction as exemplary of the section). Anchored in both memories and imagined encounters with the Tuolumne River in California, Miranda's sure, understated, and intimate narrative carries readers across and through parts of her family's complex story to arrive at a broadly inclusive and remarkably timely conclusion: "We go there [to the river] to start over again. We go there because there is one prayer we have never forgotten: water is life" (79).

Most essays in the volume, moreover, employ techniques of organization, presentation, and literary style, sometimes borrowed from other genres, that experienced readers will recognize from works of Native nonfiction published in previous years and decades. At least two selections draw explicit attention to these kinds of genealogies. Chip Livingston's "Funny, You Don't Look Like (My Preconceived Ideas of) an Essay," part of the *Technique* section, links back to Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in its tracing of the development and possibilities of lyric form (46), while Sasha LaPointe's "Fairy Tales, Trauma, Writing into Dissociation," also included in *Technique*, acknowledges the shaping role of published works written by family elders and ancestors (66). In others, the genealogical links are more subtle. This is true, for instance, of the several selections in *Shapes* that are arranged as a series of juxtaposed vignettes, meditations, or autobiographical fragments, often separated on the page by white space, such as Terese Marie Mailhot's "Little Mountain Woman," or by white space plus typographic symbols, such as Mailhot's "I Know I'll Go," both of which are part of *Coiling*, or by white space plus section numbers and titles, such as Natanya Ann Pully's "The Way of Wounds," which is part of *Plaiting*. It's also true for Stephen Graham Jones's humorous, didactic, and compelling "letter"

to beginning writers presented as a numbered list of ironic rules and recommendations, which is part of *Technique*. It's even true for Billy-Ray Belcourt's insistent stream-of-consciousness prose-poem "AND SO I ANAL DOUCHE WHILE KESHA'S 'PRAYING' PLAYS FROM MY IPHONE ON REPEAT," structured as a single, dense block of text, with line endings and stanza breaks marked, respectively, by single and double virgules, its voice presented in a shouting tone of all caps, which is located in *Coiling* alongside more quietly insistent works by Miranda, Mailhot, Bojan Louis, Tiffany Midge, and Ruby Hansen Murray.

Yes, form draws attention to itself in these and perhaps in all the selections, some to a greater degree than others, always to good effect. But the formal distance between these works and those of their literary elders is less pronounced than the editors assert. The writers they have chosen to feature are collectively engaged in an ongoing and *multigenerational* conversation about the productive tensions between content and form. The editors might not be ready to fully acknowledge it (one senses, perhaps, an anxiety of influence), but Native writers in past years and decades asked similar questions, and these more established writers felt (and continue to feel) similarly compelled to produce nonfiction that is demonstrably "form-conscious." (*Third note to self*: in future, try not to sound like such an old man.)

Given all that, the standout exception in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* draws particular attention: Kim TallBear's multiply experimental "Critical Poly 100s." TallBear's contribution not only describes but in a real sense *performs* her "autoethnographic polyamory practice" over a period of several years. And her "essay" is formatted neither as a formal report of activities (although it does include definitions for key terms, an explanation of critical contexts, and two endnotes) nor as a standard autobiographical narrative (although its voice is highly personal and its content is often intimate), but rather as a series of twenty-eight blog posts (suggesting a regularly updated and perhaps public forum). TallBear assigns each post a number, title, and date, and she arranges her series in reverse numerical *and* reverse chronological order (reminiscent, it occurs to me, of publications listed on a scientist's cv), so that readers begin with the post that is most recent, number 28 from August 2017, then count their way down and work their way back to the most distant, number 1 from September 2014. Each post appears roughly uniform in size, and, indeed, as TallBear's title hints and her

introductory paragraphs explain, each post is arbitrarily constrained—and thus deliciously *empowered*—by a strict limit of 100 words.

TallBear’s piece is the one that most obviously invites analysis of how form not only affects but also helps produce meaning. But even here, as infatuated with this work as I am (the pun is intended), I have a feeling that TallBear may be part of an already established, evolving practice of transferring—and, in a sense, translating—innovative formats first developed on digital platforms over to the print media of journals and books.<sup>12</sup> And while I understand the logic of the editors’ choice to place TallBear’s contribution in the *Plaiting* section, a strong case could be made for its inclusion in either *Coiling* or *Twining*. Written across multiple years and from multiple locations, the brief, formally experimental entries detailing lived experiments in building relations with place, with other humans, and with distinct forms of knowledge could be described as “material from different sources”—that is, from different instantiations of TallBear the experiencing individual-in-relation and TallBear the crafting writer—brought together in a single “essay.” And yet these highly-crafted, diverse *autobiographical* posts have been fitted together so well, juxtaposed so smoothly and without obvious effort, the final product feels “seamless.”

My hope is that these remarks convey my high level of engagement with *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, which I thoroughly enjoyed, along with my admiration for the volume’s editors and authors. The introduction is nuanced and thought-provoking; the basketmaking concepts behind the enticing section headings suggest ways to potentially reconceive works of nonfiction written in earlier decades; the individual selections offer a range of vibrant voices readers need to hear. I would definitely include *Shapes* on a syllabus, for either an undergraduate course or a graduate seminar, especially in conversation with other nonfiction works; I encourage others to do the same. Moreover, I want this review, which is perhaps a little cantankerous at times but largely congenial and celebratory, to be but the beginning of a more expansive discussion—within the pages of *SAIL* and other venues—about the possibilities of Native nonfiction for our reading, teaching, and scholarship. My other hope is that *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* is but the beginning of a trend in contemporary publishing. We need access to more high-quality Native nonfiction across a wide range of outlets. We need additional collections of

new work, as well as collections that juxtapose newer voices with those that are already well-established. For if ever there were a time requiring diverse Indigenous voices “concerned with problem-solving, political agitation, political theory, philosophy, strategy, and tactics,” that time is now.

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#### NOTES

1. To this list of well-received, book-length works published since 2000, one could add Linda Hogan’s *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir* (2001), Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003), Allison Hedge Coke’s *Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival* (2004), Leslie Marmon Silko’s *The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir* (2010), Joy Harjo’s *Crazy Brave: A Memoir* (2012), Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013), and Elissa Washuta’s *My Body Is a Book of Rules* (2014), among many others.

2. One could devote a mini-lecture, if not an entire section of a syllabus, to the importance of Native-focused, Native-controlled, and/or Native-owned publishers, whether in print or online. In the US, for instance, in addition to the Indian Historian Press, and in addition to tribal newspapers and pan-tribal journals, there is the tribally-owned and -run Chickasaw Press, established in 2006 “in response to the basic need of the Chickasaws to own their history,” which has produced a number of nonfiction volumes ([www.chickasawpress.com](http://www.chickasawpress.com)). And in Canada, there is Theytus Books, based in Penticton, British Columbia, that has produced a wide range of nonfiction books, alongside works in other genres, since it was established in 1981 ([www.theytus.com](http://www.theytus.com)).

3. Clearly, one could devote a whole section of a syllabus to nonfiction by Momaday, which one could augment with the 2019 documentary *N. Scott Momaday: Words from a Bear*, produced by Kiowa filmmaker Jeffrey Palmer for Vision Maker Media (distributed by ITVS, <https://itvs.org/films/words-from-a-bear>). Short- and long-form documentary films, more generally, represent additional possibilities for expanding the scope of courses on Native nonfiction. Vision Maker is a good place to start: <https://www.visionmakermedia.org>.

4. See, for example, *Red Power: The American Indians’ Fight for Freedom*, originally compiled by Alvin Josephy and published in 1971, with an updated second edition edited by Josephy along with scholars Joane Nagel and Troy Johnson, published nearly three decades later in 1999.

5. Vizenor's piece is an inspiration for Craig Womack's compelling essay "There Is No Respectful Way to Kill an Animal," published in 2013 in a special issue of *SAIL* (vol. 25, no. 4) devoted to "Animal Studies."

6. The prolific Diane Glancy has published multiple, often award-winning collections of nonfiction essays since the 1990s, beginning with *Claiming Breath* in 1992, followed by *The West Pole* in 1997 and *The Cold-and-Hunger Dance* in 1998. The prolific Gerald Vizenor published his innovative and highly generative work of critical theory and reflection *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* in 1994, followed by *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* in 1998, and, most recently, *Native Provenance: The Betrayal of Cultural Creativity* in 2019.

7. Another well-known journalist for whom I would make an exception on my syllabus is Susan Shown Harjo.

8. Many other works of Native public scholarship were able to ride the wave of national and international interest generated by the Columbus quincentennial observations and protests, including James Welch's *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Bighorn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (1994) and Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Warrior's *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (1996).

9. I have in mind, for instance, the 2018 anthology *New Poets of Native Nations*, for which the editor, Heid E. Erdrich, based her selections on the explicit criteria of promoting poets whose first books were published in the twenty-first century.

10. To point readers in the direction of but one recent example of highly innovative, Indigenous-focused approaches to reading, interpreting, and creating Native nonfiction, see *Indigenous Conversations about Biography*, a special issue of the journal *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* (vol. 39, no. 3, Summer 2016), brilliantly conceived and co-edited by Alice Te Punga Somerville, Noelani Arista, and Daniel Heath Justice.

11. I first quoted this passage from Forbes's 1987 essay in *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts*, published in 2002 (33). There I use Forbes's essay as a springboard to argue: "If we are to approach a fuller understanding of contemporary indigenous minority literatures and their development under conditions of ongoing and evolving colonialism, scholars must move beyond studies of the same handful of popular novels and undertake the more difficult task of analyzing a much larger body of nonfiction and mixed-genre texts, whose oppositional strategies may be less subtle but also less easily recognized by scholars working exclusively within the analytical frameworks provided by orthodox postcolonial theory" (34). I then acknowledge that "a number of scholars have begun to move in this direction." A list of those scholars would include Robert Warrior, whose first book *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, published in 1995, investigates the twentieth-century nonfiction writing of John Joseph Mathews and Vine Deloria, Jr.; *Tribal Secrets* was an important inspiration not only for my own first book but for a whole generation of scholarship. As Washuta and Warburton point out, Warrior's subsequent *The People and the Word*:

*Reading Native Nonfiction*, published in 2005, argues that nonfiction has been largely excluded from Native literary studies. I would respectfully contend that, although his words are rhetorically effective, Warrior overstates the case for exclusion; Washuta and Warburton deploy Warrior's overstatement as justification for their own.

12. In another genre, one thinks, for instance, of Tommy Pico's book-length poetic works that mimic and adapt the distinctive online formats of social media posts, such as *IRL*, published in 2016, and *Nature Poem*, published in 2017.

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