



Heid E. Erdrich, editor, *New Poets of Native Nations*

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by Gioia Elisa Woods

"Here is poetry of a new time—an era of witness, of coming into voice, an era of change and of political and cultural resurgence," explains editor Heid E. Erdrich in "Twenty-One Poets for the Twenty-First Century," the Introduction to this stunning collection of Native poetry (xi). The anthology and its editor are at the avant-garde of American poetic style and form, defying stereotypical conventions of what Native poetry 'should' be. The poems collected here challenge any tired notions of the 'historical' or 'vanished' American Indian; instead, these poems suggest the vibrant, vivacious, diverse body of contemporary poetry produced by Native poets. "We do and we do not write about eagles, spirits, and canyons," Erdrich quips; Native poetry is also about "grass and apologies, bones and joy, marching bands and genocide" (xiv). Erdrich conceived the idea for this anthology after noticing that readers generally lack "understanding of what Native American writing looks like, what it might be about, what styles it might choose and how it can be recognized within the whole of American poetry" (xiv). And she should know: an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, Erdrich is not only an award-winning poet, visual artist, and creator of highly acclaimed poem films, she is also a publisher, editor, and bookstore co-founder and owner.

The poems in *New Poets of Native Nations* are contemporary, but Erdrich urges readers to understand them within the context of the long tenure of Native peoples in North America. In this way, we can understand "something new and enduring at once" (xvi). In "Quarter Strain" by Laura Da' (Eastern Shawnee), the poetic persona finds herself waking on the floor, "covered and corralled / by cratered Lego fortresses [...]"



My son is prodding me / to greet him. Say hello. / Say it in Spanish. / Say it again in Tewa. Say it / in Shawnee" (61). Tommy Pico (Kumeyaay), in a poignant and funny excerpt from his book of poems *IRL*, relies on text abbreviations to develop the uncanny sense of living in-between cultures: at a party waiting to be photographed, the narrator tells the photographer he hates having his picture taken. "he asks *is this / an Indian thing? Like / does a pic steal yr soul / or something?* / I want to crumple / him up in the palm / of my hand. But I / guess it is a NDN / thing" (31-32). The majority of these poems do succeed in demonstrating both contemporaneity *and* endurance across a variety of contexts. Here readers meet the urban, environmental, technological, mythic, philosophical, wild, and domestic. The poems are often meditations on living bifurcated lives. Consider the evocative "The First Water is the Body" by Natalie Diaz (Mojave): "The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States— / also, it is part of my body. / I carry a river. It is who I am: 'Aha Makav. / This is not a metaphor" (99).

Diaz is not the only poet in *New Poets of Native Nations* to reflect on the nature of language. The phenomenal poet and artist Layli Long Soldier (Oglala Lakota) contributes some of the strongest poems to this rich collection. In the poem "38," Long Soldier recounts the 1862 hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men after a series of broken treaties and starvation led to the Sioux Uprising. The hanging, Long Soldier tells us in the poem, is "the largest 'legal' mass execution in US history" (17). Long Soldier's meticulous attention to the act of narrative making, word choice, and grammatical structure endows the poem with a deep layer of meaning: the poem not only rehearses the events around the hanging, but draws readers' focus to the metacognitive functions involved in remembering and recounting. It begins, "Here, the sentence will be respected. / I will compose each sentence with care, by minding what the rules of writing dictate [...] I feel responsible to the orderly sentence; conveyor of thought" (17). But later in the long poem, after providing lexical lessons on the proper use of *hanged* versus *hung*, explaining how she uses italics for emphasis, and directly addressing presumed questions from readers, the poet launches into historical detail about the Sioux Uprising. But despite her great faith in language and grammatical structure, she confesses: "I don't know where to begin [...] I will recount facts as best I can, given limited resources and understanding" (18).

New Poets of Native Nations is a carefully curated collection that showcases the best contemporary poetry by Native Americans. By doing so, it serves to decolonize the literary landscape. The poems demonstrate the diversity of Native peoples and poetic styles. But it is not just a testament to terrific Native poetry. *New Poets* brings together some of the best poetry being written today in the United States by anyone. It is tender, funny, insightful, and moving. These truly are poems of a new time.

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