

IJIDI: Book Review

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Indigenous peoples self-governed and had control of their people, land, and resources before the colonization of their land, now widely known as North America. Tribal lands have been, are, and will be sovereign because tribal sovereignty is not defined by any constitution; each tribe is a nation. Self-determination is a means of recognizing and rectifying the fact that centuries of colonization eroded that sovereignty; therefore, nation rebuilding is necessary to restore the economic and social conditions of tribal nations.

In *Self-Determined Stories: The Indigenous Reinvention of Young Adult Literature*, Mandy Suhr-Sytsma addresses these themes by close reading the following Indigenous young adult novels and short stories: *Slash* by Jeanette Armstrong, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, *The Heart of a Chief* by Joseph Bruchac, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* by Cynthia Leitich Smith, Susan Power's "Drum Kiss" and "Reunion", Lorie Marie Carlson's "A Real-Life Blond Cherokee and His Equally Annoyed Soul Mate", *Oracles* by Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel, *The Night Wanderer: A Native Gothic Tale* by Drew Hayden Taylor, *Flight* by Sherman Alexie, and *Wabanaki Blues* by Melissa Tantaquidgeon Zobel.

Indigenous young adult literature can be defined as stories written by authors who self-identify as members of tribal nations (not to be confused with ethnicity or race) and who write characters belonging to tribal nations; however, these narratives are meant to be read by all regardless of Indigenous status. As an Indigenous studies scholar who wrote her dissertation on collaborative sovereignty, Suhr-Sytsma has the credibility and expertise to call for increased contributions to this body of literature and its analysis as a way to effectively empower Indigenous populations. The author analyzes narratives to explain how, in its offering of stories which live within and between several different systems of being and knowing, Indigenous young adult literature radically revises typical, mainstream young adult literary conventions. Indigenous young adult literature acts as a conduit for readers to better understand Indigenous sovereignty in our modern society while also providing tools to critique multiculturalism (the encouragement of a blending of cultures as opposed to the reasons separate cultures exist), heteropatriarchy (the encouragement of male-centered heterosexuality), and hybridity (a challenge to the notion that race is fixed and stable).

As part of Michigan State University's American Indian Studies series, this collection of essays is vital to support any academic program in Indigenous studies and literature

(predominantly in North America). Its accessible language also makes this book ideal for school and public libraries and is an essential read for anyone in search of a better understanding of Indigenous young adult literature. Suhr-Sytsma's way of incorporating the conversations of other critics and scholars in her analysis is engaging while also avoiding any hint of contradiction, despite the inherent complexities sovereignty poses on political, sexual, individual, and collective identities.

Although it would be unrealistic to expect all published works of Indigenous young adult literature to appear in this analysis, the author does not provide a rationale for the selection of some slightly aged as well as newer literature. There are many other stories, such as *The Marrow Thieves*, that Suhr-Sytsma mentions in the introduction and, which are listed on the Children's Literature Association (ChLA) blog (<https://chla.memberclicks.net/>), but are not explored at length in the main text. Readers might end up wanting more. Nonetheless, Suhr-Sytsma offers a new interpretation of each source material and an intellectual progression of sovereignty. Indigenous populations have consistently been praised for resilience and endurance, but *Self-Determined Stories* opens up the hood of that resiliency and asks readers to examine its long-term impact. What is the long-term impact of burying the effects of colonialism? What is the long-term impact of being forced to betray your culture and community?

While non-Indigenous young adult narratives are concerned with individuals finding their place outside given systems, Indigenous societies live in multiple systems, including colonial ones (p. xviii). Because of this, Indigenous young adult fiction is often communal; individuals are empowered simultaneously within and outside of their communities. But the sovereign experience is a constant struggle, not just in a legal sense, but also in terms of how much sovereignty to exercise. How does a sovereign nation protect itself from harmful outside forces without excluding themselves from other potentially beneficial relationships? Thriving as a nation is not only a constant negotiation with the world outside the nation that often opposes that sovereignty, but there are also disagreements within and between national citizenships, clan memberships, religious affiliations, political affiliations, social class, and personal opinion within a nation.

Suhr-Sytsma's use of Vine Deloria Jr.'s theories enhance the authenticity in her analysis of the texts. Deloria Jr. (Native American author, historian, and activist) has called on Indigenous people to stop asking for power, rights, and recognition from colonial governments (p. 15). An individual cannot force all others to understand realities they do not endure, but he or she can use one's own community to lift themselves and others. When an individual becomes overwhelmed and uncertain how their role, identity, and ambitions fit within society, connecting with family and community that share the same perspective or experience can rectify that overbearing loneliness and uncertainty. Therefore, it is important to revitalize one's own community and find power within one's own traditions.

The author contextualizes *Slash*'s post-Red Power movement as an example of a restorative experience, and as strengthening the Okanagan community from within. In this analysis, *Slash* is a prime example of an Indigenous young adult text that allows the reader to better understand sovereignty. The Red Power movement resulted from the House Concurrent Resolution 108, which terminated the recognition of more than 100 tribes as sovereign nations and stated that they would be under U.S. law and treated as American citizens; thereby stripping Indigenous peoples' right to govern their own people ("From the Red

Power”, 2014). As a result, the Red Power movement demanded self-determination for Indigenous peoples through confrontational and civil disobedience in order to gain control of their land and resources. In the early 2000s, Indigenous youth sought to restore similar demands, and much was in response to Canada’s Jobs, Growth, and Long-term Prosperity Act.

So much has been taken away from Indigenous nations. It is their right to prioritize what makes them separate in order to rebuild, and self-determination is one way to recognize that separation. However, *Slash*, and other stories in this study, do not address how unique identities shape experiences and participation in the pursuit of self-determination, nor does it address the possibility of non-Native allies (p. 23). With sovereignty comes the right to withhold knowledge, but does it perpetuate misunderstanding and mistreatment? As these young adult characters are often caught in between two worlds, this is something to grapple with. Several narratives within Suhr-Sytsma’s analysis spark unanswered questions, particularly regarding alliance-formation with those who understand and wish to support Indigenous individual’s fight for sovereignty, not out of guilt, but out of genuine interest in challenging oppressive power structures.

Suhr-Sytsma argues that Indigenous young adult fiction critiques multiculturalism and proposes alternatives for defining, inhabiting, and learning from different cultures. While multiculturalism dreams of the death of “race” as a construct, Suhr-Sytsma and Sherman Alexie highlight that belonging to multiple tribes does not mean that all tribes and their distinctions blend and blur. Suhr-Sytsma uses *Heart of a Chief’s* character, Junior, and his realization of colonialism’s effect on his family to support this view about multiculturalism. This perspective of multiculturalism causes readers to question how Indigenous peoples might gain self-determination with and without it. It is not simply a matter of creating an Indigenous character that circumvents mainstream young adult literature; the nature of Junior’s relationship to his community strengthens his self-determination and this is what sets this work apart from mainstream young adult literature about non-Indigenous individuals and families.

Another compelling argument is that mainstream young adult romance novels and romance novels with Indigenous characters, but not written for, or by Indigenous peoples, have a recolonizing effect. Indigenous young adult narratives often resist heteropatriarchy by painting more complicated pictures of alliances and internalized colonialism. *Rain is Not My Indian Name* and “Drum Kiss” depart from these conventions. The almost absence and complete absence of mainstream heteropatriarchy elements, as opposed to what is often demonstrated in narratives for and about non-Indigenous young adults, is a strategic decision that will cause readers to question whether heteropatriarchy is the norm. More importantly, examples like the ones Suhr-Sytsma analyzes touch again on the impact of multiculturalism through mixed-racial relationships and how they “blend” by ignoring cultural differences. When characters can come to terms with this in Indigenous young adult literature, they are closer to self-realization and determination.

Finally, Suhr-Sytsma demonstrates how Indigenous fiction uses speculative elements and Indigenous hybridities (ethnic memberships not easily identifiable to colonizers) to address contemporary issues facing Indigenous people. In her analysis of *The Night Wanderer*, Suhr-Sytsma engages heavily with Donna Ellwood Flett’s analysis. Suhr-Sytsma believes Flett fails to critique freewheeling hybridity because this story emphasizes that the most important source of meaning is connection to the past, not that Indigenous peoples

transcend the history of colonialism and horrors of the past; it has been repressed, not transcended (p. 133). If Indigenous peoples are interested in self-preservation and self-fulfillment, and the sovereignty of their communities, they should be wary about crossing cultural boundaries (p. 135). Colonialism must be processed in order to move forward, and Flett overlooks the contemporary manifestations of colonial exploitation (p. 141).

This work does not fully address how traditional knowledge is used in these narratives, which is often a source of controversy and something commonly misunderstood by non-Indigenous readers. In other words, the complexities surrounding Indigenous literature are rich beyond the scope of Suhr-Sytsma's work. Although the intended audience is somewhat different, Debbie Reese's American Indians in Children's Literature blog (<https://americanindiansinchildrensliterature.blogspot.com>) is another source to consult to gain a critical understanding of these other issues.

Self-Determined Stories' ambitious undertaking focuses on the fact that Indigenous cultural influence cannot be separated from any part of American culture, and yet it is still often ignored, requiring more educational efforts to build awareness. Suhr-Sytsma calls for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers to engage with novels that privilege Indigenous perspectives in order to continue these complex conversations about modern Indigenous sovereignty.

References

From the Red Power Movement to Idle No More. (2014, January 3). *Red Power Media*. Retrieved from <https://redpowermedia.wordpress.com/2014/01/03/from-the-red-power-movement-to-idle-no-more/>

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