
The Next Wave of Native American Writing?

Jawort, Adrian L. Ed. *Off the Path: An Anthology of 21st Century Montana American Indian Writers*. Billings, MT: Off the Pass Press, 2014.

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Off-the-Pass-Press-LLC/656769057706973>

It's hard not to be hyperbolic about this book. This new anthology grabs an Indigenous literary baton and runs with it in full stride. A new generation of Native American writers in Montana bursts on the scene. Indeed, their short fiction claims to open a new perspective, a chosen new trail in *Off the Path*. I won't presume in this short review to fully map or name what is or is not new about it—that will take later literary historians—but I'll open with that question. The dark stories in this volume are suffused with reservation blues, and as Sherman Alexie has explained, such music is a song of mourning that is also a song of celebration. If transmotion shifts things with a certain trickster temper, with flair and force and precision, then this collection is an act of transmotion. It bends, deconstructs, and transcends certain hierarchies and categories. It plays with gender and race and class, even as it pushes on right and wrong, communal and singular, life and death. As it does so it moves the reader into new perceptions—like showing us that ravens are not black but blue.

If one mark of a good story is how it breaks into the reader, how it stays with you, how it carves new synapses in your brain and body, then this collection has nine pretty good ones. These short fictions by five young Montana writers work beyond merely moving you to tears or frightening you or renewing your sense of understanding. They haul you into material realities of reservation life and thought rare in print yet familiar in Indian Country. Incisive and original voices inhabit a painfully candid set of human stories behind the statistics. The prose lives inside scenes of community pathology and strength, violence, addiction, abuse, insight, and quiet, compelling realization.

The significance of this contribution to Indigenous publishing is both aesthetic and political. It consciously aims to add another stark chapter in American Indian literature, and it does so with convincing force. The new press's website describes the stories as "beautifully bleak." Editor, publisher, and writer Adrian L. Jawort launched this series, *Off the Path*, with Vol. 1 as *An Anthology of 21st Century Montana American Indian Writers*. Transmotion resonates in the title itself, clearly setting out to open new ground, as well as in the title's playful near-confusion with the name of the publishing house: Off the Pass Press LLC.

Yes, the website offthepasspressllc.com has a tendency toward campy, self-satirizing hyperbole. Jawort has announced the imminent Volume II, adding "and Indigenous" to the subtitle and going global: "Off the Path Volume II continues to forge a new trail to a place your mind has never been. Up and coming contemporary writers from the Northern Plains, the American Southwest, Hawaii, and on over to New Zealand are represented in this powerful book." In addition, Jawort's noir novel, *Moonrise Falling*, is scheduled as well, which he describes as "wild and sure to offend!" In an interview with Craig Lancaster, Jawort says that upcoming volumes in the series include a "female Native writer anthology edited by Cinnamon Spear," plus a poetry anthology.

Jawort is confident and convincing about his approach to publication as an independent press, which in the digital era simply cannot be equated with vanity publishing. Grassroots publishing might be a better term, or democratic publishing. As Jawort explains in an interview, “But why wait for someone else to give us permission to go forward, you know?” A dynamic of transmotion works first in the project itself as a series, which feels like a phenomenon, an event. There is room on these pages for another layer of copy editing to filter out some minor typos, but this is literary activism, legitimated for the bookstore market by its LLC business license and its own ISBN bar code numbers. “The faster production and lower costs of getting books these days out were certainly huge factors,” he explains, revealing another subversive stratagem of transmotion in this project. “I’ve studied the publishing industry closely for years and there have rapid and major changes lately like ebooks that big publishing houses have been slow to grasp because nothing much changed with the status quo for decades but the names, and they were the proverbial gatekeepers and that was that... but now it’s easier to merely take all of those middlemen out and speed up the process and do things like hire your own freelance editors or cover designers if need be, et cetera. With diligent work, I was able to get out a high quality, handsomely printed product that does justice to the content within. And although ebooks are free to make, a print book has seemed to be by far the preferred reading medium of Montanans at least.” As he goes global with Volume II, it will be interesting to see if ebooks outpace print.

The accomplished young writers in this inaugural volume seem as fascinating as the stories themselves, and we can be grateful to Jawort as editor and publisher for bringing them to center stage. As Jawort mentions of his model, “the late and great Montana Blackfeet and Gros Ventre writer James Welch” in the book’s introduction, “it was writing about what he knew as an American Indian growing up in his ancestral and present day territory that ultimately propelled him to literary eminence.” Welch’s realistic, seemingly non-fictional dynamic is intensified and complicated here by seven of the nine pieces being in first-person point of view, the other two in similarly limited third-person. However convincingly autobiographical this prose may seem, it is accomplished fiction rather than autobiography.

Perhaps this intensely gritty personal voice is the next wave, following on Sherman Alexie and Debra Earling and so many others, who themselves followed on the now canonical generation of Momaday, Vizenor, Welch, Silko, et al, many of whom are still writing at the height of their powers. Indeed, this volume amplifies the kind of exposure of the reservation underbelly that Louise Erdrich offers recently in her fourteenth novel, *The Round House*, focusing on violence and abuse. When asked by interviewer Craig Lancaster what had been missing from western writing about reservations, Jawort explained, “Our own specific voices as told by younger Natives themselves. Although we Natives have, respectfully, Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich and older writers representing us on the best seller lists, their experiences don’t mirror our own, and I wanted to showcase rising talent... Reservations and tribes may be similar in many ways in that we can always relate on some base level, but to note Natives as one singular conglomerate and say ‘Alexie speaks for all of us!’ is to negate all of those factors like language and cultural beliefs unique to individual tribes, and would be like claiming England and Germany and France are all alike just because they’re mostly white people.” Jawort suggests more layers of personal, generational, cultural, and national discourse emerging in this prose. The reasoning of his project is not unlike music production on the reservations, where for a generation young artists have been producing digital recordings of Hopi hiphop, Navajo heavy metal, and Lakota blues.

So on the way to the fiction let's take a look at the five contributors before we discuss their absorbing prose.

Jawort (Northern Cheyenne) is a veteran journalist who writes for various indie newspapers as well as for national periodicals such as *Cowboys & Indians*, *Native Peoples*, and *Indian Country Today Media Network*. He offers three of the nine stories here, in addition to a short, open-hearted introduction to the volume, inviting readers to “hop on this war pony of life and take a ride to a place you've never been.” As editor, Jawort addresses insiders also: “For those of you who do know these places and feel these characters from your own personal trials and tribulations, I hope this helps tell your story as well.” He describes how these writers have journeyed away from home and back, and how, “while away from it they experienced revelations about how truly unique their homeland is, as other people were truly fascinated and yearned to hear more about the area they came from.” It's a generous invitation, though gentler than some of the rough terrain in the pages themselves. I'm reminded of the contrast, noted by many of us who met the late Jim Welch, between the author's warm personality and his cold narratives. This is, however another generation. As Jawort says, “... this anthology will nonetheless open a portal into that world as told from one living in the 21st Century—because it is a unique viewpoint.”

Cinnamon Spear (Northern Cheyenne) also offers three tales. The notes on contributors explain that as “the only student from Lame Deer High School to receive an Ivy League education, she regularly returns as a motivational speaker for youth.” If anything, her bachelors and masters degrees from Dartmouth College give voice in her fiction to even more heart and vulnerability. She writes with a level of honesty that reaches healing proportions. Her profile is telling: “As she flew back and forth between poverty and privilege (both states existing on and off the reservation), Spear realized that her super-exposed, bi-cultured hybrid state allowed her to teach the world about the Northern Cheyenne people, and likewise, to teach her people about the world.” If her stories have an instructive edge, it is not didactic, but dramatic and lyrical even as it looks forthrightly through brutality and anguish.

Luella Brien (Apsáalooké/Crow), a graduate in journalism from the University of Montana with numerous writing awards, has worked for *reznets.org*, *The Ravalli Republic*, and *The Billings Gazette*. Now, as the contributors' notes put it, she “serves her community as a communication arts instructor at Little Big Horn College in Crow Agency,” one of the three dozen long-standing institutions in the tribal college network nationwide. That professional engagement is a measure of the intimate community engagement that animates hers and the other pieces in this collection.

As with some of the others in this anthology, I've attended readings by Eric BigMan Brien (Apsáalooké/ Crow) here in Missoula. In a bookstore panel, he wore a shiny grey-green suit and a porkpie hat, and bore a stage presence that certainly lived up to his name. His bio in the “About the Authors” section is also worth quoting: “He credits his numerous teachers, Grandmother Beverly and sister Luella as those who have inspired him to write. When he is not writing he moonlights as an Elvis impersonator and enjoys reading religious tracts, travel brochures and medical pamphlets. He is fond of Carnivals and Cosplay, and describes being a member of the Crow Native American tribe as, ‘Swell.’” The irony of that sincerity is its own story. Such undercurrents of self-reflective humor and irony, sometimes cryptic, sometimes loud, rise out of the dramatic and traumatic depths in each entry of the collection.

Sterling HolyWhiteMountain (Blackfeet), also a graduate of the University of Montana, holds a Master of Creative Writing from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and was a James C. McCreight Fiction Fellow at the University of Wisconsin. As the notes explain, "he lived the first part of his life according to the laws of the local basketball religion" on the Blackfeet Reservation. Currently he has returned to UM to work toward an additional bachelor's degree in Native American Studies. His is the final story in the anthology, and indeed it rounds out the collection thematically, as I will suggest below.

Jawort's project to publish a series for contemporary Indigenous voices launches here from his Montana ground, and these five young writers indeed set a remarkable standard. There's a magnetic quality to their prose, each charged by polarities of professional stylistic accomplishment, on the one hand, and unique, expressive realism, on the other. Montana has a long literary tradition, both Native and non-Native, and this anthology bodes well for the future of the art.

So let's look at their offerings.

Cinnamon Spear's first story "God's Plan," opening the volume like a slap in the face, is an inside look at the morning after another "Friday night tornado" of drunken domestic abuse when her mother has again been brutalized. It is a harrowing and perfect emotional map through the eyes of a daughter who understands her father as victimizer and her mother as victim all too well. With quiet dramatic intensity, the traumatized narrator is trying to gauge whether her father, a "blood vein-bulging, raging lunatic from the night before," might again "wake up being the soft-spoken nice guy who wants to take the kids fishing." Perhaps because of its realistic emotional poignancy, the narrative conveys not only the numbing "carnage" wreaked upon her mother's body, not only the twisted parental manipulation of the children, and not only the bitter failure of prayer, but also the girl's strength to "never ever forgive him for as long as I lived."

Her second piece, entitled "Sweetheart," profiles "a young, motivated, drug and alcohol free, 'goody two shoes' kind of girl"—who falls "insanely in love" with a "kingpin drug dealer" doing time in federal prison. She keeps justifying her delusional adventure by insisting, "He was a sweetheart." The story works on several levels, satirizing such an adoring crush with its clichéd language of love under the close watch of prison guards during visiting hours, and marking predictable pitfalls of addictive romance even as it affirms a certain desperate freedom.

Spear's third offering, "Bloody Hands," probes at the impact of a teenage pregnancy on a family, through the eyes of an older sister off at college. She clearly maps the alienated domestic terrain, "Imagining what the space between my sister and mom looked like" and "how far away my dad could set himself emotionally and physically from what was happening." Operating on the fundamental meaning of kinship, the prose segues naturally to family questions of abortion and sacrifice, of how to succeed with and without community support. Through it all, there remains a tangible personality in the narrative voice. Without any pretense or theatrics, Spear validates kinship in both its tragic absence and its understated presence.

Jawort's three pieces in the collection take a strangely refreshing and light-hearted, if uncanny, look at the afterlife, murder, and suicide, respectively. His lucid, and contemplative prose brings these topics out of the shadows into a remarkable sense of humanity. Without waxing

metaphysical, he invokes spiritual ethics. In “He Doesn’t Know He’s Dead Yet,” the narrator decides that the first anniversary of his brother’s murder is the time to quit drinking with him and to let him know he’s dead. “Tonight I think I’ll tell him.” We never know for sure if it’s the narrator or the deceased who is living—or dying—in an illusion. Jawort doesn’t overwork the ambiguity. Instead, he lets it resonate into unspoken levels, allowing without comment that other people did “seem to notice” the dead brother “—at least some of the time—and even acknowledged him. That at least made me feel not so schizophrenic... I’d have to come straight out with it.” As a kind of extended joke, the effect on the reader can be both heartening and disorienting.

The longest piece in the collection, “Where Custer Last Slept” by Jawort, could become a powerful film script—as could several of these stories. This one is a complex portrait of an interracial group of friends dealing with a vicious bully in their midst, even as it portrays rez party night life on the open prairie, near the Little Bighorn Battlefield. In the aura of that historical context, the voices in this narrative face the most sinister of dilemmas. There are echoes here of Welch’s *Fools Crow* facing the threat of the evil *napikwan*, the white hunter who wastes his kill. At the denouement, the narrator explains, “I guess it was just a story that needed to be told—needed to be let out of my blood. However, I see no reason to ‘pretty it up’ by excluding the alcohol and drug references or violence to make myself or anyone else seem noble... I hope this finally puts my restless mind at ease. I hope the ghosts will let me as well as themselves rest now. Most of all, I want people to know that this story did happen, and lives on some little reservation town where General George Armstrong Custer last slept are forever different—for better or worse—because of it.” It’s brilliant realism, beyond “suspension of disbelief” into a realm of restless questioning in the reader’s, if not the writer’s, mind.

In “The Stereo Typer,” Jawort takes us inside the agonizingly ironic mind of a homeless suicide: “She was the epitome of the starving artist.” The remarkable drama is entirely internal. Having blown her college career, “pretty much decimated her education prospects for the foreseeable future,” by getting “busted for having marijuana on her in an essentially illegal search and seizure” during finals week, “She got out of jail to a cold reception of nothing...” Even her alcoholic mom resents her, ““And now you think you’re better than me? Going to some college? You watch now, you won’t amount to nothing!” But she feels guilty for having had to punch her way out of the abuse: “She never felt so good, so liberated, and so sickened at the same time in her life. She’d defended herself finally, but at what cost? No one should ever hit their own mother like that, no matter what they’d done. Geezus.” The roller coaster of her thoughts includes an appropriate literary allusion from Tennyson’s “The Lotus-Eaters” and her ominous comment “What a lovely poem to die to.” Then she veers to bizarre self-assertion: “Most normal girls attempted suicide as lame cries for help and never succeeded, but she wasn’t like them.” Strangely, inside the insecure egotism there remains a faith in herself, in the face of such disasters.

Luella Brien’s remarkable “Green-Eyed Regret” starts and ends with seventeen-year-old Maddy lying “on the concrete thinking she was cold.... Yearning for a blanket... she never made the connection that she was cold because of the excessive amount of blood she’d lost.” The story of a fractured prom night, bracketed neatly in death, is split along a racial divide that turns romance into senseless, even unconscious violence. It’s another measure of endemic brutality in

reservation life, even as the prose is punctuated with great lines throughout where we learn to feel Maddy's promise and pain: "As her spirit escaped towards the thin layer of clouds covering the stars, she became the statistic she never wanted to be." "The tension between cowboys and Indians was palpable and Maddy never knew which side of the battle she was on." Of her parents: "An Indian rodeo queen and a white cowboy? It just didn't seem like it'd be even plausible. So he left with a bit of guilt, but it was nothing a few beers couldn't cure." "Madeline Jean Thompson was born with green eyes and freckles. It was enough to make Sydney hate her baby instantly. She hated her so much that she gave her the lanky cowboy's last name." Of grandma: "She never made her only grandchild feel bad for not being Indian enough; her mother did that all the time." Maddy's family residue grows more convoluted: "But she didn't want to watch as the meth ate her mother away like she was a walking corpse.... People whispered about her mom's beauty like it was a ghost that haunted the town.... Maddy couldn't quite figure out how having a baby could ruin someone's life 17 years later." And as the plot thickens: "He only drank on the weekends and his parents were still actually married. For any other girl he was a catch. He wrote sad, sad poetry about the Creator and owls or coyotes. He wanted to grow up to be a tribal chairman. It made Maddy want to gag. But she kept telling herself that he was a catch, and even if she couldn't stand his self-serving political dreams and stereotypical Indian poetry, she stayed with him. She smiled and played the part. Besides, the prom was coming up." The limited possibilities constrict the clear intelligence of the narrative voice. It's again an affirmation of strength in spite of radical loss.

Eric Brien's excerpt from a novella, "My Brother's Keeper," is another confident, unique voice. It drives the reader along with lively, well-timed dialogue, mostly an early-morning telephone conversation between the narrator and his estranged, dying brother, but it is punctuated by erudite and ironic asides. "After 30 years I still recognized my brother Solomon's incredibly thick and unnecessary Crow accent. What I mean by 'unnecessary' is that our mother never actually spoke the Crow language, and our white father was unknown to us.... My brother in English, however, always sounded like he was teaching the oral traditions around a campfire for tourists; and it always seemed more well-rehearsed and got even stoically deeper when he thought he was saying something especially profound." Brien's critique of self-inflicted stereotypes echoes Sherman Alexie's sarcasm televised on *60 Minutes* (in 2001) about Indians playing Indian for white audiences: "It's that whole 'corn pollen, four directions, Mother Earth, Father Sky' Indian thing where everybody starts speaking slowly, and their vocabulary shrinks down until they sound like Dick and Jane. And it's all about spirituality, and it's all about politics...." Brien's application of this irony is particularly telling in its brusqueness, because the "annoying" brother's phone call, after thirty years of resentful silence, announces a pending death. "This was already a long day of questions, and it was just starting." It's a compelling and intriguing start to the novella that I want to get my hands on.

The final piece in the collection doesn't answer questions neatly either, but as a coming-of-age story it underlines the challenges and questions and values at work throughout the volume. "The Education of Little Man False Star Boy" by Sterling HolyWhiteMountain combines teenage longing with the persistent trauma of violent death on the reservation, plus poignant feeling and gestures of traditional Indigenous respect, and finally with a reminder of what everyone there is really living and dying for: the land and the people on the land.

Appropriately, the tale earns its ageless value of Indigenous ground through irony, inaugurated in the first line: “That was the summer I got the one and only claim check of my life and spent my own small piece of the Sweetgrass Hills.” It was also a summer of unrequited love followed by an ample sexual education. On turning 18 in their graduating year, he and his friends receive “settlement money,” each spending it on a new set of wheels—by which too many die in drunken car accidents that first year out of school. “I wrote out the names of the dead on a piece of paper. I counted them up and tried to picture each of their faces. I put checks next to the ones who were related to me. I put an x next to the ones who had died in a claim check car.”

As his uncle eventually educates the narrator, “Claim checks are settlement money, he said. Money to us from the government to make up for not paying for all that land the first time. So think of it like this—every cent you spend is you spending your piece of those hills. That’s what that money is. Pretty weird, enit.” As the narrator begins to grasp the sinister history tainting that money, and as he tries “to give my last hundred to my grandpa,” the beloved old man refuses. “I don’t want nothing to do with that money, he said. Let me pay the phone bill, then, I said. Nope, he said. Go pay somebody else’s bills. So I did—I paid my auntie’s phone bill...” At the finale, again with precise absurdity, he gives the remainder away to a mooching cousin, who gestures, “Bro, I’ll get you back for it, he said.... Don’t worry about it, I said. I don’t want it anymore. He smiled his huge smile. Now that’s a good Indin, he said.”

The words perfectly express the perfect irony. In his political and cultural awakening to the value of the land—in its absence—his rejection of blood money for that land is misinterpreted by his cousin as traditional generosity. Like Welch’s Fools Crow who grows beyond his childhood name of White Man’s Dog, here the narrator has grown from Little Man to False Star Boy, a name with—now ironic—sacred resonance in Blackfeet mythology. It’s a fine mixture of rugged rez life, told through the eyes of an acute observer and participant, punctuated with nuggets of wisdom and vulnerability. Plus humor, as the narrator’s grandfather sums it up: “Not much is funny... but you got to laugh anyway.”

Driven by this energetic momentum of *Off the Pass Press*—and its Whitmanesque self-promotion (“Without missing a stride from the original and beautifully bleak Montana-based *Off the Path*... Volume II continues to forge a new trail to a place your mind has never been”)—there may be two or three more new publications by the time this review posts. That publishing energy is its own transmotion. It affirms the ancient and post-postmodern, postindian art of tricking boundaries. It navigates the world’s judgments, expectations, and divisions with a clear eye, where personal and political, artistic and historical, new and old, mind and matter, right and wrong, alienation and compassion move.

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Works cited

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