

James H. Cox. *The Political Arrays of American Indian Literary History*. University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 282 pp. ISBN: 9781517906023.

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-political-arrays-of-american-indian-literary>

James Cox's latest book with the University of Minnesota Press takes an approach that may be—at first glance—all too obvious. As he explains in the introduction to *The Political Arrays of American Indian Literary History*, his monograph “takes as its central focus what Native texts say and do politically and proposes that literary scholars approach single texts, collections of texts by the same author and by multiple Native authors,” along with the “conversations among Native and non-Native authors about their works as” what Cox describes as “political arrays” (1). By drawing on a range of historical and contemporary texts, outside of the early Native American Renaissance Period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cox's study offers a series of “confounding but also generative collisions of conservative, moderate, and progressive ideas that together constitute the rich political landscape of American Indian literary history” (1). As someone who has paid close attention to the ways in which recent Indigenous women poets living in Canada and the US speak to and are influenced by each other, such a conversation seems not only useful but indeed critical to think through the complexities of what Cox describes as “American Indian literary history” (1), to expose and unpack the differences and similarities as well as points of confluence between and among Indigenous writers. The choice of comparisons and the range of periods explored are what make this monograph both exciting and unique. Moreover, by referencing the important contributions of a wide range of Indigenous scholars working in the field in thoughtful ways, Cox establishes the conversational nature of this project and the need for more work to be done on the relationships he outlines in *The Political Arrays*.

Most compellingly, Cox insists upon the breadth of texts that he includes in this monograph, arguing that “all forms of writing under my consideration” are “literature” and deserve to be valued “as significant contributions to American Indian literary history” for their “cultural, historical, and political” perspectives (2). By decisively refusing to favor white western canonical ideas of what constitutes literature, Cox makes space for a fascinating set of case studies, beginning with the complex web of nodes created by responses to Louise Erdrich's mid-1980s novels, from Indigenous (Leslie Marmon Silko) and non-Indigenous critics and writers (Peter Matthiessen and Wendy Lesser), which he connects through Matthiessen to Simon Ortiz, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Paula Gunn Allen. By referencing “letters, novels, reviews, articles, and

paratexts," Cox conveys the range of "political positions on and investments in the field of American Indian literary expression" and the challenges that arise when Indigenous authors write (8). And by selecting a relatively recent and highly charged set of contexts, Cox demonstrates the need to think about relationality when analyzing American Indian literary history. He attends to a wide range of perspectives and makes important connections to the politics of the day, whether personal, tribal, state, federal, or transnational. In doing so, Cox refuses to see American Indian literary history as anything less than complex and messy, yet clearly worthy of further investigation.

In the chapters that follow, Cox explores the role of "Indigenous Editing" by examining the decisions of those who edited the *American Indian Magazine* (1913-1920) and *American Indian* (1926-1931); the "transnational political arrays" expressed in the periodical publications of Cherokee writers, Will Rogers and John Milton Oskison (19); the "anticolonial politics" of the Lynn Riggs and James Hughes film, *A Day in Santa Fe* (1931) and its resonances with contemporary Indigenous filmmakers (19); the significance of mid-century correspondence between Native men (John Joseph Mathews and Lyn Riggs) and Anglo-male literary scholars (primarily Walter S. Campbell and J. Frank Dobie), who promoted the work of "individual Native writers, if not Native American literature as a field" (144); and the "diachronic political arrays" that emerge from detective novels produced by Indigenous authors in the 1930s, whose influence on "post-civil-rights-era detective novels" demonstrates the continued linkages between and differences among political positions put forth by these contemporary Indigenous writers (22). The last chapter probes Louis Owens' controversial claim that Gerald Vizenor and Sherman Alexie are located at opposite ends of the political spectrum, an assertion that Cox subverts using Owens' own "contemporary Indian spectrum" (23). As part of this conclusion, Cox uses this comparison as a springboard to probe how allegations of Alexie's sexual misconduct and his responses to them intersect with critical political arrays, especially those focused on gender and sexuality. Cox turns to the work of Carole LaFavor, Winona LaDuke, and Marcie Rendon, albeit briefly, to reframe the conversation, ultimately reminding readers of the need to consider "the full range of Native politics in American Indian literature" (212)—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

While I am torn by Cox's decision to highlight Alexie in his conclusion, a decision that could be read as replicating a kind of canonization that is potentially deeply sexist and harmful, *The Political Arrays* does not shy away from initiating some of the difficult but necessary conversations that are essential to understanding American Indian literary history. As Cox reminds readers, "Native people hold political views of all kinds: liberal

and conservative, moderate and extreme, unpredictable and contradictory. American literary history contains equally diverse political perspectives" (212). Ideally, Cox's monograph will prompt a variety of scholars to continue to add to and complicate what is an important and necessary endeavor—to understand the complexities and contradictions that shape and are shaped by Indigenous literary history in the United States.

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