

Indigenizing Across Boundaries

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Chadwick Allen. *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*. University of Minnesota Press, 2012. xxxiv + 302 pp.

Chadwick Allen's *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* is an exciting new book. *Trans-Indigenous* earns itself a noteworthy place within the growing body of work on Indigenous approaches to research and cultural studies. This book nicely complements works like Margaret Kovach's *Indigenous Methodologies*, Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony*, Neal McLeod's *Cree Narrative Memory*, and Daniel Heath Justice's *Our Fire Survives the Storm* – texts that are grounded in particular Indigenous contexts and that engage in research and interpretation on those terms. Allen explains how he was influenced by the publication of Craig Womack's *Red on Red* and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, both of which appeared in 1999 (a second edition of Smith's book came out in 2012). He remarks that, at the time, these works seemed to provide “a blueprint for the primary work of Indigenous studies in the foreseeable future: centering Indigenous concerns and perspectives within academic research paradigms and localizing Indigenous theories and analytic methodologies” (xx). He then goes on to raise questions of implementation and actualization for the visions of these key texts:

A decade after the initial publication of these paradigm-shifting works, the realization of Smith's and Womack's calls for new forms of Indigenous scholarship remains largely at the level of potential rather than standard practice. This situation seems especially true within studies of literature and representation. (xx)

The way that Allen contextualizes his questions here is significant. In pointing to Smith's and Womack's writings, he grounds his own text firmly in the ongoing work by Indigenous scholars to theorize and practice Indigenous methodologies – ways of interpreting and researching that are rooted in specific social, cultural, and epistemological contexts. Allen locates his own “intellectual home in American Indian literatures and cultures” (xviii), and the readings in this text “radiate outward” from that base into Māori and other Indigenous cultures across the globe (xviii). It is inspiring to read Allen's writing as he seeks to push this work of Indigenizing methodologies further to “harness the potential” of approaches that thinkers like Smith and

Womack have advocated.

The way that Allen's work distinguishes itself is through its focus on "trans-Indigenous" methodologies for interpreting Indigenous texts. Allen alludes to a "still-emerging field of trans-Indigenous literary studies" (xxi); this book is my first encounter with a specifically *trans*-Indigenous framework, and I will be keeping my eyes open for other scholars doing this kind of work. Allen explains that he had previously framed his work by using a series of "and" statements (xii), then by using "comparative" approaches (xi-xiv), but felt caught up in a number of tensions, such as the engulfing of the "local . . . in the name of the global" (xiii) and the turning of "together equal" comparisons between Indigenous groups into a re-centering on "dominant settler culture" (xiii-xiv). He has turned to *trans*-Indigenous because he thinks that it opens up greater possibilities for exciting scholarship in Indigenous literary and cultural studies:

The point is not to displace the necessary, invigorating study of specific traditions and contexts but rather to complement these by augmenting and expanding broader, globally Indigenous fields of inquiry. The point is to invite specific studies into different kinds of conversations, and to acknowledge the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts. Similar to words like *translation*, *transnational*, and *transform*, *trans*-Indigenous may be able to bear the complex, contingent asymmetry and the potential risks of unequal encounters borne by the preposition *across*. It may be able to indicate the specific agency and momentum carried by the preposition *through*. . . . At this moment in the development of global Indigenous literary studies (primarily) in English, *trans*- seems the best choice. (xiv-xv)

I have quoted this passage at length because it conveys the spirit of Allen's specifically *trans*-Indigenous framework, while also suggesting the breadth and ambition of his project. His enthusiasm here is well warranted, as he is able to follow up in the rest of the book with readings and studies that realize his spirited introduction.

Allen organizes the body of his text into two parts, "Recovery / Interpretation" and "Interpretation / Recovery," foregrounding the importance of these projects: recovering Indigenous texts from history or from dominant discourses, and interpreting Indigenous texts from Indigenous perspectives (xvi-xvii). (Part I includes Chapters 1 and 2, and Part II includes Chapters 3, 4, and 5.) Allen explains that "what holds the book together, beyond an attention to formal innovations and several recurrent themes, is a methodology of focused *juxtapositions* of distinct Indigenous texts, performances, and contexts" (xvii). As mentioned above, he intends these juxtaposi-

tions to both respect the “intellectual and artistic sovereignty of specific nations” and contribute to “an Indigenous intellectual and artistic sovereignty global in its scope” (xviii). The book’s chapters are successful in demonstrating what this intention means.

In Chapter 1, Allen studies “the 1965 special issue of the *Midcontinent American Studies Journal (MASJ)*, ‘The Indian Today,’” by juxtaposing it with a large number of comparable and/or contemporaneous texts, in a reading that is innovative and meticulously historical. In Chapter 2, Allen examines “American Indian responses to the 1976 American Revolution bicentennial observance” (xxvii), in juxtaposition primarily with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander responses to Australia’s 1988 bicentennial celebrations. This examination, too, is meticulous and broad in scope. Chapter 3 comprises a particularly stimulating and tangible enactment of Allen’s methodological vision. He reads Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday’s poem “Carnegie, Oklahoma, 1919” through three distinct aesthetic traditions: firstly, he reads the poem “as a contemporary, literary version of the kind of pictographic marker used in the customary Kiowa winter and summer counts” (111); secondly, he looks at its syllabics to read it “through understandings of Navajo worldview and aesthetics, particularly as these are expressed in Navajo weaving” (116); and thirdly, he reads it through the Māori “art of carving in wood, stone, and bone” known as “whakairo” (131). These three readings are fruitful, but also help to make an important point about audience in Indigenous literary and cultural studies:

Engaging multiple Indigenous systems of aesthetics expands our appreciation and refines our understanding of how these texts produce meaning and pleasure for multiple audiences, including multiple audiences who identify as Indigenous. In distinct but related ways, Kiowa, Navajo, and Māori conceptions of aesthetic engagement – “beauty,” “power,” and “excellence” – help explain how Momaday’s highly condensed poem both names and overcomes a contemporary anguish over Indigenous separation from ancestors, cultural traditions, and worldviews. (136)

The three readings in this chapter open up Momaday’s text in interesting ways, and I agree with Allen that this question about audience is worth asking. He contends that “the idea of multiple and multiply informed *Indigenous* audiences has not often occurred to literary scholars in the dominant academy,” and argues for a rethinking of how Indigenous literary criticism is formulated in most U.S. English departments (142).

Chapter 4 examines a number of texts from different genres and media that are linked by “the absence or presence of Indigenous language and the mobilization of literary

and artistic strategies that spotlight the power of Indigenous ‘bilingual punning’ and ‘bilanguaging’ – “bilanguaging” meaning “operating between two or more languages and cultural systems . . . within (post)colonial relations” (xxx). Allen’s work here with languages and with “visual and aural empathy” (153) is fascinating and edgy, but evinces a deep respect for the nuanced and culturally specific understandings carried in Indigenous languages. Chapter 5 juxtaposes two longer works: “the book-length sequence of poems *Blood Run* by the American Indian poet Allison Hedge Coke (Cherokee / Huron / Creek) and the book-length sequence of poems *Star Waka* by the Māori poet Robert Sullivan” (xxx). Allen focuses, with both of these texts, on Indigenous technologies in his examination of their contents and structures: “In both their explicit contents and their more implicit poetic forms, Sullivan’s and Hedge Coke’s contemporary texts emphasize waka [vessels or canoes] and earthworks as Indigenous technologies and, more precisely, as Indigenous technologies for settlement” (195). Allen carries out his readings through these technologies in order to illuminate “the focus in each poetic text on Indigenous tenacity, survival, and endurance in the face of settler colonialisms” (195). I cannot adequately describe the intricate, diligent, and imaginative readings that lead to this insight; I recommend reading the book.

Allen’s text makes a number of significant contributions, in addition to its ambitious methodological project and its surprisingly elaborate textual interpretations. He addresses contemporary Indigenous identities briefly but usefully, opening up spaces for diversely located Indigenous people and challenging the assumption that the only “‘authentic’ Indigenous writers” are those with “unbroken” connections to their ancestral “communities, languages, and cultures” (xxxii):

Whether mourned as a loss or celebrated as survivance, the realities of contemporary Indigenous identities describe multiple kinds of diversity and complexity; often, they describe seeming paradoxes of simultaneity, contradiction, coexistence. These qualities are the contemporary Indigenous norm rather than its tragic exception. (xxxii)

In suggesting the complexity of Indigenous identities, Allen looks to “harness this diversity” and to “include” in “Indigenous-centered scholarship . . . realities and representations” that are, again, “trans-Indigenous” (xxxiii). Another significant aspect of Allen’s text is the ways in which it looks to the future. His consideration of futures is central to his discussions of Indigenous identities, of literary and cultural criticism, and of “the persistence and resurgence of Indigenous peoples and cultures within the context of contemporary politics” and “intellectual traditions” (246). Allen’s gestures toward Indigenous futures are optimistic and inspiring, but also historically and culturally rooted.

Allen's *Trans-Indigenous* will be a prominent new book for readers interested in Indigenous studies, literary criticism, and cultural studies. It offers genuinely interesting methodological considerations for taking up Indigenous texts. From imagining counter-narratives to colonialism, to working for collective Indigenous activism that maintain respect for distinct tribal traditions, to allowing methodological approaches to emerge from a text's form and content, to showing how traditional knowledges can be woven through aesthetic systems, *Trans-Indigenous* is culturally rich and theoretically adept. I will allow Allen's words to close this review: "reading through Indigenous juxtapositions reveals the potential for . . . levels of complex patterning and theory within trans-Indigenous scholarship. There is much exciting work to be done" (xxxiv).

Works Cited

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