Words that Need to be Alive in the World: A Review of Neal McLeod's *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*

*Indigenous Poetics in Canada* edited by NEAL MCLEOD
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Reviewed by KELLY SHEPHERD

The striking image on the front cover of *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* is actually an oil painting by the editor himself. Neal McLeod is an academic (PhD from the University of Regina; Associate Professor in Trent University’s Indigenous Studies Department) as well as a poet and painter. He is also author of the excellent *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (2007).

Moving from the cover art to the book’s title: what are Indigenous poetics? And what makes them important? Reading with these questions in mind is one way to approach this book. Throughout the anthology, various contributing authors—emerging artists and literary luminaries alike—give their own answers. “A key function of Indigenous poetics” according to McLeod in the Introduction, “is to puncture holes in the expectations and understandings of contemporary life.” Warren Cariou, in his chapter “Edgework: Indigenous Poetics as Re-placement,” claims that “one of the important functions of poetry in an Indigenous context is to help decolonize the imagination.” “Much of Indigenous poetics,” says dub poet Lillian Allen, in her “Poetics of Renewal” chapter, “is about freedom—freeing up sounds, words, and ideas that need to be alive in the world.” And in “Learning to Listen to a Quiet Way of Telling,” Gail MacKay suggests that “Indigenous poetics reach beyond Western literary theoretical orientations” and operate “from a de-colonial impulse.” That this literal and figurative decolonization—this reaching beyond, and this freeing—is not only possible, but essential, and how it can be imagined and achieved through poetry and storytelling, is one of the anthology’s underlying themes.

Thinking of *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* section by section is another approach: don’t read it cover to cover, but treat it as a reference book and look up the subjects or authors that interest you. The anthology is divided into four sections: “The Poetics of Memory” is about the intersections of traditional or classical Indigenous literatures and poetics with those of the present day; “The Poetics of Place” section examines what McLeod calls one of the central elements of Indigeneity, the “consciousness of specific places that emerges as people dwell in specific places over long periods of time.” “The Poetics of Performance” explores the ways in which Indigenous oral traditions and literature are expressed and enacted, and finally, “The Poetics of Medicine” deals with healing collective traumas and imagining new possibilities.

There are also instances where one section, or category, seems to blend into another. David Newhouse’s chapter “On Reading Basso” for example, about American anthropologist Keith Basso recording Western Apache stories that are associated with specific physical places and landscape features—about landscape as text, and the process of actually learning to read it—might be better suited to “The Poetics of Place” category than to its current position in “The Poetics of Memory.” Likewise Susan Gingell’s “The ‘Nerve of Cree,’ the Pulse of Africa” chapter, about the intersections of Indigenous and
diasporic poetries in Canada, might just as well belong in the “Place” section as the “Performance” one. And so on. Considering the complex relationships between memory, landscape, body, and text woven throughout these twenty-eight chapters, the sections or categories begin to feel a little arbitrary. But this is not a shortcoming; instead it underlines what Warren Cariou says about the notion of categorization itself: Indigenous poetry “infiltrates the colonial aesthetic categories and shows them that there is more to art than drawing distinctions.”

But this anthology is bigger than that; I’m not doing it justice. It might be better to think of *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* as a series of conversations: writers talking to other writers. To his credit as an editor, McLeod has selected some truly diverse perspectives and opinions. From the reader’s point of view, these make for interesting exchanges to listen in on. In one lively discussion, contributors comment (not without some irony, considering they’re writing in English) on the English language. In “Kwaday Kwandur—Our Shagoon,” Alyce Johnson notes that when English became her community’s “main language of communication,” it “disrupted [their] social systems” and led to numerous problems. The English language itself is a part of the colonial project. This is echoed by other writers, for example, Rosanna Deerchild in “My Poem is an Indian Woman.” Daniel David Moses, on the other hand, in “Getting (Back) to Poetry: A Memoir” recalls that his own family used English as their primary language for at least two generations, which for him has resulted in “a feeling . . . of entitlement, not of colonization.” He even claims that English is his “native language.” There are conversations with other cultures and languages here, too: not only Anglo but French (Michèle Lacombe), Michif (Marilyn Dumont), Chinese (Joanne Arnott), and Afro-Carribean (Lillian Allen, Susan Gingell).

Perhaps the most prominent conversation going on in these pages is the one about poetics itself. This brings me back to where I started, almost back to the oil painting on the front cover: what are Indigenous poetics? For that matter, what are poetics? Do they explain the physical art and craft of writing? Should one’s poetics also represent a political stance or a spiritual belief? And at some point, don’t these things intersect? There are conversations here between poetry and traditional storytelling (Duncan Mercredi), and between literary poetry and spoken word (Janet Rogers). And conversations with places: small northern communities and urban centres, lakes and prairies, deep-time storyscapes and post-industrial landscapes. There are also conversations with other poets and authors whose writing does not appear in the anthology, but who nonetheless preside over it both in spirit and in citations: CanLit dignitaries like Jeannette Armstrong, Thomas King, and Rita Joe, and influential American writers like Vine Deloria Jr. and Gerald Vizenor. Speaking of literature, this is another approach: what books would I compare this one to? Remember Jerome Rothenberg’s 1972 anthology *Shaking the Pumpkin*? Now picture that volume as it might look if the writers (and speakers, and singers) were not just collected and curated, but instead invited to contribute their own creative memoirs and critical essays. Think of the Poetics section at the end of Gary Geddes’ *Twentieth-Century Poetry and Poetics*, minus perhaps the “Anglo-mônîyəw interpretive matrix.” Think of *The Poet’s Calling* by Robin Skelton, or even better—
because like *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, it includes the works of numerous contributors—Tim Lilburn’s *Poetry and Knowing*. What these books opened up for a whole generation (or two) of poets and scholars of literature, by focusing specifically on Indigenous Canadian artists, McLeod has succeeded in opening even wider. This is not just ethnopoetics, to use Rothenberg’s term; it is autoethnography. It’s an inside job. This is what’s happening, now. And whoever you are in Canada (or elsewhere), it is important that you’re aware of it.

The essays in *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* are about storytelling, music, and poetry. They’re also history lessons in Canadian art and literature, biographies and autobiographies of important writers and thinkers. These essays are also places: sites of memory and activism, sites of cultural (and linguistic, and spiritual) survivance.

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