Review:

Padraig Kirwan

*The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*. Ed. Deborah L. Madsen.

Routledge, London, 2016, *hb*

524pp ISBN 978 1 13 802060 3

Sixteen years have passed since Craig Womack, the Muscogee Creek-Cherokee writer, was invited to speculate about the future of Native American Literature. “More and funkier”, he replied, laconically. Womack’s retort was as prescient as it was pithy. One has only to look at the breadth of literary styles, genres and forms—as well as the sheer talent—showcased during the Library of Congress’s recent feature on Native American Fiction Writers (May 10, 2016) in order to get some sense of Native American Literature’s rude health today.

It may not be entirely fitting to describe the scholarship that accompanies much of this fine writing as “funkier”, but there certainly is a lot “more” of it. It is definitely innovative and stylish too. The strengthening of this critical output has been buttressed by the recent appearance of a number of introductory guides and handbooks which consider, contextualize, and celebrate indigenous writing. The latest of these is Deborah L. Madsen’s (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature* (2016), and it joins other insightful offerings, including *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature* (ed. Daniel Heath Justice and James H. Cox, 2014), *The Columbia guide to American Indian literatures of the United States since 1945* (ed. Eric Cheyfitz, 2006) and *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* (ed. Joy Porter and Kenneth M. Roemer, 2005).

Like those earlier works, Madsen’s collection sets out to explore the literature in the round, and the *Companion* is compiled in much the same spirit as its predecessors; it is evenly divided into key sections, which collectively offer a kaleidoscopic take on the interconnected nature of indigenous experiences and tribal artistry. Madsen’s subdivisions are: ‘Identities’, ‘Key Moments’, ‘Sovereignties’, ‘Traditions’ and ‘Literary Forms’, and there are forty one entries in the *Routledge Companion* in total (the *Oxford Companion*, by comparison, has four sections, titled ‘Histories’, ‘Genres’, ‘Methods’, Geographies’). Here, contributors fruitfully and energetically explore a plethora of topics, ranging from U.S.-Indian treaty-relations and early Native American writing and on the one hand, to digital media and literary theory on the other. This balanced treatment of material and aesthetic concerns is deeply satisfying, and Madsen’s introductory contribution, “‘The Indigenous Contexts of ‘Native.’ ‘American.’ ‘Literature’”, serves to establish the link between the literature and broader political, historical, cultural and artistic contexts. It comes as no surprise, then, that the *Companion* contains several finely judged essays that operate within the book’s thematic and organizational framework, and reveal the delicate connection between lived realities and literary imagination. These include (but are certainly not limited to) Leah Sneider’s astute consideration of indigenous feminisms in Lois Beardslee’s novel *The Women’s Warrior Society* (2008), Mark Rifkin’s extremely shrewd examination of indigenous writers’ bid to frame, resist, codify and—in the case of Elias Boudinot—possibly even consent to Indian removal during the nineteenth century, and Eric Cheyfitz’s discussion of William Apess’s *Eulogy on King Philip* and Gerald Vizenor’s *Heirs of Columbus* in relation to the UN Declaration on the rights of indigenous people, to name but a few. Just as importantly, several of the contributions examine a range of authorial responses to a particular theme, issue, or aesthetic convention.

Another invigorating aspect of several essays in the collection is the manner in which they reveal a wealth of complexity and diversity within the literature and the attendant literary criticism. As a body, these entries reflect on a great number of the opinions, traditions and debates found in Indian Country. The effect is to offer the reader a rich and dynamic consideration of the nuances that exist within the field as a whole. A good example of this is John Gamber’s comparative assessment of numerous works, including those by Womack, David Treuer and Stephen Graham Jones; this will introduce readers to different literary styles *and* some of the critical schisms that have occurred within the field (Womack and Treuer have, in the past, had rather different perspectives regarding the notion that indigenous literatures can, or should aim to, be tribally specific). Equally as impressive is the critical nimbleness with which authors such as David Stirrup and Susan Bernardin reveal what Stirrup calls the “interplay of image and text” in their essays (345). In much the same way that David L. Moore and Kathryn W. Shanley are keen for readers to find the “vibrant threads of a living, aesthetic weave” in Native American poetic expression—both oral and written—Bernardin and Stirrup call upon us to become acquainted with both “an ethics of seeing and storying experience”, and “the imaginative possibilities set into motion by the shifting forms...of Indigenous visual narration” respectively (344; 491). This is invaluable work.

Other contributions aim to widen general perception regarding Native American literature. Brandy Nālani McDougall’s dextrous précis of the “literatures and major authors of Pacific Island nations...now considered part of the United States and its territories”, and Susan Kollin’s compendious entry on Alaska Native literature are emblematic of this move. Meanwhile, Theo Van Alst Jr.’s mischievous “Film in the Blood, Something in the Eye” surely reminds us of the ‘funkiness’ of indigenous art today; like so many of the contributors, Van Alst Jr. flags the textured and multivalent nature of writing and adaptation, and argues, persuasively, for an informed and animated response not only to literature and new media, but also to inventive articulations of Native story. Essays by Kenneth M. Roemer, Birgit Däwes and others, all point towards a readiness to speedily introduce readers to the large variety of topics, genres and literary styles.

Those who wish to equivocate might, as always, find one or two things to hone in on. Although excellent in its own right, Judit Ágnes Kádár’s study of “non-indigenous passing narratives” seems slightly anomalous; it examines a slightly different set of issues and concerns. Another slight quibble might concern the fact that entries on individual authors and themes can be very brief by times. Those very slight issues are far less perturbing than the rather stultifying £140 price tag, however! Consult the library copy methinks...

Dr Padraig Kirwan,

Senior Lecturer in the Literature of the Americas,

Department of English and Comparative Literature,

Goldsmiths, University of London

Telephone: 02079197438