
Joe Lockard and A. Robert Lee, eds. *Louis Owens: Writing Land and Legacy*. University of New Mexico Press, 2019. 328 pp. ISBN: 9780826360984.

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"Time wounds all heels": so reads the title of a poem in Jim Northup's mixed-genre work, *Walking the Rez Road* (1993). In Northup's signature humored way, the quip telegraphs the reverberating after-lives of the Vietnam War. The poem's closing line amplifies this trauma by invoking intergenerational Indigenous survivance under settler occupation: "I'm a veteran of America's longest war, maybe" (154). Choctaw-Cherokee writer-scholar Louis Owens, whose formative years—and fiction—were profoundly shaped by the Vietnam War, likewise understood the challenges of surviving the "longest war." In his critical work, he named the genocidal violence at the heart of US settler colonialism while characters in his novels alternately carry its scars and bestow them on others in acts of collateral and lateral violence. Northup's title came to mind amid my own pained and lengthy reflection on the publication of *Louis Owens: Writing Land and Legacy*. More specifically, I thought of the disjunction between the far distances the field has traveled since Owens's time, and the seeming fact that Owens himself, unlike Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, has become "stuck in time." Co-edited by Joe Lockard and A. Robert Lee, the collection announces its unease with Owens's current place in the field, a sense that, closing in on a generation past Owens's death by suicide in July 2002, "there has been a gathering if still not sufficient recognition of his varied and considerable achievement" (1). The editors make it personal, adding that "one motivation for this book project was the realization that we have personal knowledge of Louis and his concerns that younger scholars do not, along with a consequent sense of responsibility for fostering discussions that he began" (7).

I am struck by what seems implicit in this statement, and what I have observed more generally: in Indigenous literary studies today, Louis Owens's creative and critical work has little visible presence. Yet in a remarkable decade that closed with his death, Owens published a monograph, five novels, and two essay collections, contributions which David Carlson in this volume rightly calls "foundational," providing "key parameters for understanding the now-burgeoning field of California Indian literature" (98). Owens's monograph, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, published in the Columbus quincentenary, was, as contributor Billy J. Stratton affirms, the "first native-authored book-length study of Native American literature" (121). *Other Destinies* traces a genealogy of Native novelists that spanned work by John Rollin Ridge, Christine Quintasket/Mourning Dove, D'Arcy McNickle, Leslie Silko, James Welch, N. Scott Momaday, and Gerald Vizenor, many of whom he also invoked in the

exuberantly trans-Indigenous orientations of his novels. This work pivoted the field at that time, making possible the kind of robust critical conversations that seeded the explosive growth of Native American literary studies in the 1990s and onward into the present. *Mixedblood Messages* (1998) and *I Hear the Train* (2001) demonstrate the range of Owens's contributions to the field of Indigenous Studies: from his critique of post-colonial theory's erasure of Indigenous frameworks in "As If an Indian Were Really an Indian: Native American Voices and Postcolonial Theory," to his succinct yet substantive interventions in settler colonial logics from the televisual to the theoretical, from the literary to the environmental. Working with the tools and terms that were common in the 1990s, Owens repeatedly made visible how US literature, art, and popular culture lent imaginative possibility to the engines of settler resource extraction, land theft, and dispossessive intergenerational trauma. Owens never saw the blossoming of the Native American Literature Symposium, nor that of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. Yet he spoke frequently of an imagined future where there would be books written by members of every tribal nation.

At its best, this collection places Owens in meaningful relation to Indigenous literary field formation while also directing us to his interventions in US literary history. Birgit Däwes, for example, frames a compelling reading of *Nightland* (1996) with generative attention to trans-Indigenous and transnational mappings. Essays by Cathy Covell Waegner and James Mackay work to place Owens in conversation with Cormac McCarthy and Ken Kesey respectively; Carlson and Stratton provide key insights into Owens's notable career-long engagement with John Steinbeck. Others generate particularly rich new readings of Owen's novels. For example, in his luminous essay on *Bone Game* (1994), David Moore delineates how Owens "plays a literary bone game, pitting mystery against mystification to dramatize deadly colonial ironies" (179). Moore also brings important attention to how Owens's always-intertextual novels directly address a cohort of Native authors who were friends or mentors, including Momaday, Vizenor, Silko, Tapahonso, King, and Welch.

Most successful in this collection is the suite of three essays comprising the "California" section which fulfills the co-editors' aspiration to provide "a renewed center" for "diffuse Owens scholarship" (7). Together, these essays situate California as source, site, and struggle for Owens, whom Carlson aptly calls a "California-rooted Indigenous writer" (98). In doing so, they brilliantly surface the confluences of Owens's biographical, environmental, creative, and scholarly lives. Chris LaLonde, a foundational Owens scholar whose book, *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns* (2002) remains vital, identifies the through-line of how Owens turned his "sharpest sight" to

the still largely unmarked genocidal history at the heart of the so-called golden state. Through his attention to Owens's short stories—including "Your Name is Night," his last published fiction—LaLonde declares that "the genocidal history of California haunts him, haunts the state, should haunt us all" (86). Carlson's standout essay, "Louis Owens, California, and Indigenous Modernism," uses the frequent metaphor of the river in Owens's novels to tell the "indigenous understory of California" (108): "There is a river of colonial trauma, so to speak, that flows under the surface of the lives of many in California" (109). There are many facets to appreciate in this essay which so deftly comprehends Owens's dual role as Steinbeck and Native literary studies scholar. Foremost, though, is Carlson's articulation of Owens's "aesthetic of Indigenous modernism" (98). Through nimble analyses of *The Sharpest Sight* (1991) and *Bone Game*, Carlson makes the case that:

one of the underappreciated aspects of Owens's work is the way that he thought through the projects of various American modernists, including Steinbeck, in order to move toward a more inclusive aesthetic and an alternative form of historical memory, responsive to his experiences as a diasporic, indigenous person of mixed heritage in California (99).

Ultimately, Carlson details how, "in working through the problems of representing indigenous California, Owens was propelled further into an interrogation of what American Indian literature might become and how it might engage with other, more problematic stories embedded in the American canon, some of which he deeply loved" (98). Stratton's essay, "Reading Steinbeck, Reading California," similarly grounds his reading of Owens in an attentiveness to the worlds and words that Owens was raised and trained in, an important reminder of the distance covered from his first seeking out Scott Momaday at UC Santa Barbara only to be told that he did not teach a class in Native literature.¹ Stratton's essay provides a layered understanding of Owens's intellectual engagement with John Steinbeck's work, which, he reminds us, extended through his career. Stratton articulates how "Steinbeck's work was instrumental in opening a window for Owens to contextualize his unsettled experience in poverty, and to consider the empowering value of his own knowledge and experience" (128).

Yet too few essays in this collection make direct and relevant connections between the "here and now" and "then and there" of Indigenous literary studies. The resulting effect is at times a puzzling decoupling from the introduction's aspiration to generate new directions in Owens scholarship. Notably, I was puzzled why the co-editors did not confront more directly and definitively Owens's part in "a number of theory controversies" (3), for example the high-profile, often personal conflicts involving

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Sherman Alexie, and Gerald Vizenor, among others. The wounds of this time, exacerbated by how Owens was put in his posthumous place by some literary nationalism scholarship, have not healed and indeed underline Owens's lack of critical recognition today. Individual contributors take it up with mixed results, as it were: some essays seem from a different time, such as when we read Alan Velie's statement that "most of the great contemporary Indian writers are mixedblood: Momaday, Welch, Silko, Vizenor, Erdrich, and Owens..." (170). Or when Joe Lockard's discussion of scholarly divisiveness around the analytic category of "mixedblood" derails from its lack of familiarity with Indigenous Studies touchpoints and frameworks. There is still work to be done to situate Owens's approach *in his time* without veering into defensive or celebratory gestures, which several essays do here. What might we say, for instance, beyond the biographical, for why Owens, like others in his generation and before, focused on metaphors of blood? Chad Allen's crucial work would be helpful here in thinking through what he terms the "blood/land/memory complex" to consider Owens's work in relation, for example with Momaday's "memories in the blood" and Welch's "winter in the blood."

Elsewhere in the volume some contributors note an unfinished reckoning with the roots and reach of Owens's articulations of identity and ancestry. In a footnote, David Carlson writes that Owens's "own critical reflections on 'mixedblood' writing are much more complex and nuanced than they are often caricatured" (118); Billy J. Stratton powerfully underscores how

Owens's deeply personal and often poignant exploration of the complexities of his own family history, detailed in *Mixedblood Messages* and *I Hear the Train*, give voice to an enduring sense of duty to the active sense of presence and agency of all of his relations from Oklahoma to Mississippi. These are kin that he acknowledges and honors simply as "human beings who loved one other while crossing borders and erasing boundaries and, despite immeasurable odds, *surviving...*" (133).

John Gamber extends Stratton's attention to the complexity of these lived histories of diaspora and survivance by considering anew the critical debates over key analytics in Indigenous literary studies at the turn of the twenty-first century. These debates, often framed between tribal nationalism and cosmopolitanism, hinged on conceptions of identity (especially the use of the term "mixedblood"), belonging, and home. Gamber thoughtfully revisits an earlier essay, revising his understanding of how Owens's final novel, *Dark River* (1999), provides a nuanced reading of belonging, community, and modes of tribal national "naturalization" (270). As his essay aptly details, Owens's protagonist, Jake Nashoba, is a "cautionary antihero who demonstrates potential

flexibilities in belonging and citizenship primarily by failing to recognize or partake of them" (270).

Gamber attends to how Nashoba's "confusion over the land, his desire to experience it alone in the broadest sense of the term, reflects a misconception that Owens himself experienced" (284). In doing so, Gamber opens the door to what I see as another missed opportunity in this collection: to place into conversation Owens's deep engagement with Indigenous epistemologies of the environment with contemporary Indigenous scholars such Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Kyle Powys Whyte, and Robin Kimmerer. As Gamber points out, "Owens contended with these ideas of the solitary male human out in the wilderness long before he published *Dark River*" (285). Indeed, Owens turned to the "Burning the Shelter" story again and again, polishing its meanings like a stone. How might that story shape our readings of his novel *Wolfsong*, first written in 1975, and finally published in 1991? James Mackay views the ending of *Wolfsong* as "validating an essentially selfish romantic and spiritual vision in which redemption will happen through individualized, context-less spiritual renewal" (156). But I wonder how that reading edges against Owens's critiques of his protagonists? More broadly, how might essays in this volume respond to Owens's concern with land dispossession, treaties, and the "lie" of the Wilderness Act? Owens claimed that *Wolfsong* was a response to depredations in the North Cascades in the 1960s by the Bear Creek Mining Company, in violation of the Wilderness Act of 1964. Owens once said to me that "It's just like every other treaty that's been signed with the Native American." The infamous Hamms's beer sign that travels from *Wolfsong* to *Sharpest Sight* to *Dark River* (and which is insightfully discussed in Gamber's essay) was Owens's favored trope for the toxic brew of settler colonialism, masculinity, whiteness, and wilderness thinking. Like "Burning the Shelter," Owens turned again and again to this sign to serve as an unsettling sign of settler colonial epistemologies. That "motionless sign" (*Dark River* 48) of a lone white man forever paddling a canoe in a land emptied of Indigenous peoples, served for Owens as a powerful visual metaphor for the perils of being stuck in one place of thinking, in one way of being. Let's not consign Owens's creative and critical work to scholarship that does not *move* us.

Time wounds all heels. The book's powerful two-part coda, poems by Diane Glancy and Kim Blaeser, attests both to the long wake of grief and to the intergenerational continuity of the words and worlds Owens spun into being. May the dedication of *Other Destinies*—"for mixedbloods, the next generation"—serve as urgent invitation to revisit his work anew. His gracious and generous note to the future merits our wider

listening. In their introduction, Lee and Lockard acknowledge a still “wide-open field for Owens studies” (7). I could not agree more.

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Notes

¹ Louis Owens shared this story of first meeting Momaday at UC Santa Barbara many times. Here is the version I was told: “I immediately went to see Momaday, because I was so excited to find out there was an American Indian teaching on campus, even though he was teaching American romanticism and Emily Dickinson. That was really my awakening. It was the first Indian novel I had ever heard of, and I asked Momaday what the other ones were, and he didn't know of any. So I started doing research on my own at that point. I started turning the library over, and I found other books by Indian writers.”

Works Cited

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