

explorations



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REVIEW

Joanna Ziarkowska. 2021. *Indigenous Bodies, Cells, and Genes Biomedicalization and Embodied Resistance in Native American Literature*. New York and London: Routledge. Małgorzata Poks. 2024. *Decolonial Animal Ethics in Linda Hogan's Poetry and Prose. Toward Interspecies Thriving*. New York and London: Routledge.

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Native American literature continues to develop and evolve. It is even possible to speak of a new Renaissance of American Indian studies, despite the recent restrictive activities on the part of the U. S. federal bodies. There is a constant inflow of critical surveys and monographs dealing with both traditional themes and contemporary issues faced by Indigenous communities. The Native American canon – including such authors as N. Scott Momaday (whose *House Made of Dawn* is a foundational text), Louise Erdrich, Joy Harjo (the first Native American U.S. Poet Laureate), Leslie Marmon Silko or Sherman Alexie – is being constantly updated and reconstructed. New configurations and critical maps appear. To take just one example: the work of Zitkála-Šá (1876-1938), a Yankton Dakota writer and political activist, was brilliantly re-evaluated and re-edited by the late Tadeusz Lewandowski whose 2016 *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkála-Šá* (as well as his 2018 edition of Zitkála-Šá's letters and speeches) virtually discovered the Indian writer to many readers.

Speaking about the contributions made by the Polish Americanists, one must not ignore two new important books by Joanna Ziarkowska (*Indigenous Bodies, Cells, and Genes. Biomedicalization and Embodied Resistance in Native American Literature*, 2021) and Małgorzata Poks (*Decolonial Animal Ethics in Linda Hogan's Poetry and Prose. Toward Interspecies Thriving*, 2024). Published by Routledge in its *Research in Transnational Indigenous Perspectives* and *Studies in World Literatures and the Environment* series respectively, both monographs are definitely worth reading. They also demonstrate how many critical and interpretative perspectives are opened when we begin reading Native Americans attentively and without prejudice.

Joanna Ziarkowska's *Indigenous Bodies, Cells, and Genes* looks at the way(s) Native American writers have reacted and react to biomedical discourses operating in the contemporary Western world. As it is, and this constitutes the starting-point of Ziarkowska's book, modern Western medicine is informed by and connected to oppressive discourses of power which in their turn are associated with patriarchy, racism and capitalism. Not surprisingly, Native American communities "resist the reductivism of

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biomedicine that excludes Indigenous (and non-Western) epistemologies and, instead, draw attention to how illness, healing, treatment and objectives of genetic research are socially constructed and dependent on inherently racist thinking" (Ziarkowska 2-3). The examples of both biomedical oppression and resistance to such oppression are presented and analyzed in the book's eight chapters that are further grouped into four complementary parts. In the two opening chapters we have a critical exploration of how the XIX-century scientific discourse about tuberculosis led to the racially based theories of Indian susceptibility to the disease. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the historical and social factors influencing high diabetes rates (and health disparities in general) in Native American communities. In the next two chapters Ziarkowska investigates the controversies over genomic research, particularly stressing the notoriety over the examination of the genetic samples obtained from Indigenous people. Finally, in chapters 7 and 8, she examines the influence of biotechnologies on Native American bodies as well as lives, and investigates the effects of biomedicalization of psychiatry. Importantly, each theoretical exposition is informed by the analyses of selected literary works, from Louise Erdrich's novel *LaRose*, Sherman Alexie's poems and short stories, LeAnne Howe's *Miko Kings: An Indian Baseball Story*, Linda Hogan's autobiographical writings, to the poetry of Heid E. Erdrich and Elissa Washuta's essays in *My Body Is a Book of Rules*.

In a short abstract placed at the very beginning of her book Małgorzata Poks describes her study as a "plea for an urgent redefinition of human-animal relations on the basis of a nonanthropocentric animal ethic embraced by premodern Indigenous communities but depreciated by coloniality." This is a symptomatic statement. Here and elsewhere Poks advertizes her work as not only a critical monograph but also a personal declaration and a political appeal, and I think we should be aware of this fact when we read the book. At the same time, *Decolonial Animal Ethics in Linda Hogan's Poetry and Prose. Toward Interspecies Thriving* is an engaging and convincing interpretation of Linda Hogan's literary texts. Poks (whose Polish translation of Hogan's memoir *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* was published in 2021) reads them in the context of the visionary (and perhaps somewhat utopian) "interspecies cosmopolis" described by Eduardo Mendieta in his 2024 book *The Philosophical Animal: On Zoopoetics and Interspecies Cosmopolitanism*. This in itself implies "decolonizing human-animal relations" as well as "dismantling of the myth of (white) hu/man supremacy" (Poks 10). The Polish scholar finds such imperatives in Hogan's works. Understandably, she limits her interpretations to the motifs and themes announced in the title of her study. Thus, Hogan's poetry, analyzed in the first part of the book, is perceived mainly through the prism of human-animal relations, with the pride of place given to the poems about animals: turtles, coyotes or frogs. According to Poks, animals are for Hogan "correlates of Indigenous America's painful history as well as of her childhood when the future poet lived in a loving larger-than-human community" (46), and the reader will easily see her point. From the debut collection *Calling Myself Home* (1978) to *A History of Kindness* (2020) Hogan gave expression to her intimate and discreet bond with the animal world. Poks concludes: "restoring awareness of the humanimal bond, recognizing her nonhuman relatives as endowed with the same emotions, needs, vulnerabilities, and cognitive abilities as humans, Hogan offers intimate glimpses of the interspecies community she has established with her animal companions, a community sealed by bonds of love, care, respect, and gratitude" (123). Similar sentiments are articulated in the second part of the

book. Its four chapters deal with Hogan's novels: *Mean Spirit* (1990), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, *Solar Storms* (1995), *Power* (1998) and *People of the Whale* (2008). The Polish critic describes them as "historical" and "activist," and recognizes in them serious attempts to "rewrite history from the underside of modernity and give voice to the silenced" (31). The novels are of course embedded in Indigenous America's traumatic history yet the writer's focus is rather on "healing and survival" (127). Poks leaves us with this positive note.

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