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Fictions of Authority; or Editing a Cambridge History of Native American Literature

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For a Native studies scholar who studiously avoids definitive proclamations about the nature of our field or procrustean taxonomies of its artistic productions, editing a *Cambridge History of Native American Literature* was a prospect both formidable and a little thrilling. How, I wondered, could I maintain my conviction about the strained, even dangerous incoherence of such a canon; resist its detention as a subclass within a settler construct; and still present it as a vibrant tradition worthy of curation, distinction, and appreciation? It was a seductive challenge.

Just as I had begun contemplating such a charge, the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC launched a stunning exhibition called “Americans.” In an unprecedented assembly of the Indigenous images that constitute the veritable wallpaper of American culture, most arresting was its staggering evidence of Indigenous branding in the consumer marketplace, used to sell everything from “baking powder, insurance, bottled water, pop

music, guns, [and] ice hockey” to “America itself.” The extraordinary volume of images on display at NMAI was discomfiting to viewers, haunting proof of an ongoing coloniality that we fail to own or often even to see. The exhibition also entreated its viewers to breach the superficial by revising the nation’s bedrock histories and mythologies, and rejecting its facile narratives of victimization in favor of penetrating intimacy and complicity. Could – and should – a *Cambridge History* perform the same sort of work?

In an essay that I use and quote habitually, the late Choctaw-Cherokee author and critic Louis Owens critiques the phenomenon of “literary tourism,” and the particular appeal of the Native American literature classroom as a “colorful, easy tour of Indian Country.” Owens, both a novelist and a faculty member at various institutions, had grown fatigued by teaching students who had signed up for what they hoped would be an ethnographic survey of an exotic but somehow friendly species. Indeed, the American fascination with its Indigenous cultures is at least as old as the nation itself, inviting vision quests into apparently mystical, radically “other” cultural landscapes. But everything looks more inviting from behind the glass, as it were, a shield protecting our most engrained romantic fictions from the warping realities of settler colonial and racial capitalist histories, where the nation’s cherished mythologies and identities lie fatally entangled. For various reasons, simultaneously self-defining and self-defeating, America prefers its Indians to be stoic, static, humble, heroic, and comfortably alien. Owens contends that “crossing conceptual horizons can be, and in fact should be, hard work.” According to the Ojibwe author David Treuer (also one of the stellar contributors to this *History*), there is simply no way for any of us to undo centuries of “exoticized foreknowledge” about Indians: the engrained mystifications and misapprehensions borne from precious little information and a surplus of ideological invention. As both scholars and artists, we constantly run the risk of recycling rather than restyling the cultural narratives that have for so long reproduced perniciously, at home and abroad, and even in Indigenous communities and narratives themselves.



An interview with Melanie Benson Taylor, Ed of the Cambridge History of Native American Literature

As I pondered all of this, I was also beginning a new monograph of my own – in some ways, a regional and literary version of the NMAI’s “Americans” show. In *The Indian in American Southern Literature* (Cambridge UP, 2020), eventually written and published in the shadows of the editing of the *History*, I argue that the U.S. South has functioned frequently as a microcosm of the nation’s suppressed truths. It is also, habitually and uncannily, a strange mirror and a register for the Indigenous experience, both local and national. Indeed, the literature of the region simply brims with unquiet Indigenous ghosts that say more about the fragility of southern and American identity than anything at all about Indians. This seems to be what we do expertly not just in the South but in America broadly: we draw borders both cartographic and conceptual, defining ourselves in contradistinction to the others whom we simultaneously desire, fear, and reject. At the bottom of the white heteronormative American ideal is a suppressed archive of black and red bodies, labor, lives, and land. Most of my own scholarly work lingers over these absences

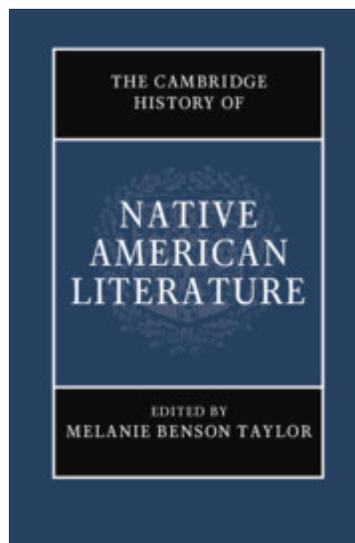
and aporia in the American narrative, and exposes the ideological images and identities summoned to mend and disguise the gaps. Fictions of origins, fictions of identity, fictions of authority.

What *The Cambridge History of Native American Literature* represents, finally, is not another feint of illusive authority but a sustained act of witness to the unsettled indeterminacy, unruly multiplicity, and the stubborn capacity of Indigenous America's various traditions to evolve and persist doggedly, often irreverently, in and alongside the disfiguring gallows of national becoming. Its contributors are as motley as the tribes and genres under examination, offering a dazzling assortment of backgrounds and expertise. And, in an act of editorial irreverence of my own, I offered the volume's final words to two of the keenest voices in our field, neither one a literary scholar per se but both attuned shrewdly to the weighty architecture and alienation of the contemporary Indigenous experience: Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), co-curator of the aforementioned "Americans" exhibition, and Stephen Graham Jones (Blackfoot), the prolific author of dozens of strange, surreal, and visionary works of Indigenous fiction. The result is a *History* that subverts expectations of all kinds: in the sobriety and the sweep of its disclosures, in its subjects' resignations and refusals, and in its collisions of multiple modernities. But it is deeply inspiring for all of those reasons, too, and in the fortitude and futurity of its uncontainable voices and visions, sharing space primarily in order to unsettle it.

Louis Owens, "Multicultural Tourism: Native American Literature, Canon, and Campus." *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998. 42-47. p. 42.

Ibid.

David Treuer, *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2006), 25.



The Cambridge History of Native American Literature By
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