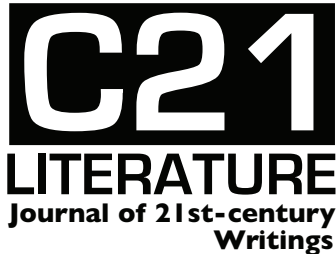




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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Book Review: *Shapes of Native Nonfiction: Collected Essays by Contemporary Writers*, Edited by Elissa Washuta and Theresa Warburton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019). ISBN 0295745754, Hb £79.00, Pb £23.99, 302 Pages

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If you pick up *Shapes of Native Nonfiction*, you will find an anthology of twenty-seven dazzling and distinct essays by Indigenous authors from Canada and the United States. The writers hold forth on a range of diverse topics from writing and species extinction to physical and mental health, colonisation, and trauma in diverse ways through the creative essay form. In this nonfiction anthology, form and craft take centre stage, with form providing the binding theme. In their scholarly introduction, the editors – Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz) author of two collections of creative nonfiction, *My Body is a Book of Rules* (2014) and *Starvation Mode* (2015), and Theresa Warburton a settler scholar in American Studies and English at Brown University – look to the handwoven basket as a central object of orientation. Drawing parallels between the weaved basket and the written form, Washuta and Warburton accentuate the nature of both as simultaneously utilitarian (both baskets and narratives transport/hold material) and as objects of creativity and expertise. The creativity of Indigenous authors, they argue, has been and is still overlooked by readers of

Native writing. The basket analogy thus serves to function as a corrective in the field of Indigenous literary studies by paying special attention to form. Thus, the focus on skill and creativity in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* resists the 'colonial demand for factual information about Native life' through Indigenous writing (6). In this regard, the anthology is part of an emergent body of work that is driving change in Indigenous literary criticism. Other notable compilation texts in this category include *Introduction to Indigenous Literary Criticism in Canada*, a scholarly collection of critical essays on Indigenous literary criticism edited by settler scholar Heather Macfarlane and Anishinaabe scholar Armand Garnet Ruffo (2016).

In addition to the basket analogy, the editors strive to go beyond metaphor, declaring that they 'see the basket not as a metaphor for this collection but rather as a structure (or form)' (5). Accordingly, the editors divide the collection into four sections named after elements of basket making – technique, coiling, plaiting, and twining. The structural divisions refer respectively to displays of writing craft (technique), seamless (coiling), fragmentation (plaiting), and flexibility (twining). There is a significant mismatch between the introduction, which is written as a piece of academic writing, and the rest of the anthology. If you only read the introduction, you would be forgiven for thinking that *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* is an academic textbook. And this scholarly introduction might prove off-putting to general readers who come across the collection. For students and academics, however, especially those who may be new to Indigenous writing or who have historically read Native writing as an ethnographic document, it provides a useful reminder to read for formal innovation and creative skill. With that said, scholarly caution is not necessarily needed as the writers themselves deftly handle the subject of a culture of literary criticism where critics and students read for information on Indigenous lives.

One author who handles the topic particularly well is Blackfeet Horror writer Stephen Graham Jones. His list essay 'Letter to a Just-Starting-Out Indian Writer—and Maybe to Myself', which addresses an imagined Indigenous reader, is beneficial to non-Native readers too who can learn much from this imagined communication (31). In his advice, Jones addresses the issue directly, saying: '*Understand that a lot of the time when your work is discussed, the question being asked about it isn't necessarily*

*going to be Is it good?*' (33). Jones takes the issue beyond that of the editors who focus on historical ethnographic lenses by bringing it into the concrete and familiar space of the contemporary literary studies classroom. In this space, he says, well-meaning liberal critics, students, and professors engage with Indigenous writing 'to focus attention on peoples and cultures and issues and crimes and travesties' rather than on artistry (33). He highlights one impact of the trendiness of Indigenous studies, arguing that instead of asking whether the work is good, the student or critic automatically assumes the quality of the work because it is written by an Indigenous person, and "'Indian means good," which is another way of saying "authentic is good"' returning critics, students, and scholars to the ethnography trap and ignoring questions of form and craft (33).

In the body of the collection, the first section, 'technique' is the shortest segment, containing five essays. Therein, Tlingit writer Ernestine Hayes writes about the role of land and environment in both ancient oral and contemporary forms and Stephen Graham Jones, as discussed above, deploys the list form to offer writing advice to an imagined Native writer. Creek author Chip Livingston in 'Funny, You Don't Look Like (My Preconceived Ideas of) An Essay' makes valuable connections between the formal qualities of the lyric essay (suggestiveness and fragmentation) and the ability to portray grief and trauma. He writes that the lyric essay is an 'appropriate form for those difficult-to-write-about moments, like grief' where wordlessness is an essential element of the experience (49). Livingston's discussion on the expressive capacities of essay forms coupled with segments of his creative work would provide a useful short essay to help creative writing students think about form and content. Other authors in technique include Diné poet Bojan Louis who employs his experience attending a childhood writing workshop to explore the colonised mind and Sasha Lapointe, Tacoma author and poet, who pens a beautiful reflective essay that combines memories of her MFA studies with passages from her memoir that work together to explore the experience of dissociation. These essays are 'craft essays' and are connected by a shared focus on being a working writer, making many of them useful for students of creative and life writing (17). The delineation between these essays as craft and the other sections as illustrative of different qualities is a somewhat flimsy demarcation.

The structuring of the collection in this way is perhaps the biggest weakness of the anthology since it does not create meaningful or useful categories for those navigating the essays.

The 'coiling' section contains seven essays and refers to texts that 'appear seamless' (17). Formally, these essays are 'generally not fragmented in their approach, are constructed using transitional gestures that unify content far ranging in time, place, and meaning' (17). One notable essay comes from Cree poet Billy-Ray Belcourt titled 'AND SO I ANAL DOUCHE WHILE KESHA'S "PRAYING" PLAYS FROM MY IPHONE ON REPEAT'. This vivid essay is written in all cap locks and fuses poetic techniques with the essay form in such a way as to express vulnerability, urgency, anxiety, and desire through a stream of consciousness mode. Belcourt explores how dating white men can be akin to a kind of mental self-harm and he links this harm to a period marked by half-hearted attempts at reconciliation with the Canadian settler state ('I THINK THE PRIME MINISTER IS GASLIGHTING ME', 104). In 'plaiting', there are six essays that use material from a single source, usually the author's experience. According to the editors, the plaiting essays demonstrate fragmentation as opposed to the seamlessness of the writing in 'coiling'. The Haisla/Heiltsuk author Eden Robinson is perhaps the most well-known author in this section and her humorous essay shifts topics with such skill that the transitions, although marked by line breaks and asterisks, feel almost imperceptible due to their subtle thematic interconnections. Again, on the subject of technique, teachers of creative writing will find Robinson's essay a valuable exemplar of how to employ cohesive narrative fragmentation. It would be remiss not to mention another essay in this section: Adrienne Keene's (Cherokee Nation) 'To the Man Who Gave Me Cancer'. Keene's essay is a powerful narrative essay about health, gender, race, and anger. Keene, having developed cervical cancer from undiagnosed human papillomavirus, tells a story in parts. Through fragmentation she is able to weave what happens to her (diagnosis and surgery) with her affective experience. She includes emphatic standalone paragraphs that weave together issues of culture and health, like 'I can't imagine a scenario where a white cis man would be asked to endure this type of procedure with just an intake of air' and a 'pre-colonisation world wouldn't have let this happen. A

matriarchy wouldn't have let a virus that is so destructive to women go unchecked because it causes no symptoms or harm in men' (140; 145). Fragmentation here is deployed to create potent connections between health and care, settler colonialism and the patriarchy.

The final section, 'twining' is by far the largest holding nine essays. According to the editors, the distinctive quality of these essays is that they draw from different source materials, often uniting personal experience and research. An exceptional essay, and deft example of twining, is the essay 'Caribou People' by Inuk and Haitian Taíno poet Siku Allooloo. Allooloo twists the themes of Indigenous cultures, extraction, species extinction, and settler colonisation with such ease to reveal how the issues – often viewed in isolation – belong together as a joint thread. Allooloo conveys statistics by portraying them as speech: 'They say the Bathurst herd was 350,000 strong that year. Difficult to imagine now, twenty-four years on, when they are down to a mere 15,000' (175). This has the effect of making the knowledge seem intimate thus strengthening the associations Allooloo makes between Dene and Inuit communities and the caribou that sustain their lives and cultures. As Allooloo writes, 'We are caribou people ... Dene and Inuit peoples would not exist without the caribou' (179). By combining personal experience with research Allooloo constructs a personal-factual account of species extinction, pollution, and resource extraction showing how these scourges impact the way of life of Indigenous peoples.

There are many excellent essays contained in *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* but there are some that are difficult and inaccessible. Overall, the collection is a much-needed showcase of contemporary Indigenous writing talent that illustrates the diversity of Indigenous experiences and nations, as well as the connections between peoples with shared experiences of trauma and ongoing anti-Indigenous policies. *Shapes of Native Nonfiction* provides an accessible way for students, critics, and scholars interested in contemporary writing to discover brilliant and innovative Indigenous writers working today. The shortness of the essays and the breadth of themes makes the anthology a brilliant place to find material for use in the classroom. Those who teach creative and life writing courses may find that many of the craft essays offer exciting examples of formal playfulness. Strong themes that may be

of interest include climate issues, such as pollution and extraction, as well as physical and mental health, all of which are wonderfully portrayed through a variety of formal mechanisms in several of the essays contained in the anthology.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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