Introduction: What Was Native American Literature?

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“Literary terrorism is preferable to literary tourism.”—Louis Owens

In 2011, Kenneth Warren alarmed many literary scholars with his provocative monograph What Was African American Literature?, which suggested that the genre had effectively ceased to exist. An epiphenomenon of Jim Crow politics, born from a consolidated assertion of racial camaraderie and political will specific to a critical moment in twentieth-century American racial history, “African American literature,” Warren argued, no longer had the same unifying character and purpose. For some, dismissing the presence of or the need for African American literature in a climate of enduring racial inequity seemed akin to disbanding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). But as Walter Benn Michaels (2011) explains, Warren’s thesis “consigns African American literature to the past not because it seeks to deny the existence of ongoing racial inequality but because it wants to question the politics of our commitment to overcoming it.” In other words, Michaels argues, “It’s not that racism has disappeared; it’s that anti-racism can make much less of a contribution to ending poverty than [say] rebuilding the union movement might.” Following Warren, Michaels and others encourage critics to shift their emphasis from the reductive, colonially constituted contours of “race” to the messier prism of class—the primary valve through which racial injustice is filtered and sustained. “By acting as if race is the thing that matters most,” Michaels avers, “we make it worse.”

There is no definable “Jim Crow moment” for the Indigenous cultures of America, but a seemingly interminable period of negotiating their “separate but (un)equal” status within American geographical and juridical spaces; and while “race” is a construct inapplicable to the cultural and legal markers of
Indigeneity, nonetheless Native identity has steadily been enfolded into the US’s broader racial filters and metrics. More is at stake here than recognition: many tribes remain determined to recover or sustain their legal status as nations, and such efforts logistically require a demonstration that “authenticity” is viable; that tradition is inviolable; that while its traces may be faint, they are nonetheless durable and flexible; and ultimately, that any expression of Indigenous survival is preferable to silence or acquiescence. Indeed, while “Indianness” may be a colonial construction, it remains the fragile foundation upon which contemporary Native existence often hinges. Similarly in African American culture, as Warren (2011, 106) says, a “dream of unity” subsumes the actual diversity of Black lives today. As Erica Edwards (2011) suggests, “Perhaps theorizing more deliberately the persistence of African American literature as the object of our desire will help us better understand how power, race, and reading communities function in the post-civil rights era to deconstruct and reconstruct African American literature through and against the upheavals of time.” More incisively, she wonders, “can we understand ‘African American’ to be an unstable signifier that names both a possibility and a problem, or, in Evie Shockley’s words, an ‘anchor’ and ‘the troubled sea’?”

These are precisely the terms and conditions by which Native American literature demands to be understood: as an “object of desire” constructed by both an American reading public and by Native peoples themselves — proof of life for the “possibility and problem” of America’s first peoples. As both the record of and rationale for a settler construct, Indigenous literature is uniquely embattled: existing within institutional and mainstream contexts as a neat subset “necessary for the subsumption of Indian identity in the national metanarrative,” as Choctaw critic Louis Owens (1998, 45) puts it, individual tribal literatures nonetheless exercise radically divergent visions about what constitutes “authenticity,” sovereignty, and even literature. Above all, their texts are a site of political struggle, shifting to meet expectations both mainstream and traditional, and are thus beset permanently by paradox: simultaneously primordial and postmodern; oral and inscribed; outmoded and novel; quixotic and quotidian. In truth, there is no such thing as “Native American Literature.” This Cambridge History thus takes up the daunting task of surveying the long tradition and enduring possibilities of Indigenous literature in a settler-colonial context, even as it questions the ideological integrity and future of a field so named.

In setting the contours and selecting the topics that follow, I have thus been guided by the conviction that Indigenous literatures cannot be defined
in any simplistic, static, or sovereign way, nor can they be removed from the fluid and often messy dynamics of their imbrication in US national politics and polities. For this reason, the title elects the term “Native American” over the timelier “Indigenous” – although the chapters themselves adopt various iterations to describe this oceanic soup of identities, and I have purposefully chosen not to standardize them. As a whole, though, the collection of perspectives here acknowledges a specifically Native American field of experience. The use of “Indigenous” as a signifier throughout expands our gaze to consider the motley Native communities worldwide, brought into political focus in part by the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Accordingly, this volume embraces the prospects of comparativist, transnational, and “trans-Indigenous” methodologies, particularly in chapters by Chadwick Allen, Eric Cheyfitz, James Cox, and Sophie McCall. Broadening our purview to include similar imperial situations – along with the political identities and literary subjects that emerged out of compatible processes of state-making, contingent upon imperial processes even as they resist them – provides useful cross-cultural perspective and fresh methodologies. The precision of interrogating local contexts remains vital, however, and an inaugural Cambridge History might best begin on primal territory which, however arbitrary and contested, exists matter-of-factly as defined and defining space for Native American individuals and communities. This approach does not entail a facile reproduction of the common center/periphery model, with Native production merely swapping positions with that of the “colonizer.” Instead, as Carolyn Sorisio (2006, 12) notes, we acknowledge that “the metaphor of center and circumference remains inadequate,” and that the study of Native literatures demands a more nuanced appreciation of the heterogeneous polities actively constituting the New World. In this way, the structure of the volume focuses on US national space but is not centered upon it – an important distinction. Indeed, many of the chapters – especially Sarah Rivett’s and David Treuer’s – suggest that Indigenous subjects have always been agentic figures in these projects. Indeed, they demonstrate in different ways that canonical American literature itself emerges alongside and in explicit, generative contact with Indigenous languages, literacies, and histories.

As these chapters repeatedly attest to the contingencies of colonial production, a new map of American literary history comes into view – one in which both mainstream and marginalized literatures are born together at the fractious join of imperial collisions. Just as the logic of the settler state is fueled primarily by economic incentives and principles, so too is the lifeblood
of Native American literary production unavoidably ideological. On the whole, critics have done little to reflect on what those interpelled forms announce and conceal. Economic approaches to Native American literature are comparatively rarer than ethnographic approaches, despite the realities of Indians’ permanent entanglement in colonial-capitalist structures. Nearly thirty years ago, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz wondered “How is it that Indians are rarely considered workers?” even in the face of persistently gloomy statistics attesting to entrenched markers of unemployment and poverty among American Indian communities (quoted in Cheyfitz 2017, 217). Critics are beginning to reflect on this evasion, which can in large part be explained by logical forces of cultural optimism and exceptionalism. Here, I have endeavored to include scholars, such as Benjamin Balthaser and Eric Cheyfitz, whose work explores the complex dynamics of Indigenous integration into modern, global capitalist economies. Parker’s opening reading of Leta V. Meyers Smart’s “On a Nickel” – a 1921 poem featuring an Indian speaker wryly confronting a buffalo or “Indian head” nickel – deftly captures the ideological bind of Native subjects both stamped by colonial-capitalist culture and striving to appraise and reflect on it. Later in this volume, Shari Huhndorf explores a similar dialectic in Louise Erdrich’s Shadow Tag, a novel that shuttles between “real” and fabricated journals (the former stored significantly in a bank’s safe deposit box) and refuses to adjudicate neatly between their competing truths: ultimately, the story of the protagonist’s life “stays entangled in the same colonial narratives that the novel aims to subvert.”

While few of the chapters directly address the economic conditions of Indigenous textual production, the structural framing and periodization of the volume reflect the fertile tensions between US capitalist-driven development and the transformation and representation of its Indigenous cultures. The chronological sections that follow attempt to bracket the successive, accretive epochs of contact, extermination, relocation, assimilation, citizenship, termination, and civil rights of the last two centuries and more – each period underwritten explicitly by the nation’s developing material ambitions, and disrupted consistently by the needling, indomitable voices of its original, inexterminable peoples.

Most Native American literary histories acknowledge scant production before the fertile, triumphant output of the 1960s and 1970s – a period dubbed the ”Native American Renaissance” by Kenneth Lincoln. In his chapter here, A. Robert Lee examines and expands the politics of this periodization. Critics have had a more difficult time locating and interpreting texts from the earlier, tumultuous periods of nearly constant assault and upheaval: these are what
Deleuze and Guattari might call the “murmuring spaces” of history, where Indigenous subjects are repeatedly suppressed but incompletely silenced. To be sure, history’s concatenations had devastating effects on Native populations, whose lands and lives have remained at the epicenter of national development long after the destructive reverberations of contact. As historian Walter Johnson has demonstrated, the pivotal process of removing southeastern tribes in the 1820s and 1830s was integral to the explosion of the Cotton Kingdom and transatlantic commodity markets, which in turn fed the economic boom of the 1850s. Following the Civil War and the nation’s avid commitment to Western expansion and industrial development, Indian tribes were again targeted and relocated to reservations. Legislative maneuvers like the Dawes Act of 1887 and the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 attempted to restructure the process by which Native peoples were enfolded into the spaces and practices that defined the American relationship to land and property rights, streamlining a national populace and program of uplift. While the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 briefly restored and supported the sovereignty rights of individual tribes, the government once again muddied its position and pursued a policy of termination throughout the middle of the century. By the time the countercultural and Civil Rights movements of the 1960s filtered to Native groups, impelling the pan-tribal organization of the American Indian Movement (AIM), Native Americans had survived numerous protracted and confused iterations of transition, loss, and recovery.

As the scholars assembled here demonstrate, Native writers have responded to such events with dramatic diversity: most maintain an intractable devotion to the particularities of Indigenous lifeways, even if that means Indigenous culture itself at times becomes a fetish; others embrace the trajectories of modernity in ways that ironically enable tribal continuity. Most betray a thorny mixture of both perspectives, either cannily or unwittingly. As Parker reminds us, intercultural syncretism was “routine” throughout early America and manifests strikingly in both the stylized and the unguarded poetry of many Indian citizens, suggesting that the angst of “mixedblood” experience preoccupying later Renaissance-era literatures is at least in part a by-product of America’s severe racial codes and histories. The challenge for critics has been to navigate these texts as both overt political proclamations and at times ambivalent sublimations of deeply vexing conditions and transformations. Academic attempts to shore up an intellectual tradition are often, and understandably, inextricable from ongoing efforts to protect tribal sovereignty and recognition; the conjoined pursuit of politics and scholarship has proven both vital and fatal to charting a coherent pathway through Native artistic production.
It is thus crucial, at the outset of this History, to acknowledge the patterns and politics of reading that variously mimic or distort the complex realities expressed and constructed by the texts themselves. Both the creation and the circulation of recognizable tropes matter because together they constitute a phenomenon that Ojibwe writer and scholar David Treuer (2006, 25) refers to as “exoticized foreknowledge” – the presumptions about Indian identity that have become common intellectual property for most US citizens, generally despite actual knowledge of Native histories and individuals. More acidly, Comanche critic Paul Chaat Smith (2009, 6) asserts that “the tacky, dumb stuff” invented about Indians by non-Natives has become “the real thing now.” Such expectations predetermine not just the reception but the very production of Indian texts, in which pan-Indian tropes and traits frequently overwrite discrete tribes’ particular ways of thinking, knowing, and enacting their indigeneity. A striking example occurs routinely in the stage performances of the North Carolina Band of Cherokee, whose long-running theater production Unto These Hills features members of the eastern woodlands tribe garbed in Plains Indian regalia and war bonnets – historically inaccurate but culturally resonant items that appear more strikingly “Indian” to Anglo audiences bred on Hollywood westerns. After decades of exercising this dramatic license, reportedly many of the tribe’s children have grown up believing that the fiction is reality – that the glammed-up pageantry is indeed a faithful rendition of their own tribal history. As one of the Cherokee performers knowingly admits, “we’re in America, man, and we have to survive. And I will do anything to help my family survive” (Friedland 2009, 121).

“Survive” is indeed the mantra of much Native literature and its criticism. More pointedly, Anishinaabe critic Gerald Vizenor (1999, vii) adopts the term “survivance” to emphasize active survival over mere subsistence: “Survivance is an active sense of presence,” he writes, “the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry.” LeAnne Howe’s concept of “tribalography” further accentuates the agency underpinning Native literary production, which she places at the genealogical nucleus of US culture, rather than the reverse. These terms are invoked regularly throughout the chapters that follow, along with the indispensable “sovereignty” – a concept vital to the understanding of Native cultural productions. Jodi Byrd’s essay in Part IV provides a full genealogy of both the term and the notion as it emerges from the colloid of colonial-capitalist

1 I discuss this phenomenon in greater detail in Taylor (2012, 128–31).
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histories. These keywords are essential to a field always already under pressure and under construction, though they are not unproblematic. Jared Sexton (2014, 593) – a professor of African American studies – recently called for reappraising the possessive underpinnings of sovereignty:

If the indigenous relation to land precedes and exceeds any regime of property, then the slave’s inhabitation of the earth precedes and exceeds any prior relation to land – landlessness. And selflessness is the correlate. No ground for identity, no ground to stand (on). Everyone has a claim to everything until no one has a claim to anything. No claim. This is not a politics of despair brought about by a failure to lament a loss, because it is not rooted in hope of winning. The flesh of the earth demands it: the landless inhabitation of selfless existence.

Such a call has not been received without controversy in a field rooted in land-based ethics, attentive to Native texts that dynamically inhabit the physical landscapes where tribal identities have been forged and foreclosed, and where extended kinship networks fasten one to precise places and people. While Byrd and others both explore and critique such fruitful new territory/ies throughout this volume, the task of unraveling the politics of production and interpretation from the multifarious substance of the literature itself remains formidable, and perhaps illogical. Further complicating this pursuit is the fact that, at a rate unmatched in any other field, Native authors frequently also function as professors and critics, as evidenced by the eclectic bibliographies of several contributors here. The parallel pursuits of creativity and critique thus converge repeatedly throughout, and these conjoined practices occasionally dramatize the farce of “critical distance” as well.

Surveying “Indian Style”

If anything thus binds the plurality of Native American literatures across vast geographies, temporalities, and distinctive cultural experiences, it is the protracted experience of negotiating settler state histories and their multifarious afterlives. As editor, my guiding philosophy has aimed not to canonize but to interrogate the very idea of “Native American Literature,” and in refusing to essentialize it, to thus actively subvert another act of rhetorical violence. Consequently, this volume endeavors to capture and question the plural, capricious, and contested character of both Indigenous texts and our habits of evaluating them.
An instructive example of this misprision is evident in both the existence of and the critical response to Plains Indian ledger art – a unique body of visual narratives produced mainly by tribes of the Great Plains and Southwest during the Indian Wars and Greater Reconstruction. While its themes draw wistfully on older pictograph traditions and subject matter – updated versions of winter counts, or meticulous depictions of military and domestic life – they are executed with novel materials, methods, and attitudes. Most notable is the introduction of paper in the form of bound account books or ledgers, acquired mainly through trade or raids, and sometimes from the looting of dead soldiers’ belongings. These texts are still mostly new to and little understood by literary critics, but one theme has so far been strikingly consistent: the presumption that these drawings constitute vital artifacts of resistance. Images of a culture arrested, they illustrate world-shattering transition and obligatory assimilation while somehow managing to defend tribal particularity and tradition in striking, defiant strokes on and over the invasive surfaces of enemy paper – and not just any paper, but specifically the ruled pages of account books used to tally military and agency purchases, to record debits and credits in clear and unerring strokes. As Anna Blume (1996, 40) puts it, “Native Americans would draw over this space of foreign calculations, thereby transforming the nature of their own drawing and the ledger book itself, creating a middle place, an in-between place, in a place of writing . . . as part of the process of their own interpretation and survival.”

Such exegesis is seductive, but incomplete. The narratives that the warrior-artists sought to superimpose on these balance sheets were often inextricably enmeshed in traditional economies of acquisition, making their drawings less antagonistic reactions to an alien form than complex responses to assault, recorded on the most appropriate medium for their grievances and fantasies of recompense. Indeed, many Indian tribes had long flourished on the basis of productive partnerships and exchange economies with early traders. This base of mutual benefit, rather than strictly of cooptation, often directly facilitated the broader project of American expansion and industrial development.2 Not all tribes were as commodity rich or intimate with traders

2 Take what historian Ross Frank terms the “fictive kinship” between the Southern Cheyenne and American trader William Bent, without which “the entire history of the United States must have been different. In 1846, Bent’s Fort became the staging depot for the Mexican War. Consider the difficulties the American commander Gen. Winfield Scott would have encountered had the Cheyennes been hostile to American troop movements through their country. There could have been no depot, no possibility of a supply line, and no chance of an American victory. Nor would young American officers like Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee have received the field experience in
(as, for example, the Southern Cheyenne), but by the mid-nineteenth century there existed almost universally among disrupted Indigenous nations a savvy understanding of the marketplace and a keen interest in profiting from it. And yet, as anthropologist Morris Foster (1992, v) explains, neither Indigenous nor Anglo scholars have been willing “to treat explicitly the economic bases for [Plains] warfare.” Consequently, the notion of an archetypal, pre-reservation past free from Western and capitalist influence has become an ossified “ideal that was not part of historical time” (vi). Historian Bernard Mishkin (1992, 8) has meticulously exposed the character of early Plains economies, where wealth was rooted not in cash but livestock, particularly horses—a vital form of early currency that he says simply “cannot be exaggerated” (8). The briefest survey of the available ledger drawings held in collections today would affirm this centrality, as the vast majority contain prominent depictions of horses. It is the idea of the horse, ultimately, that lifts off the page as a kind of fetish object; and the ledger in fact becomes an utterly fitting vehicle for recording not just what was lost, but what was desired: not simply a narrative of impoverishment, but an embellished fiction of recompense.

This acknowledgment matters, because it fundamentally complicates our view of the seemingly straightforward drama on the ledgers’ pages, and particularly how we decode their scenes of flagrant violence. In many, white settlers are shown in the moment of being killed, their bodies often garnished with vivid sprays of blood. When horses and weapons repeatedly share ledger space, the juxtaposition is not only mimetic but conceptual: these are primary, colonial-capitalist symbols working in tandem within an increasingly violent and embattled economy. Sweeping scenes of battle sometimes overwhelm the frame of the page, with the action in the center moving centripetally outward in the form of peripheral muskets, bullets, and truncated horse parts, suggesting dynamic narratives that exceed the available boundaries of time and space. Other drawings are more spare, with their scenes of battle distinctly displaced or deferred.

In such renditions, there is no visible enemy but only its ghostly revenant; the action of the scene is marginal, speculative, fragmented, and once again, Mexico which prepared them for the roles they would play two decades later.” But the relationship was not merely one-sided: for the Southern Cheyenne, it “brought vast advantages too: a plethora of European trade goods including firearms, wool, cotton and silk cloth, colorful Mexican blankets, glass beads, mirrors, brass bells, brass and iron cooking kettles, and resident blacksmiths available to forge any type of blade. It was like being married to the Sears, Roebuck Company. The Cheyennes were the best dressed and best armed people on the Southern Plains because of it” (Frank n.d.).
fetishized. Taken together, such drawings offer an apparent materialization of anti-colonial angst, a bold collection of textual retaliations against imperial and ideological incursions, particularly after the possibility of tangible resistance had evaporated with the so-called closing of the frontier circa 1890. Yet while we may be anxious to read the spectacular eruptions of representational violence as pointed, self-satisfying depictions of actual or imaginary retribution, we might miss the more systemic, specifically economic violence already pervading American Indian life and warfare, captured in the unassuming and yet deeply disturbing images of masterless, bodiless horses. The drawings’ persistent emphases on other trappings of wealth and status underscore this preoccupation, as in some artists’ depictions of a warrior’s elaborate possessions: the vivid scenes of battle are gone, but the residues left behind are nostalgic recreations of extravagance lost or never yet achieved.3

The shift in interpretive emphasis here is subtle, but its implications are profound. More and more, literary scholars are turning attention to these drawings as powerful narratives of this under-recorded epoch in American Indian history, but are mostly peering through the same restrictive, bifocal lenses of race and identity. In an examination of the Black Horse Ledger—famously “corrected” by an unknown artist or owner who meticulously obliterated and replaced all signs of Indian aggression or victory over whites (changing slain settlers to Indians, and drawing teepees over houses) – Becca Gercken’s analysis turns on speculation over whether it was a “white” person or an Indian who made the alterations. She is right to question the impulse to meddle with the historical record, but the terms of her inquiry limit our answers: she refers to the drawings as “history” and their maker as a “warrior-historian,” implying that the artists were capable only of ethnographic reportage and not complex imaginative play or manipulation. More importantly, she proposes that if a white person made the changes, he or she was fundamentally skewing the narrative of Indian resistance and power; if the editor was an Indian, the implications are “both more and less troubling.”

3 For vivid examples of many of the drawings described here, see the Hood Museum (Dartmouth College)’s Mark Lansburgh collection: https://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/search-collections?piction_obj_name=Ledger%20Drawing&piction_photos_only=1; see especially Untitled (Short Bull Raiding Five Horses), page 32, from a Short Bull notebook, about 1885–90; Untitled (Two Wounded Horses Hitched to a Buckboard), page 92, from the “Vincent Price Ledger,” late nineteenth century; Untitled (An Innuitana (Arapaho) Warrior Fires Back at Soldiers), page 138, from the Vincent Price Ledger, about 1875–78; Untitled (A Formation of U.S. Soldiers in Battle), page 139, from the Vincent Price Ledger, about 1875–78; Untitled (Membership Payment by a Tsistsistas (Cheyenne) Bowstring Society Warrior), page 101, from the Old White Woman Ledger, about 1880–90.