



James H. Cox. *Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. xiv + 338 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3679-0.

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Published on H-AmIndian (April, 2007)

## A Cup of Water

James Cox takes the title of his book from Sherman Alexie, for whom “white noise,” the static that remains on a television after broadcasting ends, represents “the oppressive noise of white mass-produced cultures, the loud demand to conform to the invader’s cultural belief system or be destroyed” (p. 11). Cox takes “white noise” to signify a broad history of colonial domination and erasure, which Alexie and the other novelists he considers write to resist. The introduction to Cox’s book, “A Cup of Water,” states his purpose to demonstrate how Euro-western and Euro-American literary and popular narratives, which almost always “culminate in the absence of Indians” (p. 13), support ongoing colonial dominance and produce real-world consequences for living Indians; and to explore the strategies used by some contemporary Native fiction writers to intervene in these colonial narratives of conquest, to render them powerless and suggest that “conquest, as imagined by non-Native authors, did not take place” (p. 18). Cox argues that his study “implements Osage scholar Robert Warrior’s proposal ... that, in any scholarship on work by Native authors, the ‘critical interpretation of those writings can proceed primarily from Indian sources,’” (p. 4); thus he intends to avoid “academic colonialism” by privileging the voices of Native writers in his own interpretations (pp. 4-5). If reality is constructed by stories, and if, as Greg Sarris observes, “In oral discourse ... no one party has access to the whole of the exchange.... [O]ne party’s story is no more the whole story than a cup of water is the river” (quoted, p. 16), Cox wishes his own “cup of water” to resist the narrative flow that justifies domination and to “nourish” new plots for Native people (pp. 16-17).

Chapter 1, “‘Them There Writin’ Folks Is Dead Easy Pickin’’: Colonial Texts in Novels from John Rollin Ridge to D’Arcy McNickle,” lays the groundwork for Cox’s analyses of contemporary authors by examining the ways that a number of early Native novels—particularly Yellow Bird/John Rollin Ridge’s *Joaquin Murieta* (1854),

Alice Callahan’s *Wynema* (1891), Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea, the Half-Breed* (1927), and D’Arcy McNickle’s *The Surrounded* (1936)—integrate colonial texts such as letters, government documents, wanted posters, newspaper accounts, memoirs, and frontier romances into their fiction in order to expose their function as “as tools of domination” (p. 26). Cox also offers a creative reading of McNickle’s *Wind from an Enemy Sky* as a retelling of Genesis to conclude that “colonialism itself is a text” (p. 53) and that critical textual analysis is, for these early Native authors as well as more contemporary ones, an important act of decolonization.

The three central chapters of Cox’s book provide more detailed readings of fiction by Thomas King, Gerald Vizenor, and Sherman Alexie, for whom Cox sees the revision of colonial narratives as a strategy central to their work. Chapter 2, “‘There Are No Truths, Coyote ... Only Stories’’: The Origins of Domination and Liberation in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*,” examines King’s extensive rewriting of the foundational national mythologies of discovery, Judeo-Christian origin stories, and seminal American literary texts—particularly Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*—in order to “replot the sacred and secular narratives that promise the doom of Native Americans” (p. 69). For King, Cox argues, “storytelling [is] a primary site of colonial conflict” (p. 61) and King’s “pan-Indian revision of these storytelling traditions ... is a direct challenge to colonial authority, as well as a reminder to colonizers that as long as the grass is green and the waters run, only *their* stories end in domination and doom” (p. 99).

Chapter 3, “‘Freedom from the Word’’: Gerald Vizenor’s Worlds beyond Text,” investigates *Bearheart*’s interventions into the mythologies of Western emigration, Manifest Destiny, and “regeneration through violence” (quoting Richard Slotkin, p. 113), and Vizenor’s “dis(re)membering” of Columbus and colonizing narratives of discovery in *The Heirs of Columbus* (p. 125). Cox

examines the way *Heirs* is “contextualize[d] within a Native written storytelling tradition” (p. 125) to explore the liberating potential of written as well as oral storytelling. He concludes that “Vizenor revises not to condemn or vilify Columbus but to insert Indigenous peoples into colonial histories” (p. 130) and suggests that “to survive and thrive” in a world of colonial domination, we must all engage the stories that support both Euro-western and Native worldviews, “not turn our backs and walk away from the story that we do not like or believe” (p. 135).

In an especially persuasive fourth chapter, “Muting White Noise: The Popular Culture Invasion,” Cox elucidates Sherman Alexie’s work as illustrative of the damage done to Indian self-esteem and ability to self-define by mainstream popular culture narratives about Indians. Focusing primarily on *Reservation Blues* and *Indian Killer*, Cox demonstrates Alexie’s exposure of the ways that “happy multiculturalism” (p. 167) and romantic narratives of Indian wisdom and harmony with nature, just as much as negative stereotypes, serve to silence Indian grief over historical and personal loss and foster violence against self and others in Indian communities. Entering the debate over the identity of the Indian killer, Cox argues that the real killer is “the widely disseminated, non-Native storytelling traditions that contain reductive and exclusive non-Native definitions of Indians” (p. 192). Countering critics who find Alexie’s fiction itself destructive in its representations of damaged characters and communities, Cox reads Alexie’s work as “nourishing” Indian sovereignty (p. 196) through its exposure and rewriting of colonizing narratives. The final chapter of Cox’s book, “Unmaking the Conquest: Red Readings of the European American Novel Tradition,” returns to the nineteenth century to offer “red readings” of Indian presence and absence in several early novels in this damaging narrative tradition, including novels by James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Brockdon Brown, William Gilmore Simms, Robert Montgomery Bird, Susanna Rowson, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Lydia Maria Child, and Herman Melville. In an interesting discussion of novels by Jack London and Frank Norris, Cox shows how the naturalist tradition “twice doom[s]” Indians by erasing them from both history and landscape (p. 238).

*Muting White Noise* offers an often interesting, readable foundation, supported by excellent close textual readings, for examining real-world implications of non-Native fiction about Indians and for studying what Arnold Krupat and Michael Elliott term “anti-colonial resistance” in Native American fiction.[1] Cox’s close readings and his careful illumination of intertextual references in the novels should prove very helpful to both

teachers and students. Particularly useful are Cox’s discussions of lesser-studied nineteenth-century novels by both Native and non-Native writers. As Cox acknowledges, he writes most confidently about mainstream American literature, and his “red reading” of *Moby Dick* and examination of narrative interventions into Melville’s novel by N. Scott Momaday, Louis Owens, Louise Erdrich, and Thomas King are fascinating, a rich area of cross-cultural negotiation that deserves to be developed more fully, perhaps in a separate book. I understand that Cox placed his chapter addressing European American novels, including *Moby Dick*, at the end of his book in order to develop his method of “red reading” first in relationship to Native texts, but I think the coherence of the study as a whole would have benefited from placing this chapter on European American narrative traditions first as a basis for better understanding Native writers’ interventions into them.

Cox does at times become tediously repetitive, and he sets up a number of expectations for the reader that are not fulfilled. Though he opens his study by stating an intention to implement Warrior’s and Womack’s ideas, he barely mentions them again beyond the introduction (nor issues of nationalism and intellectual sovereignty central to their work): Warrior appears in a single footnote and Womack only briefly in Cox’s discussion of *Wynema*. Cox quotes liberally from Native scholars such as Kimberly Blaeser, Louis Owens, Vine DeLoria, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Gerald Vizenor, George Tinker, and others, but never fully engages the indigenous intellectual traditions they contribute to. Though he references Warrior, Womack, and Kimberly Blaeser’s arguments that “familiarity with native cultural beliefs and practices is not only desirable but also necessary for an informed reading of Native literature,” on the same page he states his own “desire to avoid a discussion of culturally specific beliefs and practices with which I have little, no, or only textual experience” (p. 5). Furthermore, Cox quotes Womack’s admonishment that “Native literatures deserve to be judged by their own criteria, in their own terms, not merely in agreement with, or reaction against, European literature and theory” (p. 4), yet he confines his interpretations to Indian novelists’ rewriting of European American narratives of conquest, those stories that Cox “can speak confidently to” (p. 6). Thus he ultimately defines the texts he considers solely in terms of their relationships to colonization, undermining his own admirable intentions and keeping his narrowly delimited “cup of water” isolated from the larger stream of American Indian literary criticism and the theoretical debates that inform it.

## Note

[1]. Arnold Krupat and Michael A. Elliott, "American Indian Fiction and Anticolonial Resistance," in *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States*, ed. Eric Cheyfitz (New York: Columbia

University Press, 2006), 127-182. This essay, which surveys a wide range of contemporary American Indian novels within a framework that considers three main streams of critical emphasis—nationalist, indigenist, and cosmopolitan—could offer useful contextualization for Cox's study.

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**Citation:** Ellen Arnold. Review of Cox, James H., *Muting White Noise: Native American and European American Novel Traditions*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13022>

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