

Wabigoon River Poems

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Groulx, David A. *Wabigoon River Poems*. Neyaashiinigiing, ON: Kegedonce Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-928120-01-8. 58 pp.

[I]t was 1967-69 when I was asking around for Indian poets. Indian poets? You mean poetry written by Indians, right? . . . Well, I knew of the young poets at the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA) beginning to barely surface in the modern world . . . [such as] James McGrath and his wife, T.D. Allen. . . . [There was] Joy Harjo . . . Leslie Marmon Silko. . . . But other than that, there were no poets. Nothing. I mean literally nothing. (Ortiz 39)

Half a century after the era described by Simon Ortiz, Indian poets are no longer an endemic curiosity of the literary world. Contemporary Indigenous North America boasts not only an abundant and multifarious poetic production¹ but also a growing number of publishers dedicated to its development and dissemination, both of which strive to (re)define Native literary aesthetics in the increasingly dynamic and relational global context. One such publishing house is *Kegedonce Press*, a Native-owned and operated independent press based in the traditional territory of the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation at Neyaashiinigiing Indian Reserve in Ontario, which is one of the three established Canadian Aboriginal publishers and the only Aboriginal publishing company committed to publishing Indigenous poetry and promoting it both nationally and internationally (*Kegedonce Press*).

One of *Kegedonce's* latest titles, *Wabigoon River Poems* (2015) by award-winning author, David A. Groulx, comprises 39 poems, some of which were previously published in *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, *Ricepaper*, *About Place Journal*, *The Trillium*, *One Throne Magazine*, and *Black Heart Magazine*. Like Groulx' previous *Kegedonce* collections, *The Long Dance* (2000) and *Under God's Pale Bones* (2010), from the very first page *Wabigoon River Poems* absorbs its reader in a unique poetic architecture that masterfully integrates the vehement force of the living word with a compact *in medias res* style. The poems, largely unified by mood, tone, and the free verse form, are arranged into two sections—*Part One: Pallor Mortis* and *Part Two: Wabigoon River Poem(s)*.

Pallor Mortis is braided from three dominant structural-thematic strands—poems charged with personal emotion, such as the beautiful poem “Food for Moths” and “On Seeing a Photograph of My Mother at St. Joseph Residential School for Girls,” decolonization poems, and epigrammatic environmental verse. Ironically titled “Higher Intelligence,” “Global Warning,” and “Blind Man’s Eye,” poems from the last group sharply warn of impending ecological cataclysm and humanity’s self-destruction:

We are so smart
we've learned how to
melt the great ice
above and below the world
to flood it again

¹ As recent scholarship has demonstrated, written evidence to the rich tradition of American Indian poetry goes as far back as the 1670s (see Parker 4).

and rid it of ourselves (“Higher Intelligence” 3)

They paint an apocalyptic vision of a wasteland in which “rusted razors” carve the burning land that has been raped by a people convinced of their preordained destiny “to make / life into a commodity / to make earth into / property” (“Blind Man’s Eye” 12) whose “perverted life” and false sense of superiority continues to entrap them in their “repulsive imagination” (“Blind Man’s Eye” 12).

The same vision resurfaces in the poem “Kiss,” which replaces the “rusted razor” metaphor with that of “the abortionist’s hook”—“an inhospitable kiss” that “stuffed us back into the womb” (“Kiss” 14)—invoking the horror of coercive sterilization practices, a method of systemic annihilation of Indigenous peoples used by colonial powers all over the world. The dehumanization of Aboriginal people, historical amnesia, and the omnipresent residue of institutional racism are further addressed in “Sketch of a Small Town.” Both the poem’s language and its imagery shatter the illusion of homeliness evoked by the title as from a remote Whiteman’s gaze perspective the speaker imparts the news that a Native boy was hanged by his playmates during a cowboys and Indians game in his small town in Ontario: “. . . The police cut down / the body / and he kicked a bit / like a pony” (“Sketch of a Small Town” 8).

In piercing, precise strokes, several poems in the first section foreground the question: *What are Indians?*:

We are the aftermath of
an apocalypse

the remnants of a holocaust
that began in 1492

We are the dust of a great storm
that has not yet settled

We are soldiers after the war

Survivors of a death camp . . . (“What are Indians?” 1)

The same question reappears in the poem “I Know What an Indian Is.” Repeatedly referred to in inanimate terms, “the Indian” is identified as a dehumanized, colonially imposed configuration:

An Indian is the creation
of a subhuman
by an act
of government (“I Know What an Indian Is” 15)

Satirically subverting the imperial paradigm of civilization, the poems “Hobbesian Notions” and “Why Are They Called White People” answer the same question by deconstructing the concept of Whiteness:

If the Whiteman thinks
Indian lives were
“nasty brutish and short”
before he came

He should see them now (“Hobbesian Notions” 2)

Why are they called White people
and not immigrants
colonists
settlers
or
killers
or
kidnappers
or
thieves (“Why Are They Called White People” 9)

The second section, *Wabigoon River Poem(s)*, introduces a different, albeit thematically related, set of poems. Supplemented by as many as 126 endnotes, it explores the topics of oppression, freedom, and injustice through densely intertextual, opaque verse, revealing the author’s admirable erudition and acute awareness of imperial practices across space and time. This part of the collection maps a comprehensive diachronic geography of oppression perpetrated by “people [with] hell in [their] hand and heaven in [their] mouth” (“Wretched Red: I” 20) on all parts of the planet—from the Congo, South Africa, Ghana, Somalia, Nigeria, Haiti, Guinea, Argentina, Guatemala, Venezuela, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Palestine, Qatar, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Bosnia, Croatia, Hungary, Greece, and Spain to the small Sagamok reserve in Western Ontario. As a result, it provides a broad platform for rumination, targeting not only Native or Anglo-American/Canadian readers—as is confirmed by the Endnotes, which also explain terms such as Tecumseh (52), Custer (52), Pontiac (54), Geronimo (54), and Métis (55)—but also an eclectic worldwide audience that subsumes both cosmopolitan intellectuals and a simply curious, semi-informed readership. Poems in this section are not (just) exclusively Indigenous, or postcolonial, or protest poetry; they are above all human. Groulx’s creative imagination leads us through abysses of suffering and despair, as it breaks down the concepts of race, religion, and nation, testifies to a universal experience of entrapment in Western civilization’s materialistic overtures, and upholds a shared strife for liberation from the confines of historical injustice. It echoes the cry of the subjugated and the dispossessed whose lives have been torn apart by bigotry, structural violence, and ethnocide (“Wretched Red: III” 26). In a centrifugal sweep, it fuses the fate of Ontario Aboriginal communities ravaged by mercury poisoning with victims of Oświęcim concentration camp and Wounded Knee massacre. Transcending the boundaries of space and time, it crafts a space in which Ho Chi Minh, Sitting Bull, Geronimo, Che, Pontiac, Leonard Peltier, and Simon Bolivar stand together in fight against a man-eating

war god fed by Western scientific and philosophical ideas of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel, Rousseau, Hayek, Tocqueville, Ploetz, and Gobineau.

Yet, despite the macabre mood, some poems of this section weave a thread of hope. The persona in “Wretched Red: II” is not only the one who perceives the horrors of oppression but also the “one who remembers” (“Wretched Red: II” 24) and nourishes the healing power of word. Simultaneously, using paratextual tools, the poet positions himself as a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants, the one whose work merely follows in the footsteps set by intellectual bards of liberation such as Fanon and Achebe, whom he often credits at the beginning of his collections.² Groulx’ “celebration of influence” (see Blaeser 144) further extends to memorable resistance heroes and dissidents—Ojibwa warrior and poet, Waubojeeg, Tecumseh, Pontiac, Pope, Toussaint L’Ouverture, José Rizal, Larbi Ben M’Hidi, Breyten Breytenbach, Warsame Shire Awale, Daniel Varoujan, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Miklós Radnóti, Dennis Brutus, Mohammed al-Ajami, and many others who are referred to in the poems and the Notes. Even though the last poem, “Reckoner (Addenda),” condemns the possibility of humanity’s regeneration on its present civilizational foundations, it also calls for change, as do the poems “Wretched Red IV” and “V”: “. . . Rise / Rise / The world is waiting” (“Wretched Red: IV” 27); “. . . howl / to be free men / Amen” (“Wretched Red: V” 29). One of the final poems of the second section, “Ceremony,” shares the same tone, as it repeats not only the title but also the closing *Blessingway* pattern of Leslie Marmon Silko’s famous novel. Whereas in *Ceremony* the “witchery” returns “into its belly” and vanishes by coming back on itself (Silko 261), “Ceremony” celebrates the return of the ancestors, ancient prophets, the buffalo, and the traditional ways, discarding settler civilization’s disposable customs: “Our men will return / eat from bowels / and bowls to be thrown away / they will return, *blessingway*” (“Ceremony” 42).

Except for some minor typographical and factual errors, *Wabigoon River Poems* is a superbly crafted collection of verse. Its powerful, relatable imagery proves not only that in this time and day Native poetic voice is alive and thriving but also that the perspective it conveys, received with interest and appreciated worldwide (Croatia, in my case), is invaluable to understanding and envisioning our world.

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² This volume is framed with a famous quote from *Things Fall Apart*: “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”

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