

David Treuer's Search for Extremely Indian Fiction

David Treuer, *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*
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Review by Granville Ganter St. John's University

With friends like David Treuer, Native America hardly needs more enemies. The controversial thesis of his book is that Native American literature does not exist. For Treuer, writers work with text, and their skin color, religious belief, or sex is irrelevant to the magic they perform with words. Treuer, who is himself Ojibwe, is a talented fiction writer and academic who amasses an impressive amount of evidence to make his case. His tone is confident, almost smug at times. He is well aware of the assault he is making on identity politics, and he is deliberately calling out those who claim that the fiction of Leslie Marmon Silko is "authentically" Indian. Well, if he wants to bring it on so badly, he should do a better job.

Treuer's argument rests entirely on close analyses of style and form. In his opening case study of the fiction of Louise Erdrich, Treuer demonstrates that Erdrich writes with literary strategies taken straight from the modern fiction writer's playbook, not from some occult form of Indian blood knowledge. For Treuer, Erdrich's wickedly sharp style comes from "Western" techniques like dramatic intercutting and the use of concrete symbols. He buttresses his case by showing off his own knowledge of Ojibwe (both Treuer and Erdrich have Anishinaabe heritage) and complaining about Erdrich's errors, pointing out that her characters can't even ask for a cigarette properly in their own Indian tongue (he does not consider that Erdrich might deliberately have her characters

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Granville Ganter
is Associate Professor of English at St. John's University. His research focuses on early nineteenth century orators, including Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the Seneca orator, Sagoyewatha (Red Jacket). His current work deals with women's oratory and education.

misspeak). While criticizing Erdrich's storytelling for lack of book learning, he reprints a short Ojibwe folk tale about Wenabozho, a trickster figure. In this version, a man asks Wenabozho where to find some "smartberries." Wenabozho has him follow an animal path, eating the smartberries he finds along the way. They turn out to be rabbit turds, which is Treuer's metaphor for what we are eating when we seek to commune with Indian identity by reading the fiction of Louise Erdrich.

In his examination of the Wenabozho story (which, because he translates it for us, he suggests is 100 percent Indian), he looks for stereotypical Indian motifs that Erdrich has been credited with employing, such as multiple points of view, a deep respect for nature, etc. He finds none of these things. Instead, Wenabozho stories have a timeless setting, and no discussion of the characters' motivations. Presumably, these characteristics of a trickster cycle are what make Indian literature extremely Indian, and Erdrich's novels lack them. By hewing to his idea of Native literature-as-folk-anecdote, Treuer would probably find Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart* the most Indian novel ever written, but he has little to say about Vizenor. Treuer also does not consider that other traditional Native literary genres, such as council speeches or ritual chants, may offer a different definition of Native literature than trickster tales do. Treuer in no way wishes to disparage Erdrich's work itself—he obviously admires it greatly—but he works hard to show it is certainly not Indian. Later sections do the same thing to James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and others. Treuer goes to great lengths to talk about texts, not authors, but his argument is that these texts are certainly not Native literature, even though they were written by people of Native descent.

In one of Treuer's most compelling chapters, he helps us to understand why one of the greatest Indian hoaxes of the twentieth century passed the test of authenticity with most readers: Asa Forrest Carter's 1976 novel, *The Education of Little Tree*. That novel describes the experience of a Cherokee orphan, taken from his bootlegging Indian grandparents and put in a callous "gumint" school. The book was sold on reservations and celebrated by Native academics for over a decade as a moving portrait of what it was like to be Indian. The problem is that everyone ate the smartberries and thought they were delicious. As Treuer notes, the book was actually written by a disgruntled Klansman whose buddies were responsible for bombing dozens of Birmingham churches in the late '50s, and who himself wrote George Wallace's 1963 inaugural speech which bragged, "segregation today ... segregation tomorrow ... segregation forever." Later, after losing his own bid to run for governor of Alabama, Carter disappeared and resurfaced in the early '70s, claiming some vague form of Cherokee lineage, and started writing Native fiction. Carter simply channeled his own anti-government hatred into an Indian character's experience. (Fans of Clint Eastwood's engrossing film, *The Outlaw Josie Wales*, may be somewhat dismayed that Carter also wrote that novel,

whose anti-government philosophy is still quite palpable in the movie.) Whatever Carter's moral shortcomings, he was a good enough writer to make people believe that he was the genuine article.

As Treuer argues, Carter simply wrote by deploying stereotypes in creative and accessible ways. For Treuer, no Indian novelist writes any differently, and he indicts Sherman Alexie, in particular, for his early works that trafficked in the same stereotypes as Carter—Alexie's sin is describing how miserable life can be on the reservation. It's too bad that Treuer puts Alexie's astonishing syntactic economy in company with Carter's tendency to write nostalgic romances, but this chapter asks very difficult questions of those who are drawn to Native fiction as a means of spiritually bonding with the Other.

The problem with Treuer's argument is that it is doctrinaire American formalism, circa 1950, and he shies away from the tough questions where form and culture become hard to separate. His formalism comes from two places. First, the scholarship he cites is straight out of the heyday of New Criticism: T.S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks and R.P. Blackmur. New Criticism taught the valuable lesson of looking purely at form for understanding what makes a given piece of literature distinctive. For the New Critics, it does not matter if Shakespeare was a lesbian Latina of color with a hoop in her nose and rad tats all down her backside—the choice of words in the plays are what make that literature distinctive. Study the sentence structure, the paragraphing choices, the connotations of words' relationships to other words, and you'll get at a large amount of what makes literature worth reading. True enough.

But there are more sophisticated formalisms, too, such as that of Mikhail Bakhtin, who demonstrated that forms inhabit the novel like voices, and they are always "talking" to other forms, both inside and outside of the text. For example, the voice of the evil nun, Leopolda, in Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, is juxtaposed against the speech of the narrator, much to the discredit of the Catholic sister (and eventually to the narrator herself). I'm sure Treuer would cry "exactly!" at this moment, arguing that it is the arrangement of form in innovative ways that makes a novelist successful.

But a few more turns of the screw reveal something else too: those voices and structural elements in the novel are always implicitly derived from other previously read texts and from the world outside of the novel. Familiarity with the language of priests, of lawyers, or farmers is what makes a formal departure from those norms so charming. And further: if all human expression is a matter of forms and codes, then even what Treuer takes to be "authentic" Ojibwe literature—the Wenabozho story, for example—has no intrinsic claim to origins beyond its form, and that supposition is not only absurd, it's insulting to people whose literary traditions derive from specific social contexts like religious and political ritual, or

community storytelling. As Bakhtin helps us see, formalist analysis is not merely the study of codes and forms bounded by the single text under discussion; it requires a *cultural* understanding that those literary forms are a *part* of politics, society, culture, the whole thing.

The second problem with Treuer's reductive formalism is that, at several points in his book, he conflates fiction and literature, assuming that the critical apparatuses we use to discuss fiction are as good for understanding literature in general. The title of his book, *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, emphasizes that he is primarily talking about *fiction*, but his broader claim is that words, like money, do not carry marks of their immediate origin. As a professor and practitioner of fiction, perhaps he can be forgiven the influence of his vocation—he obviously lives and breathes fiction as if it were the dominant form of Literature in the universe. As he should be aware, however, the number of poems and novels published by Native Americans is fairly insignificant in terms of the larger scope of Indigenous literary arts in general. Rituals, chants, stories, not to mention non-fiction literatures, like Native-authored political speeches, journalism, philosophy, criticism, and polemic: these genres convey Native philosophies, stylistics of expression, and modes of being which probably would strike most people as unarguably "identity" grounded.

Which genre is the most Indian: the council speech, the folk tale, the poem, or the novel? It is a ridiculous question, but the answer that Treuer seems to give is: "the genre whose authors are long dead."

The backstory of Treuer's manifesto is a twenty-year long debate in Native American studies about identity and authenticity. Particularly since the early 1990s, there has been extensive name-calling in Native circles about the proper path forward in Native studies: a renewed tribalism or nationalism? how about plural Indian nationalisms? a trickster hybridity? more self-definition or less? Both Devon Mihesuah and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (former editors of influential Native studies journals) have argued that Native American programs should focus on studying law, sociology, and politics, not on constructions of identity via literary criticism. Mihesuah wrote an exasperated column announcing she did not want to publish any more articles on Indian fiction, and Cook-Lynn has argued that reading Native novels is not going to make anyone's life better on the reservation. Predictably enough, other voices have complained that being Indian is more than mouthing the dogmas of sovereignty. In the late 1990s, Louis Owens disagreed strongly with Cook-Lynn that her political views entitled her to speak as the real Indian, wondering how his "mixed blood" ethos could find a place in Native America. The question still remains: where and how shall Native identity be expressed and fostered?

Treuer's disappointing answer seems to be that we're not going to find real Indians in novels. The same could be said for any text (understood as a two-

dimensional document) whether coyote tale or cartoon, and I'm not sure what Treuer expects to gain by slashing away at straw men. Probably the most exciting work being done in Native American studies today is the recovery of unique national traditions from North and South America that have been disregarded as stupidly "Indian" by five centuries of European colonizers (see Womack; Weaver). The information is still there—it has been patiently kept by Native peoples despite the genocide. The colonizers were bad listeners. The contemporary generation should do better. When studying the literary traditions of Native America, why not ask an Indian novelist once in a while? After all, aren't they part of Native heritage too? ♪

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