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Indigenizing the Normal, Normalizing the Indigenous: Native American Literature, Art, and Activism

Silvia Martínez-Falquina

- 1 The COVID-19 pandemic, the aggravated climate emergency, the extension of the refugee crisis, and the reactivation of armed conflicts have together made the 2020s a decade of acute disruption. Completing this introduction in early 2026, the political climate in the U.S. and elsewhere makes it more difficult than ever to even try to imagine what the world will be like not years but even months from now. Part of the crisis is onto-epistemological, for it has to do with the increasing disagreement on what is “normal”—shared values, unquestionable truths, or things we accept out of habit. The crisis associated to this notion seems to indicate a new turn of the transmodern paradigm and its dominant narrative of globalization, deepening the sense of precariousness and calling for critical debate. Where can we look for peace amongst turmoil, for certainty when everything seems to be falling apart?
- 2 As this compilation of articles will show, Native American artistic and political manifestations offer opportunities to apprehend the abnormality of the world we live in and to learn new ways to deal with it. This is what we mean by this dual movement —“Indigenizing the normal” and “Normalizing the Indigenous.” The Indigenous Studies perspective challenges the presumed normality of patriarchal and colonial violence on lands and peoples, as well as the exploitation of resources and cultures through neoliberal extractivism. Based on resistance, Native American literature, art and criticism serve as acts of reterritorialization, contesting dominant power structures and reclaiming a place of belonging for Indigenous peoples and their ideas while foregrounding relationality as an alternative ethical and ontological framework. However, it is equally important to de-exoticize the Indigenous, and to challenge the settler colonial fixation of Native Americans in the past, which has been strategically

perpetuated. We need to acknowledge Indigenous presence in the present, recognizing that Indigenous peoples and ideas should be at the center, rather than relegated to the margins, as exceptions or exotic adornments, or as a reflection of settler guilt. This is essential not only because Indigenous perspectives and values connect to our shared humanity, but also because they offer a pathway towards ensuring our collective survival on this planet.

- 3 As we approach the six-decade mark since the Native American Renaissance and the Red Power movement, we find ourselves in a time of unprecedented Indigenous advocacy in the United States. From the fields of activism, literature, and the arts, Indigenous peoples from diverse tribal affiliations and walks of life are speaking out for their and the Earth's rights—for they understand, as we all should, human rights and ecological rights as the same. From the third wave of Indigenous writing to movements like NoDAPL and MMIW, their voices challenge the norms of dominant society and offer alternative ways of seeing the world. This collection—penned by Indigenous studies scholars who define themselves as allies from their respective non-Indigenous affiliations—sets out to acknowledge the incredible diversity of those voices, to honor their intrinsic value, and to urge us all to listen very carefully to the lessons they are offering the world about contemporary crises and possible alternatives.
- 4 The contributions gathered in this issue engage these concerns from a variety of disciplinary and methodological perspectives, exploring the diverse ways in which Indigenous knowledge, art, and storytelling intervene in contemporary debates and reconfigure dominant frameworks. Moving from theory to land and the environment, identity and the body, memory and healing, to end in futurity, each article challenges the different dimensions of what settler colonialism has constructed as “normal.”
- 5 In this regard, Deborah Madsen's “Ojibwe Mimesis in Louise Erdrich's ‘The Stone’: Indigenizing the ‘Unnatural’ in Narratology, Normalizing the ‘Natural’ in Indigenous Narrative” opens at the level of literary theory itself and sets the epistemological stakes for the whole collection. Madsen makes a point of challenging Western narratological assumptions, which label Indigenous storytelling as “unnatural” because they take for granted a human protagonist and anthropocentric causality. Yet, what counts as “natural” in narrative is necessarily redefined with this analysis of Louise Erdrich's short story “The Stone,” in which a stone accompanies a woman through her life. Madsen proposes “Ojibwe mimesis”: this is not a literary device or a metaphor, but a faithful representation of a reality in which stones are animate persons with agency, with their own temporality as well as their own relations with human beings. Far from being “unnatural,” Erdrich's story is entirely coherent within Ojibwe worldview.
- 6 A related concern emerges in Anna Brígido-Corachán's “‘Flooding Waters were a Cautious Gift’: Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Memory in Leslie Marmon Silko's and Ofelia Zepeda's Storied Landscapes,” which grounds the argument in environmental relationality, in a specific element—water—, and a specific region—the U.S. Southwest. Brígido-Corachán examines Silko's *Sacred Water* and Zepeda's *Ocean Power* as works of Native Science and memorial writing about water in the U.S. Southwest. Water is, both in the texts Brígido-Corachán analyzes, and in her own personal experience, not a resource or a commodity: it is kin, it is responsibility. Silko's and Zepeda's texts offer practical and spiritual knowledge about water at a time of accelerating climate crisis, and they do so by activating Indigenous environmental memory and place-based consciousness.

- 7 We then turn to the visual and poetic construction of landscape as a key site of colonial and decolonial negotiation with a look at how Indigenous artists reclaim the very genres used to aestheticize colonial occupation. In “As the Land Lays Dying: Normalizing Indigenous Environmental Art Resistance,” Aitana Monzón-Blasco analyzes how Cherokee painter Kay WalkingStick and Métis artist Christi Belcourt use landscape painting to denounce the consequences of colonial land relations and claim cultural sovereignty. WalkingStick and Belcourt take this historically colonial genre and turn it against itself in order to expose what tradition has conventionally concealed: cultural erasure and environmental destruction. Their work also employs “traditional ecological knowledge” and a relational ontology between human and non-human beings. Visual sovereignty, as Monzón-Blasco deploys it, means that there is no such thing as a purely aesthetic choice when Indigenous representation is at stake—every image is also a territorial and political claim.
- 8 Extending this line of inquiry, Elena Cortés-Farrujia’s “(Re)mapping Landscapes: Denormalizing ‘Manifestalgia’ or How Is the Imaginative Poetic Panorama Being Re-Indigenized in Queer and Feminist Indigenous Arts” sets out to answer the following key question: who, exactly, has been erased from the settler landscape, and which erasures get to count as erasures? The article adds a crucial intersectional dimension to the landscape conversation and it shows that the “normalization” of settler landscapes also erased queer and Two-Spirit Indigenous subjects. This double erasure makes their artistic resurgence doubly decolonial. Central to the article is the concept of “Manifestalgia,” which Cortés-Farrujia coins to refer to the settler-colonial fusion of Manifest Destiny ideology and nostalgic utopianism that needed Indigenous bodies to have already vanished from the landscape before the settler future could be painted into existence. Through the work of Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous artists and poets—Kent Monkman, Tommy Pico, Jana-Rae Yerxa—the article shows how queer Indigenous re-mapping exposes and dismantles this logic, centering Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous futurities.
- 9 With Silvia Martínez-Falquina’s “‘We Were Always More than Things’: Intergenerational Trauma, Indigenous Relationality, and Decolonial Storytelling in Mona Susan Power’s *A Council of Dolls*,” the collection moves from external landscapes to interior and communal experiences of trauma to show how memory, storytelling, and material practices sustain Indigenous relationality across time. The article reads Power’s 2023 novel as a decolonial narrative model of healing grounded in Dakota worldview. Through reverse chronology and layered narration, the novel traces intergenerational trauma across three generations of Yanktonai Dakhóta girls accompanied by their dolls. Interestingly, Power treats the dolls not as symbols but as genuine agents who carry the relational knowledge that the boarding school system tried to destroy. Both the article and the novel refuse the consolation of closure: healing, here, is not resolution but accountability, bearing witness.
- 10 In a different but related vein, Nieves Pascual’s “Culinary Resilience: Decolonizing Native American Foodways” extends healing from narrative into embodied practice, showing that decolonization operates not only in art and literature but in how people feed themselves and their communities. Pascual examines three contemporary Native American cookbooks by Heid E. Erdrich, Sean Sherman, and Freddie Bitsoie as acts of survivance and resurgence. She is particularly critical of the neoliberal discourse of resilience, which shifts responsibility away from settler colonial harm and onto

Indigenous peoples themselves. De-normalizing this understanding of resilience, Pascual proves that in these cookbooks everyday eating itself becomes a decolonial practice. By rejecting colonial ingredients and reviving ancestral foods, the authors challenge cultural erasure and assert Indigenous health and sovereignty.

- 11 Susan Bernardin's article, "Words like Beads: Elizabeth Woody and Beth Piatote's Poetics of Abundance," closes the collection with an affirmation of Indigenous presence and possibility. Beading is the central figure, capable of carrying intergenerational meaning across catastrophic loss by connecting ancestors, lands, and communities across time. As Bernardin argues, Woody and Piatote write the way beadwork is made: with attention to what has been lost and insistence on what remains. In the current political moment, when Indigenous histories are being actively erased from curricula, from national parks, from public memory, the word "abundance" in their hands stops being merely poetic. It becomes a form of resistance. It also points to futurity, insisting that continuance is possible and thus providing a beautiful and relevant closure to the collection.
- 12 No seven articles could of course account for all Native American creativity. Yet, together, these contributions demonstrate that Indigenous literature and art are not marginal responses to the current moment of global crisis but central resources for understanding and reimagining it. By engaging with Ojibwe cosmology, Pueblo and Tohono O'odham water knowledge, visual sovereignty, queer Indigenous futurities, Dakota relational ethics, culinary decolonization, and poetics of abundance, this special issue insists that Indigenous knowledge systems are neither relics of the past nor exotic alternatives to Western thought. They will be seen, I certainly hope, as living, dynamic, and urgently necessary frameworks for understanding—and improving—the world we share.

AUTHOR

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