
Adam Spry. *Our War Paint Is Writers' Ink: Anishinaabe Literary Transnationalism*. SUNY Press, 2018. 256 pp. ISBN: 978143846881.

<https://www.sunypress.edu/p-6530-our-war-paint-is-writers-ink.aspx>

The Anishinaabeg are known for transformation and adaptation. Our ancestors migrated to the lands where the food grows on water (manoomin/wild rice) and created mino bimaadiziwin (a good life), which followed the cyclical transformation of the seasons. They had a long and rich tradition of storytelling that functioned as a means to remember historical events, regulate behavior, sustain relationships with humans as well as with other beings, and provide entertainment. As the number of European traders and, later, American settlers, grew the Anishinaabe relied on their long-standing values to guide them as they adapted new technologies. We continue to adapt today and have an active and robust literary presence.

In *Our War Paint Is Writers' Ink*, Spry traces the ways in which Anishinaabe writers used new technologies of expression—such as the novel, lyric poetry, and journalism—to speak to non-Natives in a legible way. While there is an astounding and diverse body of work, he details a clear pattern of Anishinaabe writers presenting their nation as strong and legitimate. They employed literature as a tool to shape public opinion to their advantage. Spry also considers the ways in which Euro-Americans have used the act of writing to imagine Anishinaabeg. When taken as a whole, these texts offer new insights into the often-contentious relationship between two nations. Spry works to read “across the boundaries of settler-states and indigenous nations” to “challenge our understanding of the role literary writing plays in the ongoing dynamic of settler-colonialism and indigenous resistance” (xx). In addition, he asserts the importance of form and genre and argues for more research into Indigenous forms of genre.

Spry begins with the play *Hiawatha, Or Nanabozho: An Ojibway Indian Play* (1923/2011), which has largely been criticized and marginalized by contemporary scholars. He traces the complex history of this drama and identifies it as a point of convergence, drawing connections to earlier Anishinaabe writers, Euro-American writers, and contemporary Anishinaabe writers, asserting that we can both acknowledge the complications of this work while also celebrating it as an act of Anishinaabe persistence and survival. Spry challenges the reader to think about Anishinaabe and Euro-American writers as participating in a process of exchange. This text defies neat boundaries between settler and Indigenous, as do many of the other works examined throughout Spry's book. Thus, this play introduces a central argument of the book, which is that “writing allows cultural material to move independently

between indigenous and settler contexts, taking new meanings and different political valences as it goes" (4). Spry's arguments fit well within the long-standing Anishinaabe sensibility that readers and listeners must come to their own understandings of stories and that these understandings will deepen, adapt, and transform over time.

Our War Paint is focused on the post-treaty-making era from about 1886 to the present, with each chapter following a shift in US federal Indian policy: The Dawes General Allotment Act of 1886, the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, the termination efforts of the 1950s, and the tribal self-determination policy since 1973. Spry's inclusion of Anishinaabe and non-Anishinaabe writers provides the reader with a deeper understanding of the context in which the works were written and have been read. His careful historical research reveals a complex network of Native and non-Native writers who were reading each other's work both at the time the works were written as well as long after, demonstrating the dynamic nature of their engagement. Spry draws upon Gerald Vizenor's theory of transmotion throughout the book, both for textual analysis as well as for a broader understanding of the ways in which Anishinaabe understand and employ sovereignty.

The chapters are well organized and necessarily dense to effectively convey the transnational exchange between the Anishinaabeg and the United States. Spry masterfully weaves connections throughout the book. In chapter 1, "Revolutionary in Character: Translating Anishinaabe Place and Time in the *Progress*," Spry details the ways in which Theo Beaulieu, the Anishinaabe editor of the newspaper, *Progress* (from 1886-1889), published politically motivated translations of Anishinaabe sacred stories to influence the present and envision the future rather than to understand the past. In chapter 2, "Englishman, Your Color Is Deceitful: Unsettling the North Woods in Janet Lewis's *The Invasion*," Spry shares new findings regarding Lewis's little-known historical novel. He uncovers an extraordinary record of collaboration and argues that, while Lewis is non-Anishinaabe, the novel can be read as an example of Anishinaabe nationalism. Spry provides long overdue analysis of Vizenor's reexpressions of Frances Densmore's translations of Anishinaabe nagamonan (songs) in chapter 3, "What Is This I Promise You?: The Translation of Anishinaabe Song in the Twentieth Century." In chapter 4, "A Tribe of Pressed Trees: Representations of the State in the Fiction of Louise Erdrich," Spry suggests that, despite critiques by scholars including Arnold Krupat and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, we can find a version of nationalism in Erdrich's works. He delineates the ways in which several of Erdrich's characters work within the "third space of sovereignty," through both self-governance as well as leveraging federal and/or state resources.

Spry ends the final chapter by noting that, while nationalism has certainly provided a powerful means for Anishinaabeg to defend values and traditions, perhaps we need a new strategy that is more strongly aligned with our values. He suggests that “mino bimaadiziwin’s radically expansive idea of interdependency – which stretches the idea of social obligations beyond the mere humans to plants, animals, manidoog, and everything else that comprises that natural world... may eventually mean leaving behind the idea of nationhood altogether for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of what it means to lead a good life” (179). This question is worthy of consideration as we face increasing threats from multinational corporations and as many Anishinaabe nations face dwindling populations due to blood-quantum-based citizenship requirements. If we then turn to Spry’s analysis of “Initiation Song” as reexpressed by Vizenor in *Summer in the Spring*, we are reminded that “so long as the Anishinaabeg are capable of reimagining and reasserting who they are as a people – a continually new people – they will weather the storm” (Spry 183). Anishinaabe writers will continue to use literature as one means to imagine our future and to work toward mino bimaadiziwin.

As many Anishinaabe writers before him have done, Spry pushes the reader to see beyond binaries, to see complex webs of relationships and innovative adaptations to unthinkable circumstances. He offers a new methodology for the study of Anishinaabe and Native American literatures, which includes engagement across time and nation in order to understand the various ways in which literature has and can shape policy, challenge fundamental assumptions, as well as offer new visions for the future.

Jill Doerfler, University of Minnesota Duluth