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Book Review: Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry

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While Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry is written primarily for literary scholars, it does offer content useful for those in other areas of Native Studies and for those particularly involved with the study of Great Plains cultures. The editors’ introduction sets up expectations that these essays will address aspects of American Indian poetry from both Native and non-Native perspectives and will avoid the study of texts preceding the American Indian Literary Renaissance (that is, texts prior to 1968 and commonly written about by scholars such as Kroeber, Rothenberg, and Bierhorst). Contemporary writing is the focus rather than ritual oral traditions.

The well-written essays that follow offer a variety of critical and theoretical approaches from scholars and scholar/poets, with a unique intertextuality arising from some contributors analyzing the poetic works of other writers in the volume. The ordering of the essays, some reprinted, some written for the collection, underscores this. For instance, Marilou Awiakta’s “Daydreaming Primal Space: Cherokee Aesthetics as Habits of Being” is followed by Daniel Heath Justice’s “Beloved Woman Returns: The Doubleweaving of Homeland and Identity in the Poetry of Marilou Awiakta” and Susan Berry Brill de Ramirez’s “The Power and Presence of Native Oral Storytelling Traditions in the Poetry of Marilou Awiakta, Kimberly Blaeser, and Marilyn Dumont.” Although there is a heavier focus on the work of women writers, the book provides substantial range, with essays from Dean Rader’s “The Epic Lyric: Genre and Contemporary American Indian Poetry” to Qwo-Li Driskill’s “Call Me Brother: Two-Spritedness, the Erotic, and Mixedblood Identity as Sites of Sovereignty and Resistance in Gregory Scofield’s Poetry.” Great Plains
poets whose work is examined include Scofield, who is Canadian Cree; Elizabeth Cook Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux); Marnie Walsh (Dakota); nita northSun (Shoshone Chippewa); James Welch (Blackfoot Gros Ventre); and N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa).

This poetry undoes static notions of American Indian identity. An excerpt from nita northSun's "moving camp to far" reflects the changes in these cultures since contact and their continued resistance through the act of survival as near extinct eagles endure on "slurpee plastic cups." And Scofield's Two-Spirit/Queer poetry certainly challenges any essentialist ideas of Plains Indian masculinity. This volume shifts the focus in formal studies of American Indian poetics to the people as they are now and their hopes for healing in the future.

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