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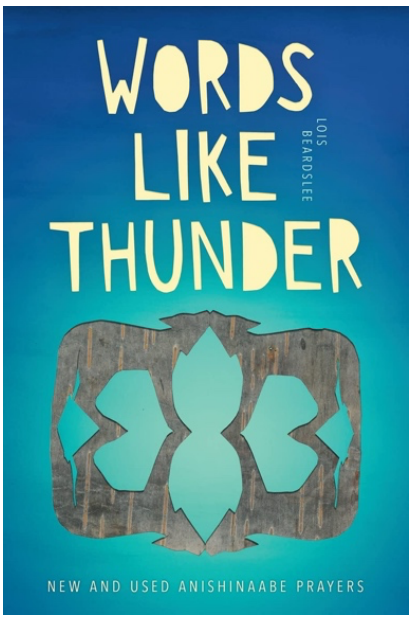
Celebrations and Rebellions: A Review of *Words Like Thunder: New and Used Anishinaabe Prayers*

Review by Emma Scott

Lois Beardslee. *Words Like Thunder: New and Used Anishinaabe Prayers.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020.



A blue book cover featuring a birch bark cut-out of two foxes facing one another, their snouts touching. The title, *Words Like Thunder*, is above them in beige.

"We were hidden in abundance," notes Lois Beardslee in her poetry book, *Words Like Thunder: New and Used Anishinaabe Prayers* (2020, 20). With this statement, Beardslee opens her discussion of settler colonialism with a nostalgic glance at the past, reminiscing about the prosperity of Native American Peoples before the arrival of settlers. Beardslee, an Ojibwe artist, teacher, and writer from what is now known as northeastern Michigan, uses a blend of Native American Traditions, nostalgia, and poetic language to attract readers to her text. She then weaves in commentary on contemporary environmentalism, socioeconomic racism, and cultural assimilation to bring attention to colonialism's attempt to quell Native American cultures. Despite this, Beardslee's message about Native American Peoples resonates loud and clear throughout the 37 poems and pieces of prose: "We are literate, intelligent and sophisticated. We are conservationists, scientists and mathematicians. We always have been and always will be" (Zoellner 2020, n.p.).

Beardslee uses poetry and prose as a vehicle for her activism in *Words Like Thunder: New and Used Anishinaabe Prayers*. She weaves Native American stories and her lived experiences together in her poems to create compelling tales that follow named and unnamed characters like Folded-Over Woman, a Native American woman who picks wild berries, and a boy who has been deemed to have "sacrosanct status" (Beardslee 2020, 89). Throughout these stories, Beardslee evaluates the intersection of race, environmentalism, and socioeconomic class at both personal and societal levels. Yet, her use of poetry and prose allow her critical discussions to be both amusing and informational. This is important because it provides readers with an accessible, personal perspective on the value of Native American Peoples and cultures. Anyone can enjoy the celebration of Native American Traditions, knowledges, and cultures in *Words Like Thunder*.

Beardslee takes an innovative approach to her discussion of settler colonialism and Native American cultures by positioning herself in a liminal space and time. First, Beardslee and her characters grapple with the "vanishing Indian trope," a myth that perpetuates the belief of Manifest Destiny, or that settlers were predestined to colonize and commit genocide while Indigenous Peoples were predestined to assimilate into western colonial society. Alongside this, her characters are navigating traditional and contemporary Native American Traditions, attempting to prove they have more "place in this world other than as symbols of the past" (Beardslee 2020, 20). These struggles cause both Beardslee and her characters to experience double consciousness, an internal conflict that subordinated groups experience when they view themselves "through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 2015, 5). As a result, they "seek solace outside of this place and time" and are positioned in a liminal space (Beardslee 2020, 98). The liminal or in-between space allows the past and present to mould and meld into one another, providing a comprehensive perspective on the importance of Native American Peoples and cultures. It similarly permits Beardslee's omnipresent voice to interject her poems and prose with evidence to contest the erasure of Native American Traditions and cultures. This is a unique and memorable take on discussions of Native American cultures and the refusal to be assimilated because the stories implicitly guide readers to her message and her omnipresent voice leaves no space for misinterpretation or arguments. Rather, Beardslee breaks free from the confines of time to evaluate colonialism from both the past and the present, the fictitious and the genuine.

The liminal position that Beardslee occupies allows her to break free from the confines of time to contest settlers' static perspective of Native American Peoples. In *Elements of Indigenous Style*, Gregory Younging states that current non-Indigenous perspectives maintain that Indigenous cultures are "at odds with the modern world," and valued primarily for that reason (2018, 18–19). Beardslee's understanding of this is emphasized as she shares her apprehension of speaking about the past, fearing that it may cause readers to believe that "contemporary Indians are just an adjunct to the past" (Beardslee 2020. 20). To challenge this, her characters occupy a liminal space, balancing both the past and present simultaneously. For instance, Beardslee describes one boy as having "His pockets laden with life lessons on how to write down his history with red and yellow ochres, / How to translate chemical formulas backward and forward" (2020, 86). Beardslee brings attention to how Native American Peoples are "fluid" and comprised of past and developing traditions; they are both Knowledge Keepers for their cultures and environmental stewards, academics, leaders, activists, and teachers individually (Beardslee 2020, 28).

Using a blend of personal commentary, Native American stories, and fictitious poetry and prose, Beardslee brings attention to the depth of Native American knowledges and practices by contrasting their sustainable agricultural and land management practices with settlers' destructive methods. This allows her to raise attention to the importance and value of Indigenous cultures in today's societies, specifically in the realm of environmental stewardship. For example, she notes that Native American Nations have "heaved and shaped this land long before continents collided and scattered DNA like pollen" (Beardslee 2020, 102). One method of doing so was "burning its forests into submission, then planting grasses, wild nuts, and berries" (Beardslee 2020, 103). Native Americans, Beardslee implies, were able to shape nature to fit their agricultural needs, whereas settlers forced the North American landscape into an impossible, idealized version of limitless sustenance. When investigating the origins of the Anthropocene, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd similarly argued that settlers' "brutal system of

imposing … an idealized version of the world" on the landscape was the culprit of drastic environmental change (2017, 796). By contrasting Native Americans' and settlers' methods of food cultivation, Beardslee emphasizes Native American cultures' innovation, modernity, *and* value through their sustainable agricultural and land management practices. As a result, Beardslee promotes her message that "people of color might actually be valuable members of our own respective ecosystems, deserving of empathy and protection" (2020, 27).

Beardslee's biggest strength by far is her mastery of language. She eloquently weaves scientific terminology, stories, and facts together to create hymn-like pieces of poetry and prose about the value and perseverance of Native American Peoples. For example, in "Ogitchidaakwewag," Beardslee writes, "We live in the present and raise our children in the knowledge that other times and places are understood, / Like bedrock and compressed volcanic ash. We are the wave-polished agates that filled small voids in the Earth's lava history" (2020, 102). As she speaks about systemic racism, socioeconomic inequality, and climate change, her hymns are transformed into desperate prayers for change. In these moments, Beardslee's narration is both deeply personal and collective. The voices of past generations and other present-day Indigenous Peoples can be heard alongside Beardslee's voice thanks to her liminal position and omnipresent narration. This stylistic choice is powerful and represents her desire "to share the responsibility of speaking for my grandmothers" (Beardslee 2020, 121).

Words Like Thunder is simultaneously a celebration and a rebellion. Beardslee unsettles colonial society's "dominance" and "superiority" as she celebrates Native Americans' cultures and knowledges (2020, 73). Her liminal position and collective voice allow her to step outside of the confines of time and embody past, present, and future generations of Native American Peoples, all celebrating and calling for recognition of the value of their cultures.

References

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