

**Beth Brant (Degonwadonti). *Mohawk Trail*. (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1985) 96 pp., \$6.95 paper.**

This is Beth Brant's first collection of her own work (she also edited *A Gathering of Spirit*, a collection of writings by American Indian women, for Sinister Wisdom). Length, genre and approach are mixed: poetry, short story, vignette, ritual, coyote tale. Thematic unity emerges in the book through Brant's focus on integrating and synthesizing her Mohawk family heritage with her current situation as writer, urban mother, and lesbian lover. The piece titled "A Long Story" brings the three themes together in the alternating soliloquies of a nineteenth-century Indian mother whose children have been wrenched away to boarding school and a lesbian mother of the 1970s who has lost her children to patriarchal court orders. Some stories present explicitly erotic material; "Coyote Learns a New Trick," with its gentle, graphic, turnaround seduction story, makes an excellent comparison with Gerald Vizenor's treatment of sexuality. Prudes will find the sex too explicit, and aesthetes will find in the book a faux-naive style that lacks irony and subtlety.

The collection as a whole fits several labels—feminist literature, American Indian literature, contemporary literature—but the most accurate is working-class literature. Some of Brant's most poignant pieces are monologues in the middle section, titled "Detroit Songs": an erotic dancer in a women's night club compares male and female audiences, a young drag queen recalls his macho father, a migrant from Kentucky mining country reminisces about her treatment as outsider and hillbilly. Brant's literary ancestors are writers like Rebecca Harding Davis and Anzia Yeziarska, who found their art in the experience of working people, the economist-sociologist's underclass. This is an important and unfortunately neglected tradition within American letters, and *Mohawk Trail* is a unique contribution to it.

Unlike that of other writers in the tradition of working-class literature, however, Brant's fiction does not rest on or embody any philosophical or intellectual understanding of the situation she portrays. There is no underlying analysis, neither Christian, Marxist, populist, liberation theological, mystical, tribal, social Darwinist, or any other. Rather, the anomalies, inequities, tragedies or triumphs depicted seem to have no other explanation than visceral or sentimental discrepancies in world view, or simple bias: all males are obnoxious to the erotic dancer, and all females sympathetic; a displaced Indian woman is exploited only by her white woman lovers, inexplicably unable to connect with the many supportive non-white women who long for her, and the sole source of her pitiable condition is made to seem nothing more than a problem of image. This has the unfortunate effect of trivializing Brant's characters, making their dilemmas and survival strategies simply the personal reflections of those shallowest of post-modern doctrines: image, pop psychology, and sex appeal. Brant's work shows she is capable of great sensitivity; one

hopes she will be challenged to develop commensurate rigor of thought.

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**Jennifer S. H. Brown and Robert Brightman. “*The Orders of the Dreamed*”: *George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823*. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988) xii, 226 pp., \$24.95.**

This text addresses the complex challenge of comprehending religious otherness. Brown and Brightman present a previously unpublished 1823 letter journal of fur trader George Nelson in which he reflects on his struggle to understand the Cree and Ojibwa people he knew at first hand. While he constantly wondered at the strangeness of Algonquian religion, he also expressed his admiration as frequently. The Cree and the Ojibwa were thoroughly religious and, paradoxical as it seemed to Nelson, he did admit that their religion worked.

Nelson’s musings comprise the most thorough account of Algonquian mythology and religious practices written in the nineteenth century. His sketch of Algonquian religion summarizes key myths, surveys the great persons of the Algonquian cosmos, and presents eye-witness accounts of the shaking tent and other rituals. Nelson appreciated the central importance of dreaming and vision questing to Algonquian religion. Using these techniques, Algonquians acquired access to the great others of myth, both those who had human welfare at heart and those like the windigo monster who embodied the antithesis of religious values. These details have special ethnographical and historical value because Nelson’s account makes it possible to take some measure of Algonquian religion midway between the seventeenth century *Jesuit Relations* and the ethnographies of the twentieth.

The book is also an excellent example of how primary documents ought to be published. Brown and Brightman’s introduction examines Nelson’s life and letters, his career and contact with various Indian groups and, most importantly, his intellectual and religious struggle to make sense of Algonquian religion. Similarly, they append a glossary of the *dramatic personae* of myth and ritual and thus make Nelson’s text more accessible. As important as Nelson’s text itself, the authors’ essay on “Northern Algonquian Religious and Mythic Themes and Personages” stands as an extremely useful overview of current knowledge of these traditions. In