

MALIA BURGESS

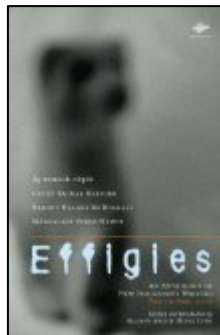
Voices From the Pacific Rim

Effigies: An Anthology of New Indigenous Writing, Pacific Rim, 2009 (Earthworks)

Edited by Allison Adelle Hedge Coke

Salt Publishing, 2009

Native American literature has enjoyed a renaissance in print for the past few decades. In her *Anthology of New Indigenous Writing*, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke highlights the poetry of two oft-overlooked groups: Alaskan and Hawaiian indigenous peoples of the Pacific Rim. *Effigies* provides generous selections from four women, whose unique voices offer vivid perspectives of Native culture.



dg nanouk okpik is an Inupiat-Inuit Alaskan native whose poetry is rooted in the senses of her forefathers, as in the thrilling opening of “Corpse Whale”:

*It comes back to the Inuit in me -
images in the mirror are closer than they appear
on my kayak skin boat. I was forged by sea salt
by snow hammered into ore red herring.*

okpik writes often of the wildlife in Alaska, both literally and spiritually. She occasionally includes images and vocabulary likely to be unfamiliar to her readers, though words such as *kuspuk*, *burin*, and *Tatqiq* are poetry in themselves.

Cathy Tagnak Rexford is Inupiaq, French/German, English, and hails from Anchorage. She plays often with format but is at her strongest with “A Caribou Skin Mask,” where she skillfully mixes her background with images that the reader can hold onto and fly with.

*She told me to bite the thread,
and a fiber got stuck
I tasted the salt oils
my mouth watered into the shape of a bill.*

The second half of the book concentrates on writers from Hawaii, a sudden leap in location and temperature which serves the collection well in its dichotomy. Brandy Nalani McDougall of Kanaka Maoli, Chinese, and Scottish heritage writes often of her family, achieving an equal balance of home life and the home, her Island. In particular her poem, “Dirty Laundry,” brings to mind the native Hawaiian home, with a devastating undercurrent. The narrator describes her grandfather performing the every day chore of laundry, but ends the poem with this:

All the dirt from the day before

*runs down the drain in a dark, steady stream.
I am still the clean one. No one has to know.*

There is a surprising lack of anger in these poems—they are too practical, too concerned with daily work to spend much time on the loss of land and culture. Yet Spanish, Hawaiian, and Chinese poet Mahealani Perez-Wendt does address it several times, most notably in “Bury Our Hearts at Wal-Mart, etc.,” in which she laments:

*O, The sands of my birth
The sands of my birth
Are digging places
Are trenching places
For excavators,
Earth movers,
And shovelers*

Just a few pages later in “No Steal,” Perez-Wendt shows a sense of humor in her pidgin-filled poem about a sticky-fingered local boy and the way the narrator got him to stop stealing.

*I tell him
You ever steal
From my property
Or my neighbor next door
I chop off your hand
With my cane knife
His eyes come big
He dig out
He don't come around
Any more*

Humor and pain, beauty and sorrow all come together in *Effigies*, an appropriate mix of emotions from the warm mountains and cold beaches of these Pacific Rim poets.