



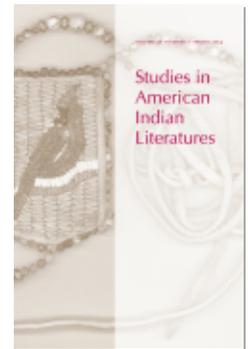
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The White Earth Nation: Ratification of a Native Democratic Constitution by Gerald Vizenor and Jill Doerfler (review)

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preted and denounced the *Johnson v. McIntosh* opinion, with special attention to the emergence of Native scholars, such as Vine Deloria Jr. and Robert Williams, invested in interrogating legal history. He considers the case's influence on international law, such as the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, and cases beyond US borders in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Most critics agree that Marshall was wrong to give credence to the doctrine of discovery and correct to reinstate Native ownership in *Worcester*. Some have even called for the Supreme Court to overturn the *Johnson* decision. As Watson demonstrates, scholarly debates continue to untangle the contradictory terms and legal positions that have shaped Native land rights. Watson's impressive volume leaves the reader with the sense of how all US law, far from being historically determined, has resulted from decisions made by particular persons with their own sets of interests. Watson concludes that while the Illinois and Wabash Land Company disbanded in defeat, the Illinois and Piankeshaw tribes joined with the Kaskaskias and Weas to become the Peoria Tribe of Oklahoma, and advocates for Indigenous rights continue to fight against the doctrine of discovery today.

Gerald Vizenor and Jill Doerfler. *The White Earth Nation: Ratification of a Native Democratic Constitution*. Intro. David E. Wilkins.

Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8032-4079-7. 100 pp.

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Simultaneously an argument and a cultural record, *The White Earth Nation: Ratification of a Native Democratic Constitution* is a uniquely constructed collection of documents including the full text of the proposed Constitution of the White Earth Nation, bookended by a series of essays produced by authors Gerald Vizenor and Jill Doerfler and consultant David E. Wilkins, all of whom were closely involved in the writing and ratification of the Constitution. For the purpose of this review, I follow David J. Carlson's review of the Constitution in *SAIL* 23.4 in referring to the Constitution itself as the CWEN. I refer to the subject of this review as *Ratification*, in order to distinguish it from the Constitution itself and to draw out the ways in which this collection is very much a narrative of public debate, political action, and, ultimately, democratic process.

Ratification, which lists Vizenor as its primary author, serves several purposes. If, as Carlson points out, the CWEN offers scholars of Native American literature a glimpse into the political applications of Vizenor's critical theory, *Ratification* reads as an extension of this glimpse into a public appeal and call to action. Like the CWEN, *Ratification* is suffused with references to Vizenor's articulations of survivance, natural reason, and irony, which the author ties to Anishinaabeg everyday life. *Ratification* also functions both as a useful source text for White Earth citizens seeking to learn more about the CWEN and as an argument for a vote in favor of passing the new Constitution. Finally, *Ratification* serves as a roadmap of struggles, successes, and contexts for other Indigenous communities engaged in the labor of developing political autonomy and defining national sovereignty. Significantly, then, *Ratification* stands as the record of a process that led to a successful referendum, which passed with 80 percent voter approval of the new Constitution on November 19, 2013.

As *Ratification* outlines, the CWEN was ratified in April 2009 after a convention of White Earth delegates met four times between 2007 and 2009 in order to achieve consensus on the language and spirit of a new White Earth Constitution written by the people of the White Earth Nation. Ratification of the Constitution was not unanimous. Of the forty sworn delegates, twenty-four voted, and the vote was passed with sixteen for and eight opposed to ratification. These numbers are perhaps indicative of the agonism inherent in the process of constitutional reform, a process White Earth Chairwoman Erma J. Vizenor has been advocating since 1987. To address potential post-ratification concerns stemming from these numbers, *Ratification* carefully makes the appeal to readers to look back to the roots of Anishinaabe legal thought and to consider the CWEN a part of this tradition, while also positioning the new Constitution within the history of constitution building beginning with the Magna Carta and leading up to current struggles for constitutional reform and national sovereignty around the world (6). Through this strategically multipronged approach, *Ratification* asks White Earth voters, as well as Native communities more generally, if Aboriginal nations are in or out of this global conversation.

Making this move for the reader, *Ratification* opens with David E. Wilkins situating White Earth firmly within global discourse on national sovereignty. "Sovereignty, Democracy, Constitution: An Introduction"

strategically aligns White Earth's "difficult process of establishing a new constitutional arrangement that links directly with their organic values, lands, and traditions" to a global movement of democratic constitution-building enterprises (8). While the *CWEN* is not "commensurate with the federal executive structures of governance," as Vizenor makes explicit in his essay, it is an emphatically democratic constitution (16). This situating rhetorical move is central to the argument in *Ratification*, which, like the *CWEN* itself, repeatedly evokes White Earth's position at the forefront of "a great tradition of continental liberty" (63). Vizenor's argument here is a complex one. He acknowledges that not all delegates "altogether appreciated" his evocation of the Magna Carta as an ideological ancestor of the *CWEN* (56). However, he insists that the "legacy of liberty" stemming from this originary document is more closely aligned with Anishinaabe political commitments and traditions than are the rigidly hierarchical models of governance instantiated by federally executed constitutions (56).

Vizenor's chapter, entitled "Constitutional Consent: Native Traditions and Parchment Rights," strikes a balance between global and local imperatives, while simultaneously arguing for the necessary presence of the literary-critical that is woven throughout the *CWEN*. Vizenor emphasizes that the system of governance mapped by the *CWEN* deliberately privileges the importance of storytelling to Anishinaabe legal thought. "Native liberty, natural reason, and survivance are concepts that originate in narratives," he writes, "not in the mandates of monarchies, papacies, severe traditions, or federal policies" (11). As Vizenor parses the political agendas and histories that guided the creation of the *CWEN*, he also takes readers through the process of ratification: the meetings leading up to the final vote, the challenges and debates experienced by delegates, and the reasoning behind some of the more transformative items in the Constitution.

Readers of *Ratification* move from Vizenor's essay to the *CWEN* itself with an ease that recalls the two texts' shared authorship. The *CWEN* begins with a preamble that defines the spirit of the Constitution, situating White Earth within "a great tradition of continental liberty": "The Anishinaabeg create stories of natural reason, of courage, loyalty, humor, spiritual inspiration, survivance, reciprocal altruism, and native cultural sovereignty" (63). Like Vizenor's essay, this preamble identifies narrative as the defining legal-exegetical tool of Anishinaabe self-governance and,

significantly, as that which places White Earth within the tradition of “continental liberty” while challenging some of the basic assumptions of that tradition. The proceeding bulk of the *CWEN* reads, respectively, as an argument for Native national democracy, as a stance on the politics of Anishinaabe identity, and at times as a specifically Vizenorian take on both of these.

Ratification was published in anticipation of November 2013, when the Anishinaabeg of the White Earth Nation held a constitutional referendum, and the degree to which White Earth citizens identified with Vizenor’s approach may have played a major role in the vote’s outcome. As Lisa Brooks points out, “the Constitution of the White Earth Nation is likely the first governing document to honor its citizens’ right to irony [chapter 3: article 5], making it wholly unique within the genre” (71). Whether this uniqueness was interpreted by voters as revolutionary, idiosyncratic, or a little bit of both, the successful referendum now stands as a testament to the compelling appeal of Vizenor’s approach.

Ratification concludes with “A Citizen’s Guide to the White Earth Constitution: Highlights and Reflections.” Jill Doerfler’s series of short essays were originally published in *Anishinaabeg Today* and were written to inform voters. The essays are also *Ratification*’s last argument for voting “yes” on constitutional reform. Each essay situates specific chapters of the Constitution within the context of Anishinaabe value systems and demonstrates how essential constitutional reform is to White Earth’s “decolonization process and . . . demonstration of sovereignty” (84).

The series of epigraphs that open *Ratification* announce the themes of land, narrative, and cultural sovereignty that structure the text’s argument. A passage drawn from Fernando Baez suggests the importance of cultural sovereignty to White Earth. It begins: “The book is an institution of memory for consecration and permanence, and for that reason should be studied as a key element in society’s cultural patrimony.” I conclude with this quote because it draws attention to the signifying value of the collection of documents that make up *Ratification*. This value announces the text itself as a record of import that seeks to become part of the White Earth cultural memory even if constitutional reform had not proven successful. Since the *CWEN* passed, *Ratification* is an indispensable background record for understanding and, perhaps, emulating its groundbreaking process. If the new Constitution had not passed, on the other hand, *Ratification* would nonetheless stand as a cul-

tural artifact memorializing a revolutionary gambit well worth preserving in cultural memory and textual history. The outcome of November's referendum makes *Ratification* a roadmap to success and a source of celebratory memory. However, whatever the outcome of the White Earth vote, the process recorded in *Ratification* is itself witness to a landmark moment and a triumph in the ongoing struggle for Native sovereignty.

M. Elise Marubbio and Eric L. Buffalohead, eds. *Native Americans on Film: Conversations, Teaching, and Theory*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8131-3665-3. 390 pp.

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Native Americans on Film compiles essays and interviews from various scholars and Native filmmakers in order to discuss Native film from a Native perspective. The anthology posits how alternative ideas and visions of Native-ness within Native film serve to combat the stereotypical depictions of Native people and culture found in most mainstream films. The three sections of the anthology, “Theoretical Conversations,” “Pedagogical Conversations,” and “Conversations with Filmmakers,” organize the information in broad, accessible categories for both scholars and nonscholars alike. These conversations capture the contemporary moment of Native film while both looking backward and forward, allowing the anthology to demonstrate that discussions about Native film have been, and will continue to be, a process involving all members of the Native film community.

The beginning section, “Theoretical Conversations,” contains essays outlining major theories surrounding Native film and filmmaking. Houston Wood opens the section by comparing and contrasting Native and Euro-American filmmaking but maintains that what can be understood as Native film and filmmaking is in itself quite diverse and cannot be reduced to a single category. Wood's essay is an excellent introduction to the primary debates and issues in Native film, particularly the tensions between Native and non-Native depictions of Indigenous people. Visual sovereignty is the topic of Michelle H. Raheja's essay. She introduces and discusses the concept in relation to two films, the non-Native-made *Nanook of the North* and the Native-made *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*. Both films have the Inuit people as their subject but rep-