

**The Ghost Dancers.** By Adrian C. Louis. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2021. 247 pages. \$28.00 cloth; \$22.00 ebook.

Adrian C. Louis's posthumous novel tells the story of Lyman "Bean" Wilson, the fictional grandson of the Paiute spiritual leader Wovoka, and his relatives. Like the author himself, his character Wilson is a Paiute poet, journalist, and instructor with an Ivy League education who lives and teaches in the Oglala community at Pine Ridge; readers familiar with Louis's life and work will recognize such autobiographical details incorporated throughout the novel. The third-person narrative perspective in *The Ghost Dancers* is shared among three characters: Wilson, his son, Quanah, and his stepson, Toby. As the narrative perspective rotates among these three characters, the action shifts back and forth between Pine Ridge in South Dakota and the Walker River Paiute reservation in northern Nevada. Louis makes the most of opportunities afforded by the novels' two settings to incorporate Lakota and Paiute histories and cultural references. Although the action in the novel is confined to a brief period from fall 1988 to summer 1989, Louis repeatedly demonstrates how the events in the present—and the characters' responses to them—are shaped in part by both Lakota and Paiute histories and cosmologies.

As noted by Steve Pacheco in the foreword to *The Ghost Dancers*, Louis likely completed the novel during the late 1980s or early 1990s. Readers acquainted with Louis' poetry, short stories, and his 1995 novel *Skins* (later adapted into the 2002 film directed by Chris Eyre) will find comparable themes in *The Ghost Dancers*. The similarities between Louis' two novels are especially striking, from the characters bitten by trickster spider Iktomi to characters' efforts to disfigure George Washington's nose at the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. Readers should be aware that, like *Skins*, *The Ghost Dancers* contains disturbing images, themes, and language. Examples of such content include, but are not limited to, alcohol and substance abuse, hate crimes, gruesome killings of Indigenous youth, child molestation, rape, incest, and suicide. Moreover, the novel is saturated with racist, sexist, homophobic, and vulgar language. While the characters ultimately attribute the prevalence of many of these issues and attitudes in their communities to the ongoing impacts of colonialism, the meddling influences of figures from oral tradition such as Iktomi or Deer Woman, or the disrespectful mishandling of sacred items, the portrait of Indian country in *The Ghost Dancers* is most often bleak.

It is in this context that Wilson and eleven of his colleagues from Lakota University operate the Ghost Dance Society, a society that began as a literary discussion group and then evolved into what Wilson describes as a traditional police society rather than a vigilante group. The actions taken by Wilson and the members of the Ghost Dance Society once again evoke similar scenes in *Skins*, from their

propensity for breaking people's kneecaps with aluminum baseball bats to their decision to destroy the largest liquor store in the nearby reservation border town, White Clay, Nebraska. And, as in *Skins*, these actions do not always result in the intended outcomes; even as they carry out their plans, Wilson and the other members of the Ghost Dance Society are often aware that their actions are not truly aligned with Lakota values. Wilson's participation in the Ghost Dance Society, however, opens opportunities for exploring intersections of Paiute and Lakota identities and histories in the novel, particularly surrounding the Ghost Dance, which Louis described in a 2016 interview with *Indian Country Today* as what he believed to be "the prime metaphor and reality for what the colonizers did to Indian people . . . the genocide, the theft of land, all the pure evil." Wilson, as one of only two non-Lakota members of the group, frequently feels like an outsider in the Ghost Dance Society.

Yet as the grandson of Wovoka, the spiritual leader who led the second wave of the Ghost Dance movement a century earlier, Wilson is also on certain levels an insider. Wilson's own life shares some parallels with the history of the Ghost Dance movement itself. Both trace their origins to the Paiute community, but eventually made their way to the Lakota homelands and integrated Lakota traditions with Paiute ones; Wilson enjoys pointing out this "miracle of history's circularity" (35). Through his grandfather, Auburn (Wovoka's son), and his Lakota friend Janis, Wilson has access to both Paiute and Lakota spiritual knowledge and traditions, yet struggles to get his life on track. Auburn's message upon his death to both Wilson and Quanah, for example, reminds them that Wovoka's teachings were rooted in love and learning to get along with other people; he emphasizes that Wilson must stop drinking, stop harming others, and strive to "do right always" (224). Wilson's actions throughout the novel contrast sharply with this advice; he drinks continually, takes part in Ghost Dance Society activities intended to inflict harm on others, and rather than acting as a good husband and father, he runs away with a young student. Janis recognizes a "deeper sickness" in Wilson despite his attempts to stay sober and arranges a sweat and a Yuwipi ceremony for him (202), yet Wilson quickly returns to his old habits. While the prologue offers a glimpse of Wilson's future and foreshadows a new set of problems as well as the possibility of new beginnings, the outcome of ceremony is somewhat ambiguous. Louis' suggestion that ceremonies and guidance from elders and relatives may not be able to help a person fully meet the challenges of living in a postcolonial world is a message that some readers may find deeply disheartening.

Like his character Wilson, who tries to "break away from the rhetoric everyone in Indian country knew by heart" (207) in his newspaper editorials, Louis appears intent upon providing a view of reservation life during the late 1980s that will challenge any idyllic notions readers may bring to the novel, and in this respect *The Ghost Dancers* is a success. Readers interested in the evolution of Louis' style as a writer and repeated themes in his work will find much to appreciate in the novel, as will readers who enjoy a narrative packed with references to Native sovereignty, histories, cosmologies, and both Native and mainstream popular culture. Some readers, however, may find that this modern variation on a trickster story—in which characters' actions continually caution readers about how not to live—unpalatable, not because they wish to cling

to romanticized views of Indian country, but because certain themes in *The Ghost Dancers* may be too painful to contend with a context that leaves such little room for hope or healing.

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