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Review of *Women Elders' Life Stories of the Omaha Tribe: Macy, Nebraska, 2004-2005* by Wynne L. Summers

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*Women Elders' Life Stories of the Omaha Tribe: Macy, Nebraska, 2004–2005.* By Wynne L. Summers. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xxix + 112 pp. Map, photographs, works cited, index. \$35.00.

I'm not sure that I've ever read such a light volume that carries such heavy contents. This book's dramatic core encompasses the life stories of three women from the Omaha Tribe in Macy, Nebraska: Eleanor Baxter, the first woman elected tribal chairperson; and Alice Saunsoci and Håwate (Wenona Caramony), language teachers and educators. Their stories collectively describe mid to late twentieth-century experiences of American Indian women, each of whom grew up learning, living, and working on the Omaha reservation and off it in what they describe as "multicultural societies" such as in Lincoln, Nebraska. Each returned to the reservation later in life to a position of cultural influence.

The book is difficult to place in terms of genre. The dust jacket describes it as a "poetical account," as it includes the author's interpretations of Omaha women's lives in poems (of sorts) sprinkled throughout. The volume contains two analytical chapters, "Finding the

Sacred” and “Language as Landscape”; a fair amount of autobiographical material describing Summers’s research process; an Omaha Language Pronunciation Guide; selected historical material; and a mixture of photos, including of the author with other Omaha language students. Collectively, the book skims and dips into so many genres (all in a hundred pages) that it is unclear what it is meant to be as a book. There are a number of editorial malfunctions, including the analytical chapters’ tendency to wander around various topics; moreover, the author’s role as editor of the first-hand accounts is never made explicit.

These unfortunate and distracting problems ultimately do not eclipse the compelling, powerful life stories. I read the book in one sitting, unable to put it down once I discovered Eleanor Baxter, Alice Saunsoci, and H awate in their own voices. Baxter relates her resistance to the public school racism she and her siblings faced in Lincoln: “we were called names . . . We’d tell the white kids we were fighting, ‘You guys should jump on the Mayflower and go back across the ocean.’” Alice Saunsoci grew up speaking Omaha at home; using gestures to communicate with the teacher when first learning English at a one-room schoolhouse (circa 1940s), she relates, “I pointed at things I wanted, but the one that caught my eye was this tablet. It was red and it had a chief on it. Indian. To me, that was beautiful. I picked that out first.”

Wynne Summers has made a significant contribution in bringing these women’s voices to a wide audience. All the women eventually returned to Macy, and each is now dedicated to the survival of the Omaha language and people. Their poignant stories describe poverty and racism; they describe the social and cultural norms of Native ways as they straddled marginal and mainstreams worlds; and they all describe the redemptive qualities of returning home to Macy.

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