For this Sunday, September 8, 2019, the Today's Issues group will discuss two articles from the August 15 issue of the New York Review of Books:

Page 37, Ian Frazier, "Staying Native," an essay about Wounded Knee and Native American history

Page 54, James Gleik, "Moon Fever," an essay about America's space program.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the readings and join our lively discussion.

Moon Fever can be read without a password by clicking here. A copy of Staying Native follows:

Staying Native
Ian FrazierAUGUST 15, 2019 ISSUE
The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present
by David Treuer
Riverhead, 512 pp., $28.00
A commemoration of the Wounded Knee massacre, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, 2016
Matt Black/Magnum Photos
A commemoration of the Wounded Knee massacre, Pine Ridge, South Dakota, 2016
In 1881 Helen Hunt Jackson, a member of that era's East Coast liberal elite, shook up her world with her book A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes. Much of it is about massacres of Indians. As Bishop H.B. Whipple wrote in the introduction, "We have not a hundred miles between the Atlantic and Pacific which has not been the scene of an Indian massacre." Jackson revived memories of horrors that had been almost forgotten and are barely remembered today—the killing of peaceful Moravian Indians at what is now Gnadenhutten, Ohio, or the wiping out of a small tribe of Christian Conestoga Indians in Pennsylvania just after the French and Indian War. She had a feeling for the details that could make a reader weep.

The book devoted its central chapters to each of seven major tribes: the Delaware, Cheyenne, Nez Perce, Sioux, Ponca, Winnebago, and Cherokee. Her point was to show that the government had dishonored itself with its cruel treatment of them, and that white people in general had not behaved toward Indians in a Christian way. When she wrote, the worst and most famous modern Indian massacre was still almost ten years off. On December 29, 1890, the Seventh Cavalry slaughtered as many as three hundred Miniconjou and Hunkpapa Sioux men, women, and children in South Dakota, at Wounded Knee Creek.

David Treuer's new book, The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present, uses that as a starting point. Jackson saw Indians as noble, helpless, and pitiful. Treuer, who is the son of an Ojibwe mother and a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, instead celebrates Indians' strength—how they've survived and prevailed. He grew up on the Leech

Lake Reservation, in northern Minnesota, and he writes with hard-won authority. In a sense, his book can serve as a broad sequel to Jackson's, outlining the history of Indian policy in America from then to now. His story is of a different kind of struggle. Whereas Indian history in the nineteenth century was bloody, "during the twentieth century the warfare waged between Indians and whites was of a quieter kind—instead of guns the combatants carried petitions; instead of scalps, people held aloft legal briefs."

That quote is actually from Treuer's previous book of nonfiction, Rez Life: An Indian's Journey Through Reservation Life (2012), which is a memoir focused more on his own family and other Indians in Minnesota. The two books sometimes cover the same ground and could be considered companions to each other. Stories told briefly in one book are sometimes told more fully in the other.

The history of Indian policy teems with complications, erratic shifts of direction, and fine print. It can wear a writer out, not to mention a reader. In 1832, in a ruling pertaining to the right of the Cherokee to remain in their Georgia homeland in defiance of the government's desire that they leave, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall described the Indian tribes as "domestic dependent nations." In effect, his ruling left the Cherokee to the mercies of President Andrew Jackson and the state of Georgia, and led to thousands of Cherokee deaths on the Trail of Tears. The evasive inscrutability of Marshall's formula became the source of all kinds of confusion. Until I read Treuer, I had never grasped how advantageous it is for a writer to be a potential litigant if he or she wants to explain certain intricate matters of policy. Laws become less dry, complicated, and mysterious when they apply immediately and maybe even painfully to yourself; and, as he writes in Rez Life:

In Indian country, it seems everyone is a lawyer; everyone has a vested interest in the exact letter of the law and nowhere else does one feel the direct pressure or pleasure of laws, statutes, Supreme Court decisions, or shifts in federal policy.

Over the last century-and-almost-a-third, federal policy toward Indians has veered wildly. Sometimes Indians were supposed to disappear, and tribes and reservations would be no more. The consequences of A Century of Dishonor, to cite an egregious example, threatened to erase reservations entirely. Moved by the book, influential friends of the Indian decided that he would be vulnerable to attack and unprotected by law until he became a citizen, and before he could do that he must possess property. Therefore, with the Dawes Act (1887), Congress provided for the dividing up of reservations into allotments, with a certain number of acres going to every head of household. Conveniently for non-Indians, the allotments left plenty of "surplus" land available for purchase; indigent Indians also could often be persuaded to sell theirs. As a result of this act, the amount of land controlled by Indians went from 138 million acres to 48 million acres in less than fifty years. Today, more non-Indians than tribal members live on Treuer's Leech Lake Reservation. Many other reservations have a similar disproportion. The Dawes Act was not the last time that white people who thought they were trying to help Indians achieved an essentially opposite result.

During the Depression another swerve occurred. By foiling expectations and not dying out—in 1917 the population of Indians in America went up for the first time in a hundred years—Indians inspired the government to take a second look at them. John Collier, the head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs under President Franklin Roosevelt, pushed through a new dispensation called the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, also known as the Indian New Deal. It finally halted the policy of allotment and led to the reacquisition of some reservation land, and it set up tribal governments with their own constitutions. Ethnicity was big at the time; Collier, who had a spiritual attachment to the Pueblo tribes of the Southwest, wanted to bring back Indian cultures everywhere.

Then the war happened, followed by the Fifties, a time of conformity, when Indians were again supposed to become like everybody else. This policy era would be known as “termination”—the end of the reservation system and the gradual disestablishment of Indian tribes. Thousands of Indians moved to cities during this period—by 1970, half of all Indians lived in urban areas—and seventy-some tribes went out of official existence. But during Johnson’s and Nixon’s presidencies the government noticed that Indian poverty and unemployment had increased under termination. It switched back to an emphasis on tribal sovereignty and Indian self-determination yet again. Many tribes that had been terminated applied for and won official re-recognition. These policy changes were mostly top-down, one-size-fits-all-Indians, and enough to make any tribe trying to keep up with them dizzy.

Since then, a big development in Indian country has been the rise of tribal gambling; it’s what many people think of when they think of Indians. With clarity and skill, Treuer traces the legal origins of the rise of Indian casinos (which now take in about $20 billion a year, but do not greatly affect the rate of Indian poverty because most reservations are too remote and hard for gamblers to get to). The crucial case began on his own Leech Lake Reservation, in the early 1970s, with a lawsuit over a property tax bill for $148 that Itasca County levied on a trailer owned by Helen and Russell Bryan. Lawyers for the tribe’s Legal Services Project took the case all the way to the Supreme Court.

Lead attorney Bernie Becker argued that the applicable law, Public Law 280, passed by Congress in 1953 to transfer certain kinds of jurisdiction over Indian reservations from the federal government to the states, was meant only to combat lawlessness on reservations. He claimed that it did not intend to give states the right to tax Indian property or regulate other civil functions. When the Supreme Court found in the Bryans’ favor, the decision opened the door to the tribes’ being able (for example) to sell cigarettes without paying state taxes and run their own gambling operations free from most regulation. Soon, tribal casinos near urban areas on both coasts were thriving. Aside from saving $148, the Bryans never made a penny off their victory, but Treuer prints their address in both books in case someone wants to send them a dollar in gratitude (Helen (Bryan) Johnson, 60876 County Road 149, Squaw Lake, MN 56681).

In The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee, he leaves out the interesting fact, mentioned in Rez Life, that his mother, Margaret Seelye Treuer, a young law student at the time, observed the arguments in Bryan v. Itasca County from the gallery of the Supreme Court, and during a lunch break gave Becker advice that helped him win the case. Margaret Treuer went on to practice law on the reservation and become a judge in the Bois Forte Tribal Court.

That type of personal story is a highlight of both books. In The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee, Treuer talks to lots of Indians to illustrate how they're remaining themselves and helping their people—serving in a high federal government post dealing with Indians, preserving ancient rituals on the Acoma Pueblo, strengthening ties as a member of a landless North Dakota tribe by means of social media, running successful tribal businesses on the Tulalip Reservation in Washington. Some of the best stories involve Treuer's encounters with fellow Ojibwe in Minnesota. He follows his cousin, Sam Cleveland, who competes in mixed-martial-arts cage fights in tribal casinos, where members of the crowd have "colorful tribal tattoos, and also a lot of tattoos that suffered from what can only be called bad penmanship."

On several occasions Treuer goes into the woods and out on the lakes with Bobby Matthews, a stocky, strongly built man with a graying ponytail who "shaves once a year, on his birthday." Matthews makes his living by hunting and gathering. He harvests wild rice, collects the green cones of many kinds of spruces and pines and sells them to seed suppliers, traps fur-bearing animals, hunts deer, and annually makes tens of thousands of dollars catching leeches, a popular item in Minnesota's $50 million-a-year bait industry. Matthews talks like this:

So Dave, so the guy says to me, "Where'd you get all those leeches, Bob?" And Dave, I says to him, I say, "Well, look here, goddamn it, I got 'em in the getting place, that's where." So I says, "Does it look like I have STUPID written across my forehead? Why would I tell you where I got my leeches?" Can you believe it, David? Can you believe it?

In the winter, when not much else is going on, Matthews searches the woods for highbush cranberry bushes, whose select branches he harvests ("Cut 'em cock thick, David"), loads onto a sled, puts on his truck, takes back to his shop, and peels with a specially modified potato peeler. Ready markets exist for the bark, which is said to relieve menstrual cramps. Treuer asks him if it really does. Matthews replies, "How the hell should I know? I've never had menstrual cramps, David!"

Matthews could be the subject of an entire book, with his minute and encyclopedic knowledge of the North Woods. Each time he reappears in The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee, he energizes it. Treuer connects him to the larger contributions made by Matthews's generation—those Indians who grew up in cities as well as on reservations, came of age in the 1960s, and provided the core of radical activists who founded the American Indian Movement (AIM). He describes AIM's penchant for violence without looking away from it or excusing it, while reminding us of the good AIM has done, the advances in education and housing and job training that have resulted from its activism; because of AIM, by the end of the 1980s, "Indian life had become Indian again." To

Treuer, Matthews represents a different kind of sovereignty. This resourceful man has prevailed “not through protest and politics, but through learning to live a life on the land, an Indian life.”

Ahundred and twenty years ago there were only about 200,000 Indians in the US. Today there are more than two million. Indian languages, though, are dying. Of the three-hundred-some native languages that existed on the continent when Europeans arrived, only twenty are expected to survive into the next century. For Indian life to remain Indian, Treuer believes, there will have to be a lot of people who speak Ojibwe and Navaho and Sioux and the other still-existing native languages. A fear of identity nothingness haunts him. He asks, “At what point do we cease being Indians and become simply people descended from Indians?” To keep that point as far off as possible for himself, knowing how to speak Ojibwe is essential.

Women’s Voices at the Council, artwork by Joan Hill
Joan Hill/Oklahoma State Art Collection/Oklahoma Arts Council
Joan Hill (Muskogee Creek and Cherokee): Women’s Voices at the Council, 1990; from the exhibition ‘Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists,’ on view at the Minneapolis Institute of Art until August 18, 2019. The catalog is edited by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, and published by the museum and University of Washington Press.
At the most basic level, maintaining the Ojibwe religion requires familiarity with the language. “It cannot be practiced in English,” he writes. “The death of our language would likely be the death of us, certainly the death of our ceremonial life.” Treuer worked to set up an Ojibwe- language immersion project at Leech Lake, but met resistance. Young people in particular had little interest in studying Ojibwe. The negatives of reservation life—the gloomy statistics of poverty and unemployment and alcoholism and diabetes and high rates of suicide and death by accident, all of which, as he notes, persist despite the positives he celebrates—create huge obstacles to teaching and learning a language.

Treuer himself speaks Ojibwe and hangs out with people who do. He tells about an evening when he and two friends go out on a lake to spear walleye, the fish that has fed the tribe for centuries. The lakeshore is crowded with summer homes; rumor says that Oprah Winfrey owns one of them. The night is quiet except for the rattle of the spear against the side of the boat and the flopping of the fish in the bottom. Treuer went to Princeton, descends from European Jews as well as from Ojibwe, writes novels, teaches creative writing, and speaks his tribe’s language with his friends while spearing walleye at night in the traditional custom of his ancestors. As Barack Obama once said of himself, a story like his is possible only in America.

Or…maybe not. The world is now so globalized that individuals who combine widely diverse racial and cultural identities within a single self exist in every country. Maybe that is what is freaking people out all over the planet, causing them to want everybody to be impossibly simpler—to be only English or only French or only Hungarian or only white MAGA American. Maybe trying to contain multitudes is overheating people’s brains. Even embracing two allegiances at once can be hard. Again and again, Treuer returns to the subject of being

American. He says, “Our people spent the better part of the 1960s and 1970s figuring out how to be both Americans and Indians.”

It’s a tough challenge and an important one, because Indians are the bedrock Americans. Through history, the way that other, newer Americans conceived of themselves has been based a lot on them. Geographically, Indians occupy the most interior places—their reservations are in swamps, on flood-prone riverbanks, in deserts, at the ends of the highways, in the middle of the Plains, even at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Theirs is the deepest American identity and the one that goes back the farthest. Treuer tells the story of Robert E. Lee arriving at the house of Wilmer Mclean after the Battle of Appomattox to surrender to Ulysses S. Grant, when the Civil War had torn the idea of being an American in half. Seeing Colonel Ely Parker, a Seneca from New York who served as Grant’s adjutant, Lee said, “I am glad to see one real American here.” In Parker’s account, he replied to Lee, “We are all Americans.”

It’s a moving remark, perhaps the first moment of healing after the war. Treuer also describes the wider contributions of Indians to the American military; they have fought for the US in every war since there was a United States, despite most Indians’ not having been made citizens until 1924. In Rez Life an Ojibwe friend tells Treuer about his fellow soldiers in Iraq, who knew nothing about Indians until he enumerated some of the injustices they’d suffered at the government’s hands. His comrades ask him why, given what his people went through, he decided to join the army. Treuer’s friend says, “Hey. This is still my fucking country. My Turtle Island. Get it?” In ancient belief, Turtle Island is the back of the giant turtle with water all around it on which all Indians—and now the rest of us—are standing.

In the epilogue to The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee, Treuer writes, “We [Indians] are, for better or worse, the body of our republic.” The book went to press soon after the political resurgence in Indian country that came with the 2018 election—a happy development that the book’s spirit of engagement may be said to have predicted. In Minnesota, voters chose Peggy Flanagan, an Ojibwe of the White Earth band, to be lieutenant governor. And for the first time ever, Native American women were elected to the US Congress: Sharice Davids, of the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) tribe, in Kansas, and Deb Haaland, of the Laguna Pueblo, in New Mexico (they and Flanagan are Democrats). Across the country, dozens of Indians ran for various local and statewide offices in 2018. The list of the candidates’ tribal affiliations is a poem of American geography, from the Gwi’chin in Alaska, to the Confederated Kootenai and Salish in Montana, to Oklahoma’s Absentee Shawnee.

More than twenty years ago I used to spend time with friends on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, home of the Oglala Sioux. Back then, people on Pine Ridge were talking about a girl named Tatewin Means. Her mother, Peggy Phelps Means, had friends among Oglala I knew, and her father was Russell Means, the famous activist and member of AIM. In 1995, at fifteen, Tatewin Means competed in the Miss Teen South Dakota pageant. When she won, the entire reservation was thrilled and proud. She went on to get a BA at Stanford and a law degree from the University of Minnesota. For five years she served as district attorney for the Oglala

Tribe, and last year she ran for the Democratic Party nomination for South Dakota attorney general.

She didn't win, but she made a campaign ad that's a first as far as I know. It is entirely in Lakota (Sioux), with subtitles in English. Means talks about herself, her tribe, and what she hopes to do for all the people of South Dakota. As a spoken language Lakota is beautiful, but aside from that I can't explain why the ad moves me. I've watched it over and over. It reminds me of the remarkable fact, mentioned by Treuer, that between the world wars Hitler sent anthropologists to the US to study Indian languages so they could not be used as impenetrable codes on the battlefield. In fact, the radio communications of Navaho and other Indian "code talkers" were never deciphered by the enemy in World War II.

Any American thing that messed up Hitler has to be worth preserving. Forget spending our money on walls—let's direct serious attention to the revival and strengthening of native languages. Treuer's instinct about their importance is sound. As his powerful and deeply felt books make clear, knowing better who you are might save your life, and your tribe's life, and maybe your country, too.
