
Gretchen M. Bataille, ed. *Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images, and Literary Appropriations*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. 265p.

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In November of 2001, I opened my local newspaper to a photo of a newly commissioned sculpture that was recently unveiled at one of my hometown's elementary schools. The sculpture—described as “stunning”—was of a white colonial girl (Sarah Noble, a member of the town's “first” family) reading to two Native American (presumably Weantinogues, though unclear) children situated below her. The newly minted school was named after Sarah Noble, who is considered a hero to the children of our town. I made a very public effort to get the sculpture, at the very least, altered, but to no avail as the public rallied against my request.

I knew before I raised the issue, of course, that stereotypes of Native Americans abound in the media. I was surprised, however, that a newly commissioned stereotype, in this case the stereotype of “civilizing the savage,” wound up in my local school. The commissioning of this sculpture reinforces the reality that stereotypical representations of Native Americans are deeply inscribed in the dominant culture's unconscious. The purpose of the essayists in Gretchen M. Bataille's *Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images, and Literary Appropriations* is to work toward the goal of uprooting these representations “as each [essayist] attempts to give back, as a sort of apology, the dignified voice or space that has been usurped from American Indians through stereotypes and misrepresentations” (Shanely 226). For these essayists, “giving back” this Native “voice or space” is linked to questions regarding who controls the representations of Native Americans and what form that voice must take if it is to be effective. And it is no easy task for a Native writer to forge an effective voice. As Louis Owens argues in his essay, “As if an Indian Were Really an Indian,” “After five hundred years of war, colonial infantilization and linguistic erasure, cultural denigration, and more, how and where does the Native writer discover a voice that may be heard at the metropolitan center?” (19).

A great strength of this book—a natural outgrowth of its variety of essays—is that it does not oversimplify “how and where” a Native American writer finds a voice, and these essays show that this “voice” does not have its origins in some essentialized form of Native American identity. Nor does this necessarily mean, as many of these critics point out, that how misrepresentations of Native Americans are challenged is necessarily effective. For instance, when Native American artists

appropriate the very stereotypes they hope to debunk, how do they do so, and to what ends? Moreover, should they appropriate stereotypes? If they do not, does this make them ineffective Native voices?

And what is the scholar's responsibility in locating Native voices? In the case of collaborative Native American autobiography, Kathleen M. Sands, in her essay "Cooperation and Resistance," calls for critics to move away from Western critical theory, which in her view ironically silences Native voices and Native traditions themselves. Sands argues, "we have limited ourselves to reading Native American collaborative autobiography almost exclusively in terms of Euro-American political and literary theories" (139). She argues that for scholars to properly engage Native American texts "demands intensive study of oral traditions and linguistics" (141). This does not mean, of course, that a scholar's understanding of a particular First Nation's "traditions and linguistics" isn't without its difficulties, for the scholar inevitably runs the risk of replicating colonial practices of speaking for that First Nation.

The book is not presumptuous about its importance. As Kathryn Shanley acknowledges in her "Afterword," "American Indian writers do and will continue to represent tribal worldviews through the myriad of literary and artistic forms that capture their imaginations ... and those writings will do more than any metacriticism can" (226). But Shanley makes the case in her essay, "The Indians America Loves to Love and Read," that scholarly questions about the representations of Native Americans are still highly relevant. For instance, regarding the question of just who constitutes a genuine Native author, she argues, "much is at stake. To the grassroots activist, more pressing concerns related to basic survival—health, education, and welfare—receive first priority; ongoing legal battles and negotiations with state and federal governments preoccupy Indian leadership as well" (33). In other words, questions about the representations of Native Americans, and who controls these representations, affects the ability of Native Americans to speak on their own terms against the dominant culture, which in turn can impede their ability to produce positive social change.

Many critics, as is readily acknowledged throughout the book, have addressed the representation of Native Americans in popular culture and literature, but this book extends this critical discourse for those in Native American Studies and anyone working in American culture and literature. Moreover, one reads this book with the clear sense that these critics are morally committed to what they're writing about. The book implicitly suggests that this moral commitment must find linkages to a wider American audience if it is going to mean anything in terms of positive social transformation. ✱