

“Our Indian Princess”: Subverting the Stereotype.* Nancy Marie Mithlo. Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2009. 208 pp.

Reviewed by Stephanie May de Montigny

In *“Our Indian Princess”: Subverting the Stereotype*, Nancy Marie Mithlo draws upon informal interviews and methods of narrative analysis, oral history, and museum studies. Mithlo avoids detailed ethnographic descriptions of people, places, and events. She refuses to “dissect Native women’s lives” (p. 21). Rather, she places the narratives of Native women artists in dialogue with theorists and highlights points of convergence and disparity between them. Thus she mobilizes “Native women’s narratives as authoritative texts” to achieve “a necessary step toward reaching intellectual parity” (pp. 7, 21). Some ethnographers’ efforts to alternate between their own exegesis and the narratives of consultants result in jarring and disconnected texts. However, Mithlo successfully integrates her complex theoretical discussion with the artists’ own commentary.

Mithlo brings her personal experiences and professional background—as art student, writer, curator, and professor—to bear on the issues. Her position as a student and professor of museum studies at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, NM provided the means through which she could observe and participate in the arts community and interview women artists. For this book, she relied primarily upon interviews with seven artists over 20 years. The artists themselves reviewed their narratives for inclusion in the book. Mithlo concentrated on individuals based in urban settings, especially Santa Fe. She also interviewed women in reservation and urban locations such as New York City, Atlanta, GA, and more.

Mithlo terms her study “an intervention in theory” (p. 20). She draws upon and critiques a wide range of literature from anthropology, Native American studies, African-American studies, feminist theory, and much more. Part of her purpose in this intervention is “to mend old, ineffective approaches” that have persisted for decades and limited scholarship on Native American identity (p. 5). For example, she traces the rejection of pan-Indianism to the works of Robert Berkhofer and Roy Harvey Pearce. Mithlo disagrees with the assumption that “only individual tribal entities deserve recognition as authentic purveyors of Native identity” (p. 30). She sees such misconceptions, among others, expressed in Edward Rothstein’s *New York Times* article critiquing the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC.

Mithlo recognizes Indian identity as fluid and multifaceted, but she argues that to preclude identity at the level of pan-Indianism denies Native people an important basis on which to organize and act politically. Mithlo asserts that pan-Indianism developed through the United States government’s treatment of Native groups as undifferentiated. Therefore, she states that pan-Indianism is one platform through which Native people can address the oppressive legacy of colonialism. It would be further illuminating to bring her analysis into dialogue with the literature on pan-Indianism in powwows.

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While Mithlo agrees that demeaning stereotypes of Native Americans, such as sports mascots, “degrade and diminish Native personhood,” she does not advocate the eradication of stereotypes in general (p. 2). Yet she asks how one can appropriate stereotypes without reifying them. Drawing on scholars like Keith Basso, she sees stereotypes as ways that people understand difference and construct expressions of self-identity. In particular, Native women articulate “conflicting values of artistic identity by contrast” (p. 111). For example, the narrative of Laura Fragua Cota shows that Native women artists shape their work in response to family and community concerns more often than do Euro-American artists.

Further, Mithlo points out that by addressing stereotypes, Native people can remember and counteract the persistent and destructive effects of racist colonial histories. She argues that to merely eradicate stereotypes would preclude the dialogues through which Native people can reclaim and rehabilitate negative imagery and diffuse its power. In line with the book’s title, Mithlo states that the use of phrases like “the pretty little Indian princess” permits Native women to “critique colonial legacies,” claim ownership of “the language of the oppressors,” and “mobilize new understandings of self” (p. 131).

On the causes of negative stereotypes, Mithlo outlines mentalist perspectives as concerned with imagery and ideas while realist positions point to material concerns and political and social behavior. In contrast, she recommends not segmenting images and ideas from material and social conditions. Nevertheless, rather than focus on causality, she advocates that “a more productive route is to consider how people think of images—how these are constructed, produced and used and with what intentions” (p. 39).

In her most compelling discussion, Mithlo states that Native American art should be regarded as fine art, not ethnography. She emphasizes that Native women artists who utilize modernist visual devices do not conform to the Euro-American ideology of individualism, competition, and commercialism that accompany fine arts practice. Rather, Mithlo argues for greater recognition of indigenous aesthetics that connect art to values of community, land, and memory. In exploring indigenous aesthetics, Mithlo builds on Howard Becker’s notion of art worlds. Although she does not discuss Clifford Geertz specifically, parallels may be drawn to his concept of sensibility.

Mithlo also draws upon Purnima Mankekar’s work on women’s television viewing in India to point out that engagement with imagery is a “site of struggle,” not a straightforward expression of resistance or compliance to dominant ideology (p. 27). Mithlo reiterates Joe Traugott’s point that reappropriation of consumer culture forms does not indicate the same content, aim, and meaning. Through the narratives of artists like Emmi Whitehorse, Gloria Emerson, Roxanne Swentzell, Jean LaMarr, and more, Mithlo shows how women contradict dominant arts ideology and assert Native philosophies, values, and modes of artistic process. Similarly, Tessie Naranjo’s description of NMAI’s collaborative curatorial process demonstrates the enactment of Native approaches to museum practice.

Mithlo’s work contributes to a wide range of theoretical discussions. The language of the book makes it too difficult as a text for undergraduates and may also inhibit its accessibility to a wider

lay audience. Nevertheless, her arguments on pan-Indianism, stereotypes, indigenous aesthetics, and Native American art as fine art challenge modes of museum representation, research, and writing. While Mithlo does not specifically address teaching, her work should be consulted to inform pedagogical strategies that convey more complex approaches to Native American identity.

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