

***Playing Ourselves: Interpreting Native Histories at Historic Reconstructions.*
Laura Peers. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007. 207 pp.***

Reviewed by Rhonda S. Fair

When we think about provocative or radical representations of Native peoples in public spaces, we often think of large national and academically-focused museums, particularly those institutions featuring fine art. However, Laura Peers demonstrates in *Playing Ourselves: Interpreting Native Histories at Historic Reconstructions* that some often overlooked areas can be just as politically engaged. Some of the most intriguing and radical work in this vein occurs at historical reconstructions, sites that are not quite museum, not quite tourist attraction, but something in-between. These liminal places provide the perfect environment for challenging, teaching, and engaging the public through discourse with Native interpreters.

Peers focuses her work on five historical reconstructions: Lower Fort Garry, Fort William, the North West Company Fur Post, Colonial Michilimackinac, and Sainte-Marie Among the Huron. These sites depict colonial expansion and the fur trade in North America, and though Peers gives a brief history of each site, it would sometimes be difficult for a more casual reader to keep them separate. Though these reconstructions differ in many ways, including staffing, budget, and so forth, they all employ Native interpreters. Peers begins by describing each of these sites as landscapes: "Landscapes are not only shaped by cultural knowledge, but are places to articulate and perform cultural beliefs; they are performance spaces where core beliefs underpinning society are enacted" (p. 1). This perspective ensures that the places themselves are seen as active players in cultural performances, and Peers' subtle critiques of the geography of these sites is well-served by such a perspective. For example, she demonstrates that the sites' attempts to portray Native people as friends, relatives, and partners rather than adversaries are often undermined by the placement of recreated Native encampments outside of large palisades.

After setting the stage, so to speak, some of Peers' most important observations follow. The chapter on cosmologies demonstrates a few of the many difficult issues that site managers face. Many of the historical reconstructions described here depict a difficult time in Native history, an era of upheaval and great change. At the same time, though, many of these sites commemorate the "cosmology of the frontier" and the nation-building version of the past that many Native people find incomplete and insulting at best, negligent at worst. This situation turns historical reconstructions into sites with the potential for great social change. As Peers points out, adding Native interpreters and encampments at these sites "goes against the grain of traditional historical narratives and the ways that the past has been represented...the addition of Native people and voices to historic sites is a critical challenge" (p. 53).

One of the most compelling chapters in this book describes how Native interpreters "make it personal." Many of the interpreters feel that they are literally "playing themselves." They are individuals with real connections to these sites, representatives of what their ancestors experienced at the site as well as the product of that experience. Native interpreters have

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firsthand experience with the effects of colonialism and use this experience to challenge the assumptions and stereotypes that some visitors bring with them to the reconstructed sites. Peers presents several instances when Native interpreters openly challenge these stereotypes, sometimes gently, sometimes confrontationally. In many of these accounts, the visitors express a shift in attitude and come away with a fuller understanding of Native life, both in the past and today. Many visitors have never met a Native person before, and naturally their questions broach topics of the past and the present. As Peers discusses in the chapters on visitors and their encounters with interpreters, some people do leave with a deeper knowledge of Native life, and this provides a nice counterbalance to the generally pessimistic literature on cultural tourism. Of course, tourists at historical reconstructions are still gazing upon an idealized and recreated version of Native life, but frequently, “Native staff refute the discourse, refuse to be the symbols that tourists assume they are, and gaze—and talk—right back” (p. 139). The ignorance of some tourists and their regurgitation of stereotypes of Native life provide interpreters with openings, teachable moments in which they can provoke visitors into rethinking their expectations about the past (and consequently, the implications of those assumptions for the present).

In closing, Peers discusses the undeniable importance of Native interpreters at these historical sites. Not only do the interpreters add a component to each site, but they also challenge commonly held myths about the past and stereotypes about the present. This challenge is actually a radical departure in the message of many historical sites, but demonstrates that how we think about the past influences how we live in the present.

Peers’ work is a valuable contribution to the literature on the representation of Native peoples in museums, historical reconstructions, and other public spaces. It also provides a subtle critique of some of the prevailing trends in the literature on cultural tourism and the “tourist’s gaze.” Not only does she demonstrate why the contribution of Native interpreters is important, but she also shows the problems that such inclusion can have for site managers on a practical level. Adding staff can be a financial strain to small budgets; finding good interpreters who are willing to answer the same question repeatedly and to confront stereotypes on a daily basis is not easy. However, these are changes that can strengthen a site’s message in important ways. Peers is careful to offer practical solutions regarding site research, staff training, and other managerial concerns, while still stressing the theoretical importance of the changes she recommends. For this reason, Peers’ work is well-balanced, and readers from a variety of fields, including museum studies, ethnohistory, cultural tourism studies, and cultural performance theory, will find much here to appreciate.

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