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Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827–1863. By Maureen Konkle. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 367 pages. \$49.95 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Writing Indian Nations is an important book. At its center is the simple point that in the ability to write lies great power. Whosoever possesses the power of the pen wields considerable influence over those who do not. *Writing Indian Nations* critically evaluates a group of self-consciously political Native writers—Cherokees collectively resisting removal; William Apess, Pequot preacher; George Copway, Peter Jones, and William Warren, all Ojibwa historians; and a group of Iroquois writers—who emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Armed with literacy, they fought similarly equipped non-Natives who for too long had been writing about Indians. Over four long chapters, preceded by an excellent and thorough theoretical introduction, Maureen Konkle, an associate professor of English at the University of Missouri, Columbia, untangles her complicated argument.

As Konkle demonstrates, the Native writers whom she features had much in common. They all shared a similar impatience with the ways non-Indians wrote about Indians, but they were also very much products of the non-Indian world. To varying degrees, each was acculturated. Apess, for instance, did not even know he was Indian until late in his life. Almost all were Christians, and all, obviously, had the benefit of education and thus the ability to speak and write English. And each of them used education as a tool in the preservation of Indian political autonomy. This is a commonplace irony in Indian history—a similar outcome plagued the planners of the boarding schools when returned Indian students used their newfound skills for the same ends. Rather than assimilating—a condition too often ascribed to these writers, Konkle claims—and turning their backs on their people, each of these writers used what they had learned to protect Indians.

That Maureen Konkle does not explicitly underscore this irony does little to diminish her strong critique of a strain of current literary criticism, which, she suggests, finds these writers wanting in their Indianness. Indeed, Konkle's dislike for critics of Native literature who fetishize the oral over the written, who see writing in English as somehow less Indian, who possess an arbitrary yardstick by which to measure the "Indianness" of a given writer, and who maintain that "Indian" is solely a cultural signifier, and not at all a political one, is a strong undercurrent in *Writing Indian Nations*. The nineteenth-century writers she showcases were engaged in a specifically political project. Through their writing—published books, pamphlets, letters, petitions to Congress—they aimed to demonstrate that Indians were an autonomous people and that autonomy was guaranteed by treaties and their history of land use before the arrival of Europeans. (Her insistence on treaties, of course, leaves out those tribes who did not negotiate treaties with the United States but who still maintain political autonomy based on aboriginal title.) Unlike critics who insist on focusing on cultural difference, while at the same time diminishing Indian political autonomy, Konkle argues that these writers worked hard to diminish the differences between Indians and non-Indians based on race and

culture. Instead, they advanced the notion that, because of treaties and their precontact political autonomy, political separateness characterized Indian *nations*. At the same time, according to Konkle, these writers argued that racial difference was a fiction or, at the very least, irrelevant in determining Indians' political status. The only way to combat the ever-growing specter of racist writing on Indians was with writing to the contrary. Here's how Konkle puts it:

Although they differed in the details of their criticism of what they understood as EuroAmericans' egregious misrepresentations of Native peoples, they essentially endorsed two points: the prior and ongoing autonomy of Indian nations from subordination to EuroAmerican authority and Native peoples' authority over their traditional knowledge, history, and contemporary experience. They all maintained that EuroAmericans' knowledge about Indians' racial difference was politically motivated and therefore Indians' representations of themselves were crucial to their political struggles. (5)

To these ends, the authors in *Writing Indian Nations* embarked on a novel enterprise: writing History. Realizing that History—that peculiar invention of non-Indians designed to chart the progress of the white race—was keeping Native peoples out of the stream of progress by denying them a place in the past, they all aimed to show that their Histories guaranteed them political autonomy and land rights. Non-Indian writers and their books—like William Robertson's *History of the Discovery and Settlement of North America*, published and reprinted many times since 1777—claimed that the march of History trampled over Indians and left them behind. Evidence was abundant of Indians' place outside History. If, for example, Native peoples were meant to participate in the nation as distinct, then they would not be disappearing.

Konkle's book is complicated and her analysis dense. The prose is at times elegant, at times, muddled, marred by overlong, confusing sentences. Yet while her main arguments are not always clear, and occasionally repetitive, several very important points emerge. These Indian historians had common themes. First, by using oral and documentary sources they placed their respective tribes in History; they were not vanishing. Second, by showing that Indians were part of History they in turn argued passionately that there was no inherent racial difference between Indians and whites. Indians could easily keep up with whites as they both marched forward in time. And third, they all, more or less independent of one another, realized that *written* History can be very powerful.

Each one of these historians is a contradictory, complicated character. Take the Ojibwa historians Peter Jones, George Copway, and William Warren. Jones's *History of the Ojebway Indians* is at once a defense of Indian civil rights, a brief in support of their capacity for self-government, and an argument for their inherent ability to progress. But it's also a pro-Christian diatribe against all things primitive, an indictment of all things a non-Indian nineteenth-century observer might consider essentially Indian. Like all the writers Konkle

features, Jones possesses a certain degree of disdain for Indians, but at the same time works hard to preserve their political autonomy. In keeping with his Christianity, he reserved his most stringent criticisms—at least as quoted by Konkle—for Ojibwa religion. As he put it: “the poor dark minded Indian ignorantly worships the creatures of his own imagination,” which leaves him “deluded” (182). But Indians are capable of redemption, if they accept Christianity, which, as Konkle wisely points out, must be embraced by both Indians and non-Indians for both to be truly righteous.

Jones, to be sure, would not make culturalist critics happy. But that’s Konkle’s point, I think, in spending so much time on him and others like him, notably Copway and Warren. She is attempting to carve out a space in historically informed literary criticism between those elusive souls who remained “traditional,” and thus are embraced by modern-day sentimentalists, and those who “assimilated,” and are consequently lamented. Neither interpretation of these complicated writers is satisfactory, she rightly argues. And, as she points out, they are ahistorical as well. Konkle situates these writers in time, just as they situated themselves and their people in History. Critics who seek out Indian individuals as representatives of essential cultures ignore history. As Konkle maintains, the multicultural world in which we live embraces different cultures as long as they remain examples of cultural difference and not as entities possessing political autonomy and political difference. As we have replaced racial difference with cultural difference as the marker that distinguishes Indians and non-Indians, politics is still left out. Konkle writes, “The effects of difference and sympathy today, as in the nineteenth century, are to displace Native peoples’ political struggle—their struggle for history and autonomy—while maintaining the ideological coherence of the United States” (28). In this regard, a superb companion to *Writing Indian Nations* is Elizabeth Povinelli’s *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002). Povinelli and Konkle both go to great lengths to restore politics to debates about culture. While Konkle’s analysis remains focused on the past—with, of course, a keen eye on the present—Povinelli aims her laserlike mind at current concerns, mostly those stemming from Australia’s very recent (1992) recognition of Native Title. Both offer fierce critiques of those who sentimentalize, essentialize, and render ahistorical Native culture.

Writing Indian Nations covers a lot of ground. Its complicated exegesis of a simple point—and that’s not a criticism—should be considered by all who maintain an interest in a myriad of topics: Native self-representation, the power of History, and the long history of Native political activism, among others. Because it is so dense I cannot recommend it for undergraduate course use, but I do think it will appeal to more than literary critics. Konkle’s recognition and discussion of these writers and their intellectual work in defense of Indian political autonomy will also be of great interest to historians.

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