

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir. By Deborah A. Miranda.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8qw0j424>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 38(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Keliiaa, Caitlin

**Publication Date**

2014-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



**Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir.** By Deborah A. Miranda. Berkeley: Heyday, 2013. 240 pages. \$18.95 paper.

Few scholarly texts confront the enduring impacts of colonialism and none quite like Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians*. *Bad Indians* is an interdisciplinary memoir that uncovers the ignored history of California and California Indians. In this brilliantly moving book, Miranda explores her Ohlone and Costanoan-Esselen roots. She carries us on a journey dating back to the moment her parents met, and we travel farther—many generations before—to the home of her ancestors at Mission Dolores in San Francisco and Mission San Carlos Borroméo in Carmel. A writer, poet, and California Indian scholar, as well as an associate professor of English at Washington Lee University, Miranda has written a provocative and enlightening piece.

As a whole *Bad Indians* tells the true history of California Indians while exposing the atrocities. *Bad Indians* rightfully attacks mission mythology and California's gold rush fantasy to uncover the disturbing and very real consequences of colonization: genocide, an inherited genealogy of violence, sexual abuse, indigenous language attrition, and cultural degradation. And yet, Miranda does not leave Indians departed and forgotten; she breathes life into the ancestors and the survivors. *Bad Indians* asserts California Indian agency, resiliency, and tenacity.

Miranda's powerful text offers a counternarrative to contemporary understandings of Indian people that, frequently based on biased and uninformed falsehoods, gloss over California Indian exploitation and enslavement. Miranda asserts, "Generations of Californians have grown up steeped in a culture and educational system that trains them to think of Indians as passive, dumb and disappeared" (xviii). *Bad Indians* facilitates a critical and informed discussion on genocide and colonization. Furthermore, the text artfully addresses the layered complexities of California Indian life while presenting a vivid example of survivance.

In *Bad Indians*, Miranda's life story and that of her ancestors is interwoven with poems, drawings, family photos, archival documents, interviews and more, covering eighteenth-century California to the present day. It critically examines California's Mission system, post-secularization, wartime, Indian urbanization, and California's fourth grade "mission unit" requirement. *Bad Indians* also tackles contemporary issues of recognition, identity, and politics.

In this, Miranda beautifully crafts an unapologetic post-recognition rhetoric that refuses to justify blood quantum or complexion. Indeed, Miranda's own colorful and comical blood quantum charts flank the contents of the book.

*Bad Indians* is an honest and witty read that will leave readers invigorated and empowered. Miranda expresses her reflections through sharp and emotional prose—at times tongue-in-cheek, at times dark, but always poignant and inspirational. Miranda's words breathe life into old voices making them clearer for the present. In the first section of *Bad Indians*, Isabel Meadows, Miranda's ancestor, has a story of her own to tell. Meadows, a Rumsien Ohlone and Esselen speaker, was regularly interviewed nearly one hundred years ago by notorious linguist J. P. Harrington. In both Spanish and English Meadows reveals that a Mission padre sexually assaulted a young Indian woman named Vicenta. While likely insignificant to Harrington, Miranda holds onto the story as a testament to the future and the power of telling. In a letter to Vicenta, Miranda proclaims, "[Isabel] respected you for refusing to shut up. She liked that you weren't a good Mission Indian. Maybe she even thought future Indian women could learn from you" (25). And Miranda did. *Bad Indians* serves to reconcile pain and injustice and gives voice to the voiceless. The text ensures that stories survive.

*Bad Indians* is also a message to the survivors. Miranda wants us all to be Bad Indians—to challenge the myths, assert our identities, sing our songs and know the flavor of our glorious languages. *Bad Indians* is a call for action—to recover, reconcile, and reinvent with integrity. Miranda warns, that just like "fishing" for endangered languages, "It's never all in one place, it's never all perfectly clear, and it's never going to be easy" (143). But the task at hand is necessary.

Miranda declares, "California Indians . . . have many other stories. They aren't easy; they are fractured. To make them whole, what is needed is a multilayered web of community reaching backward in time and forward in dream, questing deeply into the country of unknown memory—an extremely demanding task" (194). From intergenerational trauma, Miranda sees a hopeful future and a vibrant culture for California Indians. Admirably, *Bad Indians* inspires us to uncover our own personal histories, speak our heritage languages, teach our genealogies, and tell our own stories.

Native or not, all readers can appreciate *Bad Indians*. Miranda allows us to consider what we can do with our pasts, histories, and futures. With beautiful and brassy conviction, Miranda eloquently unfolds her personal search for family, love, identity, forgiveness, and the home that was always there. *Bad Indians* is a heart-wrenching yet spiritually uplifting testimony to what truths we can uncover in our own histories. In captivating prose *Bad Indians*

demonstrates the transformative spirit of the human heart and shows us how to laugh through pain and harness the strength of resilience.

At times Miranda can be crass, “Erasure is a bitch isn’t it?” (25) but it all comes from a humorous and yet very honest place. The only flaw of this text is the lack of footnotes and reference. Miranda cites photos and archives but there are no direct sources to specific facts. For the unacquainted reader, *Bad Indians* may appear to be an unsubstantiated conversation on the ills of California. In fact, Miranda references facts that have been verified by numerous preceding scholars. Therefore, *Bad Indians* would be a wonderful read in conjunction with authors Miranda notes herself, such as Hackel or Rawls and California Indian scholars, Costo and Costo.

*Bad Indians* is a book we have all been waiting for. It contemporarily addresses the gap in California Indian studies and invites itself to be taught in various introductory classes on California and Native American studies. California Indian scholars and those interested in the hidden truths of California and colonization will be eager readers. For those outside of the university, Miranda’s profound text is easily accessible and highly educational. In fact, every Californian owes themselves this read. Miranda puts it best, “Indian or not, haven’t we lived under the burden of California mission mythology and gold rush fantasy long enough? Isn’t it time to pull off the blood-soaked bandages, look at the wound directly, let clean air and healing take hold?” (208). Heed Miranda’s advice and read this important book.

Caitlin Keliiaa

University of California, Berkeley

**Biomapping Indigenous Peoples: Towards an Understanding of the Issues.** Edited by Susanne Berthier-Foglar, Sheila Collingwood-Whittick, and Sandrine Tolazzi. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012. 476 pages. \$130.00 cloth.

A collection of essays by international scholars, *Biomapping Indigenous Peoples: Towards an Understanding of the Issues* provides historical, ethnographic, and textual approaches to understanding the politics and ethics of genome research on indigenous populations. Essays primarily address peoples in the English-speaking world—Australia, Tasmania, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States—with additional chapters on Taiwan and Siberia. The volume provides a basic overview for a nonspecialist audience of the predicaments of human genome research and historical, colonial, and disciplinary contexts.

The collection’s integration of relevant specialized fields such as science and technology studies, bioethics, and Native American and indigenous studies is