UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Captured in the Middle: Tradition and Experience in Contemporary Native American Writing. By Sidner Larson.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4260h6w6

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 25(4)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Reimer, Eric

Publication Date
2001-09-01

DOI
10.17953

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

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

telling the difference. Liebersohn notes (on page 75) that James Fenimore Cooper's book was wildly popular in France, where it was translated the same year (1826) that it saw print in America. Cooper soon became a celebrity in France.

Also bear in mind that Liebersohn surveys only a portion of European reactions to images of Native America. Other European authors, left unexamined by Liebersohn, used their images of "the Indian" with some rather distinctly anti-aristocratic ends in mind. Frederich Engels, for example, found the Iroquois (as he knew them through the writings of L. H. Morgan) to be exemplars of a classless, democratic, and communistic society. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson fashioned distinctly democratic tendencies into their images of American Indians. What Liebersohn does, however, he does very well.

Bruce E. Johansen
University of Nebraska, Omaha

Captured in the Middle: Tradition and Experience in Contemporary Native American Writing. By Sidner Larson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. 183 pages. $27.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

In *Captured in the Middle*, Sidner Larson insists that it is imagination and not argument that will rescue American Indian studies and modern lives. Forged from his own Gros Ventre heritage and a biculturalism that he finds "twice as rewarding," Larson's is a capacious, comparatist, and ameliorative imagination (p. 4). His project—which is at once a scholarly search for broadly shared truths and "a straining after self-knowledge" (p. 3)—is as gracious and conciliatory as it is realistic. Larson steadfastly seeks connections and movements away from disabling divisiveness, both between Native American and mainstream societies, and amongst Native Americans themselves. In his attempt to provide "a means by which similarities among people can be emphasized, rather than the usual tendency to reinforce difference" (p. 103), Larson calls upon Western and American Indian thinkers and concepts alike to buttress his critical project, whether it's the southwestern Pueblo peoples' strategy for dealing with evil or John Keats' "negative capability."

The book's most important observations and prescriptions relate to what the author calls "post-apocalypse theory." American Indians, Larson argues, have already experienced the worst event that can befall a people, a condition that consequently—and crucially—requires not only honestly acknowledging the scope of what has occurred, but "the absolute necessity of balancing the past and the present with the future" (p. 134). Tied to the need for temporal unification, a notion to which the book returns frequently, are appeals for new elaborations of the "politics of memory," and interventions in today's "authenticity debates," which continue to show discouraging stamina. Larson sharply indicts the legal constructs whereby the US government has sought to define Indians, but also points toward the damaging "internal boundaries" created by American Indians themselves, and sees both processes as having

created a climate of exclusion rather than inclusion. His instincts are always conciliatory—he can't resist, for example, mediating the familiar Krupat/Littlefield and Silko/Erdrich debates—and, late in the text, he speaks as an impassioned advocate for today's urban Indians, "the most underrepresented group within American Indian cultures and scholarship" (p. 152).

Captured in the Middle is a lean and densely allusive text, incorporating the work and thinking not only of prominent Native American critics such as Vine Deloria Jr., Louis Owens, and Robert Allen Warrior, but also such diverse thinkers and artists as Benjamin, Derrida, Jung, William Gibson, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. The work is informed by a wide range of historical contexts and cultural history—from the Jewish Holocaust to Rwandan genocide, from structuralism and romanticism to Rorty's pragmatism—and Larson's writing is clearly energized as it crafts compelling conversations between these elements and American Indian concerns. Although always a productively meandering and engaging text, it may leave some readers disconcerted by its sometimes unsubstantiated (if always intriguing) suggestiveness. Post-apocalypse theory, for example, is given surprisingly little elaboration and contextualization, and the chapters on Deloria and on autobiographical writing, in particular, whet but do not sate the appetite. Ultimately, though, one realizes Larson's style partakes both of the rhetorical strategies of Deloria—forcing readers to resist desire for "final vocabularies"—and of the circular structure and process of accretion that Paula Gunn Allen attributes to traditional tribal narratives.

After discussing issues of authenticity and applying "negative capability" to stereotypes of American Indians, Larson announces that there is still much work to do in order that "new ways of gathering up the best parts of American Indian existence can begin to be imagined" (p. 57). Noting that an excellent place to start is with the existing work of American Indian scholars and creative writers, he moves into a series of chapters that deal individually with his favored triumvirate: Vine Deloria Jr., Louise Erdrich, and James Welch. In analysis that looks forward to the issues raised in his later chapter on pragmatism, Larson is drawn to the sense of temporal unity that informs Deloria's work, and to his advocacy of the "necessity of linking intellectual work with the living communities on which such work is based" (p. 134). Erdrich's and Welch's fiction, meanwhile, enable him to respond to the third principle of post-apocalypse theory, which, in part, is that "the work of Indian writers should reflect real experience" (p. 102). He cites the contributions of both writers in enabling "a recognition of the fault lines in other-directed life and of the hard work necessary to get beyond modern systems that create boundaries" (p. 121). Larson sees the career of his cousin, James Welch, as evolving from the modernist sensibility of *Winter in the Blood* to a style of "relational writing" that constructs narrative by juggling various storytelling styles and devices. Eventually focusing on 1990's *The Indian Lawyer*, which has received scant critical attention to date, Larson lauds the novel for capturing "the natural resistance of American Indians to postmodern schizophrenia, a resistance that has also been misunderstood as a failure to assimilate" (p. 105). Welch's achievement, ultimately, is also, we come to realize, Larson's own professional and personal goal: to actuate "a significant recovery of the past pre-

sented in a way that is understandable to contemporary Indian and mainstream audiences alike" (p. 109)

One of the strengths of this text is how it repeatedly circles back upon the author's experiences in the classroom and in the university. A professor in the English Department at the University of Oregon at the time he wrote this book and now director of American Indian studies at Iowa State University, Larson bemoans "tokenism" and the isolation that seems to inhere in being an ethnic literature specialist. Based on this text, Larson surely wants to give a helpful nudge to the redisciplining and restructuring of today's English departments and, even more broadly, today's institutes of higher learning. Native American studies too routinely get cordoned off within English departments, he suggests, and rarely are allowed or encouraged to forge affiliations across disciplines, genres, and academic protocols; he thus looks forward to a time when the academy fosters rather than discourages "alternative ways of interacting with foundationally different knowledge systems" (p. 15).

In the classroom, Larson reveals himself to be searching for ways to remain true to his cultural heritage even as he must conform to the often frustrating protocols and politics of the academy. Larson sees his job not only as correcting misconceptions among his students (who are, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly of white background) but also as forging connections across cultures, of incorporating oral traditions, and of asking students to make broader connections with their own familial backgrounds. His insights into his pedagogical philosophy become an actualization of the invigorating ways "academicians are increasingly considering American Indian intellectual history a valuable resource" (p. 131). Consistent with his general positive outlook, he's encouraged, too, by the convictions of today's students, and feels that their energies, especially when informed by "American Indian-style solutions," can help solve society's increasingly prevalent problems (p. 5).

Ultimately, *Captured in the Middle* presents this historical moment as a time of reckoning: a time that challenges the Indian and non-Indian alike to update "the ways we presently create social order, the methods by which we ground such order, and . . . our individual relationships to history" (p. 145). Delivering on this promise, suggests Larson, will involve overcoming anger, envy, and fear, eschewing the process of scapegoating, and becoming more concertedly forward-looking. It will involve not only acknowledging the damaging effects of European influence and combating the continuing process of genocide, but also widening the critical and imaginative terrain so as to emphasize connections rather than historical bitterness and acrimony. Pleading that different worldviews no longer "clash over potentially valuable territory," Larson's text reaches hopefully for various types of positive change, and ultimately supplies a more enabling critical and epistemological apparatus for moving forward, one that seeks affiliations and tolerance over division and competition (p. 28). "I now believe that almost anything can happen," Larson unapologetically announces at the opening of his book, and by the end one trusts his vision (p. 4).

Eric Reimer
University of Oregon