

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850-1990. By Emma LaRocque.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9225r8jx>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 35(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Black, Jason Edward

Publication Date

2011-09-01

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/>

When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850–1990. By Emma LaRocque. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010. 250 pages. \$27.95 paper.

When the Other Is Me is an authoritative and thought-provoking study of the ways that the Native peoples in Canada have experienced colonial oppression as represented in select literary and historical texts. At the same time—and most vitally—this examination attends to the voices of indigenous writers as they wrote “back” (during 1850–1990) in attempts to demystify colonial machinations of hierarchies entrenched in “civ/sav” (civilization vs. savagery) narratives. Emma LaRocque has responsibly brought together the most foundational and most recent works in decolonial theory (particularly in Native studies and postcolonial studies literature) as a framework for her exploration of colonial and Native peoples’ texts. This review first explores the many contributions that LaRocque’s work offers in this vein and then traces a few shortcomings of the publication.

Perhaps the most imperative contribution of *When the Other Is Me* involves its rich, thorough, and enlivening treatment of decolonization as a critical perspective of Native peoples–European relationships. LaRocque takes disparately located—and often difficult to read—research in this area and explains it in concise and applied ways. At this point in our Native studies literature, these theories might seem assumptive to most. However, LaRocque reminds us numerous times that colonization is not dead, but rather lingers on for centuries—often rearing itself up as neocolonialism through symbolic control beyond the spheres of territory, labor, and bodies. She avers that the moment we ease into complacency, we start to lose ground in our scholarship activism. Of this, LaRocque writes that “some scholars live in the illusion that they not only understand ‘Natives,’ but that somehow, by their postcolonial powers of analysis, they have neutralized the colonial experience” (167). Before this happens, explorations of what she calls indigenous “talk-back” must continue historically and contemporarily. Simultaneously, she argues that we must forge ahead with crafting our own contrapuntal spaces in the work that we do. That is, we should recognize that as we study moments of decolonization, we decolonize along with the voices to which we attend.

The notion of talk-back in Native studies vis-à-vis decolonization is not a new concept. Scores of scholarly explorations exist that are related to Native American political responses to colonial oppression (see Frederick Hoxie, *Talking Back to Civilization*, 2001), Native American public intellectual remonstrations (see Maureen Konkle, *Writing Indian Nations*, 2004; Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians*, 2005), and Native American literary talk-back (see Siobhan Senier, *Voices of American Indian Assimilation and Resistance*, 2001;

Cheryl Walker, *Indian Nation*, 1997). You may notice here that the term *Native American* ties these works together into a US context. What makes LaRocque's treatment of talk-back unique and refreshing is her focus on the experiences of Native peoples in Canada. Aside from her added national context to this strand of literature, LaRocque has contributed another key idea about indigenous resistance: agency. *When The Other Is Me* is not just about a textual examination of indigenous responses to colonizing discourse but also about the constitutive power of those Native peoples spotlighted in the analysis. LaRocque is right to view these voices as empowered rebukes and not just after-the-fact rejoinders; the latter sets up contrapuntal voices as ancillary to the larger cultural narrative. On this, she argues that indigenous voice is not a "merely reactionary sort of response; it means that mainstream Canadians will not comprehend our decolonizing discourse unless they can identify the colonial ground from and against which we talk back" (11). The utility of textual work, like LaRocque's, is that it decenters and reveals mythic centers by contextualizing resistance and demonstrating its importance with, not against or alongside, the larger cultural narrative.

To achieve her goals of exposing the colonial imaginary and highlighting indigenous counterpoints, LaRocque turns to the primary discourses of both. First, the book is organized by addressing primary colonial texts—in a Canadian context—such as those written or spoken by missionaries (John McDougall and John McLean), traders (Alexander Ross), Anglo journalists (Alexander Begg), anthropologists (David Mandelbaum), and fiction writers (Ralph Connor). This study of colonizing voices is broken down (chapters 2 and 3) into thematic areas, indicating the ways in which these figures worked through a civ/sav ideology in order to dehumanize. Subtropes of these discourses include the ways that they constructed Native peoples as savages and animals, enacted double standards of behavior and cultural practices, and forced assimilation into colonial cultures. These themes have been addressed in nearly every phase of the progression of Native studies, but LaRocque's focus on a Canadian milieu and her attention to lesser-known colonizing figures in the overall literature adds texture to the themes and the tropes that carry them out.

Second, LaRocque addresses primary resistance texts of Native peoples. In these sections (chapters 4 and 5), she explores the voices of indigenous public leaders (Joseph Brant and Catherine Sonegoh Sutton), early activists (Shinguaconse), poets (Pauline Johnson), Native missionaries (Edward Ahenakew), narrative writers (Beatrice Culleton Mosionier), and fiction writers (Jane Willis and Howard Adams). In these vital chapters, LaRocque ostensibly shows how these figures worked through a type of *détournement*—or turn around—in order to decolonize the civ/sav perspective that frames the

colonial imagination. Exposing hypocrisies of double standards, reversing the civ/sav dichotomy, and challenging the so-called benefits of colonial culture with indigenist-centered narratives are the major tropes that she features. As with the colonial tropes, these Native themes are not new to the field. However, the figures and context of LaRocque's investigation make these chapters vital in understanding decolonization as a rhetorical strategy.

Though *When The Other Is Me* contributes enormously to decolonization work and Native studies as a whole, there are a few minor limitations worth mentioning. First, the span of time covered in the book can be somewhat daunting. The period from 1850 to 1990 is quite longitudinal, and lost in that swath of time are the nuances and particularities of the texts under investigation. For instance, the colonialists and Native peoples discussed are rarely contextualized aside from a label that denotes their occupation—for example, missionary, Native leader, and poet. I understand the need to paint broadly here, but I wanted to learn more about these individual rhetors and the contexts in and through which they worked. The colonial and indigenous voices exist in the strangled nexus of imperialism and control. However, I was hoping for more specific attention to the exact policies, practices, and social/cultural milieu going on during the time of their discourses.

The time period also seemingly cuts off some pretty important discourses. Surely there are more contemporary (and biting) works of Native peoples' resistance that followed 1990, especially as decolonization took off during the 1990s and has settled into a workable practice today. Similarly, the historical periods prior to 1850 are some of the most tempestuous in Native-Canadian history (and Native-US history) when the seeds of European resettlers were sown in the soils of codified nationalisms and governmental policies. The pre-1850 period involved vibrant, foundational, and generative indigenous voices of resistance to, for example, trade practices, Removal, Christianization, and assimilation. LaRocque justifies the 1850 to 1990 time period as being a veritable bookend of resistance; and she is absolutely correct. But I think some pivotal resistance texts might be left out of this story—texts that would genuinely contribute to the book's argument—given the time period (perhaps narratives of folks such as Acaoomaycaye and Nonosbawsut).

The second limitation involves organization. Native peoples' discourses follow after the chapters about colonizing discourses. This makes sense, in a way, as LaRocque notes that the colonial context needs to be in place first. Perhaps there is a way to make each chapter thematic with colonizing and indigenous voices interacting within that particular theme. For instance, the double standard of colonialism might have been studied by addressing colonial voices and Native peoples' voices within one chapter—interacting together. In terms of decolonial scholarly practices, such an arrangement would bolster

LaRocque's contention that talk-back is not reactionary or secondary but rather constitutive and primary. *When The Other Is Me* is well argued and carefully evidenced. One decolonial tactic in our scholarship activism, however, might involve the way we (literally) present our textual analysis.

Ultimately, *When The Other Is Me* is an excellent study in the textual analysis of Native Canadian voices through decolonial lenses and a useful guide in understanding the nuances of decolonization as a political practice and scholarly intervention. Scholars in the historical-critical humanities and culturally based social sciences will find LaRocque's work an absolute treasure. (I know I will undoubtedly use the book in my research and teaching.) In the end, *When The Other Is Me* is a poignant reminder of what lies ahead for us in our interventionist work in Native studies. As LaRocque instructs, "The shadows remain colossal, both in their magnitude and in their impact on us all, and we, the decolonizing, continue to struggle against them. We face a monumental task in our efforts. Reconstruction has begun, but it will not come easily or quickly" (162).

Jason Edward Black
University of Alabama–Tuscaloosa