When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850–1990
by Emma LaRocque

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Emma LaRocque is both a university professor and a creative writer; her latest book, When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850–1990, is an academic publication. One of the problems with this volume may be that there are too many big ideas in it. Each chapter topic could be a book in itself. The table of contents gives the gist: representation, resistance, reframing, dehumanization, currency, invasion, intersection, internalization, difference, criticism, reconstruction, paradigms, decolonization, postcolonials. This list also alerts readers to the fact that, although it is definitely included, personal experience is not as large a part of the content as the title may have led them to hope. Presented as the understandable motivation behind the study, “the beginnings of my Otherness, of alienation in my own homeland” (viii), the personal does indeed inform and “humanize” the otherwise “intellectual” approach. In seven chapters plus introduction and postscript, LaRocque writes: “This book is, in part, my revisitation of selected historical and literary texts that have especially served to dehumanize Aboriginal peoples; however, in larger part, this book is about the inevitable Aboriginal contrapuntal reply to Canada’s colonial constructs” (3).

LaRocque offers powerful descriptions of herself reading books, watching television documentaries and films, and visiting historic sights in which “her people” are denigrated. However, her choice of the military metaphor, especially the use of the terms “resistance” and “invasion,” sets up the situation as a war that will result in winners and losers. Then she introduces definitions. “[R]acism is a socially licensed belief in the genetic superiority of one’s ‘race.’ . . . I believe we as human beings are, as a rule, conditioned to be ethnocentric (not necessarily racist), Native peoples no less so, but racism, as it has come to be employed by colonizers and experienced by the colonized, is specifically European in origin . . . I use the words ‘racism’ or ‘racist’ in the context of European colonization in that [citing Berkofer] ‘racism as a specific social doctrine is an invention of the European peoples in the modern period of the expansion around the world.’ Racism is both the foundation and justification of colonization” (9, 172). This definition unfortunately stops the discussion. The teams have already been stacked: Whiteshirts and Victims.

In a later chapter LaRocque asserts: “In all the Native material I have read, I have not found one piece that I could classify as racist” (117). Such a conclusion creates an impression of exclusivity, of “I’m okay, you’re not okay.” Not to mention the conundrum for people who are half on one team and half on the other. In trying to understand our past in order to create a better future, surely only win-win solutions deserve consideration.

LaRocque continues: “Colonial texts are offensive. In fact, many of these texts constitute hate literature. Few scholars . . . have challenged, much less excised, these records in any direct way” (14). She calls “to ‘extinguish’ Canada’s Civ/Sav master narrative” (15). Excise? Extinguish? A scholar arguing for censorship and redaction? Such a stance does not address the source of the problem. For she said it herself, in the quotation above (9). Racism is the root; ethnocentrism and colonization are its spawn. It may be the latest trend in academic research and LitCrit, but attacking the topic of colonization addresses the symptoms, not the causes. Furthermore, the authorities cited in these attacks, the frequent
references to international post-colonial political and literary theorists, including Memmi, Fanon, and Said, evoke a fear that academic research is just another branch of colonized thinking, following other authorities, different leaders.

I like the many epigrammatic quotations from several Native writers and thinkers that augment this book’s chapters and selections. I like the encouragement of First Nations and Native writing and criticism. I like the way the complexities of “internalization” are revealed. Yet some other points seem too obvious. Surely it is a given that many depictions of Native characters and Native peoples in early Canadian literature and historical documents are horrendous and deserve censure. Censure, not censorship. Yes, they read often like hate literature. However, as with hate literature, the legal question of intent is crucial. Much of what was done in the past was wrong, tainted by racism, but now we know better. We can do better. We can celebrate new and better laws. Teach critical thinking, high-level reading skills, racism literacy. Enforce new attitudes, police the present and the future. Continue to puncture racist myths while rejoicing in our inclusivity and our common humanity. Writing Native history, literature, and criticism is crucial. But there is a shiver of “apartheid” in LaRocque’s suggestions, a hint of “guerrilla warfare,” of subversive attacks. LaRocque concludes with one of her own poems in which the speaker advocates “pulling out their fenceposts of civilization” (170). As my English-born grandmother, an impoverished immigrant, used to say: two wrongs don’t make a right.

For me, this book by one of my heroes is disturbing both because of its questionable tactics and the unproductive emotional reaction its non-objectivity evokes. ❯

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