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American Indian Education: Counternarratives in Racism, Struggle, and the Law

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Book Reviews

Matthew L. M. Fletcher. *American Indian Education: Counternarratives in Racism, Struggle, and the Law*. New York: Routledge, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-415-95735-9. 223 pp.

Ruth Spack, *Bentley University*

American Indian Education: Counternarratives in Racism, Struggle, and the Law is the inaugural volume in Routledge's series on critical race theory in education. Matthew Fletcher, a law professor, examines the legal underpinnings of contemporary American Indian education by telling stories about a fictional Michigan tribe, "loosely based" on his own community: the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians (6). Most of the chapters address issues of ethics and fairness and follow specific, often recurring, characters as they negotiate emotionally charged social settings and legal or semi-legal proceedings dominated by the non-Indian population. For readers who are well versed in the history of American Indian education (which Fletcher touches on only briefly in his introduction) and who therefore understand the truth of the fictionalized events, the book is a unique and useful addition to the literature.

Chapter 1, "Commodifying Indian Students and Sports Mascots: The Lake Matchimanitou Warriors," introduces an activist named Parker Roberts, who appears before the school board to protest rules that disadvantage an all-Indian high school football team and to call for the elimination of stereotypical names, war cries, plastic tomahawks, and other offenses at the games. Chapter 2, "Burying

Indian Histories in the Curriculum: The American History Teacher,” follows Parker as she attempts to change the school curriculum to include histories of Michigan Indians. Chapter 3, “Criminal Injustice and Demonizing Indian Students: The American Indian Student,” focuses on the treatment of high school Indian students, who are forced to sign “affidavits” and are turned over to the local police for actions that non-Indian students enact with impunity. The participation of a tribal lawyer at the school board hearings significantly affects the outcome.

Chapter 4, “Intergenerational Character of Indian Experiences in Education: Niko Roberts on the Ice,” which Fletcher describes as “an interlude” (9), provides the larger sociopolitical and familial context in which American Indian students attain an education. The most dramatically rendered chapter in the book, it links Parker’s personal experiences with her son’s and describes a harrowing accident involving heroism in the face of tragedy.

Chapter 5, “Indian Academic Fraud: The Terrible Tribe,” revolves around a secret society supported by the university that Parker’s son, Niko, attends in Ann Arbor. Founded more than one hundred years earlier by “children of wealthy and powerful members of the Great Lakes shipping elite” (96), the society comprises members who conduct themselves according to their version of authentic Native American teachings and traditions. Their practices offend Indian students on campus. Niko’s petition to end the university’s support of the society engenders heated and sometimes thoughtful discussion at the Board of Regents Student Affairs Committee. Chapter 6, “Indian Literary Fraud: Vann Logan’s Novel,” exposes the deceptive posing of a non-Indian as an Indian writer, causing Niko and other students to consider such issues as who has “authority to speak on behalf of or about Indian people” and what constitutes American Indian literature (134). Chapter 7, “Indian Cultural Restoration: Toledo Marks’ Return,” involves a lawsuit that leads Niko, now a lawyer, to represent his grandfather, a traditional pipe carrier, against an accusation that he violated the First Amendment when he spoke to schoolchildren about the pipe ceremony.

Chapter 8, “Indian Political Resurgence and Affirmative Action:

The Lake Matchimanitou Indian School,” has a satiric, futuristic bent. It describes how a tribal community establishes a private school designed exclusively for Indigenous people and humorously imagines a future U.S. Supreme Court case challenging the constitutionality of “the Indianization of American education” (175). This chapter serves as a literary expression of Fletcher’s point that “American Indian education continues to be in crisis and perhaps always will be until American Indian people have the necessary resources and take the full responsibility for education their own” (3).

One of the most successful features of Fletcher’s book is the range of educational experiences covered, from elementary through law school. The choice to fictionalize the characters and their stories works quite well, for example, in the flashbacks that provide insight into earlier events, both in and out of school. Readers are drawn into the narrative by compelling portrayals that show how ignorant, bigoted, or fraudulent behavior is introduced and reinforced among young learners and carried into the sphere of higher education, assaulting Native American identity and producing damaging effects that reverberate down through the generations.

Robert J. Conley. *Cherokee Thoughts, Honest and Uncensored*.

Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-8061-3943-2. 208 pp.

Joshua B. Nelson, *University of Oklahoma*

Sequoyah had scarcely completed his syllabary of the Cherokee language before authors began broadcasting their opinions with it. For a people renowned for their emphasis on social harmony, Cherokees have long hauled their dirty laundry right out in public, many going so far as to make a profession of airing it. Cherokee writers have elaborated traditional practices of dissent in modern contexts and made polemic a favored genre. Into this mix enters Robert Conley with his timely collection of twenty-eight essays on a wealth of topics historical and contemporary. Conley, currently professor of Cherokee studies at Western Carolina University, is by some accounts the most prolific Cherokee author in history, out-paging