Winter 2013

Review of “Uniting the Tribes: The Rise and Fall of Pan-Indian Community on the Crow Reservation” by Frank Rzeczkowski

Christina Gish Hill
Iowa State University, cghill@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/anthr_pubs
Part of the Indigenous Studies Commons, and the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/anthr_pubs/3. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Review of “Uniting the Tribes: The Rise and Fall of Pan-Indian Community on the Crow Reservation” by Frank Rzeczkowski

Abstract
Frank Rzeczkowski’s book Uniting the Tribes brings a refreshing perspective to the much studied early reservation period on the Northern Plains. Utilizing meticulously researched archival materials, Rzeczkowski reveals the effects of reservation life on the emergence of a pan-Indian identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He dispels previous assumptions that such constructions only emerged off the reservation by stretching the origins of a Native collective political identity past the spatial confines of the boarding schools and the temporal limitations of the world wars. Instead, he argues that containment on reservations leveled the playing field on the Northern Plains, forcing both powerful and disadvantaged tribal groups to suffer under the same difficult political and economic situations caused by conquest and the encroachment of the United States...

Keywords
American Indian Studies

Disciplines
Indigenous Studies | Social and Cultural Anthropology

Comments
This is a book review from Western Historical Quarterly 44 (2013): 476, doi:10.2307/westhistquar.44.4.0476. Posted with permission.
Review

*Uniting the Tribes: The Rise and Fall of Pan-Indian Community on the Crow Reservation* by Frank Rzeczkowski

Review by: Christina Gish Hill


Published by: *Western Historical Quarterly, Utah State University* on behalf of *The Western History Association*

Stable URL: [http://www.jstor.org/stable/westhistquar.44.4.0476](http://www.jstor.org/stable/westhistquar.44.4.0476)

Accessed: 31/03/2015 11:31
to work as laborers, a variety of sports programs, an English-only policy, a highly regimented school environment, and by isolating students from tribal communities. Students who were truant, tardy, resistant to any school initiatives, or who misbehaved were punished and sometimes even locked up in the school jail. (Yes, that’s right: a jail.) Historians familiar with boarding schools won’t find anything strikingly different about Sherman. Indeed, the parallels with Carlisle Indian Industrial School are obvious throughout the book.

What sets Trafzer, Sakiestewa Gilbert, and Sisquoc’s volume apart from other boarding school histories is its thematic and topical approach. Robert R. McCoy’s chapter, for example, focuses on the school’s Mission Style architecture and how the organization of its space maximized control over the student body. Trafzer and Jean A. Keller’s chapter on the school’s cemetery presents death as an all-too-regular occurrence and how school officials handled everything from burials to informing family members. And Trafzer, Michelle Lorimer, and Shaina Wright produced a photographic essay from the museum’s nearly ten thousand photos that offers keen insights into all facets of school life.

In telling the history of boarding schools, it is tempting to judge, condemn, criticize, and ridicule the people from the past who founded, taught, and administered them. But that approach doesn’t really do anyone any good. The boarding school experience was complicated, and this book is best when it rises above cheap shots and sweeping verdicts to present a detached yet intricate portrait of Sherman. Keller’s chapter on the school’s impressive nursing program, for instance, shows how students received comprehensive training in health education—“excellent training” Keller tells us—and how their education gave them “the power to make choices about who they were and what they would become” (pp. 89, 101).

The Bureau of Indian Affairs ended the boarding school in 1970, at which time it became Sherman Indian High School. As the movement for sovereignty, self-determination, and cultural preservation crested, Native people came to assume control over the school board and integrated Native histories, cultures, and languages into the school’s curriculum. The thousands of students who attended Sherman Institute did not have the benefit of a culturally relevant education; nevertheless, the education they received and their experiences there would be life-altering.

Bradley Shreve
Tribal College Journal

Uniting the Tribes: The Rise and Fall of Pan-Indian Community on the Crow Reservation.

Frank Rzeczowski’s book Uniting the Tribes brings a refreshing perspective to the much studied early reservation period on the Northern Plains. Utilizing meticulously researched archival materials, Rzeczowski reveals the effects of reservation life on the emergence of a pan-Indian identity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He dispels previous assumptions that such constructions only emerged off the reservation by stretching the origins of a Native collective political identity past the spatial confines of the boarding schools and the temporal limitations of the world wars. Instead, he argues that containment on reservations leveled the playing field on the Northern Plains, forcing both powerful and disadvantaged tribal groups to suffer under the same difficult political and economic situations caused by conquest and the encroachment of the United States. These shared circumstances
created common ground on which to meet and a reason to do so.

Rzeczkowski convincingly demonstrates that Northern Plains reservations, which have been constructed as ethnically homogenous as well as spatially confined, were in fact spaces of intertribal interaction. He combs the archives to present example after example of Northern Plains people activating relationships across reservation boundaries created before the imposition of these borders using practices such as captivity, adoption, or intermarriage. They utilized these social ties to foster dialogue about shared political concerns, continuing a pre-reservation practice. By visiting relatives across reservation borders, Native people could share information and even negotiate wider intertribal alliances over issues like land loss and federal policy. Rzeczkowski reveals that social relationships even connected tribal groups that scholars assumed were eternal enemies—such as the Crow and the Cheyenne—and that these connections allowed them to build political ties across reservation boundaries. He deftly navigates the contradictions inherent in the pressures placed on Native people during this period by noting, for example, that some agents allowed off-reservation visiting while others prohibited it and that these attitudes shifted over time. He also eloquently represents the multiple perspectives at play—from federal officials to local Indian agents, and from Euro-American settlers to the Native people themselves.

Rzeczkowski insightfully reveals that something as seemingly benign as visiting family or friends across reservation boundaries had powerful political impacts. He concludes, however, by exploring how the same pressures that inspired reservation communities to pursue fluid connections spanning tribal affiliations ultimately encouraged these people to more rigidly define tribal identities, transforming flexible constructions into bounded ethnicities. Rzeczkowski’s book contributes to scholarship on American Indians and the American West in the most profound way. He narrates the history of peoples we think we know and reveals that their political lives were much more intricate than scholarship has acknowledged.

Christina Gish Hill
Iowa State University


Colonial Entanglement is an outstanding example of what is good about the current generation of works being produced in doctoral programs. Jean Dennison is herself an Osage and brings to her book an understanding of her people that others not born into the culture are unable to do. This is perhaps best illustrated by her use of an analogy to the art of Osage ribbon work of the eighteenth century that her fellow tribal members still make traditionally.

“Osage ribbon work,” Dennison notes in the introduction, “born out of eighteenth-century trade with the French, is perhaps the ideal metaphor of colonial entanglement. Using the raw material and tools obtained from the French, Osage artists began by tearing the rayon taffeta into strips and then cutting, folding, and sewing it back together to form something both beautiful and uniquely Osage” (p. 7). She then reminds the reader of exactly what she contends the Osages have done with colonial entanglement: “Osage