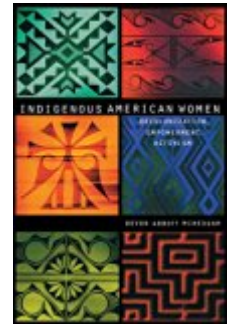


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Devon A. Mihesuah. *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xxii + 246 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3227-3; \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-8286-5.

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## Decolonizing Voices With More Effectiveness

The field of Native American studies has produced few collections representative of a body of work from a leading indigenous activist and scholar; even less common is such a work from someone in the field who also happens to be a woman. *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* helps fill such a void. Devon Abbott Mihesuah, editor of the highly respected journal *American Indian Quarterly*, member of the Oklahoma Choctaw Nation, and a proven intellectual voice for indigenous scholars and Native American women alike, has written on a number of topics. Her essays in this book, many, or portions of them, printed elsewhere, are tied together by a common thread. Mihesuah displays a sensitive attention to indigenous women, native communities, and their varied and complex struggles to have their “voices” heard, understood, and, perhaps most importantly, respected. This collection, divided into three parts with twelve essays, contains some short commentary pieces, some extended discussions of theory and identity, and some scathing reviews of poorly written works that may not even fall within the boundaries of Native American studies.

In this volume—a sort of manual with which the reader can trace Mihesuah’s maturation as an intellectual as well as a native activist—she particularly writes with an unwavering commitment to putting an end to a “post-colonial” situation holding back Indian women even today. Native women have fought to have their voices heard in the “trenches” of the academy and struggled to balance several facets of their community ties against is-

ues with the outside world. They have also faced oppression, disempowerment, and even death, at the hands of native male leaders. Indian men have adopted western notions of manly political behavior during the twentieth century to consciously stifle indigenous female activism during key turning points in Native American civil rights history—her focus here is on the Red Power movement. In some of the essays, then, Mihesuah offers a few examples and suggestions where Indian women have and should continue to stand up and be counted in various public and private realms that occupy their lives.

A short review cannot due justice to all of the interesting issues addressed by each of her essays, so the most significant raised by Mihesuah will be discussed, including points where this reviewer believes she could have pushed her analyses in more persuasive directions. The book’s subtitle, *Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, reflects Mihesuah’s goals as a scholar and public figure. Her writings in this volume could have taken more dramatic steps toward challenging the colonization, disempowerment, and de-activism preventing indigenous women from moving forward among their own communities and within the outside world. There is little doubt that many native groups, in confronting the vestiges of colonialism, have moved from matrilineal societies, with gender balance and even equality, toward western notions of patriarchal leadership and control. In this collection, Mihesuah neither offers a sophisticated program for change and development nor any indigenous-specific theory as to how native peoples should try to return

more balance to roles men and women play within their communities. Why criticize feminist theory as unsuitable for native women but offer no appropriate alternative? Mihesuah's claim that white women only focus on "women's issues" (p. 142), such as child-rearing, birth control, and abortion, while indigenous women broaden their concerns to community, environment, and tribe is an argument presented in far too general terms. Moreover, it only further casts Indian women as "others," as people who share little in common with other women. If Mihesuah's goal is to decolonize the United States because she rightly recognizes how it still treats indigenous peoples as subalterns, why take such a separatist position? Should not the goal of "decolonization" involve some process of mainstreaming indigenous women's issues, not keeping them out of the fray of contemporary female, or "feminist," activism? Drawing on a theory developed by sociologists in chapter 8 about the ways in which African Americans battle racialization while they create personal identities amidst an oppressively white society offers some interesting points of departure for evaluating similar issues facing native peoples. But why not spend pages constructing a theory addressing the concerns specific to Native Americans?

Mihesuah does make an important, and timely, argument pertaining to the many Indian histories written by white scholars. Now being able to stand back and survey an explosion in publications during the 1980s and 1990s all claiming to be "history from the native perspective," Mihesuah finds many white authors, even those highly respected within their fields, turning away from the indigenous voice (oral tradition, interviews) and directing their scholarship only at an academic audience to further their own public careers or personal interests. Her solution: those wishing to know about the history of a particular native group should talk to their ancestors; and those interested in writing Indian history should write it with a purpose to help these people today. Because of the many

years of mistreatment, however, many indigenous peoples reject any involvement by white academics. Other avenues for change certainly include having more indigenous scholars in universities building programs of study to address the present-day concerns of natives, as well as having more works published by indigenous community-based historians, poets, and storytellers. But are these the only solutions?

With several of the essays, there are also problems in structure and content. Have all indigenous women, throughout U.S. history, battled the same set of issues? Mihesuah seems to indicate so. Her essay on colonialism and disempowerment treats the wide span and scope of American expansion and its devastating effects without the necessary attention to rigorous intellectual examination, chronology, and detail. Her chapter on the Cherokee Female Seminary, toward the end, demanded more meticulous editorial work, as two paragraphs on two separate pages are almost identical (pp. 78, 80). Readers are better off with her book on the same subject.

In spite of such criticisms, Mihesuah has opened a lot of important questions for debate, brought indigenous concerns to the university, and established herself as a vocal supporter of Native American women's rights. I think Mihesuah would agree that there is plenty of more work remaining to bridge the many divides that separate native men from women, Indian communities from the outside world, and white academics from Native Americans. This collection could have more clearly mapped directions for readers interested in building those bridges, particularly for scholars from any discipline concerned with theory development and scholarship both with the intended purpose to put an end to the many injustices resulting from post-colonialism throughout the United States. In the end, though, the essays in *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* are more enlightening than frustrating.

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