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Review of *Modernity and Its Other: The Encounter with North American Indians in the Eighteenth Century*,  
by Robert Woods Sayre

Bryan C. Rindfleisch

Marquette University, [bryan.rindfleisch@marquette.edu](mailto:bryan.rindfleisch@marquette.edu)

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# Robert Woods Sayre, Modernity and Its Other: The Encounter with North American Indians in the Eighteenth Century

BRYAN C. RINDFLEISCH

Marquette University

Robert Woods Sayre demonstrates how Euro-Americans observed the profound socio-economic transformations to British North America during the late eighteenth century—or the transition to "modernity"—and the role that the Native Peoples of North America played, involuntarily, in that process. First published in French in 2008, this book features well-known eighteenth-century authors like William Bartram, St. John de Crévecoeur, Philip Freneau, Jonathan Carver, and John Lawson, in addition to lesser known individuals such as Moreau de Saint-Mery and Alexander Mackenzie, who illustrate how Euro-Americans wrestled with the onset of a commercial world, and utilized the Indigenous Peoples of North America as either a reflection or a commentary of that process. It is through these authors that Sayre imagines a "decisive historical moment" in which the "modernity" of British North America "clashed radically with the 'premodern' Native American cultures with which it was in close contact," a "watershed...in a process of evolution toward capitalism and modernity" (4). By the turn of the nineteenth century, though, with the emergence of a market economy in the

United States, this Indigenous parallel to Euro-American "modernity" faded into the romanticism of the "Noble Savage" stereotype and was replaced with the triumphal narratives of American progress that were embodied in the writings of George Catlin. Altogether, Sayre finds that the transition to a capitalist modern world—in the Weberian sense of the word—occurred at this critical juncture in the late eighteenth century, and proved intimately connected to, and inherently in tension with, the Native Peoples of North America.

Sayre's book is divided into two parts: the "View of Modernity" by Euro-American authors during the eighteenth century, and their "Views of the Other," or "Travels in Indian Territory." In part one, Sayre compares and contrasts the writings of Crèvecoeur, Freneau, and Saint-Mery to pinpoint the "onset of modernity in the English colonies through the eyes" of both famous and obscure writers. From the *Letters from an American Farmer* and *The Rising Glory of America*, to Saint-Mery's little known treatises, Sayre uses such texts to demonstrate capitalist mentalities—or the primacy of a "profit motive"—and commercial structures throughout British North America, which deviated from the agrarian foundations of the colonies (88). When Native Peoples were mentioned, which was rather infrequently by these authors, they were a tool to critique the new "modernity" (75). One of the most intriguing insights by Sayre is his analysis of Crèvecoeur's "Distresses of a Frontier Man," in which the narrator contemplates "escaping his predicament [when faced with "modernity"] by going to live in an Indian village where he is known and feels sure to be welcomed," thereby inverting Indigenous Americans as a source of comfort, nostalgia, and identity for the frontiersman (53).

In part two, Sayre uses the writings of French and English authors—beginning with the Baron de Lahontan and Francois Xavier de Charlevoix, followed by Lawson and Carver, then Bartram, and lastly the fur traders Mackenzie and Jean-Baptiste Trudeau—to better explore how Euro-American writers understood their interactions with the Native Peoples of North America within that transition to modernity in the eighteenth century. These authors' observations varied from the expected, such as by defining Indigenous Peoples as premodern (complete with the value judgments that reflected the authors' predispositions to modernity), to the unexpected, such as Bartram's "passionate identification with the Other...[who] expresses a romantic revolt against the modernity that he was convinced had drawn away from the authentically human" (234). This conflagration of modernity and Other reveals what Sayre calls a "radical paradox" exhibited by all of his Euro-American authors: a "unanimity of praise" for Indigenous Peoples and cultures (and in some cases their moral and cultural superiority), but at the same time equating those peoples and cultures as antithetical to modernity (302).

While I find parts of Sayre's book to be genuinely insightful (particularly his analysis of Bartram's writings), he argues in the preface: "I have taken into account important developments and publications in early North American history and ethnohistory that have occurred since the writing of the original French work. I have also engaged with some crucial issues that are part of current American discussions and debates on Native American history" (xi). He also asserts how it "seems important to situate my book in the context of these contemporary developments in North American scholarship and reflection" (xi). However, Sayre does not actually do this. This is not to say he is being disingenuous, as he admits "my book is not about eighteenth-century Native America per se" (xii). But, with that said, what he thinks is a serious engagement with the latest scholarship in Native American history and/or Indigenous Studies is off the mark. Sure, Sayre name-drops certain important intellectuals like Gerald Vizenor, Robert Warrior, and Donald Fixico, and references theoretical models like settler colonialism and Indigeneity, but he does not fully consider what those individuals and ideas mean to, and in some cases how they challenge, his work. This is not to mention the Native and non-Native scholars like Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, Jodi Byrd, Lisa Brooks, Kelly Wisecup, Jean O'Brien, Devon Mihesuah, Mark Rifkin, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Arnold Krupat, Jace Weaver (and so on) who have pushed Native American history and Indigenous Studies in exciting and innovative directions, and whose work has direct bearing on the sources and arguments that Sayre makes.

What I also find troubling is the fact that Sayre's book is classified as "Ethnic Studies/Native American Studies." However, Sayre admits that his work is not about the Native Peoples of North America. So why is his book billed as such? Sayre is concerned with Euro-American authors and their ideas of "modernity," whereas Native Peoples are the subjects of observation and commentary. However, Sayre at times makes the case that his book is about the "encounter of two types of society—both evolving, but which came into particularly sharp opposition and close interrelation," yet his attention toward Indigenous societies is uneven at best (xii). He is interested in what Euro-American observers had to say about Native Americans, and despite any pretensions otherwise—on his part or that of the publisher—there is a lack of engagement with the study of "ethnohistory," Native American history, and/or Indigenous Studies.

Again, this is not to take away from the contributions that Sayre makes in his work. But it is one thing to say that he has "taken into account important developments and publications in early North American history and ethnohistory," or "engaged with some crucial issues that are part of current American discussions and debates on Native American history," or consulted the "extraordinarily rich and varied work [that] has been done on all aspects of Native America, both present and historical" (xi). It is quite another thing to do it.