

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2013

Review of *Custer on Canvas: Representing Indians, Memory, and Violence in the New West* By Norman K. Denzin

Brian Rusted
University of Calgary

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>

Rusted, Brian, "Review of *Custer on Canvas: Representing Indians, Memory, and Violence in the New West* By Norman K. Denzin" (2013). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2484.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2484>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

Custer on Canvas: Representing Indians, Memory, and Violence in the New West. By Norman K. Denzin. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011. 278 pp. Photographs, illustrations, appendices, notes, references, index. \$94.00 cloth, \$36.95 paper.

This thematic collection exploring Last Stand paintings by white and First Nations artists has three origins. As Denzin notes, it extends his 2008 collection, *Searching for Yellowstone: Race, Gender, Family, and Memory in the Postmodern West*, also published by Left Coast Press. Both books gather Denzin's efforts to involve himself reflexively with the West. Spurred by an engagement with a politics of representation, Denzin locates *Custer on Canvas* in relation to the "performance turn" and its "new writing practices." A third origin is personal: Denzin's effort to engage memories that reach from childhood into contemporary, professional encounters. One in particular that provides narrative direction is a question posed by Denzin's granddaughter viewing two Last Stand paintings at the Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming: why do they represent events differently?

The first and last chapters of the book frame five experimental chapters. Denzin is clear about his critical and stylistic influences: he draws on Walter Benjamin to suggest that "a critical text consists of a series of quotations, documents, excerpts, and texts placed side by side," and acknowledges Gregory Ulmer for both the form of these chapters and the way they "travel among three levels of discourse: personal experience; popular, painterly representations of Custer; and scholarly discourses of the Old and the New West." The results are scripts meant for performing aloud in a group, creating "a shared emotional experience that brings the narrative alive." The chapters have recurring characters (Coyote, narrator, painters, critics, authors, and historians such as Brian Dipie) but are organized by discrete objectives. The

first speaks to the gap between official and unofficial histories of Custer's final battle. The second provides a contextual history of early Last Stand paintings, while the third looks specifically at their contemporary exhibition at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. The fourth chapter balances this with discussion of paintings by Lakota and Crow artists. The fifth, on Eric von Schmidt's work, is an "autoethnography" because it dramatizes and critiques von Schmidt's own account of his work. The final chapter contextualizes early paintings in relation to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

The book argues that these paintings are performative. More than novels, poems, or motion pictures, they are "mythical restagings, performances that say the U.S. military did not lose" and that "reproduce racist discourses about Native Americans." Denzin's own use of performance puts the work of these paintings under scrutiny, renders the West as a performance, and lets him imagine a "meta-museum" that is critical and reflexive about its own displays rather than adding to the repackaging and repurposing of the West for tourist consumption.

BRIAN RUSTED
Department of Art
University of Calgary