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The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of
American Literature (review)

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"You might, at least, keep quiet while I am talking" (Mina Loy, "The Artist and the Public," 1917, 333).

Surfing the Internet, it becomes equally impossible not to pause at another shiny object, a new one, the manifesto of the Dogme 95 filmmakers: "The auteur concept was bourgeois romanticism from the very start and thereby . . . false!" (http://www.tvropa.com/tvropa1.2/film/dogme95/the_vow/index.htm). The tone sounds almost too familiar. So *that* was the point of *Manifesto*—to teach the grammar of the genre. And, sure enough, Caws knew it all along: "There will always be other manifesto styles, even in what seems a post-manifesto moment. Someone will come along, alone or in a group, to invite us, loudly, to some new way of thinking (xxix)."

Bellin, Joshua David. 2001. *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. \$49.95hc. \$24.95sc. 274 pp.

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Finding the intersections of cultures and determining influences is not an easy task but one that Joshua David Bellin undertakes in *The Demon of the Continent: Indians and the Shaping of American Literature*. In his "Introduction" he promises "to examine how processes of 'mutual acculturation' manifest themselves in American literature" (3). The "demon" is the real or imagined Native American whose literary and cultural interactions with whites from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries Bellin analyzes. Or, perhaps, the "demon" is the Euro-American misperception of Native Americans or that border area where the cultures mix and absorb one another. The nuances of these interactions and influences are painstakingly and thoughtfully presented to challenge notions about how we can determine "mutual acculturation."

Bellin introduces "conversionism" to represent the often failed project of assimilation of native peoples to Euro-American culture. He redefines "noble

savagism” as a self-serving metaphor used by Euro-Americans to dismiss the complexities of native cultures and while allowing them to speak romantically as “savages.” Use of these terms enables Bellin to explore the intricacies of the cultures’ encounters and their imaginative results on both sides of the cultural divide. Missionaries, adventurers, nationalists, and educators such as the missionary John Eliot, Henry David Thoreau, James Fennimore Cooper, George Copway, William Apess, and Handsome Lake are among the individuals whose works, influences, and encounters are thoroughly explored. Bellin acknowledges the impossibility of determining in any measured way the process of “mutual acculturation.” Instead, he tries to show such results as economic exploitation by whites of Indians through appropriation of land and goods as well as the imaginative appropriation by whites of Native American oral history by turning “fact” into myth in order to debase that history.

Bellin sees this denigration as an economic issue when whites used the story-telling complex to appropriate land. Benjamin Franklin had the ability to “see Iroquois and American foundings as related” (121), to know that “it is violence, not verity, that ensures Indian peoples and stories will be rendered inert and mythic” (123); however, Franklin “suppresses his savage remarks” (123) at the Constitutional Convention. As Bellin notes, Franklin cannot accept Indian stories as equal to his own. In these sections of his text on stories, myths, and history, Bellin highlights the long-standing limitations of our understanding of oral tradition. One example occurs in Longfellow’s problematic poem *Hiawatha*, with its connection to the converted George Copway as a source, and its confusion of tribal culture heroes and tricksters. *Hiawatha* exemplifies as well the “demon” of confusion at that border where the European literary tradition and the oral story-telling traditions of Native Americans meet. Bellin concludes that Longfellow’s poem “succeeded because of its claim that Indian traditions had been rooted out at last. After all this time, *Hiawatha* announced, the story of the Indians was nothing but a myth” (182). The Ojibway and Iroquois truths are eliminated by Longfellow’s cultural mélange that undercuts historical and mythical truths with its tribal confusions and misunderstandings.

Bellin explores the fusion of Christianity and native cultures, but also sees this fusion as another form of appropriation because of the devaluing of native religions. Bellin’s text is particularly cogent when examining the Handsome Lake revival that he sees as “fascinating” not only in its meaning for the Seneca, but also the ways it informs the Christian texts “that seek to explain (and contain) it” (81). He weaves a fabric of connections among the revivalism of William Apess, its connection with oral traditions, and the religious experience of the period he explores. His discussion of the spiritual

movements of the times engulfing both Native American and Euro-American cultures is especially strong.

In his conclusion, Bellin questions whether he has “read interculturally” because he has used “mostly white authored texts” therefore leaving “only the tradition of Euro-America” (209). Bellin may be too hard on himself here, but the question he raises is particularly important when looking at the period covered, where nearly all “texts” have been filtered through a Euro-American consciousness or literary bias. In her late twentieth-century novel *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s eccentric part-Navajo shaman, Betonie, insists that ceremonies have been changing in subtle and innovative ways since their inception:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong. (Silko 1986, 126)

Bellin’s text demonstrates both interculturalism and the changes that occur in that place where cultures meet and meld. As Betonie proclaims, the arrival of whites changed native cultures, but Bellin knows that European cultures were changed into a new American culture and literature. Bellin’s text raises real issues about how we can determine, or should determine, the extent of mutual exchange. American literature was absorbing and redefining Native American traditions and, through this very discourse, was itself being changed. The exact details of that mutual change may never be completely known, but the acknowledgement of the mutual influences, of mutual conversions, is an important step in attempting to understand “the demon of the continent.”

Works Cited

Silko, Leslie Marmon. 1986. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin.