

[Global Histories]

A student journal

Review: “Officially Indian: Symbols that Define the United States” by Cécile R. Ganteaume
Author: Charlotte Sophie Kohrs

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.250>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Oct. 2018), pp. 175-177
ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2018 Charlotte Sophie Kohrs



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

Officially Indian: Symbols that Define the United States

By Cécile R. Ganteaume, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. Pp. 192, Paperback \$28.00, ISBN: 978-1517903305

REVIEWED BY CHARLOTTE SOPHIE KOHRS

In our childhood, many of us on both sides of the Atlantic have surely played cowboys and Indians or come into contact with stereotypical depictions of “the American Indian” in cartoons or elsewhere in popular culture. This was before we, as individuals, became aware of the implications of the game, and before we as a culture started to question the tropes of these childhood images and their harmful implications. “Playing Indian”¹ has a longstanding tradition on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In the United States, however, it takes on a more complex, even sinister connotation. As pointed out in the foreword to *Officially Indian: Symbols that define the United States*, playing Indian wasn’t always mere child’s play. When the revolutionaries of the Boston Tea Party dressed up as Natives to boycott British imports, they were “playing Indian” (p.12). Their reason for it was not to simply disguise themselves, to avoid being recognized, but rather to appropriate certain cultural expressions and values of Native people, weaponizing for their ideological benefit an already established trope connected to American Indians.

Cécile Ganteaume is an associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington D.C. who previously worked at the Museum of the American Indian in New York. Both are part of the Smithsonian Institute, and thus a staple of the national self-representation of the United States. In Washington she most recently co-curated a new major exhibition for the NMAI. *Officially Indian* is her first book. And, although not directly connected to an exhibition, it could easily be read as a catalogue to an imagined museum for the interaction of Indigenous and settler cultures and the creation of American identity. It holds more than forty short essays, each analyzing an object or image that stands in for some critical aspect of more than four hundred years of interaction between white and Native people.

Since the days the first Europeans set foot in the ‘New World,’ Indigenous identity and culture have been a matter of great fascination. However, European and,

¹ For further reference see: Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). And, maybe even more interestingly: Monika Siebert, *Indians Playing Indian: Multiculturalism and Contemporary Indigenous Art in North America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015). Siebert explores how the popular image of the American Indian impacts American Natives and their communities, today. While Indigenous communities struggle to achieve more political sovereignty, the traditional image of the American Indian, which was formed for and by the white gaze and which portrays them as a dead or dying race, can complicate these efforts.

later, American efforts to understand Indigenous people have not always been successful (or genuine). This eventually led to a popularization of a number of misconceptions about Indigenous life. The American Indian over the centuries thus became more of an allegory and less of a reality in American discourse: a stand-in for personal liberty and independence from the tyranny of government, a truly free spirit. The game of Playing Indian is only one such—although, in a way maybe the most long-standing—expression of popular conception of the American Indian which ignores the complex and checkered history the United States have with their native population. In *Officially Indian*, Cécile R. Ganteaume recounts how, despite the repeated attempts of the United States to eradicate Native peoples within its territories, the image of the American Indian became a recurring means for establishing a unifying American identity. Paradoxically, the more American Indians became hunted and dis-possessed the more the image of the American Indian became a symbol for values the United States promised and projected outwards. In the theft of the freedom of its native people, it forged the image of the “freest” nation on earth.

Ganteaume makes clear that she does not want to analyze all American Indian depictions in American popular culture; rather, she attempts to investigate in particular, how the image of the Native American has been used to form the greater national identity of the United States. She uses each object as a sign post on the way to American self-discovery, focusing on the expressed and implied messages behind each representation. Special attention is paid to all objects that are created or commissioned by or for the United States government: coins, stamps, and paintings feature just as prominently as army helicopters—the AH-64, also known as the Apache (p.144)—or national monuments, to prove that the use of the American Indian was intentionally and institutionally employed to create the identity of the United States.

In addition to Ganteaume’s work, *Officially Indian* offers a foreword by Colin G. Calloway and an afterword by Paul Chaat Smith. Both are noteworthy scholars of Native American Studies, Calloway currently teaching at the University of Dartmouth, Smith a founding associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) for over a decade. In his introduction Calloway recounts the troubled relationship among American settler culture, American Indian tribes, and American images and fantasies of the American Indian. Smith situates Ganteaume’s work in the context of present-day America, a society that seems more and more fractured, no longer united by a simple democratic ideal, but which can still assemble around a fictive American Indian as a symbol of American freedom (p.165).

Usually we perceive the American national narrative to be in opposition to, and exclusionary toward, American Indians. But Cécile Ganteaume shows that it is in fact impossible to imagine the United States without imagining the American

Indian. And while, on the surface, the United States seemed determined to exclude Native people from state society, the image of the American Indian became a prominent means for the depiction of American liberty and strength. *Officially Indian* makes us understand how Native people can at the same time be omnipresent in the production of American national identity and also perceived as a dead or vanishing race. In this way, *Officially Indian* helps us understand how the abstraction of a culture through the white gaze becomes a tool of intellectual genocide across the centuries.

By limiting her essays to only one to three pages each, Ganteaume attempts to give a concise overview of a visual history of the American Identity. Even though the book presents the objects in chronological order, discussing them in their order of appearance in the American context, the book invites browsing, since each essay can be read independently of the others. Many individual motifs can be traced this way through the centuries, from the times of early colonialism in North America to the most recent representations. In her essays concerning the earliest history of European and Native people, Ganteaume does not merely concentrate on British colonial settlers but includes Dutch, French, Portuguese, German, and Spanish voices. By uniting such a wide range of artefacts in this volume, her work should not just attract scholars of American Indian history, it should also find students who are interested in reading a short but insightful introduction to the history of the United States as well as those looking for a history of the importance of symbols and ideas in the construction of national identity.