

Nadja Martin-Catherin

The Making of 'Indians'

Sitting Bull, Native Agency, and American Culture

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Abbreviations

AHC	American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming
BBCW	Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming
KC	Pictographs in the Kimball Collection, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.
LOC	Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
NAA	National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.
PEPAC	Pictographs in the Pratt-Evans-Pettinger-Anderson Collection at the BBCW
QC	Pictographs in the Quimby Collection, Fort St. Joseph Museum, Niles, Michigan
SC	Pictographs in the Smith Collection, Smithsonian Institution in the National Anthropological Archives, Washington D.C.
SHSND	State Historical Society of North Dakota in Bismarck, North Dakota
UNL	University of Nebraska, Lincoln

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Introduction

He had heard enough of Sitting Bull to know that he was the unrelenting foe of the white race. The reputation of the wily savage for cruelty was the theme at every camp fire.
(DeBarthe, *The Life and Adventures of Frank Grouard* 81)

I am no chief – I am a man
(Sitting Bull to a newspaper correspondent in 1877)

The Case

When I visited Standing Rock Reservation in the summer of 2011 and spent a day at the Fort Yates Tribal Office, one tribal member, who had heard of my project to write about Sitting Bull, rolled his eyes in annoyance and asked: “Why Sitting Bull again?” Then he added that there were so many other indigenous leaders, so many other incidents that have been continuously ignored by Western scholars. He mentioned the incident at Whitestone Hill, North Dakota, as one such blank area, where in 1863, up to 400 Sioux were killed or captured by General Sully’s troops. Then he led me to a hall outside the office and showed me the wall on which hung many framed photographs of Lakota leaders, among them numerous names unknown outside Standing Rock. In his opinion, Sitting Bull has been written about too excessively by non-Indigenous scholars. Indeed, many and myriad texts covering all genres have been published on Sitting Bull, and literary interest in the man has never ceased since his emerging fame in the 1870s. When I explained to the Lakota member that it was in fact my aim to explore the reasons for Sitting Bull’s enduring popularity in American literature and culture, he looked up at me again, still skeptical, but now voiced supportive interest for my project.

The Lakota man’s discontent with Western scholars’ continual literary obsession with Sitting Bull and the neglect of other indigenous individuals and incidents in American-Indian history points at the core issues to be explored in my dissertation. In Lakota memory, Sitting Bull is well alive but has never been an object of excessive verbiage: Native Americans have continuously criticized that in his function as “a white man’s Indian,” Sitting Bull has been largely misrepresented. Besides, in their enduring fascination with Sitting Bull, Western biographers and historians have continuously attempted to grasp and define Sitting Bull. In doing so, they essentially built upon Western literary traditions of writing

history or biography and have depicted Sitting Bull and his role in American culture from a rather one-sided, solely non-Indigenous perspective. The typical Western story about him might sound something like this: Sitting Bull was a medicine man of the warlike Sioux, or, interchangeably: Sitting Bull was a warrior and great chief of the Sioux. Furthermore, it is always mentioned that he defeated General Custer and the Seventh Cavalry and lived as an outlaw in Canada, but eventually surrendered.

Especially in early biographies and frontier memoirs, Sitting Bull is delineated through a number of categories that amount to a set comprised in recurring 'basic stations.' In frontier memoirs, the Little Bighorn Battle and Sitting Bull's surrender form the most important categories. In Stanley Vestal's biography (1932), these categories are called "warrior," "chief," and "captive." Other biographies define the categories chronologically: birth, youth, becoming chief, the Little Bighorn Battle, exile in Canada, surrender, captivity, the Ghost Dance, and death. But like the term "Indian," which is a signifier without an original, as Gerald Vizenor puts it, or "Whites," these categories are likewise problematic.¹ They are foremost inventions, going back to nineteenth-century colonial rule, and in their redundancy they have become hollow.

Hence, this book is neither a history of the Sioux nor a biography of Sitting Bull, although it touches upon Sitting Bull's biography and is roughly structured in a chronological way. As an analysis of a partial history of Sitting Bull's representation in American literature, this study reveals much more about American society than about the Lakota. Vine Deloria writes in *God is Red*, "The field of literature on American Indians [...] breaks down into a number of easily categorized viewpoints which when taken together reveal much more about the conception of America held by the reading public than about American Indians, past and present" (39). Through tracing the figurations and re-figurations of one historical Indian figure, empty categories can be dismantled, exposing American self-perception. This approach dissolves formerly established clear-cut dichotomies of constructor and constructed, colonizer and colonized, as well as clear-cut cultural and ethnic lines that were drawn by historians, biographers, and ethnographers. The approach of this study allows a fresh look at human interaction in a global and local realm, given the socio-political times, historical context, and individual environment. Inspired by the contemporary dissolutions of binaries and of formerly

¹ Gerald Vizenor loosely quoted Baudrillard at a lecture he held at the Johannes Gutenberg-University at Mainz, Germany, in March 2011. Vizenor makes extensive use of Baudrillard in his works. In *Postindian Conversations* (1999), for instance, he explains his concept of the 'postindian,' referring to Baudrillard's concept of simulation and arguing that the misnomer 'Indian' is a hollow category that says nothing about indigenous identity (cf. Vizenor and Lee, 84).