

**Rifkin, Mark. *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Xxii, 293 pp.**

<http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/settler-common-sense>

As I read Mark Rifkin's *Settler Common Sense: Queerness and Everyday Colonialism in the American Renaissance*, I was reminded of British literary critic Frank Kermode's description of his relationship to the advent of Deconstruction in the 1980s:

A good part of the pleasure I derived from my profession had come from finding out what texts seemed to be saying as it were voluntarily, and in conveying this information to others; and I should have felt uneasy to join a party whose sole business it was to elicit what they were saying in spite of themselves. (5)

Rifkin's project may be labeled Queer (perhaps even Decolonization) rather than Deconstruction, but in reading works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville, he attempts to do the latter of the projects Kermode describes rather than the former. *Settler Common Sense* explores ways that these canonical American writers expressed their rebellion against conformist pressures within their nation and communities while being dependent upon those power structures to have cleared space (figuratively and literally) for their rebellion by dominating native nations. *Settler* in the title of course refers to settler colonialism; *Common Sense* refers to the "quotidian" ways the mechanics of settler colonialism operate, many times doing so in ways the settler/author does not recognize. In the texts Rifkin examines, the past and ongoing domination of the native nations has been naturalized or disappeared from view, and so he looks for traces of those acts of domination in the language of Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Melville. He also historicizes the moments of composition for key texts, describing the many ways the authors would have or could have been fully aware of native presence in New England, despite their texts' refusal or reluctance to acknowledge it.

The readers of this journal may be surprised that Rifkin mentions Gerald Vizenor just once, in an endnote. There he states that his project is different from Vizenor's in *Manifest Manners: Narratives in Postindian Survivance*, but that his "discussion of tropes of Indianness owe a debt to [Vizenor's] theorization of the ways figuration of Indianness substitute for (rather than point to) engagements with Native peoples and 'the tribal real'" (198). Rifkin's notion of "settler common sense" could be understood as a version of (or at least akin to) Vizenor's "manifest manners." Vizenor states, "Manifest manners are the simulations of dominance" (5); those simulations are the narrative representations of native conquest that produce and reinforce the dominant ideology (made most clear in Manifest Destiny). The ideological work of those simulations is more important than their veracity, and so they misrepresent actual native people. Vizenor has in mind texts (including films) that take "Indians" as their explicit topic, while Rifkin considers texts that may refer to Indians only in passing, but still he explores ways that Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Melville enable the continued dominance of native communities by the United States of America, even in the process of critiquing it; in this sense, Rifkin's readings, although informed by critical theories that have come to the forefront since Vizenor's book was published in 1999, seem to outline these texts as examples of "manifest manners."

For Hawthorne, Rifkin analyzes *The House of the Seven Gables*. The novel represents the tensions among various ways of owning land on the “Maine Frontier”: inheriting it, speculatively buying and selling titles to it, and taking possession of it through one’s labor. Hawthorne represents the last of these as the most democratic, as a method for escaping the normative pressures of society and the state. However, all of these methods of ownership require the mitigation of native claims to the land. The novel suggests working the land is a means of ownership beyond the authority of the state, but, ironically, this requires the state to have cleared the land of tribal people and their claims of ownership. The novel presents inherited fortunes (built upon an obligatory heterosexuality) as suspect because they limit democratic access to property and because they descend from treaties and purchases from the region’s tribes, and it suggests those original native claims of ownership (by the Penobscot, in this case) were illegitimate, since native people did not labor on the land in ways John Locke would have recognized.

For Thoreau, Rifkin examines *Walden* and its binary oppositions of city and nature. The city is a space for the corrupting and conforming pressures of civilization, especially “expanding and intensifying capitalist networks” (92), while nature is a space for the individual to enjoy unrestrained personal exploration with no regard for productivity—or reproductivity, as Rifkin emphasizes Thoreau’s escape from heterosexual conformity. Despite associations of the Indian with nature, in Thoreau’s formulation the regenerative qualities of nature require the absence of Indians—“living *like* an Indian, not among them” (92). Rifkin cites Thoreau’s famous example of the Indian who made baskets no one wished to purchase; for Thoreau, this Indian represented a misunderstanding of commercial endeavors and a desire to escape a system built upon such exchanges. But Rifkin cites examples of the Mashpee (quoting William Apess) and the Penobscot in Thoreau’s time and region who were engaged in commercial exchanges and who understood how to make that system work for their benefit (or at least their survival). In this case, Thoreau projects his fantasies onto the Indian, disregarding the very real Indians around him.

For Melville, Rifkin examines *Pierre*, which represents the city rather than nature as the site for escaping social, economic, and sexual pressures to conform. Rural land is held by the wealthy, so people must go to city to compete for wages, and there they can escape the “institutionalized regulation” of their desires (167). However, Rifkin describes the ways New York City in the 19<sup>th</sup> century “depends upon the continued displacement of Native peoples” (172) and is dependent upon the continued domination of the region’s native people, making this “queer urban liberation... a form of settler fantasy” (172). Melville’s novel is historicized with Seneca and Oneida resistance to dispossession.

Rifkin’s project of finding a text’s internal contradictions, its unspoken ideologies, or its unconscious desires has much in common with the style of criticism that made Kermodé uncomfortable but which became the dominant methods of literary criticism in the 1990s; and those methods have much in common with the project of decolonization, which reveals to the dominant culture the contradictions and disavowed consequences of its own ideologies. However, Rifkin may strike some readers as stretching a bit too far with a few points. He perhaps makes too much of Hawthorne’s single use of the word “tribe” in *The House of Seven*

*Gables*, and he perhaps too eagerly finds veiled references to masturbation wherever he looks in Thoreau's discussion of life alone in the woods.

If I may paraphrase Kermode in reference to Rifkin's writing style: Sometimes his sentences can challenge a reader to find what they are trying to say voluntarily, as it were, in spite of themselves. Kermode was famous for his eloquence; Rifkin's book, meantime, can be tough sledding; they are dense with references (a fourth of the book is devoted to Notes and Bibliography), and sometimes the sentences are constructed like Russian nesting dolls or are simply too long scan easily. The references are much appreciated and will be useful to other researchers and students, though the style will limit its audience and usefulness in classrooms.

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### **Works Cited**

Kermode, Frank. *The Art of Telling: Essays on Fiction*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983. Print.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. Lincoln, Neb.: Bison Books, 1999. Print.