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Missionary Linguistics and Indigenous Disruptions in North America: Review of Sarah Rivett, "Unscripted America: Indigenous Languages and the Origins of a Literary Nation"

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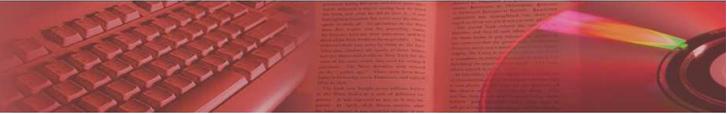
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Sarah Rivett. *Unscripted America: Indigenous Languages and the Origins of a Literary Nation.* Oxford Studies in American Literary History Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 400 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-049256-4.

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Missionary Linguistics and Indigenous Disruptions in North America

One of the most promising recent developments in early American studies has been a renewed focus on indigenous literatures and languages. Continuing this trend, Sarah Rivett's *Unscripted America: Indigenous Languages and the Origins of a Literary Nation* examines the practice of missionary linguistics in the colonies of New France and New England, tracing how the intellectual and theological engagement with Native languages had a lasting impact on American literary history. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, French Jesuit and Anglo-Protestant missionaries saw a redemptive power in Algonquian and Iroquoian languages, and they transcribed indigenous words to promote a "grammatically redeemed version" of Native people's own languages (p. 10). *Unscripted America* explores what is a central paradox of these "linguistic encounters." European thinkers saw indigenous languages as a key to understanding the universality of Christianity and Enlightenment taxonomies of human history, with missionaries believing that these languages could be used "as an instrument of a universal redemptive force" (p. 4). However, the untranslatable aspects of indigenous languages—and the multiple belief systems embedded in them—spurred what Rivett calls a "process of unscripting," a disruptive impact on existing theologies and cosmologies that prompted missionaries to confront "more secular understandings of language as a human construct" (pp. 11, 54).

The first part of this literary history explores these

tensions within missionary linguistics in New France and New England. For instance, while the French Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf sought to prove the "commensurability between Huron-Wendat and Catholic concepts," he also realized that any similarity "broke down at the level of language itself" (p. 43). Similarly, Mi'kmaq and Wampanoag languages confounded colonists' ideas about the distinctions between matter and spirit, compounding existing philosophical insecurities about the universality of Christian doctrine and the origins of humankind. By the end of the seventeenth century, the study of indigenous languages had revealed the limits of the universality of Christianity, meaning that the indigenous people of North America influenced the "archive of manuscript and print language texts" in a way that dramatically affected Christian cosmologies and Enlightenment ideas about human history (p. 17).

Rivett's study carefully explains how different religious and historical contexts affected the practice of missionary linguistics in New France and New England. Yet *Unscripted America* also sketches several broader historical shifts. First, in the eighteenth century, missionaries' knowledge of indigenous languages became more explicitly connected to matters of diplomacy, especially against the backdrop of the French and Indian War. In New France, Jesuits' longstanding linguistic and ethnographic studies paid off militarily and allowed the French to "maintain a stronghold [in North America] despite

the disproportionate colonial populations” (p. 186). In British America, meanwhile, missionary instruction became increasingly tethered to a colonial agenda through an emphasis on linguistic and social assimilation.

Another shift that Rivett traces is how these linguistic encounters were “absorbed into the American literary imagination” in the revolutionary and early republican periods, as “porous and malleable records of fluid historical interactions” (p. 19). *Unscripted America* suggests that it was the representation of Native languages—elusive and inaccessible but also aesthetically pleasing—that reinforced early American writers’ national imaginary, rather than the more coherent figure of the noble savage. A transitional figure in this analysis is the eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards, whose sermons and writings saw indigenous languages as “represent[ing] an archaeological key that unlocks a broader ancient and primitive past” (p. 176). Uniting Mohican belief systems and scriptural doctrine in his sermons at the Stockbridge mission, Edwards described a Christian God who was “palpably interactive in the natural world,” providing a compelling example of the impact of indigenous worldviews on a proto-American literary history (p. 180).

This strand of the book’s argument allows us to see canonical works of American literature in new ways. In a compelling close reading, Rivett argues that James Fenimore Cooper’s meandering and opaque landscape descriptions in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) evince more than just a hampered prose style, revealing a form of onomatopoeia that was rooted in Americans’ ideas about the relation between natural landscapes and the “metaphoric capacity of indigenous tongues” (p. 262). Reflecting on this literary aftermath, *Unscripted America* examines not only the impact of missionary linguistics in North America during the colonial period but also their impact on ideologies of Indianness in the early nineteenth century. At a time when the United States sought an increasingly aggressive approach to Indian removal, colonial-era studies of Native languages had come to provide “new origin myths” about North America’s indigenous history (p. 7).

In its scope, detail, and argument there is much to applaud in *Unscripted America*. For scholars of early (Native) American studies, perhaps its most significant contribution is its virtually encyclopedic mapping of French Jesuit and Anglo-Protestant missions, and the linguistic studies that emerged from them. Rivett’s literary history offers compelling connections (and contrasts) between authors ranging from Cotton Mather and John Eliot to

Pierre le Jeune and Brébeuf, making a convincing case that their intellectual and theological works influenced later writing by Edwards, Cooper, and Thomas Jefferson. To its credit, *Unscripted America* treats these texts not as merely European projections onto indigenous populations and languages. Rivett contends that they also testify to problematic yet crucial attempts on the part of non-Native writers to “transcribe and maintain living indigenous languages,” and should be taken seriously as a “vast archive” of indigenous linguistic knowledge. Her analysis thereby offers an important corrective to the narrative of “language death,” the assumption that “language loss is a metonym for the destruction of identity, culture, and sovereignty” (p. 16).

The book’s balance between a wide historical scope and rigorous detail is not always equally successful. At times the author presupposes too much contextual knowledge on the reader’s part and occasionally moving back and forth chronologically lets the argument lose momentum. More to the point, for a text that traces the origins of the US “literary nation,” it is perhaps a missed opportunity that the work does not engage a more elaborate discussion of the concept of nationhood in indigenous contexts, given the vexed relationship between Indian nations and the United States. Over the past two decades, studies of indigenous literature have invested much in the concept of Native American literary nationalism (and, more recently, Native American literary transnationalism), decentering the United States as the national framework for studying indigenous literatures, languages, and cultures. If these works of missionary linguistics indeed constitute a crucial archive for countering the “longstanding presumption of indigenous language death,” it leaves open the question of how these texts relate to the emergence of literary nationalism in indigenous nations, especially in the nineteenth century (p. 20).

Notwithstanding these minor problems, *Unscripted America* is a meaningful contribution to a surge in scholarship that has explored the relation between intellectual history, Native studies, and the literary history of colonial America and the early US republic. Its focus on the scientific study of indigenous languages makes it particularly worth reading alongside Sean P. Harvey’s *Native Tongues: Colonialism and Race from Encounter to the Reservation* (2015) and Robert Lawrence Gunn’s *Ethnology and Empire: Languages, Literature, and the Making of the North American Borderlands* (2015). Extending this conversation, Rivett offers a scrupulously detailed study of the cultural history of the colonial Americas,

a simultaneously wide-ranging and deeply probing account of the linguistic exchanges at the heart of colonial encounter. Making thought-provoking connections between linguistic and theological writings and the litera-

tures of the early republic, *Unscripted America* is an indispensable text for scholars examining the history of cultural exchange in Native North America.

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