

ANNETTE KOLODNY, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of Dawnlund, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), 448 pp.

Annette Kolodny is no stranger in U.S. Americanist circles. Her 1980 article “Dancing Through the Minefields” has been called “the most reprinted essay in American feminist literary criticism;”¹ her seminal studies *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984) were major mile stones in ecofeminism; and her teaching, as well as her 1992 article “Letting Go of Our Grand Obsessions: Notes Towards a New Literary History of the American Frontiers,” have left their marks on Western and Early American literary and cultural criticism. Due in part to Kolodny, young scholars have increasingly included in their examinations of ideas of the West and its contact zones works of early American literature as well as works written in languages other than English. Given these achievements, Kolodny sets a high bar for her latest work when in the first lines of her prologue, a kind of personal genesis of the book, she positions *In Search of First Contact* as the endpoint of a fifty year career as a researcher.

In Search of First Contact brings together contact narratives from Native American and Norse oral traditions. Kolodny’s aim is to locate the first contact between America’s Native inhabitants and its first know European would-be colonizers, not so much in geography, but in cultural history. Much of the monograph deals with the political and identificatory use of the Vikings as imagined ancestors in nineteenth-century America, including histories of the many forgeries and misinterpretations of archaeological evidence this search for and identification with the ‘Northern races’ has led to over the past two hundred years. One of the basic premises of Kolodny’s work is already hinted at in her monograph’s subtitle, namely that there exists an Anglo-American anxiety concerning historical roots. For Kolodny, the interpretation of first contact narratives is clearly political, and her monograph is in part a political intervention in the discursive struggle surrounding the interpretation of the ‘discovery’ of the

New World, which has too often been part of a veiled attempt to write Native American out of history and thereby justify the attempted genocide against them. In her attempt to set the historical record straight, it is part of Kolodny’s politics to treat her Native ‘sources’ with respect and responsibility. As she writes in her prologue, she consulted with her Native “helpers” (7) and asked them to correct her account of their stories and gave them last say over which of their stories she could reprint. Her goal in this was to avoid continuing in her own writing the appropriation of Native land, culture, and stories she criticizes.

The book is divided into seven chapters, plus prologue, epilogue, a note on word use, and an extensive endnote apparatus. In the opening chapter, “The Politics of American Prehistory,” Kolodny approaches the daunting task of reviewing existing research on and historical views of America’s prehistory. She sees especially older views tied to nation building and America’s political stance towards its Native inhabitants, both by those seeking to remove the Native peoples and by self-proclaimed “friends of the Indian” who sought to ‘civilize’ them (41). The logic Kolodny sees behind early appropriations of the Norse falls into two broad categories. On the one hand, they are attempts to invent a tradition independent of America’s British roots while on the other, they constitute attempts to annul America’s Native peoples’ claims of antecedence on the American continent by explaining away their cultural traces as leftovers from a ‘higher’ culture. In this chapter, Kolodny also introduces a second narrative, the rise of a challenge to Columbus’s claims of discovery of the New World in American intellectual history—especially since the mid-nineteenth century.

Kolodny’s second main chapter retells and analyzes for signs of first contact the two Old Norse sagas, *The Greenlanders’ Saga* and *Eirik the Red’s Saga*, which concern themselves with the discovery of the mythic land, Vinland. The problem with these sources, if read for historical information about a first contact and attempted European settlement of North America, is not only their at least partly literary and generic nature but also their own history as part of an oral tradition that was only later put into writing, copied and potentially significantly altered, e.g. by the influence of Christianization. Kolodny reads these narratives with both a literary interest and one

¹ Quoted in Vincent B. Leitch, gen. ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001): 2143.

in what they can tell us about the meeting of Europeans and Native Americans. To balance her reading, she compares the sagas with archaeological research. Furthermore, she brings in a Native perspective, e.g. when she highlights the importance of trading weapons for the Algonquian peoples, whom she identifies as likely candidates for the *Skraelings* (literally: the screeching ones) in the Vinland sagas.

This chapter is the most speculative in the book, and time and again Kolodny has to include statements such as “[w]e cannot know” (67). Whether Kolodny’s attempts to interpret the sagas for their historical facts are a strength or a weakness will vary between readers. A point of contention in the chapter, however, is Kolodny’s occasionally too lax source criticism. When a character in *Eirik the Red’s Saga*, Gudrid, performs spells despite her earlier protest that “[t]his is the sort of knowledge and ceremony I want nothing to do with ... for I am Christian” (78), the easiest explanation seems a later copyist’s bending of the text to make his ancestor a Christian in self-identification while maintaining her plot-relevant participation in the pagan ritual. This thought unfortunately never really enters Kolodny’s writing. While commenting on “the saga’s ongoing effort to undermine the older Norse religious practices in favor of Christianity” (83), Kolodny does not locate this effort in the saga’s delivery and transcription history, which is astonishing given her explanation of a textual contradiction through an attempt to bring together different version of the sagas a few pages later (89-90). It is easy to make similar nit-picking points about her treatment of the two sagas as independent texts. She notes with an implied suggestion of increased factual authenticity that “place names—and their geography—are identical” (84) in both texts but does not comment on the sagas’ likely mutual influence in an oral environment in which they were told alongside each other. The matching of the saga texts with known cultural practices of the Algonquians living on North America’s Eastern seaboard, on the other hand, lend a basis to the claim that there is at least some historical truth in the sagas’ accounts of first contact, all the more so when they are further backed up by archaeological research. While most scholars agree that the sagas provide evidence of an attempted colonization of North America around the turn of the first millennium, “[w]hat the sagas do not tell us are the precise geographical location

of Straumfjord, Hope, or even Vinland itself. And the sagas allow us only to speculate about the identity of the Native groups encountered by the Norse” (94). The chapter consequently ends with an educated guess about the location of Vinland, placing it within the borders of present day Canada, possibly Eastern New Brunswick.

After this exploration into the territory of archaeologists and scholars of Old Norse literature, Kolodny returns to her own disciplinary ground, her main argument, and the major strength of the book: the location of Vinland not on the map or in premodern history but in the American landscape of the mind. In the third to fifth chapters, Kolodny traces the history of Vinland and the Norse as imagined ancestors in American thought. The document sparking an interest in a Viking past among nineteenth-century intellectuals, and particularly New Englanders, was the Danish philologist Carl Cristian Rafn’s 1837 publication *Antiquitates Americanae, sive Scriptores Septentrionales Rerum Ante-Columbianarum, in America*. Among other documents, Rafn’s collection included the two Vinland sagas, as well as a five page abstract summarizing them in English (105-06). Rafn’s volume hit fertile ground in a cultural environment longing for a romantic past. The excitement sparked by *Antiquitates Americanae* was furthered by the find of an armored skeleton near Fall River as well as a ruined stone tower in Newport. Through many reviews and books popularizing Rafn’s work, his opinions were made accessible to a broad audience and had an impact on the imagination of authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett and William Gilmore Simms, artists, craftsmen, and historians, as well as some of the most influential thinkers in nineteenth-century America, including Emerson and Thoreau.

In this process of reclamation and reinterpretation, “a new image of the Norse began to emerge.” Instead of “brutal Viking conquerors” their “more civilized qualities” (132) entered the popular imagination, and the Vikings were often invented as ancestors. Apart from this invented tradition’s anti-Native thrust, Kolodny identifies a “palpable anti-Catholicism” (142) as the other dominant strand behind an idealization of Norse Vikings. Xenophobia, particularly against immigrants from Ireland and Catholic Europe, joined with conspiracy theories about

“the evil organizational genius of the Roman church” (Jenny Franchot qtd. on 143).

One rationale behind the promotion of the Norse, and Leif Eiriksson in particular, as the ‘true’ discoverers of the New World was a dissociation from the Italian Catholic Christopher Columbus sailing under the flag of the Spanish king. This revision became dominant in the years following the Civil War, and Kolodny places the controversy’s climax at the 1893 World Fair. She reads a giant replica of a Viking Ship that sailed from Norway to Chicago as a reminder of Eiriksson’s voyage as a challenge to the celebrations of the quadricentennial ‘discovery’ of the ‘New World’ by Columbus.

Before Kolodny relates this conflict of origin stories in her fifth chapter, however, she devotes a chapter to close readings of the Viking-inspired poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and James Russell Lowell. Kolodny places Longfellow’s poem “The Skeleton in Armor,” which connects the recently discovered Fall River skeleton in armor and the tower at Newport, within the context of the rise of the Norse in the American popular imagination. Throughout the chapter, she resists the temptation of brushing over the nuances of the poems and the contradictory strands of ideas floating around at one time for the sake of her argument. Instead, in her reading, Longfellow was “asking his readers to recognize the potential excesses of the romantic nationalism that then seemed so appealing” (162). Whittier likewise was skeptical of the romantic image of the Vikings. As a Quaker, he instead “praise[d] the transformation of the Northmen by the gentling influence of Christianity” (167) and suggested that Christianization would have a similar gentling effect on Native Americans. Kolodny reads his poetry as a sign of “Whittier’s eagerness to reassure himself of [...] the possibility of communion between the human spirit and the divine eternal spirit” (171). She sees a spiritual crisis of the abolitionist Whittier, whose experience with his fellow Christians who ignored the question of slavery shook his belief. Lowell is the final New England writer discussed in detail. According to Kolodny, Lowell’s goal especially in the poem “The Voyage to Vinland” is “to proclaim an idealized national destiny dressed in all the early trappings of American exceptionalism” (204). Based on her readings, Kolodny stress-

es the ‘plasticity’ of the Viking in post-Civil War culture in which

the Norse could be depicted variously as heroic warriors and empire builders, barbarous berserk invaders, fighters for freedom, courageous explorers, would-be colonists, seamen and merchants, poets and saga men, glorious ancestors, bloodthirsty pagan pirates, and civilized Christian converts. This plasticity rendered the Northmen perfect progenitors for a nation whose own postwar identity was then in flux. (204)

At the same time, the Norse also allowed these writers to elevate their New England home, which was rapidly losing political and economic importance. The chapter closes with a brief link between the Vikings and issues of manhood and a look at Viking-inspired household and luxury items.

In her last two chapters, Kolodny takes the book in yet another direction. She now attempts to reconsider not only the rhetoric and politics of European explorers’ claims to be the first in contact with particular Native peoples but in her final chapter reprints and discusses Native stories telling of the coming of strangers from the East. Kolodny discusses Mi’kmaq and Penobscot legends telling of the arrival of strangers, sometimes identified as Norse. These turn out to be even harder to place in history than the Vinland narratives. As Kolodny writes, “[d]espite the eagerness of folklore collectors like Leland and Rand to find evidence of Norse influence in the Native tales they collected, none is really there. Even less is there any significant trace of some remembered ‘first encounter’ with those who might be identified as Norse” (311). The oral nature of these tales, the intermingling of different nations and their stories, and the many contacts with fishermen, French traders, and so forth have changed such narratives. As Kolodny sums up, “there is nothing about first encounters with Europeans that specifically mirrors or corresponds to the detailed interaction between the Norse and the Skraelings as described in the two Vinland sagas” (311). The only concrete tale of a first encounter from a native perspective which Kolodny locates is Joseph Bruchac’s 1992 tale “The Ice-Hearts” which according to its author “draws on traditional materials” but is labeled as a piece of fiction by Bruchac himself (313-16). *In Search of First Contact* ends with an epilogue

subdivided into four “history lessons,” (327-33) which once again show the political and didactic nature of Kolodny’s writing by trying to derive ethical imperatives out of her search for these contact narratives.

It is of course possible to find fault with any project of the scope of Kolodny’s book, which bridges disciplines from Scandinavian Studies, via history and American Studies, to archaeology and Native American studies with an anthropological and ethnological angle. The volume covers in depth at least three centuries, the tenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century, and, while Kolodny read widely into all of these fields and her book offers a wealth of research, there are naturally countless sources she had to neglect. Such a critique, however, would miss the point of *In Search of First Contact*. While the monograph does not offer any new insights into the geographical location of Vinland or unearths previously unknown information into the historical moment of first contact, it is indispensable particularly for those interested in a well-researched account of the image of Vikings in nineteenth-century America, whose

place, as Kolodny convincingly shows, were at the intersection of many of the century’s central political, ethnic, and religious questions. This account alone makes the book worth reading. It is the politics of Kolodny’s quest that deserves to be mentioned especially, however. By bringing together on eye level sources in various languages, written Euro-American and non-written Native oral traditions, Kolodny moves in exactly the direction she outlined in “Letting Go of Our Grand Obsessions” and shows both the potential and dangers of such an approach. As much as the idea of her grand project is compelling, one cannot help wondering if the book would not have been more of a piece had Kolodny limited herself to the history of the Vikings in the Anglo-American imagination that forms the core of her work. Nevertheless, scholars in the area of North American Studies will find much to build on in their own research, to revisit, and in some cases certainly revise in both Kolodny’s study and her critical approach.

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