

“Vaudeville Indians” on Global Circuits, 1880s to 1930s. By Christine Bold. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 377 pages. \$65.00 cloth.

For many, notions of American Indian performers at the turn of the twentieth century evoke images of mounted Plains warriors attacking stagecoaches in Wild West shows and exhibitions featuring horsemanship and violence that reified stereotypes of Indian primitivism. Scholars are no exception, as few have written about the more than 300 Native vaudeville performers between the 1880s and 1930s. Based on transglobal archival research, Christine Bold portrays the careers of Native performers “that have been suppressed in the dominant scholarly account of the period’s popular culture” (13). Collectively, the biographies in this seminal study demonstrate how Native Americans helped shape popular culture and mass media through participation in vaudeville, revue, and motion pictures.

Bold’s inspiration for *“Vaudeville Indians”* began after she discovered a letter written by Princess Chinquilla in 1904. Adorned with photographs of Chinquilla and her cowboy juggling partner, the letterhead proclaims her as the “only United States reservation Indian in vaudeville.” Intrigued by Chinquilla’s photograph and asserted identity, Bold rescued more photographs and cabinet cards from “archival captivity,” then examined them with Michelle St. John (Wampanoag) and Monique Mojica (Guna and Rappahannock)—members of the Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble—and Monique’s mother, Brooklyn-born Gloria Miguel, whose vaudeville performances coincided with Princess Chinquilla’s career. These “archival exchanges” entailed detailed Indigenous readings of cabinet cards that enriched Bold’s presentation of vaudeville history.

In *“Vaudeville Indians,”* Bold demonstrates how the rise of polite (or family-oriented) vaudeville was entwined with indigeneity, and how Native performers manipulated vaudeville for their own purposes. In 1881, Tony Pastor, “the Christopher Columbus of the stage,” opened a family-friendly venue on Fourteenth Street in Lower Manhattan, then hired American Indian dancers, singers, trick riders, actors, acrobats, and jugglers who starred in Wild West shows, medicine shows, dime museums, and other theatrical and performance venues. Native entertainers lived peripatetic lifestyles, traveling through the countryside seeking new audiences and shuffling between urban venues that continuously changed lineups. Moving through “Native space” on routes established before European contact, they depended on scattered kinship networks and “Native hubs” in urban areas. Among the pre-polite vaudeville performers were James Beaver (Cayuga), known as “Uncle Beaver, Indian juggler”; Frank Loring (Penobscot), billed as Big Thunder, showman, hunting guide, basket seller; and Chief Running Deer (Mohawk).

Vaudeville productions consisted of seven to fifteen short acts, seven to ten minutes long, and playlets no longer than twenty minutes. Acts were unpredictable

and novel, which contributed to the rapid growth of the vaudeville industry in the United States and Europe by the turn of the century. By 1894, the popularity of Indian vaudeville is evident by advertisements and positive reviews in newspapers. Among the hundreds of Native performers, Bold identifies some as “Indian Ghosts” running the gamut from Indigenous persons who lost contact with their ancestral community on account of colonial trauma to “pretendians” and red-face poseurs. Although the latter can be accused of “cultural theft and trivialization,” pretendians “playing Indian” confirm the power of “Indigenous vaudeville networks that they tried to enter or emulate” (50). Bold provides biographies of several notable performers (Princess White Deer, Go-won-go Mohawk, and Mary Spotted Elk), examines the life history of a self-identified performer searching for her native roots (Princess Chinquilla), and concludes with a non-Native masquerader (German-born Chester Dieck). Four interspersed “vaudeville numbers” provide brief biographies of Will Rogers (Cherokee), Princess Watawaso (Penobscot) and Chief Poolaw (Kiowa), Mary Spotted Elk (Penobscot), and Princess Wahletka (pretendian). Their onstage acts are presented from the perspective of the audience, then reattached to the history of their making to reveal the “larger connections and cultural meanings encoded in this vaudeville bit” (26). Despite the complexities of self-identification and Indianness, all played significant roles on the vaudeville stage.

Among the early vaudeville performers were Mohawks whose ancestral lands extend from southeast Canada to northern New York State. In the early 1860s, Chief Running Deer organized an Indigenous troupe—including members of his family—that toured three continents during their storied careers. Astute managers, brothers John and James controlled their contracts and copyrighted their trick riding act. James’ daughter, Esther (1891–1992), dubbed Princess White Deer, toured with the family and then went solo from 1910 to 1929, when she retired from the stage. Renowned for singing, dancing, acting, and trick riding, Esther brokered her own deals and arranged her choreography. Notably, she also championed voting rights for Native women. Princess White Deer signed advertising photographs “Aboriginally Yours,” as Carrie A. Mohawk (1860–1924) and Go-won-go Mohawk (Seneca) had done two decades previously. Known as the “mother of all vaudeville Indians,” Go-won-go Mohawk performed stage tricks before Will Rogers did, wrote her own plays, and often played men’s roles, which led to her novelization in dime novels as a Plains warrior. Go-won-go Mohawk advertised herself as *not* one of Buffalo Bill’s Indians, and her cross-gender routine demonstrates “the power and wit of popular Indigenous performance” (95). When Monique and Michelle examined her cabinet cards, they commented about her indigenized European clothing, mixed tribal regalia, and gender-bending images that evoked comparisons to Oscar Wilde.

When public viewing of motion pictures began in the mid-1890s, vaudeville houses were the perfect venue for emergent one-reelers, followed by feature films of longer duration by the 1920s. Oftentimes, Native performers danced, sang, or did skits between reels, as did Mary Alice Nelson Archambaud (Penobscot, 1903–77), along with her partner, Chief Sheet Lightning (Sac and Fox), during screenings of John Ford’s *The Iron Horse* (1924). Ironically, the live acts overshadowed the performances

seen on the big screen. Mary Alice danced so well that when she joined the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch in 1925, Cheyenne dancers dubbed her Molly Spotted Elk. Often accompanied by actor Tim McCoy, she danced during showings of *The Last Frontier* (1926) and *The Flaming Frontier* (1927).

Performers of questionable background include Princess Chinquilla, who at age eighteen first appeared in 1885 with her banjo act in a St. Joseph, Missouri, dime museum. Over the course of her long career, stories about her Cheyenne background constantly shifted. Though Buffalo Bill endorsed her, Gertrude Bonnin, or Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Dakota), called her a phony. In comparison, Princess Wahletka, the “Cherokee princess psychic,” epitomized the popularity of faux-Indian identity by combining the image of a primitive exotic princess with the occult fad associated with western modernism on both sides of the Atlantic. Ironically, Princess Wahletka’s identity as a pretendian was never questioned, though she was scrutinized for “psychic trickery.”

Collectively, as Native and faux-Indian performers traveled through “Native space” between the 1880s and 1930s, they influenced the entertainment industry from vaudeville to revue to motion pictures. Thankfully, Christina Bold has brought this history back to life.

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