

*Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past* Edited by Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale

Alison Norman

Volume 98, Number 1, Spring 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065844ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065844ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Norman, A. (2006). Review of [*Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past* Edited by Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale]. *Ontario History*, 98(1), 117–119. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065844ar>

ording the Group of Seven and their Georgian Bay subjects a sort of preordained, deserved fame. A to-be-expected result of the author's fearlessness is that *Shaped by the West Wind* tends to overextend itself. Rarely among books that I have enjoyed have I penciled in so many marginal "?" and "!!" We are told that "repeated characterization of the archipelago as wilderness by its own users seems somewhat naïve, even disingenuous, and factually inaccurate." (p. 181) Yet Campbell herself has used the word wilderness unproblematically, and without definition, up until then. And consider the section that begins: "But Canadians rarely think of Georgian Bay as a region . . . The Prairies and the Maritimes and the North are regions." (p. 155) How

could anyone imagine that the relatively small Bay area deserves comparable status, particularly when the book only concerns itself with the Bay's eastern shore? Owen Sound and Collingwood barely make it into the index, Tobermory and Wiarton not at all.

*Shaped by the West Wind* is a book that will delight, occasionally madden, and always engage thoughtful readers.

Alan MacEachern  
University of Western Ontario

### *Bibliography:*

Vance, Jonathan F. *Death so Noble: memory, meaning, and the First World War*. Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1997.

## *Contact Zones*

### *Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Colonial Past*

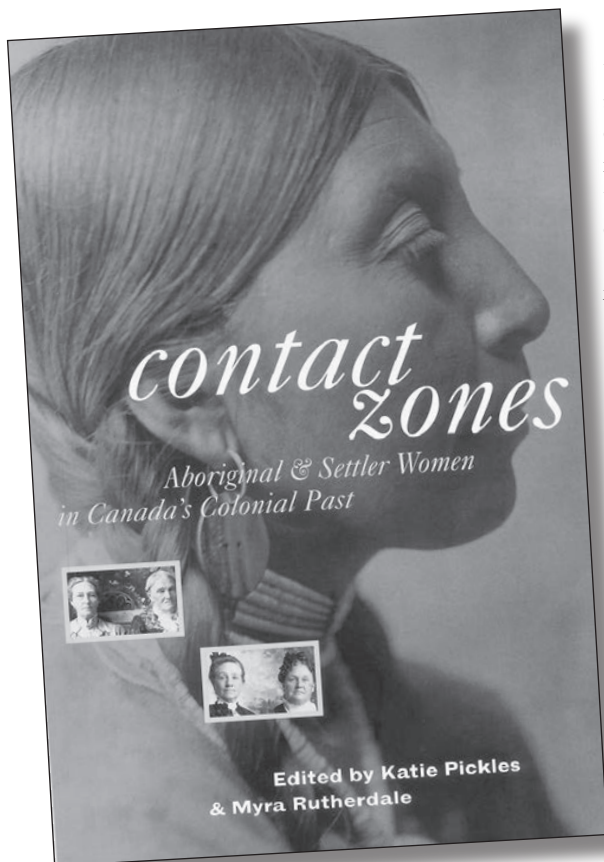
Edited by Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005.

x + 308 pp. Illustrations. \$85.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-7748-1135-8.

In her influential book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt coined the term "contact zones," and it has become a catchphrase for historians studying relationships between colonizers and the colonized in many contexts, including Canada. By contact zones Pratt means "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict." (p. 6) Such encounters are the focus of the essays in *Contact Zones*. Encouraged by a growing international

body of work on gender and empire, Canadian historians have begun to investigate the gendered and racialized nature of the relationships that existed among Natives, non-Natives, and mixed-race people during Britain's (and Canada's) effort to create a white settler society. This fascinating collection is the result.

*Contact Zones* builds on previous collections in Canadian women's history, but it is the first to focus on Native and mixed-race women and their relationships with non-Natives and the Canadian government. Editors Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale bring together work by thirteen specialists in history, art history, women's studies, Native studies, English



literature, and the new gendered colonial history of Canada. Many of their essays have been developed from previously published work; others are parts of forthcoming studies. One of the great strengths of this collection is that it puts previously scattered research into one place, allowing the common subject of women's experiences of colonization to be seen in relation to one another.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which considers women's bodies in the contact zone. In Part One Sherry Farrell Racette, Cecilia Morgan, Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag, and Jo-Anne Fiske look at how Native women in Canada responded to colonization, and not only survived, but at times benefited

from the new situation. Métis artists in the West, Iroquois lecturers Bernice Loft and Ethel Brant Monture, Mohawk poetess E. Pauline Johnson, and Native girls in residential schools all contested colonization in their own ways. Part Two considers how control over domesticity and the family were central to the colonial project in Canada. Adele Perry, Sarah A. Carter, Robin Jarvis Brownlie, and Joan Sangster show how church and state authorities did their best to control Native women's sexuality, often seen as transgressive, through Christian mission efforts to establish nuclear families, by way of laws prohibiting polygamy and other offensive sexual practices, and through education in proper Euro-Canadian morals and behaviours at residential and training schools. In Part Three, Jean Barman, Diane Newell and the editors explore how women's bodies were central to the creation of national and imperial identities. These scholars find that both white and Native women claim public spaces and are sometimes victims in these places, citing a number of examples from British Columbia.

These carefully designed sections of *Contact Zones* allow readers to compare the various ways in which women occupied the spaces of colonial encounter, challenged boundaries, and made history.

The majority of the essays in *Contact Zones* focus on people generally neglected by historians until twenty-five years ago when Sylvia Van Kirk published her landmark study, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*. Van Kirk argued that Native and mixed-race women played a central role in the complex fur trade society, and essays in *Contact Zones* continue her exploration of those roles. For example, in "Championing the Native: E. Pauline Johnson rejects the squaw," Gerson and Strong-Boag look

at how Johnson, an Ontario woman who was part Mohawk and part English, took to the national stage as a poet and performer in an effort to challenge stereotypical views of Native women and to portray them as the equals (if not the superiors, at times) of white women. They see Johnson as a cultural worker whose poetry and performances were “strategically crafted interventions in the ideological battle to legitimize the claims for respect of the First Nations in general, and of Aboriginal women in particular” (p. 63). In “Domesticating girls: the sexual regulation of aboriginal and working-class girls in twentieth-century Canada,” Joan Sangster examines how “Native and working-class girls were targeted as sexual problems by the law, the state, social reformers, even their own families and, as a result, found themselves incarcerated in training schools.” (p. 177) Located near Galt, the Ontario Training School for Girls (OTSG) was home to both Native and working-class white girls who were subjected to a reform agenda of “domesticity, femininity/purity, and honest labour.” (p. 180) Although race and class differentiated the experiences of girls in the OTSG, both Natives and whites were “caught in this web of regulation” (p. 195) intended to domesticate overly sexual girls, encourage idealized middle-class family forms, and train future workers. Sangster suggests that there is a strong link between social reformers’ efforts to domesticate and “civilize” working-class Canadians and Native Canadians, where many previous studies have seen these as separate projects.

*Contact Zones* is an intriguing and important book. The authors use a variety of sources, including literature, memoirs, poetry, visual arts, costumes and clothing, as well as church and state-produced

records, to investigate colonial interactions in the contact zone. Pickles and Rutherford have included an index, a rarity in such collections, and it makes the book all the more useful. In addition to the essays on Pauline Johnson and the OTSG, two others focus on Native women in Ontario: Jarvis Brownlie’s work on the regulation of women on Georgian Bay reserves, and Morgan’s study of Loft and Monture. The balance of the essays look at the western Canada, where contact and colonization occurred more recently. Although *Contact Zones* does not look east of Ontario, nor does it consider the pre-Confederation era, the material that it does include is critical to our understanding of Natives within Canada as a white settler colony. The wealth of information in this collection affirms that women, and particularly Native women, have been crucial to Canada’s imperial and colonial past; *Contact Zones* makes it difficult for scholars and interested citizens to ignore them.

Alison Norman  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,  
University of Toronto

### *Bibliography:*

- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Sangster, Joan. *Girl Trouble: Female Delinquency in English Canada*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002.
- Strong-Boag, Veronica Jane, and Carole Gerson. *Paddling Her Own Canoe: The Times and Texts of E. Pauline Johnson (Tekabionwake)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.
- Van Kirk, Sylvia. *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870*. Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980.