Summer 2011

Review of The Nebraska Dispatches by Christopher Cartmill

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The *Nebraska Dispatches*. By Christopher Cartmill. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010. 143 pp. $18.95.

The quest for home is an admirable one with seemingly universal appeal. That a New York City playwright would chronicle his experiences reconnecting with his Nebraska roots is something that, normally, we might applaud. Before buying this book, however, ask yourself if you care to read a comparatively privileged writer wax poetic as he parallels what amounts to be a modern existential crisis with the forced removal, military arrest, and government exploitation of a nineteenth-century Ponca father.

Commissioned by the Lied Center for the Performing Arts to write a play about Standing Bear's 1879 habeas corpus hearing, which established for the first time that American Indians who had severed tribal ties were human beings under the U.S. Constitution, Cartmill returns to Nebraska for historical, spiritual, and geographic inspiration. He documents the researching and writing of his play, *Home Land*, with a series of "dispatches"—e-mail messages, recollections, and snippets of conversation.
This review cannot speak to the strengths or weaknesses of the play, which has been staged but not yet published. But what could be a promising project in and of itself, *The Nebraska Dispatches* instead obsesses with Eurocentric notions of authenticity, the supposed nobility of American Indians, and the writer’s own purported, yet uncontextualized and unspecific, Native ancestry. The brief dispatches themselves say very little about Standing Bear, and what little is said contains distracting historical and chronological errors.

By Cartmill’s own admission, his book reflects a dose of poetic license. That license, however, wears thin, particularly with the many references to Pocahontas and overwrought Native clichés. The playwright’s attempt to compare his journey with that of Standing Bear is unsettling at best; the juxtaposition between the writer and the bombastic Thomas Henry Tibbles, on the other hand, would seem more apt.

While this book will probably not appeal to many current and former Great Plains residents as a casual read or academic text, it does have tremendous pedagogical potential in Native Studies and related fields. As *The Nebraska Dispatches* raises provocative questions about stereotypes, assumptions, motivations, and cultural privilege, instructors might productively pair it with something like Devon Abbott Mihesuah’s *So You Want to Write about American Indians?: A Guide for Writers, Students, and Scholars* (2005). Indeed, Cartmill’s editor probably should have assigned Mihesuah’s guide as required preliminary reading.

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