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## Book Review: Confronting Race: Women and Indians on the Frontier

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*Confronting Race: Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1815-1915.* By Glenda Riley. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. ix + 326 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.

In this update of her 1984 book, *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825-1915*, Glenda Riley has provided a new introduction and framework for her earlier research on white women's interactions with American Indians in the American West. Riley has copiously compared 150 European-American men's documents and 150 white women's sources to gain insight into how white men and women may have viewed and interacted with Indians differently. Riley originally argued that white women "saw Indians more clearly and related to them more intimately than most men." Having read recent work that emphasizes European-American women's complicity in colonialism, she now acknowledges that white women "were still unable to free themselves from colonialist attitudes." Despite her extensive research and this new framework, the book is unconvincing and contradictory.

For this revision, Riley recycles a framework of the frontier—as philosophy, process, place, and product—she developed in her other recent book, *Taking Land, Breaking Land* (2003). While a potentially valuable conceptualization, her use of this framework is awkward, especially in her concluding sentence: "Neutralizing negative product more than has

occurred to date is the only way to prevent the dark side of the frontier from living on in the twenty-first century."

Although adeptly pointing out the stereotypes Americans and Europeans indulged in regarding white women and American Indians, Riley sometimes perpetuates such misrepresentations. She remarks, for example, that "women were generally more hysterical in their reactions to alarms than were men." And after her perceptive discussion of white women's dehumanization of Indians through describing them as "creatures," she falls into the same trap by declaring, "White women also found strange the *mating practices* of American Indians" (my emphasis).

Riley also frequently contradicts her own arguments. On the one hand she claims, "Because white women have long believed they are conservators of home, family, and ethnic culture, they are perhaps less likely than white men to destroy the homes, families, and cultures of native peoples." Just seven pages later, however, she notes that white women sometimes recommended that Indian children be removed from their families to boarding schools.

Despite her attempt to create a more critical assessment of white women's interactions with Indians, Riley frequently lapses into a Pollyannaish view, arguing, for example, that white women, "evidently free of former anxieties, *invited Indians into their homes as domestic helpers*. . . . (my emphasis). While another historian might see this as evidence of exploitation, Riley gives it a positive twist.

Ultimately, Riley seems to have applied new theoretical concepts on gender and colonialism only superficially to her prior research, rather than conducting a thorough reassessment of her earlier interpretations.

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