

Ranta, Judith. *The Life and Writings of Betsey Chamberlain: Native American Mill Worker.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003. 284 pp. Cloth, \$47.50/Paper, \$18.95.
Book review by Margaret M. Bruchac

By reconstructing the life history of Betsey Guppy Chamberlain (1797-1866), historian and librarian Judith Ranta has done some fine detective work that illuminates an otherwise little-known aspect of women's lives in nineteenth century New England. This compilation will be useful for scholars of social history, yet there is one significant flaw. Ranta champions Chamberlain as a Native American author, and she has organized the collected works to emphasize this point.

We need not retroactively adjudicate degrees of Indian blood, but we must weigh real and fictive kin affiliation when discerning social identities. Betsey's paternal grandmother, Sarah Loud Guppy, was said to have some Indian blood, but no specific tribal nation was ever recalled. Betsey's parents, William and Comfort Guppy, who lived in Brookfield and Wolfboro, New Hampshire, near Lake Winnipesaukee, identified as white people. Given their locale, in Central Abenaki homeland, Ranta assumes that Betsey's grandmother was Abenaki Indian. There is no evidence, however, to indicate that Loud, her son, or her granddaughter ever self-identified or were counted among members of any Abenaki (or other Native American) community.

Chamberlain's publications began only after the death of her first husband, Josiah Chamberlain, when she left an intentional community (likely Shaker) in New Hampshire. She worked in the textile mills around Newmarket and Lowell, Massachusetts and ran a boarding house, while publishing dozens of articles in the mill's journal, *The Lowell Offering*. In 1843, she married Charles Boutwell and moved to Illinois, but returned to Lowell to work two more years in the mills and publish more stories in *The New England Offering* before settling in Illinois.

Ranta convincingly demonstrates that Chamberlain had ready access to popular literature, so it is no surprise that her narratives reproduced prevalent social and ethnic stereotypes. Along with hundreds of her fellow female textile workers, she partook of Lowell's public libraries, lectures, and events, and attended "Improvement Circles" featuring amateur readings at local churches. Chamberlain was sensitive to anti-Indian prejudices, and her style resembles Lydia Maria Child, with its feminine sensitivities and calls to justice for the downtrodden. Yet, as

Siobhan Senier has observed, Chamberlain's melodramatic short fiction and vignettes of home life matched popular genres, and her "dream visions" resembled transcendentalist ramblings (Senier 2004:673). None of this suggests tribal heritage.

Ranta claims that Chamberlain tapped Algonkian storytelling practices, but I see no trace of Indigenous oral traditions, cultural practices, or environmental knowledge in any of her writings. Curiously, Ranta censored the collection by omitting Chamberlain's lurid stories of Indian attacks against white settlers, perhaps because these might undermine assertions of identity. Chamberlain's anecdotes of Indian encounters on the colonial frontier employ sharp gender and racial divisions with satirical overtones and Christian messages; Native voice and agency is absent or marginalized. For example, "The Indian Pledge" recounts the rescue of a racist young white man by a "savage" Indian, in exchange for the gentle white wife's earlier kindness to the poor Indian. "A Fire-Side Scene" features an old Yankee veteran recalling, with some pride, the mass burning of a Native village on the western Miami frontier (125-126). Chamberlain's pseudonymous "Tabitha" (presented as the author of these tales) seems to be an alternate identity, rooted in ethnic masking or cultural appropriation.

Chamberlain's creative work must be seen as a commercial transaction; whether paid or not, she trafficked in productions that elevated her own social position. She earned high wages in the mills, but she also found time to compose more than forty stories for *The Lowell Offering* and *The New England Offering* in a few years' time. Exotic narratives containing Indians, scripted by a woman of mysterious ancestry, would have been an easy sell, but whence came her inspiration? Was her favorite literary character, the "old maid," based on some older woman who befriended the mill girls? Who was the old veteran who fought on the Miami frontier? Did she interview fellow mill workers (who could not write well, or could not write at all), or collect stories from her many boarders in Lowell? Whether her characters were real or imagined, truthful or apocryphal, it is both curious and notable that Chamberlain's writing took place only in Lowell; she wrote nothing in Illinois. Perhaps the dearth of writing reflected a dearth of informants?

Ranta generously dedicated her research to Abenaki people, but her over-reaching speculations are not helpful. Ranta proposes tests to verify a Native American author---self-concept; acceptance by a tribal community; tribal enrollment; and commitment to Native American causes (98-99)---while admitting that Chamberlain passes none of these. Touting this

mill-worker as “Native” does not expand our understanding of Native American literature; it only muddies the waters by promoting the antiquated notion that trace amounts of Indigenous ancestry shape cultural expression. In nineteenth (and twenty-first) century contexts, Indian-ness must be measured through tribal recognition and kinship relations, not just blood quantum. Ironically, one of the best sources for first-person perspectives on nineteenth-century Abenaki lives is a narrative written in 1861 by a white man---Joseph W. Johnson---who was adopted by the Abenaki (Johnson 1861). In Johnson’s descriptions of his family’s travels through 1840s New England (including Lowell), we find the very kind of Indigenous insights, experiences, and cultural markers that Chamberlain fails to provide.

A fellow mill worker, Harriet Hansom Robinson, claimed that out of the more than 60 women who contributed to *The Lowell Offering*, Mrs. Chamberlain, who “had inherited Indian blood, and was proud of it,” was “the most original, the most prolific, and most noted” (Robinson 1898:145). Yet, a trace amount of unknown Indian ancestry does not transform one into a Native American author; more careful and less romanticized contextualizations are needed. Betsey Guppy Chamberlain was a Yankee author with an engaging style and a family story of a mysterious Indian ancestor (which is not uncommon in that part of New England). Her writings offer us brilliant insights into the perspectives and experiences of white mill girls and middle-class Yankees. They also provide evocative visions of the angst-ridden longing, among free-thinkers, early feminists, and transcendentalists, for deeper connections to Native American Indians in nineteenth century New England.

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