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Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing About American Indians (Book Review)

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Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians. By Devon Mihesuah. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1998. xi + 212 pp. \$15 paper)

In *Natives and Academics*, eleven Indian authors from various tribes and academic disciplines address, in pointed and sometimes poignant fashion, some of the most vexing issues by which they, their nations, and the academic community are interconnected. These include debates about cultural essentialism, the appropriation and marketing of indigenous culture and identity, the relationship between documentary and oral history, the representativeness of indigenous informants, the merits of various methods of data collection, and two of the most “sensitive” topics—remuneration to tribes for information received, and the question of who benefits from research on Indians (p. x).

A majority of the essays were originally published in Winter

1996 as a special issue of the *American Indian Quarterly*, entitled "Writing about (Writing about) American Indians." This volume drew both praise and ire from many academics, and, with a paucity of books on research, theory, and methodology of writing about Indians, it was wisely decided that an expanded and revised book of essays would be a valuable addition to the field. It is certainly that.

Besides partially filling the void in literature, the book has two other broad but related goals. First, to let scholars—mostly non-Indian, but including some Indians—know that indigenous peoples have rarely been satisfied with "the manner in which they have been researched or with how they and their ancestors have been depicted in scholarly writing" (p. x). Second, "to offer suggestions scholars might use to produce more critical, creative, and well rounded interpretations of Indian histories and cultures" (p. xi). The combined intellectual and emotional force of the essays is more than adequate in fulfilling all three goals.

There is, moreover, a profound theme lacing through these essays. It centers on questions of authority (jurisdiction) and control. That is, who has the right to speak for indigenous people, and in what manner should that right be exercised? Several of the authors addressed this central concern directly. In Angela Cavender Wilson's words: "When the topic of writing about Indians comes up the first questions that come to mind are Who is doing the writing? Why? And what did the subjects have to say about this?" (p. 23). Vine Deloria, Jr., put it this way: "Should Indians be allowed to present their side of the story, or will helpful and knowing whites be the Indians' spokespeople?" (p. 68). And Karen Swisher noted that "What is missing [in non-Indian education accounts] is the passion from within and the authority to ask new and different questions based on histories and experiences as indigenous people" (p. 193).

It may be, as Deloria put it, that the issues of authority and control are irreconcilable. That "understanding the nature and depth of the confrontation between red and white in the Western Hemisphere" may be "an impossible task for any of us" (p. 82). In fact, among the authors there was a wide spectrum of views on the basic question of whether non-Indians should continue to study Indian people. For example, some authors call for non-Indians commentators to get completely out of the business of researching and writing about tribes. Others said non-Indians could continue their work but must show genuine respect and follow specific codes of ethics. Still others called for non-Indians to "think like Indians" in their work.

This is an informative and generally rewarding book. It would have been strengthened, however, had the various essays been grouped together into sections. For instance, it appears that the essays could be easily bunched into 1) Internal critiques—essays in which authors criticize other Indian academics; 2) External critiques—essays in which the authors critique the methods or substance of non-Indian academics; and 3) Indigenous responses—essays that map out alternative research strategies and methodologies for both Indian and non-Indian academics.

Furthermore, the book is heavily weighted with accounts by Indian historians, which is not surprising given that the editor herself is trained in that discipline. Several other disciplines are represented—literature, education, law, and so forth—but surprisingly, no Indian anthropologists' work was included. This was a crucial omission, given the important role that anthropology has played in scholarship by and about Indians.

In closing, many of the authors rightly bemoaned the virtual absence of Indian perspectives in the works of non-Indians or the insensitive and distorted manner in which indigenous peoples have frequently been portrayed by non-Indian academics. Such denial and arrogance are fundamentally wrong and must be corrected. But the errors and omissions of non-Indian historians and others in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences have inadvertently left plenty of open space for willing and able Indian authors to research and write the more detailed and nuanced accounts about indigenous nations and their concerns that are still needed in order to develop the baseline scholarship necessary or, in some cases, to correct or revise existing scholarship.

Natives and Academics is a worthwhile contribution to the literature because it addresses a number of crucial research questions in a candid and inspired manner while also identifying specific recommendations on what must be done to rectify the situation.