



Clyde Ellis, Luke Ellis Lassiter, Gary H. Dunham, eds. *Powwow*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. vii +309 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-6755-8.

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## Pan-Indian or Intertribal: The Identity of Powwow Dancing

Clyde Ellis, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary Dunham do a wonderful job of compiling a striking collection of works by and about powwows throughout indigenous cultures. At the root of the text is the power and knowledge represented by a uniquely indigenous expression of community and identity. Reference to some seminal texts on the powwow, including those by Barre Toelken, Clyde Ellis, William Powers, and Alice Kehoe, are offset nicely by a range of current literature, by such authors as Mark Matern, Thomas Kavanagh, and Patricia Albers, analyzing cultural values within the powwow. *Powwow* presents a collection of essays by a number of scholars and maintains a recent trend in localizing powwow activity, like Tara Browner's *Heartbeat of the People* (2002), rather than generalizing the powwow as a pan-social phenomenon.

What is a powwow? Ellis tells us immediately that "every weekend of the year Indian people gather in one place or another to share their dances and songs, renew friendships, and reaffirm their shared experiences as members of a tribe, organization, family or community.... 'Why do we dance?... Well, how many reasons you got? Sometimes it's for ceremony. Sometimes it's because I want to put on my getup and shake a leg. And sometimes it's because I want to remember my friends and family. And sometimes it's just because'" (p. vii). Overall, *Powwow* tells us that powwows are fun, serious, traditional, modern, respectful, organized, and a good time all at once. The dynamic nature of powwow essentially defines the many ways in which powwow is represented in these essays.

The authors state that the "goal is to draw attention to some of the differences and similarities from community to community and group to group and to help point the way toward a more systematic and nuanced cross-cultural understanding of powwows" (p. xiii).

Do they fulfill this goal? Yes and no. The presentation of a cross-cultural powwow understanding is present, but I am not sure that the analysis is present in this collection.

One such example is the repeated questioning of powwows as pan-Indian or intertribal. The editors and authors cannot seem to decide which term is currently appropriate for the multiple nations intermingling at powwow events. I think if we are discussing a "nuanced cross-cultural understanding of powwows," this discussion of intertribal vs. pan-Indian is vital to the way in which powwows bridge indigenous nations (p. xiii).

The book itself is divided into three sections, all easily laid out and readable. Part 1 introduces the powwow via history and how it developed into a significant marker of community identity for indigenous nations. The history of organized indigenous dancing is often traced to World War I, with some localized dances like the Grass Dance affiliating with specific nations.

Part 2 introduces performative aspects of powwows with specific reference to people and bodies—elders, princesses, singers—and how these bodies contribute to identity formation and community building in specific powwows. Essentially this section represents the people you see at every powwow.

Part 3 (what I came to refer to as Powwow Outliers) addresses powwow culture inside particular enclaves we do not immediately associate with powwow—indigenous gays and lesbians, southeastern tribes reclaiming profession of their cultures, German nationals dancing, New Age acting within a constructed tribal/powwow identity, and the multitude of expected (Indianness, common identity) and unexpected (tribally specific identity/community expression) reasons these various groups powwow.

As powwow history and lineage has been outlined in previous works, it is part 3 that fired me up the most about this book. I have so many questions to ask it—is powwow able to be appropriated if powwow is such an ambiguous and "unclaimable" event? Can anyone appropriate powwow for their community, tweaking it as they

see fit? Is powwow uniquely indigenous? What makes powwow so easily transformable for individual communities? Given its broad nature, does powwow work for or against indigenous identity? Perhaps these questions are the reason the editors did not provide a conclusion, in order to bridge some of the larger, more unsolvable questions raised through the readings.

A brief discussion of how replacing pan-Indian with intertribal concludes that “understanding powwow as both a community-specific and a cross-cultural institution means doing more than simply renaming things, so dropping ‘Pan-Indian’ won’t necessarily produce more perceptive treatments” (p. xiii). The editors do state that the collection is a stepping-off point for further discussion, not a text that solves issues. In an amazing way, however, the collection introduces the intertribal critique without overt analysis, allowing the reader to

draw his/her own conclusions about pan-Indian or localized cultural event with regard to powwow. In that way, this collection would be excellent for undergraduate populations with little exposure to powwow or indigenous cultural activities.

It seems another goal is to spark interest and discussion concerning the powwow as something more than just a set of generalized cultural practices; however, the text does just the opposite. Numerous examples illustrate how the powwow can be a sociocultural template that many groups may take and shape as their own. For example, the New-Agers, the Monacan nation, and the Ho-chunk each take the common ground of dance, music, head people, emcees, arena directors, and elders, and make it their own with practices, songs, and language unique to their own nation or region, or re-discovering of community.

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