

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Chaat Smith. *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 193 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-5601-1.

Reviewed by Jonathan DeCoster (Brandeis University)

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An Ocean of Terrifying Complexity

Paul Chaat Smith, associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian, would malign you. He would have us believe that you consider Indians “a joke, a cartoon, a minor sideshow” in American history (p. 71). In fact, not only do you believe that Indians had no noticeable effect on history, but you think that Indians stayed behind in the nineteenth century, as real as the mastodon once upon a time but now preserved only in history books and decaying photographs. If a few of these living relics happened to accidentally make an appearance in the twenty-first century, you would consider it unseemly for them to enjoy modern conveniences like airplanes and hip-hop, lest they should appear as oxymoronic as Geronimo driving a Cadillac across the plains. In short, you believe that Indians, living and dead, exist in the past tense. But do you plead guilty to Smith’s accusations? Is everything you know about Indians wrong?

In this collection of essays originally produced for books, magazines, exhibition catalogs, and presentations, Smith revisits many of the usual suspects in Native American history (Wounded Knee [both 1890 and 1973], Buffalo Bill, AIM, Alcatraz, etc.) not as a historian but rather as a cultural critic. The short pieces have a loose connection to one another, representing Smith’s varied output over fifteen years as a commentator on Native American history, culture, and politics, but he repeatedly calls our attention to the juxtaposition between Indians as idealized figures from a timeless past and Indians as real people who live in the present. Smith has no intention of enumerating and correcting our misconcep-

tions with this book, as the title might imply, but instead wants to broaden our understanding of what it means to be Indian through a series of vignettes and observations. Don’t expect a concrete revelation, though. What you should know about Indians, according to Smith, is that “the Indian experience is an ocean of terrifying complexity” (p. 10), something that cannot be fully understood, let alone explained.

Smith’s strength lies in his ability to critique Indian identity as perceived both internally and externally. He cannot resist taking easy jabs at well-meaning whites, be they “new agers” who try to appropriate a distorted notion of Indian culture, or films like *Dances with Wolves* (1990) which continue to romanticize the alleged demise of the noble savage. But it turns out that Smith’s indictment is directed as much at himself as at us, and he explicitly targets both Indians and non-Indians for his audience. Indeed, one of the great surprises (and sources of amusement) in the book is Smith’s confession that Indians learn what it means to be an Indian from many of the same places as non-Indians: from books, TV, and the movies. He laughs ruefully at the “stupid macho posturing by some of our movement leaders” whose admiration of movie and TV Indians blinded them to the need to focus on treaty rights (p. 6), and calls out Dee Brown, the white librarian who wrote *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970), for misleading as many Indians as whites. At his most insightful, he explores how the ideology of the timeless, romantic Indian is “capable of becoming an elixir that we Indian people ourselves find irresistible”

(p. 91). He also repeatedly reminds us that whites have no monopoly on romanticism, ignorance, or plain bad taste; apparently, “Indians can be just as good at turning out hackneyed, clichéd stories of noble savages as any white person” (p. 40). Smith’s overarching goal is to encourage both Indians and non-Indians to develop a concept of Indianness that moves beyond the romantic myth of the nineteenth-century Plains warrior to encompass the diverse reality of Indians who live very much in the present.

Smith’s work as an art critic and curator generated his most original contributions to the discourse on Native American representation and identity. He uses the words and work of Indian artists to demonstrate how they struggle to deal with their Indian identity through their art while resisting being segregated as Indian artists. He refers to an unwritten code for Indian artists that limits them to showing their work only with other Indian artists and restricts them to dealing with “Indian issues” such as land, identity, spirituality, and cultural persistence. If Indian artists push against the bounds expected of “Indian art,” they face criticism for denying their cultural heritage, but if their art is too “Indian,” they will be excluded from mainstream art venues. As the artist James Luna conveyed to Smith, “authenticity is not a goal for Indian people but a prison” (p. 90). If Smith sees all Indians grappling with the juxtaposition between their idealized identity and their actual contemporary existence, he believes that Indian artists face a particular dilemma that pits externally defined authenticity (art that is recognizably Indian) against individual expression. This false dichotomy prevents these artists from transcending both the message and the audience of “Indian art.” Smith’s goal as a curator has been to champion art by Indians that defies the characterization of “Indian art.”

Originally, many of the essays were short introductory and prefatory pieces for exhibition catalogs, none more than fifteen pages long and many much shorter. Others were written for oral presentation, designed to be heard rather than read. As a consequence, Smith delivers his ideas in a glib, casual tone, humorous and personal rather than scholarly and pedantic. Befitting its popular rather than academic style, the book includes no footnotes and makes few references to other works, even when encroaching on well-trodden intellectual paths. In a typical example, Smith refers in passing to “the basic premise of a frontier, a wilderness, an inevitable clash of cultures that ends in conquest,” without so much as a nod to the enormous controversy and scholarly debate over the frontier concept (p. 52). Smith’s writing style, idiosyncratic and sometimes nonlinear to the point

of stream-of-consciousness, combines with the scatter-shot nature of the pieces to give the book a meandering lack of unity, frequently repeating themes without developing them as fully as a sustained work might. Smith offers sharp and sometimes trenchant observations, and his message is most potent when directing fellow Native Americans to engage in a self-critique of their own romanticism. But readers interested in the deeper background behind the watershed events in Native American history will find them treated more substantially by historians such as Philip J. Deloria.^[1] Like Smith, Deloria has worked to expose the false contradiction between Indianness and modernity, and he explored this theme through many of the same case studies as Smith, but with a scholarly thoroughness absent in Smith’s essays. General readers will find Smith’s book appealing, and it could also be useful for teaching undergraduates. The pieces are short, humorous, and pithy, and can help give students a thoughtful and engaging native perspective on many important issues in Native American studies.

So would you agree with Smith that everything you knew about Indians was wrong? He claims that the prevalent narrative about Indians says that “we are extinct, were never here anyway, that it was our fault because we couldn’t get with the program. It says we are noble, are savage, and noble savages” (p. 52). If this sounds right to you, then I find you guilty as charged. If you thought the few remaining Indians lived on reservations in Oklahoma, if you’ve never heard of Frederick Jackson Turner or his critics, or if you wondered whether a single tear rolled down an Indian’s cheek each time you littered, then you must be as woefully misinformed as Smith claims. But this is unlikely to be the case for readers of this review. Scholars familiar with the historical literature on Indians written in the past thirty years have seen these myths debunked before, and will find few surprises in Smith’s book. They will be better served by the more analytical, original, and in-depth treatments available on many of the same issues.^[2]

Notes

[1]. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), and *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

[2]. For example, in addition to Deloria see the classic Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Knopf, 1978); and Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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