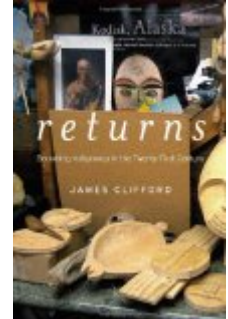


**James Clifford.** *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. 366 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-72492-1.



**Reviewed by** Nicolas Rosenthal

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**Commissioned by** F. Evan Nooe (University of North Carolina, Charlotte)

This third volume in a series of works by the prominent theorist, historian, and cultural anthropologist James Clifford holds tremendous potential for both directing scholarship and more widely reshaping the conversation on indigenous peoples throughout the world today. Following the influential *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988) and *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth-Century* (1997), *Returns* addresses the more recent past and the resurgence of “global indigeneity.” It begins with the breakdown of old colonial narratives of progress that presented indigenous people the choice between physical and cultural genocide, but always guaranteed their disappearance. By the early twenty-first century, the supremacy of the West has come into question and the “signs of systemic crisis and transition are everywhere” (p. 5). Against this backdrop, indigenous people have emerged through generations of survival, struggle, and renewal, adapted to modernity and increasingly visible as they move through local, regional, and

global networks. To understand these recent changes, Clifford calls for an “ethnographic and historical realism” that eschews both Western triumphalism and savage romanticism in favor of close readings of indigenous experience embedded within shifting global conditions (p. 7). Specifically, Clifford tracks processes of “decolonization, globalization, and indigenous becoming” as they “construct, reinforce, and trouble each other,” focusing on the past few decades (p. 8). At the center of *Returns* is a willingness to understand history as contingent and open-ended, not only as a refutation of past meta-narratives but also as a way to take seriously an “indigenous *longue durée*,” or the idea that disruptions of colonization, settler-colonialism, and modernity can be seen as brief moments in much longer histories that are passing on the way to more hopeful futures (p. 42).

*Returns* is composed of a series of essays that can be read separately or together as a single volume. Part 1 is general and theoretical in scope, introducing the author’s concerns and establishing the book’s analytical framework. Its first essay ar-

gues that “indigenous people have emerged from history’s blind spot” and need to be taken seriously as “visible actors in local, national, and global arenas” (p. 13). Indeed, throughout the world, indigenous people have come to challenge the hegemony of both the nation-state and transnational capitalist networks by asserting their presence in global culture and politics, through a diverse set of forums that range from local arts and cultural festivals to the United Nations. The old narratives make no sense when viewing the Zapatista movement in Mexico, Native Hawaiian struggles for sovereignty, or the success of Indian gaming in the United States. Calling for a “historically and politically attuned ethnographic realism” as a model of scholarship, Clifford primarily uses three analytical tools (p. 36). “Articulation” refers to how indigenous peoples assemble an identity made up of a broad range of elements grounded in their influences, encounters, and experiences over time, such as Native Alaskan communities incorporating the trappings and worldview of Russian Orthodoxy. Closely related is “translation,” where indigenous peoples remake their social, cultural, and political influences into something new, like the Zapatistas adapting Marxism to their claims for autonomy. Indigenous identities are put on display through “performance,” or staged heritage displays, cultural tourism, and other forums where indigenous peoples make themselves understandable to their audiences, often with political, economic, or cultural goals in mind. Clifford illustrates these concepts to various degrees in two essays adapted from talks on Native studies in the Pacific World and the limits and possibilities of diaspora studies for indigenous people.

A single chapter makes up part 2, focusing on the case of Ishi, the California Native man whose life and various ways that he has been understood over time illustrate the tensions between contrasting historical narratives, legacies of colonial violence, the relationship of anthropology to both settler-colonialism and indigenous resurgence,

and the possibilities for healing and reconciliation. Originally Ishi was framed as “the last California Indian” by University of California, Berkeley, anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, employing a literary and historical trope common throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ishi’s story was reshaped to fit changing historical circumstances as early as the 1960s, when Kroeber’s widow, Theodora, wrote, *Ishi in Two Worlds* (1961), which invoked ideas about genocide and romanticized indigenous worldviews for a liberal audience, even as it accepted the “inevitability” of indigenous disappearance. In the 1990s, revelations emerged over the preservation of Ishi’s brain in the Smithsonian Institute, leading to a repatriation movement, intertribal conflicts, reinternment, and some level of healing, as Ishi’s life and legacy were revisited by Native Californians. Ishi’s new visibility coincided uncomfortably with the centennial anniversary of Berkeley’s Anthropology Department, forcing it to reassess the legacies of “salvage anthropology” and the department’s influence on both Ishi’s life and the larger experiences of California’s Native peoples. Most recently Ishi’s story gained worldwide exposure (though significantly veiled and adapted to the genre of science fiction) in the form of the blockbuster film *Avatar*, based on a novella by Ursula K. Le Guin, a best-selling author and the Kroebers’ daughter. For Clifford, “The different retellings of Ishi’s story question all-or-nothing outcomes, the inevitabilities that govern so much thinking about Westernization, or modernization, or a triumphant American history” (p. 189). It speaks to contingency, multiplicity, and the “open-endedness” of historical narratives, all of which have been highlighted more broadly by the resurgence of Native people around the world.

The final section of the book applies many of the author’s concerns to his fieldwork on Native cultural renewal in Alaska. A first essay, again adapted from a symposium presentation, thinks about whether Alaska can fit into an indigenous “reimagining” of the Pacific Ocean that centers its

many Native communities rather than relegating them to the margins of empire. The next chapter more closely examines a Native heritage exhibition and heritage activity in southwestern Alaska that came about through collaborations between diverse interests that included academics and Native people. It concludes that such projects are important yet do not erase longstanding inequalities and that struggles by indigenous people for cultural authority continue. A last essay centers on the revival of mask making among Alutiiq people on Kodiak Island and its role in a broader heritage renewal and identity making throughout Alaska that responds to the violent histories of colonization and capitalist expansion. Once considered a lost or dying art, Alutiiq masks made in heritage workshops and exhibited at the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository are now an example of a “rearticulated tradition,” in that they have come to serve different purposes in the contemporary era as part of the project of cultural renewal.

Throughout the book, Clifford is hesitant to subscribe to either utopian or dystopian visions and generally is suspicious of polarities, whether he is analyzing indigenous experience or projecting conditions into the future. Yet the tone of the book remains optimistic and full of possibilities for indigenous people who now live in “a world system that can no longer be spatialized into stable cores and peripheries, that is susceptible to deep crises and profound reconfigurations,” so as to open up new spaces for those once thought destined to disappear (p. 211). Referring to an indigenous formulation of the recent past as a “bad storm,” Clifford writes that he has “tried to take seriously [this] view of historical possibility, not just as a story of indigenous survival, but as a way of living in modernity, and a way through to something else.” He continues, “How could such a vision be realistic, in a world of industrializing nation-states and global capitalism? *Returns* has offered not so much an answer as a deepening of the question” (p. 315). Indeed, Clifford’s remark-

able ability to make larger sense of the world around him without being reductive gives scholars language and ways of thinking about the sweeping changes in indigeneity over the past few decades, laying the foundation for new narratives that elevate indigenous people to prominent roles in modern, global affairs.

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