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Book Review: *The Urban Indian Experience in America* by Donald L. Fixico

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Donald L. Fixico. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000. Notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 251 pp. $35.00 cloth, $17.95 paper.

Donald Fixico's study of urban Indians may seem at first to be a review of a well-known and well-documented period: the shift from reservation life to urban relocation as a result of the US government's deliberate assimilationist policies of the 1950s. Surely the historical attitudes regarding reservation termination and urban relocation have been amply documented in the last half century. But Fixico takes us beyond the historical realities to an in-depth look at Indian life in urban America, focusing on the variety of concerns with which these populations have had to cope: economic viability; employment and financial stability; access to education; personal socialization; and the physiological and psychological consequences of relocation, namely alcoholism, disease, isolation, depression, and cultural disintegration.

Fixico weaves together historical documentation with the personal testimony of numerous tribal representatives who have struggled with relocation. Following the formal adoption of termination during the Eisenhower administration, federal efforts to find economic and social options for dislocated Native American tribes led to an urban migration which continues to this day, with more than half of America's Native Americans now residing in urban areas. The adjustment to city life—illustrated graphically in the 1962 documentary film The Exiles—is characterized as one of familiar isolation, breakdown of tribal identification, and the emergence of a new pan-Indianism, also well-documented in the literature of the 1960s and 1970s. What makes Fixico's book a meaningful addition to the literature is his integrated discussion of federal Indian policy with its effect on tribes throughout the United States—on individuals, on families, on real people. Fixico traces the shift from termination and relocation—that is, the attempts to de-tribalize indigenous peoples—to increasing acceptance of federal responsibility for assisting and financing urban Indian initiatives. Relocation in urban Indian areas with no federal subsidy for health care was one of the more deleterious results of termination. During the Nixon era, the enactment of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act enabled money to flow, only to recede abruptly during the Reagan administration. In reading Fixico's account of the shift in support for health care, one cannot fail to remember the embarrassing ignorance of Reagan's policies on "preservations" rather than reservations. No wonder health care for Indians went into great decline; it was as though the nation was in denial about the number of Indians who had moved to urban areas yet were denied services. But subsequent administrations increasingly recognized the government's responsibility, and policies enacted by Kennedy and Carter acknowledged federal responsibility through the infusion of federal dollars into urban Indian centers. Fixico's near exhaustive listing and description of Indian centers in nearly every major metropolis certainly provides an ample guide to local responses to urbanization as well as the services which emerged at each site.

The subordination of Indian identity and the emergence of a pan-Indian identity is well known; but Fixico portrays "de-Indianized" groups as developing a new, pan-tribal or supra-tribal identity, reflective of their not being assimilated at all, and this emergence is what may redeem relocatees from the despair and loss of the reservation community. In my own work with Indian prisoners, I see this same new tribalism or new pan-Indian culture as a
true new ethnicity to which tribes of different backgrounds may subscribe. Following “the way of the Pipe” is a generic Plains spiritual path embracing a multiplicity of tribes, regardless of original location or even linguistic affiliation. Fixico nicely concludes his study with insight into the ultimate realization that Indians in urban areas were becoming the norm in America—that they were not being assimilated, the assumed outcome of relocation—and that provision of health and social services to these groups has become an accepted mandate that ensures some reasonable quality of urban Indian life. As Fixico summarizes, Indian centers in America may have originated to help Indians to assimilate, but in fact they have reinforced tribal identities and a unity that validates being Indian. The effect of pan-Indianism on the emergence of “a new Indian culture that is urban oriented” is probably the most important revelation in the book.

In some of the volume’s sections one wishes that Fixico had gone into greater depth or provided deeper analysis and detail rather than focusing so heavily on a half century of well-documented urban phenomena. As a book more likely geared to a popular rather than an anthropological audience, it has great value. Its survey nature, however, has precluded more particular in-depth study of notably urban issues such as crime, drug use, street gangs, and other social forces that plague Indian communities.

For those not intimately acquainted with the impact of relocation and urbanization on Indian America, Fixico’s book is a broad and heavily researched treatment of a phenomenon every American should know about as we become more aware of the diversity of our own communities and the visibility of a subgroup of Americans that the US government did everything in its power to render invisible.

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