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Book Review: Who Owns Native Culture?

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In this important work, Michael Brown discusses competing claims to culture through a series of interesting case studies. He begins by outlining the major arguments going on inside indigenous cultures today and how efforts to assert sovereignty have brought many new issues into the political arena. Throughout the work, Brown maintains that a balance must be found between protecting Native culture from outsiders and communicating the benefits of that culture to the mainstream.

Central to his argument is the basic premise that culture is never static and must not be forced into an unnatural stasis by harsh preservation laws. Such laws would not only damage the dynamics of cultural development, but deprive the public domain of valuable information. While he is sympathetic to complaints by indigenous peoples that colonists have unfairly benefited from the use of indigenous culture, some kind of negotiated sharing is still preferable over what is called a “Total Heritage Protection” program that would completely cordon off all things indigenous.

This work should appeal not only to those interested in repatriation and sovereignty issues, but to scholars of the Great Plains generally. Several of Brown’s most useful case studies revolve around competing claims to landmarks such as Devil’s Tower and the Medicine Wheel in Wyoming. Brown also makes clear that the current contention over cultural sovereignty is creating similar challenges in Australia and Latin America. Throughout his discussion, he skillfully explains the legal implications of copyright and patent law and challenges the reader with the manifold implications for all sides.

Who Owns Native Culture? offers no easy answer to the issue of cultural ownership. Brown’s intent is to demonstrate instead the complicated nature of such claims. In the long run, he hopes that civil society (educational and religious institutions, professional organizations, and other such bodies) will negotiate settlements on the usage of sites, symbols, art, and knowledge without the choking bonds of legal absolutes. Only this way, he argues, can both Native and non-Native cultures thrive.

In spite of the complexity of the subject matter, Brown manages to present his material in an engaging and reasonably simple style. His use of anecdotes, photographs, and other illustrations adds to the work’s value. This is a must-read for anyone interested in cultural sovereignty issues and an excellent resource on several significant landmarks of the Great Plains.

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