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Review of *Medicine Bundle: Indian Sacred Performance and American Literature, 1824-1932*, By Joshua David Bellin

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interaction between “sacred performance by Indians and the performance of Indianness by Indians and whites alike” functions as a kind of cross-cultural repository, or Amedicine bundle,” for the emerging America of the nineteenth century. His argument, in a nutshell, is that the co-opting of Indian sacred performance by the dominant white culture has shaped the evolution of both Indian and white notions of spirituality and cultural identity these performances help create. And while this is unquestionably true, the argument in the end seems somewhat strained, depicting the emergent understanding of “the sacred” as giving way almost entirely to the forces of commodification and commercialism that have come to define it.

Bellin’s book opens with a discussion of the life and career of George Catlin and his attempts to exploit the ritual performances of the Mandan Indians. Here Bellin aptly describes the process of commodification of Indian performance for commercial gain and also makes a good case for Indian cultural influence on white society, especially in the early nineteenth century. He also, quite rightly, points out that Catlin’s authority hinges almost entirely upon the premise that the Indians will soon “vanish” and a need to preserve these performances and practices quickly before they are gone. But Bellin’s definition of this white co-opting of Indian identity for commercial gain goes too far at times (he levels a few particularly questionable accusations at Thoreau’s motives, for instance) and doesn’t seem to take into account the larger context of Romanticism, whose primitivist tendencies are more philosophically rather than commercially motivated.

In the second chapter, which examines the biography of Catharine Brown, a Cherokee woman who exemplifies the attempt of Removal-era Cherokees to forge a new sense of Indian identity, Bellin discusses at length the process of cultural exchange that creates new identities, a process described most definitively by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and*

Medicine Bundle: Indian Sacred Performance and American Literature, 1824-1932. By Joshua David Bellin. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. 264 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00.

The central metaphor of Joshua David Bellin’s study is an intriguing one, that the

Art (1988) and explored by many others such as Catherine Rainwater and David Moore. But Bellin's discussion is largely free of this discursive context. He mentions Clifford's work almost in passing, and says very little about the discourse surrounding this central issue.

In the third chapter, which compares the rituals of the Ghost Dance religion of the Plains with the later sacred performances enacted in such commercial venues as Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, the disparities of Bellin's approach are most clear. Though he is right to argue the dialogic nature of the Ghost Dance as the product of white culture and Christianity as much as it is traditional Indian performance, and right to argue that the Indians who performed in the Wild West Show were making a valiant attempt to "restore the old by becoming the new," in the end the comparison seems unbalanced and even, at times, offensive. While it is possible to see something of the same dynamic at work in both instances, Bellin seems to lose sight of their basic differences—that one is an attempt to re-establish the power of the sacred within an entirely Indian context while the other is a much feebler attempt to glean something meaningful out of what is primarily a white, commercial enterprise.

But then, this lack of perspective seems evident throughout Bellin's book. His use of the terms "Indian medicine" and "white medicine" throughout the text, for instance (even though he defines them in specific ways), strikes the reader as a bit odd, as though he were implying that each set of practices had equal authenticity. To many who are conversant with and sympathetic to Indian notions of the sacred, this equation seems based on artificial and strained assumptions.

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