Fall 2010

Review of *Dakota Philosopher: Charles Eastman and American Indian Thought* by David Martinez

Gwen W. Westerman
*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly)

Part of the [American Studies Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly), [Cultural History Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly), and the [United States History Commons](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly)


[http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2603](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2603)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

As a Dakota man, Charles Alexander Eastman (1858–1939) carried the values and history of his people into a rapidly changing world at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most often noted for his contributions as a narrator of Dakota life on the Great Plains in Indian Boyhood and From the Deep Woods to Civilization, Eastman was also an intellectual and an activist who worked diligently to address contemporary issues of Indian rights—efforts now brought into a new light in Dakota Philosopher: Charles Eastman and American Indian Thought.

David Martínez states that his purpose is “to treat Eastman as an intellectual” as well as to attempt to dispel the misperception that “Indian” and “intellectual” are mutually exclusive terms. Of particular interest to those critics who have dismissed Eastman as an assimilationist or characterized him as “enigmatic” is Martínez’s emphasis on his role as a philosopher with the “capacity to see through to the essence of things, whether it is being a Dakota or a Christian or the nature of modern life.” Holding true to his core Dakota values—the way he was raised by his Dakota family in Minnesota, Manitoba, and Nebraska—Eastman provides an example for today’s readers that Martínez says “demonstrates that living the life of the indigenous mind requires not disconnecting oneself from the world, but, on the contrary, immersing oneself in the land and the people.”

In five seemingly disparate chapters, Dakota Philosopher attempts to place Eastman and his work into cultural, social, and political contexts that provide insight into the difficulties faced by Indigenous writers and advocates of that period. The topics presented are wide ranging, with a deliberate inclusion of specifics of Dakota history and culture that shaped Eastman’s development as an American Indian intellectual: Indigenous philosophy, Dakota sacred history, Dakota-Ojibwe relations, and the progressive Indian agenda. Martínez frames his approach with a preface and epilogue and engages readers in a conversational narrative punctuated with personal anecdotes and observations about Eastman, the genesis of the book, and contemporary Native issues.

While the authorial interjections imposing contemporary interpretations on historical events are sometimes distracting—suggested that it would have been “wonderful” if Eastman’s books “had been issued in a bilingual edition” or wishing that he (Martínez) “could lecture [Missionary Stephen R. Riggs] about the truth of Indian sovereignty”—the overall presentation of Eastman’s contributions to Indigenous philosophy is long overdue.

GWEN N. WESTERMAN
Department of English
Minnesota State University, Mankato