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Book Review: American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays

Sandy Grande
Connecticut College

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American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays. Edited by Anne Waters. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. xxxviii + 306 pp. Bibliography, index. \$64.95 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

As Anne Waters notes, her volume is the first published collection of essays on American Indian philosophy written by American Indians with PhDs in philosophy. As such, it is a landmark, a significant juncture in the continual evolution of Native intellectual life. While all contributors share a common academic interest in philosophy, they vary greatly in their disciplinary and tribal affiliations, providing a broad range of topics, approaches, and methodologies.

The twenty-two essays written by nineteen different scholars are arranged under eight sub-headings—American Indians and Philosophy; Epistemology and Knowing; Science, Math, and Logic; Metaphysics and Being; Phenomenology and Ontology; Ethics and Respect; Social and Political Philosophy;

and Esthetics—and, though (perhaps overly) ambitious, this broad framework provides a comprehensive and distinctive examination of the “Indian thought-world.” The stated goal of the text is to “present a different way of looking at and being in the world.”

This theme more or less persists throughout the text, with authors juxtaposing Western philosophy—delineated as abstract, partial, anthropocentric, dualistic, binary, and “I-centered”—in contradistinction to Native philosophy—defined as empirical, holistic, contextual, multifarious, relational, and “we-centered.” Lead author and venerable Native scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) builds upon this basic argument in his chapter “Philosophy and the Tribal Peoples,” raising provocative questions about the emergent relationship between the “two-worlds.” At issue for Deloria is how Native philosophers will define “Indian thought” at a time when the notion of “Indian identity” is so in flux and politically charged. He writes, as “American Indians... request entrance into this professional field, the vast majority of the petitioners will have virtually no experiences of the old traditional kind. The majority of them will begin in the same place as non-Indians wishing to write on American Indian philosophy. The difference will be in the degree to which Indians take their own traditions seriously and literally.”

Just as the struggle to articulate the *difference* of “Indian identity” and “Indian thought” dominates and complicates the field of Native academics, it also dominates and complicates this text. At times the somewhat essentialist dichotomy established between the “Western” and “Indian” thought-worlds enhances these essays, particularly as it raises thought-provoking questions for other philosophers and students of philosophy. At other times it works against the text, particularly through an under-theorizing of “the Western” thought-world. Overall, however, the book is an important and impressive first step toward articulating the dimensions of an emergent American Indian philosophy, affording Native and non-Native students and educators a comprehensive text

from which to engage their own articulations
of the Native thought-world.

SANDY GRANDE
Department of Education
Connecticut College