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Review of The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions & Government Policies and Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions & Government Policies. Edited by James A. Clifton. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1990. Illustrations, appendix, index. xii + 388 pp. \$39.95.

Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy. By Sarah Carter. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. x + 323 pp. \$34.95.

Both of these books concern the force of myth. James Clifton's *The Invented Indian*, a book put together by Clifton with sixteen other authors, represents an account of the collaboration between Native Americans and whites—anthropologists, poets, do-gooders, and government policymakers—to create a stereotypical “Indian” and an equally stereotypical history of Indians. The stereotypes are conveyed as “facts” in school texts, the media, and “scholarship,” i.e., that perhaps hundreds of millions of Indians lived in America when Columbus came, that Pocahontas saved the Virginians and Squanto the Pilgrims, that the United States Constitution derives from the Iroquois, that Indians worshipped Mother Earth, that Indian “primal” religion reveals the secrets of healing, that Carlos Casteneda's stories about Don Juan are true, and so forth.

Clifton (32-38) presents a kind of archetypal story, extending from pre-Columbian days to the present, of the stereotypes constructed from these “facts.” The story starts with democratic nations of New World, “noble savages,” living peacefully with Nature, until the invasion of the evil “Whiteman” who took from the “Indian” valuable knowledge of food, medicine, clothing, and technology as well as conceptions of human rights, democracy, and the value of separate cultures. In return, the “Whiteman” committed “genocide” against the “Indian” un-

til after World War II. Then the “Indian Renaissance” began, and things began to get better. So much for parody.

Clifton and his fellow authors are properly concerned that these stereotypes have misled and will continue to mislead public policy. The answer to a stereotype is not another stereotype, however. Clifton's book presents a litany of ways in which the “Indian character” has been fabricated without explaining very well why it was fabricated or what the roots of the fabrication are. For example, Sam Gill, in his essay on “Mother Earth: An American Myth,” argues that the “Mother Earth” figure attributed to Native American theology by many people begins with Edward B. Taylor's *Primitive Culture* in 1873. This notion, then, somehow finds its way into Smohalla's “Mother Earth” pronouncements in 1885, appears elaborated in Mooney's “Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890” (1896), and then repeats itself in Lang, Frazer, Grinnell, Alexander, Eliade, Hultkrantz and others. In Gill's view, even the Smohalla story is primarily a story about Indian oppression that incorporates a creation vision as part of the hope of divine vengeance against the conquerors.

However, Gill in this chapter does not deal with the plain fact that many Plains tribes included, in their theologies, female sacred powers of considerable force associated with the earth or with agricultural production. These were not called “Mother Earth,” but they did personify earth and plant power. If these female powers were fabricated, we must assume a conspiracy of cosmic proportions, at least in the Great Plains. Are we to assume that Walker lied when he set down the stories of Maka, the female power associated with the earth, in Lakota accounts? Did Alice Fletcher make up Mother Corn, the deity that guides people in the Pawnee Hako ceremony? When Leonard Springer of the Omaha tribe, and a leader in the Native

American church, told me the story of a man who went to the spirit world and met a woman by an earth lodge halfway to the sky world, a woman he called "Mother Earth," was he making her up? Or was he using the cliché about Mother Earth and Father Sky to interpret, for a naive white person such as I was at that time, the Omaha Sky-Earth dualities that govern the clan divisions and most ceremonial activities among the Omaha? The book underestimates the degree to which clichés may serve a function in clearing the way for serious understanding and intercultural transactions. That they may also prevent understanding is granted.

Again, Alice Kehoe's chapter on "Primal Gaia: Primitivists and Plastic Medicine Men" interprets Black Elk as essentially an Oglala religionist who was finding Oglala equivalents for the seven sacraments of the Catholic church in the material he gave Joseph Epes Brown in *The Sacred Pipe*. She sees Brown as drawing from this action justifications for Western cultural primitivism, but this account certainly simplifies the issue. Black Elk, according to De Maille, stopped performing his Catholic parish duties for a time when he dictated *Black Elk Speaks*, but he later resumed his Catholic observance. Even in the *Sacred Pipe* it is not clear that he ever regards Oglala religion as superior or inferior to Christianity. Moreover, he was a sort of religious inventor, likely to be attracted to speculations about religious relationships and analogies. In *Black Elk Speaks* he recounts how, to heal his nation, he reconstructed the iconology of sacred traditional Oglala ceremonies not described in *The Sacred Pipe* and having no analogies in Catholic practice: e.g., the horse dance, the heyoka ceremony, the buffalo dance, and the elk dance. He does so to reconstruct the hoop of his nation. Why should not Catholic ceremony be grist for the same mill? That Brown may have overgeneralized from Black Elk's analogy-seeking may be unfortunate, but it is not clear that these generalizations created the stupid policies described on p. 198. The Kehoe account, in this chapter, is simply an oversimplification of a complex set of transactions between Black Elk and others.

This is not to say that some of the book's essays are not useful. Barnes's essay on Omaha ethnology represents a temperate and careful analysis. Parts of other essays are excellent. But the book as a whole represents a debunking of clichés that hardly need to be debunked. It makes little serious effort to assert what reality might lie behind the clichés or what complex histories of interaction between white and Indian created them. Such an analysis would be difficult, but it would be worth doing.

Lost Harvests by Sarah Carter is another kettle of fish altogether. Carter also begins with myth. In her case, the myth is also based on Smohalla's words about not wishing to cut Mother Earth with a plow. Smohalla's "words" were extended to sustain the view that Canadian and American Indians, particularly Plains Indians, were uninterested in agriculture and had to be forced to undertake it. In fact, many Plains groups had been successful agriculturalists in the river bottoms long before white settlement. They domesticated, to Plains semiarid conditions, such important crops as corn, beans, and squash. Further, as Carter shows, the Canadian Plains tribes asked for help in developing an agriculture soon after it became clear that the bison would not sustain them. The history of Canadian mismanagement of efforts to develop an Indian agriculture in the Plains parallels that in the United States as described by Barsh (cf. Olson, *The Struggle for the Land*, 103-267). The Canadian government provided inadequate quantities of bad land, poor teachers, and poor tools. It was captivated by Reed's notion that Indians should become European "peasant farmers" raising an acre of wheat, an acre of root crops and vegetables, and a couple of cows for subsistence. Of course, no semiarid lands farmers can, without irrigation, subsist on such small acreages. In addition, the Canadian government made a systematic effort to break down tribe and clan authority systems through allotment, to substitute "capitalistic" individualistic values for the perceived "socialist" and "communist" values of the tribes. Thus, the old governance system that might have discovered the efficiencies of small-scale farming in the

Plains was destroyed. Simultaneously, Indians were kept from competing on even terms with white farmers through government restrictions. When the whole effort failed, the Plains tribes were blamed and encouraged to sell their land to white settlers. The story is all too familiar.

What Carter does not address is the extent to which farming in the native grass semiarid ecosystems may not be a sustainable approach for either white or Indian occupants of the land. Clearly the bottomlands of the Plains have long been used effectively by Indian and white alike for agricultural production, but the massive use of monocrop agriculture, overuse of fertilizer, destruction of topsoils, and overuse of fossil fuels to support industrialized agriculture suggests that the Plains tribes' method of using native grasslands to support animal protein production and river and creek bottoms for plant food production may have made a certain sense. It is ironic that the Canadian and American grasslands continue to be plowed up to grow grain to feed fat cattle while the Brazilian rain forest is burned to grow grasses to support lean beef. In any case, Carter demonstrates how destructive has been the myth that Indians hate farming and do not wish to farm and how Canadian government policy finally gave the myth a kind of reality through forcing Indians out of farming.

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