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Review of *Sovereign Selves: American Indian Autobiography and the Law* By David J. Carlson

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Sovereign Selves: American Indian Autobiography and the Law. By David J. Carlson. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. viii + 217 pp. Notes, works cited, index. \$30.00 paper.

In *Sovereign Selves*, David J. Carlson presents an original, thoughtful, and convincing argument that early Native American autobiography was profoundly shaped by Native “engagement with colonial legal discourse.” Even more dramatically, he proposes that such an engagement framed postcontact Native self-formulations. In short, the federal legal system constructed notions of the “Indian” (child of the forest, ward of the state, etc.) that Native autobiographers both accepted and refashioned.

Well read in legal, historical, and autobiography studies, Carlson takes the scholarship of Indian law further than most by showing not merely its tangible effects on Native populations, but its profound influence on the very notion of Indian identity itself. Such an argument, of course, challenges essentialist notions of “authenticity” that insist that the only “genuine” Indian is one untainted by contact with the colonizing culture. Carlson provides vivid historical evidence that identity is not a stable, essential object, but a fluid, historical process.

In addition to expanding legal studies approaches, Carlson contributes a refreshing material history of Native subjectivities as they are represented in autobiography. After an engagingly smart introduction, he divides his study into three main areas, each focused on a historical period and its legal climate and autobiographers. In chapters 1 and 2, he examines the legal discourse about Indians during what

he calls “the early national period” of Indian policy (from the Revolutionary War to the removal period of the 1840s). Discussing how international law, common law, and contractarianism combined to influence antebellum Indian law, Carlson describes the treaty as the primary model of Native-U.S. government engagement during this period. Furthermore, he analyzes how the treaty as a colonial legal form was engaged by Seneca writers such as Maris Bryant Pierce, Nathaniel Thayer Strong, and Ely S. Parker, the first Seneca autobiographer, all of whom made land-based claims on behalf of their people.

In chapters 3 and 4, he focuses on one of the best-known and earliest Indian autobiographers, William Apess, a Christian Pequot, who wrote in the removal era (1830-1840s). Reading across Apess’s works—from *A Son of the Forest* (1829, 1831) and “The Experience of the Missionary” (1833) to *Indian Nullification* (with William Snelling, 1835)—Carlson resists the established conception of Apess as a Christianized Indian who writes a typical spiritual conversion narrative in support of Indian assimilation. Instead, he argues for Apess’s gradual transformation from spiritual autobiographer to a proponent of a new rhetoric of “Indian liberalism” that focused on Indian rights, particularly regarding property. Apess developed a “progressive articulation of Indianness as a form of civil selfhood, articulated largely in a public language of rights.”

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the allotment era (1887-1924) and Charles Eastman’s autobiographies. In *Indian Boyhood* (1902), claims Carlson, Eastman, a Santee Sioux from the northern Great Plains, used the “paternalistic rhetoric of the allotment policy,” but by the time he wrote *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* fourteen years later, he developed a more nuanced notion of Indianness that culminates in what Carlson calls “a new form of rights talk.” Because late in life Eastman had become disillusioned with the federal government’s protection and care of its Indian wards, he articulated “a rhetoric of grievance

grounded in personal civil rights and a rejuvenated emphasis on a distinctive Indian cultural identity."

Overall, Carlson concludes, Apess argued for Indian "property rights," while Eastman insisted on Indian "civil rights," a move that predicts "20th-century discussions of Indian civil rights." Indian autobiographers both shaped and were shaped by colonial legal discourses. In this superbly clear-minded and judicious study, Carlson lays out the various networks of historical and legal processes that shape and articulate Indian identities and that resonate today in ongoing struggles for Native sovereignty.

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