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Review of *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice*

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Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice. By Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. Notes, selected bibliography. xiv + 158 pp. \$45.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is a Dakota who, born and raised to adulthood on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation near Fort Thompson, South Dakota, became a successful academic and a writer. On her departure from Eastern Washington University where she taught for nineteen years, she was described by her colleagues as "one of Indian Studies' secondary founders and also, in many ways, its conscience."

She dedicates her book to "the indigenous writer in the modern world" and declares it to be "designed to raise and discuss issues that are some of the most central and crucial questions in the field of American Indian Studies." The volume consists of thirteen pieces (some first published elsewhere), grouped into five parts of two to four essays or book reviews each, which make for extremely interesting reading because Cook-Lynn examines familiar issues in history and scholarship from a non-traditional point of view. She also points out that because fiction and scholarship by Indians is "validated by non-Indian publishers, editors, critics and scholars," its value as a body of documents assisting "the recovery of memory" is too often narrowed in the interests of not offending whites while pleasing them aesthetically.

She defends with vigor and irony her central thesis that Indians are not "done for," "over," "dead and dying," but "at this moment, alive and well, walking the earth and remembering who we are." This is the vital basis for most of her arguments, for if Indians were indeed a dying people there would be no need to take the actions this book cries for: reparations, a more truthful history, an end to racism and a continuance of affirmative action, the perception of Indians as a force that must be dealt with on political, social, and economic terms. She goes further: the indigenous-

ness of Indians is unique, making them unlike any other American landowners; Indian Reservations are Indian homelands.

A mere review cannot begin to respond in any fully useful way to a book carrying such heavy moral weight and argued with such intensity. Passionate it is, defiant, angry, sorrowful, indeed, but her arguments themselves work against accepting such qualities as the reviewer's primary declarations about this work. Cook-Lynn would choose to be judged on her scholarship, the rigor of her arguments, their irrefutability, and also by the success of her aim: that we whites would come to understand our effrontery, our wrongheadedness in the matter of white scholarship concerning Indians and their work, a scholarship overlaid on the great and as yet wholly unmitigated wrongs we have committed and continue to commit against a people who constitute, in her view, if not actually, virtually, a Third World Nation.

These "most central and crucial questions" are the stalemate surrounding the question of the return of the Black Hills; the status of the indigenous woman who, a victim herself, is wrongly blamed; the continued misrepresentation of Indians in history and in the discussion of them today; the role of the Christian church in Indian history; the appropriate stance of American Indian scholars and fiction writers in their work.

It is a closely-reasoned, often difficult book, first because of a frequent verbosity that requires several readings of some sentences before their intent—straightforward enough—becomes clear, and second because the book is an indictment of white North Americans, who, no matter how sympathetic their intent might be, have failed utterly—by her lights—to do the right thing where Indians are concerned.

Of Wallace Stegner she says, "There is, perhaps, no American fiction writer who has been more successful in serving the interests of a nation's fantasy about itself. . . ." She quarrels with his claim to indigenouness on the grounds of his lack of experience compared to the thousands of years of her people

who imagined it very differently, as with his remark that in "1890 a world ended" (the year of the massacre of unarmed Indians at Wounded Knee). She also would refute his claim that education tried and failed to make a European of him. From an Indian point of view, she says, it succeeded better than he knew.

If I find myself thinking of rebuttal—Indians do not speak with only one voice; white North Americans do have some claim to a kind of nativeness; she romanticizes tribal life—I cannot escape agreeing with her central thesis, that stating our regrets is not enough; what is needed is humility, meaningful official apologies, and reparations.

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