

SPECIAL SECTION

TWENTY YEARS AFTER KANEHSATÁ:KE: REFLECTIONS, RESPONSES, ANALYSES

BOOK REVIEW

Smith, Paul Chaat. 2009. *Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN
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By pulling together 24 brief essays into a single publication with a singularly provocative title, culture/art/politics critic Paul Chaat Smith is inviting engagement: engagement with readers, with cultural workers, with academics and perhaps most vigorously, with our understanding of the history of the Americas. Any reader of this collection who is not engaged, is not thinking.

Smith's work over the past thirty years as an activist, citizen, cultural commentator and museum curator provide a timeline of some of the key moments of injustice and resistance in modern North American history. His 1996 work, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New Press), co-authored with Robert Allen Warrior, provides a study of the modern Indian resistance movement in the US. Smith's own involvement with the Wounded Knee legal defence and later with the international activism of the American Indian Movement traces out the making of contemporary Indian reality. In his current evaluation of the nineteen-month Alcatraz occupation of 1969-1972, Smith notes in 'Meaning of Life' that:

It is our people at our looniest, bravest, most singular and wonderful best, and moving beyond words even to those of us who resist cheap sentiment and heroic constructions of complicated and flawed movements. Yet there it is, over and over again: Indians who objectively have little or nothing in common choosing to join people they often don't even know who are engaged in projects as bizarre as laying claim to a dead prison on an island that is mostly rock, or picking up a gun to take sides in the byzantine political struggles of the famously argumentative Sioux. (132).

In this series of essays, Smith takes aim at the role and status of myth in our understanding of history. He argues against the simplicity of presuming there were such distinctions as 'Indians' and 'Europeans' in

1492. These oversimplifications do severe injustice to the past and the present; in fact, 'everything was so fabulously complex and so different from how we're taught to think about it' (74). The powerful constructions of history that present the Native peoples of the America as 'traditional,' i.e., resistant to the dynamic nature of modernity, and who were colonised by Europeans over the centuries because they could not get with the new game have no basis in reality: 'Contrary to what most people (Indian and non-Indian alike) now believe, our true history is one of constant change, technological innovation, and intense curiosity about the world...we only became Indians once the armed struggle was over in 1890. Before then we were Shoshone or Mohawk or Crow...as different from one another as Greeks are from Swedes' (4).

As a result of this homogenisation, the peoples of these First Nations had to learn to be Indians. It is this 'learning' that consolidates the power of art in Smith's discussions. From the movies of John Ford and John Wayne to Kevin Costner and Michael Mann; from the contemporary art of Shelley Niro and Faye HeavyShield, Smith constructs a display of the power of contemporary art that conveys the disservice done by the simplification of the past; this simplification continues on by masking the complexity of the present. We struggle to understand 'Indians,' and the continuing hold of racist structures, with the tools and images we have learned simply by being part of the culture. For example, one of the many elements that leave Smith so fundamentally pissed off about *Dances with Wolves* and movies of that ilk is the oversimplified constructions of then and now, us and them, good and evil. He notes, the struggle against the outcomes of centuries of vicious colonisation 'isn't about the good guys being bad, and the bad guys being good, but about finding new ways of seeing and thinking about the history that is all around us' (75). We can write all white characters bad, 'yet still not challenge the basis premise of a frontier, a wilderness, an inevitable clash of cultures that end in conquest' (50). Even those efforts to present 'Indian' or 'Native' views, while appreciated, fall flat: writing about a visit to Saskatchewan museums which had consulted with Elders and First Nations community leaders in planning the exhibitions, Smith asks 'Why are we in a museum at all? The English and the Ukrainians and the Germans aren't here.' (24).

Smith's questioning of contemporary expressions of Indian identity likewise challenge what he refers to as 'the distinctive type of racism that confronts Indians today: romanticism' (17). Anyone of us who old enough to remember the 1970s television advertisements playing on the perceived inherent environmentalism of First Nations peoples knows this cultural

riff. Smith sees the current 'walking in two worlds' Indigenous/non-Indigenous paradigm as yet one more myth, and he particularly uses the work of artist Erica Lord to illustrate this 'myth of an authentic culture' (36). He writes

Walking in two worlds is the expression of that myth, and the appeal of that myth is obvious. Walking in two worlds is ideological Vicodin, and because we're the descendants of the greatest holocaust in human history, you can expect most of us to keep getting our prescription refilled for the foreseeable future (36).

Our rethinking of history and contemporary reality, then, requires work and pain. Our models of how we got to this point and where we go from here are founded upon myths: frontiers were conquered with 'better' technology; forms of social organisation 'found' by the colonisers were a unified model of 'traditional' societies; and anyone who has kicked an opiate addiction can testify to the hard work and pain involved in operating outside the comfortable known. Smith is not arguing that rethinking this history will leave us with the authentic past or present. Rather, moving beyond the debates about authenticity could allow us to get past 'the limited thinking in how we see ourselves' (168). For anyone interested in overcoming the injustices in contemporary society, that is an opportunity worth pursuing.