

A Review of

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## ***EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT INDIANS IS WRONG***

Paul Chaat Smith, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

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In the past twenty years several scholarly texts on authenticity and American Indian identity have emerged including *Dressing in Feathers* (1996) by S. Elizabeth Bird, *Playing Indian* (1999) by Philip Deloria, and *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (2001) by Shari Huhndorf. These book-length studies document and analyze the American pastime of playing Indian as it manifests itself in various areas of American life from Boy Scout activities and sports mascots to blockbuster films such as *Dances With Wolves* and best-selling children's books like *The Education of Little Tree*. In his provocatively titled book *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong*, Paul Chaat Smith further addresses the construction of Indian-ness over the past five centuries, the romanticism that permeates the image of the Indian, and the challenges of defining Indian identity in the twenty-first century. Yet Smith's book invites dialogue, debate, and dissent about these issues in a remarkably engaging and direct way. Smith establishes a dialogical relationship with his reader, particularly well captured by his comments on the nature of history: "A history is always about who is telling the stories and to whom the storyteller is speaking, and how both understand their present circumstances."<sup>1</sup> His lively prose, which shift from the scholarly to the colloquial (sometimes within the same paragraph), and his insistent engagement with and awareness of his audience make this a compelling and vibrant collection of essays that should find a broad reading audience.

A discussion of this collection of essays (some of which were originally delivered as speeches) must begin with Smith's aggressive and potentially off-putting title. Before even opening the book the reader is challenged directly as Smith assumes that his audience is woefully misinformed about Indians. Yet he insists that it is little more than "...a book title, folks, not to be taken literally." As Smith notes throughout the book, he "find[s] guilt trips incredibly boring and useless,"<sup>2</sup> and he finds little value in the mere rehearsal of the litany of misrepresentations of Indians in popular culture and academia without addressing the pressing matters such as land rights, poverty, alcoholism, and education facing Indians. He asserts:

Challenging negative images and questioning who owns or produces these images are no substitute for a more all-sided oppositional effort. What's needed is a popular movement that could bring about meaningful change in the daily lives of Indian People.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know About Indians is Wrong* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 53.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 182, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Smith seems uncertain about the possibility of birthing such a movement today, and his nostalgia for the 1970s when theoretical and practical concerns were intertwined is palpable throughout this work. Yet, importantly, the essays do not read like policy manuals for the uplift of American Indians. Rather than mandating a particular course of action, Smith forces his readers to engage in a critical debate about possible paths for change.

There are problematic moments, however, where Smith's provocative language and assertions might serve to shut down dialogue rather than open it up. One of the most controversial moments in the collection of essays occurs when he speculates on the intelligence of white people who are interested in Indians: "Generally speaking, white people who are interested in Indians are not very bright... I further theorize that, generally speaking, smart white people realize early on, probably even as children, that the whole Indian thing is an exhausting, dangerous, and complicated snake pit of lies."<sup>4</sup> Given the tone of most of the essays in this book, it might be reasonable to read this statement as an example of Smith's unadulterated sarcasm. Moreover, I imagine that Smith (born to a Comanche mother and a white father) is aware of the sensitive research that Euro-American scholars such as historian Fred Hoxie, literary critic Robert Dale Parker, and anthropologist Brenda Farnell have contributed to the field of American Indian Studies. Indeed, by the end of the essay, the heart of which focuses on a 2006 exhibit at the Aldrich Museum by ten Indian and non-Indian artists called *No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art*, Smith reveals that he is both joking and being deadly serious in his ostensibly narrow-minded remark about white people. Yes, there are white people who "become interested in Indians" but because of white privilege "ignore the centrality of the Indian experience" that is key to understanding our current historical moment.<sup>5</sup> But ultimately, he employs that generalizing language in order to deconstruct it, urging us to rethink essentializing terms like "white" and "Indian" that betray the complicated history of the New World since Conquest.

One of Smith's most notable contributions in this collection is his keen insight into the state of contemporary Indian art in the United States and Canada. He discusses the work of Shelley Niro, Jimmie Durham, James Luna, and other Indian artists doing innovative work that challenges viewers intellectually, aesthetically, and politically. Smith praises those artists who are breaking free from constructs of what Indian art is supposed to look like, "constructs [that] lead into a box canyon from a John Ford western, this idea of the Noble Savage." He continues: "Artists can help lead us out, by refusing to play the assigned role and demanding an honesty in their own work and that of others that truly honors the outrageous story of our continued existence. The new generation must dare for something bolder."<sup>6</sup> For Smith, James Luna has been a pioneer in the production of this new kind of Indian art, and he praises Luna's installation work from the late 1980s, *The Artifact Piece*. In this piece, Luna literally embodied the objectification of Indians: "It required that he spend hours motionless inside that box, that he invite visitors to stare at his nearly nude body, read labels pointing out the origin of various scars and bruises, and poke and prod as they wished."<sup>7</sup> Luna's piece presages the more widely disseminated 1992 performance piece by Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Coco Fusco, *Undiscovered Amerindians*. Smith

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

also highlights the innovative work of Zacharias Kunuk, an Inuit filmmaker best known for his 2001 film *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*. Scott praises Kunuk's most recent project, the 2006 film *The Journals of Kund Rasmussen*, because the film asks two fundamental questions about his people and the arrival of Christianity ("Who were we? And what happened to us?") rather than claiming to know the answers already.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this approach to creating art can revitalize cultural production by Indians and non-Indians alike, as well as demand a level of engagement from the viewer that has the potential to effect personal and social transformation.

A particularly fascinating thread that runs through these essays is Smith's discussion of his growth as a human being. He writes poignantly about coming to terms with his own complicated family history, which includes a maternal grandfather who was a Christian minister but preached and led services solely in Comanche, and he recalls his own "failure" as a young man to fit neatly into the binary categories: "The choices, as I understood them, were urban or rural, full-blood or not really Indian, traditional or sellout. My own existence never fit into the category, and so, I thought I never qualified."<sup>9</sup> Through candid self-reflection, Smith joins the dialogue engaged in by writers like the late Louis Owens and Eva Garrouette about the stultifying myth of an "authentic" Indian identity. Smith also traces his own political and professional path. As an active member of AIM, he fought on behalf of American Indian liberation in the 1970s, representing the progressive politics of that era. Nearly four decades later, he is a founding curator of the National Museum of the American Indian of the Smithsonian Institution, a museum that, despite its unprecedented and progressive approach to representing the vibrancy and multiplicity of American Indian life, nevertheless objectifies Indians on some level. Smith's recognition of the contradictions within his own life inspires his readers to resist adherence to categories that may seem comforting but actually limit personal growth.

Even though they were written over a fifteen-year period for a variety of different publications, the book is a coherent work with essays grouped together according to theme. There are several moments when more context in the form of a footnote or a longer preface would help the uninitiated reader unfamiliar with some of the events Smith describes (like the participation of Indian artists at the 2005 Venice Biennale). While Smith's in-depth discussion of contemporary Indian artists constitutes an important contribution to the discourse on Native cultural production in the past twenty years, his reflections on the cage of authenticity, his unique account of the American Indian Movement (who knew that Richard Nixon's "administration is widely regarded as one of the most pro-Indian of the twentieth century"?),<sup>10</sup> and his discussion of how dislocation (a familiar status for American Indians but also a quintessential question for the "postmodern subject" and age) may be transformed into power may also speak to the lay reader who is interested in how the 1970s notion of "the personal is political" has new relevance for Indians and non-Indians alike at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.