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Foreword

Judith Antell

When Michael Harkin, Brian Hosmer, and I discussed proposing the “Re-figuring the Ecological Indian” conference to the University of Wyoming’s American Heritage Center for its tenth annual symposium (2002), we believed the topic of Native peoples and their relationships with the environment to be important for many reasons and deserving of serious consideration. Shepard Krech’s recently published and controversial book, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*, contributed to the timeliness of the discussion, it seemed to us.

While these foundational thoughts for the “Re-figuring the Ecological Indian” conference were hardly provocative, action that followed, as plans for the conference evolved, proved to be. Specifically, Shepard Krech was invited to give a keynote address. I supported the address because I was interested in hearing his arguments and evidence presented before an audience that was in significant measure Native American. Also, I believed the question-and-answer session following his presentation would provide an opportunity for critical discussion, challenges to Krech’s premises and positions, and a necessary opportunity for debate. I anticipated a “Krech Meets the Critics” encounter that would represent the best traditions of the academy. What I failed to anticipate was the interpretation by some that the conference’s invitation to Krech was an endorsement of him and his writings. I should have known better, and when it happened I had no trouble understanding why. I wish my timing had been better and that I had thought ahead instead of understanding after.

Gratefully, tribal people from our campus community, from our region, and from across the United States and Canada did participate in the conference as presenters, moderators, panel discussants, and audience members. Also, Native persons honored us with prayer, song, and welcoming words. Members of the Blackfeet, Lakota, Comanche, Penobscot, Cree, Abenaki, Diné, Northern Arapaho, Eastern Shoshone, Mohawk, Ardoch Algonquin, Ranamuri, Anishinaabe, and Sac and Fox nations were participants in “Re-figuring the Ecological Indian.” Donald L. Fixico, Charlotte Black Elk, Curly Bear Wagner, Raymond Pierotti, Darren J. Ranco, Burton Hutchinson, Wesley Martel, John Yellowplume, and James Trosper were some of the tribal people who played key roles in the gathering.

“Re-figuring the Ecological Indian” was shaped by the Native peoples who participated in the conference itself as well as the Native peoples whose lives in relation to the environment were the subject of consideration. All value associated with the conference is a tribute to them.

Laramie, Wyoming

Preface

Brian Hosmer

From where I now sit, fortified by distances of time and geography, “Re-figuring the Ecological Indian,” the tenth annual (2002) symposium of the University of Wyoming’s American Heritage Center (AHC), seems an inspired event, not the least because it initiated conversations that inspired this volume, so expertly organized by Michael E. Harkin and David Rich Lewis. Emerging, as such things do, out of opportunity (in this case the publication of a thought-provoking book by an eminent anthropologist), supported by AHC leadership (Rick Ewig and Michael Devine in particular), and driven by a fruitful partnership of academic departments and programs from Anthropology and American Indian Studies to American Studies and History, “Re-figuring” promised to draw significant scholarly attention to what heretofore had been an under-noticed and under-appreciated series of very fine symposia, hosted by one of the Gem City’s true jewels.

Of course, any piece that begins with the disclaimer “From where I now sit” telegraphs something more than misty reminiscence of halcyon days. Yes, “Re-figuring” put the AHC and its annual symposium on the map. And certainly, when all was said and done, participants and audience members enjoyed many stimulating conversations, provoked and inspired by a truly fine collection of thoughtful papers (a few of which are reproduced in this collection). But we didn’t always believe we’d get there, or at least I didn’t.

The stimulus for this symposium, it is true, was the 1999 publication of Shepard Krech’s *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. And in pitching the idea to AHC interim director Rick Ewig, our organizing committee (Michael Harkin; Judith Antell, director of American Indian Studies at the University

of Wyoming [UW]; and myself, then a member of the UW History Department), always conceived of a prominent role for Krech, even though we never intended the symposium to be *about* that book, either in critique or defense. Rather, we hoped that the book offered an opportunity to highlight emerging scholarship on Natives and the environment—in the broadest sense.

We were, to put it mildly, unprepared for the reaction. And fortified by that particular variety of naïveté (cluelessness?) reserved for academicians, we resolved to ride out (ignore?) the gathering storm, even if “resolve” suggests a higher degree of steadfastness than we possessed. Call it inertia, absence of an alternate plan, or a “deer in the headlights” kind of resolve.

As Michael Harkin and David Lewis recount in the introduction to this volume, the events of September 11, 2001, caused us to reschedule the symposium for the spring of 2002. By that time, passions seem to have cooled, Shep Krech felt a little less like we had used his feet to step (jump?) into a hornet’s nest, and, remarkably, most of our original presenters made the trip anyway. Donald Fixico led the revised cast of characters and, in typical fashion, found a way to gently prod us into considering the moral and ethical dimensions of what we had set into motion.

By that time, organizers and audience members were receptive to what Fixico had to say. Months of e-mail denunciations had, I think, caused us to examine our original motivations for staging this academic gathering, forcing us to take seriously the full range of genuine scholarly concern that this volume evoked. Yes, as academics engaged in American Indian Studies, we knew that this topic positively invited controversy. But did we fully appreciate just how its message would be received, translated, transmitted, and (particularly by conservative talk-radio personalities) twisted into supporting a set of political positions clearly at variance with the author’s own? Speaking only for myself, not so much. To the extent that the symposium proved successful, all to the good. But success or not, organizing it was a sobering experience, and a lesson I took with me when I moved to the Newberry Library in 2002.

But what of the issues, raised in the course of that scholarly gathering, and then afterward—in this volume and elsewhere? I interpret my role as

“preface writer” fairly narrowly, so I don’t see this as space for extended commentary. But since scholars rarely abandon any stage prematurely, allow me to suggest that, amid (or because of) the swirling controversy, the symposium presented opportunity to reflect upon power and representation, science versus myth (and mythmaking), attention given (by scholars) to Native perspectives, and the construction, and reification, of measurable categories.

These kinds of musings take us in several directions. For one, does it really matter if Indians are or are not, were or were not, “ecologists,” as we commonly understand that term? Isn’t “ecology,” as attached to the distant past and across cultures, so hopelessly anachronistic as to obscure rather than to illuminate? Although this question is better addressed by contributors to this volume, it is clear that if we consider the reaction to advance publicity for our 2002 symposium, it matters a great deal—and not simply for emotional reasons, or fears that challenging this “trope” of the ecological Indian somehow undermines Native self-image, the reality of Indian cultural distinctiveness, notions of sustainability versus the consequences of modern, technological society, or just deeply held ideas about Indians and the environment.

Rather, and in the realm of public discourse certainly, this question is consequential indeed. Consider the commonplace, though facile and inaccurate, linkages between Indians as “noble savages” and conventional understandings of tribal sovereignty. First of all, the notion of sovereign tribes is missing, and indeed replaced by suggestions that Indians—for biological and historical reasons—are, individually, recipients of “special rights.” But that aside, consider the public discourse on the Kennewick Man controversy and notice how representations of Indians (as noble in their savagery), guilt over their treatment (historically and contemporarily), and “special rights” are linked. So, when a well-respected national news program ran a story on Kennewick Man in which it attempted to discover why “Indians” were so opposed to scientific examination of the skeletal remains, its “answer” was simple: Indians fear that, if it is determined (by science and hence unassailable) that Kennewick Man was not the (biological) ancestor of historic

Native groups, Indian people would, ipso facto, lose their right to operate CASINOS. The implication being, of course, that if Natives weren't "here first," then their "special rights" were built upon a fiction.

Now of course, we scholars might argue, with great vehemence, that the one has very little to do with the other, that gaming exists for reasons other than who was "here first." But certainly we also know that the public discourse (and sometimes the scholarly discourse too) also reflects, recapitulates, and perpetuates historical operations of power. And that historically, our understandings of Indian histories and cultural values are shaped and reshaped, often in the service of ends inimical to those of Native peoples and communities, and often in spite of the best efforts of scholars who seek to ameliorate the manifold consequences of colonialism by injecting reason, balance, and scholarly disinterestedness into the public discourse.

Obviously, tension exists between Native peoples and academics, and this troubled relationship is the subject of a number of quite trenchant critiques. And so, the controversy that nearly engulfed the "Re-figuring" symposium can be understood in the light of this discourse, which is of course in some measure about power—the power to define and describe "Indianness" in the here and now and in the past.

But to describe it thus may distract as much as illuminate. After all, this power to define and describe, as claimed by non-Indians, is often supported by appeals to "science," and in this connection it may be instructive to recall the intricately intertwined histories of natural science and ethnology. Jefferson, of course, fancied himself a natural scientist, an ethnologist, and an archaeologist, and scientists of his particular mind-set, then and later, sought to create taxonomies, ways to measure observed phenomena, and interpretive frameworks in order to understand the natural world, of which Native peoples were assumed to be a component. And in a way he illustrates a pattern, seemingly rooted in the past (though perhaps not so much), of linking these emerging fields of inquiry via the history and culture of the Native peoples of North America.

The parallel development of ethnology and natural science—as fields of inquiry—is well known, as are its implications, particularly where lines

are not exactly parallel after all but intersecting. And while scholars long ago rejected the notion that Indian peoples are “natural men and women,” or subjects for natural history museums to consider alongside exotic flora and fauna, the temptation to see Native peoples through the lens of natural science persists, particularly, it seems, in popular tracts, written by scholars, in which a central concern is environmental degradation. What does it mean, for scholarly inquiry and for Native communities, when we seek answers for present-day problems in the experiences of indigenous peoples? How do we make sense of scientific evidence that humanizes Native peoples by questioning the trope of the “noble savage”? What happens when this evidence seems to suggest that cultural values play less of a role in human interactions with their environments than technology, population density, or luck?

We are, in a sense, speaking past one another, finding different things in the past, positing relationships between present-day concerns and historical events—even when we say we are not. But all is not lost. The “Refiguring” symposium ended quite well indeed, and this volume is a testament to a willingness to listen, as much as talk.

Chicago, Illinois

Contributors

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