

**Songs of Power and Prayer in the Columbia Plateau: The Jesuit, the Medicine Man, and the Indian Hymn Singer.** Chad S. Hamill. 2012. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press. xiii, 169pp.

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It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke: a Jesuit, a medicine man and an Indian hymn singer walk into a cross-cultural context. Three types at odds by institutional convention, but as individuals—and quite remarkable individuals at that—united by spiritual power and song. In this compelling study, Chad Hamill reaches back two centuries to inform a contemporary reality of indigenous power through song, at the same time revealing the fluidity of belief systems in a two-way dialogue between Native spirituality and Christianity. On another level of discourse, Hamill's monograph deals with methodologies: specifically the contest between scientific ways of knowing and aboriginal ways of knowing. He makes a compelling case for the latter through anecdote and narrative, and through his own engaging prose. Hamill's narrative argument itself reads like a story, rather than the dissertation from which it has been crafted. Its organic structure admirably weaves together historical fact, anecdote, song analysis and reflection. Although Hamill's initial point of view is confessional, the winning arguments are firmly positioned at the level of voiced narrative, privileging storytelling as proof.

Like any good story, this one has a compelling cast of characters. Gibson Eli

was known as the “last medicine man of the Spokane tribe.” As a distant ancestor of the author, he is Hamill's direct link to the narrative. Mitch Michael was a respected hymn singer and prayer leader of mixed Spokane and Coeur d'Alene heritage, a mediator between many worlds: Native and Christian, ancient and modern. Finally there is Father Tom Connolly, a Jesuit priest stationed at the Sacred Heart Mission in De Smets, Idaho. He was Hamill's living informant who claimed Gibson Eli and Mitch Michael as his “two grandfathers.”

[Spoiler alert.] The story reaches its climax in chapter six when 56-year-old Gibson Eli presents himself for baptism. Witnessed by Mitch Michael and his wife and co-singer Mary, and performed by Father Tom Connolly, Gibson Eli's entry into Catholicism occasioned Connolly's own conversion to an understanding of Native spirituality. While Connolly may have become Eli's confessor, it was the medicine man who became the mentor to the Jesuit. Connolly began attending Eli's medicine dances, accompanying him on healing visits around the territory. The Catholic priest clearly recognized the medicine man's work as a kind of ministry. In unpublished biographical notes on Eli, Connolly wrote:

I felt comfortable working with Gib. I saw the results of his work in helping people, and I knew that he recognized the power of his animals as coming from God rather than from any other source. I felt that Gib used his powers very much according to the teachings of Jesus—that all power came from God rather than from ourselves and

that credit went to Him rather than ourselves. (109-10)

This meeting of two spiritual worlds (Hamill studiously avoids using the term “syncretism”) is sealed by the hybrid Catholic liturgies over which Connolly would preside across the rest of his tenure as priest to the Columbia Plateau Native community. Detailed accounts of two hybrid services follow, testifying to the degree of integration of Native and Christian spirituality and song. One is the Indian wake wherein the infusion of aboriginal identity into the ritual is demonstrated by the indigenized Christian songs led by a Native hymn singer like Mitch Michael. Thanks to the thoughtful persuasion of Mitch Michael and the openness of Father Tom Connolly, Native prayer songs were also integrated into the formal liturgy, the Mass. In addition to introducing indigenous song, the trio of Gibson Eli, Mitch Michael and Tom Connolly introduced a Cup Dance to the Christmas eve liturgy, as well as a “shaking hands song” titled “We Are Going to Be Happy” at the conclusion of the Mass. While full credit is due to these three sympathetic spiritual leaders who welcomed one another into their previously exclusive spiritual worlds, Hamill fails to mention that these steps toward liturgical hybridization followed fast on the heels of Vatican II. The Roman Catholic Church’s dramatic shift toward ecumenization also allowed the integration of local forms of worship in the previously immutable liturgy of the Mass. Hamill’s study would have been more complete had he situated it in the context of a global vernacularization of the Catholic liturgies.

The Native prayer songs that would

become part of Catholic liturgy by the 1970s are deeply historied and occupy much of Hamill’s attention in the preceding chapters. Hamill exhumes the tradition of using music in the service of conversion from the recorded history of the Jesuit missions among the Guarani of South America in the 16th century. The link is plausibly documented. But more germane is the extensive oral history of prayer song originating with the Christian Natives themselves. In the early days of the Columbia Plateau mission, a Coeur d’Alene woman, Louise Siuwhéem, translated and taught hymns in Salish, acutely aware that for Catholicism to be embraced by the Coeur d’Alene people, “it would first need to be sung.” It was into this tradition that Mitch Michael was born, growing up between two worlds and with numerous models of Natives who forged a practice that integrated Native spirituality with Catholic practice.

Having introduced Mitch Michael, Hamill analyzes a cross-section of Native hymns from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The audio files for some of these songs are very helpfully available on a website: <http://www.songs of power and prayer.com/media/>. Transcriptions are meticulous, though open to challenge in some details.<sup>1</sup> Discussions of the ways in which Native sensibilities are reflected in text are thoughtful and thorough. But discussion of music is limited, restricted largely to pitch inflection. Only passing mention is given to temporal matters with virtually no analysis of such defining characteristics as timbre.

Nevertheless, it is the existence of the songs in a continuum of practice, more than the songs themselves that seems to be the point. Drawing on interviews,

prophecies and legend, Hamill makes a convincing argument—once again supported by story—for the equation of song and power:

To differentiate between power and song runs the risk of creating a false dichotomy at odds with Native ways of knowing... Spiritual power is woven into the song itself.... Can song function as a catalyst, a conduit, *and* power itself? I contend that in specific spiritual contexts, it can. (83; emphasis in original)

The import of this power is inherent in one of the first stories of Hamill's book, the prophecy of Circling Raven, leader of the Coeur d'Alene from 1660 to 1760 [*sic*]. Circling Raven predicted the arrival of black robes armed with "crossed sticks, new words and powerful medicines" well more than 100 years before their arrival on the Columbia Plateau (23).

Native ways of knowing, transmitted through story and song, are very persuasive indeed, which makes Hamill's epilogue defence of them against more scholarly methodologies a little too self-conscious. This unnecessary apology is balanced by an equally unnecessary, confessional preface that offers an Oprah-worthy disclosure that his PhD research was also an effort at a "healing of a torn ancestral artery" (ix) as Hamill pursued his own power as a Native individual. The body of Hamill's book itself makes the strongest possible case for the equation of spiritual power and song through a compelling story informed by Native ways of knowing. 🍀

## NOTES

1. In one recording/transcription (translated in the book as "God, Pity My Dead One" and on the website as "God, Have Mercy on My Dead One"), Hamill notes the source material in the Latin sequence *Dies Irae* (erroneously identified as Gregorian chant and misleadingly described as "florid"), but overlooks the obvious paraphrase on "Nearer My God to Thee" in mm. 7-8. Another hymn introduced in the text, "He Comes Down from a Star," cited as exemplary of hymns which were so resolutely re-framed in Native melodic terms that their origins are now lost, is neither transcribed in the book nor included as an audio file on the website.

**Aboriginal Music in Contemporary Canada: Echoes and Exchanges.** Anna Hoefnagels and Beverley Diamond, eds. 2012. McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Series, 66. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. xiv, 503pp, black and white illustrations, notes, bibliography, discography, videography, internet sites, contributors, index.

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It wasn't all that long ago that many ethnomusicologists and other scholars of non-Western musical cultures had a tendency to ignore hybrid or borrowed genres, focusing instead on music thought to be undeniably representative of a partic-