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Winter 2011

Review of *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* by Paul Chaat Smith

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Furlan, Laura M., "Review of *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* by Paul Chaat Smith" (2011). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2650.
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Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong. By Paul Chaat Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 193 pp. Illustrations. \$21.95.

In his recent collection of essays, associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian Paul Chaat Smith argues for a reorientation of knowledge about Indian peoples. The essays, all previously published, are sometimes autobiographical, sometimes humorous, and range in topic from Ishi to the Alcatraz occupation. In “The Big Movie,” for example, Smith takes on films that feature Indians, from the first moving picture made by Thomas Edison in 1894, *Sioux Ghost Dance*, to *The Searchers*, *Last of the Mohicans*, and *Dances with Wolves*. Indians, Smith writes, have become “a kind of national mascot.” These films, particularly Westerns, are a part of the American master narrative—and, well, they never tell the “real” story.

Smith often focuses his essays on central questions. In a piece called “Luna Remembers,” about artist James Luna, for instance, he asks, “Are Indian people allowed to change? Are we allowed to invent completely new ways of being Indian that have no connection to previous ways we have lived?” Smith writes, “In North America the ideological prison that confines Indian agency has unique features. We have never been simply ignored, or simply romanticized, or been merely the targets of assimilation or genocide. It is rather all these things and many more, often at the same time in different places.” In this essay and others, Smith questions the static image of Indian peoples and argues not only for the “real” story but also for a conceptualization of modern Indians that emphasizes agency and adaption—both politically and technologically.

In “Meaning of Life,” Smith writes that in the aftermath of the Columbus Quincentennial, Indians started talking to each other, “And the conversation immediately became smarter and way more interesting.” That conversation, he continues, “is about love and loss, ceremony and drinking and histories and futures, legends and gaming, and how none of us has a clear idea of what to do next.” Smith suggests that non-Indians are never going to understand Indians, and that the more productive intellectual engagement comes from Indians talking to Indians. In “Last Gang in Town,” he writes that this is precisely what he admired about Vine Deloria Jr.: “that he always wrote to us, to Indian people, at the same time he wrote to the world.” In this way, the book provides a means for initiating this conversation, for upsetting “Indian consensus”—and certainly suggests that other Native intellectuals are part of its target audience (which may not be evident from the title).

Given the nature of this collection, with essays that span from 1992 to 2007, there are bound to be gaps and repetitions. For example, Smith retells the story of Alcatraz on numerous occasions, which obviously stems from his work on *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*, which he cowrote

with Robert Warrior in 1996. The collection may be uneven in this way—Smith crosses boundaries of genre, refusing to write a scholarly book with citations; the fragments of personal memoir are intriguing but insufficient as a narrative; and the exhibition essays from art catalogues often demand context—yet Smith’s observations about the current and historical state of Indian representations are astute and thought provoking.

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