



First Person, First Peoples: Native American College Graduates Tell Their Life Stories. Andrew Garrod and Colleen Larrimore, eds. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997. 250 pp.

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First Person, First Peoples: Native American College Graduates Tell Their Life Stories, edited by Andrew Garrod and Colleen Larrimore, is a good read. This compilation of stories written by and about Native American graduates from Dartmouth College is honest, heartening, disheartening, brave, and varied. The authors tell of their experiences as indigenous people before entering Dartmouth, during their tenure there, and in the time since graduation. The editors asked the authors to focus on the ways "students navigated the transition from home to college, and what factors aided or impeded that transition" (p. 3). The resulting compilation demonstrates that the ways in which this occurred were as varied as the authors themselves.

The first section, "When Worlds Collide," contains stories about the process of reconciling cultural differences between home and the university. Through experiences with both Native and non-Native students in and out of the classroom environments, the authors found ways to reconcile these tensions. The stories in the second section, "Planted in the Ground," paint a complex picture of the various ways that the identities of Native Americans (as a group and as individuals) are confronted, reconstructed, and strengthened during their time at Dartmouth and after. The heartfelt stories highlight the ways in which structures and essentialized ideas of what it means to be "Indian" impact one's identity. Finally, "Coming Full Circle" chronicles the ways in which graduates have contributed to Native American communities since their graduation. These stories describe the numerous ways in which "the skills that they have acquired through higher education" are applied in ways that serve others (p. xvi).

There is a richness in this book which I have not seen in other works about the experience of Native peoples in education and specifically higher education. Perhaps the first edited volume in which the experiences of Native American college students are examined, it is a valuable contribution to studies of identity and higher education. Because some of the contributors have been out of college for a number of years, the compilation becomes, in essence, a longitudinal work in which students are asked to "examine their home communities and to describe how higher education may have influenced those connections" (p. xv), providing readers with a glimpse of developmental issues that are so often missing from this field.

One of the most important points made in this book is that there is great diversity in the experiences and writings of the contributors. The messages in this book force the reader



to put aside any preconceived ideas of what the "Native American experience" is. Individual authors highlight those things that are important to them and there is, implicitly and explicitly, a nod to the role of context, situation, and structure which impacts individual experience.

An important issue raised by this collection is the way in which identity politics among Native American Indian people influences the construction of identity in complicated ways. Focusing on the role of "internalized oppression" in the essentialization of identity, many of the stories in this book confound traditional notions of identity and challenge the assumptions of much current theory. Specifically, the stories describe and illustrate the ways in which individuals, who fight against having their identities stereotyped by a larger, dominant society, do very much the same thing when they discriminate against members of their own group based on a set of qualities that make people "Indian."

A few of the essays raise important questions about the ways institutions define individuals as well as the ways these individuals define themselves. One particularly powerful point is made by Elizabeth Carey in "I Dance for Me," an essay in which she responds to racist comments from other Native Americans by saying, "I never said I was Native American. The college defines me that way. I am Hawaiian. I am Polynesian. . . ." (pp. 125-126). Clearly, indigenous people make distinctions concerning identity which are not made by the dominant society, which should be examined by anyone interested in studying the group of people we have come to refer to as "Native Americans."

Finally, this book complicates notions about the ways in which individuals adapt in order to survive alien, and often hostile, environments. Garrod and Larrimore make this point simply and clearly in their introduction when they write,

For these young people, education no longer represented a one-for-one replacement of tribal identity, but rather an opportunity to sharpen tools to ensure Native American cultural survival. Native peoples have survived since ancient times not by staying the same but by adapting their cultures to suit their changing environments. [p. 16]

These stories highlight the fact that Native Americans are not people with a culture that is simply passed from generation to generation. The authors show the diverse ways in which many Native Americans have used knowledge to strengthen ourselves, and more importantly, our communities. This point is especially relevant for considering notions of culture and the ways in which its dynamic nature impact learning.

If I have a misgiving about this book, it concerns that of representativeness. Although one of the authors grew up on the East Coast, no "Eastern tribes" are represented in those who agreed to tell stories. Because there are no voices of indigenous people from tribes east of the Mississippi, this book overlooks a large segment of the Native American Indians who inhabit the very region in which its graduates attended college.



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In spite of this, however, the collection makes a valuable contribution to the study of culture, identity, and issues within higher education.

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