



BOOK REVIEW

***Alaska Native Political Leadership and Higher Education: One University, Two Universes.* By Michael Jennings. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004. 185/ix pages. Paper \$29.99, 0-7591-0069-1, Cloth \$75.00, 0-7591-0068-3.**

The ninth book in AltaMira's "Contemporary Native American Communities" series, *Alaska Native Political Leadership and Higher Education* represents a major contribution to the study of indigenous education. This work is essential for that small but significant area of scholarship usually referred to as Alaska Native studies, and it should be required reading for anyone involved in higher education across the state of Alaska. The book fills an important gap in Alaskan history, and where higher education is concerned it is the only book-length treatment of its kind. Relevant to any number of approaches to the education of Native students, this is a substantial case study, and a concise but broadly informative resource.

In many ways Alaska seems unique, an isolated place of extremes, yet Jennings connects the struggle for Alaska Native higher education to the same issues of land policy, sovereignty, cultural identity, and the right to self-determination involved in Native higher education anywhere. Many of the decisive political and institutional developments took place relatively recently, from the Native land claims of the 1960s and 1970s up to the present administration of the statewide university system, so a good deal of Jennings's historical narrative can be told firsthand, reflecting attitudes and policies (and an administration) still operative in Alaska today. Part history, part ethnography, part educational policy, this is a work of scholarship informed by advocacy and activism, an internal critique and call for reform.

The subtitle of the book is especially apt, as it suits both the work and its author on a number of levels. The book begins from two very different worldviews and belief systems, the foundational assumptions of two different universes, and shows how these divergent conceptualizations of land and our relationship to land play out within one set of political and educational institutions. The writer too may be said to have lived in two universes: Cheyenne and Irish-American, Jennings left Wyoming's Wind River reservation over thirty years ago to work on land claims for the Alaska Federation of Natives. A career insider in

the statewide university system, relating three decades of experience in Alaska, Jennings also brings to bear a perspective from the “Outside,” a personal understanding of the commonalities of Native experience and a broad background in social theory. Alaskan issues are presented not as a singular phenomenon but in conjunction with indigenous peoples everywhere.

Native students, whether in Alaska or elsewhere, cannot easily be assimilated into the generic minority category (e.g. “people of color”) that is the default assumption of the majority culture (as well as much academic theory about ethnicity): white or nonwhite. The “postcolonialist” consciousness of other ethnic minorities does not apply to indigenous groups still colonized on their own ancestral lands. Alaska Native educational policy questions must be framed, for Jennings, within the larger context of indigenous education generally, which continues to reflect colonialist functions of indoctrination and assimilation that have long been officially repudiated by the progressive American academy.

Jennings notes from the outset that “Alaska Native” itself may be considered an artificial designation, rooted in the same colonialist categories. But the identification has also been widely accepted by the indigenous peoples of Alaska themselves, due in part to the movements and coalitions the book describes, and it now carries a connotation of ethnic pride. For the author’s purposes, where the explicit focus is political and educational, the distinct ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups indigenous to Alaska can be discussed as a collective. Organizations like the Bush (i.e. ‘rural’) Caucus do represent and advocate for their own regions, but across the state they unite politically as Alaska Natives, both in the legislature and in dealing with the university administration. So while Jennings attends to the differences where appropriate, he emphasizes the commonality of the cause and the situation. As a consequence, readers looking for in-depth considerations of the particular experiences of different Alaska Native groups—Inupiaq compared with Yup’ik, Aleut as opposed to Athabascan—won’t find much of that here.

The comprehensive bibliography reveals unusually varied and detailed sources, from archives, interviews, reports, meetings and daily notes as well as books and articles. Written from within, politically and institutionally, Jennings does not hesitate to name names, to quote from personal interviews and register what was said in meetings.

Strong unifying themes connect each chapter, and choice epigraphs open the different sections. Though a relatively thin volume (185 pages, not 224 as listed by AltaMira), it is a wide-ranging discussion, and a powerful presentation of the social, economic and ideological relationship of two cultural groups and their intra-institutional encounter within a context that can only be described as contemporary imperialism.

A brief history since the first Russian contact brings the reader quickly up to the latter part of the twentieth century, the specific period the book is most concerned with. Defining geopolitical moments like the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 receive extensive consideration, as do major political

alliances such as the Alaska Federation of Natives and the Bush Caucus. The primary areas of focus are the university system and state politics, along with the development of Native leadership organizations from the 1912 Alaska Native Brotherhood to the present day, including now well-established governing bodies like the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

Both rural and urban experience and agendas receive chapter-length treatment, and each episode or set of events Jennings relates seems to reinforce the theme of competing worldviews. The ongoing contentions between Native educational leadership and the university administration involve such issues as centralization versus decentralization, in deciding for example whether to administer the mostly rural community colleges separately from the University of Alaska system. Invariably, non-Native models of organizational structure and governance prevail.

There has been no question of equal opportunity, no equal right to self-determination for Alaska Natives in state education. Presupposing its own models of capitalist development and pluralistic bargaining, its own educational agenda in partnership with industry and special interest groups, the state university dictates both content and delivery, mission and methodology. Never, the author maintains, “has education for Alaska Native people been equally available or prioritized. Nor, where it has existed, has it been appropriate to Native cultures and desires in terms of delivery or curriculum” (p. 42). While a good deal of money and resources may have been devoted to Native education during the period the book describes, the attempts have mostly failed. The book makes clear that much of this may be attributed to inappropriate programs undertaken without genuine consultation, and the university’s general inability or unwillingness to comprehend Native needs and requests.

Yet there is some cause to be hopeful. The Consortium for Alaska Native Higher Education, made up of groups from six areas of Alaska, is one of the promising recent developments Jennings describes. In Alaska Native studies and the education of Alaska Native students, a more credible effort does appear to be underway statewide, both at the university’s major administrative units and in the rural colleges. Though the book acknowledges the efforts and successes of dedicated faculty, students and staff, still the overall analysis is “critical from cover to cover” (p. 157). Whatever autonomy and recognition Alaska Natives now have within the university has been achieved only through great effort, and in the face of entrenched institutional and ideological resistance. Jennings documents what a protracted battle it has been, and the fight goes on. There is still nothing like true parity or reciprocity. Higher education, the book insists, is still determined politically and pedagogically in non-Native terms.

Thus historical analysis undercuts the contemporary rhetoric of professed support for and responsiveness to Native needs and priorities. The mission of the University of Alaska system proclaims its commitment to supporting Alaska Native studies: languages, culture, arts, crafts, etc. In a scathing conclusion the author calls this “the Indian trade,” meant in an admittedly “cynical and ironic

way” (p. 145), suggesting a continuation of the colonialist mentality and situation. It is still a case of indigenous peoples living and laboring under conditions imposed by a dominant outside culture. Ideological elements of supremacism, ethnocentrism and imperialism can ironically still be identified in today’s supposedly multicultural university. Educational and organizational theory and practice are still overwhelmingly oriented toward the state’s own agenda of intensive land usage, research and development. And the new version of the “Indian trade” is yet another way to capitalize on Natives: there are public relations benefits to be had, from the Alaska Native faces and images on all the university catalogs and promotional materials.

In the end the book takes a somewhat polemical turn. But the author has done justice to the cause of Alaska Native higher education. This is a critical study that administrators, state and community leadership, no less than faculty, would do well to consult. Obviously relevant for Alaskan higher education faculty and administration statewide, there is much here for teachers in multicultural education of any kind, and wherever Native students are a priority. The book gives essential information for anthropologists, historians, and scholars in Northern studies, and it should help the discussion of Native American higher education to avoid what has been called “the Alaskan oversight.”

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