

Race, White Privilege, and American Indians: Perspectives on Causes and Effects.

Matthew L. M. Fletcher, *American Indian Education: Counternarratives in Racism, Struggle, and the Law*, New York: Routledge, 2008, [xii] + 224, \$ 37.95 pb.

Loren L. Basson, *White Enough To Be American? Race Mixing, Indigenous People, and the Boundaries of State and Nation*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, [xiv] + 238 pp., \$ 59.95 hb, \$22.95 pb.

Race may be a social construct, as purists would have it, but it is no less real than if Race were tangible. Societies all over the world have clung to the fold wisdom that those who look different—a lot—are different enough to be kept out of the dominant society. Throughout American history, the presence of American Indians has provided a racial venue for not only the dispossession of American Indians but for fabricating an imposed niche for Indians in American society. The Indian “race” has offered unique challenges to the American national narrative too. A fictional history by Matthew Fletcher and a monograph by Lauren Basson add to the literature describing the place of Native Americans within the larger American society. Basson provides case studies of mixed ancestry Indians who sought to navigate within the dominant society. They were marginalized by *ad hominem*, dismissive racial language reveals much about American society’s fixation with race as a colonizing trope. Basson offers examples of how hard Americans had to work to keep mixed blood Indians “in their place” while trying to keeping White America’s narrative of statehood intact. The inventive Matthew Fletcher offers a parable about the determination of dominant society to keep Indians “in their place,” a controlled place of subservience and poverty.

Critical race theory and counternarratives such as American Indian Education by Professor Fletcher provide a platform for scholars and commentators to enhance comprehension of colonized peoples and the culpability of dominant society. Counternarrative, used for effect and not for ranting and raving about victimization, provides an effective means of creating the emotional impact of such experiences as “White Privilege,” being colonized, being patronized, being discriminated against, and being disadvantaged. My students respond well to descriptions of personal experiences, much better than they do to scholarly studies of discrimination. Students also respond well to case studies such as those provided by Professor Lauren Basson in support of her analysis of the meaning of State and Nation in the United States. Basson’s scholarly work is supported by her wide-ranging sources. Fletcher’s historical fiction describes what really happens and dramatizes the operation of racism and colonialism; his constructed examples have the ring of truth because they are derived from real occurrences as his ample notes prove.

American Indian Education is a fictional account of experiences that will resonate with American Indians. We can all nod our heads and grimace knowingly as we read. The larger value of American Indian Education, lies in the outrage that the incidents related can arouse in readers. Fletcher’s approach is through a thinly disguised reservation in Michigan (Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa

Indians) and the experience of racism and dominance that plague Native Americans and their governments. Each chapter focuses on one or more key issues of Indian Country but heightens the impact by providing fictional archetypes from the non-Indian and Indian world as well as drawing on events that have happened all over America. The community encompassed by Lake Matchimanitou county is the dominant society and Lake Matchimanitou is the reservation that clings to its heritage, asserts sovereignty, and tries to navigate the icy waters of the twentieth century. Topics given full chapter treatment are : Commodifying Indian Students and Sport Mascots, Burying Indian Histories in the Curriculum, Criminal Justice and Demonizing Indian Students, Intergenerational Character of Indian Experiences in Education, Indian Academic Fraud, Indian Literary Fraud, Indian Cultural Restoration and Indian Political Resurgence and Affirmative Action. These rather arcane chapter titles point readers to the documented history of dominant society responses to Indians and their governments. Readers will have a sense of what “it” is really like for Indians in America after reading these chapters as seen through the eyes of Indian archetypes.

The last chapter, Indian Political Resurgence and Affirmative Action: The Lake Matchimanitou Indian School is an explication of how non-Indians arrogate to themselves, through their laws, the control of Indians. Its impact alone is worth the price of the book. Without giving too much away, I hope, the band decides to start its own school, succeeds in creating an academic academy that attracts Indians from all over the country, and gradually succumbs to co-option by non-Indians who displace Indian control in the name of affirmative action and dominant society values. Whatever goes around comes around, Indians are left in the same subservient position despite their efforts. The school’s success was too great to leave it in Indian hands.

American Indian Education is more than just a counternarrative demonstration of what happens to Indians in America. It is also a well-researched monograph with a fictional component. Professor Fletcher provides extensive explanatory notes and references for each of the topics. It is a good place to begin for undergraduates and for advanced Indian Studies students to be updated. He also carefully explains the counternarrative and Critical Race theory that provides a framework for his tome.

I plan to assign this book as required reading for at least one of the classes I teach in the Department of Indian Studies at the University of North Dakota. It should be widely read. Of course, it is not perfect. Some of the characters are not subtly drawn and even devolve into stereotypes. I should add, however, that I have heard most of the statements that emanated from the most stereotyped characters---often there is a basis for stereotypes. Professor Fletcher, a law professor at Michigan State University, displays his wit, particularly in the form of pun, some in Ojibwe, through the mouths of his characters in Indian Education. I have read several articles by Fletcher that have appeared in law journals. He has a healthy literary turn of phrasing and pursues explication of what one might call, the Indian Experience, throughout his works. Several of the Indian Education characters have already entered the literary world. His body of work conveys Critical Race theory ; counternarrative is a frequent feature.

There are several stellar features in Indian Education which transcend it beyond just a book about the difficulties Indian communities face and have faced. Academic references and explanatory notes

provide clues to many of the key issues of Indian reservations and their citizens. It offers a gentle, understandable demonstration of Critical Race Theory. It is amusing in its irony and other witticisms. It has a uniquely Indian perspective which allows a teacher, for instance, to use it as a spring board for the examination of contemporary Indian realities.

White Enough To Be American? focuses on the development of the American narrative that justifies dominance of non-member members of American society. Professor Basson proffers the central thesis that “race [is] the main ascriptive axis along which changing definitions of the nation and state were based.” (189) Although the case studies seem to be about Indians in America, they ultimately are about the dominant society’s perceptions of the American state and citizenship. In America’s founding mythology, mixed bloods challenged the idea that Americans were a pure, coherent, society ; Americans were eager to marginalize or dismiss those, like mixed bloods, whose existence challenged the dominant narrative. No society tolerates living contradictions to its ideology.

Jane Waldron was a mixed blood who had to be made an Indian because she wanted her Indian land. Louis Riel was allowed to be treated as a traitor by Canada because he was not really American. Riel was a Metis who was not “White enough,” even if he was an American citizen. Robert Wilcox, the Hawaiian who wanted to be a practicing citizen and congressman presented unique challenges because he also wanted Hawaiian sovereignty. Lucy Parsons, the anarchist, was considered a Black person even if she was also Indian. Under Basson’s eye, the story of each provides a clear example of how America lived, lives, with the oxymoron of a Mixed-Blood and pure society at the same time.

Basson’s work challenges the theoretical framework of nationhood as represented by, for instance, Rogers Smith and his “multiple traditions” approach to explaining multiethnic citizenship. Basson holds that American expansion led to an “abstract, ideological version of Ameircanism,” a form of property rights that only those endowed by their creator, i. e. White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, were real Americans deserving of membership in society. Basson insists, and her provocative work supports, her thesis that race is a central means of defining Americans ideologically and in power. Continuous emphasis on those who are not “us” by the dominant society helped define “us.” Mixed bloods were not “us” and therefore their prattling about their place in society was a moot point—they could never be real Americans. The reality of race and identity must become part of the scholarship of nationhood. Political scientists should combine their studies of state development with citizenship/membership analysis to understand the process more completely, according to Basson.

Each of these books is well worth the time to read them and the thought necessary to fully appreciate what Matthew Fletcher and Lauren Basson have written. Each work provides a lens through which American history can be viewed more clearly. Each focuses on the legacies of the American narrative.

Gregory Gagnon, Associate Professor of Indian Studies

University of North Dakota

March, 2009

