

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists. By David H. Price

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00q1v0fc>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Jaskoski, Helen

**Publication Date**

2005-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists.** By David H. Price. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2004. 426 pages. \$84.95 cloth; \$23.95 paper.

David Aberle, Ruth Benedict, Franz Boas, Frederica de Laguna, Cora DuBois, Melville Herskovits, Harry Hoijer, Melville Jacobs, Clyde Kluckhohn, Ruth Landes, Oscar Lewis, Robert Lowie, Margaret Mead, Morris Opler, Archie Phinney, Paul Radin, Edward Sapir, Mary Shepardson, Leslie Spier, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Bernhard Stern, Morris Swadesh, Leslie White. Researchers in American Indian studies, or anyone at all who has pored over musty ethnographies from the BEA, American Folklore Society, or like institutions will recognize the names of scholars responsible for much of the twentieth century's documentation of Native cultures. Very few people will recognize them as objects of scrutiny for J. Edgar Hoover, the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, the Office of Naval Research, and various other government entities. In *Threatening Anthropology* David Price examines how, and speculates on why, anthropologists were targeted for invasive and often highly destructive investigations. The total record is mixed: the list above includes some who collaborated or even volunteered to assist government inquisitions (and the record of organizations that should have known and done better—notably the American Anthropological Association and the ACLU—is disappointing). Most, however, were victims.

The book's main achievement is documenting the extent of these many-tentacled investigations, an enormously expensive endeavor that proved ultimately worthless, as no indictments, trials, or convictions ever ensued, although enormous damage was done to individual lives and careers. What principally comes to light, in fact, is evidence that Hoover's main objective was not the prosecution of subversive agents or spies but rather a paranoid determination to maintain race and class segregation. Most of the persons whose cases are examined were outspoken critics of racism, and Price documents this position as suspect in Hoover's mind. By contrast, he also offers instances of individuals who might have been espionage agents but whose reticence on civil rights evidently spared them the inquisitions inflicted on others. This aspect of Price's analysis is what makes the study most relevant for scholars in American Indian studies.

The ongoing critique of anthropology by descendants of "studied" groups in the last fifty years has produced mixed evaluations. There is no question that salvage anthropology was undertaken with full understanding of the campaign to erase Native peoples' land base, economies, and self-determination. Now, however, some tribal and national groups are reappropriating valuable material from these archives to reconstruct and revitalize their communities. Knowing that the government (mainly federal, but also state and local) intervened and pressured the scholars who collected this knowledge complicates the story. The reader familiar with anthropological studies of Western Hemisphere peoples will remark that Price omits mention of anthropologists of color who worked with their own communities. He offers brief notes on Archie Phinney and mentions Eslanda Robeson—nothing,

however, on Ella Deloria, John Swanton, or for that matter, Zora Neale Hurston, to name three important scholars. The omission is not a flaw in the book; as Price makes clear, much of his analysis depended on what materials the FBI and other agencies were, finally, reluctantly willing to release. It is possible that these individuals were ignored or unnoticed by the snoops. However, the absence of intellectuals of color within this study suggests important issues yet to be examined.

In his analysis Price conceptualizes “race” exclusively in terms of blacks and whites. While he theorizes that their studies of diverse cultures informed anthropologists’ activism, in his narrative these upstart anthropologists learn cultural relativism from university theoreticians, see it confirmed in field research (mostly on reservations), and then transport their progressive and egalitarian ideas to urban centers where their activism on behalf of desegregation and civil rights for African Americans gets them into trouble with J. Edgar Hoover. “Racism” as an important category in fieldwork itself, or “race” as a category invidiously applied to Indian people, does not emerge as important (although, considering a passage he quotes from an FBI functionary describing the Inuit explorer Ada Blackjack, it was certainly fundamental to the bureau’s thinking), and Price does not appear to have considered whether, and why (or why not) the “informants” of these anthropologists may have been subjected to the same investigation as other associates of the scholars he considers.

One of the most important elements of the study, in my view, is this opening it offers for a deeper revisioning of the anthropological relationship. What Price suggests, that is, should be examined with much more attention to what a couple of generations of researchers learned *from* (as opposed to “about”) the Native American cultures they studied. The nexus of the varieties of American racism and their relation to paranoia about national security has never been fully examined, although interesting openings have been made. What, for instance, were the extent and effects of FBI surveillance on reservations before the excruciating 1960s and 1970s?

The book’s title is a little misleading because it is inadequate. Price’s analysis examines the operations of the government security apparatus from the early 1940s through the 1970s, long after the discrediting and censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and the book documents surveillance of “suspicious” scholars as early as the 1920s. Besides, “McCarthyism” is a slovenly catchword, too narrow and reductive to represent a national hysteria too complicated and widespread to be subsumed by a single scapegoat figure. That said, Price offers a wealth of information about these many-tentacled investigations. The most convincing material comes from FBI and other government files garnered through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Price quotes redacted documents with blacked-out passages marked, producing a strong sense of the furtiveness that characterizes this function of government. The book is weakened by undocumented generalizations and unsupported statements about the objectives of “most American communists” or the motives of “academics” generally, which contrast with the meticulously documented record of the cold war investigations.

*Threatening Anthropology* is an important book and deserves attention from scholars in American Indian studies. It should inspire further investigation, more FOIA searches. Price maintains that the incessant harassment of anthropologists had a chilling effect on certain lines of analysis and rendered subsequent generations of anthropologists timid and passive in the face of global assaults on ever more marginalized peoples. If he is correct, it should be imperative to see how that outcome was achieved. When I finished the book and began this review, I wondered about possible similar campaigns of intimidation against scholars in my own field (literature) and how, when I was in graduate school and when some of the investigations Price documents were undertaken, we might have envisioned our professional futures in the face of such overt government pressures. So I asked an anthropologist friend; we had both been graduate students at Stanford in the mid-1960s. Did any of his professors warn him about this peculiar peril of the field? No, he said. He knew a vague rumor about one of the people on my list, but nothing more. No one sat him down and said, "Professor X has had to leave the country, Dr. Y has been fired after thirty years from his curator's position, Ms. Z's contract has been withdrawn. You can expect your friends to be questioned, your correspondents to be listed, your colleagues and administrators to be interrogated, your grant applications to be diverted." As I finish writing, the current attorney general, a man who cannot bring himself to condemn the use of torture, is testifying to Congress that the most invasive provisions of the "Patriot" Act should be continued and expanded. Price's book is one important move against the power of the secret state, a move to be emulated.

Helen Jaskoski

Editor emerita, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*

**Unsettled Past, Unsettled Future: The Story of Maine Indians.** By Neil Rolde. Gardiner, ME: Tillbury House Publishers, 2004. 462 pages. \$20.00 paper.

*Unsettled Past, Unsettled Future: The Story of Maine Indians* is an ambitious attempt to write the history of the Native peoples of Maine. Neil Rolde makes an earnest effort to help readers understand the issues currently facing the tribes. Utilizing the current controversies between the state of Maine and the four tribes of Maine—the Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot (known by their confederated name of Wabanaki or People of the Dawn)—Rolde presents who these people were prior to contact, their history since contact, and the contemporary struggles they face.

In writing about the Maine Indian Land Claims and the subsequent settlement and implementation act of which he was personally involved, Rolde adopts a conversational, journalistic tone. Wishing not to sound like "just another specialized academic tome" (135), Rolde writes in a style that is deeply personal, following his journey from a boy who was a tourist among the Seminoles, through his own political career and his continued interest not