

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History. By Peter Nabokov.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/20g313dw>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 26(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

LaGrand, James B.

Publication Date

2002-09-01

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/>

A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History. By Peter Nabokov. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 246 pages. \$55 cloth; \$20 paper.

Peter Nabokov's pathbreaking book looks at American Indians' views of their own history or what he describes elsewhere as Indian "historical consciousness," "historicity," and "historiography." His study, which skillfully combines fascinating vignettes from personal experience and a survey of an astonishing range of scholarly literature, ends up presenting many profitable suggestions to historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and all those interested in American Indian culture and life. The book is unique in the literature and will be read for years to come as scholars respond to the challenges Nabokov presents.

Throughout, Nabokov focuses on the differences between American Indian ways of thinking and talking about the past and those held by other groups. Although he is careful not to overly generalize and grandly theorize about "Indian ways of thinking," Nabokov does outline several trends that characterize many Indian historical traditions. He makes clear that many American Indian people have an intense personal investment in the past and see the past and present as intimately connected. Where some non-Indians might be influenced to view history as a commodity to be passively consumed through textbooks or television programs, for Indians the past is a "collective dowry" in which they have a strong proprietary stake. Nabokov also notes the importance of place rather than time in Indian ways of doing history ("topography over chronology," in the words of Vine Deloria, Jr.). Some of the "sacred geography" explored and discussed includes the lower Colorado River region for the Mohave and the western Black Hills for the Cheyennes.

Evidence of Nabokov's prodigious reading and research manifests itself in the points of connection, as well as differences, he finds between American Indian history and other historical traditions. In writing about the function of place, for example, he notes some of the similarities between this Indian historical tradition and the *Annales* school popularized by Fernand Braudel with its focus on long expanses of time rather than short punctuated time periods. This observation is typical of Nabokov's learned and fair-minded work on display in this book.

The ways in which history functions in Indian societies, Nabokov demonstrates, also distinguishes Indian and non-Indian historical practices. Oral tradition, for instance, has the benefit of offering multiple accounts to listeners, making it more democratic than history, Nabokov argues. In general, Indian versions of history "educate, explain, and entertain at the same time." They have the potential, it seems, to play a fuller and deeper role in the life of the people than other versions of history. Folktales and myths allow Indians to address a long tradition of resistance to outsiders. The triumphs of tricksters in tales can inspire a people. In general, Nabokov argues that "history" for American Indians has the potential to function as a verb rather than a noun.

One particular case study that illustrates both the distinctiveness and richness of American Indian ways of history is Nabokov's account of an interviewer pulling out a map illustrating a theory about Navajo migration across the Bering Strait, and asking an elderly Navajo man to respond to it. The

response at first glance appears fairly straightforward. Through a translator, the Navajo man says, "Maybe some other guys came over like that, but us Navajos came a different way." Later, he comments on the tendency of scholars to "make up a theory" in response to questions that intrigue them. Nabokov returns back to this interview several times, connecting it to personal experiences and analysis of scholarly literature. He explains the Navajo man's almost dismissive tone as a result of the lack of relationship between him and the interviewer. In the Navajo man's ceremonial system, Nabokov explains, "the ownership or practical application of particular historical discourses was ... determined by who you're related to or where you live." Furthermore, the question asked of the Navajo man is not merely about getting facts right in history books, but rather infringes on "Navajo intellectual and spiritual space." By the end of Nabokov's rich and fascinating analysis, the reader is convinced that the interviewer's question was indeed dangerous, as it threatened the "core of The People's survival in historical space and time."

Since Nabokov here deals with the momentous issue of how we should understand the past and furthermore how this might be done in a multicultural context—one might expect frequent controversy and polemics. Indeed, in the hands of another author, this book might have been dominated by intellectual or ethical judgments. Nabokov, however, maintains an effective and controlled tone throughout. He never suggests, for example, that readers with questions about some of the accounts he includes have either lost their mind or their heart. He acknowledges that sorting through American Indian historical traditions is difficult and complex work. It is impressive indeed that there is not one doctrinaire note in this book, the subject of which might have led to a shrill and intolerant tone.

This important book impresses the reader not only with its content and tone, but also with the possibilities and challenges it presents. One such matter is the further study of oral traditions in a multi- and cross-disciplinary fashion, a practice Nabokov models here. Many scholars studying the creation of traditions in different contexts have demonstrated that they have sometimes been quite deliberately constructed—sometimes to fulfill social or political objectives that benefit one group in a society while diminishing another. Those writing about American Indian history and culture, in contrast, have more often suggested (implicitly or explicitly) that traditions have emerged naturally and organically and that they are consensually held by later generations. It is understandable that someone like Nabokov, who has been active in disputes over tribal land rights, balks at putting tradition under the microscope or "problematizing" it, since this tactic has been used in courts to try to refute Indian land claims. Despite its political difficulties, however, the process of carefully looking at the production of traditions—and all other accounts about the past, for that matter—might bear at least scholarly benefits. Such work has the potential to shine more light on the histories of Indian societies.

A second challenge that Nabokov boldly raises involves the question of who may participate in and benefit from the type of history described here. This question has been tackled by many scholars in recent years, who have

debated who should be writing American Indian history, under what circumstances, and for what purposes. It is indeed a difficult issue and Nabokov openly acknowledges it. On the one hand, he frequently comments on the ways in which family, community, and tribal identities enrich and enliven history. On the other hand, he recognizes the benefits of a “historical discourse that doesn’t quarantine [Indians’] pasts and their intellectual life from the broader American experiences and its modes of recollection.” The universal application of and participation in the type of history Nabokov describes here has both costs and benefits. Nabokov should be applauded for openly and carefully raising the issue.

Finally, many readers will be inspired to follow up on Nabokov’s book in their own work. They may feel compelled to join him in countering past writers such as Francis Parkman and Henry Roe Schoolcraft who haughtily dismissed Indian traditions or accounts. Yet their work will differ in some ways from that of Nabokov who early on refers to his study as a “toolkit” or “handbook.” In one sense, this characterization is far too modest. His book develops theories too extensively and includes far too much original material to fit these labels. Yet in another sense the terms do suggest that future work emerging from Nabokov’s thinking will be different in nature—less sweeping and more narrowly focused. Those following in Nabokov’s footsteps will likely find that it’s one thing to determine *whether* Indian accounts are valuable and quite another to determine *how* they are valuable—in other words, how they should be incorporated into more conventional, narrow studies. This will certainly lead to cases where oral accounts must be used side-by-side other types of sources (such as documents or fieldwork notes) where both must somehow be reconciled with each other. Indeed, challenges might well crop up even in the process of using multiple oral accounts as source material. Yet Nabokov makes manifestly clear in this wide-ranging, inspiring, and lucid book that such work will reap rich benefits.

James B. LaGrand
Messiah College

Improving American Indian Health Care: The Western Cherokee Experience. By C. William Steeler; coedited by Rashid L. Bashur and Gary W. Shannon. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. 160 pages. \$34.95 cloth.

Dedicated to the memory of William Steeler, this book is coedited by two of his colleagues, Rashid L. Bashur and Gary W. Shannon, and is based on Steeler’s 1990 University of Michigan doctoral dissertation, “Selected Health Policy Issues among Native Americans.” Although the dissertation title references “Native Americans,” the book narrows the focus to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, and specifically to two different self-help initiatives undertaken by that Nation in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The coeditors emphasize that their motivation for the book is to share the Western Cherokee experience so other tribal governments might learn from these self-help experiences