



John Sutton Lutz, ed. *Myth and Memory: Stories of Indigenous-European Contact*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007. vi + 236 pp. \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7748-1263-4.



Reviewed by Corinne George (Department of History, Simon Fraser University)

Published on H-Canada (July, 2008)

A Reassessment of Contact Narratives

Students who attended school in North America during the twentieth century may remember being taught that Christopher Columbus “discovered” America. *Myth and Memory* challenges this notion through acknowledging different contact stories. The authors in this edited collection analyze and reassess the elements of myth and memory in contact narratives. Some of the ways these scholars highlight different realms of truth are through acknowledging validity of indigenous narratives and challenging traditional European accounts. This convincing and solid collection encourages assessment and reassessment of contact narratives.

Myth and Memory employs such tools as oral history to uncover accounts previously perceived as myth, thereby incorporating further stories of indigenous and European contact. Through the use of some other methods of inquiry, including reassessments of traditional sources of European information, such as manuscripts and documents of settlers and “explorers,” these scholars engage in reinterpretations of accounts previously dismissed as myth. The indigenous groups discussed include Coast Salish, Gitksan, Kaska, Maori, Okanagan,

Tlingit, and Ts’msyen, and the chapters range geographically from western North America, eastern United States, New Zealand, England, and the Kalahari Desert.

Ten scholars from various fields, including history, anthropology, linguistics, and literature, engage in this informative work. The scholars were participants in the 2002 conference, “Worlds in Collision: Critically Analyzing Aboriginal and European Contact Narratives,” held in Victoria, British Columbia. The collection’s editor states that the work of the contributors contends that we are still in a contact zone, “the period in which two cultures are still struggling to figure each other out, a zone in which miscommunication and conflicting mythologies govern interrelationships as much as shared understandings” (p. 4). Edited by University of Victoria historian John Sutton Lutz, the chapters in *Myth and Memory* integrate a number of global indigenous perspectives. Lutz’s extensive insight regarding native and newcomer relations provides a solid basis for editorial expertise of this compendium. For example, Lutz points out that European contact narratives are often construed as history and indigenous narratives are often interpreted as myth.

Myth and Memory confronts these kinds of assumptions.

These scholars successfully portray differing accounts of truth—truth from and of indigenous populations. Lutz identifies the four themes of *Myth and Memory* as currency, performance, ambiguity, and power. In addition to these themes, the collection also provides ongoing analyses of contact narratives through acknowledging oral sources, challenging written sources, and reassessing the validity of each, meticulously substantiating variations of myth and memory. The following discussion provides examples of how some of these scholars presented their analyses.

Keith Carlson and Patrick Moore convey the nature of oral tradition within an indigenous community. Carlson outlines perception of truth within the Coast Salish community. He uses narratives to discuss two types of Coast Salish knowledge, the “sqwelqwel” (the “true news”) and the “sxwoxwiyam” (the “myth age” stories) (p. 50). Carlson describes a process by which community members differentiate between these two forms of knowledge. He concludes, “We cannot begin to incorporate indigenous historical perspectives into our Western historiography until we consider the meanings of oral accounts in their own settings” (p. 68).

Moore investigates Kaska storytellers of the Yukon. He discusses two types of Kaska narratives: the “humorous narratives” and “non-humorous narratives” (p. 70). He explains that humorous narratives describe initial encounters that are often exaggerated stereotypes and are not meant to be taken at face value. The non-humorous narratives are often critical of Europeans and their actions. Moore concludes that “further understanding of the types of oral narratives and the relations between them will contribute to a more sophisticated use of these sources as historical evidence, and to a comprehension of how they are used in the communities in which they are performed” (p. 89).

I. S. MacLaren as well as Richard Dauenhauer and Nora Marks Dauenhauer demonstrate how sources previously viewed as authoritative can be reinterpreted and reassessed. MacLaren analyzes nineteenth-century circulation of knowledge throughout the British Empire. He uses the 1859 publication of Paul Kane’s *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* along with Herbert Spencer’s *Descriptive Sociology* (1873) to challenge constructions of indigenous representations. MacLaren carefully argues that traditional sources of contact narratives need to be questioned, and he demonstrates the

layers of interpretation that nineteenth-century texts underwent prior to public dissemination. One of his concerns is that much scholarship is based on works of these authors, and that these “authoritative” representations of indigenous peoples at the time of contact need to be questioned. He contends that “scholars who approach narratives of exploration and travel with the understanding that eyewitness-equals-author-equals-authority embark on a hazardous enterprise” (p. 102).

Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer’s analysis demonstrates the importance of translators in the contact period (the focal period was between the 1790s and 1867), arguing that interpreters played key roles. They focus on the Tlingit of Southeast Alaska and their relations with the Russian-American Company (RAC). The Dauenhauers show the important roles of interpreters in trade relations, peacekeeping, advocacy for their people (translators were often Creole, Métis, or mixed-blood), and negotiations of contracts. Their analysis of the Tlingit narratives lead them to conclude, “These are not stereotypes of unseen, anonymous Indians lurking in ambush, but Tlingit individuals professionally involved in the daily affairs of business, diplomacy, and public relations, helping the Tlingit in Russian America and Russians in Tlingit America meet each other with a minimum of collision” (p. 176). The Dauenhauers encourage closer attention to those parties often overlooked, such as translators, while considering contact narratives.

Myth and Memory adds to existing European and indigenous contact scholarship, such as Robin Fisher’s *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (1992), which argues that despite a mutually beneficial relationship during the fur-trade era, indigenous populations were dispossessed of lands and resources, which, in turn, led to European domination of British Columbia by the end of the 1880s. *Myth and Memory* acknowledges other truths and challenges previous notions of the contact period. The authors in *Myth and Memory* were careful not to generalize experiences and recognize differences among indigenous groups. Apart from the incorporation of oral history sources, the book also challenges scholars to rethink the validity of written texts previously viewed as “authoritative” sources. Although there is a vast representation of a variety of indigenous groups, the book would have been further augmented with scholarship focusing on contact narratives in what is now eastern Canada. *Myth and Memory*, undoubtedly, demonstrates that we are, indeed, still in the contact zone.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Corinne George. Review of Lutz, John Sutton, ed., *Myth and Memory: Stories of Indigenous-European Contact*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. July, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14681>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.