



**Donald Lee Fixico.** *Call for Change: The Medicine Way of American Indian History, Ethos, and Reality.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. xviii + 240 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4356-9.



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## Toward a New “New Indian History”: Contemplating Fixico’s Call for Change

Donald Fixico’s *Call for Change* is well timed. After forty years of pathbreaking scholarship culminating in the “New Indian history” of James Merrell, Ned Blackhawk, and Kathleen DuVal, Fixico’s new book joins a burgeoning, field-wide conversation that centers upon several fundamental questions facing scholars of American Indian histories. What are we trying to accomplish with our work? Who is going to listen? And, importantly, where do we go from here?[1]

Fixico’s latest work argues that historians of American Indian history must relinquish their reliance upon Euroamerican written sources and grapple with the realities of Indians’ unique worldviews and ways of seeing the world; only then, the author suggests, can scholars begin the difficult work of bridging “mainstream” scholarship with Native peoples’ own understandings of past experiences. Fixico asserts that his “medicine way of American Indian history,” or the incorporation of a “worldview in an indigenous paradigm, whereby American Indians experience physical and metaphysical realities as one,” is the necessary next methodological step for the field (p.

xvii). Indeed, some have already embraced approaches similar to “the medicine way.” Elizabeth Fenn’s recent book on the Mandan, Alyssa Mt. Pleasant’s work on Buffalo Creek, “civilization,” and settler colonialism, along with Colin Calloway’s now older *One Vast Winter Count* are perhaps among the best examples of recent scholarship that embraces such a “Native way of ‘seeing.’”[2]

Following a glossary and overview of his terminology, Fixico offers three chapters that articulate the various “dimensions” of American Indian history. In chapter 3, Fixico argues that the “first dimension” of Indian history includes works that write of “Native-white relations” from the Euroamerican viewpoint wherein Native Americans appear as bit actors. His analysis follows the evolution of Euroamerican racial attitudes, and it details the academy’s failure, prior to the “New Indian history,” to offer Native perspectives on the past. He credits Robert Berkhofer Jr. and Gary Nash for being among the first “mainstream scholars” to “put Indians at center stage as equal actors in shaping history,” but he continues, “it took mainstream scholars to articulate this new

approach to thwart the tide of 'cowboy and Indian' or 'us and them' history' (p. 55). Such a critique ignores the potent influence of Vine Deloria Jr. and a number of other Native scholars. Indeed, Fixico courts similar problems when he writes that "fair and equal treatment of Indians has remained elusive in the writing of Indian-white relations," an overstatement given recent works by Brian DeLay, Daniel Richter, Pekka Hämäläinen, and others.[3] Though these latter scholars do receive brief mention in the book's fourth chapter and in the bibliography, they do not factor into this chapter's analysis; this renders the chapter problematic given the author's tendency to speak of the field in present terms (p. 56).

Fixico develops his idea of the "second dimension of interacting Indian-white relations," or "common ground" histories, in chapter 4. Histories of this "second dimension," he argues, analyze the shared power of Indians and Euroamericans along with plants, animals, and the environment in shaping history. Here the author analyzes the many reciprocal relationships that influenced Native peoples' historical experiences and the history of North America. Taking the example of a Creek medicine maker, Fixico explains that "the Creek-red-root relationship was not a one-way affair" but that "sometimes the red root communicated back to the medicine maker through a dream or vision, or simply would not be there to be found" (p. 72). These relationships, Fixico suggests, form the foundations of Native Americans' histories and are essential for understanding Indians' experiences in North America.

Fixico confronts the problem of sources in chapter 5's discussion of ethnohistory. Indeed, here he posits that the "third dimension" of Indian history is one wherein scholars seek to understand American Indian pasts by gaining intimate knowledge of Native communities and worldviews through cross-cultural analysis. Fixico is at his best in this chapter when he writes about the vast power of ethnohistorical interpretation—a method that is by now, however, familiar to serious historians in the field. The author urges historians to consider Indian models of kinship, community dynamics, "societal infrastructure," and cosmologies; to relax "empiricist tendencies" and to examine "tribal values and environmental conditions" in order to "understand Indian history and the Native viewpoint in the Third Dimension paradigm" (p. 101). Such analysis, he argues, "allows new theories and methodologies" to emerge "that make sense to Indian people and that must therefore be applied in order to restore a balance to the equation of the history of Indian-white relations, where two different cultures and

two dissimilar mindsets intersect" (p. 105). It seems pertinent to remember here, however, that ethnohistorical work is required to understand *any* past since all of history's actors held different worldviews from our own.

Fixico's next three chapters offer an attempt to construct a "cross-cultural bridge of understanding" between Indians and non-Indians—a bridge, he argues, that is requisite for the writing of American Indian history. Chapter 6 argues that historians must study Native cultures in order to develop a cultural understanding of the shared Indian and non-Indian past, while chapters 7 and 8 stress the importance of oral histories and indigenous notions of female power, environment, and place in writing American Indian histories. Here, Fixico reflects on the usefulness of ethnohistory, and he argues that historians must embrace the tools of ethnography, cultural anthropology, sociology, and linguistics when approaching Indian pasts. Oral histories and notions of place, grounded in Indian ideas of the metaphysical, meanwhile, serve as Fixico's gateways into cultural understanding. Scholars of American Indian studies and history likely will find little that is new here, particularly in chapters 6 and 7—a problem that stems from the book's pervasive tendency to speak to an ill-defined audience.

Indeed, one of the central problems of Fixico's work is that of audience. At times, he aims his "call for change" toward academic historians, other times he targets "mainstream" historians, and, still other times, non-Indian Americans writ large. It is not always clear if by "mainstream historians" he means non-Indian professional scholars or those whose works most often grace the shelves of bookstore chains. This lack of clarity in terms is particularly problematic, for example, when Fixico offers such statements as "mainstream observers often think the Native religion should be renounced" (p. 113). For the vast majority of academic scholars writing since the emergence of ethnohistory and the New Indian history, these sentiments are no longer applicable. Thus, for this reader, the uncertain use of "mainstream" produces confusion. His call subsequently falls short of its full potential because of these tendencies toward generalization.

Another fundamental problem is that of his framework, "the medicine way of Indian history" (p. ix). Fixico acknowledges several times that this implies a lumping of Native cultures and communities, but too often his analysis stops there. A question of great significance thus emerges from one of the weaknesses of this call for change: how can our histories incorporate the *many* Na-

tive ways of seeing and experiencing North America's pasts? This is an important and difficult query given the varied realities of reservation and non-reservation Indian communities today. The Indians who live in our histories are likewise diverse. While Fixico insists throughout that "the Medicine Way" most closely speaks to "traditional" Native ways of seeing the world, no Native American community embraces or embraced static worldviews, and all would, I think, consider themselves American Indian. Should we, then, write of *the* medicine way? Should we privilege some Native experiences, perspectives, and voices over others? If so, which ones? Fixico is aware of these problems but fails to interrogate them; they are, ultimately, issues worth further pursuit.

Despite its shortcomings, however, Fixico's *Call for Change* makes a number of crucial points. Referencing too briefly James Merrell's now twenty-five-year-old critique of early American historians, the author contends that "the worst sin of scholars is not necessarily to distort history and distort the descriptions of Indian people; rather it is to deny their existence and their place in history as a part of America" (pp. 62-63).<sup>[4]</sup> Many early American historians, in particular, have articulated the ways in which Native peoples produced the political history of North America and they have incorporated works by James Axtell, Neal Salisbury, and others into their analyses. Yet Fixico is right that more must be done. Indeed, historians must heed Fixico's call to embrace the centrality of Native experiences in shaping North America, and we must recognize that Indians did not exist *alongside* early America and the United States, but that they aided in the *creation* of both, along with African Americans, Euroamericans, and everyone else, to follow Fixico's lead, *everything* else.

Considering the state of the fields of American Indian studies and the histories of North America, Fixico's philosophy should encourage an ongoing conversation regarding Native peoples' place in our histories. Daniel Richter encouraged such a conversation in 1993, as did Nicholas Rosenthal in 2006, but still historians of North America's pasts—particularly those who study the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—have been slow to join in.<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, we are indebted to Fixico for issuing a bold call at a time when the field needs it most, and his work should encourage a discussion surrounding a series of difficult questions. How can we embrace the realities of American Indians' distinctiveness while incorporating them into a broader North American narrative? Are we ready to move past including "Native-themed" panels at

conferences while instead ensuring that American Indians' pasts—and their scholars—become part of the broader narratives of *North America's* pasts? *Should* we endeavor to incorporate them in such a way? Is such incorporation an imperial act or does it recognize Indians as actors who shaped the political landscape of North America and the creation of both the European and American empires? These are among the many questions encouraged by Fixico's call and to which we must turn as we contemplate a *new* New Indian history.

#### Notes

[1]. James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

[2]. Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014); Alyssa Mt. Pleasant, "Guiding Principles: *Guswentá* and the Debate over Formal Schooling at Buffalo Creek, 1800-1811," in *Indian Subjects: Hemispheric Perspectives on the History of Indigenous Education*, ed. Brian Klopotek and Brenda Child (Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, 2014); Colin Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

[3]. See, for example, Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Pekka Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

[4]. James H. Merrell, "Some Thoughts on Colonial Historians and American Indians," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 46 (1989): 94-119.

[5]. Daniel K. Richter, "Whose Indian History?," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 50 (1993): 379-393; Nicholas G. Rosenthal, "Beyond the New Indian History: Recent Trends in the Historiography on the Native Peoples of North America," *History Compass* 4, no. 5 (2006): 962-974.

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