Book Review


The primary focus of this book is American Indian identity in two generations of Anishinaabe families who reside in a mid-sized city in Michigan that experienced a boom and bust cycle in its industrial manufacturing base during the last 50 years. Jackson portrays the Indian population in “Riverton” as falling into two groups: one group of Anishinaabe with family connections in the region and a group of new Indians with little or no connection to their Indian heritage.

The theme of Jackson’s book was precipitated by an incident at a public meeting of the Indian Center’s pow-wow committee that pitted these two groups against each other over the direction and content of the annual pow-wow. Jackson uses this incident throughout the book as the defining and pivotal interaction illustrating the crosscurrents and tensions that work to establish and maintain ethnic group boundaries and authentic claims to an ethnic identity.

In the introductory chapter Jackson deals with theories of ethnic identity formation. Jackson describes and rejects the objective and subjective views. According to Jackson, we cannot rely on a set of cultural forms or traits such as religious beliefs, language or forms of dress (objective markers), nor can we rely on self-identification (a purely subjective claim) in determining who is an Indian. Instead, Jackson views ethnic identity as a social creation. Ethnic identity is not only how one view’s oneself, but is formed by positive and negative validations or challenges to that identity. It is the intersubjective process that defines the boundaries between ethnic groups. Ethnicity is a product of the negotiation of the self with other selves in a specific social context. The remainder of Jackson’s book describes the context and experiences that have shaped identity for Indians from the region.

In separate chapters, Jackson describes the global political economic context of Riverton’s changing economic fortunes and the three official American Indian institutions that are prominent in the city (the Indian Center, the American Indian student association at the local university, and the Indian education programs in the public school system). She then focuses on the two generations of Anishinaabe to make sense of how their life experiences
have shaped how they manifest their Indian identity. She devotes a chapter to the life experiences of each Anishinaabe generation that have influenced their sense of ethnic identity.

In the final substantive chapter, Jackson returns to the original theme of what constitutes Indian identity for the two generations of Anishinaabe and how the generations exhibit that identity in different ways. The elder generation does not make a show of their Indian heritage and yet it is possible to discern in their behaviors an Indian cultural bedrock that Jackson traces back to their developmental experiences growing up in a rural Indian community. The glue between generations and the core determinant of undisputed membership in the Indian community as well as the basis of the claim to an authentic Indian identity is an unbroken family connection to these communities where socialization to the Indian way took place among the generation of elders.

In the end, the weakness of the book is not what Jackson describes and interprets, but what she has left out. The new Indians, who are so crucial to the claim of an authentic Indian identity, are ignored. They are nothing more than a foil to hoist the analysis presented. They remain ciphers, a simple but cartoon-like backdrop for the actors at center stage. Moreover, there also is another group of urban Indians who no longer identify as Indian or who are marginal to the urban community that does not figure in the narrative in any way. In focusing on two generations of extended Anishinaabe families Jackson has chosen to explain the formation of Indian identity among the easiest of the groups. Although the social construction of their Indian identity is not without drama, vicissitudes, temporal variation, and substantial import, the experiential basis of their identity is relatively straightforward and Jackson has reconstructed it well. However, the book ignores identity formation among Indians who have adopted a non-Indian identity, the Indians with marginal connection to the urban Indian organizations (the homeless, alcoholic, drug-addicted, or mentally ill), as well as the new Indians whose voices are largely absent from the discussion. In order to succeed at the ambitious theoretical task of understanding the social constructionist basis of ethnic identity that she raises at the beginning of the book, Jackson also would need to include these Indians.

Despite this shortcoming, Jackson has written an account worth reading by anyone interested in American Indian ethnicity. A special strength of the book is Jackson’s ability not only to describe events but to cogently interpret the meaning and significance of the things she observed and heard. Her social constructionist view of how Indian identity is created and maintained is valuable, and the experiences of the Anishinaabe on whom she focuses clearly represent a more common, if not universal, experience of the cohort...