

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

NAOMI ADELSON *'Being Alive Well': Health and the Politics of Cree Well-Being*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2000, ix +141 pp. Cloth \$40.00 Paperback \$19.95.

"If the land is not healthy then how can we be?" This question, eloquently voiced by Joseph Masty, Sr., an elder from the Whapmagoostui Cree Nation in northern Quebec, speaks to the intrinsic connection of the history of the land and the history of the Cree people. This message frames and reverberates through Naomi Adelson's compelling and accessible "treatise on the bio-politics of health" (p. 113).

Health, as Adelson reminds us, "is never simply a neutral, biological category" nor is there "a natural or universal definition of health" (p. 3). Health is "interpreted, idealized, and enacted in various ways" (p.3) – "health and, more specifically, health ideals are rooted in cultural norms and values that permeate and define – yet extend beyond – the state of the physical body" (p. 9). Further, she contends that health "is political" in that it "takes on a particular, and particularly charged, meaning when understood within its historical, cultural, and social context" (p. 9). This theoretical grounding sets the stage for this engaging text to "present and explain the symbols and meanings of 'being alive well' for the Whapmagoostui Cree adults as they were described" to Adelson (p.15), as well as her analysis "refracted through the lens of critical-interpretive medical anthropology" (p. 114).

In 1988, Adelson entered a community formed through past and continuing encroachments by Euro-Canadians on Cree lives and embedded in colonial and neo-colonial relations of power inequities in Canada. The push for self-government and Cree nationhood was forged in response to these encroachments. The context became even more "particularly charged" after a 1989 Quebec government proposal to build a dam that, until shelved in 1994, threatened irrevocable changes to the ecosystem surrounding Whapmagoostui.

With no Cree word equivalent to "health" in English, interviews with adults revolved around the "most apt phrase" – *miyupimaatisiun* – glossed as "being alive well." Told at a time when Cree identity was seen to be in jeopardy, the stories and reminiscences make vivid the way that "health is inseparable from 'being Cree'" (p. 9) and "being Cree has everything to do with connections to the land and to a rich and complex past" (p. 25).

Miyupimaatisiun "is firmly tied to the ideals of living a Cree way of life – more specifically, a way of life imbued with robust connections to the physical and spiritual northern landscape" (p. 62), "inseparable from being able to hunt, pursue traditional activities, live well in the bush, eat the right foods, keep warm, and provide for oneself and others" (p. 97). *Miyupimaatisiun* offers "a vision of a world in which whiteman's interference was minimal"; a world "constituted primarily in the past" but one that does not exclude the hardships of the Cree lifestyle (p. 108). Importantly: "These histories describe the activities of individuals; in their telling and retelling they also suffuse the modern Cree person with a particular sense of identity so that the past is...part of how current identities are imagined and enacted. These images infuse the activities of daily living with profound meaning..." (p. 27).

Although full-time bush living is not a realistic option for most, time spent in "bush camp, goose hunting, and bush-related activities are more than 'what Cree do'; they reaffirm the distinction between Cree and whiteman" (p. 108). Adelson's analysis highlights "the connections between identity and personal, social, and political well-being" (p. 99). As "a distinctive form of agency," through "'being alive well' people are articulating dissent through cultural assertion" (p. 110). Everyday enactments immediately understood as "being Cree" are a "component in larger strategies of identity and of dissent" (p. 113). Thus, "eating Cree food imbues everyday practice with political process" (p. 111). "'Being alive well' is a means by which adult Cree can articulate their distinct status in opposition to the persistent encroachment of whiteman upon themselves and their land" (p.110).

One could quibble that Adelson does not extend the discussion beyond the Whapmagoostui Cree to that of other First Nations communities. Nor does she discuss how the expanded perspective on health argued convincingly for in this book relates to other anthropological writings on "well-being" or "what makes life worth living" (e.g. Gordon Mathews "What Makes Life Worth Living? How Japanese and Americans Make Sense of Their Worlds, 1996, University of California Press). And does the cultural ideal of a "disease-free, fit, and youthful body" peculiar to "an individualistic, industrialized, modern world" (p. 4) represent how most North Americans construe and enact "health" in their everyday life contexts? And one could wish for more discussion of "health" in relation to everyday enactments in village life. But these concerns seem small in light of what she has accomplished. This is a book that can help others see "health" in a quite different light. Well-written and carefully argued, the reflexive stance Adelson adopts, and her presence in the book, add depth and credibility. I have assigned this book to both undergraduate and graduate students and the richness of the classroom discussions exceeded my expectations. Promoting a vision of anthropological praxis warranting thoughtful regard, the book provides a useful venue for challenging negative stereotypes, presumptions of homogeneity, and other tenacious assumptions about the first peoples of North America in contemporary times.

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