

Honoring Elders: Aging, Authority, and Ojibwe Religion. Michael D. McNally. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xxi + 382 pp. \$49.87 cloth; \$29.50 paper.

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In *Honoring Elders*, Michael D. McNally proposes an interdisciplinary approach to understand the figure of the elder within Anishinaabe society. The author re-conceptualizes the aging process, emphasizing the experiential and relational attributes aging consolidates at the mind-body level. McNally argues for an understanding of the elder as someone who has mastered (or is on his way to master) the art of communal living. Through forging a long-lasting life centered in the crafting of moral and existential prolongations of the self, Anishinaabe seniors gain authority and power to relay their experiences to younger generations. The author attempts to elevate the concept of aging to a level of discussion that integrates philosophical, ethical, and political realms. In doing so, however, McNally's argument loses its strength simply by remaining exclusively at the level of solipsistic abstraction. His reliance on interpretative and analytical methods overpowers a direct contact with the ethnographic data one assumes has been substantial part of his research.

Departing from an exploration of *bimaadiziwin*—a central construe in Anishinaabe cosmology—McNally aims to make evident the experiential foundation of the elder's authority. To ground this thesis, the author acknowledges his personal relationship with informants such as Larry Cloud Morgan, who “took a considerable risk in [McNally's] education” (xix). More than this, McNally thoroughly reviews archives and ethnographic accounts in order to broaden and contextualize his discourse. With that archival focus, the anthropological perspective of the book yields itself to a more thesis-oriented approach. The use of methodological tools based on the interaction with subjects is not self-evident. Reproduction of dialogues, field notes, and self-reflections are absent. A recollection of the material circumstances that framed the ethnographer's insights would have strengthened his credibility. Throughout the book, the reader confronts an intuitive and profound analysis of Anishinaabe institutions; and analysis that, for some moments, seems to merely reflect McNally's deep abstraction and fictionalization of the topic.

Perhaps, the author aims to gain credibility by engaging the reader with the appealing moral content inherent in his interpretation of the elder figure. His ample use of literary review and cultural parallelism—e.g., the recurrent analogy between Confucianism and Anishinaabe thought—helps to fill in any gaps left in the methodological design. This last point is possibly the most salient weakness in the book. The need to “prove” the relational foundation of the elder's authority leads the author astray in terms of cohesiveness and methodic exploration/discovery of knowledge. There is no gradually revealing narrative to ease the reader's voyage into the elder's world. Furthermore, there is no sense of contact with the elders themselves. The empathy that could have been created through the incorporation of perhaps more traditional ethnographic techniques distances the reader—and the author—from the subjects.

Even though *Honoring Elders* follows a methodological approach that may discomfort readers leaned towards more rigorous (and traditional) ethnographic methods, the book becomes more effective and thought-provoking when accessed as a cross-cultural meditation upon the nature of eldership. Its cross-cultural nature involves a novel comparative study of Ojibwe religion, Confucianism, and the various ethical intersections that link together both religious

systems across time and geography. This comparative approach ultimately serves for furnishing a contemporary analysis that attempts to “denaturalize” Anishinaabe eldership (280). Beginning with a demystification of ritual and shamanism as necessary avenues for accessing the Native American cosmological systems, the book moves tangentially, searching to reframe and revalorize the centrality of social ethics within Ojibwe thought. McNally channels his conceptual explorations deploying a framework that delves not only into the religious and societal implications of “honoring the elders;” it also examines the cosmogonic side of such a longstanding social institution.

McNally excels when linking together the social and pragmatic functions of Anishinaabe eldership to a broader system of belief that sustains and encourages respect for the elder. As such, McNally introduces the core notion of “sacred community” as a form of relational cosmology that intertwines all humans, animals, ideas, or objects—what Michael Uzendoski (2008) calls “subjectivities”—into a dynamic and harmonious web of reciprocity. Within that compendium of dynamic relations, the homage and respect paid to the elders stands out as a quintessential mode of continuing and strengthening the equilibrium of forces and intersubjective connections sustaining the Anishinaabe community. For example, McNally incorporates a linguistic analysis of a standard Ojibwe greeting formula in order to show readers how human selves acquire specific shapes by performing everyday activities. This is done by interacting through a “profound relationality” that is ingrained in broader cosmological and deeply interiorized perceptions of the world. He writes:

One could...argue that Ojibwe social and ecological ethics, ritual, and even humor are principally oriented toward the humbling of the self by methodical, ritualized folding of the individual into various layers of the collective: social, natural, and spiritual (85).

According to McNally, this greeting formula, *nindinawemaaganag*, “a dubitative form that could be translated ‘you who might be relatives’...speaks to a posture toward the social, natural and spiritual world that presumes relationality” (85). Moreover, the formula prioritizes subjects’ place in a web of relations, so that they are reminded, through the everyday performance of this standard greeting, that each person in the community is an active agent within the cosmogonic and sacred web of relations. Thus, Ojibwe thought does not reduce human collectivity to a set of civil conventions and preset behaviors. Instead, Ojibwe’s “sacred community” embraces the entire world by understanding (and feeling) it as a living, ethical organism. The notion of profound relationality enacts a system of ethics and praxis. It rules local and metaphysical ontologies by infusing them with a perception of the cosmos that is shaped by a type of projected intent and emotionality. This proactive understanding and feeling of the sacred community emerges from both humans and natural subjectivities, and serves to integrate all existing creatures. Once the reciprocal and interconnected aspects of the sacred community is grasped, Anishinaabe eldership can be seen “not just as a human convention but [as] something coded into the moral landscape of the universe: a principle animating the cosmos” (91). McNally comes, in this way, to the conclusion that respect for the elders equals respect for all living creatures and things in the world.

Due to its various levels of interpretation, the book can benefit students and scholars within the fields of anthropology, religion, sociology, American History, and Native American studies. Because of its strong emphasis on interdisciplinary research, the text confers ample importance to linguistic analysis, epistemology, aging studies, and philosophy. This last area, in

particular, may serve as a rich springboard for discussion based on the comparative study of Ojibwe religion and Confucianism. Finally, *Honoring Elders*, is an ideal book for readers who are passionate about the nature of ethnography. McNally's writing, although rich in its various explorations and conceptualization of religious praxis and ethics, relies on an ethnographic methodology that seems to never crystallize into an organic stance. Throughout the book, his discussion grows into conceptually diverse and cross-cultural connections, but does not reach an embedding perception of the people and beliefs he strives to understand. This lack of phenomenological "contact" is related to the particular design of his research and not to his command of analytic techniques or historical investigation.

Going beyond the profound ideas investigated in the book, and also making an effort not to disregard the importance of ethnographic endeavor to favor and praise McNally's enticing reflections upon social ethics, I ended the book wanting something else. I felt that my "contact" with the Ojibwe world was hindered by a wall of theoretical reflections and comparative/historical analysis thereby transforming the real subject of the book into a distant archetype. Throughout the book, I could intuit or sympathize with the elders' notions of the world but I could not access any instance of interiority because, I felt, McNally's static lens blocks all of the insights. In his ethnography, the dynamic self that experiences the world and constructs reality remains absent.

ADDITIONAL READING

Barz, G. F., & Cooley, T. J.

1997 *Shadows in the field: new perspectives for fieldwork in ethnomusicology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Jackson, M.

1998 *Minima Ethnographica: intersubjectivity and the anthropological project*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Uzendoski, M.

2008 "Somatic Poetry in Amazonian Ecuador." *Anthropology and Humanism* 33: 12–29.