Blackfoot Redemption: A Blood Indian’s Story of Murder, Confinement, and Imperfect Justice by William E. Farr (review)

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Because women’s work served both “material and spiritual” functions within Dakota culture, it serves as a barometer for measuring economic and social change from the fur trade era to the present. Hyman’s analysis of relations with whites shifts the focus from the mediating role of traders’ Indigenous wives to the efforts of mostly anonymous women, whose work produced valuable commodities in a time of waning hunting opportunities and the transition to a cash economy. Following the U.S.-Dakota War, men and women were separated—several hundred men were sent to Camp McClellan in Davenport, Iowa, while women endured internment and starvation conditions, first at Fort Snelling and then at Crow Creek. During those genocidal years, women’s work was crucial to bare subsistence. Hyman shows, however, that the wakan power was dormant rather than depleted. By the 1870s, when Dakotas were reestablished at Santee and Flandreau, South Dakota, women’s creative work was central to the rebuilding of Dakota culture, particularly through the structures provided by churches. Quilting bees and church meetings became the new places for women to gather, work, and pass on tradition; the quilled hymnal covers women made demonstrate innovations crucial to resilience by integrating Dakota tradition with new realities.

While Hyman is able to trace a number of families from the 1700s through the present, her focus on mostly anonymous women requires resourceful research. Trade records show how often women made clothing as payment on goods between 1845 and 1850, for example, and lists of names of residents of Santee in the 1880s show Dakotas’ persistent use of birth-order names years after removal. Interviews with present-day Dakota women—whose memories and family stories also constitute rich historical texts—allow Hyman to form thoughtful hypotheses about the role of women’s work in ceremonial life, collective work, and cultural memory both in the past and the present.

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Blackfoot Redemption: A Blood Indian’s Story of Murder, Confinement, and Imperfect Justice.

The criminalization, findings of mental illness, and confinement of American Indians in the United States since the nineteenth century is a significant topic in American history in need of exposure. Many Indians found themselves incarcerated in prisons or insane asylums for opposing government interests, or as a consequence of cultural misunderstandings or outright racism. William E. Farr’s work is an engaging narrative of the life of a Blood Indian, Spopee, detained in federal prison and an insane asylum for over thirty years, as well as the simultaneous confinement of the Blackfoot on a reservation in northwest Montana.

Farr argues that, had Spopee been white, the courts would not have found it necessary to try him, let alone convict him, for the murder of Charles Walmesley in 1879. Although experienced lawyers represented Spopee during his trial, he was unable to speak English and could not communicate with his counsel. Further, the “murder” may have been an act
of self-defense and probably occurred on the Alberta side of the U.S.-Canadian border. Despite this, the court found Spopee guilty and sent him to federal prison, where officials determined he was insane, leading to his transfer to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, an insane asylum in Washington D.C. Unable to communicate with the asylum staff, Spopee remained silent and undiagnosed. A Blackfoot delegation to Washington “discovered” Spopee in 1914, leading to his pardon and release. Upon his return to the Great Plains, he had difficulty coping with the extreme changes that had taken place and witnessing his peoples’ confinement on an ever-shrinking reservation.

Farr exhaustively researched the life of Spopee, and his analogy of Spopee’s incarceration to the confinement of Plains Indians on reservations is brilliant. Blackfoot Redemption might have benefited from a broader engagement with such works as Luana Ross’s Invent- ing the Savage: The Construction of Native American Criminality (1998) or the literature on the Canton Insane Asylum for American Indians or similar institutions. Spopee’s life is a perfect case study and an opportunity on the part of future scholars for examining the United States’ criminalization of Indianness and the “othering” of American Indians through the labels of insane or criminal. These colonially imposed institutions allowed Americans to prohibit Indian beliefs and behaviors they opposed.

Audiences of Farr’s Blackfoot Redemption will enjoy the enthralling account of Spopee’s life and Blackfoot history in the northwestern Great Plains.

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Conversations with Remarkable Native Americans.

This book records conversations with sixteen Native Americans who have made their mark in the arts, politics, and law, and who together encompass the breadth of North America. The book begins with an introduction by Deborah Madsen, professor of American literature and culture at the University of Geneva, who, with Ojibwe author Gerald Vizenor, edits the series Native Traces for SUNY Press. Central to the series is the concept of survivance, turning on its head the usual approach to Native Americans that presents them as marginalized and historicized. Survivance puts Native peoples center stage and focuses on the perpetuation of Native culture today and into the future.

The first chapter, by Joëlle Rostkowski, explicates the concept more fully. She is an anthropologist and ethnohistorian associated with the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris who has long been involved in American Indian rights through her work as a consultant at UNESCO. She writes about Deska-heh, a Haudenoasune (Iroquois) chief who in 1924 was the first Native American to address the League of Nations and to try to move the issue of Native rights onto the international scene. With the Red Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Native rights again became a topic at the United Nations, and finally, in 1977, an NGO conference was held on “Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations of the Americas.” The work of further conferences and working groups bore fruit in the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Central to the declara-