

Culture

Jamake HIGHWATER, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America*, New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981. 234 pp., \$17.50 (cloth)

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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

James F. PENDERGAST, *The Origin of Maple Sugar*, Syllogeus, 36, Ottawa, National Museums of Canada, National Museum of Natural Sciences, 1982. 80 pp.

By M.A. Shelvey
University of Western Ontario

James Pendergast synthesizes and interprets historical sources from 1536 to the present on the origin of maple sugar. His argument for the prehistoric origin of maple sugar stands upon, (a) an early report describing a quantity of sap collected ; (b) the centrality and ubiquity of the maple in ceremony and myth for Iroquoian and Algonquian speakers ; and (c) 17th Century learned European descriptions of the maple sugar process. In 1685 Royal Society members in London were given a short account of Canadian maple sugar making.

The author's "compulsion to compile a definitive body of data" began in 1973 when he encountered disagreement by describing a St. Lawrence Iroquois archaeological site as a prehistoric sugar camp. His essay usefully compiles references and interpretations in this old controversy.

The Jesuit historian, Father Charlevoix, provoked the question of origins in 1744 :

It is very probable the Indians who are perfectly well-acquainted with all the virtues of their plants, have at all times, as well as at this day, made constant use of this liquor sap. But it is certain, they were ignorant of the art of making sugar from it, which we have since learnt them.

His conclusion was taken up by others, including Lewis Henry Morgan, who thought European invention more plausible "from the want of suitable vessels among them [Iroquois] for boiling."

There is abundant ceramic evidence that the Indians did not need metal pots to bring maple sap to boiling point. James Pendergast's historical proof of the indigenous origin of maple sugar revolves around a neglected 1557 text by Franciscan Thevet which described a certain captain, probably Jacques Cartier, collecting "four or five large pots [of sap] in an hour". A quantity of maple sap left to freeze or evaporate would naturally render maple sugar so that, "there can be little doubt that those in the Canada region could not long have handled the

large quantities of sap described by Thevet as early as 1535 without learning to make sugar."

The author makes a distinction between written descriptions about the collection of sap and references to actual sugar making. By putting these together, along with traditional stories and archaeological findings, he makes a thorough statement for the indigenous origin of maple sugar.

Jamake HIGHWATER, *The Primal Mind : Vision and Reality in Indian America*, New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981. 234 pp., \$17.50 (cloth).

By Marjorie Halpin
University of British Columbia

In this book, Highwater presents himself as a new cultural mutant — the Intellectual Savage. "Mine was the first generation for whom the Western type of intelligence became a pervasive tool rather than a vehicle for assimilation and ethnic suicide" (p. 11). Born to a French Canadian Blackfoot mother and a non-traditional Eastern Cherokee father in northern Montana, Highwater has written some ten other books and novels on native art, dance, music, and ritual — in which the New Noble Savage emerges as the perennial outsider and keeper of the spiritual consciousness of the race. It is an audacious demonstration of cultural imperialism in reverse.

In *The Primal Mind*, Highwater ventures a generalized description of his mother's heritage in terms of a basic metaphysics of Indian reality — Image, Time, Place, Motion, Sound, Identity — which is generated out of the Native's common experience of *pure vision* :

Surely it is an experience almost entirely outside the focus of Western mentality. The intellectual finesse of scholars has been capable of naming it, but are people of the West in any way capable of really *knowing* the process by which this purity of vision and this intense awareness of things unto themselves become manifested in an artist and in his work of art (p. 59) ?

Unfortunately, "Those whose experience has been destroyed are inevitably faced with an urge to destroy" (p. 204), and the book unfolds as an attack

against “the repressive dominion of reason from the time of Plato onward” as “the ruptured mentality of the West... contrasts with the holistic worldview of primal peoples” (p. 156). Not surprisingly, the primal vision “operates far more in the way contemporary artists function as ‘aliens’ within the dominant society — people who are peculiarly and marvelously devoted to the evolution of a metaphysics called ‘art’ ” (p. 106).

This permits Highwater to speak of the primal mind’s pure vision in terms of “a set of metaphors out of the Western mentality that conveys something of the fundamental otherness of Indians” — and then to use *that* as “a point of departure for a much larger idea” :

It is a metaphor for a type of otherness that parallels the experience of many people born into the dominant society who feel intensely uncomfortable and alien. It is this condition of alienation during the last decades of the twentieth century that has motivated this book. There is “an alien” in all of us. There is an artist in all of us. Of this there is simply no question. The existence of a visionary aspect in every person is the basis for the supreme impact and pervasiveness of art (p. 15).

In order for the visionary artist to speak through the primal mind, Highwater invents “The Altamira Connection” — a perennial reservoir of spiritual consciousness preserved in primitive cultures, “persisting beyond the reach of the dominant cultures, which would surely subjugate or destroy them if they could do so” (p. 208). “Altamira represents that sacredness of place and that perennial reality of the now which primal people have always understood as the first principle of their existence” (p. 211). Now ascendant in the culture of male dominated post-industrial society as the vision of abused and outcast “nonwhites, females, gays, and unpopular groups” — it is claimed as “The ultimate irony of our era : those who have been the most utterly defeated have become the most influential” (p. 207).

In Highwater’s description, the primal mind reveals a “nature immediately experienced rather than dubiously abstracted” (p. 206). It operates in terms of an essential “*inclusivity* which I identify with the very heart of the primal world” (p. xvi). “It is a lesson learned through a vision of the unspeakable plurality that transforms the person of wisdom into the shape of all shapes — so that the powers within and around him may live together *like one being*” (p. 67). It is the perennial spiritual awareness of transformational vision,

... that peculiar kind of experience that is not a conscious capability of many people of the West. American Indians,

on the other hand, look at reality in a way that makes it possible for them to know something by turning into it (p. 61).

The flaw in the argument is that Highwater must locate the condition of transformational vision in Native society :

Among primal peoples there is an exquisite homogeneity and a wholeness that puts each tribal member in direct touch with his or her culture and with its carefully prescribed and perpetuated forms (p. 55).

In this context, the Native visionary is permitted his rightful role as extraordinary deviant person :

The extraordinary is generally condemned and loathed by deeply traditional people, but Indians regard the extraordinary person as special and awesome, gifted and sacred. They accept perversity as a significant reality. Among Western people the “freak” is a pitiful target of ridicule — the perfect embodiment of the disdain for oddity and the inclination to regard peculiarity and deformity as punishment for sin (p. 175).

However, in order to locate the contemporary avant-garde Native artist as an outsider vis-à-vis his own people, Highwater must create a “reactionary mentality that poses as traditionalism” (p. 178). In order to manifest the “daring and contrariness” of the eternal deviant who “side-stepped or openly defied tribal taboos”, a contaminating “mixture of quasi-Christian morality, quasi-Indian activism, and a decline in their firsthand experience in Native American customs” is required to account for “the compromises of middle America that have left many Indians touched by a degraded and stereotyped ‘pow-wow view’ of themselves” (p. 196).

It is thus through a process of double alienation that the spiritual superiority of the Native artist is asserted and his value acclaimed. While I do believe that some such myth underlies the growing market for Native American art, I regret that Highwater constructed his myth almost without reference to the literature of ethnography and thus deprived the primal mind of the opportunity to speak in its own voice.

Wolfgang JILEK, *Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today*, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., Cultures in Review Series, 1982. 182 pp., \$7.95 (paper).

By Marie-Françoise Guédon
University of British Columbia

This new publication is a welcome addition to the Northwest Coast Indian literature and to shamanic studies ; it should interest both anthro-