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Review of *Interpreting the Legacy: John Neihardt and "Black Elk Speaks"*

Dale Stover

Universit of Nebraska at Omaha, dstover@unomaha.edu

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Dale Stover

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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Interpreting the Legacy: John Neihardt and "Black Elk Speaks." By Brian Holloway. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2003. xiv + 220 pp. Photographs, line drawings, tables, annotated bibliography, index. \$27.95.

This volume represents a feisty defense of John Neihardt's literary role in crafting the classic presentation of the voice of a Lakota "holy man" in *Black Elk Speaks*. Holloway explicitly addresses a variety of criticisms leveled against Neihardt that in one way or another accuse him of supplanting Black Elk's voice with one resonating with the biases of his own cultural and religious vision. Holloway not only provides intelligent critiques of these

charges, but also takes the reader directly to the texts behind the published text, supplying a great many photocopied pages from Enid Neihardt's typed transcriptions of her stenographic notes recording Black Elk's 1931 narration to Neihardt and from Neihardt's hand-written manuscript of *Black Elk Speaks*, displaying the literary wrestling with specific words, phrasings, and editorial choices.

Besides refuting those who would criticize Neihardt for distorting Black Elk's voice, Holloway wishes to demonstrate particular elements of Neihardt's literary genius in bringing an oral indigenous voice to authentic expression in a way that is reader-friendly for the dominant culture. Holloway claims that *Black Elk Speaks* as a text is a poetic work and not an ethnographic effort. He stresses "the narrative art Neihardt used to turn the raw material of notes and remembrance" into a finished book by employing "poetic and editorial strategies to develop the art of *Black Elk Speaks*." In pressing this claim, Holloway denigrates the literary quality of the "stringy, digressive transcripts of Neihardt's interviews of Black Elk."

This highlighting of Neihardt's artistry risks divorcing the literary process from the original oral narrative which took place in a ritual context as empowered sacred utterance. In showing what he contends is Neihardt's poetic transformation of the transcript, Holloway asserts that "the consciousness of Neihardt and Black Elk merge in the truth of art." Clearly, Black Elk and Neihardt had mutual respect for each other's gifts of visionary understanding and visionary telling and writing, but the biculturalism of their relationship may be misconstrued by emphasizing the dominant culture's understanding of "art"—a category absent from, or alien to, indigenous cultures.

The author's title, his way of proceeding, and his scholarly objective are asymmetrical in that the role and character of Black Elk as Lakota are omitted or obscured in the effort to feature the role and literary genius of Neihardt. By stressing the literary dimension as the singular merit of *Black Elk Speaks*, Holloway leaves

the reader without guidance as to whether the result is in any way culturally relevant to contemporary Lakota people. Neither poets nor ethnographers—nor critics—may disregard the need to approach the realm of Lakota discourse with deliberate respect and to represent that discourse honestly to readers who are conditioned to see indigenous people as "the Other." By developing the Lakota side of this bicultural process, Holloway could have argued that, while Neihardt intentionally employed his literary gifts in writing *Black Elk Speaks*, he did not intend to produce "art" but to facilitate something categorically new in America—a respectful telling of religious truth purposefully addressed to the whole of humanity by an indigenous man, thereby trumping all constructions of "otherness."

DALE STOVER

Department of Philosophy and Religion
University of Nebraska at Omaha