

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles. By Nicolas G. Rosenthal.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/87b344rt>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 37(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Weibel-Orlando, Joan

**Publication Date**

2013-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

with what the editors of this volume describe as “the increasingly compelling consensus regarding the need for academic scholarship to take Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing and being seriously” (xxxii). People *have* transformative experiences, and encounters with the dead. And scholars who are committed to postcolonial scholarship that takes indigenous epistemology as valuable and authoritative need to take these experiences seriously. The editors do not advocate for the belief in ghosts, but they do insist “a new kind of humility is in order” (xxxiii).

*Suzanne Crawford O'Brien*  
Pacific Lutheran University

**Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles.** By Nicolas G. Rosenthal. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2012. 288 pages. \$39.95 cloth.

Nicolas G. Rosenthal theorizes that the concept of “Indian Country,” in place and use since the American colonial period, was reimagined in the twentieth century. His assertion is based upon the development, over the past century, of the vibrant, multitribal Native American community in Los Angeles—hence the subtitle of his book. However, Rosenthal quickly and additionally states that though his reference community is Los Angeles, the contemporary and expanded notion of Indian country now includes not only tribally held lands, but also all American cities with Native American populations that increased exponentially throughout the twentieth century. The author therefore presents historical community development processes of American Indian activities in Portland, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Chicago, and a dozen other US cities that have had visible and growing American Indian presences for a hundred years or more.

Rosenthal does modern American Indian history a major service by underscoring the fact that the movement of American Indians from tribal lands into urban centers actually did not begin in 1948, nor was the introduction of federally funded urban relocation programs in the 1950s the sole cause of that urban migration. Rather, and starting with world travel in various wild west shows, Native Americans had begun to leave their reservation homes in significant numbers to avail themselves of the economic opportunities urban centers offered by the end of the nineteenth century. Urban exposure increased in the early twentieth century because of the film industry and its manufacture and promotion of films about a mythic western frontier. Major movement to

urban centers increased mid-century and especially during World War II, with the nation's need for personnel to fill both military and manufacturing posts.

Rosenthal's book is about definitions and the processes of redefinition. Traditionally, core determinants of "Indianness" have included tribal identity, shared community, and, specifically, location. It is curious, then, that the author's understanding of the original meaning of the key term "Indian country" is assumed, and not explicated in the text. To be fair, earlier scholars who used the term *Indian country* in their book titles and texts, as for example, Matthiessen's 1984 *Indian Country* and Weibel-Orlando's 1991 *Indian Country, L.A.*, also did not define the term, but rather assumed a universal understanding of it. However, since *Reimagining Indian Country* is about the process by which a concept is defined and becomes redefined, some historical background as to the origins and initial definition of the term *Indian country* seems appropriate, even essential, and is missing here.

That information is easily located—a quick google of "Indian country" results in dozens of responses. According to Wikipedia in 2012, originally, the term referenced any territory beyond the frontier and inhabited primarily by Native Americans, whether colonial and/or yet to be appropriated by the US federal government; and, as Dictionary.com adds, especially hostile Indians. The Cornell University Law School nonprofit group Legal Information Institute states on its website that United States Code 18 USC 1151 provides the latest legal and federally accepted definition of Indian country:

Except as otherwise provided in sections 1154 and 1156 of this title, the term "Indian country," as used in this chapter, means a) all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government, notwithstanding the issuance of any patent, and including rights-of-way running through the reservation, b) all dependent Indian communities within the borders of the United States whether within the original or subsequently acquired territory thereof, and within or without the limits of a state, and c) all Indian allotments, the Indian titles to which have not been extinguished, including rights-of-way running through the same (<http://www.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/1151>).

That "Indian country" should have had such a legalistic, limiting, and federally imposed origin and meaning—but, contemporarily, has been appropriated by Native Americans and scholars of Native American life to describe an expanded social reality, one that has taken on significant psychosocial, cultural and encompassing meaning, as well as political and economic impact—is the social and conceptual phenomenon that captured Rosenthal's historical interest and imaginings.

When reading the Rosenthal text I found myself writing in my notes a number of times the word *ironic*. Why, I wondered, hadn't he underscored the

irony of Native American appropriation of the original imposed term Indian country to define a larger, essentially borderless, ethnic community of mind, identity, and practice? To his credit, Rosenthal, keen analyst that he is, does state on the last page of his conclusions that “Ironically, even as Indian people continue to become more urban, the reimagining of Indian Country seems to have taken several steps back” (168).

There is a further irony about the term Indian country. Rosenthal’s book was read and this review written during the week the 2012 Democratic National Convention aired on national television. I was struck by the consistency with which the phrase the middle class was mentioned in speech after supporting and nominating speech as well as the extent to which that convention’s major players elevated the term to iconic power. I thought it ironic that “middle class” had been almost equally elevated during the height of the federal government’s implementation of its Urban Indian Relocation programs. When I worked with members of the Los Angeles Native American community in the 1970s and 1980s I had not been made privy to the BIA’s Urban Indian Relocation Program’s orientation booklets and film presentations that had been designed to teach Indians arriving in urban centers for the first time how to act “middle class.” Therefore, Rosenthal’s descriptions in chapter 3 of *Reimagining Indian Country* of some of the contents of these instructional materials were revelations to me. By taking a look at pages 59 and 60 of chapter 3 one can see just how obvious and patronizing an exercise in social engineering the Urban Indian Relocation Program had been. At the time the federal government and the BIA had no intentions to extend or reimagine the locus of Indian country. Rather, it meant to “elevate” Native Americans into average, urban, American working- and middle-class citizens, and, thereby, reduce the numbers of Native Americans still living on and, thereby, availing themselves of the rights of entitlement owed them as residents of what the government continued to define as Indian country. It seems the federal government at the time simply had not considered that, given their viable numbers, American Indians would seek each other out, associate, and find reasons to and create mechanisms by which to reimagine, experience, perpetuate, and service its own ethnic community, even in urban spaces.

The absence of a definition for the book’s critical term *reimagining* is equally problematic. The gerund *imagining* found in standard dictionaries is generally defined as the mental process of delineating, portraying, describing, or picturing in one’s mind some concept. “Reimagining” is now used in diverse academic and government contexts, such as “Reimagining Cornell: Strategic Planning” ([www.cornell.edu](http://www.cornell.edu)) and “Reimagining Cleveland: Strategic Planning” ([reimaginingcleveland.org](http://reimaginingcleveland.org)). Essentially a mental process, who is it that has done or is doing the reimagining of the notion of Indian country? Certainly since the

1960s, scholars of American Indian history, culture, and lifestyles have ruminated (reimagined) and written about the sociocultural effects of major shifts in location of Native American populations. These scholars, certainly, would be a receptive and understanding audience of this book's thesis. Starting in the late 1960s, city, state, and federal government officials dedicated to providing social services to the many ethnic sub-communities within their midst had also reimagined their responsibility for, and reordered, both their social services and granting of funds to American Indians wherever they were located. Given the current retroactive mood of funding agencies at all levels of government, however, the notion of an expanded and deserving "Indian country" may not find its most sympathetic audiences here. Finally, Native American individuals who live on Indian-held lands or in nearby rural areas, or who have opted to live and, over time, helped to build some semblance of Indian community in their city of choice, must have reimagined that Indian country could mean not only a narrow, circumscribed, and federally imposed territorial location, but any place in which numbers of Native Americans have chosen to live.

However, Native Americans who have made both tribal lands and their urban experience into "Indian country" have done more than reimagine the concept. They have, for more than a century, appropriated and expanded their own image as citizens of Indian country through individual and collective group action. The power of this book is in the thoroughness with which Rosenthal demonstrates the concerted and continuing energy with which the American Indian community building took and continues to take place, not only in Los Angeles but also in urban centers throughout the United States.

Some issues need further exploration and explanation: Why does Rosenthal's in-depth reportage essentially end with the 1970s? Published in 2012, the author must have carried on his research during the last decade. In his final chapter, Rosenthal does discuss the troubled 1980s, the fiscal retrenchments of the 1990s, and the current and reduced circumstances of urban Indian programs in a summary fashion. However, these historical periods need greater coverage and interpretation. Perhaps Rosenthal can be persuaded to continue to gather information about the enfolding American Indian history of the past three decades and to write volume two of this important chronicle.

In chapter 6 Rosenthal chronicles the social turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s and the roles the American Indian Movement and Red Power played in making Native American issues known to the larger American public. What issues prompted governments at all levels of authority, beginning in the late 1960s, to fund the initiation of urban American Indian programs with such generosity? Were these appropriations initiated as a palliative given the rise of the general ethnic minority voice and power at the time? Did the Red Power and AIM occupations so intimidate government authorities that some sort of

special appropriations were seen as needed to keep the recently educated Indian rights advocates at bay? Additionally, how American Indians in urban spaces understood, appropriated and used (or did not use) the activists' message for their own benefit needs amplification. The intercommunications (negotiations) between the activists, Indians throughout Indian country, and government officials that led to the funding and development of the urban Indian services programs during this period also need further exploration and explication.

The reasons for the more recent shift (since the 1980s) from an earlier governmental perspective about urban Indian communities and the subsequent funding policies that had unwittingly helped to create those urban Indian communities also need further illumination. Given the 2012 presidential campaign dialectic about the rightness of increasing versus decreasing entitlement programs due to the current fragile state of the national economy, will the funding agencies at all levels of governmental authority continue to encompass American Indian urban communities as part of Indian country? And, as a corollary to that, will the rightness of extending Indian entitlements to existing urban Indian programs continue to be funded in the next decade? Or will governmental funding agencies' notion of Indian country, once again, be reimagined and, in the twenty-first century, survive only as originally and narrowly conceived? Rosenthal suggests that federal, state, local, and reservation-based tribal governments may have already begun this reimagining process (161–164).

Nonetheless, Rosenthal remains optimistic. He concludes that resilient American Indians in urban places will continue to find innovative ways to continue to build “social and cultural connections between Indians on reservations and cities and towns” (167–168). Finally, he asserts that “In the end, it is Indian people who have created an Indian Country reimagined; judging by the past 100 years of North American history, they will continue to do so, well into the twenty-first century.”

*Joan Weibel-Orlando, emerita*  
University of Southern California

**Skydancer (film).** By Katja Esson. Brooklyn: Penelope Pictures, 2011. 75 minutes.

An ethnic group, even an entire country, will sometimes privilege a skill within its culture to the point where it fuses with identity: the Javanese enjoy a global reputation for their dazzling batik cloths, the Kamba tribe of Kenya is renowned for ornate woodcarving, and in sports, Jamaicans have nearly