

## Culture



**Dara CULHANE SPECK, *An Error in Judgement. The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community*, Vancouver, Talon Books, 1987. 281 pages, \$12.95 (paper)**

John D. O'Neil

Volume 8, Number 1, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078803ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078803ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

O'Neil, J. (1988). Review of [Dara CULHANE SPECK, *An Error in Judgement. The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community*, Vancouver, Talon Books, 1987. 281 pages, \$12.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 8(1), 95–97.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1078803ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1988

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Dara Culhane SPECK, *An Error in Judgement. The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community*, Vancouver, Talon Books, 1987. 281 pages, \$12.95 (paper).

By John D. O'Neil  
University of Manitoba

Dara Culhane Speck has achieved two distinctions with the publication of her first book "An Error in Judgement: The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community". She has provided us with both an instant classic in Canadian Medical anthropology and established herself as a major intellect and role model among scholars concerned with Native issues in Canada. The fact that this book is based on her Honours Thesis and that she is just now preparing to conduct dissertation research for her Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of British Columbia, leaves us in eager anticipation for her future work.

"An Error in Judgement" is first of all the story of the death of Renee Smith, an 11 year old Kwakwaka'waku girl of the Nimpkish Band, living in Alert Bay on Cormorant Island off the British Columbia coast. As such, it is a compelling, compassionate, and critical examination of the events surrounding this little girl's death, and the impact these events have had on her family and community. But Culhane Speck's book is much more than this. It is also a detailed examination of the politics of Indian health care in Canada which clearly illustrates how health services in Native communities are structured by the historical conditions of colonialism and racism. It is further an original and forceful critique of medical institutions in Canada, and particularly of the political roles played by provincial medical associations and colleges, and federal and provincial ministries of health, in the maintenance and protection of class and professional interests. Finally, it is a reflexive, revealing and challenging portrayal of a young anthropologist committed to the interests of the people in a community where she lives and works.

The authority of the text derives from Culhane Speck's intimate involvement in community life. As a White woman married to an Indian man with two children, who has lived close to her husband's family in Alert Bay for nine years, Culhane Speck can defi-

nately claim to have "been there". The text also provides a detailed rendition of the public records of the various investigations into the "incident", which are supplemented with numerous interviews with the many participants.

The book begins with a description of the events surrounding the death of an 11 year old girl in St. Georges Hospital in Alert Bay, British Columbia. Renee Smith was admitted to hospital by her uncle on a Thursday complaining of severe abdominal pain, vomiting and diarrhea. She was attended by the local physician, and medicated orally with analgesics, antibiotics and anti-emetics. Her family rushed home from a vacation to maintain a 24 hour vigil at her bedside and pressured the physician unsuccessfully to send her to a hospital in Vancouver. Five day after being admitted, Renee died.

The attending physician failed to request an autopsy, failed to sign the death certificate, and failed to report the death to the R.C.M.P.; but requested the local mortician to prepare the body for burial immediately. As the mortician began the embalming process, he noticed scar tissue near the girl's vagina, subsequently explained as the result of an accident when the girl was seven, and, over the physician's objections, reported the case as a possible sexual assault to the R.C.M.P. Renee's uncle was detained for questioning and an autopsy was requested. A Vancouver pathologist reported that the girl died of severe generalized peritonitis (abdominal infection) resulting from a ruptured appendix, and could find no evidence whatsoever of sexual assault. Although the death rate from a ruptured appendix is currently less than one in ten thousand, the local Alert Bay coroner, a close friend of the attending physician, concluded the death was not accidental, unnatural or unexpected, and did not call for an inquest.

Initially, there was little public reaction to the incident. Despite an awareness in the Native community that this was not the first case of possible medical negligence, most people were hesitant to openly criticize the town's only source of medical assistance. The Band Council felt that unless the family initiated a protest, they could be accused of exploiting personal grief for political purposes. Culhane Speck's activist orientation, and fundamental role in the ensuing

events, emerge at this point. She is instrumental in developing petitions to the provincial Attorney-General and Minister of Health, calling for an inquest into Renee Smith's death. Renee's aunts are enlisted and the petitions soon carry the names of 80 percent of the Band Members. The rest of the book describes the inquiry process and examines its impact and relationship with the wider community.

Culhane Speck's principle argument is that the death, and the public controversy which followed, have their roots in the history of racism and colonial exploitation that have characterized Native/non-Native relationships in Canada. Alert Bay is described as a "typical" community where Natives are separated physically, but are nonetheless dependent upon the non-Native elite who control the town's political economy. Stereotypic attitudes are rooted in the social Darwinism of a frontier society which justified its exploitation of original inhabitants on the basis that they were inferior beings. Culhane Speck contends that these attitudes continue to prevail, albeit in more polite form, in interactions such as hospital admissions, nursing care, and medical treatment.

Central to her argument is the medical propensity to blame patients for negative treatment outcomes, a propensity which is exacerbated when the patient is Native. She cites a provincial medical committee report which characterizes Native patients as poor compliers, as having multiple ailments and poor general health (which confuses diagnosis), as failing to recognize early symptoms of illness, and as having a fatalistic acceptance of sickness and death. These general stereotypes are articulated continuously during the inquiry process as evidence that Renee Smith caused her own death.

Perhaps most significantly, "An Error in Judgment" situates health care professionals, institutions and organizations (and associated ideologies and practices) at the core of a political analysis of Native/non-Native relations. Culhane Speck argues: "Of all the institutions that existed in Alert Bay in 1979, the one that most exemplified, personified and perpetuated the historical, colonial structure of Alert Bay society, and the relationships which are supported by such a base, was St. George's Hospital" (p. 97). Strong words, but a necessary corrective to the prevailing tendency in much of the Canadian Native health literature to see the health care enterprise as benevolently responding to the damage caused by other social forces and institutions. Elsewhere, I

have also argued that the structure of Native health services is more often part of the problem than the solution, and Culhane Speck confirms this perspective (O'Neil 1986a, b; 1988).

The inquiry process is in fact a series of investigations, each of which raised expectations in the Native community that change would be forthcoming, but each of which only created more anger and frustration. The first investigation was a coroner's inquest which labelled Renee Smith's death as due to medical negligence on the part of Dr. Pickup, the attending physician. The jury went on to recommend a Medical College inquiry into Dr. Pickup's competence and a change in the hospital's structure to increase Native involvement in policy and administrative processes.

Although the Nimpkish Band Council responded to this judgement with resolutions calling for Dr. Pickup's resignation and changes in hospital administration, both the Hospital Board and the B.C. College of Physicians and Surgeons refused these requests. Reaction was angry and swift. The B.C. coroner was highly critical of the College's decision. The Nimpkish Band demanded an immediate and open public inquiry.

The B.C. Ministry of Health responded with a closed inquiry which the Native community threatened to boycott. The so-called "Ballam Inquiry" met briefly with the Hospital Board and the Band Council and pronounced that tensions would be eased if the Hospital Board and the Band Council pronounced that tensions would be eased if the Hospital changed its name to reflect "Indian culture", and a non-Native Anglican minister was appointed to "represent" Native interests to the Hospital.

The Native community was once again outraged, but little was accomplished. The story continues with almost unbelievable plot twists. There is another apparently negligent death of a little girl. A second physician arrives who wins the hearts of his Native clients, is subsequently discovered to be unlicensed, is arrested and commits suicide in his cell. Finally, David Crombie, the "tiny red Tory from Toronto", meets briefly with Board members and appoints an "Inquiry into Indian Health and Health Care in Alert Bay".

Although the Inquiry provided a comprehensive and sensitive investigation and a wide-ranging critique of Indian health care in Alert Bay, both the

B.C. Medical College and the Ministry of Health once again refused to act. The federal government did however, provide funds for a Health Clinic on the reserve staffed by another physician.

For those who are immersed in the study of Native health and health care in Canada, "An Error in Judgement" will be a gold mine of detailed information. For those less familiar with the topic, the book would benefit from more analysis interspersed with the narrative. Additional analytic chapters relating the events of Alert Bay to the wider medical anthropological and sociological literature would have strengthened the book. In Culhane Speck's defense however, the book is intended for a general readership. As well, the data is so detailed and carefully researched, that the scholarly-oriented readers could use the book for their own analytical or comparative purposes.

According to Culhane Speck, the original manuscript for the book used pseudonyms for most family and community members. After Renee Smith's family read the manuscript, they insisted that real names should be used. They apparently felt this was a "truthful" telling of her story, and did not wish to see the power of that story reduced through the use of pseudonyms.

I used this book as required reading for an undergraduate course offered through the Department of Native Studies on "Native Medicine and Health". Generally, this class is comprised of roughly fifty percent Native students (some pursuing health careers) and fifty percent non-Native health and social service professionals. The reaction to the book was overwhelmingly positive. The professional students were outraged that the events could occur, and were universally impressed by the need to understand wider historical and political factors in clinical work. The Native students were saddened; largely because the book forced them to confront memories of their own personal tragedies which had occurred in similar circumstances. As one student stated at the end of her book review; "So what else is new?" She intended this as a criticism of the book, that it merely described what most Native people from remote communities already know. But if the task of ethnography is to reflect our subjects experience in a way which they recognize, Data Culhane Speck has succeeded brilliantly.

"An Error in Judgement" is a book that should be required reading for everyone involved in Native health, including researchers, administrators, physi-

cians, nurses, C.H.R.'s and consumers. While some may be offended or angered by her analysis, and others saddened, no one will read this book casually. The book's bias is clearly and admittedly that of the native community; a bias that rarely appears in scholarly discussions of Native health problems.

#### References Cited:

- O'Neil, John D.  
1988 Self-Determination, Medical Ideology and Health Services in Inuit Communities. IN: G. Dacks and K. Coates (eds.), Northern Communities: Prospects for Empowerment. Edmonton: Boreal Institute.
- O'Neil, John D.  
1986 The Politics of Health in the Fourth World: A Northern Canadian Example. Human Organization 45(2):119-128.
- O'Neil, John D.  
1985 Observations on the Medicalization of Inuit Social Life. IN: R. Fortune (ed.), Circumpolar Health '84. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

---

James B. TWITCHELL, *Forbidden Partners: The Incest Taboo in Modern Culture*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1987. 311 pages, US \$24.95 (cloth).

By David Kettel  
University of Toronto

James Twitchell, a scholar of English literature, has written a book on the incest taboo which is unusual compared with the rest of the literature on this subject. His book analyzes representations and uses of incest as a theme in intellectual and popular literature from the late eighteenth century to the present, and to a lesser extent in visual media and advertising. It deserves serious attention. But having said this, I must point out that all but the preface, first two chapters and the appendix fall outside of the theoretical concerns of anthropology, the current interest of some anthropologists in literacy criticism notwithstanding. This is why this review concentrates on these sections of the book. This should not be taken as a suggestion that anthropologists will not enjoy the rest of Twitchell's book; quite the contrary, since it is a witty, insightful, elegantly written work.

In the sections of the book germane to anthropology, Twitchell discusses the 'expert' literature,