

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming. By Winona LaDuke.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6sr0874m>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 30(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Talbot, Steve

Publication Date

2006-03-01

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/>

Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming. By Winona LaDuke. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005. 294 pages. \$18.00 paper.

Recovering the Sacred by Winona LaDuke is an important new book in which she informs and immeasurably deepens our understanding and appreciation of “the Sacred” in Native American spiritual culture. LaDuke, who is Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe) and lives on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, is a leading environmentalist and two-time Green Party candidate for vice president of the United States.

The work is much more than a survey of American Indian religious issues. LaDuke proactively suggests that the Indian peoples must regain “the power of naming and claiming” that which is sacred to their respective cultures. The sacred, in her analysis, includes aspects of Native culture as diverse as certain mountains, indigenous deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), Anishinaabeg rice, and Nez Perce horses. It is “the relationship of peoples to their sacred lands, to relatives with fins or hooves, to the plant and animal foods that anchor a way of life” (12).

Compared to previous works on Native American religion, LaDuke forges new ground. Vine Deloria Jr. produced a classic indictment of Christianity in *God Is Red* (1973). Sam Gill wrote two short surveys of *Native American Religions* (1982) and *Traditions* (1983), both in the paradigm of Western social science. An English edition of Ake Hultkrantz’s *The Religions of the American Indians* (which includes Central America) came out in 1979. More recently, Lawrence Sullivan brought out an edited work, *Native Religions and Cultures of North America* (2000), which, although containing several significant contributions, is marred overall by the editor’s anthropological slant. It is *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, produced by the Navajo Community College (1977), that comes closer to what LaDuke is talking about. The sacred is not just a listing of ceremonies and beliefs, and it is not only something declared holy. The sacred is to know something more with the spirit than with the other senses. It is something shared, a collective experience, and lies at the heart of Indian culture.

In a series of readable essays, the author organizes her work into four parts, “Sacred Lands and Sacred Places,” “Ancestors, Images, and Our Lives,” “Seeds and Medicine,” and “Relatives,” all of which are inextricably linked to the concept of the Sacred in Native American culture. Within each part, she presents cases illustrating her thesis.

Part I documents the struggle to stop an international observatory from being built by the University of Arizona on Mount Graham, a holy place central to the Apache religion. Then LaDuke recounts the efforts by the Zuni and other Southwest Indian nations to preserve the “great Salt Mother” (Salt Lake). There is also an essay on the traditional Navajo and Hopi peoples’ opposition to the mineral “rape” of Black Mesa and depletion of its pristine water source, “the sacred water world.” It ends with the story of Klamath termination, restoration, and the Native peoples’ efforts to preserve their water rights, salmon, and bird life in the Klamath Basin and along the Klamath River. There are, of course, many sacred places in indigenous

America, but it is not necessary to list the entire inventory in order for the author to make her point.

Part 2 begins with the saga of Ishi, who became a zoo specimen in the early 1900s for anthropologists at the University of California museum in San Francisco. Ishi became the unfortunate victim of the anthropologist's specimen-collecting mania. At death, his body was dissected in violation of his Yahi people's religious customs and his brain secretly removed and then "forgotten" for eighty-three years as it lay in a specimen jar at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. The enactment of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) became the remedial legislation to address this issue. Yet as LaDuke points out, ten years after passage, only 10 percent of an estimated two hundred thousand Indian sacred remains have even been inventoried, let alone repatriated to their respective tribes and nations. "There are loopholes in NAGPRA so large, and the lack of enforcement so dire, that you can drive an entire collection through it," writes LaDuke (106).

The author also revisits "the killing fields" of Wounded Knee, site of the 1890 massacre, and links the theft of He Sapa, the sacred Black Hills of the Lakota, to the desecration of the remains and personal effects of the several hundred Ghost Dancers slain by the US military. Grisly collections of Wounded Knee "memorabilia," including body parts and religious paraphernalia, are still found in museums and private collections. These must be repatriated; the spirits of the dead still linger. LaDuke also describes the campaign to get the federal government to rescind the twenty-one Medals of Honor awarded by the US Army to soldiers who participated in the massacre. LaDuke reminds us (citing the example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa) that only through reconciliation can the spiritual wounds of the past be healed.

Also included in part 2 is an informative discussion of biopiracy where LaDuke examines ethical concerns regarding the Human Genome Diversity Project and its implications. Part 2 concludes with an essay on the spiritual violation represented by derogatory racial stereotypes found in sports team mascots (the Fighting Sioux) and commercial products (Crazy Horse Malt Liquor).

Part 3 tells the story of the recovery of traditional agriculture by the Cayuga, Mohawk, and Oneida communities. The "Three Sisters" (corn, beans, and squash) is the foundation of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) culture. A second essay concerns wild rice cultivation by the Anishinaabeg and the threats posed by commercial production, biopiracy, toxic contamination, and harmful water projects. The story of wild rice raises the issue of indigenous intellectual property rights. A concluding essay focuses on the recovery of traditional foods that heal. "The recovery of the people is tied to the recovery of food, since food itself is medicine: not only for the body, but for the soul, for the spiritual connection to history, ancestors, and the land" (210).

Part 4 includes the heartwarming stories of the recovery by the Nez Perce of their famous Appaloosa horses and the return of "namewag," the sturgeon, to the lake and river waters of the Anishinaabeg. The author ends this section,

and her book, with an analysis of climate change, in which she describes an indigenous project in wind generation designed to counteract the harmful effects of fossil fuel exploitation of the Native environment. "Tate," the wind, is "*wakan*" (sacred), so say the Lakota.

If there is anything to criticize about this important book, it might be the "sin of omission." On my own wish list would be an essay on Native Hawai'i. LaDuke wrote a sensitive and powerful chapter on Hawai'i in a previous book, *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* (1999), in which she describes the impact of the US military and tourist industry on the sacred Native Hawaiian environment. But this omission in no way detracts from her accomplishment in *Recovering the Sacred*. It is a gem of a book and an important contribution to indigenous intellectual thought.

Steve Talbot

Oregon State University

Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americans, 1880–1930. By Alan Trachtenberg. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005. 395 pages. \$30.00 cloth; \$17.00 paper.

In point of historical fact, Hiawatha was a cofounder of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy with Deganawida, The Peacemaker. As such, Hiawatha should be a major figure in US history. Many Americans today, however, know him solely as a mythic personage concocted by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in America's best-known long-narrative poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), a fiction based not even loosely on the actual person.

The factual Hiawatha's near-fatal collision with myth making is used by Alan Trachtenberg in *Shades of Hiawatha* to illustrate much about the general fictionalization of popular historical belief in the United States. Trachtenberg says that he deals "chiefly with ideas and images rather than with social or political history" (xi). Given the trashing that history has received at the hands of historical imagination, this gives him a wide territory in which to run.

The treatment afforded Hiawatha in historical imagination makes quite evident the author's assertion that, especially with regard to Native American history, many Americans' heads swim with fiction that often obscures fact. Less popular but more accurate than *The Song of Hiawatha*, remarks Trachtenberg, was Lewis Henry Morgan's *League of the Ho-de-no-saune, or Iroquois*, the first serious ethnographic study of the Haudenosaunee in the United States, which was published four years before Longfellow's work.

Hiawatha probably lived about the year 1000, while Trachtenberg's study sketches the idea of "the Indian" from 1855 through World War I, a time when a rapidly moving non-Indian frontier fed an intense demand for imaginary "Indians" against whom the taking of land could be justified. Thus, by the late nineteenth century, little remained in popular culture of Hiawatha, the cofounder of a strong and historically significant political confederacy. He might as well have been one of Buffalo Bill's sideshow Indians in his Wild West show.