

BOOK REVIEWS

All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life.

By Winona LaDuke. Boston: South End Press. 1999. vii, 241 pp.

Reviewed by: MICHALY-DROR SEGAL

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

A long silence swept across American Indian Country after the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The massacre of 1890 marked the end of the so-called Indian Wars and, for almost 80 years thereafter, the voices of American Indians have scarcely been heard in America's public discourse.

More often heard academic discourse about American Indians treats them more as extinct beings than vital social actors. American Indians have been studied through their artifacts, burial grounds and clothing as if they were a people of the past. Such academic treatment represents and supports a perceived reality in which dominant whites and subordinate reds are defined and kept in their relative roles. America's dominant legacy has historically ignored or rendered illegitimate or irrelevant American Indian histories and cultures to the extent that even today Indians, their sacred objects, and their very corpses, are not respected as their own.

Winona LaDuke's *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* is an important work in an alternative narrative that has been taking shape since the early 1970s. Unlike many of its predecessors in this alternative trend, it is an unapologetic, yet not angry, narrative. It focuses on the highly complex connections between Indian histories and environmental crises in the contemporary USA and the solutions to these problems that American Indian cultures can offer. LaDuke brings into her narrative a wide variety of elements from the fields of history, economics, globalization theory, Indian cultures and examples from government policies from the past and present. LaDuke's explanations are rooted in all of these domains yet, despite such eclecticism, they maintain a high level of lucidity and clarity. She brings in numbers, statistical data, graphs and maps with the same ease as she introduces the reader to tribal mythology and ancient Native teachings. LaDuke moves freely between these languages and makes them all equally legitimate as she develops an all-embracing new discourse.

The book is comprised of ten chapters, most of which are dedicated to case studies that demonstrate cultural-economic-historical processes. Chapter seven "Buffalo Nations, Buffalo Peoples" provides a good example. It is a discussion of how the slaughter of the buffalo and the promotion of the cattle industry effected the physical and social ecology of the great prairies. A smaller

number of chapters discuss how more overarching issues influenced Native People in several places. Chapter five, "Nuclear Waste: Dumping on the Indians", presents the relations between governmental nuclear waste management and Indian land and health.

The book's common thread is its emphasis on how aggressive colonialism and imperialism has destroyed Native communities and wreaked havoc on the global ecosystem. LaDuke explains how ancient traditional Native teachings resurface as relevant today, in the face of clear dangers to the places in which people live. The case of the buffalo is an interesting one as it deals with an animal that has become almost mythological. LaDuke explains how in the past the buffalo cultivated the prairie by living on it. For example, the shape of the buffalo's hooves and the way it walks help keep the prairie soil fertile by turning it over. Contrarily, cattle, an industry heavily subsidized by the government, tighten the soil as they march over the prairie. This shift from roaming buffalo to cattle ranches provides one reason for the devastating flood damage which occurred in this area in past years (pp. 143-148). LaDuke delves further into the cultural significance of the buffalo for the American Indian nations of the prairie and explains that they believe the buffalo to be their older brothers. Buffaloes, accordingly, comprise nation. LaDuke's analysis thereby sheds light on the sacred ceremonies involved in the relationship between native American peoples and the buffalo.

"Somewhere between the teachings of western science and those of the Native community there is some agreement on the state of the world" LaDuke writes in her concluding remarks (p. 197). The writer is an avid environmentalist as well as a Native advocate and her book represents the interconnectedness of these issues. LaDuke was Ralph Nader's running mate in the American Green Party in the 1996 presidential campaign, an act representing the will to become visible and work through the established system.

LaDuke gives the reader a unique open window into Native American ways in a natural voice. The name of the book, *All Our Relations*, is derived from the ancient Indian prayer and blessing of the same name, or in the Lakotah language *Metaquayassin*, a reminder that all things are related and all share one destiny: people, animals, plants, oceans and mountains. This perception goes hand in hand with the Western environmentalist vision of the globe as an "Earthship" traveling through space with all its inhabitants dependent on each other. LaDuke uses it to promote an environmentally conscious discussion rooted in Native cultures.

Despite its clear language and appeal to a wide audience, *All Our Relations* is a very American book. It takes for granted that the reader is well read in American Indian history and policy. Without understanding the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 – which is not explained in LaDuke's text – it is hard to follow the politics of the two Seminole groups discussed in chapter two. The complexity of American Indian politics indeed makes it quite difficult to embrace all relevant details in a coherent text. However, *All Our Relations* could

have benefited from a concise index of American policies relevant to Native Americans or at least to those mentioned in the text.

In 1983, Homi Bhabha¹ defined the post-colonial as "a social criticism that bears witness to those unequal processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once colonized comes to be framed in the west". Since the 1970s various criticisms that can be described ²as such have been gradually developing in the American Indian context. Interaction between Indian political activism, cultural renewal and the academic writing and teaching about them are creating and promoting counter hegemonic discourses about American Indians. Indian traditional ceremonies, some banned until 1978 and others delegitimized, are coming back, spreading across the United States and beyond. Pride in being Indian is replacing the deep shame that resulted from colonization. At the same time, pioneers of theories and research about American Indians are breaking away from the long-standing monolithic understanding of Indians as an extinct, or at best subjugated, people. Researchers and writers such as Duane Champagne, Ward Churchill, Vine Deloria, Jr., M. Annette Jaimes, Troy Johnson, Joane Nagel and others create and support narratives in which American Indian political activism, traditions, leadership and cultures are understood as significant human phenomena with important results and meaningful implications.

All Our Relations brings American Indian history up to date and holds great potential to *un-other* American Indians. Indian nations that are discussed in the book have been dealt with so far generally as mythological-historical cases. LaDuke represents them as real people who live in the present and have solutions for the future.

All Our Relations will benefit environmentalists with a Native focus or Natives with an environmentalist bent. Hopefully, it will become popular among greater circles just as should *Native American Postcolonial Psychology* (Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, 1995, New York: State University of New York Press) beyond mental health circles.

LaDuke's work is also a good addition to previous work on contemporary American Indians such as M. Annette Jaimes's edited volume from 1992, *The State of Native America*. It may be read as well as a complement to historical accounts of several Native cases through an environmentally conscious lens. *All Our Relations* goes beyond the anger of previous texts by narrating in a fresh, self aware voice and by moving past historical tragedies and present problems into how Native ways can be helpful to all in the future.

¹ Bhabha, H. (1983) The Other Question In Padmini, M. (ed.) (1996) *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, London: Arnold Publishers. pp. 37-54.