

Recovering the Sacred
The Power of Naming and Claiming

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Dedication

*Mii sa
Gi-mishoomisinaabaniig
gaye
Ayaanike bimaadizijig*

This America
has been a burden
of steel and mad
death,
but, look now,
there are flowers
and new grass
and a spring wind
rising
from Sand Creek.

—Simon Ortiz, *from Sand Creek*

What is Sacred?

How does a community heal itself from the ravages of the past? That is the question I asked in writing this book. I found an answer in the multifaceted process of recovering that which is “sacred.” This complex and intergenerational process is essential to our vitality as Indigenous peoples and ultimately as individuals. This book documents some of our community’s work to recover the sacred and to heal.

What qualifies something as sacred? That is a question asked in courtrooms and city council meetings across the country. Under consideration is the preservation or destruction of places like the Valley of the Chiefs in what is now eastern Montana and Medicine Lake in northern California, as well as the fate of skeletons and other artifacts mummified by collectors and held in museums against the will of their rightful inheritors. Debates on how the past is understood and what the future might bring have bearing on genetic research, reclamation of mining sites, reparations for broken treaties, and reconciliation between descendants of murderers and their victims. At stake is nothing less than the ecological integrity of the land base and the physical and social health of Native Americans throughout the continent. In the end there is no absence of irony: the integrity of what is sacred to Native Americans will be determined by the government that has been responsible for doing everything in its power to destroy Native American cultures.

Xenophobia and a deep fear of Native spiritual practices came to the Americas with the first Europeans. Papal law was the foundation of colonialism; the Church served as handmaiden to military, eco-

nomic, and spiritual genocide and domination. Centuries of papal bulls posited the supremacy of Christendom over all other beliefs, sanctified manifest destiny, and authorized even the most brutal practices of colonialism. Some of the most virulent and disgraceful manifestations of Christian dominance found expression in the conquest and colonization of the Americas.

Religious dominance became the centerpiece of early reservation policy as Native religious expression was outlawed in this country. To practice a traditional form of worship was to risk a death sentence for many peoples. The Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 occurred in large part because of the fear of the Ghost Dance Religion, which had spread throughout the American West. Hundreds of Native spiritual leaders were sent to the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians for their spiritual beliefs.¹

The history of religious colonialism, including the genocide perpetrated by the Catholic Church (particularly in Latin America), is a wound from which Native communities have not yet healed. The notion that non-Christian spiritual practices could have validity was entirely ignored or actively suppressed for centuries. So it was by necessity that Native spiritual practitioners went deep into the woods or into the heartland of their territory to keep up their traditions, always knowing that their job was to keep alive their teachers' instructions, and, hence, their way of life.

Native spiritual practices and Judeo-Christian traditions are based on very different paradigms. Native American rituals are frequently based on the reaffirmation of the relationship of humans to the Creation. Many of our oral traditions tell of the place of the "little brother" (the humans) in the larger Creation. Our gratitude for our part in Creation and for the gifts given to us by the Creator is continuously reinforced in Midewiwin lodges, Sundance ceremonies, world renewal ceremonies, and many others. Understanding the complexity of these belief systems is central to understanding the societies built on those spiritual foundations—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.²

Chris Peters, a Pohik-la from northern California and president of the Seventh Generation Fund, broadly defines Native spiritual practices as affirmation-based and characterizes Judeo-Christian faiths as commemorative.³ Judeo-Christian teachings and events frequently commemorate a set of historical events: Easter, Christmas, Passover, and Hannukah are examples. Vine Deloria, Jr., echoes this distinction:

Unlike the Mass or the Passover which both commemorate past historical religious events and which believers understand as also occurring in a timeless setting beyond the reach of the corruption of temporal processes, Native American religious practitioners are seeking to introduce a sense of order into the chaotic physical present as a prelude to experiencing the universal moment of complete fulfillment.⁴

The difference in the paradigms of these spiritual practices has, over time, become a source of great conflict in the Americas. Some 200 years after the U. S. Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion for most Americans, Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978 and President Carter signed it into law. Although the act contains worthy language that seems to reflect the founders' concepts of religious liberty, it has but a few teeth. The act states:

It shall be the policy of the United States to protect and preserve for American Indians their inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise the traditional religions of the American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut and native Hawaiians, including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonial and traditional rites.⁵

While the law ensured that Native people could hold many of their ceremonies, it did not protect the places where many of these rituals take place or the relatives and elements central to these ceremonies, such as salt from the sacred Salt Mother for the Zuni or salmon for the Nez Perce. The Religious Freedom Act was amplified by President Clinton's 1996 Executive Order 13007, for preservation of sacred sites: "In managing Federal lands, each executive branch

agency with statutory or administrative responsibility for the management of Federal lands shall...avoid adversely affecting the physical integrity of such sacred sites.”⁶

Those protections were applied to lands held by the federal government, not by private interests, although many sacred sites advocates have urged compliance by other landholders to the spirit and intent of the law. The Bush administration, however, has by and large ignored that executive order.⁷ Today, increasing numbers of sacred sites and all that embodies the sacred are threatened.

While Judeo-Christian sacred sites such as “the Holy Land” are recognized, the existence of other holy lands has been denied. There is a place on the shore of Lake Superior, or Gichi Gummi, where the Giant laid down to sleep. There is a place in Zuni’s alpine prairie to which the Salt Woman moved and hoped to rest. There is a place in the heart of Lakota territory where the people go to vision quest and remember the children who ascended from there to the sky to become the Pleiades. There is a place known as the Falls of a Woman’s Hair that is the epicenter of a salmon culture. And there is a mountain upon which the Anishinaabeg rested during their migration and from where they looked back to find their prophesized destination. The concept of “holy land” cannot be exclusive in a multi-cultural and multi-spiritual society, yet indeed it has been treated as such.

We have a problem of two separate spiritual paradigms and one dominant culture—make that a dominant culture with an immense appetite for natural resources. The animals, the trees and other plants, even the minerals under the ground and the water from the lakes and streams, all have been expropriated from Native American territories. Land taken from Native peoples either by force or the colonists’ law was the basis for an industrial infrastructure and now a standard of living that consumes a third of the world’s resources.

By the 1930s, Native territories had been reduced to about 4% of our original land base. More than 75% of our sacred sites have been removed from our care and jurisdiction.⁸ Native people must now request permission to use their own sacred sites and, more often than not, find that those sites are in danger of being desecrated or obliterated.

The challenge of attempting to maintain your spiritual practice in a new millennium is complicated by the destruction of that which you need for your ceremonial practice. The annihilation of 50 million buffalo in the Great Plains region by the beginning of the 20th century caused immense hardship for traditional spiritual practices of the region, especially since the *Pte Oyate*, the buffalo nation, is considered the older brother of the Lakota nation and of many other Indigenous cultures of the region. Similarly, the decimation of the salmon in northwest rivers like the Columbia and the Klamath, caused by dam projects, over-fishing, and water diversion, has resulted in great emotional, social, and spiritual devastation to the Yakama, Wasco, Umatilla, Nez Perce, and other peoples of the region. New efforts to domesticate, patent, and genetically modify wild rice similarly concern the Anishinaabeg people of the Great Lakes.

It is more than 500 years since the European invasion of North America and more than 200 years since the formation of the United States. Despite these centuries of spiritual challenges, Native people continue, as we have for centuries, to always express our thankfulness to Creation—in our prayers, our songs, and our understanding of the sacredness of the land.

Dr. Henrietta Mann is a Northern Cheyenne woman and chair of the Native American Studies Department at Montana State University. She reiterates the significance of the natural world to Native spiritual teaching:

Over the time we have been here, we have built cultural ways on and about this land. We have our own respected versions of how we came to be. These origin stories—that we emerged or fell from the sky or were brought forth—connect us to this land and establish our realities, our belief systems. We have spiritual responsibilities to renew the Earth and we do this through our ceremonies so that our Mother, the Earth, can continue to support us. Mutuality and respect are part of our tradition—give and take. Somewhere along the way, I hope people will learn that you can’t just take, that you have to give back to the land.⁹