

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately? By Harvey Arden.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0mj398f5>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Bolelli, Daniele

Publication Date

2005

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/>

poems, she / constructed them” (113). Correspondingly, like in some of his past collections, Louis addresses his wife, who is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, with melancholy and deep affection: “Dear love, dear sweet broken love” (13). Throughout the text she, Colleen, enters the poems and leaves them again, mirroring the dementia of her mind and the speaker’s preoccupation and mournfulness for her mental decay. His unrelenting love for her is the only real thing amidst all the manufactured, plastic, amalgamated, degrading, and unfair things he observes around him. He bemoans in “For an Indian Girl I Once Knew in My Stone-Shaded and Tumescant Past”:

Just give me
 your trembling hand to hold. Look there, the mute
 lilacs are budding. The lilacs darling, and my eternal
 blue love for you. (72)

Louis’s poetry is at its best when it conveys these moments. Because the sardonicism is set aside temporarily, the lines become hypergenuine and make one believe (again) with him in “ancient human magic” amid the “dying planet ‘America’” (21). So, when the speaker says, “Circle, circle, we’ll soon be fine, spinning / towards loving oblivion, Elysium, the ghost road, home” (125), in the last poem of the collection, “Ghost Dance Song for Colleen,” one invests in the renewing moment with the speaker. Louis’s words have the ability to mark survival and restore life.

Evil Corn mixes the mundane with the profound, the raunchy with the sacred. The collection takes an honest look at the author’s self-imposed exile to southwestern Minnesota, where the poet and his muse are left to write and teach at a small college, but this position is rendered neither nostalgically nor sexily; rather, it is filled with raw dreams and nightmares of everyday life. *Evil Corn* is packed from beginning to end, mimicking an uninhibited mind that moves ironically through an unduly engineered landscape. The collection leads the speaker and the reader through its cover’s field by putting flesh on the scarecrow-skeleton’s frame, by putting the blood back in poetry. Ultimately Adrian C. Louis, like many contemporary Native American poets, subverts tragedy with humor and finds solace in the spiritual and healing language delivered through creative expression.

Molly McGlennen

University of California, Davis

Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately? By Harvey Arden. Houston, TX: HYT Publishing, 2004. 220 pages. \$23.00 paperback.

The name of Leonard Peltier, the subject of this book, is very well known outside the ranks of American Indian studies scholars. Peltier, in fact, is the most famous Native American inmate to be incarcerated in the United States and was the presidential candidate at the 2004 elections for the Peace &

Freedom Party. Over the last thirty years countless people around the world—including public figures such as the Dalai Lama, South Africa's most famous political prisoner and former president Nelson Mandela, Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu, actor Robert Redford, and the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, among many others—have signed petitions for his release. Director Michael Apted's movie *Thunderheart* was partially inspired by his story, which has been faithfully portrayed in successful documentaries such as *Incident at Oglala* and *Warrior*. Currently Peltier is serving two consecutive life sentences for the 1975 murders of two FBI agents that occurred during a period of civil war on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The case that resulted in his conviction is particularly controversial since there is ample proof that during those years the FBI fabricated evidence against several American Indian Movement (AIM) members. The fact that in recent years the prosecutor acknowledged that the government does not know who actually killed the agents also serves to explain why many consider Peltier a political prisoner.

Harvey Arden, the author of *Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately?*, also worked with Peltier on *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* (1999). Arden, a staff writer for *National Geographic* magazine for twenty-three years, has authored and edited several other titles in American Indian studies. The most famous among them are *Wisdomkeepers: Meetings with Native American Spiritual Elders* (1990); *Noble Red Man* (1994), with Lakota elder Matthew King; and *White Buffalo Teachings* (2001), with Arvol Looking Horse, the keeper of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe sacred to the Lakota peoples.

In many ways *Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately?* stands to *Prison Writings* the way a DVD containing the special features stands to the actual movie. On several occasions, in fact, Arden shares with the reader the events "behind the scenes" that led to the creation of *Prison Writings*, from his first meetings with Peltier to the difficult road of finding a publisher despite Peltier's immense fame. According to Arden the political controversy surrounding Peltier's case scared many publishers away, and for this reason *Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately?* was published in a private edition.

Unlike *Prison Writings*, *Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately?* is not structured as a cohesive book, with a clear beginning and end. Rather, it is a collection of various writings by and about Peltier. For those who do not already know the basics of Peltier's life, the book may be problematic since it does not explain most events in detail and assumes some preexisting knowledge of the case on the part of the reader. *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* (1991), Peter Matthiessen's detailed analysis of the conflict between the FBI and the American Indian Movement, is almost a necessary prerequisite to understand this book. Clearly, the target audience for *Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately?* comprises those people already familiar with Peltier's case. As the title itself suggests, the purpose of the book is equally clear: to keep Peltier's name in the public consciousness and motivate his supporters to keep working for his freedom despite almost thirty years of setbacks.

Among the many kinds of documents contained in this book, Arden has collected pages from Peltier's diary, recent updates about Peltier's case, an

essay about the trial of Arlo Looking Cloud for the murder of AIM activist Anna Mae Aquash, a letter by Peltier about the death of his friend Robert Standing Deer Wilson, Peltier's famous pre-sentencing statement delivered at the Fargo trial in 1977, writings about recently deceased Lakota spiritual leaders such as Wallace Black Elk and Selo Black Crow, Peltier's political commentaries on contemporary events including the war in Iraq, and some information about Peltier's career as an artist along with eight color reproductions of his paintings.

One particularly interesting theme that emerges from Arden's writings is a comparison between the Jewish and the American Indian experience—something that had been briefly treated also by Jewish lawyer Kenneth Stern in his *Loud Hawk* (1994). Here Arden argues that his own sympathy for indigenous peoples may stem from the fact that—as a Jewish man—he knows what it means to be a victim of genocidal policies. Although this is not one of the main topics of the book, it is nonetheless interesting as it may provide a key to explaining why the vast majority of the lawyers who defended AIM members and many of AIM's non-Indian supporters were Jews. In comparing the Holocaust to the American Indian experience, Arden seems to follow what historian David Stannard forcibly argued in his *American Holocaust* (1992).

Somewhat surprising were the writings about recently deceased Lakota spiritual leader Wallace Black Elk, the author of *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota* (1991). The positive portrayal of Black Elk is surprising because despite the fact that Black Elk was one of AIM's spiritual leaders during the 1973 Wounded Knee occupation, he was later criticized by several factions within AIM for spending much of his time teaching non-Indians about Lakota culture. Arden's comments about eighty-four-year-old Black Elk leading a demonstration for Peltier in 2003 and enjoying the respect of the upper echelons of what remains of AIM seem to indicate that toward the end of his life Black Elk was fully reembraced by the organization. The beautiful essay written by AIM veteran Carter Camp to honor Black Elk after his death also confirms this.

As it may be imagined, Arden dedicates much attention to the controversy surrounding President Clinton's leaving office without pardoning Peltier. Arden provides the full response given by Clinton during an interview on Pacifica Radio's *Democracy Now* to a question regarding a possible pardon for Peltier. At the time, this declaration had given much hope to Peltier's supporters that Clinton intended to pardon Peltier. Arden follows up this quotation with the story of what happened afterward, from FBI agents marching on the White House in protest to South Dakota governor Bill Janklow visiting with Clinton in an effort to prevent the pardon. Arden's conclusion is that Clinton's fear of offending powerful enemies was the reason Peltier was not pardoned, a decision that has permanently tarnished Clinton's reputation among Peltier supporters.

Overall, not all the writings in the book share the same quality: some are highly informative historical documents, and some are powerful and well written, while others are much more superficial. Among the latter is the essay about what constitutes a political prisoner and the attached list of some

Indian inmates, whose cases are summarized too briefly to be of much use. Despite the book's limitations, however, any scholar of American Indian activism in general and anyone interested in the Peltier case in particular will find in *Have You Thought of Leonard Peltier Lately?* a great collection of primary sources about the most meaningful political case involving an American Indian activist in the modern-day United States.

Daniele Bolelli

California State University, Long Beach

Indians in Unexpected Places. By Philip J. Deloria. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. 300 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

In *Indians in Unexpected Places* Philip J. Deloria has crafted a brilliant book, deserving of the widest possible audience. An astute reader of contemporary discussions within and beyond American Indian studies, Deloria develops a sophisticated account of culture, identity, and power in terms approachable by scholars and general readers alike. He refuses familiar accounts of destruction, tradition, and dehumanization, opting instead to enliven a series of "secret histories" to expose the complexities and contradictions of Indianness, culture, and power. Specifically, he offers an engaging history that challenges dominant expectations of American Indians, the writing of history, and the juxtaposition of modernity and tradition in Indian Country.

Throughout *Indians in Unexpected Places* he unpacks what he dubs "expectations" of Indians and Indianness. Although seemingly simple, for Deloria the notion of expectations speaks of the complex interlockings of preconceptions and practices through which individuals and institutions figure and refigure what it means to be an Indian. Consequently, he endeavors to expose the ideological arrangements and social formations that shape the making, unmaking, and remaking of Indianness by Indians and non-Indians alike. He grounds his analysis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a sociohistorical moment paradoxically marked by great despair and inspired hope, a period in which indigenous peoples struggled to define themselves in spite of American colonialism and to seize new technologies to revitalize themselves and their communities. In this context Deloria not only probes non-Indian expectations of Native peoples but also details the lives American Indians actually lived.

After establishing his conceptual commitments and substantive preoccupations, Deloria offers five essays to explore these themes. They address, in turn, violence attributed to Native peoples and its ideological ramifications, representations of American Indians in silent film, sport, the place of technology in turn-of-the-century indigenous lives and popular (mis)constructions of them, and popular music and the sounds associated with or projected on and through Indianness. Each of the chapters introduces fascinating characters and intriguing stories forgotten, if not erased, by dominant ideas about American Indians and mainstream history, including the involvement of Luther Standing Bear, Princess Red Wing, and James Young Deer; a