

Madonna Swan—A Lakota Woman's Story. By Mark St. Pierre. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 224 pages. \$19.95 cloth.

Reviewing publications about one's own people and culture is a sometimes onerous but necessary task. If one is analytical and attempts to critique the publication, one is often accused of being jealous or envious. (In Lakota, the term is *nawizi*.) It is essential, however, for me to place this book in an anthropological and cultural context.

This book is one item in the burgeoning literature on Lakota women—literature that is completely variable in content, form, and representativeness. The book adds to the personal document data and presents a life history from the viewpoint of Madonna Swan Abdulla. It is interesting that the last married surname is deleted from the book's title. Perhaps this denotes an increased valuation on names that "sound Indian." It may also be a means of selling more books, or it may reflect the enhanced value of "being Indian" in the contemporary world.

Madonna Swan's narrative reflects the Lakota vernacular. She recounts her experiences of poverty, illness, and racism, and describes her attempts to maintain a life that often hung by a thread—psychologically and physically. Hers is a story of feminine adaptation and survival. Madonna (I shall use her first name) displays the courage, strength, and resiliency that, in my view, characterize many indigenous women in native North America.

Madonna's story closely fits the genre of two other recent books: Carolyn Reyer, *Cante Ohitika Win* (Brave-hearted Women) (University of South Dakota Press, 1991), and Mary Crow Dog with Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1990). Madonna's book complements the first but is superior to the latter, for the recounting of Madonna's life is expressly her own. Her perceptual screens are idiosyncratic to her life lived mostly on the Cheyenne River Reservation, where she now resides. She tells only what she wishes to disclose. Her story is evocative of many of her age-mates in the reservation locales of northern South Dakota. It presents an authenticity that is useful for teaching classes on native women, and it adds a comparative mode to the published lives of mainly Oglala women which heretofore have formed the basis of most books on Lakota/Dakota women. Unlike dual-authored books, such as Crow Dog's and Erdoes's, it is an original account, refreshing to read. One is not too concerned

about appropriation here, about whose voice is speaking or what is fact or fiction. Madonna selects these for us.

Although compiler Mark St. Pierre has rearranged the collected texts into a chronology buttressed by events and explanatory notes, it seems that he has not tampered with the essence of Madonna Swan's life story. Her narrative is lovely in parts, poignant in some aspects, painful in sections, and anger-provoking in others. Through it all, the courage of a Lakota woman illuminates her life.

First, Madonna's love for family—especially her mother and her younger brother—stresses the continuity of Lakota culture in the enduring framework of *tiospaye* (extended family, not clan). The poignancy of her childlessness, her long convalescence in sanatoria for tuberculosis, and her submission to lung surgery indicate bravery and a love of life despite all odds. Her pain is evident as she explains her resentment towards her father for not allowing her to attend her beloved maternal grandmother's funeral and as she discusses the dissolution of her parents' marriage. There is an underlying dynamic in this and other places that is not explored.

One is somewhat perturbed with the snobbery evidenced in the phrase "Unlike some folks, we all had our own beds and bedboards" (p. 17). Single beds are still not normative for most Lakota households in a society that is egalitarian in pervasive poverty but ongoing persistence. The anger we all feel as Indian women is evoked when Madonna tells of an attempted sexual assault by her male employer which reflects the attitudes of most *wasicu* (white European) males.

Madonna's life, as she presents it, evidences contrasts and commonalities with the Reyer collection of first-person vignettes by women on Pine Ridge Reservation. Through her accounting, Madonna's self-actualization and her fortitude and determination shine brightly. Her life story highlights themes of cultural continuity and adaptability and portrays native women as the producers of their own destiny.

Life histories have become very popular in contemporary studies of aboriginal peoples. There is a very significant and useful literature that presents the most efficacious ways of collecting, constructing, and analyzing personal documents. Unfortunately, St. Pierre seems unaware of these. There is no information about how he convinced Madonna Swan Abdulla to be so self-revelatory. To many Lakota and other native women, this exposure

might be an anathema. How did the interaction between a white male and a native woman produce such an intimate document? I am not suggesting any impropriety. My concern is with methodological considerations for other works. What was the role of the mediator? He mentions Lucy Swan, a highly respected Lakota woman. What, if any, reciprocity was involved?

The cultural interpretation in St. Pierre's notes is provoking. He imposes a stratified society (pp. 181, 196), indicating that Madonna comes from an "upper class" family. He locates Chilocco Boarding School in Oregon rather than Oklahoma. His designation of the Lakota word for the Blackfeet Lakota—*si sapa* for *Sihasapa*—and his facile explanation of the social organization of the seven bands of the Lakota are inexcusable. He attributes a matriarchal structure to a bilateral social organization where descent was counted on both paternal and maternal lines. This attribution plays into the currently emerging assumption that Lakota is a matriarchal society.

There are other errors. Essentially, one must give minimal cultural context for any native life history in order for the reader to comprehend the interplay of culture, values, and personality. The book could have been enriched further if St. Pierre had coalesced a reasonably accurate account of Lakota society. Lest this criticism detract from the essence of Madonna Swan's life story, I hasten to add that her words enrich our understanding of Lakota womanhood.

Beatrice Medicine

California State University, Northridge (retired)

Navajo Sandpainting: From Religious Act to Commercial Art. By Nancy J. Parezo. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1983. 251 pages. \$19.95 paper.

For half a millennium, Navajo medicine men have made ephemeral paintings on the floors of their ceremonial hogans. Using crushed minerals and different colored sands from the deserts and plains of New Mexico and Arizona, they depict stylized figures of Snake people, Eagle people, Corn people, Talking God, Changing Woman, and other beings of their pantheon of supernaturals, called *yei*. For less than half a century, Navajo sandpainters have made permanent sandpaintings for sale. Nancy Parezo investigates this transformation in her book: How can a ceremonial ritual