

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Indian Work: Language and Livelihood in Native American History. By Daniel H. Usner Jr.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5qx2v9wh>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Hyman, Colette A.

Publication Date

2009-09-01

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/>

plays in American Indian survival—and how contemporary Native music and musicians are important to acknowledge, listen to, and study.

Troutman, an assistant professor at the University of Louisiana–Lafayette and a musician, has dug deep into the archives of this era and availed himself of contemporary research, bringing to us stories and information that have been long overlooked or ignored. Troutman’s research and teaching interests include multiple facets of American Indian history as well as studies of race, culture, and music in the United States during the twentieth century. This work, his first book, is insightful, well documented, and will no doubt enrich our understanding about American Indian music and musicians. We can look forward to his new research on the cultural history of Hawaiian steel guitar.

Kimberli Lee

Michigan State University

Indian Work: Language and Livelihood in Native American History. By Daniel H. Usner Jr. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 200 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

In his new book, Daniel Usner uses the phrase *Indian work* with two different meanings. Most concretely, it refers to work performed by Native Americans, but it is also the term used in the late nineteenth century by philanthropists, government officials, and reformers to describe the work that they carried out for and with Indian people in order “to assimilate them into dominant European American society, culture, and values” (2). More generally, this manner of “Indian work” amounts to constructing certain images of Indians that ultimately, Usner argues, shape the real opportunities for Indians to work. “Indian work” as image making is thus far older than the use of the phrase; it is as old as the first accounts of North American indigenous peoples produced by Europeans. Through five case studies, Usner explores the relationship between the two realms of Indian work, synthesizing and critiquing, along the way, significant bodies of historical, ethnohistorical, and anthropological scholarship.

The five case studies selected for this study span the course of US history, beginning with the late-eighteenth-century ideas of Thomas Jefferson and others who ignored the evidence before their eyes in constructing an image of Native peoples that suited their vision of the new nation. Each case study highlights the remarkable ability of public officials, philanthropists, artists, and writers to construct their own versions of how Indians should earn their livelihood, none of which bore much resemblance to the realities of Native peoples’ lives. Because of the power of these Indian workers to publicize their views, in policy making, the press, visual arts, and literature, however, these misconstructions ended up shaping not only the general public’s assumptions about Indians but also affecting Indian peoples’ ability to make a living. At the same time, Usner demonstrates that Native peoples made their own responses to these images and used the opportunities created by “Indian workers,” as Usner calls them, to their benefit.

This interplay between image making and Indians' work is nowhere more evident in Usner's work than in his chapter on Choctaw women's basket making in post-Civil War Louisiana. Usner develops some of the themes he addresses in his 1998 study *American Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley* regarding Indians in New Orleans and visual and literary representations of Louisiana Indians during the nineteenth century. Although basket making had long been a part of Choctaw women's work, both for use and for trade, toward the end of the Civil War, Indian workers' "impulse to highlight both the quaintness and pathos of Louisiana Indians' movement on white society's margins" and increased attention from tourists, collectors, and anthropologists combined to create a new demand for Indian-made baskets in New Orleans, as well as in other parts of the United States (97). Although Indian workers who bought and publicized the fruits of Choctaw women's labors presented these women as passive characters too downtrodden and demoralized to do any other kind of work, Usner shows how Choctaw women seized this opportunity for income-generating work, which also allowed them to keep alive traditional labor and art.

Discourse about Native peoples and work not only defined avenues of work open to Indians but also shaped policy not directly or exclusively related to Native people, as Usner suggests in his chapter entitled "The Discourse over Poverty." He shows, for instance, how misrepresentations of Indians as backward and/or lazy became integrally woven into discussions of the "undeserving poor" and into US social welfare policy. At the same time, though, stereotypes associating Native peoples with undesirable and threatening behavior have led to the distortion of and ignorance about medical care, education, and other benefits provided to Native Americans by the federal government in accordance with its treaty responsibilities. Here as in other chapters, Usner reviews the relevant scholarly literature as he studies the historical developments. In this case, he delivers a sharp criticism of American social welfare history and American Indian history for the little attention they have devoted to the complex topic of poverty among Native Americans.

One of Usner's motivations for writing this book is to reclaim "Native American livelihood from . . . various layers of colonial language" in order to open the way for a more direct historical study of "Indian trade, Indian labor, Indian enterprise" (17). Ironically, *Indian Work* is most successful in this endeavor because of its own weaknesses: though proposing a balanced look at "language and livelihood in Native American history," as the book's subtitle would suggest, his attention to the former is far greater than to the latter. Through what he says about "livelihood," however, Usner suggests some general outlines for a history of Native American labor, an area that is beginning to receive attention in the field of Native American studies but remains woefully underrepresented in the field of labor history. A review of the programs of the North American Labor History Conference going back to 2004, for instance, yields one paper at the 2009 conference, one three-paper session at the 2006 meeting, and little more. Although such neglect might reflect the urban and industrial focus of the field, labor historians have, in recent years, given greater attention to agricultural, domestic, and service

work. What we learn from Usner is that Native people are present in all these occupations. At the same time, attention to labor in areas such as basketry, pottery, weaving, and beadwork would also expand the notion of “labor” as understood by historians of labor.

Building on Usner’s analyses, Native American labor history might begin with the work of Native women and men in the precontact and early contact periods that would include economic activity engendered by the increasing presence of Europeans and Euro-Americans, such as the fur trade. *Work*, here, could be conceptualized broadly to include activities involved in subsistence, commerce, and reproduction, as well as those deriving from diplomatic relations. The latter, in turn, would include not only the activities of the men directly engaging with European and Euro-American officials, but those of the women preparing, among other things, the feasts that appear in travelers’ accounts whenever explorers or officials appeared in a Native community.

In subsequent periods, warfare, removal from traditional homelands, and concentration on reservations all brought with them new kinds of labor: the work necessary to keep family members alive on forced marches and in captivity; the farming work imposed on Native men and the domestic chores imposed on Native women by missionaries and other agents of the US government; and the ranching, gardening, and farming developed on reservations. Native American labor history would cover the more traditional topics of labor history when examining the wage work sought by men and women off the reservation, in nearby communities and distant cities, in factories, in canneries, in mines, on plantations, in homes, in tourist attractions, and elsewhere. In the twentieth century, the establishment of tribal governments following the Indian Reorganization Act, the implementation of the American Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975, and the development of tribal casinos have created new opportunities for employment on reservations, where, in some cases, tribal governments have become the largest employer. Finally, as any study of Native American history must address the issues of citizenship and sovereignty, so must a labor history of Native America take into consideration how those key issues have shaped the experiences of Native Americans in the labor force and, for instance, in labor-related political activism.

Daniel Usner’s *Indian Work* also provides a valuable preliminary bibliography for this Native American labor history, and works-in-progress by Carol Williams and others about the labor history of Native women indicate that this field is growing. In terms of the primary sources for such a history, Usner also makes useful suggestions, though here it is as much by what he omits as by what he discusses. For instance, the chapter on the Iroquois reminds us that Indian leaders left their own marks on the documentary record, and his discussion of the different plants used by Choctaw women in making baskets points to the importance of material culture for studying the work of women and men who left few or no words describing their work.

At the same time, however, recent scholarship in Native American history by Waziyatawin Angela Wilson (*Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives*, 2005) and Jennifer Nez Denetdale (*Reclaiming Dine History*:

The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita, 2007) shows how historians can use oral traditions and oral histories when studying the histories of indigenous people. One wonders, therefore, how much more we could have learned about Indians' work in D. H. Lawrence's Santa Fe from oral histories conducted with members of the Pueblo communities of Northern New Mexico.

The breadth of empirical and theoretical issues addressed in *Indian Work* is exciting and inspiring. More important, however, are the questions that Daniel Usner raises in this book about existing scholarship and the directions that he suggests for further research.

Colette A. Hyman

Winona State University

The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890. By Rani-Henrik Andersson. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 437 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

In the 1880s, a religious revitalization movement called the Ghost Dance swept through the Plains tribes of North America. According to its prophet, a Paiute Indian called Wovoka, "the white people would disappear in a great earthquake, and only those Indians who believed in his [the prophet's] message would survive. Then they would live forever in a world of happiness where there would be no hunger or disease. To make this happen, the Indians need to dance a certain sacred dance" (x-xi). Although the movement emphasized religious transformation through peaceful means, white authorities panicked in the belief that the Ghost Dance would lead to another Indian war. The culmination of these tensions was the massacre of fleeing Ghost Dancers on 29 December 1890, at Wounded Knee Creek. As many as 370 Lakota Sioux Indians (including 250 women and children) were killed, and about fifty of the Indians survived the onslaught. The soldiers lost twenty-five dead and thirty-nine wounded, a number of them shot by their own men in the crossfire. The Lakota dead were stripped of "valuables" and their frozen bodies buried in a mass grave. Twenty-three Medals of Honor were awarded to members of the US Cavalry for their "heroic action" during the "battle of Wounded Knee."

Wounded Knee has remained strong in the Lakota tribal consciousness. Although not a sacred place in traditional Indian culture, the "killing fields of Wounded Knee" are held in deep reverence by the Lakota. The eminent Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. recounts a visit to Wounded Knee as his strongest boyhood memory. "The massacre was visibly etched in the minds of many of the older reservation people. . . . Many times, over the years, my father would point out survivors of the massacre, and people on the reservation always went out of their way to help them" (Alvin M. Josephy, *Red Power*, 1971, 238).

By the 1880s, the great victory over Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry by the Indians at Little Big Horn had been eclipsed