
Book Review

Elizabeth Hoover, *The River Is in Us: Fighting Toxics in a Mohawk Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 392 pp., \$112.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-5179-0302-2.

The environmental history of Akwesasne ('Land Where the Partridge Drums') is very complicated, but one that holds lessons for everyone involved with environmental justice. The narrative of this history, through the lenses of its people, is deftly handled by Elizabeth Hoover of Brown University in her book. Akwesasne is a Mohawk (Kanien'kehá:ka) Nation Territory that straddles the international border of Canada and the United States in northern New York State, and, as such, shares jurisdictions in two countries, two provinces, and one state. More importantly, the Mohawk are one of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, whose colonized name is Iroquois. Since the opening of the Saint Lawrence Seaway in the early 1950s, this Mohawk community has been under assault from large paper, auto, and aluminum manufacturers that took advantage of cheap energy and transportation on its banks. This resulted in the poisoning of this community due to elevated levels of PCBs and fluoride, as well as a host of other destructive chemicals. This important book tells the story of this assault and the Mohawk community's response—as well as their resilience and revitalization.

Hoover begins with the Haudenosaunee traditional values regarding the Natural World embedded in the 'Creation Story' (Tsi Kiontonhwentsion), which 'demonstrates the importance of women's bodies not only as the basis of human life but also the source of original foods' (p. viii); the 'Thanksgiving Address' or 'The Words that Come Before All Else' (Ohnen:ton Karihwatehkwen), which addresses beings of Creation upon which all life depends; the 'Great Law of Peace' (Kaianerekowa), which was given to the Haudenosaunee by the Peacemaker over a thousand years ago to provide the political and spiritual structure of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy; and 'One Dish, One Spoon', the Haudenosaunee understanding that there is one earth that we all must share and which is encoded in a wampum belt. Guided by these cultural principles, the Mohawk have managed to navigate the environmental destruction brought to them by modern progress.

Hoover's commitments to environmental justice, de-colonizing methodologies, and promoting Indigenous values are plainly articulated in her introduction. Her intention is to bring forward the views of Mohawk people like Katsi Cook and clanmother Louise McDonald at Akwesasne throughout her narrative. As such she maps out a unique methodology that fills in the gaps between scientific discussions of environmental destruction and the Mohawk people on the ground who have to live with the

consequences of a toxic environment. This is not a story of victimhood, however, but one of a community carefully taking matters into their own hands for their own 'survival'.

Chapter 1 is a descriptive ride through Akwesasne territory. Having been a frequent visitor myself over the last 30 years (my wife's father grew up there before the Seaway), I thought this was a remarkably simple, yet effective device in orienting the reader to Akwesasne. It is also an exploration of the daily challenges of living in the northern borderlands. As the water and land become more toxic there has been a subsequent shift in work and the community's relationship with the river. Traveling from Hogansburg to St Regis one can cross the international border between the United States and Canada without realizing it. A smuggling economy, led by a warrior faction (alcohol, cigarettes, people), has supplanted a traditional subsistence economy of fishing and farming.

Environmental studies on the effects of pollutants on Mohawk lands started in the early 1970s. While this was seen as progress in the environmental science community, residents of Akwesasne were concerned that they should get these reports in a timely manner in order for them to be useful. Chapter 2 describes this struggle between an unhurried scientific methodology and the urgent needs of Mohawk people, particularly mothers who were concerned about the health of their children. Scientists work slowly to gather evidence and try to avoid misrepresenting their findings. People who are adversely impacted by heavy industrial pollutants, and who are committed to staying on their lands, are desperate for information immediately. This tension led to the need for community-based participatory research (CBPR). As research progressed, and samples of mother's milk were required, the Mohawk people gradually took control of the research process. Scientists from SUNY supported these efforts, and it was the Mohawks who supplied the data. The Akwesasne Environmental Task Force and other community-based entities were empowered through this process to gather data and then report it back to the community in a timely fashion. In their matrilineal society, women are the givers of life and, following their values, they were very concerned that they get the information they needed to nurture future generations. Hoover's interviews with non-Haudenosaunee scientists and Haudenosaunee community members about advancing the CBPR model are particularly helpful in Chapters 2-4.

In Chapter 4 Hoover expands her analysis. This study demonstrates that illness is not confined to an individual human body but connected with cultural transformations in relationship to the land. The Mohawks of Akwesasne are very concerned with their survival, not just personally but as a nation. They have a basic distrust of governmental institutions, including universities. Along with the Seneca Nation, the Mohawk is considered the 'elder brother' of the Six Nation Haudenosaunee Confederacy and have, therefore, been signatories to centuries-old treaties with European people. Increased toxicity of land and water means the loss of traditional foodways and a more sedentary lifestyle, which results in more fast-food consumption and elevated risk of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. There is an ongoing concerted effort by Mohawks to turn back toward traditional farming, eating, and fishing practices. This is aligned with a resurgence of language-learning and ceremonial practices.

In the end this book is a much-needed study of the ongoing survival and resurgence of an Indigenous community and the scientists who assist that struggle. It is a survey of a developing community-based participatory research methodology whose

orientation is toward environmental justice. Akwesasne is a unique test-case for other communities where environmental racism and ongoing neo-colonial practices of resource extraction continue to erase Indigenous peoples. In short, this book is an exquisite example of best practices and expresses a deep and abiding respect for the natural world and the people who care for it.

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