
Book Review

Dina Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 212 pp., \$25.95 (hbk), ISBN: 9780807073780.

Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 310 pp., \$26.95 (hbk), ISBN: 9781786636737.

The Standing Rock (aka #NoDAPL) protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline was historic in numerous regards, including for the ways religious claims and actions undergirded and overarched the nearly year-long event (April 2016–February 2017). Having visited the camps twice in the autumn of 2016, I can attest firsthand to the vitality of the movement and its religious energy. Scholars of religion and nature have a great deal to learn from the Standing Rock phenomenon, both in terms of what took place but also by way of the ongoing ramifications of it for Indigenous and environmental movements elsewhere. Additionally, the movement challenges scholars of religion to think in fresh ways about the intersection of religious traditions and protest contexts, especially with reference to the ways longstanding ritual traditions are invoked and refashioned in such settings for the explicit purpose of shaping the comportment of individuals and the collectivity. As was intoned repeatedly at Standing Rock, the movement itself was ‘ceremony’. This was meant in a specific sense—every day unfolded by way of various ritual moments—and in a general sense insofar as the camp itself was understood to be a ceremonial frame that demanded appropriate behavior. Such sacred framing made all the difference in terms of the sustainability of the camps, fostering a collective sense of purpose and purity, and it established the Protectors on the moral and representational high ground vis-à-vis the pipeline and its advocates, not least of all the state (Johnson and Kraft 2017). What can we learn from such settings?

Significant contributions to helping us understand Standing Rock have been made by Dina Gilio-Whitaker and Nick Estes, whose books are the subject of this review. It should be noted up front that neither book was written for a religious studies audience or even for a strictly academic audience. These are popular press books for a broad audience. This is part of what makes them so informative, frankly. Gilio-Whitaker and Estes, while academically trained, are not beholden to narrowly framed academic debates or jargon habits that drain prose of life. These are very readable books that would be fantastic in classroom settings at a range of levels. Another observation should be made explicit: neither book is only about Standing Rock, at least not in a straightforward sense. Rather, the respective books draw attention to

Standing Rock as a focusing device and in doing so enable us to see the movement in ways we might not have otherwise. Specifically, *As Long as Grass Grows* is set in two frames: a broad historical narrative that helps readers fathom the ramifications of environmental injustice as an ongoing facet of settler colonialism, and a contemporary frame that enables Gilio-Whitaker to compare Standing Rock with other recent events and movements that have pursued environmental justice (EJ) for Indigenous communities. *Our History is the Future*, by contrast, is cast by means of a deep historical frame set in the specific locus of the Standing Rock reservation, which provides Estes a means to chart in a compelling way how a range of historical forces and vectors led up to the #NoDAPL moment. Both approaches yield considerable insights about the movement and the endurance, creativity, and future-oriented religious visions across the contexts they survey. I strongly recommend both books and urge reading them together in order to benefit from their complementary contributions.¹ In the remaining space of this review, I will treat each book separately, with special attention to how religion is addressed in each.

As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock does not, on the face of it, centrally address 'religion'. However, if we broaden our view of religion to include lifeways and the systems of reciprocity and responsibility they entail, including to the non-human world, then we see that Gilio-Whitaker's book tells powerful stories about Indigenous religious struggles. This is particularly true with regard to her many examples that pertain to food, water, and medicine. These are Indigenous *religious* concerns, as are caring for ancestral places and cultivating contemporary sovereignty, insofar as these acts define peoplehood over and against forces of erasure. Gilio-Whitaker helps readers make such connections through her various examples, including the case of the Genga and Panhe sites in California, struggles over the sanctity of the San Francisco Peaks, and of course Standing Rock itself. Unpacking these examples among others, Gilio-Whitaker flags the ways Indigenous religious concerns are at turns supported, ignored, missed, or even challenged by non-Indigenous activists in the EJ movement, including examples of the latter with regard to Makah whaling and Timbisha Shoshone land-management practices. This story is told most fully with regard to the camp context at Standing Rock with attention to gendered ritual contexts and modes of comportment relative to them. Gilio-Whitaker might have widened the aperture of her analysis of rituals in the camps to probe other dynamics of inclusion and exclusion along lines of locality, age, and class, for example. The story she tells of Indigenous-ally relationships would be enhanced by a more sustained focus on the micro-nuances of such fraught settings and the interactions they entail.

As Long as Grass Grows concludes on a forward-looking note with a discussion of recent strategies and mechanisms that may enable better futures, such as invoking the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007), which signals a paradigm shift away from mere consultation to an ideal of free, prior, and informed Indigenous consent. Gesturing in such a direction, Gilio-Whitaker's message is clearly political. How could it not be? The issues she addresses are profoundly urgent for Indigenous communities, and the consequences for them—and the rest of us—are so

1. An additional resource for understanding the #NoDAPL movement is the #StandingRockSyllabus project: <https://nycstandwithstandingrock.wordpress.com/standingrocksyllabus/>.

stark as to require new models of engagement and new visions for collective planetary care. In her words, ‘effective partnerships with allies in the environmental movement will provide the best defense for the collective well-being of the environment and future generations of all Americans, Native and non-Native alike. In the long run, environmental justice for American Indians is environmental justice for everyone...and for the Earth herself’ (p. 162). In the end, I’m not certain that such a message will persuade unsympathetic audiences. But for those of us who share Gilio-Whitaker’s baseline worries and hopes, she offers a Standing Rock-oriented framework for better understanding living Indigenous traditions and how to connect the dots from the #NoDAPL camps to reach back in time and across Indigenous spaces. An important contribution of the book is found in its message that religious freedom protections have routinely and disastrously failed Indigenous peoples and that, rather than abandoning the quest to protect sacred sites and practices, Indigenous communities are increasingly seeking alternative legal strategies and new allies. For a forthcoming and richly detailed account of such shifts in trajectory, I strongly recommend Michael McNally’s forthcoming book, *Defend the Sacred: Native American Religious Freedom beyond the First Amendment*.

At over 300 pages, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, is the longer and more detailed book, including with regard to religion. Discussions of prophecy, dances, ceremony, and religious struggles configure the book. Estes is a gifted storyteller. He deftly moves across sweeps of time, frequently using a religious lens to do so. The pattern is consistent, but I found it productively jarring in each instance. Beginning with Black Elk, the Ghost Dance, and other well-known points of entry, Estes builds discussions that dig deep into Lakota and Dakota histories and frequently outward to broader contexts, including the sordid history of settler colonialism. He then moves forward to Standing Rock, showing in riveting ways that these histories are living and unfolding. In his account, the #NoDAPL movement was not merely an occasion for reconnection to *canupa* (pipe) traditions, a venue for the restating of prophetic themes, and a place to reconstruct Indigenous values of sharing and mutual care. It is the ‘re’ that misses the mark. In place of *reconnection*, *restating*, and *reconstructing*, Estes makes a compelling case that these Indigenous modes of being—religious and otherwise—stand in an ongoing, future-oriented tradition. Estes’s vivid prose and consistently lucid framing make the case for the *continuity* of Indigeneity. Along the way, he provides a nitty-gritty history of various colonial episodes, including exploration, the near extermination of buffalo, mining, disastrous government policies designed to constrain and limit Native American lifeways and sovereignty, and near-term histories such as the Pick-Sloan dam projects that led finally to the events at Standing Rock. Telling this history, Estes also develops a powerful account of the Indigenous resistance movements, especially in the past century.

Along the way, and more so than Gilio-Whitaker, Estes gives a sometimes detailed account of the #NoDAPL movement, both at the level of an overview of circumstance and politics that conduced to it and with regard to telling micro-details about camp life. Thus, for readers who are seeking direct information about #NoDAPL, this is the more useful book. But, again, I strongly suggest reading them together. Insofar as I detect any shortcomings of *Our History is the Future*, these are minor and include occasionally odd characterizations, such as Geneva being a ‘quaint mountain town’ (p. 201) or James Mooney being an ‘armchair ethnographer’, a statement that misses

his considerable if problematic fieldwork and his role as an employee of the Bureau of Ethnology (p. 124). Another criticism is that he is sometimes quick to frame matters in an overly rigid manner, stating, for example, that with regard to federal Indian law, ‘the arc of the Western moral universe never bends towards Indigenous justice’ (p. 230). While fully appreciating his skepticism, those of us who work in repatriation contexts, for example, might wish for at least a ray of optimism to be reflected with regard to the very real and meaningful history of the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act* (NAGPRA 1990), among other positive developments in recent decades.

Estes, like Gilio-Whitaker, adopts a staunchly political voice, which to my ears sounds just right in this context. But even so, he borders on shrill at times, which might turn off readers who don’t already share his perspective. For example, he closes thus:

What does the earth want from us? Mni Wiconi—water is life—exists outside of the logic of capitalism. Whereas past revolutionary struggles have strived for the emancipation of labor from capital, we are challenged not just to imagine, but to demand the emancipation of earth from capital. For the Earth to live, capitalism must die. (p. 257)

Stark framing aside, if one follows Estes from page to page, his sense of urgency and ultimacy can certainly be appreciated. Furthermore, as he describes so well, the camps of Standing Rock constituted an exemplary space that stands outside of capitalist and settler colonial influences—places of sharing, collective deliberation, and future-oriented religious action that include all the infrastructure necessary to care for the community, including education and healthcare, and led in many instances by women.

Estes’s account has strong resonances with the 2019 protest on Mauna Kea, where similar communal and religious dynamics are in play with regard to the anti-TMT movement. Every day on the *mauna* includes hours of formal ceremony and training in appropriate ritual comportment, very much in the Standing Rock model; indeed, a number of key Standing Rock figures having visited the encampment and *mauna*, including LaDonna Bravebull Allard, who helped found the #NoDAPL movement, and Arvol Looking Horse, a Lakota religious leader. Standing Rock, in this sense, has an immediate and discernable afterlife. To my mind, this is one of the most powerful upshots of Standing Rock—the movement manifests Indigenous engagement across and beyond home territories, fostering a trans-local Indigenous community of care for the planet. Scholars of religion have a great deal to learn from how such connections are being forged, sustained, and expanded, for here we have a real-time case of religious formation in action that has consequences for all of us.

Continuing the comparison with Mauna Kea, I will close with a brief reflection on how Estes’s assessment of Standing Rock rings true with my sense of what is happening in Hawai’i.² He writes, quoting David Archambault, ‘Perhaps only in

2. For a contemporary account of the events on Mauna Kea, see ‘The Abusable Past: Mauna Kea’, a forum in *Radical History Review*. Online: <https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/?cat=196>. For important background on the sacred status of Mauna Kea, see Brown 2016.

North Dakota, where oil tycoons wine and dine elected officials, and where the governor, Jack Dalrymple, serves as an adviser to the Trump campaign, would state and county governments act as the armed enforcement for corporate interests' (p. 48). Estes continues quoting Archambault, 'In recent weeks, the state has militarized my reservation, with roadblocks and license-plate checks, low-flying aircraft and racial profiling of Indians' (p. 48). The comparative resonance with Mauna Kea is striking, as others have observed, where protectors (*kia`i*) are experiencing heightened surveillance, emergency declarations from the state, and threats of intensive multi-jurisdictional force. In Hawai`i, state politics are markedly more 'liberal' than in North Dakota, a vast ocean separates the islands from continental interests, and the project in question is not a pipeline. And yet, even with these seemingly critical variables changed, the scene is strikingly similar, with bedrock features exposed: an incapacity to fathom Indigenous presence in any serious way, especially with regard to future-oriented claims advanced through religiously inflected discourses of people and nationhood.

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