
Race, Religion, and Land in *The Gods of Indian Country*

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In her book *The Story of Radio Mind*, Pamela Klassen retells an exchange between Canadian government officials and an unnamed Gitksan elder in northwest British Columbia.¹ The officials insisted that the Indigenous community was on Canadian land. To which the elder replied, “If this is your land, where are your stories?” Klassen remarks that stories and land restitution “must be at the heart of any attempt to take responsibility for and to remedy the ways that North America came to be through the theft of Indigenous lands.”²

Jennifer Graber’s book *The Gods of Indian Country* is one such story that can help take responsibility for and remedy one of the causes of dispossession.³ Graber tells of federal and religious strategies from 1803 to 1903 to assimilate Kiowa people. A central contribution of her story is a description of the role of race and religion in determining national belonging. While African slaves’ racial otherness was construed as insurmountable for citizenship, Indigenous people were racialized differently; they could become American through cultural conversion. Graber reveals how Christians were central agents of the attempt to absorb Indigenous communities into American culture.

Graber also demonstrates that at the heart of this process has been land (i.e., territory). Rather than discuss land as something passively encountered—from which one migrates, on which one draws borders, or to which one belongs—the through-line of Graber’s story is land as the fundamental broker to Indigenous-settler relations. Graber makes two arguments: first, that religion was used

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1 Pamela E. Klassen, *The Story of Radio Mind: A Missionary’s Journey on Indigenous Land* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). Klassen is quoting from J. Edward Chamberlin, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2004).

2 Klassen, *Radio Mind*, 7.

3 Jennifer Graber, *The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

as a means for land acquisition and cultural transformation (which is a polite way of saying dispossession and cultural genocide); second, that Indigenous peoples—specifically Kiowa in her narrative—used “religion” to enact and protect their sovereignty as a defense against these efforts.

To understand both the formation of American land as we know it today and nineteenth-century American religious history, we must look to Indigenous peoples. Typically, the history of land and religion has placed settlers at the center and Indigenous peoples at the margins; Graber instead places Indigenous people and their territory at the center to retell this history.

The specific story Graber tells is how Quakers and other Christian “friends of the Indian” participated in this imperial project of land acquisition and Indigenous assimilation through activities geared toward making the place and people amenable to government aims and policies. The political background, of course, is the forced removal of Indigenous people. Graber’s story, though, also calls attention to figures like Jedidiah Morse—a geographer and minister who outlined what a “friend of the Indian” consisted of. Graber quotes Morse, who described Indigenous people as “neglected and oppressed” and who argued it was therefore the responsibility of Americans—specifically Christian Americans—to improve Indigenous communities for the benefit of the entire nation. The polemical context for defining friendship was forced removal. Friendship came to be defined through arguments and protests against Jackson’s Indian Removal Act. Both Jackson and “friends of the Indian” claimed to be acting out of humanitarian motivations. While friends objected to removal, they nevertheless shared the same vision for political and religious organization of the place referred to as Indian Territory.

It is on this point I want to make two observations intended both to show how the story Graber tells is helpful for contemporary efforts of decolonization and to move the conversation forward. First, by foregrounding the good intentions and seemingly charitable vision of both political and religious colonial agents, Graber analyzes the complexity of colonial powers to see the various ways people fit in. This capacity is a good reason to read her book in a Mennonite context; we settler Mennonites have a tendency to hold on to aspects of our identity and history so as to disassociate ourselves from colonialism. But this can only be achieved when the account of colonialism in mind is overly simplistic. The more complex the account, the more we discern just how capacious colonialism is. In other words, recognizing how pervasive colonialism is disabuses us from tendencies of disassociation and leads to acknowledging that we fit into that narrative, we have a part we play.

I am left wondering: where does Graber and her scholarship fit in the narrative of colonialism? More reflection on her positionality woven throughout the book would have helped locate Graber’s work within the current flows of colonialism and efforts of decolonization. How is her positionality reflected

and brought out or changed through her research—telling the stories, looking through the ledgers and calendars? Graber mentions her relations, but they only appear in the acknowledgments and epilogue. What would it look like to weave these into the story she tells? How would explicitly interconnecting her positionality with the archival documents affect the work—the kind of knowledge it produces and for whom it could be given? Here is an opportunity to decolonialize academia in general and religious studies in particular; instead, Graber continues the practice of playing off personal relationships and experiences as color commentary to the bare facts of the events research methods uncover. Indigenous scholars refuse to do this in favor of Indigenous methods and traditional knowledge and routinely express how the peer-review process is prejudiced against their approach to academia.⁴

Second, Graber argues that “our histories mirror nineteenth-century policy goals in which white Americans occupy the center and Native people dwell on the periphery.”⁵ American religious history needs more Indigenous voices. Graber balances the scales by bringing in Indigenous sources to describe Kiowa ceremony and community life—a risky undertaking that she handles deftly. And yet, the analytical framework for Kiowa religion is largely constructed through white-settler scholars. There is a sense in which the center-periphery issue Graber mentions in her field is reiterated in the theoretical underpinnings of the book’s interpretive lens. Indigenous scholars, including Kiowa writers, are in the footnotes and bibliography but don’t noticeably affect how Kiowa religion is understood in the text.

For example, Kiowa understood and practiced religion, according to Graber, as “rites for engaging sacred power.”⁶ In Graber’s narration, Kiowa turned to religion for sacred power to provide protection, but in 1833 these rituals “were

4 For a conversation with Indigenous scholars on this topic, see “The Politics of Citation: Is the Peer-Review Process Biased against Indigenous Academics?” CBC Radio, posted February 23, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/decolonizing-the-classroom-is-there-space-for-indigenous-knowledge-in-academia-1.4544984/the-politics-of-citation-is-the-peer-review-process-biased-against-indigenous-academics-1.4547468>. See also Heather Castleden et al., “I Don’t Think That Any Peer Review Committee . . . Would Ever ‘Get’ What I Currently Do’: How Institutional Metrics for Success and Merit Risk Perpetuating the (Re)production of Colonial Relationships in Community-Based Participatory Research Involving Indigenous Peoples in Canada,” *The International Indigenous Policy Journal* 6, no. 4 (2015); Jackie Street et al., “Is Peer Review Useful in Assessing Research Proposals in Indigenous Health? A Case Study,” *Health Research and Policy Systems* 7, no. 2 (2009); Elaine Coburn et al., “Unspeakable Things: Indigenous Research and Social Science,” *Socio* 2 (2013): 331–48.

5 Graber, *Gods of Indian Country*, 14.

6 Graber, *Gods of Indian Country*, 12.

not enough” “to ensure health and safety.”⁷ In one particular encounter that became known as the Cutthroat Massacre, Osage killed many Kiowa and also captured two children, a medicine bundle, and the *Táimé*.⁸ In 1834, during an American-instigated parlay between Kiowa and Osage, one of the children and the *Táimé* were returned. Graber notes that while Americans focused on their own involvement in the negotiations to work toward a treaty, Kiowa oral traditions gave primary agency to the child who was returned. It was “not through an American-brokered truce, but because she implored a medicine bundle” that the girl gained “new powers from a buffalo,” which she transferred to Kiowa warriors upon her return.⁹ “This story” Graber writes, “captures something about the Kiowas’ strength, as well as their adaptability.”¹⁰

While Graber’s framework shows how strength and adaptability are qualities internal to the community, it doesn’t further connect these qualities to Kiowa sovereignty or nationhood. Jenny Tone-Pah-Hote, a Kiowa scholar at University of North Carolina whose work Graber cites, narrates the event as one of the “acts of diplomacy in the shifting political landscape of the plains [that] shaped the history of the Kiowa nation.”¹¹ Expressive culture, such as dances and art, communicate the importance of the relations that form their nationhood, which is composed of less politically defined structures and more “familial and community life, where maintaining an understanding of Kiowa identity centre[s] on individuals related to one another.”¹² In other words, drawing on and interacting with sacred power through expressive culture such as ritual and art communicates Kiowa identity through relationality, which is the basis for sovereignty and governance.

For Tone-Pah-Hote, tying expressive culture to diplomacy, religion to relationality, is how Kiowa both navigated and survived the assimilation era as well as set the “foundation for the spread of intertribal movements in which Kiowas would participate” in the twentieth century.¹³ The framework for understanding nineteenth-century Kiowa identity and nationhood through religion sets the stage for understanding contemporary Kiowa resistance, survivance, and flourishing through dance, art, and material culture. Again, it’s not that these Kiowa-voiced dynamics and connections aren’t present in the book; it’s that

7 Graber, 33.

8 Graber (3) defines *Táimé* as “the sacred object at the center of Kiowa Sun Dance practices . . . [It is] considered a mediator between the sun and the people.”

9 Graber, 43–44.

10 Graber, 44.

11 Jenny Elizabeth Tone-Pah-Hote, *Envisioning Nationhood: Kiowa Expressive Culture, 1875–1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 9.

12 Tone-Pah-Hote, 6.

13 Tone-Pah-Hote, 9.

they're just peripheral. Without their centrality, settler religious scholars are still tempted to view ritual acts such as the one that preceded the Cutthroat Massacre as a "failure" because it didn't effect a specific cause; that is, it is tempting to view the act as superstitious.

Religion determines belonging, but whether that belonging is vicious or virtuous—whether it engenders habits and character qualities that deteriorate or foster one's tradition—is determined by relationships. Put differently, to say that religion determines belonging is to say that religion expresses primary, political attachments. Graber's book tells a story about settler colonialism that helps us understand how religion as a force and expression of relationality has been both an agent of colonialism as well as a tool for decolonization. The term "friend" as a form of political belonging continues to be used in settler-Indigenous alliances, so Graber's book is both a window into the past as well as an analytical resource for understanding contemporary relationships.

One group in Manitoba, Canada, for example, call themselves Friends of Shoal Lake 40.¹⁴ They are a group working with Shoal Lake 40 First Nation for access to clean drinking water—a resource that was polluted as a result of its provision to Winnipeg.¹⁵ One awareness-raising campaign the group held was to create stencils of stories from the Nation and use water to fill out the message on concrete sidewalks during summer. Surely it's good to get the perspective and experience of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation's members to form the basis of their advocacy, but is getting community members to tell their stories for the public appropriate? The First Nation members have already given Winnipeg clean drinking water; haven't they given enough? The members of Friends of Shoal Lake 40 that I know were keenly aware of this dynamic.

Whether or not engagement and advocacy are an example of extraction or justice won't be determined through an abstract interpretive framework; rather, it will be determined by relationships. Friends of Shoal Lake 40 is a case that reminds us to be vigilant in the political function of friendship; relationships like the ones in this case, as Graber's book shows, need to be scrutinized. This example is also a reminder that the function of academic conversations and scholarship is up for grabs and open to interpretation, but if it's rooted in explicit positionality and relationship, it will have the potential to participate in decolonization.

14 See their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/friendsofSL40/>.

15 For the history of Shoal Lake 40 in colonialism and the lack of accessible clean drinking water, see Adele Perry, *Aqueduct: Colonialism, Resources, and the Histories We Remember* (Winnipeg: ARP, 2016).