

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2001

Review of *The Animals Came Dancing: Native American Sacred Ecology and Animal Kinship* By Howard L. Harrod

Christopher Vecsey
Colgate University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Vecsey, Christopher, "Review of *The Animals Came Dancing: Native American Sacred Ecology and Animal Kinship* By Howard L. Harrod" (2001). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2225.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2225>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Animals Came Dancing: Native American Sacred Ecology and Animal Kinship. By Howard L. Harrod. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000. Notes, bibliography, index. xxv + 170 pp. \$35.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.

Over the past several decades Howard Harrod—Oberlin Alumni Professor of Social Ethics and Sociology at Vanderbilt University—has published widely and well regarding the religious history of Great Plains Indians. His latest work examines what he calls “sacred ecology’ . . . the sensibility, evident in North Plains cultures, that the world was constituted by powers that took the form of Persons. In hunting cultures, these Persons often appeared in animal form.” A non-Indian (indeed, a non-hunter), Harrod has written his book because he thinks that these Native Americans have valuable insights for us all in

“reimagining our relationships with the non-human world.”

Having produced two books—*American Indian Environments: Ecological Issues in Native American History* (1980) and *Imagine Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians* (1988)—that share Harrod’s explicit goals, I was eager to see how he proceeded and to what conclusions he came. My report is that he has composed a perceptive, graceful monograph.

Harrod grounds his work in a depiction of Plains Indian hunting culture before the great changes of the late nineteenth century. His subject matter, however, is not hunting practice per se, but rather the symbolic, ritual expressions by which Indians conveyed meaning in their lives, particularly in their relationships with animals. Harrod retells Indian myths, tracing the origins of those relations: how animals participated in the creation of the world, “a dense and complex horizon of associations”; how they gave themselves as a gift to sustain human existence; how they formed intimate relations with humans through marriage, adoption, competition, and inspiration. At heart these myths present “a basic dilemma[:] . . . how were humans to understand what it meant to kill animals and consume their flesh” since humans and animals were joined in a “kinship network”? The solution offered by the myths was a “double consciousness that enabled [the Indians] to empathize with both human and animal realities.”

If Plains Indian myths attempted to understand what it is to be *hunted* as well as to be *hunters*, their rituals made it possible to express the voices and movements—the personhood—of animals in dance and song. Hunters imitated animals in order to appreciate them and to reenact mythic patterns, but also to gain magical control over their prey within “a structure of mutual obligation.” The Sun Dance and other Plains ceremonies must be seen in this context, Harrod argues: they reaffirmed and renewed the paradoxical relations between human and animal persons for symbiotic benefit.

Harrod’s last chapter takes us from the interpersonal relations of Plains Indians and animals in the past to the contemporary “food culture” of most Americans: the “factory farms” and the “packaged ‘meat’” found in modern-day supermarkets. It is no overstatement on Harrod’s part when he says there is an “almost total disassociation from the natural world” in twenty-first century America and that “Native American hunting traditions on the Northern Plains gave rise to a very different food culture, one that ritually connected humans with the deeper sources of their lives.”

CHRISTOPHER VECSEY
Native American Studies
Colgate University