

**Cutchá Risling Baldy. *We Are Dancing For You: Native Feminisms & the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies*. University of Washington Press, 2018. 193 pp. ISBN: 9780295743448.**

<http://www.washington.edu/uwpress/search/books/RISTOG.html>

Hollywood has, arguably, done more to perpetuate the stereotypes of *the* "Native American"—a haphazard, non-existent, mish-mash of cultures, like those of the Apache, Comanche, and Lakota—than any other place.<sup>1</sup> Yet, when one thinks of the "first peoples" of California, what often comes to mind are the Spanish missionaries or, later, the U.S. settlers that flooded the region during the 1849 Gold Rush. There may be a few who recall Ishi, a "Yahi man [...who became] a display in the UC Berkeley museum" in 1911 and was known as "The Last Wild Indian" (Risling Baldy 75). However, most will likely not think of the many tribal nations of California, perhaps because their populations were reduced by 90% between 1846 and 1864 as a result of, among other causes, the Mexican-American War, Spanish colonizers, miners, and numerous massacres, with fifty-six occurring in Humboldt County alone (55). Yet, in *We Are Dancing For You*, Cutchá Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk) works to reclaim, "(re)write, (re)right, and (re)rite" the Flower Dance (ch'íłwa:l) of the Hoopa Valley Tribe,<sup>2</sup> located in what is now known as Humboldt County in Northern California, as part of a cultural revitalization movement that "articulates and supports an Indigenous decolonizing praxis" (9).

As suggested by the work's subtitle, Risling Baldy's main emphasis is on women's coming-of-age ceremonies, but, as she notes, "[i]n the anthropological record of Northwest California, there is little discussion of Indigenous epistemologies of menstruation" (108). For Risling Baldy, a main reason for this erasure can likely be summed up by a single name: Alfred Kroeber—arguably one of the "fathers" of the American anthropology, early chair of Berkeley's still top-ranked department, warden of Ishi, and author of what remains a foundational text on the subject: *Handbook of the Indians of California* (1925). Consequently, Risling Baldy begins (re)writing the history of the Hupa by starting to right what is wrong with Kroeber's account. Because she cannot correct all of his 1,000-plus-page ethnography in her compact monograph, she chooses to focus on the reclamation of women's voices. She points out the fallacies that arise when a white man relies on postinvasion Indigenous male informants, which, unsurprisingly, results in the increased entrenchment of heteropatriarchal ideas in relation to the Hupa. For example, Risling Baldy notes:

Kroeber's approach to establishing the superiority of one Native culture over another included his designation of women's coming-of-age and menstruation ceremonies as "a mark of inferior cultural development." Kroeber wholeheartedly believed that tribes who continued to practice public puberty rites well into the contemporary period would never be able to reach the same level of civilization as tribes who had "never" had public puberty rites or who had given them up altogether. (83, internal citations omitted)

Risling Baldy challenges these notions, among others, influenced by salvage ethnography by conducting an extensive literature review of anthropological texts from the historical to the contemporary and theoretical works ranging from feminist to indigenous perspectives, in

addition to their various intersections.<sup>3</sup> She argues that Kroeber's "scholarship is deeply ingrained with a Western patriarchal belief that menstruation is dirty and polluting," which "meant that Kroeber was particularly critical of women's coming-of-age ceremonies and practices associated with women, menstruation, and power" (83). But, Risling Baldy does not stop there, she also uses primary texts—including Theodora Kroeber's analysis of her husband, Alfred Kroeber's own archive, as well as correspondence from his contemporaries—that reveal letters encouraging Kroeber to "'get in closer and closer contact with the Hupa Indians and take a good look at their religion'" (Risling Baldy 86). Ultimately, Risling Baldy counters the conclusions of Kroeber and his peers by sharing her own personal interviews with Hupa, Yurok, Karuk, and/or Wiyot peoples, usually those who identify as women, who articulate what was ignored, such as the significance of the Flower Dance to the "Athabascan cultures of California and the Southwest," with a specific focus on the Hoopa Valley Tribe (87).

According to Risling Baldy, pre-invasion, the Hupa culture recognized women as equals who possessed strength and luck, especially when menstruating (*tim-na'me*), but the introduction of notions of the "taboo" and Christian ideology, including the idea that women were the cause of original sin and should be subordinate to men, shifted community beliefs and practices. As a result, the Hupa went from performing public celebrations of menstruation to treating it as something that is shameful and should be hidden. In addition to other complicating factors that contributed to this change, Risling Baldy draws attention to a mistranslated word: *Min'ch*. Kroeber and his contemporary, linguist Pliny Earle Goddard—despite neither ever having seen one—contended that *Min'ch* signified a flimsy, temporary shelter known as a "menstrual hut," a term which also appears in the Hupa Online Dictionary (Risling Baldy 111, 169 n67). Risling Baldy challenges this definition by breaking down the linguistic roots to argue that *Min'ch* actually means "something like 'a small, familiar, or dear house'" (113).

However, Christianity and white anthropologists were not the only threat to the Hupa way of life. Risling Baldy argues that the miners (often known as the 49ers), rushing to conquer the land and profit from its resources, perceived coming-of-age ceremonies as fertility rites and an open invitation for sexual assault. As such, another part of the (re)writing and (re)righting is acknowledging the role violence and settler colonialism played in eliminating these rites and people. Or, as Risling Baldy's mother puts it: "My grandfather once told me, 'Remember, Granddaughter, you are alive because some miner was a bad shot'" (52).

Consequently, as Risling Baldy makes clear, many ceremonies are only available in a limited sense: they are found in the writings of white, usually male, anthropologists or government ethnographers and based on what the Indigenous populations were willing to share (some participated in ethnographic refusal). They are further compromised by the fact that what is documented is one particular version of a ceremony, as told by a handful of members—or maybe only one person—of a tribe, band, clan, or family. Hence, they must be (re)rited in that the ceremonies have to be pieced together, updated for the contemporary time, and reimagined to fill in the gaps that have been left, while accounting for the inherent variations and omissions of the "original." Risling Baldy ends her text by doing this work, documenting interviews with those who have participated in the Flower Dance performed by the Hoopa Valley Tribe since 2001, including the first woman to be celebrated in many generations, as well as the medicine women who performed the rite and a number of others who have been a part of this cultural

revitalization. Because of her close interactions with the participants and the community, Risling Baldy suggests that bringing this rite back into the public eye has had a positive impact on the members of the Hoopa Valley Tribe, including a slow, but steady, change in attitudes of and toward women, as well as beliefs about traditional ways. Precontact, *ch'itwa:l* (the Flower Dance) was originally intended to do be one of the four main ceremonial dances, the others being *xonsil'-ch'idilye* (the White Deerskin Dance), *xay-ch'idilye* (the Jump Dance), and *xon'na'we'* (the Brush Dance), with the first three being "world renewal dances" (19). Risling Baldy implies that the revitalization of the *ch'itwa:l*, the most female-focused dance, will start to restore balance (152).

That said, at times, *We Are Dancing For You* may seem like it has too much critical framing and might occasionally feel repetitive; however, this form may actually be necessary for the (re)righting of these ceremonies. Unfortunately, when someone is among the first to analyze or explore a subject, particularly when incorporating personal observations, interviews, or stories, and, *especially* when that person is challenging the established view of things as told by a respected, senior member in the field, like Risling Baldy does in this work, it becomes essential to demonstrate that one is well versed in the extant scholarship and can use that language fluently before introducing one's own argument and knowledge. In other words, in a world that continues to be predominantly heteropatriarchal, anyone who is not a cishet, white, Christian man must demonstrate that they have the right to speak, because, having gone through other rites of passage (such as earning a Ph.D.), they have the authority to do so. Risling Baldy moves between the worlds with ease: one moment calling out the aforementioned "heteropaternalism" or "heteropatriarchy" that were introduced postinvasion, then explaining the *ch'itwa:l* and *K'ixinay*, before shifting back into theory to show how these stories are part of "epistemological frameworks of decolonization, self- determination, sovereignty, and survivance" (8). Her research and bibliography are gifts to anyone who wants to better acquaint themselves with the field. Because each chapter is able to stand alone, it is a valuable pedagogical tool. Overall, *We Are Dancing For You* is a significant contribution to the growing field of scholarship on the Indigenous peoples of California.

*Crystal K. Alberts, University of North Dakota*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Reel Injun* (2009) or an interview with the film's director, Neil Diamond, in *Indian Country Today*.

<sup>2</sup> Risling Baldy is an enrolled member. <https://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/bio.html>

<sup>3</sup> Salvage ethnography is the belief that Indigenous peoples and cultures would soon be extinct, and a scholar should preserve whatever he could in the time that remained. See Jacob W. Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 72, No. 6 (Dec., 1970), pp. 1289-1299.

#### Works Cited

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