

Ella Deloria. Waterlily. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The value of Ella Deloria's Waterlily derives not only from its thoughtful and lucid analysis of kinship relationships among the Dakota Sioux, but also from the fundamental ethical lessons it imparts. We should read this book as a primer in the ethical life, taking its place alongside classic works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and others. Waterlily remains an enduring masterpiece of the real Dakota life—especially the elaborately textured layers of the all-important and all-encompassing kinship relationships.

Waterlily presents an extraordinarily practical idea that, if implemented, could help end perpetual cycles of violence: the concept of “kinship appeal.” The violating outsider is required to become a member of the harmed clan—to “replace” the member of the tribe that he killed: “Though he has harmed us, we shall make him something to us (a relative) in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead your brother? Then this man shall be your brother. Or your uncle? Or your cousin? As for me, the dead man was my nephew. Therefore his slayer shall be my nephew. And from now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us.”

Ella Cara Deloria led a remarkable life. We can share part of that life by conducting a careful and purposeful analysis of her classic work, Waterlily. One of the most exciting and profoundly important aspects of this text is Deloria's ability to lucidly present a comprehensive picture of the traditional life and times of Dakota Sioux prior to the disruption and dissolution of their society that resulted from contact with European cultures. Because of her training at Columbia University by distinguished anthropologist Franz Boas, Deloria is able to provide us with a detached, objective, scientific analysis of the culture of the Dakota Sioux—one that provides penetrating analyses of the anthropological foundations of the Dakota society. At the same time, Ms. Deloria, because of her linguistic and creative abilities, weaves a compelling narrative replete with strong characters, a flowing plot, and instructive lessons.

Waterlily is a magnificent story that teaches us how to respect one another and all of the life on earth. Its value derives not only from its thoughtful and lucid analysis of kinship relationships among the Dakota Sioux but also from the lessons it delivers for respectful living. Curiously and largely unknown to us, the Dakota Sioux in the early nineteenth century lived a life of great balance, reverence, respect, and harmony with nature. The events portrayed in Waterlily, fundamental to living an ordered and honorable life, provide lessons that all people should seriously consider. This is a text rich in ethical analysis; by observing the kinship relationships and way of life of the Dakota Sioux, we are provided with a superb primer in the ethical life.

Waterlily describes the life of a Dakota woman (Waterlily) carrying her from birth to marriage, to the death of her first husband, and then to her marriage to a second virtuous Dakota man. The story flows full circle. At the end of the novel, the young mother, Waterlily, gives birth to her daughter—Mitawa (“My Own”). All along the way, we learn about the finely attuned, purposeful, and virtually perfectly ordered life of the Dakota because of one major institution—*elaborate, powerful, and appropriate kinship rules and relationships*. The Dakota life may not be perfect, but the order and appropriateness of their lives and the ways in which their lives are conducted certainly seem to be about as optimal as it gets. Again, the sine qua non, the foundation of all of this revolves around elaborate kinship relationships, which create unity, solidarity, and

common goals among the people of the kinship circle. There are profound lessons to be learned from this careful analysis of Dakota Sioux life by a Boas-trained anthropologist.

Waterlily emerges as a tour de force in its poignant description of Dakota Sioux kinship relationships before the arrival of large numbers of Europeans. It mirrors in many ways the themes of another internationally acclaimed novel—Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. Why? Because Achebe also tells the story of an advanced, ordered, and balanced culture (the Ibo people) living within small villages of Nigeria in the nineteenth century. In addition to tracing kinship relations among the Ibo people, it also describes a well-oiled, well-balanced society, containing smoothly functioning legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. There is order, stability, and sustainability to this Ibo culture. Just as Deloria does, Achebe paints the people with great respect and dignity. Sadly, millennia of societal balance and sustainability crashed to an abrupt and harsh end when the English colonized the Ibo people. Kinship bonds were broken, and, as the title suggests, things fell apart; the Ibo society was devastated and perhaps irreversibly lost. Regrettably, that may be true for the Dakota people as well.

Waterlily also traces the cycles of life of an indigenous people. But rather than the Ibo of the equatorial zone of Nigeria, it is the nineteenth century Dakota culture of the western Great Plains that becomes the subject of Deloria’s investigation. These meticulously detailed anthropological observations read like a novel. Like Achebe’s work, this insightful study of the Dakota people presents a picture of a richly layered, sophisticated, and well-ordered society as it elaborately documents judicial, legislative, and executive decision-making. The glue holding Dakota society together was the kinship relationship. Unfortunately, their elaborate kinship rules crumbled under contact with European cultures as they pushed constantly westward before and after the Civil War. It was impossible to keep Dakota society intact. As with the Ibo in Nigeria, the Dakota culture fell apart. And not only did the Dakota people suffer, but those in the white community also became worse off.

And why were they? Because there was so much they could have learned from the lives of the Dakota Sioux—lessons that would have enabled them to live more completely, more respectfully, more compatibly, and more sustainably with their fellow humans as well as with their biotic brethren. Additional informative aspects of this text include Deloria’s analysis of the Kit Fox Society, upbringing of the children, the “horror” of the Dakota people upon witnessing how Americans treated their children, various ceremonies celebrating milestones in the lives of the people, and the common theme of the “give-away,” not only between individuals but also between tribes. Readers can learn much about the “honorable life”—the life of virtue and character discussed by Aristotle, Jesus Christ, and Immanuel Kant and so poignantly displayed by the Dakota people.

Waterlily is a magnificent story. Its value derives not only from its thoughtful and lucid analysis of kinship relationships among the Dakota Sioux, but also from the lessons it delivers for respectful living for all people. The concept of “kinship appeal,” for example, can help people view life differently and change their behavior. The virtually intractable problem of revenge and violence promotes endless cycles of conflict and disharmony. It makes no sense. Why would any rational person choose revenge as a means of eliminating revenge? When an outsider kills a member of my clan, the standard response is to seek revenge by killing that murderer or a member of the foreign clan. This is the principle of “an eye for an eye.” Gandhi’s admonition that “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind” should disabuse us of any confidence that revenge brings positive results.

Waterlily teaches the extraordinary idea that, if practiced, could end the endless cycle of violence—the concept of “kinship appeal.” As the name implies, the violating outsider is requested to become a member of the harmed clan. The perpetrator of violence (in this case, killing) is located, captured, and offered an opportunity to “replace” the member of the tribe that he killed. Members of the tribe provide gifts. Quoting from the experience of a Dakota named Yankton in Chapter 15 of the text, “The gifts you bring shall go to the murderer, for a token of our sincerity and our purpose. Though he has hurt us, we shall make him something to us (a relative), in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead your brother? Then this man shall be your brother. Or your uncle? Or your cousin? As for me, the dead was my nephew. Therefore his slayer shall be my nephew. And from now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us.”

This “kinship appeal ceremony” is described on pages 192 to 194 of the book. A Dakota Sioux man named Yankton had witnessed the “kinship appeal.” Several steps are involved in the process: 1) Enraged young relatives of the slain man seek immediate retribution (“an eye for an eye”); 2) Analysis of a wise elder provides support at first for retribution, but later he revises his argument (“there is better way, a harder way . . . we are men of another make, so let us take the harder way, the better way”); 3) The proposal is made (“We shall regard him [the murderer] as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us”); 4) Finally, the most difficult part—inner struggle. The enraged relatives must somehow deal with their pride and anger and accordingly come to the resolution: they can accept the murderer as their relative. This necessarily is extremely difficult for them; 5) Acceptance (“ . . . they accept what their elder kinsman said *because they saw that it was right!*”); 6) Proposal to the slayer; and 7) Outcome (“ . . . there is no more powerful agent for ensuring good will and smothering the flame of hate than the kinship of humans!”).

In addition to this extraordinary Dakota practice of “kinship appeal,” we learn many other useful and compelling Dakota kinship relationships based upon the highest standards and principles of moral behavior. Revenge does not have to be the standard “default mode” for our response to violence. Cultures like the Dakota Sioux, the Nigerian Ibo, and others can instruct us in the modes of more sustainable and loftier, often much harder, principles to order our lives. Could we not embrace some of the many themes of Waterlily, not the least of which could be the “kinship appeal”?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was unique about Ella Deloria’s training that allowed her to write so comprehensively and with such authority about kinship relationships of the Dakota Sioux people?
2. Why is Deloria a true South Dakotan?
3. Why are the combination of crisp, scientific anthropological observations and the writing of a fascinating novel like Waterlily such a powerful vehicle for understanding? Is this literature a kind of new literary genre? Do you know of other texts like this?
4. Write a character sketch of Waterlily herself. What kind of woman was she? Who were the most influential people in her life? Why were they so important to her development?
5. Good writers of novels create engaging characters who are multi-dimensional or “round” versus uni-dimensional or “flat.” How would you describe the characters in

Waterlily? Are they round or flat? Does Deloria do a good job in characterization? What other aspects of her writing do you like? What are some weaknesses in her writing?

6. As you proceed through the book, list various kinship rules when they are encountered. Do we in our white society have comparable kinship rules? Are there qualitative differences between those of the Dakota Sioux and white society? Which of the kinship rules make the most sense to you and why?

7. Do you think the world in general could ever get to the point where we as a global society could adopt practices such as the incredibly powerful “kinship appeal”? Why or why not?

8. In your mind, what is the overall value of Waterlily? Would you recommend this text to your family or friends? Why or why not? Does Waterlily provide an accurate representation of Dakota Sioux of the nineteenth century in South Dakota?

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

In future history books on South Dakota, the “Life and Times” of Ella Deloria (1888-1971) should be one of the chapters. She is a true South Dakotan who was born at White Swan in the Yankton Sioux Reservation. Her Dakota name, Anpetu Waste, means “beautiful day.” Her Protestant Episcopal religion and Sioux heritage were major influences in her life. Ms. Deloria completed her high school training as a student at All Saints boarding school in Sioux Falls and then enrolled in Oberlin College. She then completed her BS degree in science at Columbia Teachers College in New York City (1910-1913), where she met Franz Boas, an internationally acclaimed anthropologist. Later Ms. Deloria collaborated extensively with Dr. Boas, serving as an American Indian ethnologist and linguist. She worked with him to translate and edit a number of texts in the Sioux language. In 1929 Ms. Deloria published a report on the Sun Dance in The Journal of American Folk-Lore. An accomplished anthropologist in her own right, she published three scholarly texts: Dakota Texts (1932), a foundational work on Sioux dialects, folklore, and mythology; Dakota Grammar (1941), a collaboration with Dr. Boas; and Speaking of Indians (1944), a scholarly yet readable depiction of Sioux culture. The first draft of Waterlily was also written in the early 1940s. Ms. Deloria returned to All Saints in Sioux Falls (1915-1919). She worked for the YWCA as a health educator and traveled extensively throughout the West while working with Indian students and carefully observing diverse Indian groups. After working at Haskell Indian School, she worked extensively with Boas until his death in 1942. From 1955 to 1958 she served as director of her former elementary school, St. Elizabeth School, on a bluff overlooking the confluence of the Grand and Missouri Rivers in western South Dakota. From 1962 to 1966 she worked on various projects at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. Ella Deloria lived the remaining years of her life in Vermillion and died in 1971 at the age of 83. Her inspirational career can serve as a model for all of us; she had a most remarkable life.

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