

A CONVERSATION WITH GWEN WESTERMAN AND BRUCE WHITE

What research did you undertake in writing your award-winning book?

Gwen did extensive interviews with Dakota elders throughout Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Canada. Bruce did archival research in Minnesota, Washington, D.C., and Canada on written sources on the Dakota people and their connection to the land. Both of us were aided by a number of other people in the work.

"Minnesota is a Dakota place, resonant with the history and experiences of the Dakota people."

How long did it take?

The research was begun in 2008, under one grant. In 2010 we received a second grant from another source that funded the writing. The major work of writing the book was completed by early 2012. So in all it took more than four years.

What interesting challenges did you encounter while writing *Mni Sota Makoce*?

Westerman: Working with so many sources was interesting, especially when our Dakota oral histories challenged the "established" histories that had been accepted as authoritative sources of the story of our people. It took a number of intense discussions with our research teams to come to an understanding that

this book was to be presented from the Dakota perspective.

White: The most interesting challenge was to overcome the pre-conceptions I had about Dakota history. Much of what had been written about the Dakota people and their connection to Minnesota was simplistic and some of it was wrong. Making a real attempt to look at the history of Minnesota from the point of view of Dakota people was an important challenge. Working with Dakota people throughout the process of writing this book was an important way for me to attain a better understanding of Dakota history in Minnesota.

How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?

Westerman: My earliest memory of writing was scribbling in a book that had questions at the end of each story with lines for the answers. My high school teachers encouraged me to go to college for journalism, and I was part of the editing class for our high school poetry publication. And I always loved to write letters (and still do). I became a technical writer and then a teacher of writing, and kept journals as well as wrote poetry.

White: I have always wanted to be a writer since I was a child. In high school I wrote for my school newspaper. I also kept journals, wrote essays and short stories, and wrote drafts of a few novels. It was not until my late twenties that I began to think of writing about history as a creative process.

What do you most like about the book?

It was very gratifying to find a publisher in the Minnesota Historical Society Press that believed in what we were doing and helped us to make it better.

How does being a Minnesotan and the particular community in which you live inform your writing?

Westerman: While my family roots are deep in the Minnesota landscape as the descendant of Dakota people, I was not born here and moved to Mankato in 1991. I felt an instant connection to this place as home. The landscape is prominent in my writing and art, and the cultural heritage of my ancestors and my family is all around me in the history and place names of Minnesota.

White: I have lived in Minnesota since high school. I realized soon after coming to live here that the Native American history of this region was not widely taught or understood by non-Indian people. Over the years I have had the good fortune to be able to work with Indigenous communities throughout the state and this has nurtured my own knowledge of the region, giving me a new perspective on every place I visit when traveling in the state.

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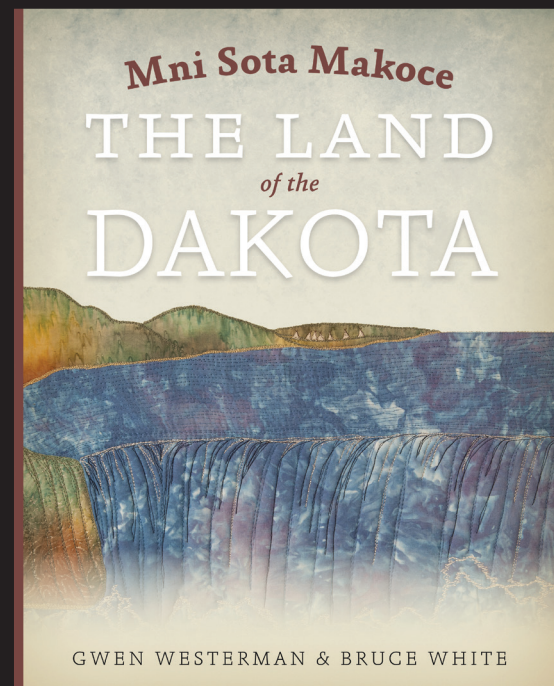
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Mni Sota Makoce: *The Land of the Dakota*

by Gwen Westerman and Bruce White

MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESS



Mni Sota Makoce



SUMMARY

The Dakota phrase, *Mni Sota Makoce*, Land Where the Waters Reflect the Clouds, gives the state of Minnesota its name. In this examination of the history of the Dakota people and their deep cultural connection to their homeland, authors Gwen Westerman and Bruce White examine narratives of the people's origins, their associations with the land, and the seasonal round through key players and place names.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn about the Dakota people in school and how is it different from what is presented in this book?
2. Did you know that the name Minnesota is a Dakota name and that this was the homeland of Dakota people?
3. Are there any Dakota cultural and village sites or burial places near where you live? Have they been protected or interpreted in the history of your community?
4. How have the multiple stories presented in this book affected the way you think about Dakota history and culture?
5. What is the significance of storytelling and the oral tradition in preserving a culture—why do people tell stories? Do stories play an important role in your family?
6. Did you know that there was a Dakota language version of the 1851 Treaty of Traverse des Sioux? What do you think about the comparisons between the original English version and the translation of the Dakota version?
7. What have the oral histories and early maps added to your understanding of the way Dakota people thought about the land?
8. Do you tend to identify more with land areas defined by political boundaries or areas defined by natural features? Discuss your personal connections to the places that you know well.
9. To what extent do things such as weather, terrain, and the history of a place shape the culture and the day-to-day lives of individuals who live there? How does the physical nature of the land affect cultural values and mindsets?
10. What is the value of understanding and having connection to one's family and geographical origins over several generations? How might learning about something significant and troubling in your family's history change you?

ABOUT GWEN WESTERMAN AND BRUCE WHITE



Gwen Westerman, an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate, is Professor in English and Director of Humanities at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and currently serves as the Executive Director of the Native American Literature Symposium.



Independent historian and anthropologist, Bruce White researches and writes for Indian tribes and government agencies. He is the author of We Are at Home: Pictures of the Ojibwe People, a 2008 Minnesota Book Awards finalist.

Learn more about the author's work at MinnesotaHistory.net



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