Gambling on Ore
The Nature of Metal Mining in the United States, 1860-1910
KENT A. CURTIS

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In Gambling on Ore: The Nature of Metal Mining in the United States, 1860-1910, Kent A. Curtis traces the early decades of mineral exploration and exploitation in the Rocky Mountain West, with a particular emphasis on the region around Butte, Montana. The engagingly written and thoughtfully researched text offers a nuanced examination of changing social, legal, and political understandings of natural resource ownership and use in an increasingly urbanized and energy-dependent nation. In addition, Gambling on Ore explores, in some detail, the evolution of mining techniques and practices, particularly the change from individuals and small groups searching for placer deposits along streambeds to a capital-intensive, corporate-dominated model centered on excavating vast underground ore lodes with expensive equipment and wage labor. Many environmental histories of mining have focused on the industry’s effect on people, land, water, and air. Curtis pursues a different approach, centering his analysis not so much on the industry’s material impact as on ideological understandings, calling our attention to the ways in which the excavation of metals transformed ideas about nature and humanity’s place in the natural world.

Curtis begins his story with the mid-19th-century Montana gold rush, highlighting the largely unpredictable character of small-scale placer gold mining. While the industry as a whole produced tens of millions of dollars in wealth, life for most miners was difficult and rarely lucrative—a reality that seldom dissuaded would-be prospectors from testing their odds in the Rockies. The pursuit of gold also led to the development of a regional “mineral geography,” providing a road map of sorts to those searching for silver and then copper in later decades. The culture of the gold rush period proved significant, for, as Curtis points out, miners valued gold for its purely monetary potential rather than for any practical purpose or use. The ore had appeal as a means to wealth, rather than as a productive good, a pattern that would continue with silver as well. Metals, like so many other products in industrializing America, became commodities, items with significance and meaning far removed from their point of origin underground or along a creekbed.

By the early 20th century, some metals, especially copper used in wiring, had become ubiquitous in many cities and towns. Proximity, however, did not breed familiarity, as most consumers had little to no knowledge of the actual processes associated with the formation and extraction of ores. Instead, “the almost unnatural overproduction of metals from US mineral resources led to the naturalization of metals in society,” with most Americans coming to assume that a steady and ready supply of relatively low-priced metals was an altogether ordinary state of affairs (p. 7). The history of metals in Montana, a complex story involving the violent displacement of Native peoples, harsh working conditions, environmental degradation, toxic waste, and financial uncertainty, not to mention government subsidization of private profits, largely faded from view, and was replaced with notions of unproblematic mineral abundance. Ironically, at just the moment that the nation became a “mining society,” to use Curtis’s phrase, the actual ecological and financial costs associated with mining became increasingly invisible—an at times willful ignorance that persists to the present day, as the widespread use of so-called rare earth metals in everything from smart phones to televisions and personal computers goes largely unremarked (p. xii). The United States thus remains a “mining society,” albeit one still largely uninterested in exploring the varied and lasting consequences of this ongoing condition.

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White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy
Learning to Be Indian
FIRST PAPERBACK EDITION
LAWNEY L. REYES


The exploitation of Native Americans as a result of white encroachment and government acquisition is well-known history. In that sense, Lawney L. Reyes’s White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy: Learning to Be Indian, a history of, and record of life among, the Sin-Aikuat Indians, members of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation in northeastern Washington State, treads fa-