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## Cowboys and Indians: The Image of the Indian in American Literature

VICTOR MACARUSO

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“‘Cowboys and Indians’! What are you going to teach, Zane Grey and Gary Cooper?” my incredulous colleague asked as we sat around a table, far from the small college where I worked. My friends had asked that question every time I had mentioned the new course. I smiled a practiced smile and began to justify “Cowboys and Indians.” My friend sipped his sherry, listened attentively but seemed bemused like all the others before him.

The genesis of “Cowboys and Indians” was unique. The Indian Studies Department formally requested the English Department to structure a course which treated Native American literature. This request was not as strange as it seems. Mount Senario College is a small liberal arts college in rural northwestern Wisconsin with a student population that is 24.5% Native American. The Indian Studies Department was understaffed and, more importantly, lacked faculty trained in literature. This invitation had the added advantage of allaying the unspoken anxiety that we, as Whites, were inherently presumptuous and bound to fail in attempting to teach such a course.

But the English Department was hesitant to accept the invitation. After all, who among us had studied Native American literature in graduate school? We had read an occasional work by a Native American author, but who were the significant authors? Where were the critical texts to be found? How could the works be approached? Where to begin?

My solution was to build on what I already knew. Trained in American Literature, I decided to begin with the works of Anglo writers—Cooper, Parkman, Thoreau, Melville—who had created the American Indian according to their individual biases. From the nineteenth century it was natural to move to writers of earlier periods—Morton, Bradford, de Crevecoeur, Freneau. To afford a more inclusive selection of works which deal with American Indians but were not written in English, I expanded the definition of American literature to include any work which dealt with American Indians. Thus I was able to include translated works of early explorers and missionaries—Columbus, Vespucci, Bernal Diaz, de las Casas.

In all the works it was profoundly evident that each writer had uncritically imposed his own value system on the people he encountered and had found the Native people to be deficient in those qualities which mark a culture as great. The theme that would give the course unity had become apparent. We would examine the value system inherent in each work. We would explicate subtleties, examine metaphors and pay careful attention to form, but value inquiry would form the central concern of the course. By examining the bias and prejudice in these works about Native Americans we would inevitably be dealing with the concept of stereotype, a distortion or exaggeration of the facts. However, by turning first to non-Indian writers, I too had subconsciously judged works by Native Americans to be less sophisticated than mainstream literature—topical, polemical, curious but not necessarily well written or subtle. The irony of examining literature about Native Americans written by Europeans, Euro-Americans and Americans, while not examining the myths, legends, songs, stories and oratory of the Native Americans themselves, became apparent. In order to bridge the gap from mainstream Anglo-American culture, where we stand comfortably with our feelings of superiority, over to the cultures of people who have been viewed at best as noble savages and at worst as savage, pitiful remainders of the Stone Age, it was necessary to examine how the Native Americans portrayed themselves and their cultures. Thus, the first section of the course would examine the American Indians as they were perceived by the White man and the second section of the course would deal with the way in which Native Americans traditionally perceived themselves in relation to their world.

Because a majority of the Native American students at Mount Senario are Chippewa, it was appropriate to teach the Wenebojo myths and tales. Gerald Vizenor, *Anishinabe Adisokan*,<sup>1</sup> and Victor Barnouw, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales*,<sup>2</sup> offer excellent material. Among other choices are the creation myths and trickster tales found in *Portable North American Indian Reader*<sup>3</sup> by Frederick W. Turner, III, and *Literature of the American Indian* by Thomas Sanders and Walter Peck.<sup>4</sup>

The third section of the course was the most complex since it involved an examination of the response of the Native Americans to the impact of Anglo-American culture. For the vast majority of American Indian tribes, cultural contact with the White people meant the inevitable destruction of traditional ways. The material basis of the American Indian economy was destroyed as the White people pushed westward clearing land and destroying game. The destruction of the buffalo meant the destruction of the cultures based upon it. The removal of tribes to reservations marked the beginning of the destruction of the sense of space and time that had formed the fabric of the traditional way.

Historically, Native people have responded to mainstream Anglo-American culture in several ways. Some have rejected it entirely. Others have acculturated, either through assimilating or by becoming bicultural. Those who rejected mainstream culture were systematically destroyed, unless they lived on arid land not desired by settlers. The Yahi Indians provide one of many examples. Their land in north central California was invaded by settlers and gold hunters. In attempting to defend their land the Yahi were destroyed except for a small band who survived by hiding. *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in America* by Theodora Kroeber treats the problem of the destruction of a People and the consequences for Ishi, the last surviving Yahi.<sup>5</sup> People who acculturate, either through assimilating or by becoming bicultural, are forced to adapt to a dominant culture other than their own.

Those who become bicultural gain a culture, but not without a large expenditure of psychic energy. They must be able to employ the correct set of cultural patterns at appropriate times. They must frequently have facility in two languages to organize and express two different world views. They must know which forms of behavior are acceptable in each setting and be able to respond accordingly.

Those who assimilate lose a culture. They no longer feel at ease with their former culture. The assimilated cannot communicate with their former culture nor with their family and friends who retain the original culture. Assimilated individuals frequently lose a culture and may find they are banned from entering into the culture for which they have prepared themselves. They lose their personal identity; their self-image becomes confused. They become marginal people living on the illusive fringe between cultures without a home in either culture. There are many means by which this assimilation is accomplished, but a primary agent of assimilation in our society is the school; consequently, American Indian children were frequently taken from their parents and sent to boarding schools. An excellent work which treats the boarding school experience is Frances La Flesche's *The Middle Five: Indian Schoolboys of the Omaha Tribe*.<sup>6</sup> Two works which further explore the problems of acculturation are the *Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* by Paul Radin<sup>7</sup> and *Mountain Wolf Woman* by Nancy Oestreich Lurie.<sup>8</sup>

After almost five hundred years contemporary Native American writers have inherited a culture adversely affected by contact with White people and have been conditioned by stereotypical images of American Indians. They are especially concerned with exploring the significance of being American Indians in twentieth century America. It is not surprising that a central concern in contemporary American Indian literature is the question of how Native Americans can adapt to a changing world without giving up the essence of their cultural identity. In much of the contemporary fiction written by Native Americans there seems to be an awareness of the difference between traditional culture and cultural tradition. Cultural tradition is a matter of feeling which is manifested in life style and in a system of values. It is useful because it guides behavior, individual creativity and interpersonal relationships. Traditional culture is a matter of knowledge and facts that can be learned from books; whereas cultural tradition is a matter of experience that must be lived.<sup>9</sup> N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a poetic attempt to fuse the two. Momaday is searching to define himself by recreating the experience of the Kiowa people. The book is a history of the Kiowa and contains elements of legend, folklore and autobiography. Momaday explains:

In one sense, then, the way to Rainy Mountain is pre-eminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself, and it has old and essential being in language. The verbal tradition by which it has been preserved has suffered a deterioration in time. What remains is fragmentary; mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay—and of course the idea itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was. This is the miracle.<sup>10</sup>

Another attempt to relate traditional values and ancient beliefs to the modern world is Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. In this novel Momaday portrays the problems of Abel, a returned World War II veteran who finds himself alienated from both worlds. The work identifies language, the medium through which we express our perception of the world, as a central problem. The Priest of the Sun defines this problem in his sermon:

In the white man's world, language, too—and the way in which the white man thinks of it—has undergone a process of change. The white man takes such things as words and literatures for granted, as indeed he must, for nothing in his world is so commonplace. On every side of him there are words by the millions, an unending succession of pamphlets and papers, letters and books, bills and bulletins, commentaries and conversations. He has diluted and multiplied the Word, and words have begun to close in upon him. He is sated and insensitive; his regard for language—for the Word itself—as an instrument of creation has diminished nearly to the point of no return. It may be that he will perish by the Word.<sup>11</sup>

Momaday uses the points of view provided by both Anglo-American and American-Indian characters to enable the reader to see into the Indian and the White worlds. The reader comes to appreciate the difficulty of communication between these cultures.

James Welch, another contemporary author, using a nameless narrator in *Winter in the Blood*, creates the world of a Blackfeet who comes to understand what his grandfather meant when he said, "We can't change anything. Even the deer can't change

anything. They only see signs."<sup>12</sup> By the conclusion of the novel the narrator comes to understand, "It wasn't the ideal place," but "maybe I had run out of choices."<sup>13</sup> For Welch the means of reconciling the dilemma between traditional culture and cultural tradition lies in acceptance.

For Leslie Marmon Silko the reconciliation of this dilemma lies in the American Indians' willingness to change but to do so without giving up their cultural identity. Her novel, *Ceremony*, deals with the struggle of Tayo, a Laguna half-breed, who attempts to discover value and purpose in his life after having survived a Japanese prison camp. Betonie, a Navajo medicine man, performs a healing ceremony to lay to rest the spirits that have been haunting Tayo. Betonie, speaking for Silko, explains:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals . . . only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong . . . things which don't shift and grow are dead things. They are things the witchery people want. . . . Witchery works to scare people to make them fear growth. But it has always been necessary and more than ever now, it is. Otherwise we won't make it. We won't survive. That's what the witchery is counting on: that we will cling to the ceremonies the way they were, and then their power will triumph, and the people will be no more.<sup>14</sup>

The variety of ways in which each writer confronts the problem of reconciling traditional culture with cultural tradition is indicative of the complexity of this problem. The tripartite structure of the course was complete. It allows the student to look at American Indians from three perspectives: that of the non-Indians, the traditional American Indians, and the contemporary American Indians. By examining the ways in which the Indian has been depicted in literature by non-Indians from Columbus to Faulkner, students will become aware of how American Indians have been fictionally re-created to suit the needs of the White people. Looking at the ways in which traditional Native Americans recorded

their culture, students can come to know both how the American Indians understood their relationship to the tribe and to the world and how the advent of the White people affected this world view. Contemporary literature allows students to examine the many ways in which writers are attempting to discover what it means to be a Native American in twentieth century America.

The problems which arise in teaching American Indian literature are problems of context, because the essential subject matter is derived from the author's cultural experience as a member of a particular tribe. Since the understanding of literature depends to a great extent on understanding the culture from which it is derived, the reader who is unfamiliar with the cultural background is unable to interpret the work adequately. Contemporary authors frequently use thought patterns of their tribal culture as well as its mythology, history and behavioral patterns. This causes confusion for many readers. Further knowledge of the traditional culture of the tribe can be gleaned from many sources, among them the bulletins of the Bureau of Ethnography and the publications of the American Ethnological Society. Thus equipped we can rely on our literary training to make the structure and significance of the work meaningful to the student.

"Cowboys and Indians," with its tripartite structure, was designed to serve as an introduction to the complex phenomena of American Indians in literature. Its scope is necessarily broad and it can only hope to introduce students to topics which they can explore in greater depth in other courses. Stereotypical images of American Indians throughout Western culture, art and advertising find a necessary place in this course to the extent that students become more aware of them. Slides of the works of Catlin, Remington, Russell, Bierstadt and Moran are readily available. Hugh Honour's *The New Golden Land*<sup>15</sup> and Ellwood Parry's *The Image of the Indian and the Black Man in American Art, 1590-1900*<sup>16</sup> provide an excellent introduction. Gretchen Bataille's slide program, *Inside the Cigar Store*,<sup>17</sup> offers a look at the stereotypical images found in artifacts and in the media.

One-quarter to one-half of the students who enroll in "Cowboys and Indians" have been American Indian. The perspective these students bring to the course has made the experience of teaching it particularly rewarding, although not without difficulties. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, which I



frequently include in the course, has caused problems. A Chippewa student who usually participated actively in discussions was silent during the discussion of that work. I questioned her as she was leaving the class and she said, "I didn't finish the book. I got so mad at Cooper, that I flung the book across the room." She explained it was not the portrayal of Uncas nor Chingachgook that had infuriated her, but rather Cooper's treatment of Magua and the "savage" Indians.

Some Chippewa students have helped to bring storytellers to class to present the Wenebojo stories. The storyteller, usually an old woman, tells the tale in the Chippewa language with vocal characterization and appropriate gestures and her companion, a younger woman, translates it. This experience makes the tradition and the text vital for the student. It is necessary to schedule the course when the snow covers the ground, because the Wenebojo stories can only be told at that time.

N. Scott Momaday's belief that "The average American would be hard pressed now to accept the image of an Indian as depicted in the past—a ridiculous befeathered spectacle chasing John Wayne across the screen"<sup>18</sup> might be shaken by some of the student responses I have received to the question, "What is an Indian?"

"I myself have not encountered any so-called savage Indians, but I know people who have."

"Indians are a band of people who were first discovered on American land."

"I have never been afraid of Indians."

"The Indians have just as much right on this land as we do."

"What the Indian is, or for that matter was, is a mystery to me. Whether the Indian is the man in the anti-pollution commercial or the scalping savage of the movies, or neither, I have no idea."

This exercise, with which I begin the course, reassures me that a real need exists for a course like "Cowboys and Indians" which invites students to study the multifaceted image of American Indians in literature and to re-examine their perception of what an American Indian is.

## NOTES

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