

Risen from the Dead: American Indian Mythmakers

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In the beginning circle of a new millennium, Indian authors and historians are becoming as well known as the legendary Squanto (Pawtuxet), Pocahantas (Powhatan), Hiawatha (Onondaga), Chingagook (Mohican), Sitting Bull (Sioux), Geronimo (Apache), Jim Thorpe (Sac and Fox), Will Rogers (Cherokee), and Chief Knock-A-Homa (Atlanta Braves). Since 1969, the year designated by literary critics as the beginning of the Indian Renaissance, American Indians have been prolific at reinventing themselves for public consumption.

A. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) led the way with his Pulitzer-Prize winning *House Made of Dawn*, followed quickly by the better known *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.¹ A plethora of others, including historians and novelists such as Louise Erdrich (Chippewa), Michael Dorris (Modoc), Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), Gerald Vizenor (Chippewa), James Welch (Blackfeet/Gros Ventre), Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), and Ward Churchill (Cherokee/Creek) enjoy a devoted reading public worldwide.

Most contemporary Indian authors focus on the theme of identity and identity politics with the main characters caught between worlds of red and white, living red in a white society, and/or confused by their heritage:

1 N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) and *The Way To Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969).

"full blood," "half breed," or "synethnic."² Writers and their protagonists seek to replace a feeling of "otherness" – a modernist alienation and postmodernist fragmentation – with an authentic Indian identity based upon a sense of place. All writers stress the importance of the oral tradition in Indian life. Momaday creates the Indian world through the "imaginative experience and the historical" record.³ Erdrich, Welch, and Silko focus on the dislocation and confusion of being mixed-blood.⁴ Vizenor's trickster is a conciliator advocating "reinvention" through adaptations.⁵ Deloria stresses cultural nationalism and Indian spiritual environmentalism.⁶ Churchill is an accusationist tearing at the Hollywood image of the White man's Indian.⁷ True identity versus stereotype is a major thematic characteristic of most modern Indian writings.

An equally prominent literary trend of the 1990s has been the rise of the personal memoir or autobiography to the detriment, some say, of higher fiction. American Indians have contributed to this genre, mixing history with reminiscence to recreate their lives or particular tribal history. Over 700 Indian autobiographies have been published in this century, with a large part of them written since 1969.⁸ Two of the best

2 Faced with the racist terminology "quadroons," "octoroons," "half-breeds," etc., the terms "synethnic" and "metis" are becoming increasingly popular. "Synethnic" is a term that a trickster would love because of its connotation of "synthetic" as something man-made but not natural to sperm and egg combinations. A "synethnic" human is someone not quite human, trapped between worlds. The word itself is a combination of the descriptive "synonymously ethnic"; that is simultaneously being from two ethnic groups. For more confusion, see Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1992), particularly Parts 4 and 5.

3 Momaday, *Rainy Mountain*, 4.

4 See especially: Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984) and *The Beet Queen* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986); James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) and *The Indian Lawyer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977) and *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

5 Gerald Vizenor, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1978; rpt., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) and *Griever: An American Monkey Kitzg in China* (1987; rpt., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

6 Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) and *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1983).

7 Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage Press, 1992) and *From A Native Son: Selected Essays on Indigenism, 1985-1995* (Boston: South End Press, 1996).

8 H. David Brumble III, *American Indian Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 16, 11.

"fictions of the self" – as H. David Brumble labelled the genre of autobiography – are among the newest.

Wilma Mankiller's (Cherokee) *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* and Russell Means' (Oglala Sioux) *Where White Men Fear To Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* successfully mix the personal, historical, and mythical to create two contemporary Native American lives.⁹ I am reminded that Hertha Wong admonished all critics of autobiography that it is an outrageous hubris to analyze these very intimate re-creations of the self.¹⁰ But Mankiller and Means have written themselves not from the reflective vantage point of old age but during the prime of life. They have entered the danger zone because of the many living contemporaries who will read their judgements of the past, listen to them confess their lives, and be asked to believe them. We can't just accept their inventions because we too remember things and so will evaluate their stories and histories for ourselves.¹¹ Annie Dillard perceptively argued that autobiographers "cannibalize and reinvent" their lives.¹² Of his own *Education* Henry Adams said that "autobiography is a form of suicide."¹³

The two lives presented by Mankiller and Means are radically different and testify to the error manifest in the hackneyed saw, "seen one Indian, seen them all." That said, all readers of Indian autobiography have a difficult time distinguishing the "dance from the dancer" not only because each autobiographer creates a story that may or may not be true to the actual lived life, but also in the sense that Hollywood has given us so many – and so few – images of Indians. A reader has a difficult time

9 Wilma Mankiller with Michael Wallis, *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993); Russell Means with Marvin J. Wolf, *Where White Men Fear To Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995).

10 Hertha D. Wohlg, *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), vi.

11 John Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-5; William L. Andrews, *Classic American Autobiographies* (New York: Mentor, 1992), 10-11.

12 Dillard quoted in William Zinsser, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 15.

13 Adams in Robert F. Sayre, ed., *American Lives: An Anthology of Auto-biographical Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 14.

fighting past the stereotypes to find the person asking to be heard and believed as an individual storyteller.¹⁴

Americans have never been great readers – although they are not as bad as the stereotype has it – but they are great movie watchers. There is something of an Indian movie revival in progress with the recent releases and critical acclaim of "Dances With Wolves" (1990), "Black Robe" (1991), "Last of the Mohicans" (1992), "Thunderheart" (1992), "Geronimo: An American Hero" (1993), and "Pocahontas" (1995) to name the most prominent films. These movies are not a great improvement over their 2,300 forerunners, except for their inclusion of Indian actors in the main roles and for a few nods to history, languages, and scenery.

Where the older movies dealt mostly with the "savage savage," the newer ones are more sympathetic to the "noble" one. This is revisionist but it fails to go far enough to get to the human, or to the post revision. The noble savage is not an improvement on the savage savage because both stereotypes lack the essential truth that humans and groupings of humans are neither that bad nor that good in comparison with other groups. The movies have always presented what the majority Euro-American audience demanded. In the Nineties, directors know that most people want a sympathetic view, even if they still expect all movie Indians to wear buckskin and to exhibit the "Other" role when confronting white explorers, pioneers, Jesuits, or soldiers. So even though there are more movies about cowboys and Indians than there are years since Christ – thereby giving ample opportunity to portray nuance and variation among individual Indians and tribes – Hollywood has generally presented the Indian as one of three types.

The "savage savage" is the bloodthirsty Indian standing in the way of white progress and territorial expansionism. Most portrayals of this type simply "ugh" their way through the scenes, if they are not ambushing innocent settlers, lusting after a white woman, or communicating by animal calls. The female version of the "savage savage" is the squaw, demonstrably unkempt, a chewer of buffalo hide, and sharp-tongued

¹⁴ The phrase "to distinguish the dance from the dancer" was used by John Sturrock to explain how literary theorists look at the text and conventions of storytelling instead of at the historical context. I have used it differently, conforming more to the New Historicism. Sturrock, 9-10.

toward her husband. The "noble savage" is more of a sidekick to whites, as was Tonto to the Lone Ranger, Chingagook to Hawkeye, or Wind in His Hair to Dances With Wolves. And then there is Pocahontas, the comely Indian maid who willingly helps Whites at the expense of her own people. "Wigwam stereotyping" is what Vine Deloria, Jr., calls film images of Indians.¹⁵ Movie critic David Seals succinctly describes this dehumanization of Indians as "Custerism...[a]reduction of the image of people [that] kills as surely as any real-life, Wounded Knee-type massacre...the celluloid residuals of Manifest Destiny."¹⁶

Hollywood's mythmaking of Indians confronts autobiography's mythmaking by Indians. The problem of finding the real person in an Indian autobiography is acute, although Mankiller seems easier to locate than does Means. Means' true self is difficult to capture because of his latest forays into the lights and soundtrack of Hollywood movies where he played Chingagook in *Mohicans* and was the voice of Powhatan in *Pocahontas*. His is also a life of contradictions that might be interpreted through the body of Iktomi, the Lakota trickster, were it not for the fact that the trickster adapts to changing conditions in an appeal for harmony. Gerald Vizenor, who has written the most about the trickster tradition in Indian oral and written literature, has described Means as the "postindian warrior of simulations" for his playing out of the warrior role Whites want to see. Vizenor wrote that Means posturing is "Nonsense, and his taboos and proscriptions misconstrue the natural pleasure of trickster figuration and the tribal creation stories. The warriors who turn simulations into prohibitions, rather than liberation and survival, are themselves the treacherous taboos of dominance.... This portrait is not an Indian."¹⁷ Ted Jojola (Pueblo) also dismisses Means as a "stereotype."¹⁸ Still, Means is caught between cultures as he has been the savage savage of confrontation politics, but also the assimilationist noble savage, and

15 Vine Deloria, Jr., "The American Indian Image in North America," in Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet, eds., *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1980), 49-54.

16 David Seals, "The New Custerism," *The Nation* (May 13, 1991): 23.

17 Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 18, 20-21.

18 Jojola quoted in S. Elizabeth Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 1.

"somewhat Pocahantas" of the movies. The only consistency in these three roles for Means's actual life seems to be in the romanticizing of the Indian past. In real life and in the movies he is a "New Custerist" with the ironic twist that he is an Indian romanticizing Indians.

Critics Jeanne Perreault, Arnold Krupat, Hertha Wong, and Paula Gunn Allen (Lakota/Laguna Pueblo) have reminded us that every person is actually a multiplicity of identities and selves that intersect, go out of focus, become variable, and still remain one.¹⁹ Means and Mankiller fit this pattern as they represent outsiders that have been too little heard by the dominant EuroAmerican society. They are border crossers standing astride two or more cultures and telling the stories to coauthors who helped in the writing. This collaboration further confuses their voices, doubling them, changing them, expressing them all in the ethnocritical, multicultural language of English underlaid with the oral tradition and speech of Cherokee or Lakota.²⁰

Neither Means nor Mankiller is fluent in a native language other than the English of the assimilated Indian. This may not be a problem in the strictest sense of writing a novel. The majority of 1990s writing by Indians is in English and not in the language of their Indian ancestors. Momaday, for example, doesn't speak Kiowa or Cherokee, but his love for language and oral tradition allows him to get to the essence of Kiowa understandings.²¹ Certainly the singular voice of the "I" in autobiography has become at least a fourfold voice when put forward in the "as told to" memoirs of American Indians of synethnic heritage.

During the Indian Renaissance, Momaday and Silko showed the way in the use of the oral tradition and "pictorial I" to inform self identity. Mankiller and Means use both constructions to further their individual first person pasts. Beginning each chapter with a Cherokee folktale, italicized for supernatural effect, helps Mankiller sprinkle in the past with

19 Jeanne Perreault, *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autograplzy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 22; Arnold Krupat, ed., *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), xxiv; Wong, 88-117; Paula Gunn Allen, ed., *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983), 57-58.

20 Mae G. Henderson, ed., *Borders, Boundaries, and Frames: Essays in Cultural Criticism and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1-7; Krupat, xxiv; Wong, 11; Andrews, 10-11; Brumble, 11-12.

21 For a discussion of the importance of words and language to Indian identity; see N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

local color while informing it with the mythical. Means incorporates tales he heard as a child into the body of his text, emphasizing his involvement in long-standing Oglala ceremonies and spiritualism as the way to maintain his "indianness." Manttiller lets the folktales speak for themselves as informing, but not muting, modern Cherokee adaptation. Talking of her people, Manttiller writes, "We Cherokees have managed to figure out how to live successfully in a very modern, fast-paced world, while preserving our cultural values and traditions.... We are people of today – people of the so-called modern world. But first and foremost, and forever, we are also Cherokees."²²

Both authors punctuate their works with the "photographic I." Means selected the confrontational and Manttiller the communal. Means presented shots of Indians in rebellion, famous Oglala patriots, and American Indian Movement (AIM) demonstrations of the 1970s as well as photographs of himself, his wives, and children. His "photographic I" celebrates a warrior masculinity with guns, clubs, warpaint, feathers, buckskin, and women. The first picture in his photo section is of the leader Crow Dog; the last is of Means in the movie *Maltepeu* as Chingagook. Both photographs illustrate Means' focus on past glories and demonstrate his belief as a "traditionalist" that Indians should stop taking any Government assistance whatsoever and demand full nation status for all tribes within the United States. Manttiller's "visual I" is more community and family oriented and includes neither pictures of men warring nor of the infamous Trail of Tears where 4,000 Cherokees died in the removal from Georgia to Oklahoma in 1838. Her "pictorial I" is celebratory of family and optimistic about the modern place Cherokees have shaped as American citizens of Indian heritage.

Perhaps no two tribes are so dissimilar and similar as the Cherokee and Sioux. Cherokees made up part of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes of the Southeast who intermarried quickly with whites, built houses, cultivated crops using slave labor, invented an alphabet, and pressed its cases in the US Supreme Court. Of all tribes, the Cherokees have become models of assimilation. The Lakota have been made into the Indians of legend, unrivaled on the horse, led by Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Red

²² Manttiller, 254 and 257.

Cloud, defeating Custer at the Little Big Horn (1876), wearing buffalo skins and feathered headresses, and living in tepees on the Plains – the Indians Hollywood most often depicted as opposing EuroAmerican Manifest Destiny. Manltiller and Means are trapped by these histories of assimilation and resistance even while they write confidently of their own identities.

The authors benefit from the fame of the Laltota and Cherokee as the two most known American Indian civilizations among the 556 groups in the 400 nations living in America in 1997. Moreover, members of their tribes write. The first novel (1854) published by a Native American was by John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee).²³ In 1932, Laltota holy man Black Elk made the most lasting contribution in the genre of "as told to" autobiographies.²⁴ Charles Eastman, Luther Standing Bear, and Zitkala-Sa are famous.²⁵ In the 1990s, Laltota writers Leonard Crow Dog, Mary Brave Bird, and Vine Deloria, Jr., publish their stories.²⁶ Iron Eyes Cody has written of his life as the quintessential Hollywood Indian.²⁷ Contemporary Cherokee writers include Vickie Sears, Thomas King, and Ward Churchill.²⁸

Russell Means has been in the spotlight for thirty years. He became known through his militant Red Power politics in the 1970s when he was a leader of the American Indian Movement's (AIM) high visibility campaign on behalf of Pan-Indian rights. As a child he was relocated from South Dakota to California under the Federal "Termination" program. He dabbled in crime, drugs, and alcohol and, for years, drifted from job to job and woman to woman. With the formation of AIM, Means threw himself into the protests at Alcatraz, Mount Rushmore

²³ John Rollin Ridge, *The Life and Times of Joaquin Murieta* (1854).

²⁴ Black Elk with John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (New York: Morrow, 1932).

²⁵ Charles Alexander Eastman, *Indian Boyhood* (New York: McClure, Phillips; 1902) and *Tlze Indian Today: Tlze Past and Future of tlze First American* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1915); Luther Standing Bear, *My People: Tlze Sioux* (Lincoln; Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1975) and *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933); Zitkala-Sa, *American Indian Stories* (1921; rpt. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). These authors are the most anthologized American Indian authors.

²⁶ Leonard Crow Dog with Richard Erdoes, *Crow Dog: Four Generations of Siow Medicine Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995); Mary Brave Bird with Richard Erdoes, *Ohitika Woman* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Vine Deloria, Jr., "Afterword" in Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., ed., *America in 1492: Tlze World of tlze Indian Peoples Before the Arrival of Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 429-43.

(where he publicly peed down the stone face of Washington), Plymouth Rock, the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Building in Washington, Wounded Knee, and more. Means always placed himself in front of the cameras raising the consciousness of Americans to the plight of Indians and giving Indians a red Malcolm X. After artist Andy Warhol immortalized Means as face number one in his American Indian series, Means understood the fame his protests had brought him. He joined with porno lung Larry Flynt in a brief run for the Republican presidential nomination, failed to get the Libertarian nomination, joined the Moonies, and turned to the movies.

Means boldly describes himself as "an Oglala Lakota patriot," an instrument of the "Great Mystery," and the reincarnation of Crazy Horse, the most respected Lakota hero.²⁹ Historian Richard White joins Vizenor and Jojola to describe Means as "the White Man's Indian" who believes real Indians lived before 1890 or might live again in the future, but can't, except for notable exceptions, be found in the present. White's conclusion that Means has "framed his life as a movie" pushing the Hollywood stereotype for personal reward seems accurate.³⁰ Perhaps Dillard's comment about cannibalism and Adams's reflection on suicide applies directly to Means's *Where White Men Fear To Tread*, even while Wong's admonition about hubris disturbs the confidence of this reviewer.

Mankiller is tolerant where Means is intolerant. Her celebration of Indian life reflects the "good mind" approach she believes in as well as her feminist understanding that "women ... have always tried to keep harmony and balance in our world."³¹ Aligned directly with traditional Cherokee maternalism, Mankiller is an acculturated synethnic (Cherokee/Dutch/Irish) who became the first Principal Chief of a major Indian nation. Like Means, she was relocated to California from Oklahoma under the "Termination" program, demonstrated at Alcatraz, and became a strong advocate for self-help. But whereas Means put himself on

27 Iron Eyes Cody with Collin Perry, *Iron Eyes Cody: My Life as a Hollywood Indian* (New York: Everett House, 1982).

28 Vickie Sears, "Grace," in Patricia Riley, ed., *Growing Up Native American* (New York: Avon, 1993), 279-98; Thomas King, *Medicine River* (Toronto: Penguin, 1990); Ward Churchill, *From A Native Son* (1996).

29 Means, 536 and 554.

30 Richard White, "The Return of the Natives," *The New Republic* (July 8, 1996): 37.

31 Mankiller, ix and 226.

camera, Mankiller worked in Pan-Indian community centers in San Francisco before moving back to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the Cherokee capitol. Her approach is indigenous self-help and education alongside financial aid and federal government responsibility.

These two autobiographies demonstrate the range of different viewpoints – including Lakota and Cherokee, male and female, chauvinist and feminist, modern and traditional, acculturated and resistant, local and national – that go into the re-creation of individual and corporate Native American identities. They should help replace the Hollywood Indian with the human being. Means and Mankiller have written themselves in the ancient and modern voices of their peoples as they stress the strength of the hoop, elders, and circle of life, even as they embrace modern communication, technology, and living standards of the coming millennium. In so doing they have continued the oral tradition, "as-told-to" autobiography, and American success stories that persist in making myth and legend. They have dreamed and imagined themselves into existence in ways that make writers and critics of the Indian Renaissance smile.