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INDIGENOUS AMERICAS

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EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT INDIANS IS WRONG

Paul Chaat Smith

INDIGENOUS AMERICAS SERIES

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Every Picture Tells a Story

History records that Ishi, a.k.a. the Last Yahi, the Stone Age Ishi Between Two Worlds, was captured by northern Californians in 1911 and dutifully turned over to anthropologists. He spent the rest of his life in a museum in San Francisco. (And you think your life is boring.)

They said Ishi was the last North American Indian untouched by civilization. I don't know about that, but it's clear he was really country and seriously out of touch with recent developments. We're talking major hayseed.

His keepers turned down all vaudeville, circus, and theatrical offers for the living caveman, but they weren't above a little cheap amusement themselves. One day they took Ishi on a field trip to Golden Gate Park. An early aviator named Harry Fowler was attempting a cross-country flight. You can imagine the delicious anticipation of the anthropologists. The Ishi Man versus the Flying Machine. What would he make of this miracle, this impossible vision, this technological triumph? The aeroplane roared off into the heavens and circled back over the park. The men of science turned to the Indian, expectantly. Would he quake? Tremble? Would they hear his death song? Ishi looked up at the plane overhead. He spoke in a tone

his biographers would describe as one of "mild interest." "White man up there?"

Twenty years later my grandfather would become the first Comanche frequent flyer. Robert Chaat was born at the turn of the century in Oklahoma, when it was still Indian Territory. It was our darkest hour. The Comanche Nation was in ruins, wrecked and defeated. The U.S. Army did a census at this time and found that 1,171 of us were still alive.

Grandpa Chaat was one of those holocaust survivors. He was a tireless fighter for the Jesus Road, who battled the influence of peyote and forbade his children to attend powwows. Yet he also taught pride in being Indian and conducted services in Comanche into the late 1960s. His generation was pretty much raised by the army, who beat them for speaking Indian and had them march like soldiers to school. Geronimo was the local celebrity, and my grandfather remembers meeting him before the old guy died in 1909. Fort Sill was a small place; I guess everyone knew Geronimo.

My mother remembers her dad's trips to Chicago and New York when air travel was often a two-day adventure. He sent his five children trinkets from the 1939 World's Fair, newspaper clippings about his speeches around the country, pictures of himself with Norman Vincent Peale.

She discovered the lantern slides on a trip back to Oklahoma in 1991. They were in a battered and ancient black case buried deep in a closet. These closets have given up more and more secrets as time has passed. A few years earlier, when Grandpa still lived in the tiny house in Medicine Park (soon he would move to a nursing home in town), he produced an eagle feather from one of those closets. The feather, he told my mother, belonged to an ancestor who was a medicine man.

The forty-eight square glass slides are about three by four inches, at least an eighth of an inch thick. Each has its own slot in the felt-lined case. They're heavy: a single one weighs more than an entire box of their modern equivalents. Generously engineered with metal and glass instead of cardboard and film, they are about as similar to today's slides as a 1937 Packard is to this year's Honda.

They show Indian lodges, tipis, Comanches of all ages in brilliant clothing, buffalo, horses, wagons, Quanah Parker's Star House, all in vivid, lifelike color.

Their meaning and purpose? Fund-raising, of course. There were even a few pledge cards in the case: "Indian Mission Fund. I pledge to pay the sum of __________ before May 1, 19_____." I could see Grandpa lugging his twenty pounds of glass slides through airports (still called "flying fields") because they would have been too precious to check through, the key to next year's budget or the church's building fund.

But what were these pictures? Mom could identify some of the locations and people, but most of them she could not. Maybe they weren't even Comanche. Perhaps the Dutch Reformed Church had a media consultant who put it together. The label points in this direction: "Chas. Beseler Co., New York," not some outfit in Lawton or Oklahoma City. Grandpa might have sent along a few of his own pictures, and the rest, for all we know, might have been from a photo agency in Manhattan.

To me the Indians in the pictures seem dignified, friendly, open to religious instruction and new cultural ideas. I imagine listening to Grandpa in a church meeting room in New York or Boston in 1937, hearing about the struggle for redemption and a better way of life. A people at a crossroads, he might say. The images underline his script: Indians in blankets with papooses on their backs next to Indians in starched western shirts and bandannas, posing for the camera on their way to a Jimmie Rodgers show. We see, ridiculously, an umbrella next to a wagon.

Which Will It Be, the Blanket or the Bible?

On second thought, it's obvious the Indians are resistance fighters pretending to cooperate. See that look in their eyes? They are American hostages denouncing imperialism in a flat, dull voice for the Hezbollah. They steal the photographer's gun when he's not looking. At the Gourd Dance tonight in the foothills of Mount Scott, they make plans for the future, plans the city fathers won't like.

We have been using photography for our own ends as long as we've been flying, which is to say as long as there have been cameras and airplanes. The question isn't whether we love photography, but instead why we love it so much. From the Curtis stills to our own Kodachrome slides and Polaroid prints and Camcorder tapes, it's obvious we are a people who adore taking pictures and having pictures taken of us. So it should hardly be a surprise that everything about being Indian has been shaped by the camera.

In this relationship we're portrayed as victims, dupes, losers, and dummies. Lo, the poor fool posing for Edward Curtis wearing the Cheyenne headdress even though he's Navajo. Lo, those pathetic Indian extras in a thousand bad westerns. Don't they have any pride?

I don't know, maybe they dug it. Maybe it was fun. Contrary to what most people (Indians and non-Indians alike) now believe, our true history is one of constant change, technological innovation, and intense curiosity about the world. How else do you explain our instantaneous adaptation to horses, rifles, flour, and knives?

The camera, however, was more than another tool we could adapt to our own ends. It helped make us what we are today.

See, we only became Indians once the armed struggle was over in 1890. Before then we were Shoshone or Mohawk or Crow. For centuries North America was a complicated, dangerous place full of shifting alliances between the United States and Indian nations, among the Indian nations themselves, and between the Indians and Canada, Mexico, and half of Europe.

This happy and confusing time ended forever that December morning a century ago at Wounded Knee. Once we no longer posed a military threat, we became Indians, all of us more or less identical in practical terms, even though until that moment, and for thousands of years before, we were as different from one another as Greeks are from Swedes. The Comanches, for example, were herded onto a reservation with the Kiowa and the Apache, who not only spoke different languages but were usually enemies. (We hated Apaches even more than we hated Mexicans.)

The truth is that we didn't know a damn thing about being Indian. This information was missing from our Original Instructions. We had to figure it out as we went along. The new century beckoned. Telegraphs, telephones, movies—the building blocks of mass culture were in place, or being invented. These devices would fundamentally change life on the planet. They were new to us, but they were almost as new to everyone else.

At this very moment, even as bullets and arrows were still flying, Sitting Bull joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West (the word "Show" was never part of the name) and became our first pop star. Like an early Warhol he sold his autograph for pocket change, and like Mick Jagger he noticed that fame made getting dates easier. He toured the world as if he owned it, made some money, became even more famous than he already was. Afraid of cameras? Talk to my agent first is more like it.

It was an interesting career move, even if it couldn't prevent the hysterical U.S. overreaction to the Ghost Dance that resulted in his assassination the same month as the Wounded Knee massacre.

Some think of Sitting Bull as foolish and vain. No doubt Crazy Horse felt this way. The legendary warrior hated cameras and never allowed himself to be photographed, although this didn't stop the U.S. Postal Service from issuing a Crazy Horse stamp in the 1980s. Maybe Sitting Bull was ego-tripping, but I see him as anxious to figure out the shape of this new world.

For John Ford, King Vidor, Raoul Walsh, and the other early kings of Hollywood, the Indian wars were more or less current events. Cecil B. DeMille, who made more than thirty Indian dramas, was fifteen at the time of Wounded Knee. They grew up in a world in which relatives and friends had been, or could have been, direct participants in the Indian wars.

The promise of film was to deliver what the stage could not, and the taming of the frontier, the winning of the West, the building of the nation was the obvious, perfect choice. Indians and Hollywood. We grew up together.

This has really screwed us sometimes, for example, the stupid macho posturing by some of our movement leaders in the 1970s. (If only their parents had said, *Kids! Turn that TV off and do your homework!* we might have actually won our treaty rights.)

But maybe it's better to be vilified and romanticized than completely ignored. And battles over historical revisionism seem doomed from the start, because the last thing these images are about is what really happened in the past. They're fables being told to shape the future.

All of the lame bullshit, the mascots, the pickup truck commercials, the New Age know-nothings, I used to find it embarrassing. Now I think it's part of the myth to think all that is bogus and the good old days were the real thing. The tacky, dumb stuff about this country is the real thing now. The appropriation of Indian symbols that began with the earliest days of European contact is over, complete. Today, nothing is quite as American as the American Indian. We've become a patriotic symbol.

For our part, we dimly accept the role of spiritual masters and first environmentalists as we switch cable channels and videotape our weddings and ceremonies. We take pride in westerns that make us look gorgeous (which we are!) and have good production values. We secretly wish we were more like the Indians in the movies.

And for the Americans, who drive Pontiacs and Cherokees and live in places with Indian names, like Manhattan and Chicago and Idaho, we remain a half-remembered presence, both comforting and dangerous, lurking just below the surface.

We are hopelessly fascinated with each other, locked in an endless embrace of love and hate and narcissism. Together we are condemned, forever to disappoint, never to forget even as we can't remember. Our snapshots and home movies create an American epic. It's fate, destiny. And why not? We are the country, and the country is us.

(What? No flash again?!)

Part I. States of Amnesia

Lost in Translation

The following comments were delivered as a presentation titled "Lost in Translation: Why the News Media Has So Much Trouble with Indians," Boswell Symposium, DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, March 15, 2004.

I work at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, and although I speak here as an independent critic and curator, I draw on that experience to look at why Indians, and Indian issues, are so often overlooked, misunderstood, misrepresented: in short, why the international community and the news media have so much trouble with us.

The answer to that question, as with so many others, is best provided by one person. He's one of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers, a man who speaks truth to power and who commands the attention of millions. As I'm sure you've guessed, I am, of course, speaking of legendary television producer Don Hewitt. The genius behind *60 Minutes* once explained how he managed to keep the show at the top of the ratings decade after decade, and why others who copy this apparently simple format always fail: he had rules. One of them was to avoid, at all costs, doing stories about Indians. Why? Because Indians talk too much, too slowly, and what they say is always complicated. With Indians it's never just "water"; it has to be "springs of life bestowed on us by our grandmothers." Why did Hewitt avoid Indian stories? Because we're lousy television.

He's completely right on all counts, and when I first came across that quote years ago it blew me away. Hewitt somehow understood one of the deepest truths about us, which I am sharing with you: although we are imagined as primitive and simple, we're actually anything but. He realized the Indian experience is an ocean of terrifying complexity. We are reputed to be stoic, but in reality it's hard to get us to shut up.

Even a talent as oversized as Don Hewitt (whose stock in trade was to make complex stories work on the unforgiving format of commercial television) says it's almost impossible. I propose, however, that Indians who won't shut up, and whose lives and political situations are bewilderingly complex, are only the tip of the iceberg.

The iceberg itself is the problem. And the iceberg is this: the Indian experience, imagined to be largely in the past and in any case at the margins, is in fact central to world history. Contact five centuries ago that for the first time connected the world was the profoundest event in human history, and it changed life everywhere. It was the first truly modern moment: continents and worlds that had been separated for millions of years became just weeks, then days, and now only hours away.

But how can the Indian experience be central when it is largely ignored and for most Americans encountered through cartoonish movies and in the names of rivers, cities, and sports teams? We are not marginal, and in the twenty-first century we are everywhere and nowhere, invisible and standing right next to you. Hardly any Indians live in Washington, D.C., unless you count all those Mayan Indians who clean offices and landscape gardens.

It all seems to suggest that everything most people know about Indians is wrong. Well, it is. That's the other profound truth I am sharing with you.

In February 1973, Indians in South Dakota took over the hamlet of Wounded Knee and were soon surrounded by hundreds of heavily armed federal troops. This won the Indian movement widespread international attention, including the most glittering of prize of all, the front page of the *New York Times.* Above the fold. Lots occurred over

the next two and a half months, including a curious incident in which some of the hungry, blockaded Indians attempted to slaughter a cow. Reporters and photographers gathered to watch. Nothing happened. None of the Indians—some urban activists, some from Sioux reservations—actually knew how to butcher cattle. Fortunately, a few of the journalists did know, and they took over, ensuring dinner for the starving rebels.

That was a much discussed event during and after Wounded Knee. The most common reading of this was that basically we were fakes. Indians clueless about butchering livestock were not really Indians.

In a funny and tragic way, this one incident had more resonance than the fact that the United States deployed Phantom jets and Vietnam-era weapons against a few hundred ragtag rebels armed mostly with shotguns and hunting rifles, or the subsequent criminal prosecutions of hundreds of activists that lasted for years and constituted one of the largest mass political trials in American history.

Sure, the illegal use of the military in the poorest jurisdiction in the United States is kind of interesting, but it was the cow-slaughtering deal that kept coming up. The Lakota patriots at Wounded Knee lost points for this. (I myself know nothing about butchering cattle, and would hope that doesn't invalidate my remarks about the global news media and human rights.)

That would be the last time in the twentieth century we ever made page A1 of the *New York Times* as a breaking news story.

Four years later, in September 1977, hundreds of Indians from throughout the Americas assembled in Geneva for a non-governmental organization conference. It was led by many of the same activists who were part of the American Indian Movement. The conference was a huge success. The U.S. State Department alerted embassies throughout the world to anticipate lots of tough questions about sterilization of Indian women and other human rights violations, and in the official documentation the United States issued a formal response, quoting the UN ambassador, Andrew Young.

Well, you know the punch line here. The Geneva Conference got virtually no coverage in the United States.

Yes, the news media always want the most dramatic story. But I would argue there is an overlay with Indian stories that makes it especially difficult, and that explains not only why an unprecedented international conference gets no ink but even why, when our actions meet their criteria, our incompetence in butchering livestock always overshadows the story of Phantom jets against .22s and shotguns.

What can one person do?

Not much.

So, I urge everyone, Indians included, to start with the assumption that everything you know about Indians is wrong. Begin not by reading about South Dakota but by looking for the Indian history beneath your own feet.

On Romanticism

Brother Eagle, Sister Sky: A Message from Chief Seattle is a beautifully illustrated children's book by Susan Jeffers. This publication spent more than nineteen weeks on the best-seller lists and was chosen by members of the American Booksellers Association as "the book we most enjoyed selling in 1991." Here's a passage from the text:

> How can you buy the sky?
> How can you own the rain and wind?
> My mother told me
>   every part of this earth is sacred to our people.
> Every pine needle, every sandy shore.
> Every mist in the dark woods.
> Every meadow and humming insect.
> All are holy in the memory of our people.
> My father said to me,
>   I know the sap that courses through the trees as I know the blood
>   that flows in my veins
> We are part of the earth and it is part of us.
> The perfumed flowers are our sisters.

We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat.
If we sell you our land, care for it as we have cared for it.
Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it.
Preserve the land and the air and the rivers for your children's children
and love it as we have loved it.

It's a great book with only one problem: it's a fabrication. *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* is pretty much made up from start to finish. Who wrote these pretty words? Not the Suquamish leader Seattle. Not even Susan Jeffers, though she did some rewriting.

This speech, by now probably the most famous single piece of Indian oratory, was actually written in 1970 by a University of Texas instructor named Ted Perry. Perry was hired by the Southern Baptist Convention to write a documentary film on the environment. He came across a disputed (and probably fraudulent) version of a speech Seattle may or may not have given and rewrote it to express 1970s environmental ideas. At most Perry used a few lines of what Seattle may have said. At Expo '74 in Spokane, Washington, portions of the Perry–Seattle speech were plastered across the wall at the U.S. pavilion. This worked out well, since Expo '74's theme was the environment. The rest, as they say, is history.

The controversy concerning the origins of the speech began just as *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* started its long tenure at the top of the best-seller lists. The fact that this book was written by and for white environmentalists was awkward, but the publisher handled the matter expeditiously. The best-seller lists simply reclassified the book from nonfiction to another category: advice, how-to, and miscellaneous. (That's where they put the cat books.) And they did more. The publisher brought out new advertisements featuring an endorsement from Jewell Praying Wolf James, said to be Seattle's great-grandnephew, who offered congratulations and thanks to the publisher for "taking our famous chief's words and transforming them into an experience all can use to stimulate an awareness of a natural world that is rapidly losing *its* beauty." *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* continued to sell and sell and sell. But one reason the book's authenticity became a point of challenge

can be found in another story. This one concerns *The Education of Little Tree: A True Story,* by Forrest Carter, the autobiography of a Cherokee Indian's boyhood in Tennessee. Published by Delacorte Press in 1976 with virtually no promotion, the book slowly found a mass audience. It was re-released by the University of New Mexico Press and by the spring of 1991 had soared to the top of the *New York Times* nonfiction best-seller list. Reviewers and the public at large loved the story's strong environmental message, and the book proved especially popular with younger readers.

So now you're thinking, ha, Ted Perry again, right? Well, not this time. *The Education of Little Tree* was in fact written by Forrest Carter. The problem was that Forrest Carter turned out to be Asa Carter. And Asa Carter turned out, number one, not to be Cherokee, and, number two, to have been a legendary white supremacist. In the 1960s he led a Ku Klux Klan fringe group. In those days he was living large as a speechwriter for Alabama governor George Wallace. It was Asa Carter who wrote the electrifying battle cry: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever."

When all this was revealed in devastating detail by Emory University professor Dan Carter (no relation) in October 1991, there was mumbling about how Forrest must have mellowed over the years; that when he wrote *Little Tree* he was a different guy altogether. Yet a close reading of *Little Tree,* and his novel *The Rebel Outlaw Josey Wales,* which later became a Clint Eastwood movie about Comanches, shows a consistent worldview obsessed with the racial purity of family and kin. In all of Carter's writing, including the speeches he wrote for George Wallace, it's us against the world. Trust no one. So what happened? *Little Tree* was reclassified from nonfiction to fiction, and, like *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky,* continues to sell. Finally, it didn't really matter that the first Indian autobiography to win a mass audience of young people in the United States was both fake and written by a committed racist. It seems the penalty for fraudulent Indian books these days is getting moved from one best-seller list to another. Later editions of *Little Tree* include an introduction by Osage Indian academic Dr. Rennard Strickland, who discusses the controversy, agrees that Asa

Carter is the author, but still endorses the book as an accurate portrait of Cherokee life.

I've written about these two books at some length because to me they're perfect examples of the ideological swamp Indian people find ourselves in these days. We are witnessing a new age in the objectification of American Indian history and culture, one that doesn't even need Indians except as endorsers. Our past is turning into pieces of clever screenplay. And even the exposure of an Indian book as a total fake turns out to be little more than a slight embarrassment, easily remedied. The Indian intellectual community responded to this scandal with a deafening silence. Kurt Cobain, the late prince of grunge, appropriately from the city that bears the name of the Suquamish leader who so captivated Ted Perry and Susan Jeffers, wrote a lyric that described pretty well our reaction: "I found it hard / it was hard to find / Oh well, whatever, nevermind."

In the context of these publications and their checkered past I can't help thinking of Vine Deloria Jr., a Lakota and one of our best intellectuals. In 1969 he wrote *Custer Died for Your Sins,* a tough, funny book with the subtitle *An Indian Manifesto.* Fortunate timing helped make it a best seller. It was at the crest of the original Red Power movement of the 1960s: there were hunt-ins, fish-ins, and the occupation of Alcatraz Island. *The Unjust Society,* by Harold Cardinal, a Canadian Indian, and Stan Steiner's *The New Indians* seemed certain to be the first of a new wave of books about our current situation. But something else happened. Americans became fascinated with Indians all right, but not the ones still here. Instead, Americans turned to *Touch the Earth,* a sepia-toned volume of famous chiefs' greatest rhetorical hits. They read *The Memoirs of Chief Red Fox,* by a living Sioux chief no living Sioux had ever heard of. Chief Red Fox claimed to have personally witnessed the Battle of Little Big Horn. (This book was quickly revealed to be fake, but only after it sold more than any serious book about Indians ever had.) And, of course, the mother of all Indian books, Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee,* an entirely reasonable history of Indians that ends in 1890, without even a hint that some of us survived.

Well, all of this blew Deloria's mind, and in 1973 he drew this analogy. Imagine it's 1955, right after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling on desegregation, in the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott. Martin Luther King Jr. holds a press conference, but it's a disaster; all the reporters ask about are the old days on the plantation and the origin of Negro spirituals. The freedom struggle pushes on, undaunted. Americans are transfixed by these dramatic events and rush out to buy new books on the cultural achievements of Africa in the year 1300. Two new Black writers, James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones, publish important books, but they're ignored in favor of a new history called *Bury My Heart at Jamestown.* People are terribly moved. Deloria continues, "People reading the book vow never again to buy or sell slaves."

Considering that recent decades have seen the most significant Indian political movement in a century, including much new sensitivity and education, we might have thought things had improved. But the familiarity of the situation around these recent publications leaves me feeling that things haven't gotten any better, only more subtle. The discourse on Indian art or politics or culture, even among people of goodwill, is consistently frustrated by the distinctive type of racism that confronts Indians today: romanticism. Simply put, romanticism is a highly developed, deeply ideological system of racism toward Indians that encompasses language, culture, and history. From the beginning of this history the specialized vocabulary created by Europeans for "Indians" ensured our status as strange and primitive. Our political leaders might have been called kings or lords; instead, they were chiefs. Indian religious leaders could have just as accurately been called bishop or minister; instead, they were medicine men. Instead of soldier or fighter, warrior. And, perhaps, most significant, tribe instead of nation. (For a more recent example of this, note how press accounts often talk about ethnic troubles in Europe, but tribal conflicts in southern Africa, Iraq, and Afghanistan.) Language became and remains a tool by which we are made the "Other"; the Lakota name Tatanka Iyotanka becomes Sitting Bull.

This is not to say that "bishop" was necessarily more accurate than

"medicine man," or that we have not made a term like "warrior" our own, or that translated Indian names aren't beautiful. It is to recognize that there are political implications to those decisions, and it is not one of multicultural understanding. The language exoticizes, and this exoticization has encompassed and permitted a range of historical responses from destruction to idealization.

Because our numbers are so few, the battle for a more realistic and positive treatment in the mass media has always been a necessary component of our struggle. The new traditionalism that does exist in Indian Country was won at great expense and effort. After all, it wasn't so long ago that Indian languages and ceremonies were discouraged and in many cases outlawed

In the 1970s it was enough to denounce silly books and movies about Indians, but today that reaction almost misses the point. What's different about our present situation is that it's become clear that we as Indian people love these books and the images they present as much as anyone else. In fact, both *Little Tree* and *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* will probably find their way under many Indian Christmas trees and the fact of their authorship will not greatly affect their promising future with Indian readers any more than it will with non-Indian readers.

To me these new stereotypes show us that the myth-making machine has learned new and deadly tricks, much like the cyborg in *Terminator 2*. The ultimate result—the continued trivialization and appropriation of Indian culture, the absolute refusal to deal with us as just plain folks living in the present and not the past—is the same as ever. That's why challenging negative images and questioning who owns or produces these images are no substitute for a more all-sided oppositional effort. What's needed is a popular movement that could bring about meaningful change in the daily lives of Indian people.

In the 1970s, for instance, the American Indian Movement and other organizations challenged racist stereotypes while at the same time engaging a host of structural issues directly relevant to Indian people. These groups pushed for better housing and education, treaty recognition, an end to police brutality, the ouster of dictatorial colonial elites on reserves, and an end to exploitative lease arrangements.

It was in the context of this multifaceted social change effort that the fight for new imagery had a fuller meaning. Unfortunately, the current prospects for building such a movement are gloomy. But though things are bleak, co-optation is not inevitable. What has made us one people is the common legacy of colonialism and diaspora. Central to that history is our necessary, political, and in this century often quite hazardous attempt to reclaim and understand our past, the real one, not the invented one.

Five hundred years ago we were Seneca and Cree and Hopi and Kiowa, as different from each other as Norwegians are from Italians, or Egyptians from Zulus. One example of just how different is the splintering of languages. Greek and English and Russian all have the same Indo-European root. As different as those languages are, at one point they were very similar. In North America there were more than 140 different language stocks. The Americas were a happening, cosmopolitan place, and when Europeans first showed up one suspects the reaction was less the astonished genuflection the explorers reported than something more like, "So, what's your story?" When we think of the old days, like it or not we conjure up images that have little to do with real history. We never think of the great city of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, five centuries ago bigger than London at that time. We never imagine sullen teenagers in some pre-Columbian Zona Rosa dive in that fabled Aztec metropolis, bad-mouthing the wretched war economy and the ridiculous human sacrifices that drove their empire. We don't think of the settled Indian farming towns in North America (far more typical than nomads roaming the Plains). We never think about the Cherokee, who built a modern, independent nation, with roads and schools and universities and diplomatic recognition from European countries. After Sequoyah invented the Cherokee alphabet, it took just over a year for the entire nation to become literate. The Cherokee were just as typical as the Sioux, but you don't hear much about them.

America pre-Columbus was a riot of vastly different cultures, which occasionally fought each other, no doubt sometimes viciously and for stupid reasons. If some Indian societies were ecological utopias with

that perfect, elusive blend of democracy and individual freedom, some also practiced slavery, both before and after contact. And if things were complicated before the admiral showed up, they got even more so later. For centuries North America was perhaps the most intricate geopolitical puzzle on earth, with constantly shifting alliances between, with, and among Indians and Europeans. As Chuck Berry would say many years later, anything you want we got it right here. Yet the amazing variety of human civilization that existed five centuries ago has been replaced in the popular imagination by one image above all: the Plains Indians of the mid-nineteenth century. Most Indians weren't anything like the Sioux or the Comanche, either the real ones or the Hollywood invention. The true story is simply too messy and complicated. And too threatening. The myth of noble savages, completely unable to cope with modern times, goes down much more easily. No matter that Indian societies consistently valued technology and when useful made it their own. The glory days of the Comanches, for example, were built on the European imports of horses and guns. (We mastered both and delayed the settlement of Texas for 150 years, a public service we're proud of to this day.)

I have avoided here the usual recitation of broken treaties, massacres, genocide, and other atrocities. It's what we're supposed to talk about, but business as usual has been a dismal failure as far as dialogue goes, and I find guilt trips incredibly boring and useless. So when I say, for example, that the Americas are built on the invasion and destruction of a populated land with hundreds of distinct, complex societies, and a centuries-long slave trade involving millions of Africans, I offer this as an observation that is the minimum requirement for making sense of the history of our countries. This unpleasant truth is why Indians have been erased from the master narrative of this country and replaced by the cartoon images that all of us know and most of us believe. At different times the narrative has said we didn't exist and the land was empty; then it was mostly empty and populated by fearsome savages; then populated by noble savages who couldn't get with the program; and on and on. Today the equation is Indian equals spiritualism and environmentalism. In twenty years it will probably be something else.

I suggest that a powerful antidote to the manufactured past now being created for us is the secret history of Indians in the twentieth century. Geronimo really did have a Cadillac and used to drive it to church, where he'd sign autographs. Quanah Parker, the legendary leader of the Comanches, became a successful businessman after the war. He was part owner of a railroad, and endorsed farming and Jesus. At the same time he was a leader in the Native American Church and advocated the use of peyote. One of the most instructive lives is that of Black Elk, one of our greatest heroes and most revered spiritual leaders. His astonishing life included a stint in Buffalo Bill's Wild West

Geronimo and his famous Cadillac—except it was a 1905 Locomobile Model C. Courtesy National Archives, photo NWDNS 75-IC-1.

show and surviving the Wounded Knee massacre. An impresario-anthropologist named John Neihardt wrote of his fantastic visions in *Black Elk Speaks.* It's a book that has become quite literally a Bible. Apprentice medicine men use it today as an instruction manual for establishing their own practices.

I should clarify here that I am not Lakota and not particularly spiritual. Of course, to justify my own lack of spiritualism, it is necessary for me to cite the relatively pedestrian cosmology of my people, the Comanches. It seems like we had enough magic to get by, but everyone agrees our religion was a rather basic affair compared to that of the Hopi or the Sioux or the Egyptians. We're most famous for killing more settlers than any other Indian people, so I don't know, maybe we just didn't have the time. But anyway I was intrigued recently to come across a reference to Black Elk in which it was stated matter-of-factly that he was a Catholic most of his life. I found it fascinating that despite hearing about Black Elk for many years, I had no idea he spent most of his life as a Catholic. I learned that many believe Black Elk and white assistants sat down and invented practically a new religion, explicitly designed to blend teachings of Christianity and Lakota spiritualism. At the time, he was working as a catechist for the Roman Catholic Church of Nebraska. Essentially he was a lay priest. I also learned he had a first name, and that it was Nick. The *Who's Who* entry for Black Elk, then, probably would have described him as religious leader, entertainer, church bureaucrat, best-selling author. It would say he revolutionized Sioux religion with the help of anthropologists. Do any of these facts about Nick Black Elk invalidate his contribution to the Lakota people, or his spiritual teachings? I think that to say they do is to say the invented, impossibly wise sages are preferable to the people who actually lived. Nick Black Elk, an extra in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, a paid employee of the Catholic Church, only becomes more interesting, not less, and his accomplishments even more remarkable. Those who would have it otherwise cherish the myth more than the genuine struggles of real human beings.

I believe all of our lives are just as crazy as Nick's. And when we refuse to acknowledge this, and pretend that it's otherwise, to pretend we are real Indians, instead of real human beings, to please an antique notion of European romanticism, we may think we're acting tough but instead we're selling out.

Some people, Indians as well as non-Indians, will always prefer Ted Perry's version of Seattle's speech to Seattle's. And some will find the Black Elk of John Neihardt's book preferable to the intriguing, complex Nick Black Elk. In other words, some will prefer white inventions of Indians preferable to the real thing. There will always be a market for both nostalgia and fantasy. The cottage industry of Native Americana, formerly the province of hippies and enterprising opportunists, has become mainstream and professional. Today in the average chain bookstore in the United States, most of the Indian titles are in the New Age section. Well-meaning feminists conduct Indian rituals, and the men's movement has appropriated Indian drumming for its get-togethers. The myth-making machinery that in earlier days made us out to be primitive and simple now says we are spiritually advanced and environmentally perfect. Anything, it seems, but fully human. Over time these cartoon images have never worked to our advantage, and even though much in the new versions is flattering, I can't see that in the long run such perspectives will help us at all.

The victory of these new stereotypes and our seduction by them have serious implications for contemporary Indian life. In the old days—by this I mean the 1970s—there was a sense of irony and distance between whatever Hollywood or hippies or anyone else thought of Indian life. That seems to have all but disappeared, and many of us seem to have settled for the jukebox spiritualism of a manufactured image that in truth is just a retooled, updated version of the old movies we all used to laugh at.

I agree with Eduardo Galeano, who wrote, "I am not one to believe in traditions simply because they are traditions. I believe in the legacies that multiply human freedom, not in those that cage it. It should be obvious, but can never be too obvious: when I refer to remote voices from the past that can help us find answers to the challenges of the present, I am not proposing a return to the sacrificial rites that offered up human hearts to the gods, nor am I praising the despotism

of the Inca or the Aztec monarchs." As a cultural critic and participant in the contemporary art world, I reflect on these histories as a way of putting current events and ideas into perspective, in order to find my own place and direction within them. These broad cultural issues are a foundation from which I can look at my own work within this culture.

A few years ago I had the chance to visit a number of museums, interpretive centers, and heritage centers in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. I was fortunate enough to get a backstage tour of the redesigned Natural History Museum in the capital city, Regina. The staff had completely rethought and redesigned the wing of the museum dealing with Indians. They consulted with Native people and hired Indians to paint and construct exhibits; I was especially impressed with a beautiful display of a modern canvas sweat lodge. Another had Indians in a tipi with a dog sled out front, and next to that were Indians in a cabin with a snowmobile out front. In these exhibits we managed not to be extinct.

I left the tour with nothing but respect for the efforts of a staff that obviously had thought long and hard about how to represent Indian culture. At the same time, for me the nagging question remained: Why are we in this museum at all? The English and the Ukrainians and the Germans aren't here. Only us, next to the dinosaurs. The museum I want to visit might show the history of the land now called Saskatchewan, and how humans have come and gone and changed the landscape. How Indians tricked buffalo into jumping off cliffs is worthy of an exhibit, but why stop there? How about one on Ukrainian farming techniques, or the socialist-inspired wheat cooperatives? How about an exhibit on the efforts of the Cree to learn farming, and the government policies that made those efforts almost impossible? Why not discuss the spiritualism of typical Saskatoon residents today? Give us a church next to that sweat lodge.

The big museums, together with the government itself in the United States and Canada, are key operators in the success or failure of Indian artists. They are playing a central role today in the development of contemporary Indian art—a great irony since many are still

in the process of properly relocating the tens of thousands of human remains in their collections, along with associated funerary objects. I bring this topic up not to run another guilt trip, since I've heard enough of those to last several lifetimes, but because I find it interesting that the same museums that carried out that ghoulish work of not so long ago, work that included scientific studies proving the inferiority of the red people, now rush to embrace the awesome accomplishments of this previously inferior race. I heard that fund-raising letter for the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., speculates that Indian astronomy was so advanced that it can perhaps aid in the exploration of Mars. This is something. Just in the space of a few decades they go from collecting our bones to saying we're smarter than NASA! One might even argue that a Native artist with talent has as good a shot at a viable career as white artists with similar abilities—perhaps even a better shot.

Despite this new and long-overdue attention, I believe making Indian art is a vocation fraught with danger, in some ways just as dangerous as those who participated in Sun Dances and peyote ceremonies when they were outlawed not so long ago. We can argue that we are part of an unbroken circle extending across half a millennium, but it's foolish to deny that in the here and now we exist as doubly marginalized cultural workers in a capitalist system. We know our audience will be overwhelmingly non-Indian. We know our work might be extravagantly praised and at the same time patronized and ignored in the circles where art matters. As artists, we need dialogue and criticism to improve our work, yet we must deal with the weird politics of not being simply artists but Indian artists.

Even the most adventurous contemporary Indian artist faces the prospect of a lifetime of Indian-only shows. Even fiercely intelligent, complex Indian art—without a reassuring eagle or buffalo in sight—runs the risk of becoming another form of exotic souvenir. Indian artists who choose to participate in the world of professional art critics and curators and museums, to dance with the prospect of fame and fortune, must face these contradictions head-on if they expect to survive with a shred of integrity. Ours is the first generation to have

enough writers and artists achieving success in the dominant culture to make up a crowd. And our backgrounds are often not so different from those of many other artists. Most Native artists went to university, have formal art school training, and professionally are not so different from their non-Native peers. But this does not mean we are the same, nor does it mean that we don't have something unique and valuable to offer. Silence about our own complicated histories supports the colonizers' idea that the only real Indians are full-blooded, from a reservation, speak their language, and practice the religion of their ancestors. Even though these criteria represent a small number of us as a whole, and fit few or none of us plying the trades of artist or writer or activist, we often consciously and unconsciously try to play this part drilled into us by the same Hollywood movies from which non-Indians get their ideas.

The process of incorporating traditional methods and worldviews into a form of expression that simply didn't exist a few centuries ago, a few lifetimes, really, is a monumental task that requires the greatest honesty and focused intelligence about our history and future as a people. It requires a foregounded knowledge that virtually every aspect of being Indian in North America has been highly politicized, from the obvious examples of genocide and the deliberate destruction of language and religious practices. It means understanding that Indian culture is a valuable commodity that is bought and sold much like any other commodity.

For me, too much of Indian art settles for the expected protest, and the comforting, pastoral images that for the vast majority of us originate in exactly the same place as they do for non-Indians. Our predetermined role is to remain within the images of ecology, of anger, of easy celebration. There are many reasons the old myths are comforting and safe. Many Indian folks and our so-called friends in the Wannabe Tribe make a pretty good living dispensing jukebox spiritualism and environmental teachings. They believe being Indian means trying to be like the imaginary Seattle. History lessons from our recent past are irrelevant to the new Indian thought police, who prefer endless metaphysics on the essentially unknowable perfection of a past

that has little relation to their own lives. A cultural politics that chooses European images over the real history of our people is a politics that encourages the commodification of distorted, invented Indian values. It's a politics that insists Indians produce passbooks to make art.

These constructs lead into a box canyon from a John Ford western, this idea of the Noble Savage. Artists can help lead us out, by refusing to play the assigned role and demanding an honesty in their own work and that of others that truly honors the outrageous story of our continued existence. This new generation must dare for something bolder. For those willing to leave behind the cheap, played-out clichés, a great project awaits. It is nothing less than a reclamation of our common history of surviving the unparalleled disaster of European contact and the creation of something new and dynamic from the ashes.

Our survival against desperate odds is worthy of a celebration, one that embraces every aspect of our bizarre and fantastic lives, the tremendous sacrifices made on our behalf by our parents and grandparents and their parents. Dressing up, intellectually or literally, to someone else's idea of who we are insults that rich tradition of struggle and resistance, and turns our party into someone else's freak show, with us as the entertainment.

Not even Seattle talked like Seattle. Black Elk was not so different from our own goofy, imperfect uncles and grandfathers. The only reason Nick and Sitting Bull weren't playing Nintendo on the ship to Europe with Buffalo Bill is because it wasn't invented yet. Only when we recognize that our own individual, crazy personal histories, like those of every other Indian person of this century, are a tumble of extraordinary contradictions, can we begin making sense of lives.

Geronimo's Cadillac is waiting, and if we want, it can be a hell of a ride.