

CONCLUSION



## Writing the Indigenous Nation

One underlying question in the novels I have discussed in this study, and indeed in indigenous studies in general, is the destiny of indigenous people, whether that destiny be in terms of “race,” culture, geographic boundaries, economic development, or political empowerment. It is worth considering, finally, what these novels might suggest to us about the role of resistance narratives in the future of Native America. For the most part, indigenous writers and activists have emphasized the fundamental importance of sovereign geographic spaces to the future of indigenous groups, indicating their commitment to a measure of independence within America’s own grand narratives of national unity. For most Americans, the educational systems teach that any question of dissembling the “united” in the United States was most clearly settled in the late nineteenth century with the American Civil War and later with subsequent campaigns against indigenous tribes in the West, most notably the massacre

at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890. It was in this era that America achieved a sense of national completion with the “closing of the frontier” and the full realization of “manifest destiny,” two highly visible terms that offered a kind of narrative denouement to the long struggle from savagery to civilization. This sense of national completion was further reinforced with various national pedagogies (to use Bhabha’s inflection of the term, suggesting both ideology and national instruction), including holidays such as Thanksgiving (1863), nationalist songs such as “America the Beautiful” (1895), and observances such as the Pledge of Allegiance (“one nation, under God, indivisible”) (1892). Americans, now more or less safe from the possibility of armed Indian resistance, confident that indigenous people would soon vanish into history, began reflecting upon previous generations of indigenous peoples nostalgically and romantically. Actual living Indians remained a “problem” and a “burden,” subject to any number of attempts to vanish them still further—boarding schools, the Dawes Severalty Act (1887), and later the Indian Citizenship act (1927). But for most Americans from the late nineteenth century and throughout the next century, Indians were no longer independent peoples with a measured claim to their own forms of nationhood; instead, they were and are an essential and quite malleable character of the great story of America’s inexorable movement from savagery to civilization.

The attempted erasure of indigenous nations thus came from two directions: one through assimilationist policies and practices and the other through more diffuse national pedagogies of an indivisible nation. Politically, indigenous nations overcame efforts to deprive them of their status as tribes and nations, in part due to the efforts of the assistant secretary of the Interior John Collier and his 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. In terms of more general national pedagogies, however, as Vine Deloria and Clifford Lytle argue in their *Nations Within: The Past and Present of American Indian Sovereignty*, most Americans would not think it possible that separate nations do in fact exist within the borders of the United States. They write: “when the idea of Indian tribes as nations is voiced, many Americans laugh at the pretension, convinced that Indians have some primitive delusion of grandeur that has certainly been erased by history” (1). In the vacuum of accurate information about indigenous history, the pedagogy of an indivisible American nation

legitimizes an erasure of indigenous nations, leading to untenable yet powerfully compelling narratives about the place of indigenous people in America. For instance, many Americans conclude that federal benefits, reservation lands, and legal exceptions are “gifts” from the United States, rather than rights of independent peoples who never completely relinquished them (legally termed “reserve rights”). This discourse of the gift has the further benefit of providing Americans not only a narrative of their innocence, but also, ironically, a testament to their benevolence and largesse. This same pedagogy of the indivisible nation also informs the narrative of American conquest, which suggests that western expansion was inevitable, justifiable, and complete. Furthermore, because conquest offers the narrative of glorious battle rather than the grim and largely bureaucratic and uneven advance of colonialism, it likewise provides a measure of innocence, for (the logic goes) “to the victor goes the spoils.”

Of the over 500 hundred indigenous tribes, in fact very few were conquered through battle. Most tribal leaders understood that they could not defeat the Americans militarily and, rather than proclaiming that “it is a good day to die,” as popular American narratives go, instead negotiated contractual treaty agreements, which varied sometime considerably among tribes, in hopes that they would ensure their continued existence as a people. By definition, treaty agreements connote an international dimension, and to the extent that indigenous leaders saw their tribes as distinct linguistically, culturally, and spiritually, these agreements should be understood as compacts between separate nations. Yet, in spite of the diversity of agreements and histories between tribes and Americans, federal Indian policy such as allotment and the Indian Reorganization Act generally offered (and continues to offer) uniform approaches in their dealings with indigenous peoples. Such uniformity also appears in the cultural narratives of American conquest and benevolence, which appear to offer comprehensive clarity to the history of American, but which actually deny more complex but more accurate local narratives of indigenous peoples. After 500 years of contact, the destiny of indigenous peoples is without question inextricably connected to the destiny of America—legally, politically, and globally. But these destinies are not necessarily the same; indeed, the national American pedagogy of the indivisible

nation impedes those tribal nations that wish to affirm their own narrative destinies, many of which pre-date the existence of the United States.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, written indigenous literature has been a record of the degree to which indigenous characters succeed or fail within American metanarratives, not indigenous metanarratives. Yet even for the most ardent of indigenous assimilationists, the American narratives of an indivisible, benevolent nation prove to be tragically inadequate. At the turn of the century, for instance, Dakota writer Charles Eastman writes himself directly into the discourse of progressivism by offering what we might call a recapitulation narrative, an analogue to Ernst Haeckel's theory that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, in other words, that the growth of the individual organism recapitulates the organism's evolutionary growth. Eastman offers a personal narrative that ostensibly demonstrates that his journey from savagery to civilization recapitulates the social narrative of American progress. Specifically, his *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* chronicles his eventual claim the two preeminent signs of civilization: American education and the Christian religion. Eastman's fundamental commitment to the metanarrative of progress and Christianity never wavers in his autobiography. Indeed, in a first-person account of the aftermath of the Wounded Knee massacre near the Pine Ridge Reservation, Eastman appears to offer his reading audience some measure of absolution for the destruction of indigenous peoples. Elsewhere, Eastman offers a number of examples of how he accedes to his recapitulation narrative by moving away from his indigenous beginnings to become part of the "civilized" world, for instance, separating himself from his Indian brethren at Beloit so they won't hold him back; assuming the guise of a "Turk" to sell the appropriately named book *Knights of Labor*; using indigenous etiquette to collect sacred artifacts from indigenous groups; translating important Lakota names into English that was "easily pronounced by the white man" (Eastman 1916, 183).

In spite of how the recapitulation narrative ostensibly determines the trajectory of the book, this narrative structure is finally insufficient to contain Eastman's growing uneasiness with American civilization—its agency, not innocence, in the suffering of indigenous peoples, especially in his dealings with unscrupulous Indian agents and politicians. This disillusionment

contrasts with his experiences with indigenous peoples, who appear to embody the values of the highest Christian ideals—selflessness and disregard for materialism. Thus the end of the book recalls its beginnings, where Eastman defines the man or warrior as one who is trained “not to care for money or possessions, but to be in the broadest sense a public servant” (Eastman 1916, 1). As the title of the book suggests, Eastman hopes to communicate a vision of the future that is progressive yet non-materialistic, Christian yet infused with some indigenous ideals—but none that include, Eastman makes very clear, indigenous ways of life. He states in the penultimate paragraph of the book that “there is no chance for our former simple life anymore” (Eastman 1916, 195). Yet in spite of his stated commitment to American pedagogies, a shadow narrative emerges that returns to the beginning as a kind of circular plot moving him towards indigenous traditions. Indeed, Eastman earlier suggested that such a move was a signal marker of indigenous thought: “What is the great difference between these people and my own? I asked myself. Is it not that the one keeps the old things and continually adds to them new improvements, while the other is too well contented with the old, and will not change his ways nor seek to improve them?” (64).

This shadow narrative of indigenous triumph throws into question the terms of savagery and civilization, giving the book an almost chiasmic structure. It is a structure that parallels one of Eastman’s memorable statements: “Some persons imagine that we are still wild savages, living on the hunt or on rations; but as a matter of fact, we Sioux are fully entrenched, for all practical purposes, in the warfare of civilized life” (165). As Gale P. Coskan-Johnson writes in her similar reading of Eastman’s *Soul of the Indian*, Eastman “uses the tragic figure of the noble savage overcome by progress that makes up an essential aspect of the national story of the United States of America.” She adds: “Even though Eastman borrows the language of progressivism, he deploys it in novel ways that transform its linear temporality and the assumptions underlying the civilized/primitive binary” (Coskan-Johnson 2006, 123). The conclusion of his narrative emphasizes his powerful ambivalence about America, where one group of people proclaims freedom at the expense of another, where one group acquires enormous wealth and another is impoverished. Yet because he is a product and apologist of American pedagogies,

Eastman can never quite abandon the belief in “progress along social and spiritual lines” toward unity in the form of “universal brotherhood.” This vast chasm between his experience as an American and American’s pedagogy can only be expressed as an aporia in the final paragraph his autobiography: “I am an Indian . . . I am an American.”

While the American narrative of progress threatens to annihilate tribal life altogether, almost equally untenable is the status quo of an unjust America, where “savagery and cruelty and lust hold sway” (194). The shadow narrative that emerges from these two alternatives suggests a different destiny, not in the form of nativism which, as Eastman himself points out, offers little hope for the future, nor in projects like contemporary multiculturalism, which frames indigenous struggles as “preserving culture in the modern world” with visible signs of identity. Nor is this shadow narrative an example of Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderlands, as Eric Anderson postulates, with its suggestions of social evolution. (Anderson 1992, 146).<sup>1</sup> Instead, the shadow narrative evokes a future for indigenous peoples that is both connected to but also distinct from that of other Americans, emerging from the particular histories and local narratives of the individual tribes themselves. Because Eastman fervently believes in the future of Christian civilization, he finally cannot claim this shadow narrative as his own, even though it haunts him to the last paragraphs of his autobiography.

The emergence of this shadow narrative follows certain features of Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) argument in *Nation and Narration* that narratives in the name of “the people” or “the nation” inevitably exhibit ambivalences about “the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of national pedagogy” (294). Bhabha writes: “It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional reality” (1). The writing of a nation as narrative, for example, produces “double-times,” the people as temporal practice and the nation as expression of myth beyond time. Much like the relationship between signifier and signified, the mapping of performance to pedagogy does not produce a complete sign of the nation, “out of many one” (the phrase Bhabha considers) or, to refer to my previous

discussion, the nation indivisible. The nation as narration thus undermines the certainty and ideology of nationalism: “The liminal figure of the nation-space would ensure that no political ideologies could claim transcendence or metaphysical authority for themselves.” For minority discourses, too, this conception offers a space of enunciation between the two discursive registers of nativism and nationalism. Bhabha quotes Fanon’s critical stance toward the fetishization of fixed markers of culture (“stereotype and realism”), and focuses on Fanon’s idea of a people as “the fluctuating movement that the people are *just* giving shape to” (303).

Because Eastman is committed to the American pedagogy of unity and progressivism, he is only able to acknowledge certain indigenous beliefs and practices from his past, not the emerging shadow narrative that offers the possibility of distinct destiny for indigenous peoples. In this “contest of stories,” to quote Jana Sequoya Madagaleno’s phrase, Eastman envisions success and failure for indigenous people as the degree to which they—as individuals and tribes—recapitulate the American narrative of progress, of which he is an exceptional example. Historically, indigenous literature has appropriated to this general narrative form, from the beginnings of indigenous writing with Samson Occum and William Apess, through the twentieth century with writers such as D’Arcy McNickle, John Joseph Mathews, and James Welch. More generally, literature by non-tribal writers, and indeed almost all representations of indigenous people by non-tribal people in art, sculpture, movies, and television likewise follow this predominating narrative structure of indigenous success and, more frequently (and perhaps necessarily), indigenous failure.

For a few indigenous writers, as I hope this study has shown, this “contest of stories” has resulted in narrative approaches that offer much different destinies than those dependent upon American pedagogies for significance and legitimation. *Cogewea*, *Ceremony*, *Bearheart*, *Love Medicine*, and *Black Eagle Child* not only explicitly reject the American pedagogy of unity and progressivism; they also reverse the terms so that characters that accept the American pedagogies are in some sense failures rather than successes. Densmore in *Cogewea*, Rocky in *Ceremony*, Nector and Beverly in *Love Medicine*—all appear as characters that are damaged in large part because their versions of

American progressivism separate them from those they care about or should care about the most. In *Black Eagle Child*, characters such as Claude Youthman, Lorna Bearcap, and Edgar Bearchild, who find some measure of success by American standards, discover that their skills in education, art, or writing can be a hindrance when they return home to work in their indigenous community. Structurally, *Ceremony* and *Bearheart* offer a more general critique of American pedagogies of progress and unity. In *Ceremony*, the American narrative offers returning World War II veterans the Manichean choice of either extreme failure in the form of the stereotypical drunken Indian, or success at the cost of separation from the indigenous community. *Bearheart* provides a cultural critique at American progressivism by first, showing that its logical end is a depletion of natural resources and, next, by reversing the direction of the narrative so that the book returns to a four worlds vision of indigenous beginnings.

Similar to Bhabha's arguments about minority discourse, these novels question the American nation's claim of "transcendence or metaphysical authority," given the degree to which the flesh and blood events of history (the performance) unmask the myths, and given how the very existence of indigenous nations subverts the pedagogy of national unity. This continuing indigenous existence in the closing chapters of *Cogewea* and *Love Medicine* is somewhat tenuous, a moment of personal victory for the protagonists. As a rewriting of an indigenous oral story, *Cogewea* appears as both a confirmation of the truth of the oral story and as an assertion of a mixed blood territory. *Love Medicine* is less sanguine but nonetheless hopeful, offering a profound connection to an absent mother against the fragmenting history of a tribe. In a sense, both these novels suggest Fanon's "fluctuating movement that the people are *just* giving shape to," that is, a rejection of American pedagogies and an affirmation of a presence of indigenous people and their narratives. Going a step further, *Ceremony* and *Black Eagle Child* not only offer a "shape" of an indigenous presence; they also offer longstanding tribal, perhaps national, metanarratives. In doing so, however, these novels embody the same ambiguities that Bhabha identifies in other national narratives: namely, the slippage between performance and pedagogy. Both *Ceremony* and *Black Eagle Child* structure their novels on

a tribal metanarrative, and in both novels, a central thematic question is whether characters are able to parallel the narrative of their own lives to that of the tribal nation.

*Ceremony* is perhaps the most complete example in indigenous literature of the marriage between the two discursive registers of the performed and the pedagogical. By the end of the novel, the trajectory of Tayo's life through his personal ceremony is an almost exact recapitulation of the tribal narrative of drought, ceremony, and balance. If the relationship between the performed and the pedagogical is an analogue to sign and signified, then Silko's novel allows for little slippage in narrative and language. Silko's commitment to these clear and repeated systems is evident in her critique of Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*:

Erdrich's prose is an outgrowth of academic, post-modern, so-called experimental influences. The idea is to "set language free," to allow words to interact like magic chemicals, in a word sorcerer's pristine laboratory, where a word and its possible relationships with other words may be seen "as they really are, in and of themselves" without the tiresome interference of any historical, political or cultural connections the words may have had in the past. (Silko 1986b, 179)

Of course, slippage does occur in Silko's novel. It must occur, Betonie tells Tayo, for even in ceremonies that are performed the same way each time, there is always a difference, "if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the voices from generation to generation, singing the chants" (Silko 1977, 126). Betonie argues that this slippage between the performed and the pedagogical is essential if traditions are to grow, instead of becoming frozen in time like displays in a museum. Furthermore, as Bhabha (1994) observes, the liminal position allows a space of enunciation for minority discourse—in this case, the discourse/narrative of the mixed-blood protagonist. But *Ceremony* makes clear that this essential slippage is potentially quite dangerous: just as it almost destroys the protagonist, so too can this space of enunciation widen into the discourse of opposition and the fragmentation of the witchery.

Young Bear's *Black Eagle Child* offers a similar writing of the nation: several characters recapitulate to varying degrees the tribal/national pedagogy of the metamorphic, circular journey adumbrated in the ceremony at the Well-Off Man Church. Also, the description of religious language in *Black Eagle Child* is similar to Silko's vision of language, for the religious songs that the mythical Dark Circling Cloud gives to the community are so exact that even the substitution of a syllable will change the meaning of the songs entirely. *Black Eagle Child* differs, however, from *Ceremony* in important ways. Unlike *Ceremony*, where almost every event is highly mythologized (the protagonist himself is a figure from older traditions), the community in *Black Eagle Child* shows the mundane and sometimes humorous rifts between the performed and pedagogical: American holidays, old cars, popular music and television, and corrupt school-board members. Similarly, the novel offers American pedagogy not as a generalized, mythical presence, but as the literal boarding-school system, which initiates a crisis by fostering distrust in the community and by (presumably) educating children away from their hereditary leaders to those chosen by the American government:

*Unfortunately, the deterioration of a strong  
Nation began the day white politicians asked  
the Bearchild patriarch for his own ideas  
on education and community welfare.  
It was then that the master plan was unfolded:  
he unknowingly accepted education on behalf  
of the tribe. (Young Bear 1992a, 86)*

From this event onward, the tribal community loses its way, moving toward a recapitulation of the American pedagogy of success based on money, rather than recapitulating the tribal/national pedagogy. The tension of the book becomes a contest of national pedagogies, suggesting the potential and indeed the necessity for the community to decide its own fate, despite the difficulties and despite the national pedagogy that tells them that they do not have the capabilities. When individuals choose to parallel their lives with the metamorphic structure of the Well-Off Man Church, their successes are highly

attenuated, never whole and complete as they are in *Ceremony*, indicating that the journey home will not be easy—but these individual acts nonetheless suggest an important direction for the community as a whole.

Against the pedagogy of the American nation, these novels envision a viable indigenous presence in America and, in some cases, affirm a quite different narrative destiny for indigenous peoples. Like Eastman's shadow narrative, these indigenous narratives rarely emerge as part of the academic or popular pedagogy about the formation and character of America, but they never quite disappear either, in spite of the insistence of Americans to mass produce images that situate Indians into the American pedagogy: helpful natives, ethnic sidekicks, and sports mascots. While the audience of resistance fiction, and indeed all indigenous literature, remains relatively small, and while fiction of any stripe has rarely motivated social change in America, these novels help to bring indigenous narrative possibilities from the shadows to the light, and contribute to a growing conversation among indigenous writers, activists, grass roots organizations, and academics, who steadfastly assert the rightful freedoms of indigenous tribal nations.

