

# The Place of Janet Campbell Hale and Sherman Alexie in American Indian Literature

---

*Two writers invite readers to contemplate American values in a context of controversy and dialogue.*

**Written by Dennis Walsh, Professor of English, Idaho State University, 1995**

Indian literature is fascinating in that it contains literary forms and cultural views that run counter to those of the dominant white culture. Thus it is kind of counter-discourse that allows a reader to contemplate American and western values in a context of controversy and dialogue. Indian literature usually attacks common stereotypes that Indians were and are either noble natural men, on the one hand, or brutal savages, on the other. Instead it insists on the humanity of Indians, the differences among Indian cultures and differences among whites and Indians, and on the fundamental importance of tradition and community. Indian writers insist that not all-Indian cultures have vanished, but many have resiliently changed and adapted in the face of murderous circumstances.

The earliest works of Indian literature are traditional oral tales, songs, and myths. They are found transcribed into English in anthologies such as *American Indian Myths and Legends* but are best understood in the specific cultural contexts where they were sung or enacted dramatically. An exception is N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, which explores Kiowa culture and myth in three juxtaposed voices, all his own, the mythic voice, the scholarly voice, and the personal voice. Another exception is *Spider Women's Granddaughters*, a collection of traditional oral tales and contemporary short fiction by Indian women. The fiction takes themes and characters from the tales.

A second early form of Indian literature is the captivity narrative, the best of which reveal much about Indian cultures before extensive contact with whites. A problem with these narratives is that they are often long, repetitive, and non-literary. One of the best is that of Cabeza de Vaca, a Spanish soldier, who, with four other survivors of a military expedition, made his way (1527–1535) from Florida to New Mexico as a holy man or healer among Indian peoples. He was the first European to record these cultures and to see buffalo and the Mississippi River. Another excellent narrative is that of John Tanner who was captured at age nine (1789) in Ohio by Shawnees, was purchased and raised by Ojibwas, and became an Ojibwas hunter, husband and father.

He returned to white civilization in his thirties, became literate and wrote his narrative, but disillusioned, returned to the Ojibwas. These narratives provide fascinating accounts---with varying degrees of subjectivity---of traditional Indian cultures and their relationships to the land.

Autobiography has continued to be important in Indian literature, though the novel is currently the dominant literary form. Additionally, considerable amounts of poetry have been published. Among the significant poets are Joy Harjo and Wendy Rose. Perhaps the most substantial anthology of Indian poetry is *Songs from This Earth On Turtle's Back*.

As-told-to autobiographies are those in which an Indian tells his or her life story to a white who does the writing. They are narrated in first person. The best known of these is that of Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man who was at both the Battle of Little Big Horn (1876) and the Wounded Knee massacre (1890). Unlike Black Elk's narrative, John Lane Deer's conversations with Richard Erdoes were taped in English, and Lane Deer read and approved the subsequent text, a clear but rhetorically subtle account of how Lane Deer became medicine man by experiencing everything in Sioux and white culture. It is often very funny and contains great detail about both traditional and modern Sioux cultures. Mary Crow Dog's *Lakota Woman* (with Erdoes again) focuses on the 1973 takeover of Wounded Knee in South Dakota. I find its best passages to be those about modern reservation life and those relating to Indian civil rights activities. It is frank, explicit, very accessible and radical. Increasingly, autobiographies written by Indians themselves are appearing, such as Janet Campbell Hale's *Bloodlines*.

The outpouring of modern and contemporary Indian novels was heralded by Momaday's 1969 Pulitzer Prize winning *House Made of Dawn* (set at Jemez Pueblo) and Leslie Silko's 1977 *Ceremony* (Laguna Pueblo). Both focuses on WWII veterans in the decade after the war who are uprooted from their native cultures, and both end in the men "homing," finding their way back to tradition and the land. Both contain sections on urban Indians (Los Angeles and Gallup). These early contemporary novels are wonderfully written and finally redemptive but are grim and humorless, while the next generation of novelists begins to find humor of a very dark sort, survival humor, in grim circumstances. James

Welch's *Fools Crow* is a readable historical novel set among the Blackfeet at a time of rapid change during the 1860's and 1870's. Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) is one of four connected novels set on a fictionalized Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota (starting in 1912 and coming up nearly to the present). Linda Hogan's 1990 *Mean Spirit* (Osage, 1920's) has been characterized, like Erdrich's novel's as "magic realism," setting wonder and magic in brutal social and historical circumstances. These tendencies toward survival humor and magic realism go a step further in the fiction and poetry of Sherman Alexie. Janet Campbell Hale is in some ways a throwback to the grimness of Momaday and Silko but in other ways writes something quite new in Indian literature. (set at Jemez Pueblo) and Leslie Silko's 1977

Indian writers have often used their life experiences with little disguise in their fiction. The implication is why fictionalize when the experience of being a Native American needs little adornment and speaks powerfully for itself? This "let-me-tell-it-like-it-is" is there in the above noted "as-told-to" accounts, as it is somewhat evasively in more as Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and Silko's *Storyteller*. Janet Campbell Hale's 1985 novel, *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*, is drawn almost directly from her own life, and her 1993 autobiography, *Bloodlines* (subtitled "Odyssey of a Native Daughter") clearly reveals the sources for the novel.

In Hale's novel, Cecelia Eagle Capture Welles is in the Berkeley, California jail on a DUI charge. The novel is a series of flashbacks that allow her to discover how her whole life has been a kind of incarceration. After being released from jail, she nearly kills herself but instead finds the means "to remake her life more to her liking... now... free to go on with the life she did have." Like Hale, Cecelia is a mixed-blood mother who passed for white and was constantly escaping from her drunken, violent husband. Cecelia's mother and older sisters often belittled her. Her beloved father, a full-blooded Coeur d'Alene, grew up on an Idaho reservation. The Family finally settled in Wapato on the Yakima Reservation in Washington State. Cecelia dropped out of high school, escaped to San Francisco, lived in poverty, was a teen-age mother, married a college-educated white who demeaned her, and escaped again to go to college and then law school. Though these elements are very close to those of Hale's life, we learn

other details about Cecelia that may or may not be autobiographical: Cecelia in jail is at the end of her tether. She is an alcoholic who has had numerous one-night stands that are described in great detail. Her first child was the son of the one man she seems to have loved, Bud, who was later killed in Vietnam. Most importantly, what Hale's novel and autobiography have in common is that the main personages escape from destructive and dysfunctional Indian circumstances. However, largely through the memory of their ancestral Indian roots, they find---or begin to find---personal integration in urban circumstances. A major difference between Hale's novel and the autobiography is that the novel is grittier and rawer, explicit in language and faithful to the details of everyday experience, sometimes so much so that it borders on sensationalism.

*Bloodlines* is written for a general audience and is remarkably gripping for a non-fiction work. Perhaps this is because of the clear language and the oral storytelling style. As in Mary Crow Dog's autobiography, little attempt is made to be literary in terms of poetic or elegant phrasing. However, comparable to Lane Deer's narrative, the subtle and sophisticated arrangement of materials belies the simple language. Each of the eight essays stands alone, but together they make---with some repetition---a powerful statement about losing and re-gaining an ancestral Indian heritage, adapting it to new circumstances.

Readers who enter Sherman Alexie's literary house must be wide-awake and ready for new experiences. His 1993 book of stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and 1992 book of poetry and stories, *The Business of Fancydancing*, blend fiction and poetry, fiction and autobiography. They detail reservation life and language in a way no other writer does. Alexie is 13/16 (as he says in one poem) Spokane/Coeur d'Alene and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation one hour northwest of Spokane, Washington. Most of the million or two Indians in the U.S. do not live on reservations as homelands, places where cultures and languages are kept. Reservations differ from one another as well. The Spokane Reservation, as Alexie describes it, has poverty, malnutrition, generations of alcoholics, disease, gross unemployment, a large welfare roll, poor education, hopelessness, beatings and murder, self-destructiveness in various forms. We've heard this before but never in so much

detail or in so many authentic reservation voices cussing, dreaming, deceiving themselves, imagining, storytelling, and forgiving.

One way to see Alexie's *Lone Ranger* is as a large tapestry with different characters caught in motion but waiting for something to happen. The motions themselves are cynical and repetitive. The tapestry is viewed by the ancestors who laugh at both Indians and whites. Another way to perceive the book is that it is about survival and resilience, about "beautiful dissonance and implied survival"---like the Bartok music the major recurring character, Victor, plays on the piano at an outdoor party, causing all the Indians to weep. Basketball is part of that---it "should be our new religion," its sound that of the drumbeat, an all-star jacket like the shirts the Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee wore. "Survival = Anger x Imagination" and imagination is the only weapon on the reservation. Imagination and laughter lead to forgiveness. And all of this is revealed through storytelling---stories within stories, until the reader loses track of who is speaking. Telling stories, finding a voice and an audience, even in the language of the invader, is redemptive.

*Fancydancing* is best encountered after coming to grips with Alexie's stories. It contains forty poems and five stories but the stories contain poetry and the poetry, stories. Much of what I have spoken of above is in the poems as well but in a darker vein and in a more personal voice. The beloved character of Thomas Builds-the-Fire appears as in the stories, visionary and comical. Here he is arrested for kidnapping the postmistress, his friend, with "the idea of a gun." In one of the stories he is tried and convicted in the present for killing soldiers in his other, nineteenth-century lives. He is quintessential storyteller, telling his visions to dogs and cars when people will no listen. Seymour ("Crazy Horse"), the returned Vietnam vet, is there selling his medals for booze. Fancydancing is the dancing in ornate outfits that Indians do at powwows. It offers the opportunity for the kind of graceful, elegant, athletic action that can seldom be performed communally, in a circle, and to the beat of the drum, the pulse of the earth.

I wish to end by saying what Indian literature is not. Particularly it is not books like those written by Jamake Highwater (AKA: Jay Marks), whose name, like his

self-created whiteshamanism and his "Indian" philosophy, is fake. He claims that through his writing he has become an Indian and can speak as an Indian, though his views (what Hopi poet and anthropologist Wendy Rose calls "extended repackaging of Greek mythology and pop psychology in the garb of supposed 'primal Native American legends'") are not those of any Indian people. Like other whiteshamans and mediums, implicitly Highwater is saying that Indians need Euroamericans to speak for them. This is the worst kind of Eurcentrism and cultural imperialism, and sadly readers tend to accept it. Wendy Rose believes that even more serious writers like Gary Snyder in his Pulitzer Prize winning *Turtle Island* or Carlos Castaneda in the Don Juan books have profited enormously by similar means. Mainly what I have been arguing for is authentic Indian voices speaking from real circumstances, past and present.

---

## Works Cited

- Alexi, Sherman. *The Business of Fancydancing*. Brooklyn: Hanging Loose, 1992.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1993.
- Allen, Paula Gunn, ed. *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989.
- Bruhac, Joseph, ed. *Songs From This Earth On Turtle's Back*. New York: Greenfield Review, 1983.
- Covey, Cyclone, ed. *Cabeza De Vaca's Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*. Albuquerque: New Mexico UP, 1984.
- Crow Dog, Mary, with Richard Erdoes. *Lakota Women*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1991.
- Erdoes, Richard and Alfonso Ortiz, eds. *American Indian Myths and Legends*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- Erdich, Louise. *Tracks*. New York: Perennial, 1989.
- Hale, Janet Campbell. *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*. New York: Random House, 1985.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *Bloodlines*. New York: Random House, 1993.

Hogan, Linda. *Mean Spirit*. New York: Ivy, 1990.

Lame Deer, John and Richard Erdoes. *Lame Deer – Seeker of Visions*. New York: Touchstone, 1972.

Momaday, N. Scott. *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Signet, 1969.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: New Mexico UP, 1969.

Neihardt, John G., ed. *Black Elk Speaks*. New York: Pocket, 1979.

Rose, Wendy. "The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on Whiteshamanism." *The State of Native America*. Ed. M. Annette James. Boston: South End, 1992.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin, 1977.

Tanner, John. *The Falcon*. New York: Penguin, 1994.

Welch, James. *Fools Crow*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1986.