

Introduction

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Robert Berkhofer, Jr., writes, "That Whites of earlier centuries should see the Indian as without history makes sense given their lack of knowledge about the past of Native American peoples and the shortness of their encounter. That later whites should harbor the same assumption seems surprising given the discoveries of archaeology and the changed condition of the tribes as a result of White contact and policy. Yet most Whites still conceive of the 'real' Indian as the aborigine he once was, rather than as he is now. White Europeans and Americans expect even at present to see an Indian out of the forest or Wild West show rather than on a farm or in a city" (29).

Currently, there is a broad and often romanticizing interest in and fascination with things Indian—literature, crafts and art, music, dance, and medicine. Conceiving of Indians as aboriginal also entails perceiving them as anthropological artifacts that are tragic, romantic, and vanishing or already vanished. Even the best of current ethnography tends

to articulate the traditions and presence of Native Americans who live on or near reservations, failing to account for the traditions and beliefs of the three to four million Indians who have been living and working in urban or suburban settings for two or three generations. In many cases, these Indians, who make up more than half the Indian population in the United States, have grown up with mixed blood—a result of intermarriages between tribes relocated to Indian Territory as well as between Indians and African- and Latino-Americans. Only a few can remake themselves as full-blood essentialists. The rest have grown up influenced by a mixture of Native traditions as a result of their participation in urban Indian centers such as those in Los Angeles or Chicago where Hopi children learned Apache ways, or Nez Perce children learned Osage dances. *As We Are Now* aims to begin correcting the perceptions that define contemporary Indians in terms of the tragic and outmoded vision of early anthropologists—in terms, in other words, of the false classifications of race. More than that, this collection aims to envision and articulate the outer limits and the complexity of Native American experience by expressing the autobiographical, historical, intellectual, cross-cultural, and artistic experiences of mixblood Americans who, in all cases but one, have grown up in cities and towns, away from reservations and tribal councils.

Umberto Eco suggests that the American imagination demands the authentic or real and that to attain it has to create the absolute fake. In relation to Native Americans, this creation of fakery is pervasive: Kachinas made in Taiwan, Sweat Lodge ceremonies at local health clubs, dream-catcher key chains, authentic reproductions of Anasazi dwellings at “The Garden of the Gods” in Colorado Springs, or crystal skulls through which Laguna women teach people to channel. In literature, there are examples such as Forrest Carter, a one-time member of the Ku Klux Klan, who fakes an Indian child’s narrative (*The Education of Little Tree*), or the most famous fake of all, *Black Elk Speaks*, in which John Neihardt freely augmented, embellished, and altered the notes his niece recorded in her own invented stenographic shorthand as Black Elk’s nephew translated what his uncle was saying—without regard for the multiple difficulties of translation, recording, and transmission.

In the midst of all the fakery, much of it commercially produced and propagated by Native Americans themselves, there is a steadier renaissance

sance in the descriptions of Native America and its relation to the umbrella of American culture—race and identity—and American history. These descriptions—which cross boundaries in the fields of storytelling, ethnography, history, psychology, dance, music, and art—are often narrative and nonlinear: rooted as they must be in the overwhelming respect for the power of words and the oral tradition of “telling” or “saying,” the new generation of Native American writers is appropriating the genres and modes of the Western tradition to its own purposes. Ignoring some of the “Western” demarcations, they are writing prose that sometimes incorporates poetic language and even the line lengths of poetry, as well as playlike dialogues and stage directions, mixing genres and modes as well as chronology and tense on purpose, to better bridge the gap between themselves and the dominant culture around them, as well as the gap within themselves (for example, Indian and white, Chicano and Anglo). This narrative mixture of modes is often produced by the act of reclamation, an imaginative act of identity and selfhood that must be reenacted every time the mixblood writer sets out to write, an act that always involves recognizing the gap, entering the dialogue between disagreements (European or Native American, linear or circular, direct or indirect, historical image or historical actuality), and then finding a way to bridge that gap—or to express it. Behind *As We Are Now* is the belief that to lose that gap, to lose the tension, to lose the enhancements, transformations, and experimentations that result from the dialogue is—for urban mixbloods, at least—to lose whatever is American Indian.

Concurrently, *As We Are Now* aims to express the idea that the non-reservation or urban mixblood, besides being underrepresented in literature about Native America, is a person whose comfort with English combines with his or her desire to be, remain, or represent “Indian,” to create possibilities, choices of technique as well as of relations, writer to story, writer to audience or other people, writer to world. If Karl Kroeber (quoted in *Narrative Chance*) is correct that the American idea of progress “destroys diverse modes of imagining,” then a renewed diversity of imagination and thinking is something mixblood writers—whatever their backgrounds or disciplines—offer postmodern America and Western culture. *As We Are Now* intends to offer a new vision of race and identity, of Indians—at least that half of Indian America that has grown up in

cities or towns—and to begin the integration of that vision into the vision of America's future.

This collection of essays is, as one critic already has noted, "trail-breaking." Nothing like it has been done before, although we hope that if it breaks a trail, many books like it will be done after. Its uniqueness is not simply in the broad, multidisciplinary way it begins a new dialogue about race and identity or that it offers new voices of Native American experience in place of the voices with which people of the Americas are all too familiar. It is also in the extension of the boundaries from Native American to urban mixbloods generally and its inclusion of Chicanos/as, Latinos/as, as well as one writer of black and German ancestry. It crosses the lines of essay writing along with the lines of race and begins to highlight the north-south axis which is so powerfully offered in novels such as *Almanac of the Dead* as a defense against the usual east-west axis of thought.

Opening with the more personal accounts of race and identity (essays by Erika Aigner-Varoz, Craig Womack, Alfonso Rodriguez, Carol Kalafatic, and Inez Petersen), the collection moves toward the combination of personal with public, the personal with the political or historical (essays by William S. Penn, Kimberly Blaeser, and Rainier Spencer), bridging into the final movement of essays, which are more analytical, historical, or political (essays by Arturo Aldama, Diane DuBose Brunner, Shari Huhndorf, and Rolando Romero), and capped by Patricia Hilden's essay, which brings back all the themes and ideas, as well as the orally-based aesthetics, of the other essays. It is the grounding of all the essays in varied but often similar oral traditions—the belief, as Leslie Silko puts it, "that stories are all we have" and that it is narrativity that in part admits to the survival of the cultures represented here—that makes these essays "narrative." Narrative essays try to tell the truth the way Nez Perce storytellers or historians tried to tell it: they may augment in detail or description, they may change the actual wording, they may tell who said what and how they said it; they use, in other words, the elements and techniques of fiction to give the truth context, to make the truth "truer" for the audience willing to listen and participate in the telling. Here the telling is written. Yet, in all of these tellings, there is the representation of different oralities, whether Chicano/a, African, or the varieties of Native American.

The classical Maya wrote their histories by recording and *giving context* to the events considered to be most important to the people. Narrative essays, I suggest, do the same. Thus, in contextualizing ideas, they may well seem loose, nonlinear, fractured, or digressive. But in reality they are carefully structured, and each structure may be both described and defended. They are not loose, but oral and even conversational—as though talking to a really imagined audience; they are nonlinear only in the sense that for most of us all things are connected, and thus to give the proper context dialogue rarely follows from A to B to Z; they are not digressive but, as I have begun to insist, “augmentative”—and augmentation (a term I borrowed from my father-in-law) adds connection and context, gives life to dull “facts,” and celebrates the power of imagination, metaphor, and the cross-connections between the speaker and the listener, which is another way to claim that narrative essays work toward community, toward inclusion and not the exclusivity of colonization. The narrative essay is, in my opinion, where scholarly or academic writing is heading, or where it will head if it wants to revive its relation to an audience greater than seven. Yet it is not something we, the essayists, have chosen or decided to do; it is what we have always done, telling, even as grade school students, the story of ideas. Only lately is the rest of the world coming to narrativity, and sometimes out of the usual economic necessity—for example, publishers are asking academic writers to incorporate their footnotes into the text because footnotes scare off readers or increase the costs of publication. Given the language, ideas, methods, and structure of their essays, the participants in this collection agree, at least implicitly, about the need for narrative.

Here, then, are essays that cut and pin patterns of identity and survival. Here are essays that express what it may be like to be an Indian storyteller who, most usually asked to tell creation stories, stories of animal people and earth or sky figures that fit with the romanticized preconceptions of what Indians are, would rather tell about his Uncle Sonny Boy, “who got drunk and bit off my Uncle Gool Coachman’s ear,” or about what it is like to be a mixblood Indian man who is gay—an identity that most Americans seem to find fantastic. There are essays that involve us with the questions and considerations of the diversity of Chicanos and

the need to confront “unpleasant truths about our individual and collective past.” Some offer more questions than answers: questions about the meanings of “tradition” or “authenticity” and the delusions of “blood quantum,” which seem to take in people who are insecure about who they are and thus become raving essentialists; about the current polemics regarding affirmative action and the movement to limit immigration in states like California, especially if those immigrants are from Middle or South America; about the importance of language; or about the contortions demanded by the search for an active and meaningful identity.

Ultimately, the collection is unique because of the way in which it presents diverse modes of imagining race and identity by mixbloods who are not yet well known. The essayists come from varied backgrounds and disciplines. Some are historians, some are trained in literature, and others are storytellers, writers, or people who have been struggling with the problems of race and identity and found they had something to say for this collection. The claim to newness or novelty, of course, invites irony: the Museum of the American Indian in New York, which offers up the same old, static repetitions of an artifactual and romanticized Native America, a “New” Museum of the American Indian housed in the “Old Customs House” in an irony that is so thorough that it achieves perfection. These essays, I hope, are not subject to that kind of irony, aiming as they do at creating dialogue about some serious questions about “race” and “identity.”

To those of us classified to one extent or another by it, “race” is both a curse and an invention, a problem and a celebration. Most of us might agree with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s saying that “there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us”; personally, historically, and politically race has done a lot, both negative and, more recently, positive. Even though we may agree with Rainier Spencer, who finds a delicate irony in his need to use inaccurate terms like “black” and “white” if only to discredit them as terms, whenever we say that race does not matter, we are forced in the moment of saying to admit that yes it does—if only because it matters so much to other people. Other people invent it and use it and make it matter, sometimes unintentionally like a college department chair who claims only experts can teach his field but “anyone” can teach a course titled “The Oral Tradition and Native American

Literature and Ideas," especially if that "anyone" is also identifiable as "Indian." Sometimes the intention is obvious in legislative propositions like the one in California that is meant to discriminate and exclude the people on whose backs the Golden State was constructed. Its meaning continually shows in the faces of all those senators and journalists and pundits who assert that race doesn't matter, that the experience of a Native American novel or an African American novel is for the Native or the African, essentially, the same as the experience of a Finn or a Pole.

While I would never in my life deny the intensity or importance or sensitivity of the Finn or the Pole, the British or the German, there is a particular moment in which Indian or Chicano or black readers and listeners recognize the well-intentioned skewer of race. It comes when a reviewer of a grant proposal for a new collection of Indian legends and stories says that there are already enough of these around, as though there is no new work being done in the translation of stories and as though we have not heard endless collections of tales and stories from other, more dominant and dominating cultures. It comes hidden beneath the linear faces of clocks and the sour faces of those baptized in the faith called Progress and the assumption that anything other than their "progress" means regress. It comes, too, when academics assume that all Native American scholars are experts in Indian literature or Indian history (all Indian literature and history), categorizing the young Native American student as someone who has automatic interests and automatic associations. It comes back when Native people assert that only Native Americans can study, write about, or teach Native American literature and ideas, and yet once again when we notice the certain and continuous cultural assumptions at play in even very liberal-minded and sympathetic non-Native scholars. As a young black man of about my height put it, "Nobody ask *you* if you play basketball." True, but they may allow a hungry audience to equate the surprise of Sand Creek with the iconographic romance of Custer's "defensive" posture at the Battle of the Little Big Horn (a.k.a. "Custer's Last Stand").

The project that has resulted in this book was born two years ago when I was invited to participate on a university panel on "Ethnic Studies." I was

asked by the associate dean to give a paper on my views of what a future “Ethnic Studies” program at Michigan State University should be. There was precious little else in the way of definition or description of what we’d be panelizing about, so I went prepared to speak or (preferably) not speak, hating, as I do, the sound of my own voice (an honest statement that my graduate and undergraduate students alike would find odd if not comic). But lately I had been finding support for some of my inclusive views in storytelling by Leslie Silko, Louis Owens, Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa, Manlio Argueta, Rosario Ferré, and Jack Forbes, or in essays like those included in Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann’s anthologies. Inclusion had been with me since my early boyhood when my innocent first love affair had been with a Mexican girl whose mother fed me spicy lunches, and I had grown up with the visual and aural joy of Olvera Street, which is so nicely recalled in Patricia Hilden’s “Richie Valens Is Dead: *E Pluribus Unum*.”

I found myself—the passivity is literal, like Dante’s “I came to myself in the middle of the journey of my life”—up on a dais beside a local Asian and an imported Chicano “star” facing an audience of deans, directors, low-level administrators, and professors (possibly with the odd student thrown in like bell peppers for color and spice), wondering if the fever I felt (my forehead beaded with sweat) was due to being very sick or to being made sick with words. Or both.

“I am panelizing,” I told myself, trying to keep old habits of truth and directness down like the flu. “You (I said, feverishly adopting yet a second person to get through the afternoon) asked for this by agreeing to be empaneled on the dais.”

What was billed as a panel discussion of Ethnic Studies had turned into a skirmish over turf, a skirmish that I have turned into full-dress battle, an unpitched battle over who owns the past and present, with the “star” panelizer calling for a “domestic ethnic studies.”

Domestic Ethnic Studies? I wondered. No cross-border influences? No studying Guatemalan or Quechua Indigenos? It’s like a stockade fence, the U.S. border. Used to keep people out as well as to keep people in, to keep people on their familiar turf—turf they, minority or nonminority, can defend.

Out of that moment came a new course to teach, one that would sidestep the question of what Ethnic Studies was or wasn't, and would cross the old borders to celebrate the mixture.

Out of that moment came this project. The project itself has sometimes made me feel sad with a comic abrasion. In the long run, however, the comic won out, and these are the results: of reading and talking with other people who identify themselves as mixbloods either from urban settings, living in them presently, or (in the case of one essayist) commuting to them to work; of waiting for the essayists to get their essays to me and for me to get their essays back to them; of finding friends—and when all is said and done, I hope that is what this is, a group of writers from a variety of backgrounds and experiences who may call themselves “friends.”

“Mixbloods” and not “mixed bloods” because they express the unified and inseparable strands of their heritage and experience. Mixblood instead of crossblood, though in this instance mainly because crossblood has been so long confused with “mixedblood.”

Their essays raise some questions about race and identity, and perhaps even suggest some answers. They are eclectic. I do not agree with everything they say, and they do not always agree with the things other essayists say; I tried to exercise great care in editing them, leaving the ideas and stylistic processes free, shaping only the structures slightly and not the ideas. In few cases did the heavy hand of the editor unmask itself, but I hope for a more coherent expression of the essayist's ideas and not for agreement with my own. New essays by new writers, some of whom will probably one day become the old, usual writers excluded by someone like me because everybody knows their names.

Some final notes and acknowledgments. An old good friend warned me years ago not to edit collections of anything, and I am here to say that wisdom drips slowly into the mind like a leaky faucet, for only now, twenty years later, do I understand at least in large part what he must have meant. This project took a year longer than I had imagined to complete and mail—some of that delay stemming from the slowness of some of the essayists to write and revise, but much of it my fault, as I was interrupted by other planned projects and deadlines, teaching, and travel. Though there have been times I have emerged weary from my study and

times I have felt the centrifugal force of personal responsibility pushing me out of the circle, I would not have not done this. In the process, I have learned a great deal from the individual writers and I have been lucky enough to have made many of them my friends. Many have been the times I've needed their friendship, and often have been the moments when their words—by e-mail or phone—have shown me how little I know or understand, and for that I am very, very grateful.

The people who suffered most, perhaps, were Jennifer, my wife and closest pal, and Rachel and William, my daughter and son, who are perfections, themselves. They are the ones who say, "Let's do *x*," and have me say defensively, "I have to do *y*." They are the ones who ask if they can go to the park and have daddy say he's too tired. It has come to seem strange, to me, by means of this process, that it is to the very people for whom one does the work that one is often saying no. For my work is *for them*, and I hope some of it is good. In the long run, I can say that without them, the care and time and joy they give beyond reason, nothing.

In addition, I need to thank A. C. Goodson, the director of comparative literature at Michigan State University, a real human being who stays true to his words. No one has been more supportive of my work at this university. I want to thank David Morris, who sicked the University of California Press on me. All the essayists have to be thanked, but it was Patricia Hilden who helped me find several of them and who sometimes helped them revise their essays. Other people have contributed in their ways, too: Arnold Krupat with his friendship and constant insight and care; my father, who has put up with much, and my grandfather, who put up with much in his turn; my father-in-law, Tony Siani, now deceased, but who provides still many of the arguments I often argue against or for; and last, but far from least, Jack Hicks for his encouragement, patience, unstinting help, sense of humor, and friendship.