

THE FRENCH LAKOTA

JAMES WELCH'S *THE HEARTSONG OF
CHARGING ELK* AS A COSMOPOLITAN TEXT

Overview

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Abstract:

James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* tells the story of a Lakota in France. This opens up discussions of subalternity, cosmopolitanism and identity.

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1. James Welch
2. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*
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1. James Welch

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- born 1940 in Browning, MT
- Blackfeet / Gros Ventre;
grew up on Blackfeet and Ft. Belknap reservations
- died 2003 in Missoula, MT

1. James Welch

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- depiction of reservation life and American Indian Identity in his novels:

Winter in the Blood (1974)

The Death of Jim Loney (1979)

Fools Crow (1986)

The Indian Lawyer (1990)

1. James Welch

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□ Browning / Blackfeet Res.



1. James Welch

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□ Browning / Blackfeet Res.



1. James Welch

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□ Fort Belknap Res.



1. James Welch

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□ Fort Belknap Res.



1. James Welch

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- in 2000, has been made a Chevalier (knight) in the „Ordre des Arts et des Lettres“ for his contributions to French culture

The Heartsong of Charging Elk (2000)

2. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*

2. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*

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- Charging Elk travels with William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody to France, is part of his Wild West show
- he gets sick and is left behind in Marseilles
- the novel tells about his struggles to arrive in French society and build a life there

2. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*

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- can be read as counterstory to the life of Black Elk:

Black Elk travels with Buffalo Bill,
but returns to America

Charging Elk, by force of circumstance, remains
and takes charge of his life – outside America

2. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*

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difficulties to overcome:

- language problem
- outward appearance:
skin color, height, long hair
- habits
- modes of thinking and believing
- political status
- fitting in to Marseilles
(sea, fish, big city vs prairies, horses/buffalos, rural)

2. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*

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however:

- city also enabling: multicultural atmosphere
- experience: subalternity as a universal problem, not just for Native Americans
- his being a *peau rouge* exoticizes him, both negative and positive consequences

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3. A Lakota Perspective of France

3. A Lakota Perception of France

“ He liked this wide street with the rows of knobby trees on the street-side edge of the broad walkway. There were many places where he could look in windows at clothes and sweets and knives and everything a man might want. There were cafés, but he hadn't the courage yet to enter one for a small cup of the bitter pejuta sapa. But he always stopped at a particular kiosk with a bright green-and-white-striped awning that sold the flimsy papers with wasichu writing on them. Often they had pictures on them, drawings, mostly of men he thought all looked alike, with their beards and stiff collars. (165)

3. A Lakota Perception of France

“ [after being shouted at in a restaurant,] Charging Elk sat for a moment, looking down at his half-eaten meal, confused. He understood why the wasicun miners in Paha Sapa hated him, but why would these sailors hate him in Marseille? There were many people of many colors here. Why would they choose him? He had spent the past three winters making himself invisible, yet they knew him right away. [..] Suddenly, he saw the crowds in the stands at the Wild West show with their big eyes and shouting voices as he rode hard after the buffaloes. (200)

4. Depiction of Lakota Identity as Subaltern

4. Depictions of Lakota Identity as Subaltern

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- double language problem: he speaks Lakota, but neither English nor French
(Lakota as peripheral, English & French as central/imperial)
- he is religiously excluded, yet carries his belief in *Wakan Tanka* with him
 - late in the book, his religiousity is accepted by his future father-in-law
- the US government does not feel responsible for him
(Lakotas not yet US citizens back then)

4. Depictions of Lakota Identity as Subaltern

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- narration of Lakota history within the novel
- Charging Elk's connection with the Ghost Dancers
- use of Lakota concepts and words throughout the novel: Lakota identity depicted as subaltern, yet not vanishing
- this also underlines the specificity of „Indian“ culture

4. Depictions of Lakota Identity as Subaltern

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- dock workers –
depiction of structural racism in the labor market
- poverty in France:
even the imperial center (Europe) holds diversity
- subalternity and privilege are relative
and occur outside America as well
→ may this allow overcoming subalternity through
contextualization and relativization?

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5. A Lakota-French Perception of America

5. A Lakota-French Perception of America

“ [H]e wondered if there were any buffalo left. He thought of Bird Tail’s dream of the buffalo entering the cave in Paha Sapa. He had never heard of the buffalo returning. All he ever heard about America – well, he heard almost nothing. Because he couldn’t read, he didn’t know what the journals said about his homeland. Sometimes he unloaded ships from America. Sometimes he heard his fellow workers curse America for being greedy and arrogant. President Roosevelt had attacked the small country of Cuba for no reason. Now they were in the Philippines. The rabblers among the dockworkers often talked about refusing to unload American goods. Charging Elk didn’t understand their anger and didn’t know enough about American to come to its defense – even if he wanted to. (420)

5. A Lakota-French Perception of America

“ “This is my home now, Joseph. I have a wife. Soon I will have a child, the Moon of Frost in the Tipi.” Charging Elk stopped as he realized how improbable this must have sounded to Joseph. Then he said, in a wistful voice, “I am not the young man who came to this country so long ago. I was just about your age and I thought of it all as a great adventure. But now here I am, a man of thirty-seven winters. I load and unload ships. I speak the language of these people. My wife is one of them and my heart is her heart. She is my life now and soon we will have another life and the same heart will sing in all of us.”
[Joseph gives him something.] “It is only a stone. But it came from Paha Sapa. Perhaps one day it will bring you back to us.” (437)

5. A Lakota-French Perception of America

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- Overcoming Subalternity Through Displacement?
- Charging Elk eventually becomes accepted in France as a Lakota, not a U.S.-American

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