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Exiled on their Own Land: American Indian History in Literature

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Presentation Outline

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2. Storying and Survivance

For instance, survivance in the sense of native survivance, is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence.

(Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 15)

Only an Indian knows who he is [...] an individual who just happens to be an Indian – and if he has grown up on a reservation he will naturally write about what he knows. And hopefully he will have the toughness and fairness to present his material in a way that is not manufactured by conventional stance.... What I mean is – whites have to adopt a stance; Indians already have one.

(James Welch, quoted in Lincoln, "Back-Tracking James Welch," 24)

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

Memory has most often been operative as a presence, located in material and immaterial ways [...]. Memory speaks of and from a home and the cultural practices which we call "ours."

(Rüdiger Kunow & Wilfried Raussert, *Cultural Memory and Multiple Identities*, 9)

Memory is inherently contentious and partisan: one man's acknowledgement is another's omission. [...] Unlike memory, which confirms and reinforces itself, history contributes to the disenchantment of the world. Most of what it has to offer is discomfiting, even disruptive – which is why it is not always politically prudent to wield the past as a morel cudgel with which to beat and berate a people for its sins. But history does need to be learned – and periodically re-learned.

(Tony Judt, *Postwar*, 829f)

Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss. Regard experiences then *as if they were about to disappear*: what is it about them that anchors or roots them in reality? What would you save of them, what would you give up, what would you recover? To answer such questions you must have the independence and detachment of someone whose homeland is "sweet," but whose actual condition makes it impossible to recapture that sweetness, and even less possible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma, whether deriving from pride in one's heritage or from certainty about who "we are."

(Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 407)

Sherman Alexie, "Migration, 1902" (2000):

The salmon swim
so thick in this river

that Grandmother walks
across the water

on the bridge
of their spines.

(from *One Stick Song*, 55)

James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):

They had never spoken of leaving the Stronghold. It was true that Charging Elk himself had had these very thoughts, but when he visited his parents and saw the way the people lived on the reservation, he quickly put them away. "and if we go, and if we come back, how will we live? What will be here for us? (33)

Ibd.:

[..] Bird Tail told them that he had had a dream in which a buffalo wandered through the forests of Paha Sapa and came upon a cave carved into a scarred rockface. The buffalo turned around four times, as a dog does before it lies down, each time looking back at the world. It seemed to be looking at everything, as though it wanted to remember all that was there. It looked for a long time, through the many winters of its ancestors, over the plains and rivers and mountains they had crossed; it looked at times of good grass and times of hunger; it looked at times of trouble and times of peace. Finally, it looked up into the sky at the sun and its eyes turned as white and hard as polished stone. Then it whirled and entered the cave. (127)

Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek* (1981):

*Repression works like a shadow, clouding memory
and sometimes even to blind, and when it is on a
national scale, it is just not good.*

In 1969
XXXX Coloradoans
were killed in Vietnam.

In 1978
XXXX Coloradoans
were killed on the highways.

In 1864,
there were no Indians killed.

Remember My Lai.

In fifty years,
nobody knew
what happened.

It wasn't only the Senators.

Remember Sand Creek. (14f)

3.2. (Re)definition

When cultural contact between Native Americans and Europeans has occurred throughout history, I am assuming that it is just as likely that things European are Indianized rather than the anthropological assumption that things Indian are always swallowed up by European culture. I reject, in other words, the supremacist notion that assimilation can only go in one direction, that white culture always overpowers Indian culture, that white is inherently more powerful than red, that Indian resistance has never occurred in such a fashion that things European have been radically subverted by Indians.

(Craig Womack, *Red on Red*, 12)

James Welch, *Fools Crow* (1986):

[Yellow Kidney] remembered how the people were happy because the Napikwans promised them many goods in exchange for their land. When their wagons came filled with crates, the people gathered around and the Indian agent began to hand out small things. Cut beads, iron kettles, knives, bells, the ice-that-looks-back, carrot and twist tobacco, a few blankets. All the chiefs got Napikwan saddles to go with their medaillons. Then the Napikwans gave the people some of their strange food: the white sand that makes things sweet, the white powder, the bitter black drink. The people were happy, for they knew these white men would come often to hand out their goods. Even Yellow Kidney had been happy. Along with the others, he agreed with the white big chief that the Pikunis should rase the puny whitehorns and dig and plant seeds in the breast of Mother Earth.

Along with the others, he knew that the Pikunis would go away and hunt the blackhorns as they always had. But their agreement had made the white chiefs happy, for now the Napikwans could move onto the Pikuni lands. Everyone was happy.

[..] He had been hearing around the camps of the Pikunis that owl Child and his gang had been causing trouble with the Napikwans, driving away horses and cattle, and had recently killed a party of woodcutters near Many Houses fort. It would be only a matter of time before the Napikwans sent their seizers to make war on the Pikunis. Their people would suffer greatly. (16)

James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):

It was early in the Moon of the Shedding Ponies, less than a year after the fight with the longknives on the Greasy Grass [..]. He understood that these wasichus had made his sister and brother and his mother cry. He understood that his father and the other men would not fight anymore. He understood that his people would not be allowed to go back to the buffalo ranges. They were prisoners. [..]

He looked down at the fort, at the log buildings, at the red and white and blue flag of America that hung listlessly from a pole, at the row of soldiers with their rifles with steel knives tight against their shoulders, at the thousands of Indians who ringed the open field, and he wasn't afraid anymore. The Indians who awaited them were alive – and they were singing. The whole valley was alive with the peace song. (1-4)

Ibd.:

[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)

3.3. (Re)orientation

Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek* (1981):

*Who stole the hearts and minds of the humble
hard-working folk until they too became moralistic
and self-righteous: senators, bishops, presidents,
missionaries, corporation presidents?*

They were simple enough.
Swedes, Germans,
Mennonites, Dutch,
Irish, escaping
Europe.
Running.

They shouldn't have stopped
and listened to Puritans.
And learned
that mountains were chains
to be crossed like breaking
something.

[..]

They shouldn't have listened
to those strange preachers.
The Congress.
Cotton Mather.
On their way west.

They shouldn't have understood
those Biblical words that way
and become simple as death.
And, finally, complex liars.
And thieves. (50f)

Sherman Alexie, *Flight* (2007):

I am standing in the middle of a real Indian camp, complete with thousands of real Indian tepees and tens of thousands of real old-time Indians. [..] Yep, a bunch of real old-time Indians. I'm not exactly sure what year it is. It's tough to tell the difference between seventeenth- and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indians.

These are how Indians used to be, how Indians are supposed to be. [..] These old-time Indians have dark skin. There aren't any half-breed pale-beige green-eyed Indians here. Nope, unlike me, these Indians are the real deal.

I don't hear any of them speaking English. [..] Even the dogs seem to be barking in Indian. (60)

Ibd.:

Crazy Horse is here. And that older Indian dude standing over there by the horses? He sure looks like Sitting Bull does in the history-book pictorials.

I realize this skinny river is the Little Bighorn, and I have been transported back to June 1876. [..]

Custer is marching towards his slaughter.

Custer is a crazy egomaniac who thinks he is going to be President of the United States. Custer is one of the top two or three dumb asses in American history. [..]

Thousands of hot and angry Indian dudes ride out to meet Custer and his doomed soldiers. (68f)

Ibd.:

They named the battle all wrong.

They shouldn't have called it Custer's Last Stand. Oh, it was his last stand. He died there. Here, I mean. But Custer wasn't important. He was easily replaced. There were plenty of other soldiers who were smarter and better at killing Indians.

Little Bighorn was the last real battle of the Indian wars. After that, the Indians gave up. So Custer's Last Stand was really the Indians' last stand. [..]

I can't see anything, but I know what's happening. I read about this fight. I watched a TV show about it on the History Channel. (70f)

4. Outlook

[T]ribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon. [..] For much of this time period [i.e. American history], we have had literatures. Without Native American literature, there is no American Canon.

(Craig Womack, *Red on Red*, 6f)

Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek* (1981):

That dream
shall have a name
after all,
and it will not be vengeful
but wealthy with love
and compassion
and knowledge.
And it will rise
in this heart
which is our America. (95)

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