# Finding Empowerment through Writing and Reading, or Why Am I Doing This?

*An Unpopular Writer's Comments about the State of American Indian Literary Criticism*

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In late 1998 I became editor of the *American Indian Quarterly.* A year or so later I realized that unless I put a stop to repetitive and basically uninformative literature submissions, then I would continue to drown in paper. Destroying trees in order to print tiresome essays is one thing, but I also became worried that American Indian literary criticism threatened to take over the whole of Indigenous studies. Indeed, instead of scholars deciding to enter other crucial fields of policy, history, science, social work, environmental protection, and recovery of Indigenous knowledge, we now have hundreds of scholars earnestly studying the fiction works of Indigenous writers (or people who claim to be Indigenous; it appears that all a good writer has to do is claim to be a member of tribe X, Y, or Z and everyone takes his or her word for it). Most of these students of Native literature either do not look for important messages of hope, empowerment strategies, and tribal unity and strength, or else their fave writers do not write about such things in the first place.

After posting the new *AIQ* guidelines that stated the journal was no longer accepting submissions on those writers who Cherokee writer Daniel Heath Justice calls "The Noble Nine," I received some commentary from disgruntled individuals who were angry that I had taken such a stance. On the other hand, I received even more support from dozens of Indigenous activist writers (and some study literature) who were enthusiastic that finally someone had made a statement about the questionable usefulness of the work of many scholars in the field.

At the same time that I put a halt to accepting submissions on those writers in hopes of curtailing repetition, I also stated that *AIQ* was not accepting submissions about identity because far and away the majority of

authors who submit these "train of thought" pieces are literature students trying to find a way to substantiate their claims of being Indigenous. This move of mine has proven to be mighty unpopular, thus reinforcing my point about the endurance of the boring topic of identity that more often than not contains fabricated family histories and commentary about the evilness of blood quantum requirements.

Why did I do this? I believe that studying Indigenous literature should compliment what we as students of Indigenous history and culture should be doing. And that is using our knowledge, resources, and talent for writing to better the lives of Indigenous people. It is incomprehensible to me that some scholars study literature in order to dissect and furiously examine factoids and superficial details only about "humor," "place," "erotica," "trickster," and/or "identity" instead of using information gleaned from literature to find decolonization strategies. I am equally puzzled that many talented writers only write novels, stories, and poems without taking the opportunity to create situations from which we can learn and actually use in real life. Even worse are those who write only in order to make a buck (And how do they do that? By writing to please, not to inform, mainstream America) and those who believe they do not have to be accountable for accuracies in language use, history, and culture (and, indeed, where they even get "their" ideas from) because they are writing "creatively." I agree that writing and reading whimsical Indigenous writing can be fun and sometimes necessary, but to indulge in only nonthreatening literature (that is, to eschew more difficult literature in favor of writing that does nothing to improve our lot as tribal nations or does not educate us) as a profession, and to refuse to take responsibility for one's writings because one believes he or she is a privileged writer of fictions, are ideologies I cannot get my mind around.

But this appears to be the way the field operates. A case in point: When *AIQ* put out a call for opinions as to what works by Indigenous authors have most influenced readers, the responses were more than depressing. What I got were lists that featured 98 percent fiction writers. Incredibly, with the exception of Duane Champagne's essay, "American Indian Studies is for Everyone," one work on Julie Cruikshank, and Vine Deloria Jr. being mentioned exactly once, there were no nonfiction writers included anywhere! And even with the compilations of fiction writers that I received, none of them write about empowerment. None have created a realistic role model we can aspire to emulate. None have created diffi-

cult situations and strong characters that show how to survive and to emerge victorious from whatever is troubling them. Why was Vine Deloria Jr. listed only once? Where were the activists who devote their lives to the betterment of Natives? Realizing the missing names, quite frankly, knocked the wind out of me. The interview with Diane Glancy in *AIQ* volume 26, number 4, where she answers a question about accessibility, is just as shocking. Shall we forever be overshadowed by those fiction writers who are considered by literary critics to be the only Indigenous "intellectuals" in existence?

The answer to those questions are obvious. Many lit critters do not want to pay attention to those people who make them uncomfortable. They do not want to have to be responsible. That is, many of them have little concern about the problems tribes face, and they do not want anyone calling attention to the reality that their professional expectations do not include such goals. In addition, getting out in the field to work with communities, to talk to the people, and to write useful work is extremely difficult. Reading and critiquing literature (at least in the way it is currently being critiqued) is, in large measure, a safe and monolithic field. Apparently, it is much easier to ignore activist writers and to instead bestow all kinds of reverence upon those who write nonthreatening, romantic fiction and upon those who make lit critters feel warm and fuzzy.

It is also disconcerting that some literary scholars only look for topics they want to find rather than acknowledging the messages the writer clearly wants readers to consider. Case in point: Last year I found out by chance that there has been a master's thesis written that compares my fiction to the fiction of Louis Owens. Incredibly, the author of that tome not only never interviewed me but also misspelled my name in the title, made shockingly inaccurate assumptions that could have been cleared up easily by a conversation, and most interestingly and no less disturbing, never mentioned any of my books or writings except *Roads of My Relations.* I remain curious to know why discussions of various aspects of my career writings that focus on decolonization are missing from this exercise: for example, the devastation boarding schools have caused past and present generations (*Cultivating the Rose Buds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851–1907*); the impact of stereotypes on Natives (*American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities*); methodological and ethical problems within the academy (the edited an-

thology *Natives and Academics: Research and Writing about American Indians*); the need for research guidelines and accountability (the essay "Research Guidelines for Institutions with Scholars who Study American Indians" ); the ethics and politics of repatriation (the edited anthology *Repatriation Reader: Who Owns Indian Remains?*); the extraordinary complexity of identity formation and maintenance (the essay "American Indian Identities: Comment on Issues of Individual Choices and Development") plus dozens of essays on sexism, activism, gender issues, and, well, you get the picture.

No offense to myself, but simply looking at my first novel and picking out the "supernatural" aspects is not all that important. The other essential foci in that book, such as gender issues, patriarchal thought, colonialism, stereotyping, repatriation, author agency and accountability, activism, boarding schools, racism, traditional diet, family connections, and many other "et ceteras" *are* important. And, if we are going to profile a writer's work, then why not look at the basic ideologies that form the foundation of why he or she writes in the first place?

Another example is my recent novel, *The Lightening Shrikes,* a simple story that deals first and foremost with the empowering of a group of Natives from different cultures when they are forced to coalesce as a softball team. They face personal challenges, but as a group they also have to deal with racism, stereotyping, and coming to terms with what "success" really means. Does being "successful" entail garnering money and fame? Or is success measured by how you empower other Natives and give them hope? The fact that I put them together as a softball team is unimportant; they could have just as easily played soccer. Not surprisingly, feedback from (white) critics who have played ball themselves and who are eager to snipe at a female Native focuses only on the intricacies and realities of softball, mentioning nary a word about the messages of the book and ignoring discussions about the heterogeneity of tribal America. Expect for picking up on issues they disagree with concerning softball, they missed the boat entirely.

Sadly, there are only a handful of Indigenous writers who successfully write fiction and nonfiction. Fewer still write with a focus upon empowerment. There should be hundreds of us! But since the status quo disallows this kind of work from taking center stage in any field of Native studies, it probably should be no surprise that Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, for

example, has to repeatedly state what we should be doing—and that is to focus on the importance of traditions, sovereignty rights, and the tribes as a whole instead of the continually repeated themes of alienation and individualism.

I am not deterred by what appears to be the norm, however. Nor am I deterred by the overwhelming racism, jealousy, and territoriality that appears to lurk in every corner of the academy and, indeed, in the vast arena of fiction writing. In all my writings I have (and will continue to) placed Indigenous concerns, decolonization, and empowerment strategies at the forefront of my work.

Not everyone feels the same way I do about writing, that is for certain. But really, do we want to use our personal experiences, combined with our imagination, to create empowering, dynamic stories that lift us up and inspire us to better ourselves, or do we want to write the same stories about alcoholism, depression, alienation, and tribal destruction that bog us down in sadness? Do we only want to study the same and wallow in helplessness and hopelessness? I hope not, because not only are we what we eat, we also are what we think.

Nor do I want to read a story about Natives that has me closing the book in tears, à la *Old Yeller* and *Where the Red Fern Grows.* Nor do I want to read any more tedious offerings—both stories and the critical evaluations of them—about mixed-blood angst, "the humor in ___" (fill in the blank with your favorite author), "the sense of place in ____" (ditto), or the inevitable loss of culture. Nor am I interested in yet another essay about the *House Made of Dawn* or *Ceremony.* If anyone can come up with something new and different about these great works, then I am all ears (or eyes, I guess); but, considering that as editor of the *American Indian Quarterly* I have now received over thirty submissions since early 1999 on *House Made of Dawn,* and that these essays say absolutely nothing about empowerment or decolonization, then I am not holding my breath for something constructive.

What I want to read (and write) are books that leave me enthused. I want to be inspired and made happy, but more importantly, I want to know that there is hope for the future. If an author creates a story in which the protagonists face all kinds of adversity, then I want those protagonists to find a way to resolve the issues. The state of Native America is grim. Not only do statistics tell us the reality of what is happening,

many of us live with those harsh realities. Crushing racism is only part of the problem. Poverty, abuse, murder, dysfunctional families, despair, and treaty abrogation are a few others.

Hope, inspiration, happiness, and striving for decolonization are things we all can live with. And live for. There are dozens of overlooked and ignored Indigenous writers with these messages in their nonfiction works, novels, stories, and poems. In fact, there are prominent and eminently talented writers who also have these same messages waiting to be found in their wonderful works. We must start looking for them. I cannot see that we have time to do anything else.