

Sovereign Worlds: Native Peoples Reclaim Their Lives and Heritage

The failure of European cartographers to name the New World “Columbia” instead of “America” may seem an injustice to the courageous navigator Christopher Columbus, but it is no more an injustice than his misnaming the peoples he found here “Indians.” Although Columbus may have died still convinced he had reached India, those who followed him to these shores soon realized his error, yet they retained his name for the native peoples found here. They then compounded his mistake by calling America a “new” world. This, most assuredly, it was not. Rather, it was an “unknown” world, one long populated by numerous and diverse peoples with cultures as distinct and vibrant as any to be found in Europe. Indeed, not far from the site of Columbus’s first landing were the empires of the Mayas and the Aztecs, often referred to as the Greeks and the Romans of the Western Hemisphere. Their ancestors were laying the foundations of their empires around 2800 B.C., about the time the Old Kingdom pharaohs of Egypt were building the great pyramids. No matter. The Europeans regarded the natives more as natural objects – another form of fauna to be exploited – rather than as sovereign peoples with histories as rich and ancient as their own.

This, for the Indians of North and South America, the Columbus Quincentenary is not a time of celebration. Most Indians echo the sentiment of George P. Horse Capture, a member of the Gros Ventre tribe and author of the introduction to *After Columbus*. “For America’s Indians,” he notes, “1992 means we will have survived as a people for the 20,000 years before Columbus and the 500 years since.”

The loss of sovereignty for the peoples of North and South America began with Columbus, who immediately claimed for Spain the lands he came upon according to the right of “discovery.” From his act, claims Sioux historian Vine Deloria, Jr., stems all the injustices perpetrated upon the people of the Americas over the past five centuries. As he explains in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, “discovery negated the rights of the Indian tribes to sovereignty and equality among the nations of the world.” It not only took away the title to their land, but also gave Indians the right only “to sell it to the European nation that had *discovered* their land.”

The process of establishing sovereignty over the tribes within North America varied little among the European nations. Most at first negotiated treaties with the Indian tribes, treating them much as they would sovereign independent nations, but in reality the Europeans did not consider the New World peoples as such. Treaty-making was merely an expedient means of obtaining lands from the natives without the risk of warfare. The

United States, for example, continued to write treaties with Indian tribes until the 1870s, even though President Andrew Jackson had called the practice “a farce” more than 40 years before. By then, the Indians of the United States had totally lost their sovereignty and were little more than federal wards, and the instrument designed for their governance was the Bureau of Indian Affairs – often referred to by Indians as the BIA, for “Boss Indians Around.”

Perhaps the loss of sovereignty helps explain why Indians have been, until quite recently, “literary captives,” a people dependent upon others to write their histories. Although books about Indians have always been extremely popular – indeed, few peoples of the world have been studied or written about more than native Americans – it has only been in the last 20 years or so that Vine Deloria, James Welch, Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris, and numerous other equally gifted Indian writers have entered the literary marketplace.

Much of the credit for this goes to Vine Deloria, who burst upon the national scene in 1969 with *Custer Died for Your Sins*, which certainly stirred the conscience of America. Blending humor, rapier-like sarcasm, and chilling factual evidence, Deloria gored sacred cows, demolished myths and stereotypes, and mauled missionaries, anthropologists, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

American hypocrisy was an easy target. Consider the thoughtlessness in requiring Indian children to sing “My Country Tis of Thee,” particularly the lines “Land where our fathers died, Land of the Pilgrims pride.” The fathers of Indian children, Deloria points out, doubtless died trying to keep those pilgrims from stealing their land. Indian rights? It would take the countries of the world centuries to violate as many treaties and agreements with the United States as the federal government have broken with its own native peoples.

Deloria has a simple manifesto. It is a “cultural leave-us-alone agreement.” Indians need economic assistance, but they do not need do-gooders, government officials, and Christian missionaries trying to change their ways of life, to make them either live up to an image that never existed or become something they can never be and remain Indian.

Widely read by Indians and non-Indians alike, *Custer Died for Your Sins* gave focus to the issues that surfaced in the Indian community during the Red Power movement in the early 1970s. One demand was restoration of the sovereignty that had been wrested from the Indians of the Americas over the past 500 years. “Red Power,” Deloria wrote, “means we want power over our own lives.”

The search for sovereignty is a persistent theme in each of the books introduced here. In my book, *After Columbus*, I outline the struggle for sovereignty that began with the first Europeans to come to these shores. Whether conquistador, colonist, or missionary, whether from England, France, Russia, or Spain, the newcomers pressed two goals: to subjugate the Indians politically and to change them into their own image. In short, the Europeans systematically worked to eradicate “Indianness” from the Indians, if not to eliminate Indians altogether. It almost worked, but not quite, as readers of *After Columbus* will discover. Indians have managed not only to survive, but even to thrive. Many tribes still retain much of their original culture and many of their traditional beliefs. Most importantly, thanks to the federal government’s recent willingness to allow tribes to determine their own affairs, Indians are beginning to regain at least a part of the sovereignty they enjoyed prior to the arrival of Columbus.

Ironically, while stripping the Indians of their sovereignty, the Europeans readily adopted the essence of their political philosophy: individual rights. As Jack Weatherford explains in *Indian Givers*, the liberty of the common man, which has become the hallmark of the United States, is very much a legacy of the first Americans. All of the tribes in North and South America had some sort of political organization, although few were as sophisticated as the Aztecs and Incas, whose rulers enjoyed powers that rivaled those of any monarch in Europe. No matter how stratified the society, however, American Indians enjoyed a freedom of action, a personal “sovereignty” that marveled and mystified the Europeans. “We are born free and united brothers, each as much as great lord as the other, while you are all slaves of one sole man,” a Huron leader informed a French visitor in 1683. “I do what I wish, I am ... subject only to the Great Spirit.” Weatherford suggests that egalitarian democracy and liberty owe little to Europe but, instead, entered modern Western thought as American Indian notions translated into European language and culture.

Our romantic fantasies of noble savages notwithstanding, Indians did live a fairly democratic life, they were egalitarian, and they did live in harmony with nature. “Modern democracy as we know it today,” Weatherford believes, “is as much the legacy of the American Indians, particularly the Iroquois, whose league formed the basis for the formation of the United States, as it is of the British settlers, of French political theory, or of all the failed efforts of the Greeks and Romans.” Indeed, the American Indians’ notions of personal freedom, liberty, and individuality have spread across the world much like the plants they introduced to the first Europeans to visit these shores.

These notions are certainly evident in the behavior and thinking of the people who live on the Chippewa-Cree reservation in North Dakota, the setting for Louise Erdrich’s novel *Love Medicine*. Her story concerns two Indian families, the Kashpaws and the

Lamertines, and is told through the lives of several members of each family across multiple generations. Interlocked through marriage, the families are a microcosm of Indian life in the mid-twentieth century.

Love Medicine is not an angry story. Nor is it sarcastic and cynical, like Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Nonetheless, an underlying bitterness at the various federal Indian programs and policies that contribute to the dilemmas facing the Kashpaws and Lamertines is evident, especially in the musings of Albertine Johnson, a young woman studying to become a nurse: "The policy of allotment was a joke. As I was driving toward the land, looking around, I saw how much of the reservation was sold to whites and lost forever."

This is a story of grinding poverty, alcoholism, boredom, injustice, and despair, yet it is sprinkled with humor, love, generosity, and wisdom. Erdrich shows us the emotional reality of Indians living in the world Deloria seeks to change. She is at her best in conveying the strength of the Indian family. Home always beckons, even for those who risk estrangement by leaving their communities to seek a new life for themselves in nearby cities. While Erdrich makes us feel the warmth of life with an extended family, she never sentimentalizes it. Rather, she shows us how the loss of sovereignty affects the daily life of reservation Indians, who seem entangled in a web of incomprehensible taxes and regulations, bureaucratic machinations, and government treachery; yet, despite the limits this world places upon them, her characters reflect the emotional resiliency that has enabled America's Indians to retain much of their cultural values despite 500 years of buffeting and change.

About the only similarity between Erdrich's Chippewa relatives and the principal character in *The Indian Lawyer* is the fact that they are Indians. Sylvester Yellow Calf, like his creator James Welch, is a Blackfeet. Yellow Calf represents a small but growing segment of the Indian community, the assimilated individual who has made it in the "white world." A college sports star and a successful lawyer in a prominent Montana firm, he fits easily into all strata of white society. He is dating the daughter of a prominent Montana politician; he himself is being groomed for national office on the Democratic ticket. Ironically, as a member of the Montana Parole Board, he often has to deal with Indians like Erdrich's Gerry Kashpaw, an appealing, free-spirited, 300-pound rebel who has a talent for escaping from prisons.

Despite Yellow Calf's opportunities, charisma, and intelligence, he becomes a victim, not of injustice, like many of Erdrich's characters, but of his own success. Yellow Calf wrestles with his Indian heritage, and he questions the sincerity of the whites he encounters, especially those with whom he is trying to establish a romantic relationship.

Perhaps even more stressful is trying to reconcile his success with the failure of those he left behind of the Blackfeet reservation. A poignant moment occurs when his grandmother, a carrier of Blackfeet traditional belief, tries to give Yellow Calf his grandfather's medicine bundle. Intended to be worn about the neck when facing danger, it is an object of intense religious significance to traditional Indians. Yellow Calf holds it to his chest, looks at himself in the mirror, and tries to imagine himself a Blackfeet warrior preparing for battle against his Crow enemies. Instead, all he sees is a man at war with himself, a "fat cat lawyer, helping only himself, and some fatter cats, get richer."

Deloria, Erdrich, and Welch are trying to convey to mainstream America what it means to be an Indian today. Whereas Deloria is concerned with tribal sovereignty, Erdrich and Welch present sovereignty as a personal issue. The Indians in *Love Medicine* are battling, often unsuccessfully yet always with life-affirming humor, to maintain at least a sense of personal sovereignty, while Welch's Indian lawyer, successfully mainstreamed into white society, struggles with a loss of identity.

Sadly, many Americans think of native peoples as living artifacts of the nineteenth century. By reading these books, non-Indians will be able to appreciate some of the difficulties faced by those of minority cultures trying to adapt to life in the midst of a larger and often intolerant society. Perhaps one day soon, all writers – non-Indians as well as Indians – will be able to write about Native Americans as ordinary people, occasionally fallible, occasionally virtuous. "We need to look forward to writing about *people* who happen to be Indians, rather than about *Indians* (uniformly stoic, brave, nice to their friends)," writes Modoc scholar and novelist Michael Dorris; works written from this perspective, according to Dorris, stand "a better chance of acting as a bridge between societies that have for too long woodenly characterized each other." As Jack Weatherford notes in *Indian Givers*, for most of us the real Americans have yet to be discovered.

***Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*
by Vine Deloria, Jr.**

Custer Died for Your Sins is one of those refreshing books that is as enjoyable to read as it is important. The author, the son of a Sioux clergyman, studied for the Lutheran ministry before becoming convinced that the overzealous Christian missionaries probably were the source of much of the harm caused to American Indian peoples. Thereafter, he emerged as the Voltaire of the Indian community, lashing out at established religions as readily as he assaulted the federal bureaucracy. His slashing, acerbic wit makes him heard if not always liked. As one reviewer put it, Deloria's more interested in results than in being tactful."

It was this book that made Deloria, by default if not intent, the darling of white liberals seeking a spokesperson for American Indian issues. Never at a loss for a quip or

retort, he endeared himself to the media and became a hero to young Indians across the country. As Deloria himself once remarked, a primary purpose in writing *Custer Died for Your Sins* was “to raise some issues for younger Indians which they have not been raising for themselves” and “to give some idea to white people of the unspoken but often felt antagonism ... Indian people [harbor] toward them and the reason for such antagonism.”

Vine Deloria, Jr. *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*. 1969. University of Oklahoma.

***After Columbus: The Smithsonian Chronicle of the North American Indians*
by Herman J. Viola**

My intention in writing *After Columbus* was to give as complete a picture as possible of North American Indians today, but we cannot understand their present situation without at least a brief overview of their history over the past five centuries. Perhaps the most important point to glean from *After Columbus* is that no single history of the American Indian is possible for the simple fact that the peoples of the Americas were – and are – as culturally diverse as the peoples of Europe. It is no more valid to think that the history of the Italians is the same as the history of Germans than to think that the history of the Cherokees is the same as that of the Apaches. I also tried to present the Indian point of view where possible, no easy task since North American Indians had no written language, and few of the early visitors to the Americas recorded Indians’ oral histories, speeches, or other evidence of their wisdom and knowledge. Whereas most books about American Indians end with the close of the nineteenth century, when Indians were placed on reservations and, in a sense, did become “vanished Americans,” *After Columbus* devotes a third of its space to Indians in the twentieth century. This emphasis on the modern period is designed to correct the notion, gleaned primarily from Hollywood and television, that Native Americans are a people suspended in time. *After Columbus* shows that this is not so. On and off reservations, Indians live as much as Americans do everywhere. They are represented in all professions and trades. Indian women are a force in government and education as well as maintaining the cultural and spiritual life of their communities and home. Indian men and women have distinguished themselves in the arts and sciences; in the classroom and courtroom; on the athletic field and the battlefield. While struggling to maintain some semblance of the sovereignty of their world before Columbus, Indians have accepted the challenge of living in the larger world and making it their own.

Herman J. Viola. *After Columbus: The Smithsonian Chronicle of the North American Indians*. 1990. Smithsonian Institution.

Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World

by Jack Weatherford

For some, the expression “Indian Giver” has come to mean a person who takes back a gift. As readers of Jack Weatherford’s insightful book will discover, if Indians were able to rescind the gifts they have given Europeans, the world would be filled with sick, hungry, and miserable folks deprived of chocolate, pizzas, and a variety of drugs that cure us of everything from constipation to malaria.

Most non-Indians have only a superficial appreciation for the contributions Native Americans have made to the world we enjoy today. Maps are sprinkled liberally with Indian place names such as Milwaukee, Mississippi, and Chicago, and we pay homage to Indians in a fuzzily romantic way on Thanksgiving Day. Weatherford, however, shows us how limited this sentimentalized view really is. He also points out that while the world has benefitted greatly from American Indians, the failure of the first Europeans to recognize what Indians were prepared to provide has resulted in a tremendous loss to us all.

The motivation of most of the Europeans who came here, including Columbus, was wealth, primarily mineral wealth in the form of gold and silver. Cortez spoke for most of the early explorers when he remarked, “I have a disease that only gold can cure.” Admittedly, considerable mineral wealth was mined from the New World, but its most enduring treasures, Weatherford explains, were American Indian plants, not gold and silver. The number of plants developed by Indians for medicinal as well as nutritional purposes staggers the imagination. It is estimated that three-fifths of the food consumed in the world today evolves from plants first developed by American Indians.

In return, the Indians received diseases – it is estimated that by 1900 between 50 and 90 percent of the Indians of North and South America had died of diseases introduced from the Old World. Whole tribes disappeared. No wonder Indians mourn the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

Jack Weatherford. *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World*. 1988. Fawcett.

Love Medicine

by Louise Erdrich

Love Medicine is the first novel of the Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich (her father was a German-American teacher for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and her mother a

Chippewa employee of the Bureau). Narrated by several different characters from two Indian families living in North Dakota, it is the first in a series of novels that document the continuing encroachment of white civilization on the Native American community. Erdrich manages to portray this bitter, multigenerational tragedy on the smallest of canvases, never focusing directly on political or sociological issues, but rather on the details of individual lives. As Erdrich commented in an interview published in *Booklist* magazine, “I think if you first make your protagonist someone any reader is going to identify with and then place the character in a political context, it creates a political statement, but it’s not preaching; it’s not spoken from the pulpit.”

Her characters do not exist to convince us of the correctness of a certain political or social position; rather, they exist to tell us their stories – stories that are rich with the nuances of Chippewa life, but also with the fundamental human concerns that drive all our lives. We experience the mystical side of the Chippewa life; we see the injustices of the reservation system; but we also feel the renewing power of love, the sting of jealousy, the lure of tradition. *Love Medicine* is a novel about Indians, but its truths are universal.

Throughout her ongoing series (*The Beet Queen* and *Tracks* follow *Love Medicine*, and a fourth book is planned), Erdrich stresses the importance of humor. “The humor in my books,” she has said, “is a dark humor, a humor about pain and embarrassment. It’s probably a way – at least for me – to come to terms with past embarrassments.” If humor is central to the ability to survive, so, too, is storytelling. Both literally and metaphorically, narrative becomes a life-giving force in Erdrich’s world. Nanapush, a character in *Tracks*, speaks for all the Indians in the three novels when he says, “I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on.”

Louise Erdrich. *Love Medicine*. 1984. Bantam.

***The Indian Lawyer* by James Welch**

James Welch, a college professor who is of mixed Blackfeet and Gros Ventre descent, was raised on a reservation. In *The Indian Lawyer*, he uses this background to write about a character not usually encountered in contemporary Native American fiction. Sylvester Yellow Calf is a successful lawyer, respected both by his peers on the reservation and by the white establishment, but he, too, must struggle with issues of sovereignty. Yellow Calf wants to enjoy the benefits of life in the greater society – status, a fancy car, material comfort – and his mastery of the law enables him to do so. Still, even though he has attained material success and thereby freed himself from the restraints of the reservation, he must ask himself what the psychological cost of his success has been. While he may be reclaiming a measure of independence in the world at large, he risks

sacrificing his sense of himself as an Indian. No survey of Native American fiction, or no look at the Native Americans in today's society, can be complete without examination of the kinds of issues Welch raises here. For Sylvester Yellow Calf, sovereignty of the soul is an issue worth fighting for.

Like Erdrich, Welch is a brutally honest writer who never backs away from the hard realities of contemporary life faced by many Native Americans. "We are reminders," Welch writes, "that this is not always the 'Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.'"

James Welch. *The Indian Lawyer*. 1990. Norton.

For Further Reading: A Sampler

Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux. 1932. As told through John G. Neihardt. This religious classic has had a profound effect on both Indian and non-Indian readers. It offers a tangible link with the past for today's young Indians, who find the roots of their own identity in the holy man's structure of a universal reality that transcends the loss of individual and tribal sovereignty.

The Broken Cord. Michael Dorris. 1990. This account of Dorris' adopted son, Adam, a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome, is both a moving personal memoir of familial love in the face of tragedy and a revealing anthropological investigation of the devastating effects of FAS on Native Americans. Research indicates that half of all Indian newborns are afflicted with FAS – a shocking reminder that, for Native Americans, Columbus was the bringer of disease. Dorris is also the author of *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, which tells the story of three generations of Indian women, nurturing, rebelling, suffering, and loving. Harper.

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West. Dee Brown. 1971. Although scholars have challenged the author's popularization of history, this decidedly pro-Indian account of the battles that occurred between the United States and the tribes that attempted to maintain their independence did much to inspire the American Indian cultural resurgence of the 1970s. Holt.

Ceremony. Leslie Marmon Silko. 1977. This mesmerizing first novel draws upon Silko's knowledge of traditional ritual and lore as well as her childhood experiences to tell the story of life on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico. Penguin.

Fool's Crow. James Welch. 196. The only one of James Welch's four novels set in the past, this moving story recounts the end of an era, as the traditional tribal life of the Blackfeet unraveled in the 1870s under the onslaught of manifest destiny. Penguin.

The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indian. Francis P. Prucha. 1986 (abridged edition). This comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the United States and the Indian tribes within its borders details in blow-by-blow fashion the manner in which sovereignty was stripped away from tribal peoples. University of Nebraska.

House Made of Dawn. N. Scott Momaday. 1966. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, this beautifully written novel by Kiowa writer Scott Momaday tells the powerful story of a young American Indian who cannot find his place in society after returning from World War II. His experience is like that of so many other young Indians who find themselves alienated not only from the traditions of the past, but also from the values of the dominant society that engulfs them. Harper.

Inca: The Life and Times of Garcilaso de la Vega. Edited by John G. Varner. 1968. The classic account of the impact of the Spanish conquest upon the native peoples of Peru. Written in the sixteenth century by the son of an Inca woman and Spanish nobleman, it is the most reliable source on Inca culture prior to the conquest and details the disorientation and demoralization that occurred when the great Inca Empire disintegrated. University of Texas.

One Hundred Million Acres. Kirke Kickingbird and Karen Ducheneaux. 1973. According to Vine Deloria, who wrote the introduction to this edition, *One Hundred Million Acres* is the first effort by Indians themselves to present their side of the legal difficulties that have beset the relationship between the sovereign tribes and the government of the United States. Macmillan.

Stay Away, Joe. Dan Cusman. 1968. This delightful novel, both humorous and insightful, does much to explain the difficulties faced by Indians who try to adjust to government policies designed to make them effective participants in modern America. Once the book of young Indians, *Stay Away, Joe* is the story of a Sioux cowboy who returns from the rodeo circuit to help his father manage a herd of government cows as a part of an Indian development program. Stay Away Press.

Tracks. Louise Erdrich. 1988. "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall." Although a funereal tone dominates this third novel in Erdrich's cycle, it is finally a story of survival. "Bureaucrats sink their barbed pens into the lives of Indians," savaging the forests and stealing the land, but the Indians protect themselves with wit and the ability to create myth. Harper.

We Talk, You Listen. Vine Deloria, Jr. 1970. In this, his second major work, Deloria concludes that Indian tribes must turn away from technology-obsessed contemporary society and return to traditional social organizations in order to survive. He further notes that tribalization is evident in the responses of other groups to the dehumanization of modern society, citing the drug culture as a notable example. Macmillan.

Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer. Thomas B. Marquis. 1962. More than the subtitle implies, this is a fascinating account by the Northern Cheyenne Indian Wooden Leg, whose life spanned by the turbulent years from the Civil War to World War I, as told to a physician who worked on the Cheyenne reservation in Montana. Wooden Leg describes what it meant for the Northern Plains Indians to lose their freedom as nomadic buffalo hunters and become reluctant wards of the federal government. University of Nebraska.

Dates listed following titles in this bibliography reflect original publication. Publishers, which appear following the annotations, reflect in-print paperback editions, where available.

“Sovereign Worlds: Native Peoples Reclaim Their Lives and Heritage” was written by Herman J. Viola, Director of Quincentenary Programs, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Development of this theme was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional support and materials have been provided by the American Library Association.

