
**“An Evening’s Curiosity”: Image and Indianness in James Welch’s
*The Heartsong of Charging Elk***

TAMMY WAHPECONIAH

“In order to be recognized, to claim authenticity in the world—in order to be seen at all—the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from the outside.”

---Louis Owens

Some of the most important and challenging questions in American Indian literature scholarship are those that deal with authenticity. How do writers construct images of Indianness? Is it possible to avoid stereotyping, and if not, how does one resist reducing characters to tropes or types? How does one assimilate—and I am using this term provocatively—self-identity and imposed identity? What makes a character, a writer, a scholar “Indian enough” for inclusion in Native studies? Questions such as these are not easily answered, nor are they comfortable to address.

I would argue that American Indian identity brings with it a special set of concerns that are not as prevalent in other fields of ethnic studies. For example, Hertha D. Sweet Wong, Lauren Muller, and Jana Magdaleno address the issue of identity in the introduction to their anthology of American Indian women writers entitled *Reckonings*: “In selecting the writers to include . . . we chose not to require tribal enrollment, a decision that risks judgments of ‘inauthenticity’” (xxiv). The editors’ decision succinctly illustrates that “*who* and *how* is an Indian is an ongoing contest of stories in North America” (xxiv, emphasis mine). As we can see in the introduction, the editors of *Reckonings* had to define *Indianness* before they could determine whose works they could include in their collection, even when their very definition is far from definitive.

Defining Indian identity seems to be an inherent part of American Indian studies. I include in this category both critical and creative work. Thus, we see scholars such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Hilary N. Weaver and Sean Teuton, writing about authenticity, focusing on those of us working in the field as well as those whose works we study and, more importantly, *how* we read those works. In addition, American Indian novelists, poets, etc., deal with issues of identity and authenticity in many, if not all, of their works.

In “Literary and Political Questions of Transformation: American Indian Fiction Writers,” Elizabeth Cook-Lynn takes issue with the use of western literary theory in American Indian studies. She argues that there are two issues surrounding the study of contemporary Native American novels: *cosmopolitanism* and *nationalism*. Reading a novel through the lens of cosmopolitanism means that the scholar “explores the tastes and interests of the dominant culture,” while one who reads through the lens of nationalism is interested in “nation-specific creativity and political unification in the development, continuation, and defense of a coherent national mythos” (46). Because cosmopolitanism is *de rigueur*, literary criticism focuses on questions of “identity, authenticity, and purpose,” and in asking these questions, claims authority over the native voice (47). To continue asking these questions, Cook-Lynn argues, is to continue to hold captive Native American literature by forcing scholars to analyze it using western literary theory (51) and writers to comply “with metropolitan literary tastes” that function, erroneously, as “Native American literary expression” (49).

Sean Teuton, in his analysis of identity in James Welch’s novel *Winter in the Blood*, lays out the debates over the concept of identity with which many Native Studies scholars are engaged. He begins in the 1980s with Paula Gunn Allen and Ward Churchill’s essentialist views of identity, which do not allow for “the continued development of persons and communities” (628). He then moves into the 1990s, discussing the postmodernist theories of Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens, and Kimberly Blaeser. Although Teuton has a more positive view for postmodernist theory, especially Vizenor’s, he argues “the postmodern diffuses the political force of identity *by detaching identity from social location*” (632, his emphasis). He argues that the theoretical approach defined as “realist,” formulated from the works of major analytic philosophers such as Charles S. Peirce and W.V.O. Quine, allows us to “evaluate various identity constructions according to their ability to interpret experiences accurately” (632). Thus, Teuton concludes that claiming identity as an “Indigenous Exile” is more “real” than the identity “Native American” because one’s experience can better explain one’s collective and individual idea of the self rather than a government-designated racial marker.

I would agree with Elizabeth Cook-Lynn that questions of identity come out of cosmopolitanism (50); however, I would argue that the *issue* of identity is grounded in a variety of mythologies surrounding Indians. Because these mythologies are so embedded in the American cultural consciousness, it is difficult for writers and scholars to turn away from

questions surrounding authenticity and identity. The myth of the Indian is so prevalent that by the end of the nineteenth century, Americans' perception of Indians was, as L.G. Moses points out,

As carved statues that adorned shop entrances or as heads in profile on coins that jingled in their pockets or purses. In their thoughts about the West and its original inhabitants, Americans variously imagined an Indian to be a noble savage, a rapacious killer, a reservation idler, the vanishing American, or a war-bonneted equestrian raider of the plains. (4)

Such perceptions have continued well into the twenty-first century. For example, in Stephen Graham Jones' 2008 novel *Ledfeather*, a white couple visiting the Blackfeet casino insultingly calls their waiter "Kemosabe" and has similar views of Indians as Moses recounts above.

According to the varied aspects of this enduring myth, Indians were (and are) to exist as the vanishing savage while simultaneously exhibiting their barbarism and savagery through war whoops and unprovoked violence, performing their unholy misdeeds in face paint and feathers. To further complicate this paradigm, Indian performance is only to take place under white control, i.e., the reservation, and for white pleasure in shows like Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

The protagonist in James Welch's novel, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, must bear the repercussions of such inflated and farcical mythologies. In a world devoid of an accurate conception of the American Indian, Charging Elk is paradoxically both esteemed and castigated based upon his level and locality of conformity to the paradigm of Indianness. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* provides a fictional example of a mythology that still permeates Euroamerican beliefs about the Indian. Yet we see Welch's protagonist negotiating a constantly changing cultural landscape that moves beyond a simple assimilation into Western (specifically French) society. Instead, Charging Elk's negotiations with this new culture illustrate strategic action, choice, and an attempt to turn the performative nature of "Indianness" into "an effective means of self-representation" (Maddox 9).

Welch's novel follows the titular character from his home in the Black Hills to Europe as a member of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Left behind in Marseille, he is mistaken for Featherman, another show Indian who dies from influenza. Because of a bureaucratic mix-up (the doctor identifies the dead Featherman as Charging Elk), the American consulate is unable to

send him either home or to Italy to rejoin the show. In addition, Charging Elk is not a United States citizen and thus the French government labels him *sans papier avant la lettre*. Ironically, this label comes to benefit him after he is charged with murdering a man who attempts to rape him and is sentenced to life in prison in France’s notorious La Tombe. The French see his tribal status as citizenship in the Sioux Nation and, therefore, because no legal agreement exists between the two nations, he is released from prison.

Both arising from and contributing to the paradigm of Indianness is the concept of “playing Indian,” which factors heavily in the plot and themes of Welch’s novel. In his book *Playing Indian*, Philip J. Deloria argues that playing Indian is an act in which Americans have engaged in an attempt to create both a personal and national identity. Deloria contends “savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national self” (3). Playing Indian, however, is not limited to non-Natives, as Indians have also taken part in this act, both voluntarily and involuntarily. According to Deloria, “as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unfolded, increasing numbers of Indians participated in white people’s Indian play, assisting, confirming, co-opting, challenging, and legitimating the performative tradition of aboriginal American identity” (8). In the act of performing the *idea* of the Indian, by embodying those fictions in their actions, Indians who participate in “white people’s Indian play,” make those artificial conventions appear to be natural and necessary.

In an article entitled “The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe,” Rayna Green writes, “The Wild West Shows, with the sequelae, cemented roles for Indians who play Indian, or as Indians will later call them, ‘show’ Indians” (38). For Charging Elk, playing Indian as a participant in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show is the result of an impossible standard imposed by a society that prohibits him from being anything but a hyperbolic caricature of himself and his people. As such, he is at the mercy of a system that simultaneously allows and disallows entrance to that system based upon the single criterion of Indianness, a “static view,” where the Indian, “in order to remain authentic, must camp forever in the eighteenth, seventeenth, or sixteenth century. . . .” or in this case, the nineteenth century (Moore 45).

Throughout the novel, Charging Elk is haunted by this ever-present paradigm imposed on him by a society that “desired Indianness, not Indians” (Deloria 90). He and his friend, Strikes Plenty, audition for the Wild West show in order to escape the only other choice allowed them: a

demeaning life on the reservation. Strikes Plenty, however, is denied a place in the Wild West show because “he is not Indian enough for [the] white bosses . . . [who] think they know what an Indian should look like. He should be tall and lean. He should have nice clothes. He should look only in the distance and act as though his head is in the clouds (34). Strikes Plenty “did not fit [the] white men’s vision” (34), both literally and figuratively. The other Indians vying for performative positions with the show “wore their best clothes, beaded and fringed buckskins, blue felt leggings, calico blouses, some even full headdresses. They painted their faces and their horses and they rode their woolly saddles with a practiced recklessness” (34). Found early in the text, the Indians’ behavior and appearance is an example of the myth of Indianness that reverberates throughout the novel in many forms. However, the paradigm is perhaps most succinctly expressed by the French newspaper reporter Martin St-Cyr, whose expectation of Indianness is evidenced by the following queries: “Would [Charging Elk] be dressed in feathers and fur, in war paint? Would he have a fierce scowl? More important, would he be dangerous, a wild savage from the American frontier?” (93). St-Cyr’s ludicrously exaggerated estimation of Indianness is a perfectly preserved reflection of the contemporary societal viewpoint.

In her book *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities*, Laura Browder explains the fascination with ethnic performance in general and Wild West shows in particular: “Cody’s display of Native Americans reenacting the battles they had lost softened the brutal history of conquest and made it palatable for audiences” (58). According to Browder, white society craves the display of Indianness because of the alleviation of guilt that it provides for them. As a result, she contends that “Cody’s shows depended for their success on authenticity” (58). Thus, “Everything Genuine” became Cody’s trademark promotion. By offering audiences alleged authenticity, Cody was essentially assuring them that history unfolded in this less offensive manner. Moreover, by using Indians in the performance, he implied their acceptance, and even endorsement, of his scripted version of events.

Furthermore, many Americans in the nineteenth century believed the Indians to be entirely disappearing from the continent and considered Wild West shows to be of great historical significance, a valuable opportunity to behold the vanishing race. Browder states, “Most of the spectators at a Wild West show in the 1880s had never seen an Indian; in the public imagination, Indians were passing out of existence” (58). In Welch’s novel, Franklin Bell, the American vice-consul to France, shares this belief viewing Indians “as still attempting to live in

the past with their feathers and beads” (82). He concludes that their attempts are only natural “since they had no future to speak of. . . . They were a pitiful people in their present state and the sooner they vanished or joined America the better off they would be” (82). For this and many other reasons, the tenets of the show so resonated with American and European audiences that “within two years of its [Cody’s Wild West show] first appearance in Omaha, nearly fifty circuses, medicine shows and rival Wild West shows had incorporated, and in some instances copied, many of its features (Moses 23).

Browder explains this phenomenon of popularity, partially attributing it to society’s obsession with the myth asserting, “Cody offered the public an iconic view of the Native American. He recruited only from the plains tribes, particularly the Sioux, and offered the public the same images—over and over again—of Indian clothing, Indian dwellings, and Indian behavior” (65). In addition, the Wild West show, “helped to create ‘the Indian’ and thus literally removed American Indians into the American and European imagination as ‘first citizens’ of the nation, securely conquered within and tied to this nation’s creation myth” (Optiz 165). Charging Elk, unlike Strikes Plenty, is considered Indian enough by Buffalo Bill’s show scouts, his appearance and performance lending him to perfect correspondence with the myth. First, Charging Elk is considered “dark even for an Oglala” (Welch 42). Second, he thrills the audiences with his display of Indian dress, performing in “his father’s hairpipe breastplate [and] his own badger-claw necklace” (133). He wears “brass armbands, earrings, and the two eagle feathers in his hair” (133). Dressed in his “finest clothes,” Charging Elk “knew he was quite a sight” (49). Finally, he performs the various elements of the show with enthusiasm, his “recklessness” suggesting, “a life lived the old way” (34). In fact, he is a self-avowed “seasoned performer” (51). For him, playing Indian includes “burning the settler’s cabin, chasing the Deadwood stage, [and] fighting with the soldiers in the big show of Custer’s last fight” (15), all of which contribute to the amplified paradigm of Indianness.

In choosing to be part of the myth, Charging Elk is also choosing to conform to the myth, making “him an accomplice in the erasure of history as [it is] embedded in the tribe’s collective memory and the construction of a revised and officially sanctioned historical American memory” (Bak 110). Leaving behind his cherished horse, Charging Elk “rode [a] painted horse in the procession” (51), catering to the myth at its most hyperbolic level by mounting the proverbial spotted steed. In addition, Charging Elk is aware that the “excitement and danger of the event”

(47) felt by the audience is as staged as the show's buffalo hunt. His performative Indianness is foiled by the "cowboys, soldiers, vaqueros, and wagons filled with elk, deer, and buffaloes" (49), as representatives of every significant western myth ride side by side in contrived and historically inaccurate harmony.

Despite the contradictions presented, engaging in performance also has some notable benefits. On a practical level, playing Indian affords Charging Elk access to more food, money, and opportunities than are available to the Lakota on the reservation. Welch's narrator contends that "the Indians were treated well, they got enough to eat, they saw curious things, they got to show off before thousands of people, and they made more of the white man's money than they could spend" (33). More importantly to Charging Elk, as is evidenced by his repetition of the fact throughout the novel, much of his pay is sent home to his parents, which will help to somewhat lessen their dependence on the government commodities he so despises.

In addition to the financial advantages, it is through this controlled showmanship that Charging Elk attains the temporary and precarious status of being appropriately Indian. In a society that distrusts and degrades Native Americans, playing Indian becomes a rare opportunity for Charging Elk to experience any measure of social affirmation. He and his friends relish "the spectacle of themselves reflected in the astonished eyes of the French people" (Welch 22). As a participant in a show established for white entertainment, Charging Elk is subject to awe and admiration for his mythic Indianness. Performing provides Charging Elk with a sense of safety and comfort, "the only time Charging Elk had been at ease among the *wasichus*" (Welch 167). Ulla Haselstein notes that "[t]he nostalgic image of the warrior provides protection and identity but also turns Charging Elk into an allegorical character in a past constructed to provide an image of the American nation" (96). However, once he leaves the show, his true Indianness earns him only scorn and malevolence. According to the narrator, "Charging Elk had entered [Marseille] in triumph and the people had welcomed him. Now they looked at him with suspicion, even with hostility, just as the Americans did" (52). On his own, without the artifice of the performance arena, "Charging Elk's wildness counted for nothing now" (130), showing that Indianness is measured by both quality of and context for adherence to the paradigm.

This concept of acceptance only within the confines of the myth is also expressed in D'arcy McNickle's novel *The Surrounded*. George Moser, a white storeowner living on a reservation, offers the following description of his wife, Sara:

She was a girl from his own little village in Pennsylvania and she was good and sick of the Noble Red Man as a neighbor. She liked him in a Wild West show, but his smell invaded her parlor and caused her to keep linen covers on her horsehair furniture the year round; even with that precaution she was not sure she would dare return to civilization with such contaminated belongings. (32)

In Mrs. Moser’s estimation, Indianness is an acceptable, even desired quality within the performance arena but is unwelcome outside of it. Similar attitudes surround Charging Elk. As long as he exercises his Indianness within the confines of the paradigm, he is revered and appreciated. Thus, playing Indian affords him a few moments of limited and conditional acceptance by a society that controls the myth.

Playing Indian also provides him a fleeting connection with his Lakota life. According to Moses, “the only place to be an Indian—and defiantly so—and still remain relatively free from the interference of missionaries, teachers, agents, humanitarians, and politicians was in the Wild West show” (278). To some degree, Charging Elk could tap into centuries of hunts, traditions, and ceremonies by playing Indian. He could relive the history of his ancestors, albeit in an exaggerated way. Playing Indian also allowed him an opportunity to showcase the venerable characteristics of the Lakota, who “encouraged self-control, generosity, tact, wisdom, and responsibility toward the poor or helpless as well as courage and prowess in battle” (Moses 84). Indeed, in playing Indian, Charging Elk strives for dignity because he, like his friends and fellow performers, “wished to be thought of as *wichsa yatapika*, men whom all praise, men who quietly demonstrate courage, wisdom, and generosity—like the old-time leaders” (Welch 51).

For Charging Elk, playing Indian is an attempt to resist being “tamed by the white bosses” (34) and rediscover the legacy of dignified leadership that he so admires. Indian Removal had confined Native Americans to reservations, and strict regulations severely hindered the continuation of many tribal ceremonies and customs. For example, chiefs were now subject to American governmental authority. In fact, when Charging Elk recalls Red Cloud, he surmises that the man “*had been* a great war chief. Now he was a reservation Indian and had been one for ten years. Now he took his orders from white chiefs . . .” (2, emphasis mine). Charging Elk thinks of Red Cloud’s leadership in past tense because it is no longer effective. Before they arrive in Europe, Charging Elk and the other performers hope that since European audiences “had never seen Indians . . . they would treat the Indians like important chiefs” (32). Charging

Elk wants to believe that Europeans would respect him and the others, allowing the Indians to regain the dignity he knows they should have.

Playing Indian also provides Charging Elk with a degree of control over the evolution of the myth. American Indian author and activist Vine Deloria acknowledges that Indian performers in the Wild West shows were offering exaggerated reenactments of their earlier years but suggests, “Perhaps they realized in the deepest sense, that even a caricature of their youth was preferable to a complete surrender to the homogenization that was overtaking American society” (56). By engaging in performance, Charging Elk can, to a limited extent, influence the paradigm rather than simply be overtaken by it. In his article, “Methodological Approaches to Native American Narrative and the Role of the Performance,” Randall Hill writes, “Since performance provides the means through which people negotiate cultural boundaries, performance makes a difference in whether cultures survive or die” (113). Charging Elk realizes that “next to Buffalo Bill, the audiences wanted to see the Indians most” (Welch 50) and it is estimated that in one year, the Wild West show had been performed for a total audience of more than one million people (Moses 30). His participation guarantees survival for his people in the sense that through the myth, their image, although skewed, will be projected far into the future. As a result, because he is “proud of being a Lakota,” Charging Elk is also “proud of being in the show, proud of his appearance. He [is] eager to put on a show for these new *wasichus* that they [will] talk about long after he [is] gone” (Welch 147).

Although Charging Elk’s performance in the Wild West show is voluntary, his conformity to the mythic paradigm is mandatory. As previously stated, his Indianness is desired, even encouraged, but only within the confines of the show, as the only other place where adherence to the myth is allowed, albeit with limitations, is the reservation. Therefore, Charging Elk must either play Indian, essentially parading a caricature of himself before white audiences, or go to the reservation, surrendering what he regards as the last vestiges of true freedom. As Browder points out, “Officials considered participation in the shows a good way of keeping potential troublemakers off the reservations and safely involved in performance. What they did onstage they could not, thus, enact in real life” (59). Similarly, Archilde, the protagonist of *The Surrounded*, assumes that “he would wind up like every other reservation boy—in prison, or hiding in the mountains” (150). Like Charging Elk, Archilde recognizes the limiting nature of the reservation and the likelihood that Indian boys with few outlets for their frustration,

disappointment, and desire to exhibit true Indianness will find themselves in compromising situations.

Indeed, reservations were so strictly regulated that Charging Elk considers his people little more than prisoners (Welch 3). Choosing instead to live on their own at the Stronghold, Charging Elk and Strikes Plenty “laughed and mocked those Indians who had given up and lived in the wooden houses at the agency, collecting their meager commodities, their spoiled meat, learning to worship the white man’s god, [and] learning to talk the strange tongue” (20). He fondly recounts the days before the Oglala were forced onto the reservation, remembering the “women picking berries, men coming back with meat, the dogs and horses, the sudden laughter or tears of children, the quiet ease of lying in the sunny lodge with the skins rolled up to catch a breeze” (11). Perhaps because he was so young at the time of Indian Removal and does not—or does not want to—fully comprehend its mandatory nature, Charging Elk views reservation life as a dismal liminal space between the old way and a distant future, a holding pen for passive Indians who have voluntarily surrendered their autonomy to the government. As a result, he willfully plays Indian, glad to be “dressed in his finest clothes, riding a strong horse, [and] preparing himself to thrill the crowds with a display of the old ways” (52) rather than being confined to the parameters of the reservation.

While adherence to the paradigm provides a degree of immediate and short-lived benefits, the myth is overwhelmingly destructive in nature, prompting undeserved aversion based solely on ethnicity. Charging Elk illustrates that once Indians step outside the paradigm, their image becomes increasingly marred and distorted, subject to fallacies that are even more egregious. For instance, because she is so schooled in the myth of Indianness, when Madeleine Soulas meets Charging Elk for the first time, “she was quite surprised to see how calm and benign [he] looked” (Welch 115). The hyperbolic Indian is engrained on her mind to the extent that she is unable to recognize a true Indian. Therefore, her confusion and misunderstanding is manifested by undue fear and dislike. As Madeleine prepares for his arrival, she calculates the risk Charging Elk poses to her children, erroneously assuming that young Chloe and Mathias will be plagued by nightmares of “painted, screaming savages chasing the monstrous bison, or worse, the brave pioneers,” and “was surprised and angry to see a tear fall into the batter” she is stirring (151). Madeleine’s inability to see beyond the myth produces a genuine fear that only her repeated and positive exposure to Charging Elk alleviates.

In addition to provoking undue fear, the myth contributes to the dehumanization and over simplification of Indians as individuals. Moses argues, “Because Wild West shows created stereotypes about Indians . . . [they] have been treated as artless victims, dismissed as irrelevant, or worse, simply ignored. With only a few conspicuous exceptions, nothing is known about their experiences. They have remained merely caricatures, as wooden and artificial as supposedly the images they created” (7). For example, Rene Soulas describes Charging Elk as a “simple soul” (Welch 74) pacified by the occasional offer of tobacco and sweets. As such, while he does evidence a desire to be of assistance to Charging Elk, Rene primarily seems to consider the Indian an adult-sized toy created solely for his entertainment and amusement.

Moreover, as Charging Elk moves outside of the myth, he ceases to exist for the American ambassadors Archibald Atkins and Franklin Bell. Although they are annoyed by the mistaken issuance of a death certificate for Charging Elk instead of Featherman, Atkinson and Bell choose comfortable complacency over the preservation of Charging Elk’s individuality, willing to view him as “dead, plain and simple” (157-58). Bell states, “I don’t think the French care which Indian lived and which died. I hate to say this, but one Indian is as good as another to them—no insult intended” (160). His casual estimation of the French regard for Indians is actually a thinly veiled account of his own view of the matter. Bell is discomfited by the situation and perhaps even feels a modicum of sympathy for Charging Elk, yet he accepts the tenet of the myth that relegates Indians to interchangeable characters in a play, performers who can simply be recast when necessary. As Rene similarly asserts, “one could almost forget that [Charging Elk] had been a celebrity with Buffalo Bill” (174) and thus forget that he even existed at all.

Charging Elk also illustrates the relationally limiting nature of the myth in that attempts to step outside of the paradigm and into everyday life are met with, at the least, unease and uncertainty. For example, his coworkers at the soap factory exhibit the following reactions to him: “Some of the men made jokes about him; others made what they thought were war whoops when he was out of hearing range; still others watched him with a wary awe, some with hatred because he was different” (261). Throughout the novel, the responses Charging Elk’s ethnicity elicits consistently correspond to this catalog of attitudes. While a performer in the Wild West show, his Indianness incites admiration and praise. By contrast, as a member of society and not as a performer, his Indianness garners ridicule, fear, and disdain. One exception is the temporary positive attention he receives from protestors at his trial. While Charging Elk is imprisoned and

awaiting sentencing, St-Cyr uses his article to stimulate interest in the Indian’s dilemma. As a result, “the persecution of ‘the vanishing American’ (as St-Cyr himself termed the plight of the American Indian) was more than they could bear” (Welch 335). The French people organize rallies and protests, but their defense is short-lived. Since their support is not necessarily for him, but an emotional response to yet another tenet of the myth, they quickly move on to something or someone else.

Only those who are unschooled in the myth are able to accept Charging Elk as an individual rather than as a stereotype. Because they have very little prior knowledge of the societal conception of Indianness, Mathias and Chloe Soulas quickly become attached to him, exhibiting none of the undue fear their mother, Madeline, experiences. Later in the novel, Nathalie, slightly more influenced by preconceived notions of Indianness than the Soulas children, does at first distance herself from Charging Elk. However, this hesitation is as much due to their differing ages, unexpressed physical and emotional attraction, and levels of maturity as anything else. Because her prejudices are minimal and not deeply ingrained, she is able to separate her expectations of Charging Elk from those that the myth outlines.

Interestingly, while incarcerated in La Tombe, Charging Elk is able to disprove his adherence to the myth and thus gain the respect of the wardens and his fellow inmates. His ability to do so is directly related to the fact that for this one time in his life, his identity is defined first by his sentence and social status as a convicted felon instead of by his ethnicity. His categorization primarily as an inmate and secondarily as an Indian affords him the brief opportunity to manipulate the application of the myth and showcase positive qualities such as respect for authority and an impressive work ethic.

Despite these rare opportunities for manipulating the myth, it is apparent that the power of the paradigm supersedes that of Charging Elk to overcome it. For example, once Mathias Soulas becomes exposed to the myth, the friendship he and Charging Elk share quickly disintegrates. After the trial in which Charging Elk is declared a savage incapable of adhering to the laws of civilization, he encounters the young man and sees “the large brown eyes of Mathias looking at him without a hint of expression” (Welch 412). As a result of unfair assumptions and unwillingness to consider Charging Elk’s side of the situation, Mathias loses respect for his former friend and the bond between them is severed.

Furthermore, the myth even tempers the friendliness the brothel owner, Olivier, shows to Charging Elk. Because he does not realize Charging Elk is an American Indian, Olivier allows him to frequent the salon alongside his fashionable and wealthy clients. He surmises that Charging Elk must be “a prince of the Orient” (222) and sees him as “an evening’s curiosity” (225). Olivier has had no exposure to anyone who looks like Charging Elk, as “the only *indiens* he had seen had been illustrated tabloids and they had worn feathers and war paint” (223). He considers them “a most disagreeable race of savages” (223). If Olivier were aware of Charging Elk’s true ethnicity, he would never have allowed the Indian entrance into the salon, demonstrating that it is the mythic paradigm that negatively influences Charging Elk’s social interactions and not necessarily his heritage.

In addition to affecting his relationships with others, the myth erodes Charging Elk’s estimation of himself. Despite his determination to cling to the old ways and his respect for his culture, Charging Elk cannot help but internalize some of the continual social strife between the white and Indian worlds. As he beholds his future wife, young, graceful, white Nathalie, “he suddenly felt unworthy” because he considers himself “a savage that didn’t deserve much beauty” (Welch 401). For a moment, he subconsciously accepts the mindset that has been forced upon him and that has dictated almost every aspect of his life. Rather than deriving a sense of pride from his ethnicity, Charging Elk has no one with whom he can identify and “[thinks] of himself as one who [has] no color, [is] in fact almost a ghost even though his large dark presence always attracted attention from both light and dark people” (198). At one point, looking at himself in the mirror, he “*almost liked* the dark, chiseled face” (214, emphasis mine). Ironically, his appearance, which affords him such personal pride within the performance arena, is a source of ambivalence outside of it.

While he is very much accustomed to the social ramifications of being an Indian, Charging Elk nonetheless struggles to comprehend the justice of a system which ranks worth based upon skin color and makes additional deductions for being Indian. He understands why the white miners in the United States from whom he and his friends stole would dislike him but he questions the source of hatred shown by the American sailors he encounters in a Marseille restaurant. He marvels in dismay that although “he had spent the past three winters making himself invisible, . . . they knew him right away” (200). It is only after he fully reverts to Lakota ceremony and sings his death song before the sailors that he feels, once again, like a “man to be

reckoned with” (202). When Charging Elk first enters the restaurant, he feels “that he was part of the festive crowd” and his French is good enough to converse with his waiter (197). But he begins to feel a separation as he looks around at his fellow diners and realizes “that they were all *wasichus*” (198). This separation is further exacerbated by the sailors’ response to his presence—“He is a goddamn ignorant blanket-ass”; “Ask him to give us a war whoop”—which reflects not only their anger but also their adherence to the myth of “Indianness” (199). Yet, when he begins to sing his death song, “the accordion player [squeezes] his box in a hushed, toneless accompaniment” (201) and Charging Elk leaves the restaurant to make a prayer while the “Moon of Black Cherries [glares] above the Old Port” (202). Charging Elk’s perception of himself, when seen through the lens of the myth, is one of deficiency, yet Welch uses this scene to illustrate a complex process of transculturation. We see Charging Elk move from feeling “happy” (197), to feeling “uneasy” (198), to feeling “confused” (199), and finally, to feeling “strong” and “light” (202). The scene in the Marseille restaurant illustrates Charging Elk’s mediation of the performative nature of “Indianness” through strategic self-representation.

Because the paradigm of Indianness is so distorted Charging Elk has difficulty recognizing himself, or more accurately, what he is expected to be, within the myth. A prime example is the account of the teacher in the government school who attempts to teach Charging Elk the Word “Indian.”

[The teacher] pointed directly at him, then at the board, and said “Indian.” She made all the children say “Indian.” Then she showed them a picture of a man they could not recognize. He had sharp toes, big thighs, and narrow shoulders; he wore a crown of blue and green and yellow feathers and an animal skin with dark spots. His eyes were large and round; his lips tiny and pursed. The white woman said “Indian.” (56)

The mythic Indian is so exaggerated that the caricature retains few original or accurate qualities.

As Opitz states,

What is constructed here is the figure of prehistoric and fantastic “Indianness,” the racist fantasy that needs to project the “Indian” as artifact, as fetish, and as Other. The fantasy operates on three assumptions: that this “Indian” is a stable object of representation, that he is in some strange way identical with the sign, *and* that he identifies himself with it. . . . The lesson of the Indian is not merely

meant to teach the other children what a creature the Indian is, but by identifying Charging Elk with this picture, the teacher means to suggest that he is this—and nothing else—unless he assimilates and relinquishes the particularity of his experience and cultural identity. (174)

Unfortunately, the power to change the paradigm is withheld from those upon whom it is based. Charging Elk, although he does not recognize the corresponding description, must learn the denoted title, since it will be applied to him whether he offers an endorsement or not.

Ironically, it is the myth of Indianness that saves Charging Elk from immediate execution for killing Breuil. According to the *procureur general*, he cannot be held responsible for his actions because he is a “savage who could never comprehend the rules and obligations of a civilized society” (Welch 315). Moreover, a French doctor ludicrously testifies that it is “common knowledge” that Indians’ brains were smaller than that of the average individual, rendering them “less capable of making sound decisions” (320). Thus, instead of receiving the death penalty, as was the norm, Charging Elk is sentenced to life in prison because, according to the magistrate, “he simply cannot conform to even the most elementary code of conduct—and therefore will always remain a threat to society” (341). Because of this misrepresentation, Charging Elk is labeled “a threat to society” (341) for responding in self-defense to unsolicited sexual acts performed upon him by another man. The public, on the other hand, mourns Breteuil, who shake their heads in dismay that a lawless savage brutally and senselessly murders such a fine, upstanding gentleman.

A contemporary manifestation of this concept is found in *Smoke Signals*, the film based on a Sherman Alexie screenplay within which Alexie frequently satirizes the paradigm of Indianness. The character Thomas Builds-the-Fire, a Coeur d’Alene Indian, tells the story of his uncle’s involvement in a fight, saying, “Arnold got arrested, you know, but he got lucky. At first, they charged him with attempted murder, but they plea-bargained that down to assault with a deadly weapon. And then they plea bargained that down to being an Indian in the twentieth century, and he got two years in Walla Walla” (*Smoke Signals*). Although contrastingly humorous in nature, the premise of Thomas’s scenario parallels that of Charging Elk’s court experience. In both instances, the Indians are given lighter sentences based on the false assertion that they are unable to adhere to the rules of civilized society, not as a result of justice being served. Charging Elk is spared the death penalty not because he acts in self-defense, but because

he is erroneously perceived to be incapable of anything else. Likewise, Arnold evades the charge of attempted murder not because his actions are considered justifiable but because it is assumed that his inherent tendencies to violence have naturally surfaced. When viewed through the myth, Charging Elk and Arnold become cardboard characters measured solely by their actions rather than their respective contexts. In a bittersweet trade, they receive lighter sentences at the cost of their reputation and dignity.

Strangely enough, very few characters in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* seem to realize their culpability in crafting or contributing to the myth. Although Franklin Bell reflects upon his mismanagement of the incorrectly issued death certificate and the havoc wreaked upon Charging Elk thereby, he seems more concerned with the effect it has upon his own career. He admits, “It had been so easy to lose the big Indian, to let him disappear into Marseille, to forget about him” (Welch 286). Charging Elk’s troubles are an afterthought when compared to Bell’s preoccupation with advancement and personal success. Interestingly, when Bell does pause to consider the plight in which he has thrust Charging Elk, even his thoughts are tainted by the myth. His “fear of discovery of his blunder” (286) prompts him to envision Charging Elk standing at his door, blood dripping from a tomahawk and staining his expensive Persian carpet. Rather than connecting Charging Elk to the natural responses of anger, frustration, discouragement, or disappointment, Bell subconsciously attaches to him a mythic and violent reaction involving invasion and bloodshed.

Only Martin St-Cyr seems to evidence authentic concern about his role in the dissemination and perpetuation of the myth. In various instances throughout the novel, Charging Elk’s story becomes an opportunity for St-Cyr to advance his fledgling career. Despite his initial genuine concern for Charging Elk’s well being, St-Cyr primarily defends the Indian not out of sympathy or solidarity, but because he recognizes an opportunity to exploit a newsworthy subject. When he reads that Charging Elk has been charged with the murder of Breteuil, St-Cyr “had the feeling that he had read this article before, perhaps even had something to do with it” (Welch 282). Reflecting on his personal advancement under the guise of helping the Indian, St-Cyr realizes that “his small triumphs had been as hollow and empty as they now felt. He had betrayed Charging Elk” (343). While St-Cyr perpetuates the myth by referring to Charging Elk as a savage, he also demonstrates an ability at least to recognize the effect of the paradigm on the Indian. He establishes culpability of society in general and himself in particular by writing, “May

his God forgive us all” (343). Unfortunately, the narrator leaves it unclear as to whether this sentiment is the product of spontaneous personal free writing or if it was actually meditated upon, polished, and published for St-Cyr’s audience to read.

Despite his strides toward autonomy from the myth and the limited assistance from others such as Rene and St-Cyr, Charging Elk remains engulfed by the paradigm, his actions and attitudes continually assessed within its context. As Browder points out, “With his insistence on authenticity, Cody encouraged audiences to take the staged behavior he presented in his show as reality, and he created stereotypes of Indians that persist to this day. The stereotypes, like all stereotypes, locked Indians into a prefabricated image” (65). For Charging Elk, the “prefabricated image,” although overwhelmingly beyond his control, dictates all aspects of his life, from his interaction with others to his estimation of himself. The basic premise of the stereotype Browder discusses is the overly generalized and highly simplified concept that all “real Indians, as the public came to believe, lived in tribes, slept in tipis, wore feather bonnets, rode painted ponies, hunted the buffalo, skirmished with the U.S. cavalry, and spoke in signs” (Moses 1). Further exploring the tenets of the myth, Rayna Green asserts,

The Wild West Shows, with their remnant Sioux and Crow, traveled America and Europe to enormous success. These warriors, Lords of the Plains, forever mounted on their ponies, forever attacking wagon trains and hunting buffalo, become *the* Indian in the American imagination. (38, her emphasis)

Because of this paradigm, with each person he encounters, Charging Elk can only attempt to overcome the myth by breaking it down and rebuilding it over an extended period of time in order to experience any degree of satisfactory social interaction. According to Philip Deloria, “the only culture allowed to define real Indian people was a traditional culture that came from the past rather than the present” (91).

For Charging Elk, being Indian is both a matter of birth and a myth imposed on him by society. He voluntarily engages in performance, essentially playing Indian before white audiences, because it provides him temporary approval, financial gain, and opportunity to showcase the old ways, and a degree of control over the myth. He shows that within the confines of the Wild West show, society values and accepts Indianness. However, once Charging Elk steps outside the arena of performance, his Indianness is the subject of, among many things, suspicion, scorn, and ridicule. Because he is indeed Lakota, an American Indian, he is unable to

escape the disproportionate myth of Indianness and is subject to social and emotional repercussions. In many ways, Charging Elk’s identity is at the mercy of a society that simultaneously allows and disallows entrance based upon a single standard, a hyperbolic paradigm within the context of performance.

Charging Elk is ultimately able to resist the caricature of the Indian that Western society has invented creating a transcultural identity that encompasses characteristics of both Lakota and French culture. At the end of the novel, he attends a performance of the Wild West Show, which has returned to Marseille. When the show is over, Charging Elk visits the Indian camp hoping to speak with someone who may have news of his family. He finds Andrew Little Ring, his wife, Sarah, and Little Ring’s nephew, Joseph, who tell Charging Elk that his father has died, but his mother is still alive. He learns of the forced assimilation of his people: boarding school for the young, where they learn English and are forbidden to speak Lakota as well as the denial of their freedom to worship Wakan Tanka or perform any ceremonies. Charging Elk also learns of the Ghost Dance and the massacre at Wounded Knee. Even with such heartbreaking news, he knows the Lakota have survived and will continue to do so “because we are strong people, we Lakotas” (435). And though he is finally presented with the chance to return to the United States, he refuses because of the strong connections he now has to his life and home. He tells Joseph, “This is my home now. . . . I have a wife. Soon I will have a child. . . . 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’ll have another life and the same heart will sing in all of us” (437). Although he has changed significantly over the past sixteen years, especially in his clothing and his ability to speak French, the Lakota performers still recognize Charging Elk as one of them. Andrew Little Ring tells him, “You are not a stranger. You are Lakota, wherever you might go. You are one of us always” (436).

Charging Elk is able to create an identity that contains significant elements of French culture without sacrificing any elements of Lakota identity. As he returns home to his wife and unborn child, Charging Elk walks away from the show grounds “past the sideshows, dark now and the empty arena, while the “Moon of the Falling Leaves . . . [lights] his way” (438). As James J. Donahue puts it, Charging Elk’s use of the Lakota way to mark the cycles of the moon “signifies both that he has retained his Native American worldview and that it will ‘continue to light his way’” (70). Yet, Welch’s final paragraph shows something much more complex.

Charging Elk's movement away from the show grounds and towards his wife and child represent the continuum of the self as he refuses to "play Indian" any longer, while his reference to the Lakota calendar along with his final words to Joseph beautifully illustrate Charging Elk's transcultural identity. The "same heart" that will sing in his child is the definition of survivance; the child will be "an active sense of presence, the continuation of native stories" (Vizenor vii). Charging Elk, along with his descendants, illustrates and embodies what Vizenor terms the "postindian" because he (and they) renounce "dominance, tragedy, and victimry" through his ultimate resistance to the Western representation of the Indian (vii).

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