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## Letter to a Just-Starting-Out Indian Writer—and Maybe to Myself:

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- 1) **This isn't the Native American Renaissance.** That was a great and essential and transformative movement without even meaning to be a movement, but that was a different generation, with different issues. You're not resisting falling dead off the back of a horse anymore. You're not resisting people wanting to call you Billy Jack. You're not resisting the invisibility that comes from colonial myth-making so much as you're resisting the voicelessness that comes from commodification. What you're resisting is headaddresses on Reebok shirts. What you're resisting is only being on *Longmire* as some android who can't use contractions. And, think about it: if you do stand up and try to fight for the same things those Native American Renaissance writers were fighting for, then you're pretty much saying that they didn't make any headway, that American Indian literature hasn't made any progress.
  
- 2) **Don't be an elf.** That's what America wants you to be. Elves are liminal beings. They live close to the spiritual source. They commune with nature. They're stewards of the trees. They belong in the forests. They cry because of Dr. Pepper bottles in the creek. Also, as it turns out, they're made-up, they're not real. If you're an elf, you don't exist, and like that America's won, who cares if your profile is Che Guevara'd onto a t-shirt. One thing about those profiles? They're silhouettes. They're the shape of us but it's that End of the Trail mode, that says we've come as far as we can, and it was a good fight, but now it's time to die, now it's time to fade into that sunset looming behind us. And it's such a picturesque compelling image that we even kind of hesitate, don't we? Learn not to hesitate. Be faster than that. Be so fast that the silkscreeners can't capture your image in polyester. Either that or start your own t-shirt shop.
  
- 3) **Sometimes the way *not* to be an elf? It's to write about elves.** Go on, get out there, traffic in the genres typically denied to Indians. That we're not allowed to do fantasy or science fiction and the rest, it's both stereotyping us and it's primitivizing our writing: it's saying we can't play in the branches that come off literature with a capital L—we can't go out on the

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branches because our literature is still ‘formative,’ it’s still in its infancy. Not letting us write for the commercial shelves is saying we have to write ‘form’ before writing free verse, but it’s also getting to designate what that form is. Resist that every chance you get. Sneak over the line every time you can. Write where you’re not supposed to write, and then move on, do it on the next shelf over too. And the next, on down the line. Leave the whole bookcase red.

- 4) **Don’t ask for permission to do what you do.** I’m not talking about permission from your family or friends, your clan or nation or chosen representative or role model or idol. I’m talking about the critics who give your work the seal of approval, where ‘approval’ means inclusion in the classroom. Yes, it’s great to be in the classroom, it’s an honor, but it’s also great to be everywhere. Really, it’s better to be everywhere. If you ask the critics be the main and only gatekeepers, then you’re chaining your work to the trends and fads of criticism—which is to say, you might be setting yourself up for not getting through that gate. Trick is, don’t even worry about the gate. Sneak down the road, jump the fence, and then tell everybody else how to get across as well.
  
- 5) **Understand that a lot of the time when your work is discussed, the question being asked about it isn’t necessarily going to be Is it good?** So many readers and critics and students and professors, they don’t engage the writing as art, they engage it as an ethnographic lens they can use to focus attention on peoples and cultures and issues and crimes and travesties and all the ‘other’ that’ll fit in a discussion. Resist this too. Resist this hard. Insist that your work be dealt with as art, not as an entry point to a culture. But understand that the only means you *have* to resist this, it’s your writing, it’s your art. So write better. Write in ways that refuse to submit to the kinds of discussions that neglect your work’s status as real and actual art. Any discussion which doesn’t start with Is it good, that means the presumption is that it *is* good, and that presumption, then, it’s usually wound up with the fact that you’re Indian, meaning the argument is “Indian is good,” which is another way of saying “authentic is good.” And this is so, so dangerous.
  
- 6) **So, don’t ask for permission, no. But don’t ask for forgiveness either.** You’re going to mess up. You’re going to say things you wish you hadn’t, or that you wish you’d said better.

It's part of the nature of writing or speaking aloud that you misspeak, that you write a line you wish you could reel back in. Just keep moving on. Don't let that flubbed line define your career, your stance, your identity. Hide that flubbed line with ten thousand perfect bulletproof timeless lines. Be a different writer each time you turn the page. Anytime you see that dissection pin coming down for the center of your back, close your eyes and roll somewhere else.

- 7) **Understand that when the audience or the market or the critics refer to you as an “American Indian Writer,” that this is an attempt to dismiss you,** to preserve you on a shelf, to prepare you for display. What you are is a writer who happens to be American Indian—a characteristic that may define you as a person, yes, but you're maybe also a basketball player, or a pretty good carburetor rebuilder, or maybe you can draw hands so delicately that we want to reach into the page to touch them. None of that gets turned into an adjective in front of “Writer,” though. Neither should “American Indian” or “Native American” or “Blackfeet” or whatever. Indians having to have pedigrees to get into the show makes racehorses or dogs of us. And it means we have to carry some version of our registration around with us too.
- 8) **Understand that the market, the publishing industry, it's going to want to package you as “exotic,”** as somehow foreign and alien on a continent you didn't need anybody's help finding. Always resist this. Always displace that alien-ness back onto them. But in doing so, be careful of pretending that you didn't cut your own teeth at the cineplex, at the local comic book shop. It's completely okay to let John Rambo be your hero, instead of Crazy Horse. To say otherwise is to let America tell you this is for us, this is for you. Take whatever you want, and take it precisely *while* the guards are watching. Dare them to tackle you in the aisle. Then come back the next day with a hat on, do it all over again.
- 9) **In the same way, don't let people shame you about not being an expert on your own culture.** You don't have to be. Did you sign up to be the official record keeper or historian for your nation, or for all of the nations? You didn't sign up for anything, really. You just happen to be who you are. Maybe you speak your nation's language, maybe you don't. Maybe you

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grew up on the reservation, maybe you didn't. Maybe your blood's at some level the government prefers, maybe it isn't. Maybe your nation signed a treaty back when, maybe it didn't. Maybe your cheekbones or your hair are what somebody wants to call 'wrong.' The people who care about that? They're the ones who want to put up a higher fence around whatever country club they're already in. Trying to meet their criteria, then, it's asking to be let inside, so you can keep others out. Try try *try* not to start playing that game on the page. Yes, if we all still had our language, that would be all right. It wouldn't be bad to, you know, have all our own land back either. Yes, things have been stolen and yes we need to hold onto things, and how you feel about that will serve as fuel for your words, definitely. Just be wary of ever allowing yourself to think that your “Indian experience” matters any less than any other Indian's experience, or any other model of “Indian experience.” That creates hierarchies, which leads to the authenticity shuffle, which is an ugly, ugly dance to do for all the people who really want us to do it. Us doing that dance, it keeps us looking at each other, not the world.

- 10) **Don't have a checklist to address in your writing.** Yes, *have* a social agenda, a list of grievances. Pissed off is far and away the best place to write from. If you don't have an axe to grind, you don't need to sharpen it with your words. Always keep that axe close at hand. But don't let it reduce your writing to thinly-disguised reform. The real reform, it's that you, who are supposed to be invisible, who's supposed to just be a silhouette on a t-shirt, a painting in a motel, a design on a blanket, you have a voice, you can speak, you can make wonderful challenging art. And remember that it's always about the art. If it starts to be about you and your 'identity' or any of that, then people aren't engaging your words on the page, they're looking up between every sentence, for you. Write better, then. Make them unable to look up.
- 11) **Step on everybody's toes in the room, always.** Chances are you're young, can outrun whoever takes offense. But some of those old cats are still pretty fast, too, so be ready to fight as well.
- 12) **Step on FORM's toes.** Just be prepared for people wanting to read this innovation as a callback to the oral tradition or an appeal to a different aesthetic. Unless that's true—and I've

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never known it to be—please don't ratify that. But don't speak against it either, as you'll be protesting too loudly, and people will nod, say behind their hands, "Look, the Indian thinks she's trying to be modern, but really she's still ancient." 'Ancient' is where the world wants us to be. Ancient things are buried in the past, ancient things belong in museums. You're doing new things on the page. Just keep doing them.

13) **You don't have to be able to define what an Indian is in order to write "Indian."**

Putting a definition on us, that's playing their game, that's submitting to being an entry in an encyclopedia. That's saying yes, you drew the boundaries well, I will live just in this little block of text. Instead, just, you know, *write*. If you are Indian, whatever "Indian" might be, then whatever you do, that's Indian as well. You can't *not* do it. It only messes your writing up to try to adopt a persona or put on a headdress to write. When you do that, your voice will probably get all noble and stoic, and then, yes, you may as well be falling dead off the back of a horse. Where you'll land will be a John Wayne movie. And that's a bad place for an Indian to have to spend forever. It's a bad place for an Indian to even spend ten minutes.

14) **You don't have to answer Who are you writing for?** But it is a good question to keep in mind. Another good question: Who are you writing against?

15) **Your writing doesn't have to be 'responsible'** as regards representation or culture or any of that. That's not part of your charge as a writer. Your charge as a writer, it's to be sincere, whether you're writing about six-armed Martians or your uncle that time he said he could change the brakes with a blindfold on. Any art that tries to be responsible, it stops being art. Art isn't responsible. Art challenges, art breaks things, art leaves before the tab's been paid. And hopefully it does some good as well. Hopefully it breaks the right things more often than it breaks the wrong things. But sometimes you just have to break everything, too.

16) I don't know what to call this exactly, but when you meet somebody who's into a certain type of music, say, then you spend the first little bit of discussion establishing your bonafides, don't you? Sure, I know Zep, who doesn't, but let's burrow down in the garage of 1978 some, be sure we're each actually committed to this. Same thing happens when you're from a

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certain region, or when you grew up without money, or when you play basketball or hunt or used to cheerlead or any of that. It’s natural. It’s how we judge whether you’re worth talking to on this subject. It’s how we navigate tastes, so as to avoid blunders later on. All of which is good and fine and unavoidable. But please note that this is happening in American Indian writing more and more, where the first little bit of a piece isn’t the writer telling the story, but the writer establishing he or she’s really Indian, by showcasing “expected Indian things,” exhibits 1 through 8. This is often cleverly disguised—until you start noticing it. And it seems benign. It’s not. What it is is submitting to the process of legitimization. It’s taking a blood quantum test on the page. It’s having to ‘prove’ ourselves. It’s asking the audience to please now turn to the author photograph, to see if this is a real true Indian or not. And, at that point? You’re already losing. Instead just **assume the Indianness**. Of everything. Overwrite the world with *us*. Because we are everywhere. We’re in the soil, yes, but we’re in the future too. Insist upon that.

- 17) Please please please **let there be bad Indians?** The cruelest form of essentialism is that which we lay on ourselves. And it’s our knee-jerk response, too. Have the Indians be the heroes? Sure, of course. If it feels like resistance, it must be resistance. But if we’re always the good guys—which, in Indian stories often translates out to ‘victim,’ as being the hero in a trauma drama isn’t really the same as putting on a superhero cape and saving the day—then we may as well sign up to be noble as well. And understand that us being the bad guys sometimes, that means that somebody who’s not Indian might be a good guy. Granted, your writing might not be as simple as ‘Good Guys vs. Bad Guys.’ But at some level, that’s always exactly what it is. Never mind that you used up all your grey crayons drawing this situation out, and stole your kids’ grey crayons too. Yes, steal back the comic narrative if you can do it honestly—steal back everything you can, then put it in a pile and burn it—but your writing, if it’s sincere, then it’s going to go where it goes, too. Your job as a writer of real words, it’s to follow those words, these characters, and to render them so real and so true that the reader forgets she’s reading about these supposedly exotic “Indians” with all these complicated, ‘tragic’ issues, and starts instead just reading about people. Gerald Vizenor says that being Indian is an act of the imagination. I’ve always been drawn to that, but until writing all this out, I don’t think I ever really understood it. I’m starting to, though. It’s not exclusively an act

of the imagination on our part, but on the readers'. Through our words, our art, we infect the world with not what we are—we're not a 'what'—but with *who* we are.