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# Forum Prompt

## Approaching Indigeneity, Learning Modernity

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In *Blackfeet* author James Welch's novel, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000), a Lakota performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show is stranded in France, accidentally left behind on the show's 1889 tour. As Charging Elk stumbles around this alien landscape, he encounters many people who view him through the lens of their own expectations and respond to him accordingly—among them an American vice-consul in Marseille, a reporter, members of a French family, and other performers from his own Lakota community. What might these interactions suggest about our encounters, as scholars and students, with Indigenous figures—on the page, on stage, in film, in the archives—especially historical figures, and particularly (but not only) when their images are circulated through popular media? With Welch's novel as something of a guide, I'll move towards the question of how our various positions affect our approaches to Indigenous creative expression, especially in the case of non-native scholars such as myself.

It's no secret that non-native representations of "The Indian" have long been a mainstay of popular culture. Cherokee scholar Rayna Green and Dakota historian Philip Deloria have called the phenomenon "playing Indian." Think of almost any mid-twentieth-century western film with its German-American and Italian-American actors playing American Indians, or come forward to the controversy around Johnny Depp playing Tonto in 2013. Go back almost 200 years to the literature that was heralded as distinctively American: James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking series with its alternately noble, stoic, and evil Indians, or, a few decades later, Beadle and Adams's dime novels proliferating and exaggerating those stereotypes. Public culture has been littered with wannabes and imitators; go back earlier still, before the American Declaration of Independence, to the revolutionaries who dressed Mohawk to throw tea into Boston Harbor. The logic of these representations is that Native peoples inevitably could not survive the onset of modernity—the sleight-of-hand by which settler colonialism both dispossesses peoples and appropriates their identities in its own interests. This is sometimes called the "vanishing Indian" trope.

Charging Elk, as written by James Welch, gives us access to a very different, more hidden, history. This is the history of how peoples Indigenous to Turtle Island (North America) have long been central to modernity not just as figures of representation but as agents in its making. Charging Elk is not simply the victim of others' gaze; nor do he and his fellow Wild West performers remain passively trapped within the stereotypes of "Indians." These are real threats to their existence, but the novel also shows how these highly skilled Indigenous performers return the gaze, how they make community within the Wild West show, how they come to know and negotiate audience expectations. These are creative acts of "survivance"—the term coined by Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) which includes Indigenous forms of survival, endurance, and resistance in the face of genocidal policies and practices.

There is increasing scholarship on the centrality of Indigeneity to modernity; the scope is huge, as one title by Jace Weaver (Cherokee) suggests: *The Red Atlantic: American Indigenes and the Making of the Modern World, 1000–1927*. Charging Elk's story lies within the period often considered key to the emergence of modern culture as we now know it—approximately the 1880s to the 1930s. Even if we keep our focus trained on this one period, there turns out to be a host of "Indians in unexpected places" (to cite another book by Deloria)—as writers, performers, film-makers, musicians, statespeople, athletes, and more.

One form of expressive culture that emerged during this period was motion pictures. Early moving pictures are rich with Indigenous presence, as documented by Michelle Raheja (Seneca), Joanna Hearne, and others. The film industry's first "power couple" was Ho-Chunk film star Lillian St Cyr, who performed as Red Wing, and her mixed-race Nanticoke husband, producer, director, and actor, James Young Deer. Throughout the silent film period and into early talkies, critical contributions were made by Indigenous stuntmen and women, actors, screenwriters, directors, and directors' advisers. "Indian and Western" films (as they were then called) were key to the success of the American movie industry. Even the first western film—*The Great Train Robbery of 1903*—which is often said to have no Indians (as in, no Indian roles) turns out to profit from the riding and dance skills of Mohawk actors.<sup>1</sup>

What about writing, both popular and more literary? Kirby Brown, scholar and citizen of the Cherokee Nation, recently addressed the period known as Modernism, identifying the "Indian Problem" in how this field of artistic innovation has been construed. Partly by naming a host of Indigenous writers at the turn of the twentieth century, Brown shows how even more recent, revisionist definitions of Modernism erase Native creativity. A small selection of these names drives home his point: Mourning Dove/Humishuma (Okanagon) and Tod Downing (Choctaw) working with popular genres; Lynn Riggs (Cherokee), D'Arcy McNickle (Salish and Kootenai), and John Joseph Mathews (Osage) developing innovative theatrical and narrative forms; Gertrude Bonnin/Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Sioux) fusing her individual writing with collective political organizing (whose larger rhetorical implications have been explored by non-native scholar Michael Taylor). Dakota/Apache scholar Kiara M. Vigil pursues four Indigenous intellectuals from the same period: Charles Eastman (Santee Sioux), Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai), Luther Standing Bear (Oglala Lakota), and, again, Gertrude Bonnin. She argues that Native writing and oratory forged new genres of public expression in the face of the reservation system, boarding schools, allotment practices, and other forms of cultural genocide. Such recoveries don't just "fill a gap" in literary and cultural history. They demand fundamental rethinking of periods, movements, and definitions. Vigil's work challenges assumptions about the definition of a public intellectual. Brown leads us to ask, who made modernity? Raheja places early Indigenous cinematic innovations

centrally within Native peoples' "visual sovereignty." Scott Lyons (Leech Lake Ojibwe) similarly discusses writers' "rhetorical sovereignty" as a key part of Indigenous self-determination.

This brings me to very challenging questions about the position of non-native scholars in this conversation—whether we identify as "settlers," "arrivants," uninvited guests on stolen land, or non-native allies, or in some other terms.<sup>2</sup> From a non-Indigenous position, there are myriad complications in contributing to recovery efforts, or even developing reading practices, in relation to Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Yet it is equally problematic to dodge the challenge, to not engage with First Peoples' creative expression, especially as they so forcefully challenge the fields in which we work. There is much to be learned from what are often called Indigenous Research Methodologies. Indigenous scholars working with Indigenous worldviews and cultural protocols teach us about the building of relations between scholar and subject-matter. Core principles are often articulated as relationality, responsibility, reciprocity, respect, and usefulness.<sup>3</sup> Researchers do not work "on" subjects; they engage with communities.

The best book I know which brings these issues directly to literary studies and grapples with their implications for students and scholars at different stages is *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures*, edited by Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder and non-native scholar Linda M. Morra. The work gathers a large range of Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinkers and artists from across North America; I'll here paraphrase just some of the pressing questions and practices which they advocate. In any approach to Indigeneity—as reader, scholar, researcher—remember to reflect on our own positions and purposes without decentering the Indigenous work. To what community does any of us feel accountable in doing this work? Do we mean to critique stereotypes and misrepresentations, contribute to the recovery of Indigenous voices, or pursue some other goal? What cultural assumptions frame our responses; what mythologies or stereotypes do we need to look beyond? Pay attention to Indigenous scholarship and sources. Be specific—in citing the source of information or analysis and in respecting the rich diversity of cultures by naming particular Nations or tribes when possible. Start from where we are, which may mean starting small. Although collaboration with Indigenous community is a key component in a settler scholar building relations, that may not be feasible in a student's or scholar's particular situation. What difference can it make, however, to conceptualize

our scholarly purpose as preparation towards such solidarity? Can that self-positioning alert us to appropriative or extractive approaches? Changing our vocabulary is a small but significant step, not just in naming Indigeneity in respectful language but in thinking about our own processes. Critiques of Columbus, for example, remind us that, even when we work in archives, we don't "discover"; we learn or encounter or listen to pre-existing presences. One of the touchstone questions which I find most helpful comes from Cree Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach, who asks us always to ask ourselves: "Am I creating space or taking space?"

Such challenges can seem daunting to the point of paralysis, so let me say a word about my own attempt to follow these principles. My current research project is situated in another sphere of popular culture which is widely recognized as central to modernity and turns out to be infused with Native artistry: vaudeville in the 1880s–1930s. This work began from my position as a non-native scholar who had long researched the history of US popular culture but only gradually realized the centrality of Indigenous peoples to that story. I'm now focused on helping to recover the community of entertainers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who "played Indian" on global vaudeville circuits, in the process forging compelling performance strategies of survivance and trans-Indigenous networks. Much of my time is spent in archives, trying to piece together these stories, but my identification of leads and analysis of implications depend heavily on the building of research relations with contemporary Indigenous theatre artists. In particular, I am developing forms of research exchange—through archive and memory, financial and physical resources, listening and telling—with the founding members of Spiderwoman Theatre (1976–) and Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble (1999–2008), whose family and performance techniques connect to the vaudeville moment.<sup>4</sup> I have learned from them a great deal about how Indigenous performers and audience members forge kinship lines and intergenerational community in spaces of popular performance. One of my purposes is to return these performance stories to their communities through digital and other forms of recirculation whenever possible. Another is to develop forms of oral and written presentation that make transparent the relationality across Indigenous–settler divides underpinning this recovery project. A third is to contribute to reorienting the study of popular culture around such Indigenous presences.

These reflections are as much for myself in my own ongoing, always incomplete, efforts as an invitation to *Criterion* readers and contributors. The journal seeks submissions which engage with any of the questions, concepts, or authors discussed above. How do or might these principles of respectful relations between student or scholar and subject-matter shape your work, whether your focus is an Indigenous text or some other material? These principles are, after all, applicable to any field of criticism or research. However, they hold a special charge in approaching Indigeneity, given the long reach of the objectification of Indigenous peoples—as in the case of Charging Elk.

## Endnotes

- 1 See Galperin.
- 2 “Settler scholar” is commonly used in Canada; for “arrivant,” see Byrd.
- 3 See, among others, Kovach, Simpson, Smith, Wilson.
- 2 For more sense of these relations of research exchange, see Bold, with Monique Mojica, Gloria Miguel, Muriel Miguel. I particularly thank these Guna-Rappahannock artists along with Michelle St. John (Wampanoag). Also, this project would not be possible without funding from many sources, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the U of Guelph, and a John Topham and Susan Redd Butler Faculty Research Award, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young U.

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