

The Other Side of the Story: The Importance of James Welch's *Fools Crow* Novel

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Before beginning this paper, I would like to mention the loss the literary community suffered this year with the passing of James Welch on August 4, 2003 and Edward W. Said on September 25, 2003. Both of these writers will be sadly missed, but their contributions to the world will live on. As they have now passed their teachings on to us, we must keep their lessons and carry on, so that the changes that they initiated in our thinking will continue to flourish, evolve, and grow.

Evaluating differences of perspective is crucial to the validity of interpretation of any event. In the clash between Native American and Euro-American cultures, a one-sided representation of perspective went on for centuries. In fact, Euro-American writers constructed the Native American identity for its reading population, and the dominant culture began to see and identify "Indians" based upon what they read. What Euro-American society learned about Native American society was that printed by the Euro-American culture, and it was full of false stereotypes. Hence, in order to correct this one-sided presentation of indigenous cultures, historical novels such as James Welch's *Fools Crow* are crucial writings. In Welch's novel, a stereotypical concept such as Indian barbarianism—a popular stereotype perpetuated by the dominant culture from Puritan beginnings to the Western novels—is obliterated, and Indians are seen as human beings facing life on their terms and experiencing drastic lifestyle changes. *Fools Crow* reveals the other side of the story of the development of America, presenting a critical, more balanced perspective of history that serves to deconstruct the Euro-American's concept of Indian barbarianism and reveal typical misconceptions and startling truths.

First of all, we must realize, as Edward Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, that there is more to examining both sides of an event than merely revealing the two sides. The problem lies not only in the fact that one side was muted, but also in the rationale behind the muting. Said notes, "The difficulty with theories of essentialism and exclusiveness, or with barriers and sides, is that they give rise to polarizations that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagoguery more than they enable knowledge" (31). Thus, if one assumes that one's cultural experience is only comprehensible to others who share that same culture, cultural boundaries are then created between the Orient and the Occident. Hence, the Occident is "likely as a consequence to defend the essence or experience itself rather than promote full knowledge of it and its entanglements and dependencies on other knowledges," resulting in a demotion of "the different experience of others to a lesser status" (32).

In essence, then, when differences are expected, it becomes a battle of "ours" against "theirs." Because Native people for the most part lacked both English speaking and writing skills in the first three hundred years of American development, only one side of the picture of conquest was presented—the side that the dominant culture wanted its

society to see. Thus, Indians were *made* through the pen of the conquerors, validating the new country's actions in conquest. As Said acknowledges, "The novel is fundamentally tied to bourgeois society; . . . it accompanies and indeed is a part of the conquest of Western society by [what Charles Moraze] calls *les bourgeois conquerants*" (70). While Said does not claim that the novel "caused" imperialism," (70) he does note that the connection between the two is too important to ignore: "Of all the major literary forms, the novel is the most recent, its emergence the most datable, its occurrence the most Western, its normative pattern of social authority the most structured; imperialism and the novel fortify each other to such a degree that it is impossible, I would argue, to read one without in some way dealing with the other (71). Said further adds, "Nor is this all. The novel is an incorporative, quasi-encyclopedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power" (71). Thus, the novel is a vehicle to perpetuate and validate imperialism, not only because it promotes the mores and values of the bourgeois society, but also because it works to validate the actions taken by the conquering nation. As Said further explains, "the crucial aspect of what I have been calling the novel's consolidation of authority is not simply connected to the functioning of social power and governance, but made to appear both normative and sovereign, that is, self-validating in the course of the narrative" (77). In other words, the novel becomes the means of knowledge for a society, and thus a weapon of imperialism. Said also notes that history is subjective, founded upon ordering, reordering, and filtering events through the eyes of the dominant power (79). Said asserts, "The capacity to represent, portray, characterize, and depict is not easily available to just any member of just any society . . ." (80). Said highlights the novel's power:

We have become very aware in the recent years of the constraints upon the cultural representation of women, and the pressures that go into created representations of inferior classes and races. In all these areas—gender, class, and race—criticism has correctly focused upon the institutional forces in modern Western societies that shape and set limits on the representation of what are considered essentially subordinate beings; thus, representation itself has been characterized as keeping the subordinated subordinate, the inferior inferior. (80)

Consequently, the novel becomes a tool of the empire, validating and promoting its experiences. And for hundreds of years, Euro-Americans kept tight control on their constructed image of the American Indian through the writings that were published and readily accessible to the general public. Because Indians had not yet become a literary force, most of the writings on the market were writings about Indians through the eyes of Euro-American authors, who often misrepresented Native culture. However, things began to change dramatically in the 1970s with the Native American Renaissance, and the Euro-American-made concept of "Indianness" began to be deconstructed.

Thus, Welch's historical novel is a crucial read because Welch is a modern-day descendant of the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre people of whom he writes. In his article "About James Welch," Don Lee connects Welch to the Marias River Massacre, where

“one hundred seventy-three Indians, mostly women and children, were killed, but among those who escaped was Welch’s great-grandmother, of whom Welch heard stories from his father” (197). So who better to write about what actually happened in the 1870s to that Blackfeet band from the Indian perspective than a descendant who has grown up with the stories?

As Devon A. Mihesuah’s *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities* points out, “The belief that it is in Indians’ nature to fight is one of the most pervasive images of this country’s native peoples” (48). Mihesuah continues, “it is always the Indians who are portrayed as bloodthirsty villains. Endlessly we see them circling the wagon trains, waiting to massacre innocent pioneers without the slightest provocation. What can we conclude but that such seemingly irrational barbarism reflects a warlike nature?” (48) Thus, Welch’s historical fiction also helps to debunk the illusionary notion of Indians behaving barbarically for sheer pleasure of the kill.

Welch opens the novel with his eighteen-year-old protagonist White Man’s Dog preparing to make a horse-taking raid on the Crow tribe, a contestant with the Blackfeet tribe for the hunting grounds in Montana, to obtain both property and a place in his tribe. Welch tells readers that White Man’s Dog “had little to show for his eighteen winters. His father, Rides-at-the-door, had many horses and three wives. He himself had three horses and no wives. His animals were puny, not a blackhorn [buffalo] runner among them. He owned a musket and no powder and his animal helper was weak” (Welch 3). Without respect and property, White Man’s Dog could not marry. According to the narrative, “Even the bad girls who hung around the forts wanted nothing to do with him. Because he did not own a fine gun and a strong horse they ignored him” (Welch 4). Thus in order to secure a wife and a place in the tribe, White Man’s Dog had to gain horses. Contrary to the Euro-American assumption that the young men went on raids because they loved to fight, White Man’s Dog is frightened by the prospect of battle. He tells his friend Fast Horse, “Without my good medicine I am afraid of the Crows. They will surely kill me, and our relatives in the Sand Hills will say, ‘Here comes the coward, he was afraid of the Crows.’ I am not fit for such a party” (Welch 8). But Fast Horse convinces him to go, and on their way to gain Crow horses, White Man’s Dog is forced into killing a youth who is guarding the horse herd to keep the young man from alerting the other Crows. Riding back to the other horse-takers, White Man’s Dog “felt suddenly drained. Although they weren’t out of danger, the excitement of his first kill was beginning to wear off. He had killed a youth, not a man. The youth was an enemy and would surely have warned the other Crows, but he was not a man” (Welch 32). As the horse-takers get closer to the Crow camp, Welch’s novel reveals a side of an Indian warrior that few Euro-Americans have contemplated—one that is afraid and emotionally unsettled by the actions of battle: “White Man’s Dog could not get out of his mind the look of fear on the youth’s face as he rode down on him. He could not forget the feeling in his arm as his scalping knife stuck bone in the youth’s back. He should have stopped the attack then, but the youth would have warned the village. He had no choice but to kill. . . .” (Welch 62).

After securing horses in the raid, White Man's Dog falls in love with and marries Red Paint, the daughter of Yellow Kidney, a warrior who was severely maimed, tied to a horse, and left to die in the wilderness by Crow chief, Bull Shield. Now, part of White Man's Dog's social duty is to seek revenge for his father-in-law's mutilation, and Welch reveals the warrior's fear through Red Paint's eyes: "[White Man's Dog] was restless and he would not be at peace until he had counted war honors against the Crows. Last night he had struggled and cried out in his sleep, and she knew that he was frightened" (Welch 130). Later, as the two lie together, she asks White Man's Dog directly if he is afraid; he responds "'Yes, I am afraid.'" (Welch 135). When she asks if he fears the Crows, he tries to cover his fear and responds, "'Yes—no, not of the Crows. My medicine is strong. My luck has not been better, but—'" (Welch 136). She interrupts, asking if there is nothing that he fears, and he responds "'There is always a chance that a Crow shooter will find me'" (Welch 136). While he says he does not fear his death, he fears what would happen to her, his unborn child, and his extended family if he should die in battle.

Then the battle date comes, and as the conflict with the Crow intensifies, both the emotions of fear and unsettled feelings are further highlighted. During the conflict in Crow camp, White Man's Dog is knocked down; Bull Shield approaches and is about to kill him, when White Man's Dog suddenly finds his gun and fires in self-defense. White Man's Dog's father quickly rides up and orders his stunned son to scalp the Crow, and White Man's Dog does so almost mechanically. Then his father yells, "Get up, get up, you brave! . . . Take this fine horse, this prize Crow horse! . . . My fine son, this day you are a brave!" (Welch 147). Quickly the two gallop out of danger, but once in safety, the reality of what has passed hits White Man's Dog, who "looked down at the sticky scalp in his fingers. Then he leaned over the side of the black horse and vomited" (Welch 148). Few white readers would think of Indian warriors reacting this way; most books, movies, and television programs picture Indians yipping and yelping in triumph with bloody scalps dripping in their hands.

In addition, Welch shows that Indians were not always looking to fight. Worried that Owl Child and his band have been raiding nearby settlements, the Pikuni chief Rides-at-the-door counsels peace. He tells White Man's Dog and other young men, "Any day the seizers could ride into our camps and wipe us out. It is said that already many tribes in the east have been wiped away. These Napikwans [whites] are different from us. They would not stop until all the Pikunis had been killed off. . . . For this reason we must leave them alone, even allow them some of our hunting grounds to raise their whitehorns. If we treat wisely with them, we will be able to save enough for ourselves and our children" (89). However, as Owl Child's band continues to make trouble, often near a peaceful camp's location, the soldiers move in. General Sully demands that Rides-at-the-door and Heavy Runner turn Owl Child over for arrest, and in addition, the army demands that all harassment, raiding, and killing "will cease as of this moment" (Welch 279). The novel reveals not only that the chief had very limited power, but also highlights another common problem in the clash between Indian and Euro-American cultures—the language barrier. Rides-at-the-door tries to explain to the General that Owl Child cannot be surrendered:

Some of our people grow impatient because of their suffering. Some of them, the young ones, take matters into their own hands, and then trouble begins. Some, like Owl Child, take pleasure in making the white people cry. But he is no friend to the Pikunis. Among our people he is known as a murderer and a thief—he has caused us to suffer as much as the whites. He has even killed a member of my band, and for that he should be punished. But he is a bad head and an outcast—he is not welcome in the Pikuni camps and so he should be turned over to the Napikwan chiefs. But how is this possible? He and his gang are seldom seen. They leave no tracks.... Many of our people are afraid of them and so let them have their own way. No, I see no way to capture Owl Child. It would be easier to kill him as one would kill a real-lion, who would seek to—
(Welch 280-281)

However, he is cut off by the impatient General Sully who only understands the Pikunis' word "kill," and who sets a location where Rides-at-the-door is to deliver Owl Child's body (Welch 281). Then the general further demands that Rides-at-the-door warn the other Indian bands that war is looming, and "their people will be killed like so many buffalo. They themselves will be killed or brought to justice" (Welch 283). Again, the novel addresses the problem of cultural misconceptions. The general assumes that the chief has as much authority over the other Indians bands as a general has over the army.

Before the council ends, Heavy Runner asks "for a piece of paper with writing on it that states that I, Heavy Runner, am a friend to all whites. If your people decide to make war on the Pikunis, I would desire it to be known to them on paper, that Heavy Runner and his followers are at peace" (Welch 284). Ironically, Heavy Runner is later killed while waving his papers of peace signed by General Sully in the Marias River Massacre, a relatively little known tragedy in American history.

As Rides-at-the-door's small band moves north to escape a smallpox outbreak, White Man's Dog (now named Fools Crow) sees and approaches the fleeing, wounded Indians struggling through the deep snow. A woman tells him, "They killed Heavy Runner" (Welch 379). Fools Crow goes on ahead to the massacre site to check for survivors. Approaching the smoldering ruins, "he began to weep" (Welch 380). Coming into the camp, he sees the body of a dead, burned dog lying in the snow, a precursor of the destruction ahead:

Then Fools Crow saw something else lying in a patch of blackened, melted snow. . . . The sight made his stomach come up against his ribs. It was an infant and its head was black and hairless. Specks of black ash lay in its wide eyes. Fools Crow fell from his horse and vomited up the handful of pemmican he had eaten earlier that morning. He was on his hands and knees and the convulsions wracked his body until only a thin yellow strand of saliva hung from his lips. He stayed in that position and gulped hard until the wracking stopped. He wiped his mouth and eyes, then stood. And he

began to pick out the other bodies. Most of them had been thrown onto the burning lodges but they were not black like the infant. (Welch 380)

Once again, readers see an Indian warrior sickened by warfare. It was the U.S. Cavalry who were guilty of savagery as Welch reveals in this scene. In addition, readers see the U.S. cavalry's misdirected punishment, attacking peaceful chief Heavy Runner's band and not the dissident Owl Child's band. When Fools Crow asks, "Where are the warriors?" an old woman replies, "Off hunting" (Welch 383), a fact confirmed by historical accounts. Welch also used historical data to support what happened to Heavy Runner, as Bear Head recalls the massacre for Fools Crow: "Curlew Woman says Heavy Runner was among the first to fall. He had a piece of paper that was signed by a seizer chief. It said that he and his people were friends to the Napikwans. But they shot him many times" (383-384). If Indian warriors were as blood-thirsty as many Euro-American accounts have claimed, one would think that Fools Crow would immediately gather the warriors and go after the army. However, his only concern is the safety of the tribe; he says, "We must think of our children" (386).

The novel ends a few months after the massacre. Fools Crow and his band are celebrating the return of spring, the time of renewal. In the ceremony, readers see Fools Crow teasing his toddler who rides in the cradleboard on Red Paint's back: "Fools Crow stepped back and made a face at him, and Butterfly looked back with calm curiosity" (Welch 389). During the ceremonial dance, Fools Crow recalls a vision he had of "the Napikwan children playing and laughing in a world that they possessed. And he saw the Pikuni children, quiet and huddled together, alone and foreign in their own country" (Welch 386). Even though Fools Crow was "burdened with the knowledge of his people, their lives and the lives of their children, he knew they would survive, for they were the chosen ones" (Welch 390). Thus, Fools Crow is content to let events fall as they may; he is not planning revenge on the nearest settlement, for he is able to consider the broader history of his culture's past.

In Welch's novel, readers get to see the human side of an Indian warrior. Readers see a young man afraid to go into battle, a young man sickened by the horrors of war, a young husband who fiercely loves his wife and child. In addition, the novel reveals what Euro-Americans did not understand of the Indian social structure. Finally, readers see, from just a portion of the description of the devastation in the Indian camp after the Marias Massacre, that the barbarians were not the Indians after all.

Works Cited

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