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## “These Have No Ears”: Narrative and the Ethnohistorical Method

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The history of the Western Sioux, the *Lak'ota* people, from the late 1700s to the 1870s—the period during which they contested with Europeans for control of the Great Plains west of the Missouri River in present South and North Dakota and adjacent portions of Nebraska, Wyoming, and Montana—is voluminously documented. The written record describes a series of significant events that includes peaceful encounters with European explorers and traders, military encounters with the U.S. Army, treaties, diplomatic missions to Washington, the destruction of the buffalo herds, and shifting adjustments to life on reservations. These documents by Euro-American authors, composed at first in French or Spanish and later in English, provide the bulk of the data from which histories of the Sioux have been written. Although there are numerous recordings of speeches by Sioux leaders, translated into English and preserved in stenographic reports of talks and councils, most of the contemporary written materials present outsiders' viewpoints on the course of events that, in less than a century, transformed the Sioux from independent buffalo hunters to reservation dwellers. The authors of these documents—travelers, traders, colonial administrators, military officers, missionaries, Indian agents—represented a cultural tradition very different from that of the Sioux. Even when these observers were sympathetic to Indians, they usually failed to understand enough of native culture to empathize with Sioux perspectives.

Underlying the writings of Euro-Americans was the assumption that Indian culture must inevitably pass away before the march of civilization:

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humanitarians worried about how to preserve the Indians while persuading them to abandon their traditional culture; pragmatists focused on the destruction of Indian culture rather than the fate of the culture-bearers. Small wonder that the literature on Sioux history largely centers on warfare and diplomacy, the two modes in which Euro-Americans dealt with Plains Indians from the late-eighteenth through the nineteenth century.

There is, however, a complementary body of written material that more directly represents native points of view. It comprises documents written by Sioux people themselves, most in their own language and some in English, that preserve insiders' perspectives on the Sioux past. Native language literacy was introduced by Christian missionaries to the Eastern Sioux in Minnesota during the 1830s, and by the 1870s it began to be widely used by the Western Sioux as well. This literary tradition flourished until the mid-twentieth century, the time when the last of the old people who had known the pre-reservation way of life passed away. Primary among the forces keeping this literacy alive was its use in daily religious life, through the translations of the Bible and other Christian texts and hymns as well as the activities of men's and women's church societies and annual summer church congresses, all of which conducted their prayers and business in Lakota. Moreover, native-language newspapers, widely read on reservations across the northern Plains, were published regularly from 1871 until about 1940, and written Lakota was also used for personal correspondence, private diaries, and other records, and for the inscription of documents intended to preserve the knowledge of traditional culture and of historical events.

This body of written material constitutes a very different understanding of the Sioux past. These documents represent Lakota cultural perspectives that have changed over time, of course, but they always provide significant counterpoint to the documentary record of Euro-Americans. The events chronicled in the two sets of records are by and large the same, but the significance and meaning of them frequently is seen to lie in completely different aspects of those events. In other words, Lakota and non-Lakota documents provide complementary perspectives based on different cultural premises; in a fundamental sense they represent conflicting realities, rooted in radically different epistemologies. The challenge of ethnohistory is to bring these two types of historical data together to construct a fuller picture of the past.

Events surrounding the Sioux War of 1876 provide abundant examples to illustrate the ethnohistorical challenge and the methodological problems it involves. The defeat of Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his Seventh

Cavalry at the Little Big Horn on 25 June 1876 is a pivotal event in Sioux history. It was, on the one hand, a magnificent victory for the Sioux and their Cheyenne allies. The Indians quashed Custer's invasion of their hunting grounds in the single biggest defeat ever in the history of Plains Indian battles with the U.S. Army: "*kasota*," the Sioux always say, 'wiped out' (see Black Elk in DeMallie 1984: 184). On the other hand, the Indians' military success sealed their fate, for the government would not let them rest until the Army had hounded them to surrender and settled them at Indian agencies on reservations. This warfare, in fact, provided the government with the pretense for abrogating the 1868 treaty and seizing the Black Hills from the Sioux.

What brought about Custer's defeat? Significantly, in most of the historical literature the victory is not attributed to anything the Sioux themselves did; rather, Custer is portrayed as the cause of his own demise. He was overconfident and arrogant, and heedless of the advice of his Crow and Arikara Indian scouts concerning the strength of the Sioux. Moreover, he was anxious to win the first victory, and so failed to coordinate his actions with those of his fellow officers, Generals Alfred H. Terry and John Gibbon; indeed, some historians have argued that Custer openly disobeyed Terry's orders and thereby placed his troops in jeopardy.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, the Indian participants in this event would not have surrendered the credit for it to Custer, but neither did they see it as the result of their military skill or stratagem. Instead, for the Sioux, the victory at the Little Big Horn was religiously sanctioned.

The documentation of this Sioux perspective can be traced to at least 1883, when a St. Paul newspaper printed an interview with Mrs. Spotted Horn Bull, a Sioux woman who had been present in the Indian camp at the time of the Custer Battle. Although the interviewer was most concerned with learning details of the battle itself, Mrs. Spotted Horn Bull prefaced her account by describing the Hunkpapa Sioux chief Sitting Bull's participation in a Sun Dance eleven days before the battle. On that occasion, Sitting Bull joined other petitioners in fasting, making ritual offerings of flesh, and dancing. He fell into a trance and, when he revived, he told of "a dream in which it had been foreshadowed to him that his people were soon to meet Custer and his followers, and would annihilate them" (Graham 1953: 82–83). This incident fits comfortably with Sitting Bull's well-documented reputation for prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

Popular interest in the Custer Battle grew, rather than diminished, with the passing years. In September 1909, under the aegis of Philadelphia philanthropist John Wanamaker, leaders from tribes throughout the plains were brought together at the battlefield for "A Last Great Indian Council,"

designed to record the Indians' story of the Custer Battle and to make a photographic record of the chiefs and their distinctive tribal dress (Dixon 1925). Under the direction of Joseph K. Dixon, the council sought to set the record straight concerning one detail of enormous historical concern: the identity of the man who actually killed Custer. As the story is told, the Indians present found this question impossible to answer; apparently no one individual claimed personal responsibility for killing the famous general. Shorn of his trademark long hair and not identifiable by any special insignia, Custer seems to have died anonymous. Only after the battle was his body identified. But history demanded a personal victor for this very personal defeat, and the assembled Indians decided to accommodate that demand by electing one of their number—Brave Bear, the Southern Cheyenne chief—to the status of Custer's official slayer (Miller 1957: 212–13).<sup>3</sup> The contrast in understanding of the concept of *history* is striking; Dixon apparently refused to accept this solution as historical fact and avoided the question in his book.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, many of the survivors gathered at the battlefield. This commemoration attracted a good deal of media attention and drew numbers of curious historians—amateur and professional—eager to learn new details of the famous encounter. It was not the first such survivors' gathering; they had apparently begun ten years after the battle. But with the passing years there was now a sense that this would be the last one attended by any large number of actual participants in the battle. Once again, lacking the identity of Custer's slayer, an individual was selected to represent the Indians in the formal peace ceremony held on the battlefield; this time it was the Minneconjou Sioux chief White Bull (Vestal 1934: 252–53).

Walter S. Campbell, an English professor at the University of Oklahoma and an amateur Western historian who published under the pen name Stanley Vestal, attended the 1926 gathering at the Little Big Horn and, from that experience, developed a deep interest in the Sioux. Having written a biography of Kit Carson, the mountain man, Campbell decided to write a parallel biography of an Indian, and he chose Sitting Bull.<sup>4</sup> Not content to rely on written sources, he began field studies in 1928, traveling widely throughout the western states and Canadian provinces to interview Indian people of many tribes who had known or were influenced by Sitting Bull. His studies focused, of course, among Sitting Bull's own people on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. There he met the chief's nephew, One Bull, who, during the course of an interview, mentioned Sitting Bull's Sun Dance vision. Campbell's notebook records One Bull's words as follows: "Had had a dream over here on Rosebud in sundance

& told them they would k. [kill] sold. [soldiers] but do not touch their bodies.” Realizing the importance of this prophetic dream to the story of Sitting Bull’s life, Campbell followed the technique he used whenever he learned of important remembered speeches, prayers, names, or conversations: he asked the interpreter—in this case One Bull’s daughter, Cecelia One Bull Brown—to write down in the Lakota language the exact words of the vision. She obliged, using a separate sheet of paper, which Campbell tucked into his notebook.<sup>5</sup>

As in so many other cases, the written material Campbell secured in Lakota was far fuller than the version he was able to record in English. In this instance, the words that parallel the cryptic statement in his notebook may be translated as follows: “He [Sitting Bull] heard a voice from above, so he looked there, he said. ‘These have no ears,’ he said, and he looked beneath the sun; like so many grasshoppers, with heads down they came; that is what he saw, he said. ‘These, they will die, but you must take none of their possessions from them,’ he said.”

The account was so important to Campbell that a year or two later he requested One Bull to repeat his story of the incident. Again Cecelia Brown transcribed her father’s words, translated as follows: “[Sitting Bull] participated in a Sun Dance on Rosebud Creek at the Picture Rock. Now when it was noon he heard a human voice from above, so he looked up; then it said: ‘These have no ears!’ So these white men came with their heads down. They were on horseback. The horses came head over heels. He told the people.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, in 1930, White Bull, also a nephew of Sitting Bull, told the same story to Campbell; this time he recorded the material only in English: “He [Sitting Bull] sort of fainted . . . they laid him down & put water on him & he told them he had seen right below the sun where he looked—many soldiers & horses all with heads down & some Inds. [Indians] with heads down.”<sup>7</sup>

For Campbell, Sitting Bull’s prophecy provided a powerful narrative device, and when he wrote his biography of Sitting Bull he made full use of it, combining the versions given by One Bull and White Bull. In Campbell’s re-telling, Sitting Bull “heard a voice from above saying, *‘I give you these because they have no ears.’* He looked up and saw soldiers and some Indians on horseback coming down like grasshoppers, with their heads down and their hats falling off. They were falling right into our camp” (Vestal 1957: 150–51).

Campbell’s handling of this material inevitably reflects Western cultural understandings. Most dramatically, perhaps, Campbell personalized the “human voice” from above: “*I give you these.*” In the next paragraph

he added: “Those white men, who would not listen, who made war without just cause, were coming to their camp. Since they were coming upside down, the Indians knew the soldiers would be killed there. The people had what they wanted: Wakan’ Tanka would care for His own” (ibid.). (Note that Campbell capitalized *His* to make clear that the Sioux ‘Great Spirit’ is to be considered the equivalent of the Christian ‘God’.)

Despite the laudable attempt at cultural relativism, Campbell unintentionally distorted the Lakota versions, which offer no such personalization of the voice from above and identify the impending deaths neither as a supernatural gift nor as supernatural vengeance. Sitting Bull’s Sun Dance vision, appropriately enough, seems to have come from the sun itself (hence the voice from above), and to portend events as they would happen, with no expressed moral judgment. The injunction in One Bull’s version against taking spoils from the dead serves as the basis for another prophecy. Later in the book, Campbell related Sitting Bull’s prophecy that because the people had disobeyed the vision and stripped Custer’s dead of their belongings, ever after the Sioux would covet the belongings of the whites, which would ultimately lead to the destruction of the Sioux as a people (Vestal 1957: 175).

Returning to the verbal message of Sitting Bull’s vision—“These have no ears”—the significance of these words is worth considering in the context of Lakota culture. As a symbol, *ears* figured prominently in Lakota rhetorical discourse. For example, references to ears abound in the written proceedings of treaty councils. In 1865, Lone Horn, the Minneconjou Sioux chief, speaking to a group of commissioners, opposed their proposition to open a road through Sioux country: “If you white people go through our country, I fear as to those young men among us who have no father and mother to restrain them; I fear they will have trouble with your white people back here, who have **no ears**” (U.S. Treaty Commission 1865: 31). In another example, from the following year, the Minneconjou chief Running Antelope made an appeal to the commissioners for guns and ammunition. The commissioners had just signed a treaty with the various tribes of the Missouri River that was intended to bring about peace among them, but Running Antelope expressed the general distrust: “You have made peace with all, but there are fools in all tribes who will not listen to your words. . . . some of their young men have **no ears**, and I wish you would give us some guns and ammunition with which to defend ourselves against them” (U.S. Treaty Commission 1866: July 25). In a general sense, those with “no ears” appear to have been the young men (as opposed to the chiefs), who were dedicated to war and refused to listen to the advice of their elders.

Following reverse logic, when Sioux spoke of agreeing with a proposition, the metaphor involved ‘opening’ or ‘piercing’ the ears. Thus in the 1865 treaty proceedings, The One that Killed the White Buffalo Cow, a Lower Brule chief, attempted to impress upon the commissioners his desire to plant corn: “It was fifteen years ago that the white men **bored my ears**; since that time I hear very quickly” (U.S. Treaty Commission 1865: 41). (Rather than ‘bored’, the translation ‘opened’ would have been less startling!) From the same commission comes a statement by the Hunkpapa Sioux chief Tall Soldier, who was asked whether he had heard the treaty and was ready to sign it. He replied: “Yes, I have heard it; **I have ears** to listen. . . . [Addressing the commissioners:] **Have you ears**, too? ([Answer:] Yes.) I am looking over you to see whether this will be true or not. If I hear anything, I want to hear the truth” (ibid.: 84). Yet another example can be drawn from the 1866 commission proceedings; Man They Dance Around, a Yanktonnai Sioux chief, commented: “**My ears are open** to hear what words are sent from my Great Father. I want you to deal honestly with us” (U.S. Treaty Commission 1866: June 22).

Numerous other variations on the theme of ears and hearing are to be found in the written record, and physical representations of opening the ears are also recorded. For example, in describing the treatment of the bodies of the soldiers under command of Captain William J. Fetterman, killed by Sioux and Cheyennes in December 1866 near Fort Philip Kearny, Wyoming, the official report notes that ears (as well as eyes, mouths, and arms) were “penetrated with spear-heads, sticks, and arrows” (Carrington 1884: 25). Similarly, Kate Bighead told Dr. Thomas B. Marquis, an amateur historian, that after the Battle of the Little Big Horn she saw the Cheyenne women open Custer’s ears: “The women then pushed the point of a sewing awl into each of his ears, into his head. This was done to improve his hearing, as it seemed he had not heard what our chiefs in the South said when he smoked the pipe with them” (Hutton 1992: 376).

Metaphorically, the act of opening the ears had reference to ear piercing, the ceremony by which every Sioux infant had tiny slits cut into the ear lobes, through which earrings were later hung. Until the ears were pierced, a child was not considered fully human, a true member of society. Semantically, it appears that the piercing, opening, or mere acknowledgment of possessing ears expressed a willingness to listen to and accept a significant message, and served, moreover, as a pledge that the parties involved were speaking truthfully. To have open ears was to be adult, sensible, and responsible.

From this brief cultural exegesis, an interpretation may be suggested of the words Sitting Bull heard in his vision. The treaty of 1868, signed



by representative chiefs of most of the Sioux bands, guaranteed the Sioux the right to hunt in the vast plains westward from the Black Hills into Wyoming and Montana; it was “unceded Indian territory.” But the influx of fortune-seekers in the Black Hills, following the discovery of gold, brought pressure on the government to restrict the movements of the Sioux, settle them at agencies on their reservation, and negotiate with them for the cession of the Black Hills. Temporarily, control of Indian affairs on the Great Plains was turned over to the military. The Army’s campaigns against the Sioux, which struck the Indian villages in the very heart of the hunting grounds promised them by the treaty, could appear only as the work of men “with no ears.” In short, to the Sioux, it must have seemed a familiar scenario, but with the roles reversed: time and again, following peace agreements, young Sioux warriors refused to listen to the advice of their chiefs and continued to make war; now it seemed that the Great Father—the president of the United States—was unable to control his own young men.

In his zeal to incorporate Sioux oral accounts with the documentary record, Campbell—as have virtually all ethnohistorians since—decided to treat his written field records as equivalent to any other historical documents. Thus he assumed a single “truth” to Sitting Bull’s vision and did not hesitate to combine the accounts from two different eyewitnesses into a single narrative. And to give that narrative verisimilitude he refashioned it around a very Western conception of vengeance for injustice. Of necessity, he took the material about the vision out of the Sioux cultural context and fit it into his documentary context to make it serve a causal and explanatory narrative function. In so doing, he assumed he understood the significance of the Sioux oral material because he knew the documentary record that provided, for him, its proper context (i.e., the historical record surrounding the Custer Battle). Yet the effect is a bit like combining lines from two different plays with radically different plots and definitions of characters; the result, while aesthetically pleasing, fails to represent either of the originals accurately.

Not surprisingly, Campbell chose to ignore a different story told by One Bull that represents another of Sitting Bull’s prophecies. According to this account, just two days before the Custer Battle, Sitting Bull had a vision of a fierce gale behind which marched countless mounted soldiers; the gale approached until it reached a white cloud; then a terrific thunderstorm resulted, after which the gale was entirely dissipated. Sitting Bull told his vision in council, explaining that the wind storm was Custer’s Army coming to destroy the Sioux; the white cloud represented the Sioux camp. On the basis of the vision, Sitting Bull predicted a great victory

over the soldiers.<sup>8</sup> While this vision in no way contradicts the earlier one, it is redundant in a narrative sense. To Campbell, the second prophecy apparently seemed unnecessary—a kind of afterthought.

Other Indian accounts of the Custer Battle tell of different prophecies, or relate in some other way to supernatural involvement in the Army's attack. Thus, in an incident related by Campbell, the Cheyenne prophet Box Elder foretold that soldiers were coming to attack the camp (Vestal 1957: 155). As another example, Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux who, as a small boy, witnessed the Custer Battle, related the tradition of the prophesy of Custer's defeat but did not link it to Sitting Bull or any other individual. In his story, the image of soldiers with their heads hanging down was seen depicted on Picture Rock on the Rosebud River a year before the Custer Battle. Black Elk explained that prophecies foretelling events during the coming year would appear engraved high on this bluff, out of reach of human beings; the image of a man hanging down headfirst always foretold disaster (DeMallie 1984: 198). This is a convincing argument for the significance of the vision of men seen upside down.

From these diverse accounts it seems safe to conclude that the Sioux and Cheyennes interpreted the Custer Battle as supernaturally foretold. The details of how or by whom the prophesy was communicated to the people apparently reflected the individual teller, and there is no reason to conclude that any one version represents the truth; in fact, none of the versions is mutually exclusive.

Indeterminacy such as that surrounding the prophecy of Custer's defeat epitomizes the dilemma of writing historical narrative in the ethnohistorical mode. It also illustrates the generally divergent tactics of historians and anthropologists in the writing of ethnohistory. For me, this is a very personal dilemma. I was led into anthropology because of a deep interest in Plains Indians and a sense that understanding cultures and social structures was fundamental to the writing of Indian history. In graduate school I began to marshal the specific tools necessary to writing Sioux ethnohistory: knowledge of the literature, study of the Lakota language, fieldwork with contemporary Sioux people, archival study of historical documents (including the fieldnotes and unpublished writings of previous anthropologists who worked with the Sioux), and study of museum collections. As I contemplated a dissertation topic—ultimately, a historical reconstruction of kinship and social organization—it seemed to me that the basic sources, so many of which were unpublished and many even untranslated from Lakota, called out for editing and publication before there could be any serious attempt to synthesize the historical record. Then,

detailed studies of cultural systems—politics, economy, religion—as they changed over time, would be necessary to lay the foundation for the interpretation of historical events. Now, more than twenty years later, I am still translating, editing, and analyzing the preliminaries. The firmer the anthropological foundation, the farther off my writing of narrative history seems to be.

In a recent thoughtful article on the role of narrative in history, William Cronon asserts “the virtues of narrative as our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world” (1992: 1374). But how is the narrative constructed, and what is its relationship to history? Cronon contrasts the post-structuralist literary critics, who argue that narrative is only a western cultural construct that we force on the past, with a position articulated by David Carr, representing a probable majority viewpoint among historians, who argues that narrative is fundamental to the way people organize experience and, moreover, that the structure of narrative “inheres in the events themselves” (*ibid.*: 1368–69). Rising to confront the “postmodern challenge,” Cronon ultimately concludes that histories are different from other types of narratives because of three constraints: (1) “our stories cannot contravene known facts about the past” (i.e., history must be “accurate and true”), (2) “our stories must make ecological sense,” and (3) our stories “are judged not just as narratives, but as nonfictions.” In this way Cronon seeks to escape the “endless postmodern deconstruction” of historical narratives (*ibid.*: 1372–74).

Although Cronon addressed his essay to the historical profession broadly, and was not specifically considering the history of cross-cultural interactions or the past of nonwestern peoples, the conclusion seems to me inescapable that the post-structural theorists he confronts are right on one point: narrative history, at least as Cronon defines it, is undeniably a western cultural category. Such a conclusion is apparent to scholars who take seriously American Indian native histories—an approach that Raymond D. Fogelson (1989: 134) called “ethno-ethnohistorical.” Such insiders’ perspectives tell the story of the past according to perceived cultural dynamics that invariably differ from those of western historians; they are filled with concrete exhibitions of supernatural power that shape and motivate the course of events, and even what appears as events from our outsiders’ point of view may be epiphenomenal to insiders. Nor do the narrative forms of history as told or written by American Indians themselves closely match western forms. In native Sioux histories, actors are frequently unnamed, motives are rarely articulated, and morals are almost never drawn.<sup>9</sup>

Rather than restricting *history* to written traditions or western epis-

temology, it may be argued that every cultural tradition, each linguistic group, has its own particular sense of the past. This universality, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, reflects “the basic historicity of human experience” (1981: 294). He argues for the “irreducibly narrative character of history” by suggesting that “historicity comes to language only so far as we tell stories” (ibid.: 275, 294). When we write academic historical narratives, we are not restricted to the particular cultural constraints of the actors, although they form one basis for interpretation. Our work is not usually focused on telling about the past exclusively in its own terms, but rather includes perspectives from the present as well, for just as we are outsiders to other cultures, we are also outsiders to the past. To restrict our narratives to the participants’ points of view would be to negate the value of historical study as a moral enterprise, the purpose of which is to learn from the past and, in Ricoeur’s phrase, “to enlarge our sphere of communication” (ibid.: 295). By the very act of composing a narrative, we necessarily impose cultural perspectives and make moral judgments. But to write a narrative about the past without attempting to understand historical cultures in their own terms would vitiate its significance as history. In short, understanding the past in its own terms is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the writing of history.

The dilemma of creating believable historical narratives about the American Indian past is exacerbated by the fact that native understandings frequently involve supernatural events that are causal and fundamental to the story but, from western rationalist perspectives, are not acceptable as true. For example, Cheyennes reported that in the winter of 1874–75 the religious leader Stone Forehead, fleeing from the Army, protected his men by performing a sacred ritual after which they were invisible to the white soldiers. An account of this incident was related to George Bird Grinnell by a Cheyenne who was present on the occasion. When Father Peter J. Powell (1981, 2: 898) described this incident in his narrative history of the Northern Cheyenne chiefs and warrior societies, concluding that the party had been saved because “Stone Forehead had transformed them into buffalo,” a number of scholars expressed concern.<sup>10</sup> By privileging Cheyenne perspectives over those of contemporary western society, Father Powell’s narrative seemed to his critics to have transgressed historical and scientific canons.

The controversy over Father Powell’s massive and insightful history centers around the issue of narrative. Whose story comprises legitimate history? In this book the author clearly states his procedures and articulates his point of view: “Whenever possible, I have used Cheyenne accounts of the events and people portrayed on these pages” (ibid., 1: xvii–xx).

The unique perspective that underlies the book was developed out of his study of the written record, his long and close relationship with Cheyenne people, and his identity as an Anglo-Catholic priest. Understood in the context of the parameters within which the narrative was conceptualized, *The People of the Sacred Mountain* is the most thoroughly consistent, culturally grounded interpretation of the history of an American Indian group ever written. To me, its publication serves as a watershed; it points the way to alternative narrative modes.

For his history, Father Powell chose a Cheyenne narrative voice, an interpretive construct based on his understanding of the Cheyenne past and present. Yet many reviewers repudiated this narrative perspective on two grounds. The first, that the author is not himself a Cheyenne (although adopted by the Cheyennes), should be dismissed out of hand; following this logic, ethnohistory would become an impossibility, since few of us are actually members of the groups about which we write. Second, that such a culturally specific narrative voice is inherently “biased,” failing to tell the story of the past as it really happened; in other words, the book violates the three constraints for narrative history articulated by Cronon: that humans can be transformed into buffalo, for example, contravenes the historian’s sense of past reality, of ecology, and of nonfiction. Yet such criticism suggests that the perspectives of the actors in histories are not legitimately part of their own story.

If we are to understand history as lived reality, it is essential to understand the perspectives of the actors involved. It is equally important to understand the distinctive features of historical narrative from the perspective of the groups whose past we are investigating. Returning to the Sioux for another example, without appreciating the ways in which their own narratives about the past are structured, it is impossible to evaluate the materials given to us by Sioux sources or to integrate them meaningfully into ethnohistorical narratives.

During the past decade I have been working on translations of historical documents written in Lakota from the 1880s to about 1920 by literate Sioux individuals who, for a variety of personal reasons, chose to preserve records of traditional culture and history. The impulse to use writing for this purpose appears to have been very strong, and there is little doubt that the documents of which I have knowledge are only a small representation of a vigorous—but largely private—literary tradition, most of which has not been preserved. Among the materials now available for study are manuscripts written by George Sword (ca. 1847–1910), an Oglala Sioux from Pine Ridge. In his youth, Sword was a warrior who

fought against both enemy tribes and white invaders; later he served as an Army scout, then as captain of the Indian police force, and finally held positions as judge of the Court of Indian Offenses, president of the Pine Ridge Reservation Council, and deacon in the Episcopal Church. Thus he was experienced and knowledgeable, and well situated to write about the dramatic events that transformed the Sioux during his lifetime from nomadic buffalo hunters to sedentary reservation dwellers.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of Sioux culture Sword was a deeply religious man: he had experienced sacred visions, had been given powers of healing, and served his people as a ritual leader—first in traditional religious rituals, then in those of the Episcopal Church. Many of his writings deal with the sacred dimensions of Sioux life. However, in a long text he wrote documenting his life story, Sword adopted a uniquely pragmatic mode, perhaps as a means of dividing public from private representations. Like virtually all the rest of Sword's writings [ca. 1905–10], this document is written in the third person, further distancing it from the private domain.<sup>12</sup>

The structure of Sword's autobiographical narrative is informative. He begins with a genealogy, telling about his parents and listing his siblings and their various names; then he presents a long record of his brave deeds, a traditional counting of coups; next he switches to tell about the early agency period during which he worked with the army to bring about peace; finally, he lists the significant events of his life after his people settled on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The account is as instructive for what it does not tell as for what it does, and studying it helps to explicate Sword's conception of historical narrative.

A number of general principles about Sword's narrative may be suggested. Important exchanges are quoted in the first person, providing an on-the-scene immediacy (and eyewitness validity) that punctuates the third-person flow. Moreover, the grammar of the Lakota language requires that a speaker indicate by the use of the words *keyapi* 'they said', or *ške* 'it is said' anything that is not known from personal experience. Thus the validity of the story rests on the narrator's reputation for veracity. Throughout Sword's text, individuals other than the narrator play only minor roles; they are one-dimensional, and their names, if they are given at all, are of little significance to the story. Chiefs, designated to speak for their people, do so in the first person; in such discourse, "I" designates the entire social group, representing the consensus of the tribal council. The only exception seems to be for the most prestigious leaders, to whom the motivation for peace or war is ascribed. In Sword's narrative these leaders are Red Cloud and the President of the United States, but rather than personalities, their names serve to designate the collective decisions of their respective

peoples. Again, this serves to minimize the relevance of personalities, even those of chiefs, to the historical narrative. The narrative is told as a series of episodes without drawing connections between them, suggesting the factors that underlie them, or making any moral judgment about them. Causality is generally implied by an indefinite third-person form: “they decided”; “it will happen.” The important category for Sword’s history is the event; the narrative presents a chronological sequence of events, just as the earlier portion of his life story consists of listing a series of brave deeds.

To give a sense of Sword’s style, which I consider to be paradigmatic of Sioux historical narrative in general, I have selected a passage describing the mission of the envoys sent from Red Cloud Agency (later called Pine Ridge) in the winter after the Custer Battle to find Crazy Horse’s Oglalas and persuade them to come to nearby Fort Robinson and surrender to the Army. Sword’s narrative begins with a discussion of events that led up to this expedition and explains his eagerness to participate in it, not as a pawn of the whites but for the good of his people and their future. The situation was tense; while it was the nonagency Sioux who had defeated Custer, government officials knew that the agency Sioux had provided arms and ammunition, as well as other supplies, to their nonagency relatives. Moreover, two agency Indians at the Cheyenne River Sioux Agency had killed a white clergyman. Congress wanted vengeance, Sword wrote, so it was said that the government had decided to exile the agency Indians permanently to Indian Territory, then annihilate the remaining nonagency Indians in the north. Already the government had confiscated the arms and horses of the agency Indians and stationed military detachments at each agency.

This was a dramatic historical moment: the Sioux and Cheyennes had celebrated their victory over Custer, but now they were being hounded by military troops determined to maintain the pressure until all surrendered and settled at the agencies. In fact, Army troops, led by agency Indian scouts, had attacked and destroyed the village of the Northern Cheyennes, making them virtual refugees in the Sioux camps. At this point, Sword wrote, the President ordered General George Crook to send out emissaries in an attempt to end the hostilities.

Sword and a group of some fourteen other men went in search of the nonagency Sioux to bring them the message of peace tendered by the government; by implication, if they refused to accept this offer, the Sioux would lose their homeland. Sword wrote: “In January and February 1877 they were sent out to where the Indians lived to make peace with Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull; their people were the ones who wiped out General Custer. So now they went.” This was not the first attempt of the agency Sioux to speak to the nonagency Indians, Sword said, but previous mes-

sengers had returned unsuccessful, and their expeditions had nearly ended in open warfare with their nonagency Sioux relatives.

Sword's trip started out ominously; while they were camped for the night, some Cheyennes came and stole their horses; however, four members of Sword's party chased the Cheyennes, fought them, and recovered most of the horses. Then they pressed on. The weather was cold and snowy, and by the time they reached the Powder River, most of them wanted to return. Sword, however, with three companions—Running Hawk, Tall Whirlwind, and Fire Crow—continued on. By the time Sword's party reached the Tongue River, they had not eaten in three days. Then the other three men wanted to turn back, but Sword urged them on. The continuation of the story is best told in Sword's own words:

Where Mountain Sheep River joins the Wood Louse River and goes into the White Mountains the hostile people were camped, and also they were camped where General Crook had fought the Cheyenne people.<sup>13</sup>

Enemy Bait [the name by which Sword was known at that time] with his three friends went there and looked toward the people. Suddenly there was noise and they mounted their horses and they [the nonagency Indians] came carrying their weapons and they surrounded them, but they did not mistreat them.

They returned with them to the lodges and on the second day a large number of people, including all the Cheyenne people, gathered together to make a big council and Enemy Bait and Running Hawk joined with them. Those other two did not agree to join. They were afraid.

So one of the Indian soldiers stood up in the big council and said this: "Well, Enemy Bait, now tell what you have to relate. What have you come here seeking?"

Then Enemy Bait himself spoke: "My friends, you are a people; I consider myself to be from here, so on account of all of you I have gladly come over here. And this day, gladly I join in the big council you have made. And I am filled with happiness," he said. "A soldier named Three Stars [General Crook] sent me to all of you." And he said: "The Indians' Grandfather [the President] now from this day on wishes there to be no fighting, so throughout the land there will be no fighting, and no matter who, all will be at peace. So my friends will all return together in peace. And just as many of the Sioux here live in peace, in the same way you will live," he said, and: "If my friends return, nothing bad will happen," he said.

And again that Indian soldier stood up and said: "Well, Iron



Hawk stand up, and reply to Enemy Bait's speech, but say what we told you, and speak in that manner!"

Iron Hawk spoke: "Well, Enemy Bait, sit and listen carefully. This country is mine and in this way the Great Spirit raised me, so this is how I live. But my friend, the white men came from where the sun rises, stealing my land, and now my country is small, so I do not allow him in; yet he comes in and when he sees me, he shoots me, and then I too shoot him and I kill him, and as I stand looking at them, my heart is bad. 'These, their relatives, I have beaten!' I think, and so I bring sorrow on myself.

"So someone acting as Grandfather wishes peace, you say. Well, it shall be a big peace! As for me, whoever brings good to me will not outdo me. So moving this camp, I will come, but I have much food; I am heavy. There is much snow; all the rivers lie across my path with deep waters. Moving camp slowly I will come, so Enemy Bait, before I have arrived, you will come to me again, or perhaps you will send one of your boys," he said.

Then the soldier said this: "So far the speech is good, and only that he will relate," he said.

Iron Hawk said this: "I—the Oglalas and Cheyennes, these two—principally live here in the land, but I am alone. Now there will be peace, I have said. For the Minneconjous and Hunkpapas live below me," he said.

And the people all returned in peace.

Discussion of Sword's account may begin by examining it as narrative. While it differs in many respects from western historical narrative, the specification of time and place attests to the historicity of the story. Sioux myths, in contrast, are virtually never situated in time and are not usually situated in space. (A few myths that account for the origin of particular geographical features are spatially located, but in such cases they serve historical purposes.) Sword, as is proper in his role as narrator, is the driving force behind the action: if he had not persevered, he tells us, all the others would have abandoned the peace mission out of fear of reprisal from the nonagency Indians. The crux of the narrative is the exchange between Sword and Iron Hawk; its importance is marked by the fact that it is quoted as direct discourse. The drama of this historical moment—whether the Sioux would be able to keep some part of their homelands or be dispossessed of them entirely—is focused on this exchange. The retelling of the event is formal, and probably should not be considered a reportorial representation of all that was said at this council. The dialogue

recorded here preserves the essence of the exchange. The words of this dialogue can be analogized to the Plains Indian warrior art preserved on hides, muslin, or paper: stylized representations of men and horses facing each other at the turning point of battle, spare drawings, elegiac, shifted out of time. The manner of Sword's recounting of Iron Hawk's speech is especially revealing, the content structured in order of importance: first, complaints about the whites; second, the assertion that the land belongs to the Indians, and oblique reference to Custer's defeat ("These, their relatives, I have beaten!") as attestation of Indian rights; third, the determination to make peace; and only fourth, the immediate reason for making peace: the nonagency Oglalas and Cheyennes are now alone, the last of the holdouts; the Minneconjous and Hunkpapas have gone "below," down the Grand, Moreau, and Cheyenne rivers to settle at the agencies on the Missouri River. Sword's account of these speeches reduces negotiation to its outcome.

There is a wealth of cultural detail embedded in this short narrative that provides an understanding of the dynamics of the Sioux political process and the formalities of council meetings that surpasses any of the generalized ethnographic accounts in the literature. Especially dramatic is the role of the unnamed Indian soldier who serves as master of ceremonies for the meeting. Such soldiers (*akic'ita*) were appointed by the tribal council and carried out its bidding. In this case, the words of Iron Hawk, who serves as spokesman for the tribal council, are carefully monitored by the soldier. Iron Hawk speaks for the camp council, not for himself, and he speaks in the first person to represent the consensus of the united Oglalas and Cheyennes.

Sword comes to this meeting not as a stranger, but as an insider; as he says, he considers himself to belong to this group of people. Among the Sioux, the idiom of social discourse was that of kinship: the only people to be trusted were relatives, and kinship was freely extended and not solely dependent on the accidents of biological relatedness. Sword comes to the nonagency Sioux as a concerned relative, bringing the white man's offer of peace; if his message is rejected, war between the agency and nonagency Sioux would be the inevitable result (i.e., the Sioux scouts would have to lead the Army against their own people, as they have already done against the Cheyennes). Sword's speech to Iron Hawk is structured as a formal request (*woc'ekiye*)—a word that designates in religious context 'prayer' and in social context 'formal request made of a relative' (as Sword says, "I consider myself to be from here"). Organizing his speech according to this structure, Sword uses declarative sentences to state the desired outcome ("There will be no fighting . . . my friends will all return together

in peace”). He depends upon his listeners’ adherence to the values of the Sioux kinship system to, as the Sioux say, “take pity” on him. The analysis of this interaction must draw on implicit cultural knowledge; kinship is not overtly mentioned in the text—rather, it is contextual. Thus Sword uses kinship strategically to attempt to coerce the warring Sioux to cooperate with their relatives at the agency. Following the norms of Sioux culture, the refusal of anything requested in the name of kinship was an affront not easily smoothed over. It is in this context that we must understand Iron Hawk’s statement, “Whoever brings good to me will not outdo me”; in an exchange between relatives, those who give goods can expect more than what they have given in return. Here the same holds for the exchange of good feelings.

As Sword tells the story, the resolution of the conflict—the decision of the nonagency Indians to come in and make peace with the government—has nothing to do with victory or defeat, or with right or wrong; it does not even have much to do with the white people themselves. It is a decision the Sioux reach among themselves, relating primarily to themselves. Ultimately, it is an act of unity. This perspective differs widely from that portrayed in standard histories, which focus on the Indian-white conflict rather than taking a comprehensive view that embraces the agency and nonagency Sioux equally. From the white perspective, the mission of the envoys whose story Sword recounts in this narrative is about persuading Crazy Horse to surrender; from Sword’s perspective it is about healing a rift tearing the Oglala people apart, reaffirming bonds of kinship; in the central episode, the formal council between the envoys and the representatives of the nonagency Sioux, Crazy Horse is not even mentioned.

A comparison of Sword’s story about the envoys to Crazy Horse’s camp with any of the versions in published histories ultimately involves a contrast in point of view. Sword’s is an insider’s perspective, focused on the Oglalas as a whole, while published accounts inevitably reflect the perspective of the sources on which they are based—mainly military documents. Both the Sioux insiders’ and the U.S. military officers’ outsiders’ perspectives present *histories*, using that word in its double sense to designate both the events that really happened as well as the narrative of those events.<sup>14</sup> They may contradict one another not because one is right and one is wrong, but because they are composed for different purposes, and are based on different cultural premises.

The two historical episodes I have discussed here—the accounts of Sitting Bull’s vision and Sword’s telling of the mission to Crazy Horse’s camp—were selected in part to suggest the value of native language documents for

ethnohistorical study, but the issues these examples raise are applicable to ethnohistorical analysis in general. The interpretations I have suggested of these events have depended on cultural knowledge implicit in the documentary sources. In order to explicate the events of the past we have to explore the mental worlds in which those actions took place, the cultural knowledge on the basis of which choices were made. To attempt an understanding of the Sioux past it is essential to come to an understanding of Sioux culture, which provides the context. The need to understand systems of thought—the norms and values of a particular group at a particular time—involves us in an essentially synchronic reconstruction achieved by building up a picture of component parts (culturally specific symbols and meanings) while at the same time taking it apart to analyze each element separately. This analytical activity by its nature takes us away from the writing of narrative; yet it is fundamental to the writing of history.

Paradoxically, however, the writing of history is essential to the understanding of culture, which, despite our fiction of synchronic analysis, is never static. Thus culture and culture change are, in effect, the same phenomenon. It is in the play of ideas through action that we come to understand the direction and dynamics of culture change.

The tension that occurs between the analytical and narrative modes of reconstructing the past is reflected in the scholarly activities of anthropologists and historians. This tension is clearly highlighted in the historical and analytical literature on the American Indian past. The narratives of historians impress anthropologists as interesting stories, but anthropologists are made uneasy by the lack of analysis. Historians, in return, find anthropological analyses useful only to the extent that they can inform chronological narratives. Yet, as seems obvious, both kinds of studies are needed, and it is apparent that the bulk of the work will continue to be divided according to disciplinary lines.

A common thread can hold us together and coordinate our efforts, no matter what our disciplinary affiliation. That thread is the ethnohistorical method. I refer to method in the singular not because I believe that there is only one way of writing ethnohistory, but because I believe there is a common commitment that unites us all, a commitment to understanding the past in its own terms, of reading the record of the past in a manner that as fully and verisimilarly as possible represents events as they were perceived by the actors, then uses this knowledge to write culturally grounded histories and historical ethnographies. Some of these studies are better designed as chronological narratives, while others are better served by temporal or topical analysis. Of necessity, most of these studies involve cultures in contact, frequently in the midst of rapid change. Hence there is an implicit

comparative dimension to these studies, for they usually contrast actors from nonwestern and western cultures.

In the ideal case, with the right combination of source material and interest, studies that employ the ethnohistorical method synthesize anthropological and historical approaches. By the conscious commitment to draw on the resources of both anthropology and history, the ethnohistorical method occupies a unique position that straddles and speaks to both disciplines. In this way it is a valuable intellectual tool that leads its practitioners to transcend disciplinary boundaries and ultimately to unify the past by coordinating the studies of anthropologists and historians. It has borne rich fruit in the field of American Indian studies. Arguments that the term *ethnohistory* should be abandoned because of the perception that the designation *ethno-* signals some qualitative difference between the past of nonwestern peoples and our own fail to understand or to value the fundamental concepts that underlie the approach.<sup>15</sup> Only we can rectify such misunderstandings, and only through the tangible products of our work.

Like a nineteenth-century government treaty commissioner, I find myself drawn inevitably into preaching the benefits of civilization—in this case, the ethnohistorical method. Surely I have “bored your ears” long enough for one evening, but I cannot resist a final anecdote, an eyewitness account told by One Bull and his wife to Walter Campbell about the killing of Sitting Bull. When Sitting Bull was dragged from his cabin before dawn on December 15, 1890, to be arrested and taken prisoner to the Standing Rock Agency for his refusal to cooperate with the Indian agent’s policies to stamp out the Ghost Dance, the captain of the Indian police, Bull Head, struck the chief on the back three times, saying, “You have no ears, you wouldn’t listen”; then he shot Sitting Bull dead. In answer to Campbell’s question, One Bull said there had been no trouble between Sitting Bull and Bull Head before settling at the agency; adherence to different strategies to reach the same result—accommodation with the white people—led to an irrevocable breach between them.<sup>16</sup> What happened between these two men could happen to us. If we allow the institutional competition between the disciplinary strategies of history and anthropology to prevent us from reaching a common goal, ethnohistory can have no future. We need to listen to one another and keep our ears open.

## Notes

My teachers at the University of Chicago—the late Fred Eggan, Raymond D. Fogelson, and George W. Stocking, Jr.—gave me an appreciation for the potential

of integrating anthropology and history. At the Smithsonian Institution, Margaret C. Blaker, Mildred Mott Wedel, and William C. Sturtevant taught me practical ethnohistorical methods. I am deeply grateful to all of them for the inspiration they have provided and the support they have so generously given over more than twenty-five years. I wish also to express gratitude to Father Peter John Powell, whose commitment to the Cheyenne people and exemplary scholarship in studying their history and culture has likewise been a valued inspiration. It was at Father Powell's suggestion that I looked at the documentary record concerning Sitting Bull's Sun Dance vision, which provided the idea for the first part of this paper. Special thanks are due to Raymond A. Bucko, S.J., Karen I. Blu, Harvey Markowitz, and Douglas R. Parks, all of whom read and provided helpful commentary on the draft of this paper. Finally, I am pleased to acknowledge that my studies of the Sword manuscripts have been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from Indiana University.

- 1 For an overview and assessment of Custer, see Utley (1988).
- 2 The standard biography is Vestal (1957). For a new biography of Sitting Bull based on comprehensive study of published and manuscript sources, see Utley (1993).
- 3 A search of Dixon's papers [1908–21] in the William Henry Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University, Bloomington, failed to uncover any documentation concerning this aspect of the council. Miller (1957: 262) wrote that according to the Cheyennes, the reward for the identity of Custer's killer was \$1,000 in cash and enough fresh beef to feed all the people throughout the days of the council.
- 4 For biographical information, see Tassin (1973). Campbell's manuscripts and papers [1909–57] are preserved in the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma.
- 5 Notebook 19, Box 105, Campbell Collection, [1909–57]. Translations from Lakota of material in the Campbell papers are my own.
- 6 *Ibid.*, Box 104.
- 7 *Ibid.*, Notebook 8, Box 105. A magnificent portrayal of this Sun Dance was drawn by Standing Bear, an Oglala Sioux artist, and is reproduced, with historical commentary, in Powell (1992).
- 8 Robert P. Higheagle, "Prophecy of Sitting Bull—of complete annihilation of Custer and his soldiers. As told to One Bull." *Ibid.*, Box 104.
- 9 The attempt to understand the vast differences between western and Native American histories so perplexed historian Calvin Martin (1987: 198–99) that, throwing out the baby with the bath water, he relegated American Indian history to the category of myth—a tactic that merely reverses the usual practice of relegating American Indian myth to history.
- 10 Among published commentaries, John Moore wrote: "One looks in vain in these volumes for a more common-sense evaluation of military tactics" (1983: 121), and William T. Hagan noted that Powell "presents without question a succession of miracles and other evidences of divine intervention as determining the course of Cheyenne history" (1982: 432). Reviewers frequently criticized the narrative style of *People of the Sacred Mountain*. Moore commented that "Powell has covered up a lot of ambiguity and contradiction in the original documents in seeking to write a flowing narrative" (1983: 117).

- Hagan said of Powell's style: "In his notes he may acknowledge problems with the evidence, but the text is a lively narrative unmarred by the hesitancy to make sweeping judgments, which characterizes more orthodox histories" (1982: 432). E. Adamson Hoebel also pointed out that in the notes Powell acknowledges contradictions in Cheyenne viewpoints, even in regard to fundamental religious beliefs, but that indications of these ambiguities "do not appear in the text" (1983: 112).
- 11 For discussion of this translation project, and of Sword's writings, see Douglas R. Parks and Raymond J. DeMallie (1993).
  - 12 Sword's autobiography is in the ledgerbook containing his writings, James R. Walker Collection [1883–1926], Colorado Historical Society, Denver.
  - 13 "General Crook" here personifies the Army. The attack on the Northern Cheyenne village, 25 November 1876, was under the command of Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie, one of Crook's subordinate officers. See Powell (1981, 2: 1056–71).
  - 14 Cf. Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," p. 288.
  - 15 Krech (1991: 363–65) discusses these critiques, concluding that "it may be ill-advised to continue to use 'ethnohistory' as we have used it in the past." Despite its limitations and the ambiguities of the term, I believe that ethnohistory still offers the most effective means for coordinating the scholarship of anthropologists and historians, particularly in dealing with cross-cultural contact. As a method, ethnohistory provides an opportunity for interdisciplinary cross-referencing and the building of intellectual bridges that can overcome disciplinary specialization in the interest of more in-depth understandings of the past.
  - 16 Notebook 19: 83–85, Campbell Collection.

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