

The Principal Indian tribes of North America inhabited all parts of continental North America - hunting and tilling the earth from the forests of New England to the deserts of the Southwest, from the shores of the Eastern coastline to the mountains of the Pacific Northwest.

These Indians created their folklore poem/songs about things they held sacred - songs about salmon, coyote, fox, bear, and dog; songs about heroes earning their eagle feathers through-brave deeds; songs of the magical healing Power of herbs; and songs of the mystery of the Great Spirit.

After the white man took possession of the Indian's land, there were new poem/songs made up about the Indian himself - poem/songs about how the Indian was treacherous, untrustworthy, and ignorant. It began in early American literature, by authors such as James Fenimore Cooper in THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS (1826) and the other LEATHERSTOCKING TALES, where Indians were depicted as simpleton children, quaint aborigines who talked a lot of "ugh" talk, a weird pigeon English littered with cliché buzzwords like wampum/powow/teepee/wigwam/squaw, and repeating dumb things like,

White man speak with forked tongue.

Longfellow perpetuated the stereotype in HIAWATHA (1855), depicting Indians with noble souls but inept life styles. And our modern poets like Robert Penn Warren in CHIEF JOSEPH OF THE NEZ PERCE (1981) reinforced the caricature of Indians speaking with inverted syntax and using monosyllable jargon such as,

I slow-squeezed trigger.

And,

Fora, true chief no self has.

Later Hollywood movies and TV treatments went even further, portraying Indians as drunken, illiterate louts. It took Marlon Brando's protest against this misrepresentation of the American Indian in 1973, when Brando refused his Oscar for THE GODFATHER at a nationally televised Academy Awards ceremony, to bring the problem to media consciousness.

If we want to get to the reality of the American Indian today, we must go to the contemporary Indian poets who are beginning to speak for themselves. From tribal reservations in some ten states (New Mexico, Arizona, Montana, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Idaho, Wisconsin, Maine, New York, and Nebraska), from the large industrial cities where some Indians have emigrated, and from our leading American colleges and universities, the modern Indian is creating new poem/songs of disillusion and dislocation, rootlessness and dismay. It is a highly articulate, surrealist dream poetry that these Indians are writing, and completely disconnected from the earlier Indian poem/songs of sacred seasons and the cycles of birth and rebirth. Today's contemporary Indian poet sings a poetry of hopelessness, a song of loss - our modern industrial civilization has so distanced the Indian's language and folklore, as Leonard Crow Dog (Sisseton) puts it, the Indian's whole life has become 'white-manized'.

For today's Indian Poet, to be 'white-manized' means being without political or economic power; having substandard housing; maintaining marginal health so he seldom lives past the age of 43. It means the Indian's suicide rate is ten times the national average; his death by tuberculosis is seven times higher than other Americans; his incidence of fatal dysentery is forty times greater; his blindness from trachoma occurs only on federal reservations. It means his children generally complete only five years of schooling even on reservations, where he has to learn to read textbooks that contain gross distortions of his own history and culture.

