

“There Are No Two Sides to This Story” **An Interview with Elizabeth Cook-Lynn**

Nick Estes

On December 21, 2013, I sat down for an interview with Elizabeth Cook-Lynn at the Rapid City Public Library in Rapid City, South Dakota. Prior to this, she and I had hours-long conversations and plenty of e-mail exchanges about the role her work has played in the development of American Indians studies and the histories and politics of our nations. Our paths crossed years earlier when I was teaching summer school for a Native high school honors program at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology campus near downtown Rapid City. She had a book signing for the publication of *New Indians, Old Wars* at a local bookstore.¹ I missed the signing but picked up a copy during my lunch break. I stopped for coffee on my walk back to campus with book in tow. She happened to be sitting in the coffee shop with a friend. I introduced myself, and she graciously signed my book and offered a few words of encouragement to me to pursue my graduate studies in history at the University of South Dakota. It was a pleasant encounter with a writer I had admired from afar for her sharp intellect and biting pen.

Later, I cracked the book and read her scrawled inscription: “Pidamaye. Remember the stories. Always your relation.” It was a kind thank you and reminder of our common histories, despite decades of age difference. I was born and raised in the notorious border town, Chamberlain, South Dakota, twenty miles south from where she grew up in the village of Crow Creek. We both know the river, the Mni Sose,

the Missouri River. We both know the story the river tells, when the Pick-Sloan dams flooded our nations, the Hunkpati Oyate, the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, and the Kul Wicasa Oyate, the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe. Only a river and a dialect separate our nations. Hers Dakota. Mine Lakota. Nevertheless, we are relatives of the Oceti Sakowin, the Great Sioux Nation. We both write and speak from this perspective of place and history.

The following is an edited transcript of our December conversation. In many ways, our conversation was, and always is, a continuation of previous discussions, ranging from history and politics to the place we know as home, the Mni Sose. I have tried to keep intact styles and manners of speech, only editing redundancies and repetition for readability. I have also chosen to keep the Lakota and Dakota words spelled according to the ways in which I have come to know them. Our languages are oral, and that is how I came to Lakotiyapi. Although I am a lifelong learning Lakota-speaker who is not fluent, I have primarily come to the language through stories and songs. To my fault, hardly have I engaged in its writing and reading. Yet there exist promising and compelling studies on Indigenous oral histories and traditions as well as dictionaries and well-developed curricula, promoting the vitality of our languages and stories as *living* things.² However, in the spirit of the manner in which I was taught, I find it best to reflect the authentic voices of two relations—one gilded by the wisdom and authority of an elder scholar and grandmother of our Nation and the other an apprenticed learner. Our conversation was a sharing and imparting of wisdom, history, and stories from one generation to the next to *keep the plot moving*.

NICK ESTES: Why did you choose the life of a writer?

ELIZABETH COOK-LYNN: Well that's an interesting question. I didn't choose the life of a writer. But I have always wanted to write. I grew up in a home where two languages were spoken all the time. I'm interested in language for that reason. Then I went off to boarding school where we learned the mass in Latin. I could see the connection between Latin and English, and I found it interesting. Nobody else did, but I did. And I knew it had nothing at all to do with Dakota, but I liked English. I thought it was an interesting language, so I spent a lot of time trying to get good at using English. I grew up with a lot of people who either didn't speak English or didn't want to speak English and weren't interested in it. On the other hand, I grew up with people who were interested in language and how language was used. I grew up with a grandmother who was very . . . What is the word? Precise about language.

So I think that maybe writers do choose to be a writer. I really didn't. I didn't know any writers. I didn't know anybody who was a writer. I shouldn't say that because my grandmother did write for some of the early church things. I really didn't know what a writer was. But

I'm glad that I chose the way of writing because writing is a good life and the academic life is a good one. I don't know that I chose anything. I don't know that I made decisions about it. When you realize where I come from, which is a totally nonacademic world, the idea that I would become an academic was fairly bizarre. I had no notion of it. So I don't know that I chose to be a writer. Even now I don't say I'm a writer. Very often I don't.

I have a friend who was applying for a visa, and she wanted me to go with her. I chose not to. I also applied for a visa. She said, "They ask you what your occupation is." And I said, "Well, what did you put there?" "I put that I'm a poet." I have never called myself a poet either.

I think in the long run, though, you have to own it. And I tell students that a lot. If you're going to be a writer, own it.

NE: You talk about your grandmother being a writer and going to boarding school. Can you describe the place where you grew up in Crow Creek and Fort Thompson, South Dakota? And why is it important to you?

ECL: Well, Fort Thompson is actually the agency of the Crow Creek Sioux. Where I grew up, there was a nice, cute little village right along the river. When I was in college, it was decided by the federal government that they would put five or six hydro-powered dams into the Missouri River, which changed that whole world. But when I grew up there, it was a little village—Fort Thompson was. I didn't live in that village. I had a lot of relatives who did. I lived about thirteen miles from there, and my father was a rancher. He was actually an old rodeo rider who turned out to be a kind of successful rancher. And that's where I grew up, but I grew up in all three of the districts there. There's Fort Thompson, Crow Creek, and Big Bend. I lived in all three of those districts at one time or another. I grew up on horses. My father had a lot of horses. My grandpa did, too. My grandpa ran something like two hundred head of horses out there at one time, maybe before I was born.

That's where the Sissetonwan ended up after the Little Crow War. It started out as a concentration camp in 1863. And it's a fairly difficult community because of that kind of transition. You can't live in a concentration camp without a whole lot of trauma. So it is, I think, a traumatized community. It certainly was at one time.

NE: You talked about the Pick-Sloan dams. A lot of your writing, especially the *Aurelia* trilogy, talks about the idea of historical crime.³ Specifically, how do you see the area—in Crow Creek and Lower Brule along the Missouri River, the Mni Sose—and the damming of the river as contributing to your political consciousness?

ECL: Oh, I think it has everything to do with it. I grew up in a political family—both from Sisseton and Yankton and from Crow Creek. I grew

up with a lot of men who thought they were politicians. They weren't religious. Many of the people I grew up with were not Catholics. I mean, they weren't Christians. My father was never a Christian. My grandpa wasn't either. But we were surrounded by oppressive Christianity.

And the question of how one becomes a political person out of it, I think, is a really interesting question. I don't know what the answer is, except that I grew up with a lot of these people. My grandpa was the first councilman, one of the first councilmen ever elected to that council . . . He was a man who spoke all three dialects of the language. He was considered an important figure in the decision making and all that. My father eventually grew into it. He wasn't driven to it in the beginning. He preferred rodeos and breaking horses. My mother was not interested in politics at all. I never heard my grandmother speak much about the political nature of being an Indian in America.

So I don't know how one becomes political. I think politics is basically whatever it is that tells you how we are governed. That's all I think it is. How the Dakotas saw themselves in relationship to the federal government was always a topic of conversation in my family. I listened to it a lot as a kid, both in Indian and in English. Most of it I see now as fairly dismal conversation and not much hope going on there. But I find politics really the only basic conversation worth having. I'm not interested in religion. I'm not interested in the inner self. I know people argue about it because I write poetry, too. But I'm truly not interested much in that kind of thing. I'm interested in politics. I think even my poetry is fairly political. I think all the stories I tell are, too. So it's just my nature I guess to be political and to like to write. I like to use language to try to explain who I am and what I think of the world.

I have a friend whose name is Ray Young Bear. Maybe you know him. He's a poet, Meskwaki. He and I used to talk a lot. And, he said, "You know, writing is just an experiment with words." He also is a Native speaker. And sometimes I think it's true: writing is just an experiment with words. It explains a lot to you about what you think. And what I think politically is probably not printable, actually, because it's such an incredible, corrupt story of America. And I'm not like Vine [Deloria Jr.], a colleague whose work means a lot to me. I'm not like him in that I don't care to speculate about Christianity. I simply reject it. He speculated a lot about it. But it's just, for me, an objectionable power that America wields all over the world. Maybe it's always been true of Europe and the seats of power in Christianity. I just find it a totally objectionable history.

NE: You talk a lot about the male figures in your life. Your father and grandfather were political leaders. How do you see yourself as a Dakota woman, a Dakota Winyan, within that history, within that genealogy and lineage?

ECL: That's an interesting question because I really never thought about it. You know, in our language women have a way of speaking. As soon as you start talking, they know you're a woman. Same way with men. There are endings to words, full names, or things that women use. Well, I grew up like that and recognized that about language, which also made me understand how different Dakota is in seeing the world from English.

But I do think the men in my life have been much more of an influence. That includes my husbands. I have had two husbands. That includes my son and my grandsons. I think men have a huge, huge influence in women's lives, and I'm not talking about power. I'm not talking about oppression. I'm not talking about all the stuff, you know, feminists speak of very often. I do think men and their relationship to women accounts for everything, really. A little girl growing up and trying to see herself in the world, I think that there probably isn't too much you can say about it.

From a personal point of view, I have never felt oppressed by men. I have never felt that I couldn't do anything I wanted to do as a woman, as a female person. I have never felt the kind of oppression that is spoken of in today's world. Never. Not from grandparents. Certainly not from my father. My father really found me to be an interesting person. He liked me a lot. And he would talk to me often, even though we didn't have much in common. He was a horseman. He would've liked it if I wanted to do that. But I'm the kind of person if I got on a horse and looked bad I got off quickly. And he said, "No, no, no. Don't do that. You get on the horse, you stay there." He and I had totally different lifestyles, I'm sure, and what we thought about the world. The thing about a little girl growing up is that she must feel, I think, that her father likes her. A lot of times there's some hostility between father and daughter growing up, between a mother and a daughter growing up. I had much more hostility getting along with my mother than I ever did with my dad because he just thought I was okay. Whatever I did was okay with him. Not with mother. You had to meet certain standards with my mom, which is also good.

But I don't know how to speak to the issues of being a Dakota Winyan. I am that. And it's okay [laughs]. I don't go there very often. I don't write about it very much either. I don't write about that very much except to say how influential men have been in my life. And I'm sure my father's non-Christian view of the world is really a part of my view of the world, too.

NE: You started off doing a lot of creative writing, a lot of fiction. Then you shifted gears pretty dramatically into nonfiction academic prose. What authors influenced that transition for you?

ECL: I don't really know. When I started becoming an academic, I had to do what I was good at. What I was good at was language. It led me into English departments and humanities departments. I read everything. I'm appalled at how little students have read now of anything. But I read everything. There are a lot of writers who influenced that. I could talk a little bit about it—T. S. Eliot, Joyce Carol Oates . . . all sorts of people who are part of the American literary scene.

I'm writing now what I think might be a memoir. We'll see if it is or not. I do talk a lot about it. I do talk about going off to Palo Alto, doing some work in an English department there, and reading the work of a man who was a British scholar who wrote a lot of academic stuff. He also wrote something called *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.⁴ He happened to be one of the British officers who built a bridge for the Japanese during World War II as a prisoner. It eventually became a movie. Eventually, it became a novel of the same name written by a Frenchman by the name of Boulle. Well, I studied at Stanford with the British guy who wrote it. His name was Ian Watt. I was interested in his perspective on how it is that myth—how a historical event becomes myth. He wrote a lot about it. So I went there, and I studied it. That's, by the way, where I learned to write the kind of stuff that I eventually learned to write. That was an important place. I was already a professor by then.

That's where I really learned to write and maybe it was the crucial point where I turned to doing some analytical writing. I was writing a lot of stuff then, but I really hadn't published all that much yet. I was still writing poetry and getting over my graduate program at University of [Nebraska–]Lincoln. That was probably the crucial place. As a matter of fact, when I started writing this thing called a memoir, I start there. I start talking about that Palo Alto experience with that writer, Dr. Ian Watt. I didn't know he was an anthropologist then. But he did write a lot of anthropology. He wrote with Dr. Goody an essay called "The Consequences of Literacy," which was very interesting to me because I'm literate in English but I'm not literate in Dakota, a language I've always known since I was a kid.⁵ I grew up with it, but I'm not literate in that language. I don't write in it. I kind of got interested in it. I think that's when I decided I'd write more analytical stuff. I tried to do that also in my PhD work at Lincoln.

The authors who really touched my heart, of course, are authors like Vine Deloria and Scott Momaday. One of the things that interested me in Scott—I mean, I've never read a novel as compelling as *House Made of Dawn*.⁶ One of the things that interested me about him was, as he got old, he went home to Oklahoma and started working and completed a restoration of cemetery. What is that book?

NE: *The Way to Rainy Mountain*?⁷

ECL: He went home and worked with people to restore Rainy Mountain. It says to me that writers like us—no matter how sophisticated, elite, whatever you must say we become—we never move away from those places. I never move away from the Missouri River, the Kud Wicasta.⁸ In my old age, I go there a lot. Those are the kinds of things about Momaday that have just—there's not a word, a phrase that he can use that doesn't just haunt me. That includes much of his prose. And so you're there as a writer.

That isn't exactly what drew me to Vine and Vine's work. I think what drew me to it was his real ability to analyze history, to analyze events, and to analyze the law. It was an incredible journey for most of us back in the sixties. I remember taking some of that work home to my father and mother and others and talking to them about it. They said things like, "Well, we know that." Everybody had that recognition, you see, what Vine was doing, what he was saying.

I as a writer am rather narrow-minded. Maybe people don't think that because Vine said something at one time when he wrote a review of something of mine. He said, "This woman's vast discussion is wide-ranging." I don't know that I think that. I'm fairly narrow-minded as a writer. There are just a few things that interest me, not everything.

NE: What piece was he reviewing specifically?

ECL: He reviewed something and said that I was a great essayist, which was a real compliment because my undergraduate degree was in journalism. I've never really liked journalism, but I do love the essay form, which is also the way that you analyze. He published it in some obscure journal.

NE: You are a poet, novelist, and an academic. How do these labels speak to the diversity of your work? One thing that has always struck me about your work is you were the first person that I had read, the first Indian scholar, the first Dakota scholar, to make the connection between U.S. imperial wars abroad, especially the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the Indian wars. You're analyzing it through a Dakota lens, but you're making these broader connections. Later on you had people making the connections saying, "Oh! This is like the Indian wars in the past." Your analysis showed the depth American Indian studies framework could provide.

ECL: There were a few people who went there when I started talking about that. But I've always understood it. I've always understood the colonial nature of the relationship that my tribe has always had with the United States. I've always despised that history and very often despised our tribal reaction to it. I don't know where to go with that.

Well, it took me a long time to get there, too. I'm glad I didn't publish anything early on in my career. I didn't publish anything until

I was forty. It took me a long time to get there. It also took me a long time to say out loud, "I'm not a Christian. I have never been." I didn't know it when I was nine, ten, and fifteen. But I know that I have never been a Christian. It took me a long time to say it out loud. We are as oppressed ourselves and our history as anybody I know, as any group of people I know. I always knew also from my parents' and my relatives' experiences that we were colonized people. I remember going with my father up to the agency. My father ended up owning a lot of land because he had many brothers and sisters who wanted to sell their land, take it out of trust, and sell it. He said, "No. Don't do that. I'll buy it." It's not that he wanted the land. He said, "If this tribe has no land, we are not a tribe." He had some notions about it. It ended being that he had quite a lot of land. What I wanted to say about it was I remember his efforts to be a successful rancher. He took me with him, of course, to Crow Creek Agency to find out if he could cut some poles from land that he owned to make a fence. They went into the agency and they told him, no. He said, "Well, why not? It's my land." They said, "No, it's not your land. The government holds this land in trust." I was probably eight or nine years old when that happened. We talked all the way home about that. As I then went to school and learned about Africa and learned about a lot of other places, I recognized who we were as a nation of people. My father always said, "The Dakota Nation, The Great Sioux Nation." That's English, but he said it all sorts of ways. I had kind of a nationalistic view of who we were as a people. Part of it comes also from being the survivors of the Little Crow War, which has been written about terribly in history. It wasn't the war that I knew from my relatives. A lot of it comes out of that. My family never did succumb to the oppression that followed that war. We were always, I suppose in some way or another, outside of even the mainstream of Dakota life, to say nothing about being out of the mainstream of American life.

I think that my connection then to colonization and to the Third World came late for me also. I struggled a lot. If you had seen my writing prior to my publishing, I struggled a lot with it. That's the purpose of writing, to find out what you know in order to think. I'm glad I didn't publish it, but you have to go through some stages before you become a writer. My stages were to get rid of a whole bunch of stuff so that I could analyze and write.

NE: You often speak of Third World liberation scholarship, or Third World nationalism. It's peppered throughout your work. You talk about it as being foundational to Native studies, in your own work, and in your own writing. Why is it important for Native nations and scholars to turn to Third World scholarship?

ECL: It's something that all new scholars have to confront because the truth is democracy has failed. In Indian Country, we've known it a long

time. America hasn't come to that conclusion yet. But I'm not talking about the kind of democracy that has been imposed on Indian nations, which in itself is fairly criminal. When you put democracy in a broader sense, capitalist democracy is not going to proceed as it has in its exploitative way because it is not sustainable.

I have been fortunate in being introduced to a lot of the Third World writers. I have been invited to conferences. I went to one rather recently and talked about genocide. I was there as an Indigenous person talking about genocide along with people from Africa. They had scholars there who were talking about the Rwandan genocide. They had people who were talking about Nazi Germany. All sorts of things like that. I found it interesting that I was invited. I have been, over the years, invited to those kinds of things. A long time ago I had been invited to some La Raza things that went on in California and in the Southwest. I knew that while tribal genocide—tribal protests against law, while I knew that those were fairly narrow in their perspective, I could certainly see the broader connections to it. It started early on for me, maybe even the fifties and sixties. I didn't write about it for a long time, but I've thought about it for a long time.

It's not so much that I'm interested in liberation. Those movements didn't seem to catch my interest even during the AIM [American Indian Movement] years. It wasn't about liberation. It was really about the protests against declaring us—as Native peoples, as Indigenous people—irrelevant, as vanishing, and not really a part of the modern world. I knew that to be false. I really knew a lot about Dakota belief in what goes in the universe—how they viewed their position in the universe.

I had this grandmother who said this to me earlier, "You don't even own your own life, my dear. You're only taking care of it for the next generation." That's fairly profound when you think about it. It is really what the Dakotas think about themselves and the world. It has, on the one hand, been their weakness because it's been exploited. But on the other hand, it is also their strength. It is what will make them, in the end, the winners in this conflagration. We're not protesting so much as we are saying: we have the right to our place in this universe. Maybe I'm the last generation of people who talks like that. The young people ought to think about it once in a while.

My grandmother also used to say, "We love to talk Dakota." And part of it was because in the Dakota language is where our values really are expressed. If you know the epistemology of words—which I don't, I'm not saying I'm any kind of expert—the epistemologies of the words of our language possess our view—worldview—of ourselves. It's really important. All of it I think leads into nationalism. I have always thought that these nations, which are Indigenous in the United States, are nations. What do nations do? Well, they possess their own language. They

possess their own land. They raise armies. They do what nations do. To suggest that we're some kind of sociological phenomenon out there in the middle of nowhere is offensive. Don't you think?

[Both laughing]

NE: There was an opinion piece in the *Rapid City Journal*, the high school newspaper [sarcasm], about the "legal fiction" of the Great Sioux Nation. It argues the 1868 treaty was properly dealt with in the 1877 Black Hills Act, then rectified with the 1980 Black Hills Supreme Court case. The author suggests we should just establish our own sovereignty by accepting money. This is from a historian . . .⁹

ECL: Yes! Yes! Yes! It's amazing how pervasive that view is. I just wrote a manuscript and sent it off to somebody, and it's probably going to be published. I don't remember which pages or where it is. In the end of it, I write this thing about, I don't remember the ending, but it had to do with the Great Sioux Nation. When you send something off to the university presses, they have a bunch of readers out there. They're academics and they're historians. They're writers. This guy wrote . . . and they give you some good advice every now and then. Every now and then, they're quite wrong. One of things he said at the end was: "You have to explain your use of the phrase, The Sioux Nation. There is no such polity." This happened in 2012, after years of the effort on the part of us, Native scholars. And this is still pervasive in the history departments? This is still pervasive in university presses? I wrote back, of course. I said, "What do you mean there is no such polity as this? Of course it is a political entity. Of course it's in all of the treaties. It's in all of the documents that come out of D.C., that come out of the Congress and everywhere. You've never heard of the Sioux Nation?" It's astonishing! I said to my copy editor, "I'd like to talk to that guy. Who is he?" Well, of course, they wouldn't tell me. This was all a secret, which is in itself bizarre. This is all some kind of secret phenomenon.

But, yes, I'm not surprised that a local historian . . . Most of them are uninformed and, if not stupid, ignorant. They're certainly ignorant of the kind of things that have been going on in Indian studies in the last thirty years. They don't read it. They don't know the bibliographies. They don't know who's writing. They don't know anything. I'm not surprised.

NE: Let's talk about Native studies. I always think of *Wicazo Sa Review* as being the preeminent Native literary journal, the premiere Native academic journal, when it was founded in 1985. Can you talk about that history?

ECL: By that time, in 1985, the discipline of Indian studies was fairly fragile. You had people who were confusing Indian education with Indian

studies. You had people coming out of English departments who were confusing Indian studies with the literary voice of American Indians. You had anthropologists who still saw Indians as informants to their interests as a discipline. By then it had only been in existence about one hundred years as a discipline. Anthropology has always been the handmaiden of colonialism all over the world. Not just here. Not just in Indian Country. Everywhere. It was the big argument between Vine Deloria and his cousin Dr. Bea Medicine. It is the big argument still between Indian studies and other disciplines.

I was teaching in an Indian studies component at Eastern Washington University, which started out, by the way, as a fairly interesting experiment. It is surrounded by about seven powerful tribes in the Northwest—the Nez Perce, the Colvilles, the Flatheads . . . all those powerful tribes right there in what is called “Inland Empire.” Not the coastal people. Right there in the middle of Palouse Country. These were powerful, political nations of people. And they were our board of directors to start that program. They were hiring people and I was just getting out of some graduate program. I was hired there, so was Dr. Cecil Jose, who is Nez Perce, and others. We started that program because we wanted it to be a mechanism in defense of tribal nationhood there. They were in the midst of fishing controversies. They were in the midst of fights with the state over this and that and the other thing. That was a good place for me to be. I learned a lot there. That’s when we decided we would start this journal.

Wicazo is one of the ways you say pencil in our language. Sa is one of the ways you say red. There are many ways to say red in our language. I had a discussion with one of my daughters who said, “How come you didn’t call it Wicazo Duta?” My answer was, “Because you don’t.” I don’t know the answer to that question, but it was a good question.

Anyway, we started it. Everybody picked up on it and liked it and tried to turn it into a literary journal. One of the reasons it didn’t go to some other university is because everybody wanted it to be a literary journal. I said, “No, no, no. This is an academic journal for the academic development of the academic Indian studies curriculum.” I really think that there are few people who know how to edit a journal, first of all. There are few people who want to do the writing that it requires. It’s much easier just to become something else. We have had a horrible time defending that journal as a Native American studies journal. There are a couple of others that are okay. We wanted to try to direct the development of Indian studies. That’s what I wanted to do. What’s the point of being an editor if you aren’t going to tell people what to write and how to write it? So we rejected a lot of manuscripts and said, “No, that doesn’t tell you anything about what we need to do to go forward in Indian studies, so we’re not publishing it.” That’s what we did with that journal for a long time.

Then I was wanting to retire and do some significant writing. In the process of it, we looked around to find an academic home for it. Almost everybody who looked at it wanted to turn it into a literary journal. We finally found an academic home at Arizona State University. Dr. James Riding In is now the editor of it. One of the reasons is he knows what Indians studies, as an academic discipline, is because he knows who our constituencies are. Our constituencies are the large land-based, federally recognized tribes with treaties. That is the focus of that journal. We had to find an editor who knew that and knew how to do that. I think he's done a really significant job. I'm happy with the home at ASU. It has achieved success not because it's such a great place, but maybe it's the only place for it to exist, in the manner that we want it to exist. You know what I mean? It may be that it will not exist in this way.

NE: Was there a lot of contention over the fact that it is a Dakota-named journal? Who were the original scholars? Where were they from?

ECL: The first few issues we put out, we got some questions about "Why did you choose that name? You can't pronounce it. Nobody knows what it means." [Both laughing] I wrote back saying, "It's the only Indian language I know. And it means, 'Red Pencil' Review."

Besides that, it seems to me that when you look at Indian Country, you look here. Where do you suppose the most important protest against genocidal law came from? Everybody thinks it came from California. There are a whole bunch of people who write that. No. It came right out of the Dakotas, where 550 square miles of treaty-protected land was flooded in the fifties and sixties, where state jurisdiction was fought off by every group here, where all sorts of dreadful laws were being passed against tribal autonomy. And, it really came out of the streets of Minneapolis, where a whole bunch of Lakotas and Dakotas ended up on relocation. Who thinks relocation is a good idea? Well, the people who want to flood your land think it's a good idea. You've got to put them somewhere. Why not start an urban project—problem, too? Why not urbanize all these people? Make them join the real world. It came right out of the streets of Minneapolis, in my view.

Much of the need for change in federal policy happens here. It was so obvious here, much more so in the East, the Coast, the Pacific, or even Canada. It's no accident that the Sioux were at war for thirty to forty years here. It says something about the important need for us to maintain our worldview. It's sometimes an obsession. It's no accident that much of the sixties, seventies, and eighties protests came out of this part of the country. You can claim it, if you want to, that it happened at Alcatraz. But it didn't. It was a tribal thing. It was a nationalistic thing. Then it turned into, as all movements do, a lot of disappointing kinds of things. The leadership, of course, became corrupt. All movements are

like that. Look at the black movement. Look at La Raza. Movements are like that. And movements go away. Then the real work begins. That's where I think Indian studies began. That's how I think Indian studies began. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm too nationalistic about it, but I really believe it.

NE: I think that the biggest misconceptions about that period is that scholars place the failure of Red Power onto the shoulders of certain individuals. But we're talking about the American Indian Movement, a revolutionary organization engaged in armed resistance. Whether or not you agree with the tactics of protest they did participate in, the fact is they were being killed and targeted by the FBI. At the same time, there was institution building. It wasn't just domestic issues. It wasn't a parochial civil rights movement. It was an international movement.

ECL: Exactly. It was an international movement, and it's nothing new to us as the Lakota–Dakota people. We have had treaty councils here since the mid-1800s. When you start talking about treaties, it's national and international. You can't deny the resistance that's an obsession with us as a tribe of people. The Sioux people have always resisted. You can hear all these stories about how the people in Wampanoag welcomed the people at Thanksgiving and baked pies and cooked turkey. Look. The Lakota–Dakota people never welcomed the intruders, the invaders. You can have that wonderful dream if you want to, but it's not true. What do you think the Lakotas were saying when they met Lewis and Clark down here on the river? Lewis and Clark went away from there and wrote in their diaries these are the most contemptible people we've ever met. Everybody else was wonderful. They went up north and talked to the Three Affiliated Tribes and they welcomed them with melons.

NE: I believe they called the Sioux "the vilest miscreants of the savage race."

ECL: The vilest miscreants . . . What the Sioux were telling them was, "Hey, this is our river. We'll control the traffic on this river. This is our place." When you don't understand the language, when you don't understand their tactics, when you don't understand what they're doing, you then have to make up something. Lewis and Clark made up a wonderful, wonderful American story. But the Sioux never, never welcomed them.

NE: Let's go back to the concept and idea of resistance. How do you see yourself, your work, speaking to centuries-long resistance? We have the treaty councils. We have the wars. We have the war of 1862. We have "the Great Sioux War" of 1874, the War of the Black Hills. When we talk about resistance, oftentimes we get stereotyped as the AIM-armband-on-the-street-corner Indian yelling and screaming. Yes, it's one aspect, but what about how we built institutions? What does it

mean to be a scholar within those institutions and be a part of the history of resistance?

ECL: That's a very awful question. I don't really see myself as a part of a conscious resistance. Although I must say, I could have gotten caught up in the AIM business. If I hadn't been a divorced woman with four children who had to get to work and put food on the table, I probably would have been in the streets, too. I don't think of resistance like that.

Somebody said something to me last night at the meeting they had. We were talking about the sculptures that we're trying to get going.¹⁰ She said, "I see that as a resistance movement, as a resistant action." I hadn't thought of it that way. I don't think of my writing that way either, and I'm not naive enough to believe that we can change much. The changes will be slow and they will take forever. We just have to keep on going.

One of things you have to have, if you're going to be a voice in this dilemma, is you have to have a core of knowledge, I guess, or a core of something. And my core is, historically speaking, there are no two sides to this history of the United States and its relationship to people who have lived here for thousands of years. There are no two sides to that story. You have no right to displace people, to steal their resources, and steal their lives. No human right, no human being has the right to do that to another human being. That's my core resistance. I don't do that to you or to you or to you. I very often go back to that. What directs a lot of my writing is: there are no two sides to this story. That's not very scholarly. It's not acceptable because there are two sides to everything, maybe this and maybe that. Part of the empirical evidence that history tells you is that for a while this was true and now that's true, and so on. That's the empirical evidence. That's not the evidence that I use. I say, there are no two sides to this story. What America has done is criminal. And they're still doing it. Sooner or later, a capitalistic democracy is going to be seen for what it is. It's simply not going to be sustainable.

I don't know if that answers the question, but it's a good question.

NE: In 2008, you have an exceptional moment of crisis with the subprime mortgage crisis collapsing the global market. Then you have arising a notion of, what I would call, "lateral dispossession," or this idea that everyone is dispossessed. But, as you say, this capitalistic democracy is unsustainable, and it came about through the dispossession and genocide of Indian people. For Native people, we begin asking questions like, "What do you mean 'the 99 percent' is dispossessed? What do you mean when you say 'occupy'? Isn't this land already occupied?" These are very contentious terms. For Native people, it obscures the real history that this capitalist democracy has always been a failure, if not premised on our death.

ECL: That's a very complex question, and there's a very complex dialogue that could come out of it. In any discussion like this, you have to have somebody to blame. I'm very sympathetic to the dispossession of ordinary Americans, but the truth of the matter is that immigrant societies, like this one, an American immigrant society if you don't count Indians—American immigrant society bought into this in the first place. I'm not talking about who we need to blame. The truth of the matter is that American Indians never bought into it. They were forced into it by law. Not even some kind of choice was made. Even though I have sympathy for particular people, I don't have any sympathy for America. It's an immigrant society that bought into it from the very beginning. And it is not blameless in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, not here, not in Brazil, not in Africa, not anywhere. Immigrant societies, and this one in particular, it's a dangerous concept that people buy into not because they have some kind of commitment to who they are in the world, but they bought into for very selfish reasons. And they still do. People come here. They came here in the beginning to take the land away from the people who had it for thousands of years. They're still doing it. When you talk about dispossession, I think there's a whole different thing you need to talk about when you talk about Indigenous dispossession and dispossession in other venues. And I'm not very sympathetic about it.

Yeah, I stood on the corner, too, with my sign saying I'm one of the 99 percent. I am [laughs] because I'm an American, too. But I have a different history, a whole different history. When you talk about Occupy, that's one of the reasons there was not a whole bunch of Indians who stood on the corners with us because we have a different definition than what Occupy means. We have a different definition of what dispossession really is. We have never bought into this of our free will anyway. Our relatives were not Christians when they were born. They didn't speak English when they were born. They weren't Americans when they were born. They became that because they had to. That's really different from anything you could say about an immigrant settler society. I know that the Sioux have a reputation about going around marauding Pawnees and everybody, but they weren't interested in the total decimation of a race of people. America cannot get away from its sins. That's what Vine said early on.

NE: A recent academic debate has been swirling around Israel–Palestine. I was recently in Washington, D.C., at a conference where scholars were debating the efficacy of a boycott of Israeli institutions in support of the Palestinian cause. I'm very sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and how Zionism became an ideology that motivates and justifies the occupation of Palestine in outright colonialism. It sounds familiar to the Manifest Destiny narrative. I was thinking back to where I grew up in

Chamberlain, South Dakota, hearing the same justification from white people for taking Indigenous land and the myth of Manifest Destiny not living up to its promises. People say, "We were promised paradise, and we received salt."

ECL: Poor us.

NE: What do you think about that? And the power of myth?

ECL: I haven't gone there that much. One thing I want to say about that whole Palestinian–Israeli thing: I went to a lot of powwows because I have children who are dancers and relatives who have a drum. We went to a lot of powwows in those days, and I love doing that. We went to one in Minnesota. We went to one in Sisseton. We went to one in Montana. And guess who was there? This would be like in 1970 or later. The Palestinians were there. We had all sorts of tipis there. They had their tents there. Groups of thirty, forty, fifty Palestinians with their guns, with their uniforms, came after the prayers in the morning, after and before the grand entry, and when people could go to breakfast and having coffee and getting organized, the Palestinians were out on that tarmac doing the military maneuvers. They did it for forty minutes, and then they left. They were invited there by our tribes. There was not much discussion of it anywhere. It didn't appear in the newspapers. It didn't appear anywhere. It was a part of the AIM reach toward Indigenous people. AIM didn't even talk about it. The leaders of AIM didn't talk about it that we've invited our Palestinian brothers.

I found it really compelling. In 1970, in 1975, in the 1980s, and then, after a while, all that disappeared, and it didn't happen anymore, as far as I knew. But then I got busy and did other things. I wanted to say that in response to the notion of what has happened to the Palestinians and what happens to aggressive colonizers also who are afraid to promote genocide and theft, and all sorts of other things.

What was the last part of that question?

NE: The power of myth . . .

ECL: Yes. I would like to write about it, but I just don't know how. I look at it kind of like myth, mythology, is the body of knowledge a people possess. That's not a very satisfactory explanation. But a myth is not a story. Mythology is the body of knowledge. It's usually expressed in symbols. One of the most important ones is language. Our mythology is embedded in our language. Okay? The way we express it, however, is kind of a literary thing. We express it through ceremony. We express it through, which is the way you say, "I am a Lakota." Or, "I am a Dakota." Or we express it in ritual, which is the way you talk to God. Or you express it in storytelling. Or you express it in dance, art, and music, and so on.

Let me give you an example. We say we come from the Star People. You probably know this. You probably heard me say it before. The first Dakotas were the Star People, or the Star People were the first Dakotas, whichever you want to say. We are their relatives. If you know the language, if you know the story, and if you know the history of it all, you'll understand we express it every time we go to a powwow. We go there and we have four dancers who come around with a blanket. They say, "Give us some money. We've come from a long ways." That's what the song says. That's a reference to the Star People who went across the skies and helped the Dakotas into humanity. Eventually, they reach the earth. This is the way it goes, you see.

I have never been able to write about it. I've never been able to express that kind of mythology. But I'm sitting in my hot tub with my grandson some years back and I say, "Do you know that constellation up there?" And he said, "Yeah, that's the Big Dipper." I said, "No. We call that Wicakiyuhapi."¹¹ "What's that mean?" "Well, it means a lot of things. But one of the things it means is 'man being carried across the sky.'"

That's the way mythology works. I don't know how to write about all of it. I know a lot of that stuff. But I don't know how to write about it. I've never found a satisfactory way to write about it. Yet, I think it is perhaps the most powerful impulse that human beings have, to possess mythology that expresses what they know. It's in language and ways of behaving. It's one of the reasons we do all the weird things we do like go to powwows, sing these songs, look at the drum, and all that. Maybe we have a way of saying what that means to us in terms of just inner knowledge. I don't know that scholarship, as we know it, and writing, as we know it, can really ever do justice to that whole thing. I don't know how to access it except that you live in circumstances where it's available to you.

Now, people growing up in Phoenix don't find it available to them unless they live out there at Four Corners, out there with the sheep, out there somewhere with grandma speaking the language. That's where it's available. That really brings us to the final decision about what is the function of Indian studies. Indian studies isn't a thing you can get into, get a good job, get a PhD, and go to Baltimore and teach somewhere. That's not what it's about. Young people ought to know that and not be too disappointed in what's offered to them. You go to these classes, you write these things, you try to do some research, and you do it. Then you get there. It may not be as compelling. It may not serve that inner thing you have as a human being, as much as knowing the mythology of your people.

I don't know anything about the mythology of the Navajos, but I consider it one of the most powerful of all the notions about the universe. I don't know it, but I think it's what myth is. It's the power in

the universe that finally makes us human beings. Just like the stars that eventually become the Dakotas. We eventually become human beings. And it's hard.

A U T H O R B I O G R A P H Y

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N O T E S

- 1 Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *New Indians, Old Wars* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
- 2 I have avoided the use of diacritic marks in the writing of the Dakota and Lakota words because the two languages have been developed into two relatively incompatible linguistic orthographies. Instead, I've chosen common spellings that are most widely used across Dakota and Lakota orthographies. See Lakota Language Consortium, *New Lakota Dictionary* (Bloomington, Ind.: Lakota Language Consortium, 2008); John P. Williamson, *An English–Dakota Dictionary* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1992). I have also consulted Waziyatawin Angela Wilson's invaluable study on the practice and writing of the Dakota oral tradition and histories in *Remember This!: Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives*, trans. WahpetunwinCarolynn Schommer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005). For another study on the practice of Indigenous oral traditions and history, see also Jennifer Nez Denetdale, *Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).
- 3 Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Aurelia: A Crow Creek Trilogy* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 1999).
- 4 Ian Watt's personal experiences as a POW in World War II were recounted to Pierre Boulle, who fictionalized them in the historical novel, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, in 1952, which was later adapted in 1957 into a film by the same name.
- 5 Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5, no. 3 (1963): 304–45.
- 6 N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*, 1966 (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).
- 7 N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976).
- 8 Kud Wicasta, in the Dakota dialect, is the name for the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, or the Kul Wicasa Oyate.
- 9 Eric Zimmer, "Forum: Inaction on Black Hills Is Sovereignty in Action," *Rapid City Journal*, December 14, 2013, http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/forum-inaction-on-black-hills-claim-is-sovereignty-in-action/article_0a7e91df-f548-59e8-ba76-69e721f38411.html.
- 10 The night before on December 20, the First Nations Sculpture Garden project held a community forum in Rapid City, South Dakota. It is proposed to construct the sculptures of Charles Eastman, Black Elk, Oscar Howe, and Vine Deloria Jr. near the downtown area to celebrate and honor the achievements of Dakota–Lakota intellectuals from the Oceti Sakowin, the

Great Sioux Nation. The city and its white residents were resistant to the plan from its inception. See the project's website: <http://www.fmsg.org>.

- 11 Dakota–Lakota star knowledge is a vast cosmological epistemology that relates to the creation stories and the creation of the first human, Tokahe. The constellation known as the “Big Dipper” in English has many names and meanings for Dakota–Lakota peoples. For example, the seven stars represent the Oceti Sakowin, the Great Sioux Nation, or the seven council fires of the Oyate, the Nation: the Dakota-speaking nations (the Mdewakantonwan, the Sissetonwan, the Wahpekute, the Wahpetonwan), the Nakota-speaking nations (the Inhanktonwan, the Inhanktowanna), and

the Lakota-speaking nation (the Tintonwan). It also represents the Canunpa, the sacred pipe brought by Pte Hincala Ska Win, the White Buffalo Calf Woman. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in this instance, refers to the constellation as the Wicakiyuhapi. The belief is “the four stars of the dipper are called in Lakota [and Dakota] either the ‘carriers(s)’ or the ‘stretcher(s).’ Wicakiyuhapi is literally, ‘man carrier.’” As she mentions, the four dancers carry a corner of the blanket, which symbolize one of the four stars of the dipper, to reenact the journey Lakota–Dakota people make in life and death, to and from the Star People, the Wicahpi Oyate. Cited in Ronald Goodman, *Lakota Star Knowledge: Studies in Lakota Stellar Theology* (Mission, S. Dak.: Sinte Gleska University, 1992), 22.