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Re-inscribing Ancient Connections, Following New Trajectories in Native American Literature: William Sanders' *The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan*[1]

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From the outset, the modern Native American novel has attempted to demolish the stereotypical representations constructed in mainstream literature—whether negative or positive—and substitute more authentically drawn portraits of American Indians. Those one-dimensional creations of European and Euro-American literature, "the noble savage" and "the bloodthirsty savage," have been replaced with complex characters who commingle flaws and virtues, who experience the full range of human thought and emotions, but who express those ideas and feelings, as we all do, in ways shaped by their particular culture, social context, and historical experience. Above all, the stereotype of "the vanishing Indian" has itself vanished to be superceded by characters who survive and adapt to modernity and westernization utilizing an array of strategies that enable them to retain as much of their traditional value systems as possible.[2] This is what the Anishnaabe writer Gerald Vizenor has called "survivance," i.e., not mere survival, not just staying alive but, rather, actively coping, persistently denying the objectification imposed by the dominant society, continually refusing to be passive victims.

While accomplishing this part of their project, Native American writers, more often than not, borrowed the forms of Western literature, but renovated them for their own purposes. In particular, they favored the popular genres: the western or "cowboy" romance (as in Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* [1927]), the thriller (as, for example, Louis Owens' *Nightland* [1996]), the mystery story (take Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* [1996] or Louis Owens' *The Sharpest Sight* [1992] for instance), the road novel (such as David Seals' P*owwow Highway* [1979] or Stephen Graham Jones' *The Fast Red Road* [2000]) the vampire novel (A. A. Carr's *Eye Killers* [1995]), the family saga (Louise Erdrich's novels about the Nanapush clan), the historical novel (Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit* [1990], or James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* [2000], or his *Fool's Crow* [1986]). The changes they wrought upon these genres constitute part of the distinctive genius of Native American writers. While reshaping

[1] Parts of this essay are drawn from a talk delivered at Boğaziçi University, in İstanbul, November 11, 2003.

[2] In the canon of classic American literature, all three of the most prevalent stereotypes—the "bloodthirsty savage," the "noble savage," and the "vanishing savage"—are to be found, par excellence, in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, which first appeared in 1826 and epitomized Euro-American attitudes about Indians at that time.

the content and the character types of these popular genres, and playing with the established generic conventions, they generally did not do much in the way of altering the form *per se*. There are, of course, exceptions to this general trend: Gerald Vizenor and, more recently, Stephen Graham Jones have experimented extensively with form as well as content.

Having dispensed with the stereotypes and re-imagined the characterization of Native Americans in literature, contemporary Indian writers have more recently tackled the broader question: what should the scope or reach of the Native American novel be? What are the trajectories that will successfully propel it into the future? In several recent texts, North American Indian writers have sought to enlarge the space their people should rightfully occupy, extending it far beyond that which colonialism and its aftermath allotted them. They have done this by re-inscribing ancient connections European hegemony had all but erased, as well as by transgressing both spatial and temporal boundaries laid out by colonial empires. As far as I can determine, this intellectual reversal or refusal of empire by native and mixed-blood writers began a decade earlier in Canada than in the United States, however the new set of trajectories remained unknown to U.S. readers until the 1985 publication of Gerald Vizenor's *Griever, an American Monkey King in China*. Even then, it was probably regarded as a further manifestation of Vizenor's idiosyncratic literary experimentations, rather than the beginning of a new tendency.

In *Griever*, Vizenor investigates the commonalities existing between Native Americans, the earliest Asian settlers of the New World, and the people of China. Griever, the main character, and very much a Trickster himself, finds the similarity he anticipated between Coyote, Raven, and various other Trickster figures in Native American myth and the Monkey King of Chinese legend.[3] At the same time, he gradually comes to realize the difference that different historical experiences and different kinds of prolonged subjugation can cumulatively make to the daily lives and attitudes of ordinary people, whatever their ancient belief systems may have been—and thus the real differences between today's American Indians and the Chinese.

[3] The Trickster is said to be the favorite of Native Americans among the figures of their mythology. The Trickster is an extremely complex figure, so for those unacquainted with this mythic being, here are some of his most salient characteristics: (Actually, one should say "his" or "her," for, like Turkish, American Indian languages in general do not have word gender nor gender-specific third person pronouns, therefore, in this case, the Trickster can be either male or female, or both at the same time.) He or she is a jokester, a prankster, whose role is that of an equalizer, humbling the prideful (including him/herself, at times) and buoying up the downcast and downtrodden. In this regard, he/she indicates the fundamental balance and harmony of the universe. The Trickster is often represented as an animal known for its cleverness: Raven in the Northwest, Coyote in the Southwest, Spider in the Southeast. Therefore, he/she may be seen as a metaphor for human intelligence, which can be our salvation, but, also, at times, our own undoing. (The Trickster often outsmarts him/herself.) He/she is also the embodiment of humor, which for Native Americans has proven to be a major survival tool. In another sense, the Trickster is the meeting of the divine and the human. Most cultures, have in their folk traditions some sort of Trickster figure. For the Chinese, it is the Monkey King.

Linda Hogan, in her novel *Solar Storms* (1995) transgresses the colonial boundary between Canada and the United States and unites native and settler peoples on both sides in a common struggle to preserve the environment from further degradation. In the process, she succeeds in linking the exploitation and abuse of peoples (the main character, Angela, has been a victim of child abuse) to the despoliation of the Earth, thus merging the psychological, the physical, and the ecological.

Solar Storms received its inspiration from the protest among native peoples over the so-called James Bay Project in the northern part of the Canadian province of Québec.[4] Hogan transposes this massive hydro-electric project to the Boundary Waters between the western part of the province of Ontario and the American state of Minnesota. The story begins with a multigenerational family of women in an Indian village located on the Boundary Waters—an area still caught up in a three-way dispute among Canada, the U.S., and the tribes who were the original inhabitants. For the elders of the village, water is "a god that ruled their lives" (62). Among other things, this polyvalent symbol stands for history flowing onward in its ultimately inexorable course. In such a long-range scheme of things, the European settlers have it all contrariwise, attempting to alter the course of rivers, destroying everything that could save them (86), frantically seeking the future instead of learning from the past. But the strongest of enemies is, says Hogan, "a system, a government run by clerks and bureaucrats" (72). It matters not whether the bureaucrats reside in Washington or Ottawa.

Angela and her family join in the protest against the hydroelectric project. They unite with groups from all over the vast region to be affected, journeying by boat and on foot to the construction sites. This journey of protest becomes a pilgrimage in which the Indians revisit their past. As they progress through space they move back through time to a world of connectedness, of wisdom deeper than the technological know-how of modern times. Ultimately, the protest fails in its immediate goal of halting the project. But in another real sense, it succeeds because it has shown all who participated the potential of concerted action.[5]

A decade earlier, *Slash* (1985), by the Canadian Native writer Jeannette Armstrong, likewise disregarded the U.S.-Canadian frontier in the depiction of its protagonist's growing political consciousness. Slash, the main character, moved from

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[4] The James Bay Project, undertaken to make the Province of Québec economically self-sufficient (at the expense of its Native population) is a colossal hydro-electric project, costing some 20 billion dollars and flooding 13,341 square kilometers (about the area of the entire state of New York in the U. S.) The lands flooded were mainly Cree Indian hunting grounds and the rivers that were diverted, traditional fishing areas. For more detail see: James McCutcheon, *Electric Rivers: The Story of the James Bay Project* (1992).

[5] See also John K. Donaldson, "As Long as the Waters Shall Run: The 'Obstructed Water' Metaphor in Native American Fiction" (2002).

village to city and then from Canada to the United States at the time the Black Civil Rights Movement was also inspiring political action among Native Americans. His participation in this movement alters him in a way that changes the entire direction of his life, even after he returns to Canada.

This panoramic North American perspective was anticipated in 1975 by another Canadian writer, Jovette Marchessault, with *Le Crachat Solaire*, the first volume in her series, *Comme un Enfant de la Terre*. In *Le Crachat Solaire*, the writer/narrator traverses Mexico, the United States, and Canada in a Greyhound bus, searching for *Terre Amerindienne*. (There is something more poetic, more distinctive, and therefore more appropriate about T*erre Amerindienne* than there is about the sober phrase used in the English translation, "Native American Land.") As Marchessault is carried across the continent by the Greyhound (which, in a sense, becomes her totemic animal), hers is the insider's project of reclamation, not the outsider's voyage of conquest.

In exploring not only the continent of her birth, but also the meaning of multiple affiliations—mixed-blood, Québecois nationalist, Canadian, North American, lesbian—Marchessault sets the stage for some later developments in Native North American and mixed-blood writing. The polyconscious, polyphony of *Le Crachat Solaire* cannot truly be said to have been an influence on U.S. Indian writers—the English translation did not become available to readers until 1988[6]—but it was indisputably a precursor for the enlargement of vision that was to come later in both the U.S. and Canada.

Three more recent examples of this enlargement of vision can be found in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), and Win Blevins' *Rock Child* (1999). In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, within the span of a few short years and a few hundred miles, Tomson Highway moves us from the world of semi-nomadic caribou hunters living in close-to-Stone-Age conditions, via the hellish preparatory school of the Native residential institutions,[7] to the dangerous no-man's land of Winnipeg's urban Indians.[8] He juxtaposes the worlds of traditional culture, modern material culture, and European Hochkultur—in this case, classical music and ballet—and what they demand of the individual and what they offer in return.[9] Sex, drugs, drink, dysfunction, and death—both spiritual

6 Called *Like a Child of the Earth* and published in Canada.

7 In Canada, as in the United States, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian children were taken from their parents and placed in boarding schools. There was a similar practice in Australia for Aboriginal children.

8 Winnipeg has one of the largest Native populations of any city in the United States and Canada.

9 *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is largely autobiographical. As a young man, Tomson Highway, like the main character in his novel, was a classical pianist, before he abandoned his musical career for social work and, eventually, writing. His brother, who also plays a fictionalized role in the novel, was the first Native to become a leading male dancer with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.

and physical—are themes explored to their heights and depths. In the end, Tomson Highway gives us a work that is a novel of survivance in the modern age, a family saga, a story of brotherly love, a gay novel, a religious novel, and a portrait of the artist as a 20th century Indian.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, Leslie Marmon Silko links traditional Native American beliefs and practices with the Universal Goddess worshipped before patriarchal times. Using images of water in opposition to aridity, themes of cultivation versus exploitation of nature, she contrasts egalitarian matrilineal societies with hierarchical patriarchal systems. She explores the consequences of these opposed social organizations for those living in them and those lost between them.

In *Rock Child*, the part-Cherokee author, Win Blevins,[10] places Asie, his main character, in contact with the mainstream of American history from which he and his people have been systematically excluded. In that novel we find Asie consorting with such well-known individuals in the canon of European and American history and literature as Mark Twain, Brigham Young, and Sir Richard Burton (the explorer, not the actor). In addition, Blevins also arranges for his protagonist to become acquainted with Asia and some aspects of Asian belief systems when he encounters a Tibetan Buddhist nun named Sun Moon, who has been captured and sold into slavery as a prostitute in the mining camps of the Western United States. "A-s-i-e," pronounced "ossie" in this case, spells out the French name for Asia. Asie, the character, rescues Sun Moon, and eventually they marry. Asie is thereby united with Asia, the pre-historic homeland of the American Indians. When Sun Moon becomes pregnant, she meditates upon the meaning of the baby in her womb, and realizes it is simultaneously "self" and "other." This union of opposites—a basic tenet of many Asian and American Indian belief systems—is suggested by her very name, Sun Moon. A further layer of significance is added if one realizes that sun and moon are the same word in Cherokee, distinguished by speaking of the "sun of the day" and "the sun of the night."

Win Blevins was by no means the first to move toward connecting Native Americans with the Western canon. That direction had already been well explored by Louis Owens and Thomas King. Owens' work, for instance, interrogates the master narrative of American (and world) history, especially as it is expressed in the literary canon. His novels, replete with references to one another and allusions to other Indian writers, incorporate elements of mythology, both Native American and Greco-Roman. By his own declaration, Owens writes simultaneously for the wider public, for a Native American audience, and for a literary and scholarly elite. In keeping with this intention, his works can be read as mystery stories or thrillers (his preferred genres) or as modern expressions of ancient mythological themes. The mythological

10 Blevins does not claim official Cherokee affiliation, but does trace his ancestry back to Irish, Welsh, and Cherokee roots.

level of his multi-layered works can be sensed as it permeates the atmosphere he creates for each of his works, but it cannot be fully understood—and certainly not articulated—without knowledge of the religious beliefs of the several groups Owens writes about, namely, the Choctaw, Cherokee, and Northwest Coast peoples. Nor can it be fully understood without an acquaintance with European mythology. Thus, for the serious reader lacking sufficient background, who wishes to go beyond the enjoyment of the narrative level, some sort of guidance is necessary. Luckily, there exists a good starting point in Chris LaLonde's *Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens* (2002),[11] which traces nearly all (no one could get them all) of the mythological and other extra-textual references.

Thomas King, like Louis Owens, is a highly referential author. His *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), in particular, is filled with constant allusions to the Euro-American literary canon and mainstream popular culture, thereby setting up a dialogue with, and interrogation of the European settlement of the Americas and its expansion under such 'justifications' as the doctrine of manifest destiny. In the course of this dialogue, King transforms traditional American Indian humor and puts it to use in his capacity of writer with a strong social conscience. Like Owens', King's work is so complex it needs a kind of readers' guide, if one is to go beyond the narrative and the surface humor. Fortunately an excellent guide does exist in Arnold Davidson, Priscilla Walton, and Jennifer Andrews' *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions* (2003).[12] As the title of this work suggests, King crosses many cultural frontiers, transgresses many previously set boundaries in his writings.

Another mixed-blood Cherokee writer, William Sanders, explores ancient connections through the mythology of his own people and through an encounter one of his characters has with a woman from Asia. His novel, *The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan*, epitomizes two of the tendencies under discussion here. It seeks to establish connections between the lives of modern Indians (in this case, Cherokees) and the ancient wisdom of their ancestors, and at the same time suggests the even more ancient link between the American Indians and the peoples of Central Asia.

Sanders is probably best known for three mystery novels set in Oklahoma. Contrary to what one might expect, only the last of these, *Blood Autumn* (1996) has an "Indian setting" and concerns itself with "Indian characters." The fictional detective featured in this series, Taggart Roper, is a white man. Although Roper has a Cherokee girlfriend, Rita Ninekiller, the fact is of no particular significance in the first two novels of the series. Instead, interest focuses on the characterization of Roper and

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[11] See John K. Donaldson, "Chris LaLonde, Grave Concerns, Trickster Turns: The Novels of Louis Owens" (2003)

[12] See John K. Donaldson, "Arnold Davidson, Priscilla Walton, and Jennifer Andrews, *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions*" (2003).

Rita and of their relationship. Sanders portrays Roper as the kind of wisecracking, smart-aleck, would-be macho man who often ends up outsmarting himself and getting soundly trounced. Rita admonishes, chastens, and plays the role of helper and healer. In the end, her sound common sense usually outdoes Roper's calculations and pseudo-holmesian deductions. In Taggart Roper, the reader can discern a variation on the type, common to crime novels, of the bumbling, beat-up tough guy with a heart of gold.[13] In the context of another tradition, one can also catch a glimpse of the Trickster figure—especially "the Trickster tricked by his own trickery." At the same time, Billy is clearly a persona for Sanders himself—Sanders the VietNam era veteran and participant in numerous real-life adventures and misadventures.

In *The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan* (1999), Sanders at last produces what can undeniably be called "an Indian novel." Categorized by booksellers as science fiction, Billy Badass is more accurately a modern retelling of an important set of Cherokee myths. Cherokee traditions and values are woven into the fabric of the novel, including implicit references to traditional gender roles. These distinctly Cherokee elements are combined with the persona Sanders had previously developed for himself in the Taggart Roper novels. *The eponymous Billy Badass*, a Cherokee Indian, has the same character as Sanders' white detective, but is more clearly autobiographical in details of his character and background than Roper was.

While merging a present-day version of ancient myth with the author's self-representation, *The Ballad of Billy Badass* also introduces an environmentalist theme and a commentary on cold war rivalries and the abuses of both world communism and world capitalism. Sanders shows himself to be a Trickster author, who, not satisfied with turning the tables once, proceeds to do so repeatedly, and is even willing, on occasion, to turn them on himself.

The plot of *Badass Billy and the Rose of Turkestan* revolves around a toxic waste dump, hidden away in a remote part of the Nevada desert.[14] The land, the underground water, and the air are all being poisoned, resulting in sickness and death for the adult Indians living nearby, and in birth defects for their children. The intense radioactivity given off by the dump has coalesced to form a monster, which, detaching itself from the toxic waste that spawned it, preys on humans in order to renew its energy. The invisible monster prowls the desert night to satisfy its insatiable need to reenergize itself. The multiple deaths that result are attributed by the police and the press to some particularly vicious and incredibly stealthy serial killer.

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[13] See also John K. Donaldson, "Native American Sleuths: Following in the Footsteps of the Indian Guides?" in *Telling the Stories: Essays on American Indian Literatures and Cultures* (2001).

[14] Sanders obviously has in mind the much disputed toxic waste dump planned by the U.S. government for Yucca Mountain, Nevada, a site 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. The facility is scheduled to open in 2010.

At this juncture, Billy Badass enters, engaged in his own pursuit of a young woman named Janna he has trailed from a powwow in Oklahoma. Initially, he had thought she was another Native American—not Cherokee, like himself, but maybe Apache, maybe Aleut. To his great surprise, she turned out to be a Kazakh from the former U.S.S.R. Janna had come to the U.S. under the auspices of a nuclear disarmament coalition studying pediatric cancer and genetic defects produced by radiation exposure among the Indians of Nevada and Utah. In Kazakhstan she was on the staff of a hospital specialized in the treatment of children suffering from radiation, the legacy of decades of Soviet nuclear-weapons testing.[15] A romance develops between Janna and Billy and eventually they join forces in solving the mystery of the multiple deaths—a union of fourth-world peoples against the forces of the first and second worlds.[16]

Their progress is impeded by an assortment of government agencies, business interests, the mob, and the operators of a New Age healing center located in a former rancho-bordello adjacent to the reservation on which the deaths have been occurring. The monster is clearly the offspring of this powerful military-industrial-criminal-profit-and-power-oriented complex. Billy, Janna, and their allies are puny in comparison, an unlikely array of would-be monster slayers, who initially do not even know that there is a monster. Billy, however, is guided not only by his love for Janna, but by the advice of his dead grandfather, heard in the voice of a bird that tags along after him.

The average reader might not necessarily realize that Sanders is presenting in this tale a modernization of an important Cherokee myth—or, rather, a complex of related myths and legends. The most important of these is Stone Coat, which goes more or less as follows:

Long ago, a creature, whose name can be approximated in English as Stone Coat,[17] began to prey upon the People. In his primary state, he was covered completely with a scaly stone skin, which formed a natural armor, sufficient to protect him from any attack. Furthermore, he could make himself invisible at will. No one knew his identity, and so he went from place to place unimpeded, killing as often as he needed food.

The people began to live in fear, particularly for their children. Nighttime was especially terrifying, for the killer seemed to strike after dark. A few of the

[15] In some ways, the novel is a kind of mirror image of the "Das Kapital" section of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) set in Kazakhstan. That is to say the wasteland produced by nuclear testing is transferred from the former Soviet Union to the United States of the future.

[16] Here I am using the somewhat dated term "fourth world" because it serves the purpose of distinguishing between the so-called first, second, and third worlds, and the enclaves of ethnic minorities that live within them.

[17] In Cherokee the name is Nvnyunuwi, which is untranslatable into English, but means something like "covered in stone."

People wanted to take immediate action to punish someone they supposed was the culprit, but the medicine man advised them to wait and get to the bottom of the mystery lest they make a mistake and commit an injustice. Ultimately, a council was held to determine what might be done. They decided to lie in hiding to see if they could uncover the killer's identity. When they discovered it was Stone Coat, they despaired. His armor-like hide could protect him from all their traditional weapons put together.

Finally the birds, the messengers of the gods, told the secret of entrapping and slaying the monster. They were to find seven menstruating women and have them stand naked along the path that Stone Coat usually took for his attacks on the People. When Stone Coat first sighted the naked women, he spoke to them lasciviously. But, as he became aware of their condition, he hurled insults at them. With each successive encounter, however, his power diminished. He began bleeding himself—vomiting blood—and finally collapsed.

The People built a great fire and burned Stone Coat upon it. As he was being consumed, he released both power and wisdom to the People. Wisdom and understanding are power, the myth suggests. When daylight came to the scene of the execution, there remained only a heap of white ashes and a few pieces of broken bone, still glowing red—white and red, the sacred colors of the Cherokee. Afterwards, the People raked the ashes and found that Stone Coat's heart had metamorphosed into a crystal, and, by gazing into it they were able to see the truth of all things.[18]

So, in keeping with this mythical tradition, Billy's grandfather who dwells in the spirit world, speaks to Billy through the call of a bird. He enables Billy to identify the monster and counsels him on how to slay it. The monster cannot be subdued by all the manly prowess Billy may possess, but only through the love and respect he feels for Janna—and with Janna's active participation. In fact it is the power of woman for creation, nurture, and healing that undoes the bonds in which the People have been held. The understanding of this is true wisdom, and in that wisdom lies real power. The crystalline clarity of this insight reflects the hope for the future.

As a properly respectful Cherokee, Sanders has altered details of Cherokee religious tradition in his rendering of the myth, particularly matters concerning ritual. To do otherwise would be sacrilegious. But, as he explains in his preface to the novel, "[t]he traditions described are valid in general outline," if not in every specific detail (7). And the mythic truth they contain speaks to us in spite of the alterations, and, all the more clearly because of those changes which modernize the setting, the action, and the characters so as to create a parable for our time. This, however, is not the end of

[18] This rendition of the myth is based on a synthesis of several versions found in James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* (1900) and Frank Speck and Leonard Broom's *Cherokee Dance and Drama* (1951) and compiled in John K. Donaldson, "The Themes of Reciprocity and Renewal in Traditional Cherokee Culture" (1995).

Sanders' rather remarkable accomplishment. By displaying the relevance of ancient Cherokee thought for modern people of all tribes, nations, and beliefs, he has enlarged the space his people should rightfully occupy, expanding it far beyond that which European colonialism and its aftermath left them.

The principal personages in all of the novels mentioned so far can be said to inhabit what Homi Bhabha (1994) has called "interstitial space." Existing on the edges of more than one culture, they are all of them seeking to establish a hybrid identity in consideration of, but apart from contending national and cultural constituencies.[19] They are attempting to construct and perform their own narratives and, through them, establish a status that will not be subordinate. This is clearly true of Billy Badass. His name itself is an emblem of the previous interstitial place he occupied and of his previous cultural subordination. "Billy Badass" is the kind of derisive nickname teenagers bestow upon one another. This particular one goes back to Billy's days on the high school wrestling team, and, as Sanders explains, an escapade "involving some bootleg whiskey, a hot-wired Buick, and the coach's teenage daughter" (10). His "legal" name is William E. Badwater, clearly a hybrid designation—part Euro-American, part Indian; part Christian, part "pagan"—an index of his general cultural hybridity. Moreover, the Indian part, the surname, is a mistranslation of the Cherokee original, "a bit of sloppy work on the part of the official interpreter when his great-great-grandparents had been forcibly enrolled, back around the turn of the century,"[20] Sanders notes (10). The Cherokee name more precisely refers to dangerous waters, such as rapids or a whirlpool (10). And though this implies some degree of hazard, it also signifies a source of great power, and has a religious implication (one aspect of which has to do with cleansing and rebirth). The positive connotations of the Cherokee have been turned into negative ones in English, and then further modified in a denigrating way. However, the pejorative is worn as a badge of honor by Billy, who, obviously, in good Trickster fashion, relishes its multivalent and "subversive" implications.

The polyvalence of the name does, however, lead Billy to ponder the question of his own identity. As Sanders elaborates:

> His enrollment card in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma gave his name as William E. Badwater . . . He had another card, issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, that said he was a full-blood Cherokee. ("Four-fourths" was the Bureau's old terminology: He often wondered why they had chosen to

[19] Although Billy is presented as a "full-blooded" Cherokee, many characters in Native American novels are of mixed descent. This is also true of many Native American authors—including Sanders, himself. The mixed blood can be seen as the embodiment of hybridity. For an exploration of this theme see John K. Donaldson, "Trademark of Metaphor?: Two Case Studies of 'Mixblood' Writing in the United States Today" (1997).

[20] American Indians were enrolled by tribe by the United States government as a way of "administering" them. The enrollees and their descendants were then "officially" Indians.

express it that way rather than, say, sixteen-sixteenths or sixty-four sixty-fourths.) His Oklahoma driver's license said he was twenty-eight years old, five feet eight, a hundred and eighty-five pounds . . . with black hair and brown eyes, and that he was authorized to operate a motorcycle on public highways.

His wallet also contained a page of military gibberish that, decoded, stated Badwater, William E., had been honorably discharged from the United States Army, having attained the rank of Staff Sergeant. That was just about all the wallet contained at the moment. Eight years of military service, including participation in a violent if short-lived war [the Gulf War], had generated a great deal of paper, but very little of it had been of the green sort.

He was a dark, wiry young man, with the classic mountain Cherokee build; long arms and legs, narrow high-boned straight-nosed face, and almost no ass [which adds another layer of semantic misdirection to his nickname]. He wore tight-cut jeans, a black T-shirt printed with a Jerome Tiger design of an Indian on horseback,[21] cheap running shoes from a Wal-Mart in Tahlequah,[22] and a sweaty red bandana for a headband. His coarse black hair was starting to reach the point where he would have to make a decision either to get a haircut or let it grow long. He was inclined to the latter choice-maybe even braid it, Plains style, even though that would piss the Cherokee traditionalists off—less from a desire to look Indian than as a delayed reaction to years of military hair-length regulations.

His grandfather/bird/whatever was right about his present condition, though. He had been hanging out lately with a bunch of Southern Plains types, Kiowas and Comanches mostly, who had been trying to get him into the Native American Church.[23] The previous night he had finally gone to one of their services near Tulsa, out of curiosity and a vague idea it might help him

[21] Jerome Tiger (1941-1967) was a Creek/Seminole painter, who, in his all-too-short career, is credited with having established some of the new directions American Indian art was to follow in the second half of the 20th century.

[22] Tahlequah is the capital of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

[23] The Native American Church is a syncretistic religion, blending some aspects of Christianity with elements of various Native American practices and beliefs. It is sometimes referred to as "the peyote religion" since it uses this hallucinogenic cactus in its rituals. Originating in the Southwest of the U.S., it has spread to other parts of the country, and is a pan-Indian, rather than a tribal-specific organization.

> get his shit together. Even before he had risen to his feet and lurched hastily out of the peyote lodge and off into the night, puking every few staggering steps, he had known this was not for him. (10-11)

As we can see, Billy Badass refuses to let himself be essentialized, to be placed into any subordinate categories—even those of "traditional" Indian or "pan-Indian," and certainly not those of "consumer," "wearer of designer-label clothing," "physical anthropological type" or "disaffected and disoriented army vet." Any of these imposed identities—imposed by the dominant society, imposed by binary classifications—would be as inadequate and inauthentic as the layered misrepresentations conveyed by Billy's names. What Billy Badass/William Sanders discover in exploring their Cherokee roots is that 1) the ancient wisdom of the ancestors is as applicable today as it ever was—the stories repeat themselves—and 2) their roots branch out so far, in so many directions that transgress the boundaries set by Euro-American hegemony.

Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan is the most Indian of all William Sanders' novels. It is also, in my opinion and that of numerous reviewers, his best work to date. This is important because it demonstrates clearly that the choices post-colonial criticism often seems to impose between authenticity and representativeness, on the one hand, and literary and esthetic qualities on the other, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Its multilayered texture also shows that the current debate over whether Native American literature should be judged by "universal" standards or understood in a post-colonial (or even colonial) context, whether it should be interpreted in the light of shared elements of the various American Indian cultures (or seen as an expression of the author's particular tribe) rather misses the point. All of these approaches are necessary; none of them is sufficient. The best Indian writing is polyvalent, and if its many strata of meaning are to be understood, critics, teachers, students, and even general readers need to open their minds and expand the repertory of their approaches to literature. That is part of what complex writers such as Sanders are inviting us to do.

Sanders' intention stated in an essay called "Billy and Me" (1999) was to create a modern parable based on the type of Monster Slayer legends "found in virtually all native people's traditions" in order to say something about the "authentic monsters of our own times. "I consider this," said Sanders, "the finest story that has ever chosen me to tell it." I feel he is justified in thinking so.

In this era when audience reaction is considered as part of the construction of a text, it is useful to look at the sort of commentaries on *Billy Badass* submitted by ordinary readers to the review section of amazon.com. Granted, these readers are perhaps not truly ordinary in that they are self selecting and limited mainly to those who were already admirers of Sanders' work or who are devotees of American Indian literature in general. But by the same token, they also possess a connoisseurship not

to be found in the average reader. One such amateur reviewer has commented, "This is an extraordinary book. That it had to be self published[24] is a crime against nature—which is perhaps fitting, as it is a powerful sermon on that subject . . . but that should give its readers the satisfaction of knowing they have found buried treasure." This observation involving the way in which commercialism plays a *de facto* censorship role in our society was echoed in several other readers' comments. Another reader predicted, "*[The Ballad of Billy Badass and the Rose of Turkestan]* will be a cult success. It deserves to be much more."

Turning to the remarks of a professional critic, Al Sirois has commented, "the novel is lean and mean like Billy, but soft in all the right places like Janna. It kicks butt" (1999). Perhaps that is Sanders' greatest triumph in this novel—his unheroic Indian hero, who is anything but the idealized, therefore inauthentic, "noble savage," stops getting kicked in the ass by the powers that be and begins to do some mighty butt kicking of his own in the name of peace, and harmony, and sanity, and humanity, and not with the gratuitous cruelty and violence of the stereotypical "savage warrior."

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[24] Sanders was initially unable to find a commercial publisher for his novel.

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