Restructuring the Self:
The Curious Voice of Mary Crow Dog

in Lakota Woman

Mary Crow Dog’s Lakota Woman, written in conjunction with Richard Erdoes, is the life story of a modern American Indian (Sioux) woman. Published in 1989; it represents one individual’s difficult coming of age at a crucial time in history—the Siege of Wounded Knee near Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in 1973. It is a graphic personal account, including historical, political, religious and philosophical comments on Indian life as she understands it. Reviews on this autobiography are generally favorable. Some see it as a simple, though horrifying, tale of her abusive upbringing (Guthrie). Others see it as history of AIM in the early 1970s (Ms.). Still others claim it as an education in as well as revival of Indian religious practices (Adams). Whatever else the book is, it is a tremendous study in voice. Is this woman’s story genuine and universal, or just one woman’s cry out of a very limited and perhaps distorted perspective?

An autobiography by definition is the story of one’s own life. In fact, Lakota Woman represents only 16 of 37 years, from the early 60s to the mid 1970s. Born in 1955, she includes an epilogue dated 1987, so she wrote it ten years after the fact. Moreover, she is highly selective, picking events from her early childhood, after that from her boarding school days, then her wild adolescence, culminating with her involvement in AIM. Then she turns to the Siege itself where she gives birth to a son, which is followed by her marriage to Leonard Crow Dog and her life during and after his imprisonment in the East. But the work is not just linear,¹ for she often mixes later and earlier events with the present. And the book seems to center on her giving birth at Wounded Knee, before and after which she becomes more topic-
oriented, discussing things like peyote, the Ghost Dance, her marriage, religious ceremonies, and feminine mythology.

But perhaps the most characteristic aspect of the work is the language itself. It is direct, passionate, sometimes biting. Reviews comment on her “sharp wit” (Ms.), her “caustic humor” (Carroll), her “heated but not incendiary” style (Devereaux). The overall tone is informal, as if Mary is speaking rather than writing, and in the way she says things, we discover an impatience, even anger (Devereaux), especially at the whites, but including Indian opportunists and sexist males. What I call voice depends on choice and arrangement of material, as well as the language or tone in which it is presented. By looking at these aspects of her writing, we can tell more accurately whether that voice is authentic, truly insightful and educative, or merely a one-sided diatribe by a disgruntled woman who undercuts the essential message she may be trying to convey.

First, let’s turn to the tone of Lakota Woman. We’re told the book is done “with Richard Erdoes,” whom she tells us she met on one of her Eastern trips. Erdoes is noted for his direct, critical style, such as we find in statements of Mary’s like: “The ‘boob tube’ brainwashes people, but if they are poor and nonwhite, it also makes them angry seeing all those things advertised . . . the whole costly junk of affluent America” (26). This is tough, colloquial diction. One critic says her “short, choppy sentences” give the sense she’s “speaking directly to readers” (Addison). We might ask, however, if this is a feminine biography, whether the author is really being herself, or has she adopted a masculine (Hemingwayesque) rhetoric to achieve her purpose?

Mary starts her linear story by claiming the whites (the government agent and missionary) destroyed “the tiyospaye” (close-knit clan) “as a matter of policy” (13), driving the men to “the bottle” and the women and children into poverty. Mary claims she became a rebel in that context, yelling at her mother about her “wino” stepfather. “So I drank and ripped off as I got older,” she says, “becoming a hobo, punishing my mother that way” (15). Mary’s claim of the intentional breakup of the clan by whites is basic to the book, for it is the
root of Mary’s dysfunction, as well as her people’s, and sets up the only solution for her—rediscovery of her Indian heritage. What she doesn’t tell us, of course, is that the “hell” of her childhood is also the source of her passion and creativity, something that may be symbolized (perhaps unconsciously) by the one thing the whites didn’t take away from the Indian children—“riding horses” (27).

One of “six kids,” Mary says that she was raised by her grandmother, a Catholic, who “thought she was helping” by not teaching “Indian ways” (22), the kind found in her “turtle aunt,” who Mary thinks is “one of the strongest women of her generation.” Curiously, this woman is found dead, “naked, with weeds in her hair” (25); and her death is never investigated. This is the first of many examples of Indian women whom Mary uses to demonstrate the importance of women to the survival of a culture. Part of Mary’s technique here is to juxtapose abstract negative statements, such as “many in my family turned Christian, letting themselves be ‘whitemanized’” (8), with beautiful, concrete images with which the reader can’t help but sympathize, such as the “turtle woman” who dies as an integral part of the earth.

The next step in Mary’s life is the boarding school, where “the do-gooders, the white Indian-lovers” made the children “caricatures of white people” (30). Here she tells how a “nasty” priest “molested a little girl,” and a nun “pulled my panties down” and “gave me twenty five swats” (34). Still, Mary creates a certain distance from all this through what one critic calls “caustic humor” (Carroll). Once when she and her white friend Charlene are ironing the priest’s vestments in back of the Church, they discover “a statue of the crucified Savior, all bloody and beaten.” After Charlene says: “Look at that poor Indian, the pigs sure worked him over,” Mary reflects “That’s the closest I came to seeing Jesus” (38).

The boarding school experience is a terrible indictment of Catholicism. What’s different about her voice here is that, on looking back, she sees the priest, whose methods of teaching English she criticized, as a “good priest” who even “learned the (Indian) language” (41). More than that, she says, he “stood up for us at Wounded Knee,” and through him she
found out "there are good whites, too" (41). So Mary is ambiguous about her religious training, and in describing her own part in the school Mary says: "We were like cats," who "can't be tamed" (33). She also wrote for the school paper, The Red Panther, where she called the principal, Father Keeler, "a goddamn wasicum son of a bitch." It was a kind of writing that "foamed at the mouth," because she "put all her anger and venom" into it, but at the same time, she says, it "lifted a great deal of weight from one's soul." (36) Indeed, the latter might be the motive for Mary Crow Dog's whole biography.

After Mary leaves school, she describes her life as endless rounds of drinking and fighting, of general aimlessness. It includes "a lot of pot" (59), "shoplifting" (61) and continual "sexual harassment" by whites (70). She blames this stage of her life on her home, where there was a "Grand Canyon" of "misunderstanding" (57). She blames it on the whites, who "profit" (54) from the liquor and she says, "provoked" (61) the stealing, making getting a little of it back "like counting coup" (61). She blames it on racism where whites habitually force Indians into a "corner" (51), and sexism, where the courts claim the women are "always asking for it" (68). At this point her voice is a graphic, down-to-earth description of a "lost weekend," after which she sees "the emptiness" (58) of it all, and even gives some credit to her "her mother's staunch Christianity" and "the missionaries moral code" (65). Given the complexity of the situation, Mary's voice here is mythic--the universal scream of a rebellious teenager of any color; however illogical, it seems to make perfect sense. It's as if she become a kind of Indian trickster.6

For Mary, what comes through this morass more than anything is a new insight into women, which surfaces in Rapid City, for her "the most racist town" (48) in America, but extends as far as Seattle. Mary speaks, not only of "wasicums," especially the "honkies," whose desire to dominate women is age-old, but "skins" who talk big about "Grandmother Earth," and "White Buffalo Woman" (66), but misuse their power as warriors. Mary was "forcibly raped" at 15, so for her "the feast" surrounding menstruation, so powerful in the old days, "is gone" (67) and with it the dignity of women. Mary uses several examples of the
brutalization of women, including her sister-in-law Delphine, "beaten to death by a drunken tribal policeman" (48). More than anything else at this stage, it is the rage related to her sex that defines her voice as it gives power to her writing.

In contrast to most people's change of directions in life, Mary's was not religious, but political. She found AIM (American Indian Movement), in fact, she gave it its name (76). After this she "stopped drinking" (76), though in another place she tells us she got "sick" (45). What she did was to get involved in something larger than herself. She began to think seriously about Indian things she missed in life, and traveled to Washington to protest, where in Russell Means words, they sent up "a helluva smoke signal" (91). As one critic notes, AIM filled a "political vacuum," (Skillman), and Mary Brave Bird was there. She describes it as "Ghost Dance fever" (73) for her people and an "earthquake" (74) inside herself. Of this experience Mary says, "The Blacks . . . want in (American society). We Indians want out" (77),7 and it is in such short, pithy lines that Mary's written voice emerges as an integral and memorable part of the movement that she made her life.

Two aspects of her involvement with AIM are worth noting, for they may be contradictory. One is that she meets Leonard Crow Dog, who will become her teacher and husband, and to whom she will take a subservient role, calling him "uncle" (170). The other is that she starts to articulate the needs of women, for example of sister Barb, who is forcibly sterilized by the BIA (79). She sees the need to stand up, like Martha Grass, who proudly gives the finger to the Interior Secretary in Washington (90). And she tells stories, like that of Lizzy Fast Horse, who climbs Mount Rushmore and reclaims the Black Hills for the Indians. One part of Mary's voice is that she is a storyteller,8 something indigenous to her people, and more and more she uses that talent to champion the role of women. In the words of an old Cheyenne proverb: "A nation is not dead until the hearts of its women are on the ground" (80).

At this point Mary's story becomes cyclic, or ceremonial, rather than linear, focusing on the spiritual, as if the Sioux needed a new depth going into Wounded Knee. "Crying for a
Dream” is really Mary’s lecture on the importance of peyote to Indian “heritage” (96), to the Native American Church,9 “the religion of the poorest of the poor, conquered, and despoiled” (99), but especially to herself. There may be two sides to the peyote controversy,10 but for Mary Brave Bird, it is the key to becoming a full-blood, not just a yeska, “a half-breed”11 (93). It is also the source of dreams, she says, which make me “understand myself and the world around me” (100). Because Mary’s role is now more public, she looks at peyote as the equivalent of the Christian “sacrament” (107) and she rejoices in a legal suit which establishes Native “Freedom of religion” (107). Indeed, this woman is finding a new avenue for her gifts.

Mary also goes back to criticize her mother once again for making her the opposite of an apple—"white outside and red inside” (94), and is somehow able to recall a peyote meeting with her full-blooded grandfather Fools Bull, after which like Sitting Bull himself she dreams of “white soldiers riding into camp,” but this time it is the women and children, particularly an old woman singing, who get killed (97). Now as an adult at a peyote ceremony, she hears a voice from the drum telling her “Peyote will give you a voice,” and she begins to sing, “the first woman to sing during meetings” (101). Other things then give her strength, as a visit with Leonard to the southwest, the source of peyote, where she learns of “the great role” (106) of Pueblo women, and she laughs at herself crossing the Mexican border where she get “all peyoted up” when it isn’t necessary (106). “I sure was in the power” (110), she says. For Mary, peyote now means the ability “to sing” in a deeper and more public way, and that is her new power, her new spiritual voice.

Not seeing herself as a “radical” or “revolutionary,” Mary’s view of the 1973 Siege is not military, but philosophical. She roots the cause in “housing conditions . . . discrimination and police brutality” (116) against which AIM was protesting, and then she highlights “the drunken, degrading, humiliating poverty” (112) by contrasting it with the wealth she later experienced out East, including a “Persian rug” she got on “special sale at Macy’s.” Politically, she cites the Reorganization Act of 1974,12 which destroyed traditional
self-government and spawned the BIA--the “puppet regimes” like that of Dickey Wilson and his “goons” (112), who maimed and killed at will. More immediately, with the acquittal of the murderer of Wesley Bad Heart Bull, “all hell broke loose” (119). In the fighting Wesley’s mother is “clubbed” and his wife imprisoned for rioting (121). The siege lasted seventy-one days, two Indians were killed, one trooper on the other side. And though the men were “overprotective” (137), Mary claims the women “became stronger,” manning bunkers, shouting messages through megaphones, holding off marshals during a firefight (137).

Far more important for her than the details of Wounded Knee is the double-edged way she dramatizes it. She speaks of the death of her friend, Annie Mae, who “got close to Leonard Peltier” (191). For this reason after the siege she is captured in “an Omaha Beach type of assault” (195) and later “found dead . . . raped . . . a bullet hold in her head . . . hands cut off” (197-8) and later thrown into her coffin. Mary calls Annie Mae a “Sun Dancer” who vows to “undergo pain . . . so the people may live” (198). Juxtaposed with this death is the birth of Mary’s son during the siege. Left pregnant by a boy she loved but who was unfit to be a husband or father (116), she now delivers Pedro “inside a trailer house.” During the pains she wishes for a father, but is “lucky to have such devoted women friends standing by” (162). Pedro in Spanish means “rock,” but “Tunka, the rock” (202) is also one of the oldest of Sioux gods. For the Lakota, what is solid is the natural cycle of death and life,13 and in Annie Mae and Pedro she captures the meaning of the siege in a way the feds, try as they may, cannot bulldoze away (169).

After Wounded Knee Mary’s voice changes dramatically. Leonard Crow Dog pushes her to marry him. As much as she admires the man, she resists, says she’s “not ready” (171), but then she moves in. Both families oppose the union, hers because her mother’s Catholic, his because she’s not a full-blood, doesn’t even know the language. She fights “day by day to be accepted” by the Crow Dogs with their “legend” and “history” (176), while the Fools Bulls have none. She does break through the “buckskin curtain,” but after coming into his tipi, she discovers the “reality” is different from the “myth” (183). She can’t cook, and
yet has to feed this popular medicine man, together with all his friends, who come in droves and stay forever. “It can be hell on a woman to be married to such a holy one” (176) she says. Then she breaks down, gets “sick.” She finally revives through “peyote” (184), but she has changed. One critic claims her marriage “strengthened her own feeling of identity with her people” (Rosser), but that is questionable. She is a broken woman, a kind of slave, not a singer, dreamer, mythologizer. At best she is a survivor, but temporarily her public voice is gone.

In “The Ghost Dance,” a chapter following the siege but preceding their marriage, Mary in a strong voice praises Leonard, because he revived this famous ceremony which dates back to 1890. It is a salute to him and the people: the nation’s hoop is “mended” (155). But after their marriage that voice seems to disappear. She includes a chapter on ceremonies, “Cante Ishta--The Eye of the Heart,” which is the way (says Leonard) one must enter into “the sweat bath, the vision quest, the yuwipi, the making of relatives, the soul keeping” (200). Mary is “enraptured by Leonard’s tremendous power--raw power” (200), but these ceremonies are new to her, and she sees some she didn’t even know existed. Unlike Leonard, she feels engulfed by “white-man intellectualism” (201). Though “reflective” and “non-defensive” (Skillman), Mary’s voice is not the spiritual power it once was. She is more reserved, hesitant.

Always conscious of the power of women, and as a kind of antidote to Leonard’s power, she introduces Bessie Good Road, a medicine women, who is able to teach him; he listens and then teaches his wife “how to listen” (202). She tries to enter into the sweat bath, where she eventually feels “newly born” (205). But rituals are difficult for her, and for the most part she merely summarizes them. In the process she recalls other experiences, like a sweat she once experienced in L.A. where the heat was unbearable. “I thought I would die,” she says, and, “Never thereafter would I eat lobsters, knowing what those poor creatures have to go through.” (205). This is a different kind of humor for Mary Crow Dog, a
"sharp wit" (Ms.) she uses to survive. She wants to be totally Indian, but the vehicle is not yet hers.

In the final two chapters a new Mary Crow Dog emerges. Because of his closeness to Leonard Peltier, Leonard Crow Dog is captured with Annie Mae in the same Omaha Beach kind of assault (220) and imprisoned in the East. He remains a "moral power" (222) and gains "the respect and affection of the prisoners" (235), but in his absence Mary’s life changes again. She travels to new places, meets new people, deals with lawyers, newspapermen, organization heads, composes leaflets and tapes (234), and becomes a "good speaker" (226). She also makes new friends, including Richard and Jean Erdoes, and learns to like whites who are sympathetic to the Indian cause. Leonard breaks down in prison and the old Crow Dog House is burned (1976); when he’s finally released, it is a "bittersweet homecoming" (237) but Leonard has become "a symbol" of "justifiable Indian claims" (241). Mary is given a new name, Ohitika Win, "Brave Woman" (240), but she is more than brave, she is a new woman in a way few, even of her own, recognize.

The final chapter, "Ho Uway Tinkte--My Voice You Shall Hear" betrays that fact. Though Leonard is more tolerant, he has a hard time accepting "changes in thinking . . . during his absence" (249). Mary is no longer "an uncritical admirer of our warriors" (244), many of whom beat their wives and becomes monsters through drink. Leonard is disturbed by women who want to take part in the Sun Dance, even have their own, and he "freaks out" at the thought of a lesbian Sun Dance. In this context Mary, no longer the reticent learner, begins to elaborate on several Sioux legends of Creation, where "woman came first" (246). This is a new type of woman’s story and she uses it personally and politically. In the end she takes part in a Sun Dance of her own, becoming "wholly Indian" (260). This is her own symbolic act, for it comes from the inside, though it revives an Indian tradition, where women put things back tougher once they are broken (McKenna).

The voice of Mary Crow Dog at the end of her story is ambiguous. Not only has she disregarded the white background of her childhood, she has moved away from her husband and
her people, putting herself in a tenuous position.¹⁶ She is a “brave bird,” not just because she suffered on Leonard’s behalf, for she believes in his spirit and his cause, but because she is something he can’t totally be, a champion of women, wherever they are. Hence, the importance of her giving birth at the center of the biography, for through it she tries to refocus the importance of her sex, lost in society, Indian and white. For the same reason she includes women throughout her story, especially Annie Mae, for she wants us to know that they are always there, no matter how callously people have treated them, and she is their voice. In the end, it’s a voice that is mixed—masculine and feminine, strong and weak, angry and reflective, sure of itself and hesitant, traditional and explosive. It is the voice of an emerging writer, powerful but still searching for a dream.
NOTES

1 Indian space and time are cyclic, meaning all points on a sphere are of equal value or significance (Allen 7), and Crow Dog seems to structure her overall work this way, even though she begins in a linear way.

2 The autobiography, according to Kathleen Sands, best demonstrates “the transition from traditional oral literature to contemporary written literature (62).

3 Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions, is another example of a caustic style done in collaboration with Richard Erdoes, and examples used by Mary Crow Dog, such as that of Lizzy Fast Horse, remind us of essays like “Sitting on Top of Teddy Roosevelt’s Head” in Lame Deer’s collection.

4 Freud saw animals, including the horse, as an unconscious symbol of great energy, including sexual (see page 141).

5 The turtle in Indian mythology is noted for its strength, even supporting Earth at the time of Creation (Benton-Banai 33). Mary’s remembering this aunt here is curious, not only because it comes out of her childhood, but because the image applies equally to Mary herself.

6 Velie say the trickster in Indian literature is “amoral and has strong appetites, particularly for food and sex; he is footloose, irresponsible and callous, but somehow almost always sympathetic if not lovable” (122). Jung adds that the trickster as a component of personality has a therapeutic effect” (Radin 207).

7 In God is Red Vine Deloria discusses the involvement of Blacks and Indian Americans in the Civil Rights Movement (46-50).

8 Allen points out that stories are really sacred or ceremonial and therefore have a special power (19). Mary Crow Dog makes use of that power by including stories periodically in her narrative.

9 The Church of which Mary speaks seems quite different from Emerson Spider’s in “The Native American Church of Jesus Christ” where he sees a mixture of Native and Christian beliefs and practices (189-209).

10 Spider discusses the use of “dope” as distinct from peyote as a sacred substance (197). John Lame Deer also addresses the difference between the use and misuse of peyote (50-54).

11 Velie treats mixed-bloods in his analysis of the fiction of Gerald Vizenor. He says that “half-blood” in American English connotes “bastardy” (138); maybe that’s why Mary Crow Dog moves away from being identified as a yeska or half-breed.

12 Some authors, like Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, see the Reorganization Act of 1974 as a positive act for American Indians (see Moyers’ Interview).

13 This is another example of Mary’s viewing space and time as cyclic rather than linear.

14 Lewis gives a full explanation of the healing nature of the yuwipi in “The Contemporary Yuwipi” (173-87).

15 Arthur Amiotte explains the nature of a person’s four souls relative to the sun dance, and how the sun dance is “a transformation” whereby the dancer “realizes the wholeness and unity of all things” (86-9). Such a background is helpful in understanding the change Mary envisions at the end of her biography.

16 Beatrice Medicine in “Indian Women and the Renaissance of Traditional Religion” would probably consider Mary Crow Dog, because she was a member of AIM and a radical critic of white society, including Christianity, a "self-styled' medicine woman" (164).
Works Cited


McKenna, Megan. "This woman's heart is not on the ground." *National Catholic Reporter*. 1 March, 1991: 17.


