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# Review Essay: "Indians Are Us?: Culture and Genocide in Native North America" by ME Monroe

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## REVIEW ESSAY

BY JOHN LA VELLE

WARD CHURCHILL. *INDIANS ARE US?: CULTURE AND GENOCIDE IN NATIVE NORTH AMERICA*. MONROE, ME: COMMON COURAGE PRESS, 1994. 381 PP., NOTES, INDEX. \$14.95 PAPER.

*Indians Are Us?* is a collection of commentaries on American Indian political and social affairs, written in the truculent tone that readers have come to expect from writer Ward Churchill. Like its predecessors, *Fantasies of the Master Race* and *Struggle for the Land*, this latest Churchill project consists largely of polemical pieces hastily compiled from obscure leftist publications.

Through the course of all his writings, Churchill gradually has emerged as a spokesman of sorts for those persons derisively referred to as Indian "wannabees"—individuals with no American Indian ancestry or tribal affiliation who nonetheless hold themselves out to the public as "Indians" by aggressively inserting themselves into the political affairs of real Indian people. Churchill's appeal among the "wannabees" lies both in the boldness with which he expresses contempt for Indian tribes, and in the scholarly facade he gives his anti-tribal propositions; indeed, many Churchill fans appear to have been won over by the mere fact that Churchill's books contain an abundance of endnotes. By researching those copious endnotes, however, the discerning reader will discover that, notwithstanding all the provocative sound and fury rumbling through his essays, Churchill's analysis overall is sorely lacking in historical/factual veracity and scholarly integrity.

In *Indians Are Us?* this problem is best illustrated in Churchill's recurring denunciations of the right of Indian tribes to determine their own members. Tribal self-determination is, of course, an inherent attribute of tribal sovereignty, cherished and fiercely guarded by Indian people against all efforts to deprive tribes of this fundamental right. What is intriguing about Churchill's assault on tribal self-determination is that Churchill launches his attack, ironically, under the guise of championing Indian rights, invoking, in the process, an altogether remarkable revisionist depiction of the history of relations between Indian tribes and the United States government. Thus, in his essay "Nobody's Pet Poodle," Churchill characterizes Indian tribes in

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the following disparaging manner:

These entities' membership rolls originated in the prevailing federal racial criteria of the late 19th century. The initial U.S. motive in quantifying the number of Indians by blood was to minimize the number of land parcels it would have to assign native people under provision of the 1887 Dawes Act....Tribal rolls have typically been maintained in this reductionist fashion ever since.... [p. 92]

This peculiar wholesale condemning of Indian tribes by reference to the universally hated 1887 General Allotment Act (or Dawes Act)—assigning blame, as it were, to the victims of nineteenth century federal Indian policy—derives from Churchill's insistence that the General Allotment Act imposed an eligibility "standard" of "one-half or more degree of Indian blood" (p. 62) on Indians seeking land parcels under the Act. According to Churchill, this insidious "standard" was then imitated by tribes, in puppet-like fashion, in formal enrollment procedures "as a matter of U.S. policy implementation" (p. 333). And so, according to Churchill, Indian tribes today deserve to be violently opposed for implementing tribal citizenship standards that, in Churchill's scheme, are nothing more than a mirror-image of the oppressive General Allotment Act's "formal eugenics code" (p. 333).

The main flaw in this federal/tribal conspiracy theory is that it rests on—and propagates—demonstrably false information concerning the contents and impact of the General Allotment Act. Contrary to Churchill's claims, the General Allotment Act did not require Indians to be "one-half or more degree of Indian blood" in order to be eligible for land allotments. Churchill's asserted General Allotment Act "standard" does not exist anywhere in the text of the Act. This, in turn, explains why Churchill never once provides a citation to any provision of the General Allotment Act (25 U.S.C. § 331 et seq.) wherein that dubious "standard" can be found.

While the General Allotment Act itself simply does not define "Indians" (i.e., those whom the Act renders "eligible" for land allotments), a provision of the Code of Federal Regulations implementing the Act specifies that such eligibility depends on whether the applicant is a recognized member of an Indian tribe or is entitled to be so recognized.

Such qualifications may be shown by the laws and usages of the tribe. [C.F.R. § 2531.1(a)] Thus, the General Allotment Act's "standard" is not the "formal eugenics code" asserted by Ward Churchill. Rather, that Act—like nearly all federal legislation in both historic and modern times—defers to membership in an Indian tribe as the core criterion for triggering the law's applicability to individuals.

As disturbing as Churchill's use of invented historical information to cast aspersions on Indian tribes plainly is, his additional attempts to "validate" this false propaganda by misrepresenting the views of fellow writers

is even more disconcerting. In attempting to prop up his insupportable claims about the nonexistent "eugenics code" of the General Allotment Act, Churchill invokes two sentences from historian Patricia Nelson Limerick's acclaimed book *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. Churchill writes:

As the noted western historian, Patricia Nelson Limerick, has observed: "Set the blood-quantum at one-quarter, hold to it as a rigid definition of Indianness, let intermarriage proceed...and eventually Indians will be defined out of existence. When that happens, the federal government will finally be freed from its persistent 'Indian problem.'" [p. 42]

Churchill then interjects:

Ultimately, there is precious little difference, other than matters of style, between this and what was once called the "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem." [p. 42]

By placing the quotation from Patricia Nelson Limerick in the midst of his incendiary pronouncements about the "genocidal potential" of the "Indian identification criteria" purportedly contained in the General Allotment Act (and allegedly mimicked by tribes), Churchill makes it appear as though Limerick herself is likewise bemoaning this asserted federal "usurpation" of tribal enrollment under the 1887 legislation.

In reality, however, Limerick is not commenting on the General Allotment Act at all. Rather, she is describing a 1986 proposal of the Reagan Administration to reduce overall federal spending by restricting eligibility for Indian Health Service benefits to Indian tribal members with "at least one-quarter Indian blood" (Limerick, p. 338). As Limerick explains in the very paragraph from which Churchill extracts the two quoted sentences, tribal leaders universally opposed and successfully rebuffed the Reagan proposal precisely because it "threatened to crack the bedrock of tribal self-determination" by making "Indianness a racial definition rather than a category of political nationality" (Limerick, p. 338).

Obviously, these remarks would make no sense at all if Limerick herself were to maintain—as Churchill insinuates she does—that this "bedrock of tribal sovereignty" had been successfully "cracked," and "Indianness" successfully subverted, a full century earlier, through tribes' wholesale adoption of the 1887 General Allotment Act's dreaded "eugenics formulation." Thus, Churchill's out-of-context manipulation of the quotation from Patricia Nelson Limerick can be viewed as nothing other than a deliberate attempt to mislead his readers.

Equally astonishing is Churchill's misrepresentation of Russell

Thornton's painstaking scholarship. Once again, to artificially validate his own hostility toward tribal membership procedures, Churchill (p. 93) asserts the following: "Cherokee demographer Russell Thornton estimates that, given continued imposition of purely racial definitions, Native America as a whole will have disappeared by the year 2080." Churchill then cites to nine pages from Thornton's definitive *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: A Population History Since 1492*.

Nowhere in those nine pages, however, does Russell Thornton make an assertion even remotely resembling the grim, sensational forecast that Churchill attributes to him. In fact, Thornton is decidedly optimistic about the future of Indian tribes throughout the chapter containing those nine pages. The chapter begins, "Since around the turn of the twentieth century American Indians have made a remarkable population recovery as a result of their greatly improved demographic situation" (Thornton, p. 159). Under a heading entitled "A Look to the Future," Thornton points out that "American Indians are thriving today demographically" (Thornton, p. 182). Thornton continues:

If this rate of growth from 1970 to 1980 continues to the year 2000, the size of the American Indian population then will surpass 4 million....But, it will likely not continue....One projection is that the American Indian population will not increase to around 4 million until the year 2020... It is also projected, however, that the American Indian population will increase to almost 16 million by the year 2080.... [Thornton, p. 182]

Clearly, Russell Thornton's comments concerning various estimates of the future population of American Indians all point to an anticipated increase in that population in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, Ward Churchill, for his own purposes, cites Russell Thornton as authority for an antithetical proposition never put forward by Thornton and implicitly repudiated, in fact, in Thornton's text—i.e., that the American Indian population is in danger of suffering a dramatic decrease in the twenty-first century. A more perverse rendering of the plain meaning of an author's text would be difficult to imagine.

There is no escaping the conclusion that in *Indians Are Us?* Ward Churchill misrepresents the writings of both Russell Thornton and Patricia Nelson Limerick in order to create a false appearance that these acclaimed scholars corroborate and partake of Churchill's hostility toward Indian tribes. In reality, neither Thornton nor Limerick has ever maintained a disrespectful attitude toward Indian tribes in general or toward the enrollment methods employed by tribes in particular. Indeed, the anti-tribal posturing that Churchill cunningly assigns to Thornton and Limerick is decisively negated by both authors in those very same passages, no less, to which Churchill cites!

Numerous other problems plague Ward Churchill's treatment of historical and political issues in *Indians Are Us?*—so many problems, in fact, that readers would be well advised to independently investigate the veracity of any inflammatory/defamatory assertion made by Churchill before relying on it or repeating it. Several red flags can be briefly noted:

1. In the book's "Acknowledgments," Churchill engages in scurrilous name-calling of prominent, widely respected Indian leaders. Among the Indian rights advocates and grassroots community organizers mocked and maligned by Churchill are U.S. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Washington lobbyist Suzan Shown Harjo, and American Indian Movement leaders Vernon Bellecourt, Carole Standing Elk, and Fern Mathias.
2. In "Let's Spread the 'Fun' Around," Churchill unleashes a torrent of pointedly offensive racist, sexist, and ethnically derogatory epithets ("Niggers," "Spics," "Kikes," etc.), on the pretense of encouraging non-Indians to be sensitive to Indian people's objections to sports teams' exploitation of Indian identity and culture.
3. In "Nobody's Pet Poodle," Churchill calumniates Indian rights advocates who successfully lobbied Congress to enact the 1990 Indian Arts and Crafts Act, a piece of anti-fraud legislation widely praised by Indian leaders and detested by Churchill. In the course of his tirade, Churchill compares Indians to dogs, suggesting that like poodles and Afghan hounds, tribal members "also sport *their* pedigree papers" (p. 90, emphasis in original).
4. In "Another Dry White Season" and "P is for Plagiarism," Churchill launches outlandish raids on the reputations of writers Jerry Mander and Jack Weatherford, both of them respected scholars of high integrity who are among the strongest and most dependable of Indian people's non-Indian supporters. Sideswipes at other writers who support Indian causes are scattered throughout the book.

A few other noteworthy problems in *Indians Are Us?* require more in-depth attention. One such problem is Churchill's reprinting of distorted versions of the "Declaration of War Against Exploiters of Lakota Spirituality" and the "Alert Concerning the Abuse and Exploitation of Lakota Sacred Traditions." In their original forms, the "Declaration of War" and the "Alert" are important documents in the grassroots campaign of Indian people to stop the exploitation of Indian spirituality and culture; these documents were developed by the nonprofit organization Center for the SPIRIT (Support and Protection of Indian Religions and Indigenous Traditions) on behalf of and in consultation with a coalition of traditional Lakota spiritual leaders and

community advocates from the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. As co-founder and executive director of Center for the SPIRIT, I personally assumed the responsibility of drafting in their entirety both of the "Declaration of War" and the "Alert," under the guidance and direction of the traditional Lakota coalition from Pine Ridge.

The original "Declaration of War" was adopted unanimously as a resolution by both the National Congress of American Indians, representing more than one hundred fifty Indian nations, and by the Lakota Summit, representing all forty Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota nations and bands in the United States and Canada. Thus, as originally conceived, drafted, and adopted, the "Declaration of War" articulates the overwhelming consensus of Indian tribes that the commercial abuse and exploitation of Lakota ceremonies by non-Indians no longer will be tolerated.

Ward Churchill neither requested nor was granted Center for the SPIRIT's permission to reprint either the "Declaration of War" or the "Alert." However, that considerable impropriety alone pales by comparison with a much more serious transgression, namely, Churchill's decision to strategically alter the "Declaration of War," distorting it to conform to his own anti-tribal bias.

Thus, the original "Declaration of War" expresses indignation toward non-Indians who have formed "*imitation* 'tribes'" (emphasis added) like the so-called "Bear Tribe" and the "Deer Tribe Metis Medicine Society," whose non-Indian "members" systematically exploit the spiritual traditions of Indian tribes for profit; Churchill's version of the resolution, on the other hand, omits the crucial word "imitation," making it appear as though the resolution were expressing resentment toward Indian tribes themselves, as such. Likewise, Churchill's version omits an entire "whereas" provision of the true resolution, wherein emphasis had been placed on the fact that the exploitation of Lakota traditions "has reached epidemic proportions in urban areas throughout the country." Presumably, this provision was deleted because it detracted from the false inference advanced by Churchill's version of the resolution, viz., that the exploitation of Lakota traditions emanates primarily from Indian tribes themselves, as such.

In short, Churchill's ersatz version of the "Declaration of War" is a strategically manipulated and subtly distorted device, which could be used to undermine rather than support Indian tribes in their efforts to safeguard their sacred traditions and culture.

Yet another noteworthy problem in *Indians Are Us?* is Churchill's harangue in "Naming Our Destiny" against popular use of the word "tribe." "[T]o be addressed as 'tribal,'" Churchill insists, "is to be demeaned in a most extraordinarily vicious way" (p. 295). The persuasiveness of Churchill's case against the word "tribe" is decisively undercut, however, by Churchill's reliance on his contrived, indefensible position concerning the nonexistent "eugenics code" of the 1887 General Allotment Act, as critiqued previously

in this essay. And so, Churchill's argument that "the preoccupation with 'blood lines' connoted by the term 'tribe'" (p. 296) is rooted in "a system of identifying Indians in accordance with a formal eugenics code dubbed 'blood quantum' which is still in effect at the present time" (p. 333) is as fallacious and unavailing as the tribal sovereignty-bashing conspiracy theory on which that argument entirely depends.

In a section of "Naming Our Destiny" entitled "'Tribes' versus 'Peoples,'" Churchill endeavors further to rationalize his antipathy for the word "tribe" by invoking "the definitive *Oxford English Dictionary*," which in one obscure definition, according to Churchill, defines "tribe" as a group in the classification of plants, animals, etc., used as superior and sometimes inferior to a family; also, loosely, any group or series of animals. [p. 294] Churchill then excerpts definitions for the word "people" from the Oxford dictionary and, curiously, from a 1949 edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, to decree that the word "people" in all ways is preferable to the word "tribe," since "tribe" embodies an "expressly animalistic emphasis. . . . It follows that when indigenous peoples are passed off as tribes . . . they are effectively cast as being subhuman" (p. 298).

Of course, Churchill never explains why he so fervently insists on vesting in English dictionaries the ironclad authority to dispose of an issue of self-naming that for Indian people is a matter exclusively for the tribes themselves to decide. Be that as it may, it is instructive to examine a few of the wobbles in the eccentric spin of Churchill's treatment of language.

First, Churchill's disdain for the word "tribe," by his own avowed reasoning, should extend with equal force to the word "family," since each of these terms may denote a general category in the classification of plants, animals, and other living organisms, within the science of taxonomy. Likewise, since the word "community" may denote any interacting population of life forms (human and/or nonhuman) in the language of scientific ecology, Churchill logically should be just as disgusted by any reference to human beings *per se* as constituting a "community." Clearly, if a person actually were to be repulsed and enraged whenever words like "family," "community" and "tribe" were used in ordinary conversation—and merely because these terms, like most words, have multiple, divergent meanings—then such a person would be in need of psychological treatment for what would amount to a debilitating disorder in interpersonal communication.

Second, Churchill summons forth his sundry dictionary definitions in a noticeably lopsided manner. For instance, Churchill chooses not to divulge the fact that *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* lists a definition for the word "peoples" that has as much "animalistic emphasis" as Churchill's comparably obscure definition for the word "tribe." This omission is especially noteworthy because Churchill admits that he in fact consulted this very same dictionary—*Webster's Ninth*—in order to "cross-reference the 'old' definitions obtained [in the 1949 Webster's] with those in newer iterations of

the same dictionary, to see whether there have been changes" (pp. 332-333). According to a definition in *Webster's Ninth* suppressed by Churchill, "peoples" may be defined as "lower animals usu. of a specified kind or situation . . . 'squirrels and chipmunks: the little furry [peoples]." In addition, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* calls to mind yet another amusing "nonhuman" meaning for the word "peoples." According to this particular Webster's (not concededly referenced by Churchill), the word "peoples" may denote "supernatural beings that are thought of as similar to humans in many respects . . . 'kobolds, trolls, and such [peoples] are not to be trusted.'" Thus, it appears that Churchill's pedantic argument against the word "tribe" rests not on any objective analysis of dictionary definitions at all, but rather on a highly manipulative process of selectively disclosing those definitions that would appear consistent with Churchill's antitribal thesis, while carefully concealing those definitions that would seem to contradict that thesis. So much for the manifest silliness of competing (and, in Churchill's case, cheating) in a game of *Trivial Pursuit* with "definitive" dictionaries to ascertain by what name Indian tribes will be permitted to identify themselves.

But beyond all the tedious game-playing and semantic trickery in "Naming Our Destiny," there remains unresolved a very serious implied question: By what mechanism does an abstraction like "Indian self-determination" get transformed into real selfempowerment for Indian people?

As demonstrated in this essay, Ward Churchill expends a great deal of effort in *Indians Are Us?* espousing the counter-intuitive thesis that Indian tribes themselves are an obstacle in the struggle for Indian self-empowerment, and should be aggressively disavowed and devalued, therefore, in all political discussions bearing on Indian self-determination. Of course, the very fact that Churchill strives to "prove" his case against Indian tribes by falsifying the historical record, misstating the views of fellow scholars, issuing distorted versions of public documents, and shrewdly manipulating language is enough to dissuade any sensible reader from taking Churchill's anti-tribal propaganda seriously. Still, the goal of clarifying and affirming the integral role of Indian tribes in the dynamic of Indian selfempowerment is extremely important and challenging—much more so than is the relatively easier task of dismissing Ward Churchill's obfuscation of this profound topic.

For there can be little doubt that for most Americans, Indian tribes will always be an enigma. After all, Indian tribes are organized around distinctive values that in many ways are incompatible with and even diametrically opposed to the values that inform the political nation-states of the modern West, including, most emphatically, the United States. These unique tribal values—an emphasis on the well-being of the entire tribal community rather than the self-interest of the individual; on a nature-centered spirituality rather than an acquisitive materialism; on an ethic that treats one's homeland and the earth itself as a mysterious, living, dignified

presence rather than as a lifeless repository of exploitable resources—are what constitute the very core and substance of Indian tribes.

Tribal sovereignty, in turn, is the collective endeavor of all the members of an Indian tribe to maintain, nourish, and reinforce that fragile, living constellation of tribal values which comprises the tribe itself, rooted in a unique, spiritual relationship with the land that has been passed down from generation to generation, since time immemorial, through closely guarded tribal kinship systems. Tribal members carry on this heroic task of exercising tribal sovereignty—that is, of safeguarding the survival of the tribe itself, as such—under the most difficult of circumstances because of the enormous pressure to conform to an alien and often hostile system of values that constantly is being exerted by a dominant, non-Indian society ill-equipped to comprehend, let alone appreciate, the beauty and significance of the values inhering in Indian tribes.

Genuine self-empowerment for Indian people, therefore, is inextricably attached to the dignity accorded Indian tribes themselves as such, for real Indian self-empowerment is made manifest only when Indian tribes are granted their due respect as sovereign nations, with an inherent, inalienable right of tribal self-determination. Any attempt to dislodge the principle of Indian self-determination from the sovereignty inhering in Indian tribes as such is, in reality, an attempt to tear asunder and destroy the unique tribal values that make up the very essence of Indian people's continuing existence as Indians.

The inherent right of Indian tribes to determine their own members is, of course, the most critical factor in the process whereby Indian self-determination is transformed into Indian self-empowerment, for if non-Indians can succeed in usurping this fundamental tribal prerogative and themselves seize control of the right to ascertain who is and who is not an Indian, then by their sheer numbers these non-Indians will quickly overwhelm whatever tenuous political power real Indian people have retained in American society. In this disastrous scenario, non-Indians will rapidly supplant tribal values with their own invasive non-Indian values, in accordance with dominant societal norms permitting and even encouraging individuals to accrue political power by any artifice whatsoever—including that of opportunistically and capriciously defining themselves to be "Indians."

Just such a blueprint for disrupting Indian political affairs and disempowering Indian people would appear to underlie the architecture of anti-tribal propaganda in *Indians Are Us?*—a kind of Trojan horse wheeled to the gate of an unsuspecting American public, cleverly disguised in what Ward Churchill calls "a language of American Indian liberation" (p. 291).

In view of America's entrenched ignorance of the legal and political concerns of Indian tribes, the publication of a grossly misleading and misinforming book like *Indians Are Us?* constitutes a regrettable setback in

Indian people's struggle for social justice. There is no doubt, of course, that many of the topics ostensibly covered in Churchill's book deserve serious public attention: the trivializing of Indian identity by sports teams; the exploitation of Indian spirituality by the men's movement and the New Age movement; the propagation of degrading Indian stereotypes by the entertainment media; the targeting of Indian political activities by clandestine military operations. All these problems must be squarely confronted if grave injustices suffered by Indian people are ever to be acknowledged and remedied.

However, Indian people stand to benefit only if these momentous issues are addressed with an unsparing honesty that openly concedes the extent to which Indian tribes as sovereign nations have been and continue to be brutally defamed, demeaned, discredited, undermined, and otherwise victimized by those whose overt and/or covert political agendas necessitate the subversion and ultimate destruction of Indian tribes. With its pervasive hostility toward Indian tribes and its constant twisting of historical facts crucial to an intelligent assessment of tribes' legal and political needs, *Indians Are Us?* compounds and exacerbates what are already formidable popular misconceptions concerning Indian law, policy, and history.

The renowned scholar of Indian law Felix Cohen wisely warns us that "confusion and ignorance in fields of law are allies of despotism." As Cohen well understood, and as history abundantly testifies, there is no political arena in which confusion and ignorance take a more terrible toll than in the oppression bearing on American Indian people's five-centuries-long struggle for basic human rights. With this essential realization in mind, supporters of Indian rights should insist that any serious discussion of Indian issues be, at the very least, compassionate and respectful toward Indian tribes, as well as fundamentally truthful in recounting the brutal treatment that tribes have been forced to endure historically. By this minimum standard of integrity, *Indians Are Us?* is a bitter disappointment indeed.