

Afterword: End of the Line

This book, as you've figured out, is a collection of essays. The oldest was written in 1992, at the end of the first Bush administration; the newest (this one) is being written in the final months of the third. My obsessions haven't changed much: I continue to find buried history, pop music, failed revolution, television, and futures that never quite arrived subjects of endless interest. But the truth is, I'm not really the same guy who wrote these essays. Are you the same person you were in 1992? I hope not, especially if you're nineteen.

My career in the Indian business and in a way this book both began in 1974, in the midst of my extremely brief tenure as a college student, when I applied for an internship with the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee. The big idea that greeted me in South Dakota was that lots of Sioux people didn't care much for the United States and considered themselves a sovereign nation, and that it was possible, through legal and extralegal methods, to negotiate a new relationship based on existing treaties.

By 1993, I was giving worrisome lectures that said "many of us have lost sight of the ideals of not just the better aspects of the Indian movement of the 1970s but those of the resistance fighters of earlier generations and centuries that are the reason we are here in the first place. Today, the cutting edge of the political Indian world in North America revolves around questions of gaming, tobacco, of representation, of mascots and burial sites. (It is too perfect that the biggest single donation for the National Museum of the American Indian comes from proceeds of the Foxwoods casino.)"

Now, after yet another fifteen years, I don't know what to think. This book is called *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*, but it's a book title, folks, not to be taken literally. Of course I don't mean everything. Just Most Things. And the You really means We, as in all of Us.

In 1974, I liked the big ideas, but I mainly liked being part of the struggle, as we called it in those days. It was exciting! You never knew what would happen next. I wrote press releases about the trials, and a few years later I was assigned to the International Indian Treaty Council, the international wing of the American Indian Movement. They sent me to San Francisco to launch the *Treaty Council News*, which brought word to the Indian masses that through alliances with the African National Conference, the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Zimbabwe National Union, and other friends from distant shores, we could pressure the United States into reconsidering its policy of beating us up, throwing us in jail, and stealing our land. It sounds crazy now and was mostly crazy back then, but at the time it did seem that perhaps the American empire was receding fast. There was, for example, the military defeat in Vietnam. Watergate. Countries in Africa were being liberated practically every few weeks. Our friends in the Puerto Rican Socialist Party seemed poised to take over the island through the ballot box, and, even more amazing to me, in 1974 we filled Madison Square Garden with demands for Puerto Rican independence and Lakota sovereignty. If tens of thousands of New Yorkers were rallying for the Indian movement, who knows how many more, around the country and around the world, might be persuaded to join us?

The Treaty Council (or actually, the white lawyers we hired) wrote smart papers about international law and legal precedents, about how the Navajo Nation is larger than loads of countries in the United Nations, about how a reborn Great Sioux Nation

would be a friendly asset to its American neighbors, about how white farmers would be compensated or maybe even stay there and become citizens.

Except when I was reenrolling in school or living in my parents' house in Shaker Heights and working at a restaurant, I was part of AIM for about five years. I was even listed as a member of AIM's Central Committee (yes, my gang were self-identified leftists), but every month from the summer of 1974 until I left in 1979, AIM became more dysfunctional and irrelevant.

I moved to New York, cut my hair, and basically retired from Indian activism. What was left of AIM turned into a pitch-perfect version of the U.S. sectarian left, with competing factions and vicious infighting. Nobody cared, including me. As I would remember years later in the essay "All the Rage" (published for the NMAI exhibition *New Tribe New York: The Urban Vision Quest*), using the obligatory Jay McInerney second-person voice all of us were legally required to use in the 1980s: "You are moving to New York because your little crowd that used to run AIM no longer does, and you always felt like a tourist in San Francisco anyway. You're moving to New York because it's the capital of the planet, because your comrades are there, because it's the first choice of political exiles the world over. And because in New York, you can be anonymous."

Yeah, so thank you, Jesus, for New York. Here insert misty memories of thrilling bands at thrilling clubs, legends now but back then within the reach of nearly anyone. A right-wing governor of California had become president of the United States, but New York felt like rebel territory. Elvis Costello and the Clash were at the peak of their careers, and releasing brilliant new records what seemed like every few months. In 1987 I wrote my first essay for an art exhibition, one called *We the People* organized by Jean

Fisher at Artist Space. Although that essay is too lame to include here, it was liberating to write about Indian space without having to advance organizational agendas.

I loved New York but realized that for me, living in New York and writing were both full-time jobs, so in 1991, on the eve of the first Iraqi war, I chose writing and moved to my family's empty vacation home in central Virginia. It was perfect: in the morning I would drink coffee and read the Washington Post and watch herons spear fish in the artificial lake a dozen yards from my front door. But really, who can write in such an environment? So, bored with country life, I moved to Washington a few years later. By now I had a book contract, and in 1996 Robert Warrior and I authored *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*.

I felt out of touch during the Columbus Quincentennial, hated Dances with Wolves, and felt estranged from the triumphalism within the U.S. Indian world during those years. So I spent the Clinton administration writing *Hurricane* and exhibition catalogue essays about dissident artists. I also began curating shows. In Washington, I found paid employment as an office temp and watched suspiciously as something called the National Museum of the American Indian came to life, first in New York, and then in Washington.

The NMAI always struck me as a bad idea, but a bad idea whose time had come. When I was rummaging through my papers to put together this book, I came across something I wrote about the museum in 1993, when I thought I was too good to work at the museum. Back then, I was at least smart enough to realize that the museum would have an impact on all of us; I knew that “for artists and intellectuals today, many of whom came of age in the wake of the Indian movement of the 1970s, we are affected by the new museum and all it represents, both literally (what Indian artist would not love

to have their work on display at the NMAI) and metaphorically.” Even then, from my high horse, I knew that the museum was a place of great contradiction:

We work and think in this contested and unresolved space, somewhere in between a disreputable past and a glittering future.

The Indian movement genuinely shocked the ruling class partly because it was so completely unexpected. We had, in those days, a capacity that I fear we have lost, the capacity to surprise. In the early 1960s, the popular image of Indians, an image we internalized to a large degree, was that of a passive, docile people. The style, tactics and rhetoric of the militants turned those images upside down.

I believe one of our greatest traditions is precisely this. In earlier eras, Indians were suppose[d] to surrender; instead we fought. We were supposed to die off from war and starvation and disease; instead we survived. We were suppose[d] to assimilate; instead we kept our traditions and languages. We were supposed to leave reservations for cities; instead we live in cities, towns and reservations.

Our designated place today is similarly neat and confined. We are keepers of the earth, of the zoos, of the skies and stars and plants and animals and insects. We are spiritual teachers, wise elders, environmentalists par excellence. We are wonderful artists and gifted storytellers. For some the new museum will be a proud symbol of our continued sovereignty; for others proof that we are Americans after all. It is a debate that is far from over.

The National Museum of the American Indian, I have little doubt, will be a beautiful place full of gorgeous art. I wish it well. At every turn it will endeavor to show us as a people still here, still changing, not frozen in the past but bravely marching into a new, Indian future of our own making.

Still, I can't help thinking about the symbolism of the NMAI rising on the last piece of open ground on the Mall. Indians are the last piece in the puzzle. It's as if, finally, with great relief, the country has figured out what to do with us, as if our place and role in the Nation [have] at last been decided and reconciled and determined. (Art. Culture. Beadwork.)

For some artists, however, we are a riddle that can never be solved, and these new constructions present an exhilarating challenge to turn it all upside down again. If some of us are shopping for designer gowns and black ties, others, I think, see the moment as a once in a lifetime opportunity for the unexpected, the daring, the dangerous. They also know the best parties are always in the kitchen, on the street, way downtown or way uptown.

See you in the after hours club.

The truth is, I always wanted to work there, even when I denounced it as a sellout enterprise. I wanted to work there because I was tired of being broke, but also for the very reason that it was such a splendidly goofy idea, I was sure it offered extraordinary possibilities. For what, I wasn't exactly sure.

In August 2001, my secret dream came true. On a humid summer afternoon I reported to the Smithsonian for processing as a new federal employee, shopped for designer neckties at Union Station, and checked out the vast hole in the ground between the Air and Space Museum and the Capitol.

The first three years I was assigned to the permanent history exhibit. Since 2004, I have worked mostly on contemporary art projects. When people ask me what it's like, I usually say, "Best and worst job ever." Although I've written at length elsewhere about

the NMAI project, I have chosen not to include those essays here. The reason is simple: I'm too close to the subject, and feel that I don't have enough perspective.

However, despite my best efforts, irony lives, and I'm not oblivious to the fact that my career in the Indian business began with AIM and I am now a curator for the Smithsonian: a government employee. People ask me how that feels, and I tell them that working for AIM in the 1970s and for NMAI in the 2000s has more in common than you might imagine.

Consider: Scrambled, their acronyms differ by a single letter. The histories of both are filled with controversy and often-negative newspaper articles. AIM said it was a movement and not an organization, though it had officers and chapters and budgets. NMAI says it is a center of living cultures, not a museum, though the letter M stands for museum and it has exhibitions and collections. With AIM, white lawyers and leftists raised money and did their best to keep people out of jail. Most NMAI staff are white, particularly at middle and senior management levels. Both see themselves as one of a kind, original, like no other, and are comfortable playing by their own rules. Actually, come to think of it, both are one of a kind, original, like no other, and comfortable playing by their own rules.

NMAI and AIM really, really mean well. In their own hearts and minds they are on the side of the angels. Yes, each organization has failed more than it has succeeded. How could it not? The shambolic movement of the 1970s and the twenty-first-century museum that denies it's any such thing have been fabulous laboratories of imagination and daring. I owe them more than I can ever repay.

And yet, U.S. history teaches us that some of the most catastrophic forces visited upon Indians—boarding schools, allotment, relocation—were created by our most

enlightened and progressive friends. Good intentions aren't enough; our circumstances require more critical thinking and less passion, guilt, and victimization.

I read once that Charles Dickens sometimes had his characters do things in his novels that Dickens himself would later do in real life, for example, buy a house in a certain neighborhood in London. I can see exactly how this would happen. Dickens is thinking over breakfast, maybe I should move, and he's heard good things about some place across town, and he's also writing a novel, why not have some of those people, the fictional ones, check it out? He's also thinking about all the pages he has to write that day, and combining the real estate research with the novel research looks like a pretty smart move.

These essays, written over a period of fifteen years about, well, all kinds of things, were never meant to be a book, yet through the magic of publishing the essays become chapters, and the chapters reveal themes, and there you have it. I would prefer you didn't, but it's possible to read this book as a list of complaints. I criticized the way Indian activism of the 1970s is either ignored or portrayed by Hollywood with a half-breed FBI agent as the hero, and a few years later I'm coauthoring a book called *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*. In the 1980s, I started writing about Indian artists, and soon I'm curating shows. In the 1990s, I point out all the reasons why the National Museum of the American Indian is probably a bad idea, and in any case certainly not the kind of outfit I would ever consider joining. Sure enough, some years later there's PCS, a government employee at the Indian Museum. So, here's some advice to all you cultural critics out there: be careful what you write.

That's it for volume one. Thanks for reading.

