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Research Note

A Cross-Disciplinary Note on Charles Eastman (Santee Sioux)

William Oandasan

Bo Scholer's article "Images and Counter-Images: Ohiyesa, Standing Bear and American Literature" appeared in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*. To this article Raymond Wilson has voiced objections, including a misquote from his dissertation on Charles Eastman, a misinterpretation of a passage in Eastman's *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, and errors in certain citations in Scholer's article. Indeed there are incorrectly cited passages but the responsibility for this is not so apparent, since they could be found in the author's oversight, typographical errors by his secretary or the manuscript's typographer, or the neglect of the editors, readers or proof-readers; and at a second glance the inaccuracies are not severe or misleading, though they do reduce the article's thoroughness somewhat. The objections to misinterpretation and misquotation however open the way to a brief but significant discussion on a cross-disciplinary approach to research.

Wilson asserts that Scholer is in error when writing that Eastman "states that Jesus must have been an Indian" (p. 51) because he did not state this in *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (p. 143); and Wilson also asserts he "never stated" in his dissertation, as Scholer "indicates," that Elaine Eastman conducted most of Eastman's writing. Wilson further elaborates:

I did state that she served as his editorial assistant, a fact Ohiyesa [Eastman] recognized. The original ideas

William Oandasan's poetry thesis *Round Valley Songs*, for the Master of Fine Arts degree, is scheduled for publication in 1984 by West End Press in Minneapolis, MN.

were his. Mr. Scholer makes it sound that I did not recognize this, but I certainly do. In other words, the ideas were Ohiyesa's, and his wife polished his writings for publication. Furthermore, he did not stop writing after 1921 [when the Eastmans had separated]; however, he was unable to publish anything after that date.

What Wilson writes here is essentially what is in his dissertation. The quotation selected in *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* is what Eastman reports an unnamed, older Native American man to have said, and is what Scholer should have made translucent to the readers of his article.

Scholer responds to these assertions by referring to three statements in Wilson's dissertation:

- 1) Elaine Eastman "did most of his [Eastman] writing" (p. 48);
- 2) Wilson relates from a personal interview with Dr. Herbert B. Fowler, a grandson of Eastman: ". . . his grandfather deeply resented the way Elaine would rewrite and change the meaning of his manuscripts" (footnote 55);
- 3) Eastman acknowledged her [Elaine] "devoted cooperation" in developing his writings (p. 160).

(It is worth noting that Elaine Eastman had said nothing publicly on the subject.) In his article Scholer agrees with Wilson that Elaine Eastman worked with Eastman in an editorial capacity and that the originality of his ideas were essentially preserved; Scholer also maintains (based on an interpretation of the imagery and structure of Eastman's books and on a comparison between these books and other Siouian books) that Eastman's work was written by a Sioux person, implying Mrs. Eastman did not originate the ideas. The contradiction between what Wilson claims and what Scholer responds with is not so important as what might be the reasons for these differing views.

The basis of the above contradictions is that each writer's approach to Eastman's work, in question, is correct but has not completely covered the subject matter due to the limitations of their respective methodologies. Scholer acknowledges Eastman's report of what another Native American *said* on Jesus

being an Indian [to imply that Native Americans do not stand completely outside the domain of a moral, compassionate civilization]. In this acknowledgement he also recognizes Wilson's claim of misinterpretation—to a point. But he also states that he has no way of knowing that Eastman's script is literally true, which Wilson suggests. Nevertheless, in the context of Scholer's article, whether the quotation is a "historical" fact or a "literary" technique, the quoted passage was used as an example of the "counter-images" employed by Eastman against the disparaging statements of the Christian missionaries of past times regarding the Native Americans and their civilizations. The way Scholer communicates this to the reader blurs the context in which it was written. Scholer maintains in the end that it doesn't matter who actually made the statement because it is Eastman who "wrote" it, suggesting it is a literary technique employed in countering the missionaries.

The problem of interpretation here seems to be between the literal and the figurative. One viewpoint appraises the cited quotation in the historical sense where the works of the passage are the objective representations of their subject. The other viewpoint appears literary in that it not only observes the words as representatives of their subject but that the words are also animated by their narrator, the writer. Seen at once, the passage is both a report and a report used for a purpose. This is why Wilson's statement on Mrs. Eastman's involvement in the writing of Eastman's work, Eastman's acknowledgement of her "devotion," and what Dr. Fowler was to have said on his grandfather's resentment of her involvement can be viewed as three separate historical facts; and why these statements can also be associated resulting in an unconsciously implied expression by Wilson, which is consequently left open to varied interpretations. The lesson here might be that any literary interpretation should be based on an accurate communication of the historical facts and that the historical facts are open to interpretations. What must be avoided is the limitation of the facts and their interpretation.

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