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Peer reviewed

# Unfencing the Range: History, Identity, Property, and Apocalypse in *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*

GEOFF SANBORN

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*Look, I'm a man. I exist. Take notice of my existence!*  
—Lame Deer<sup>1</sup>

In the eighteen years since the publication of John (Fire) Lame Deer's autobiography, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*, very few critics of Indian literature have responded to the old Lakota's plea.<sup>2</sup> Of these critics, only Kenneth Lincoln, who discusses *Lame Deer* at length in an essay on Indian humor, has used the book for anything more than a passing reference or brief excerpt.<sup>3</sup> This prolonged silence says a great deal about the conventional perception of the text. *Lame Deer* is a widely available and highly entertaining book; it has not been ignored because scholars do not know it exists or because it is incapable of producing a response. Most likely, it has received short shrift in the study of Indian literature because it has been considered insufficiently "literary" or insufficiently "Indian." Perhaps because academics have been unsure if *Lame Deer* is a serious artistic work or because its genre has been confused by the participation of a white coauthor, Richard Erdoes, the book has been treated as if it were the scholarly equivalent of a junkyard car—good for spare parts, but incapable of running on its own.

The best way of responding to the dismissal implicit in such a minimal critical history is to offer a reading that demonstrates

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that the book *does* run on its own, that both formally and thematically it is a serious work of literary autobiography. Formally, however chaotic it might seem to readers raised on Western literature, *Lame Deer* has a meaningful structure, based on Lakota understandings of numerology and discourse. Thematically, the book consistently explores the conflict between white and Indian conceptions of history, identity, and property; it does so not just to increase cross-cultural awareness, but to help bring on an apocalyptic triumph of the Indian way of life. Lame Deer imagines the struggle between whites and Indians as a battle between spiritual forces which, to use the language of nuclear physics, could be called fission and fusion. The white's power has derived from division, privatization, and accumulation, Lame Deer thinks, while the Indian's power depends on connection, community, and gift-giving. By repeatedly invoking the image of the fence, which whites have used in both actual and metaphorical ways to subdue the Indians, Lame Deer identifies the problem; by presenting us with Indian forms of spiritual fusion, particularly in his treatment of the Lakota pipe ceremony, he offers a solution.

Lame Deer was born around 1903 in a log cabin which he says sat "between" the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in southwestern South Dakota. He was one of the twelve children of Sally Red Blanket, a Minneconjou, and Silas Let-Them-Have-Enough, a Hunkpapa. Many of the children did not reach maturity, and others died in early adulthood, so when Sally Red Blanket died of tuberculosis in 1920, only Lame Deer, a sister, and his father were left. His father went north to his relatives on the Standing Rock Reservation, splitting his land and stock between his two children. Lame Deer, however, wanted "to raise cain, not cattle"; he sold off all his inherited property, bought rodeo clothes and a series of cars, and embarked on what he called a "find-out" (pp. 28, 45). Over the next twenty-five years, he was a cross-dressing rodeo clown, a member of the peyote church, a tribal policeman, a bootlegger, a Catholic husband (briefly), a convict, a soldier, a sign-painter, a sheepherder, and, above all, he says, a Lakota holy man. After World War II, he returned to Rosebud and "settled down to my only full-time job—being an Indian" (p. 59).

In 1967 Lame Deer, with a small group of Indians, joined Martin Luther King's peace march in New York City and met Richard

Erdoes, a white European journalist who had been trying for some time to write and sell magazine articles about Indians. Lame Deer invited Erdoes to his home in Winner, South Dakota, and they initiated a working relationship that would last for four years. Working from tapes and notebooks of their conversations, and conversations with other holy men, Erdoes and Lame Deer put together *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*, which was published by Simon and Schuster in 1972. It received only a scattering of mini-reviews and did not go into a paperback printing until 1976.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of traditional Western literary form, *Lame Deer* has little or no structural coherence. If it is read as a chronological narrative, it is an autobiography that runs quickly out of gas and turns into a repetitive potpourri of chapters about Lakota and pan-Indian beliefs. The book also resists being characterized as a personal narrative, because of its shifting point of view: Lame Deer often allows other Lakotas to speak directly about their beliefs and versions of events, and Erdoes contributes an afterthought to chapter five and a lengthy epilogue. Add to this its frequently crude, conversational tone, and *Lame Deer* might seem no more than the product of improvisational madness. However, in the context of Lakota tradition, the book's "madness" assumes both a method and a divine sense.

There are sixteen chapters written in Lame Deer's voice, and they are divisible into four groups of four. The first four chapters are autobiographical; the following four describe some of the distinguishing features of Lakota society; the next four are concerned with those religious beliefs that Lame Deer regards as specific to Lakota culture; and the last four center on those religious beliefs he sees as pan-Indian. Through these four cycles of four, we receive a gradually unfolding image of Lame Deer in relation to his personal history, his society, and the spiritual world. Because the book is intended as a sort of prayer, a sacred act imagined as a force for positive change, the four-by-four structure of the chapters is essential. As Lame Deer tells us, "We Sioux do everything by fours":

*Four* is the number that is most *wakan*, most sacred. Four stands for Tatuye Topa—the four quarters of the earth.

The Great Mystery Medicine Bag contained four times four things. . . . The bundle contained four

kinds of skins from the birds, four kinds of fur from the animals, four kinds of plants, four kinds of rocks and stones.

Four things make the universe: earth, air, water, fire. . . .

We take four puffs when we smoke the peace pipe. Those of us who believe in the Native American Church take four times four spoons of peyote during a night of prayer. We pour water four times over the hot rocks in the sweat lodge. For four nights we seek a vision during a *hanblechia* (pp. 103–104).

By constructing a book that contains “four times four things,” *Lame Deer* is emphasizing the sacred purpose of his work, in a way that is neither artificial nor antiquarian. As William Powers writes:

The number four . . . should be seen as a means of classifying contemporary ideas relevant to Lakota culture, as well as to old traditions. . . . (F)rom the Lakota viewpoint, all things in culture may be classified by their “natural” proclivity to confine, constrain, even squeeze things that are meaningful to them into units of four.<sup>5</sup>

Once we begin to think of the action in *Lame Deer* in terms of interrelating cycles of four, we more easily accept the lack of any consistent temporal sequence. Because the book is less concerned with dramatic development than it is with continually invoking a way of being, it is, quite openly, repetitious and synchronic. “My talk is like the sun dance,” *Lame Deer* says, “so many things going on at one and the same time” (p. 192). *Lame Deer* would like his oral narrative, which is bounded in time and has no spatial dimensions, to aspire to the condition of the pictograph, which is bounded in space and has no temporal dimensions; he wants every meaningful event in his life to be “going on at one and the same time.” His arrangement of chapters into four bundles of four helps provide his history with this sense of sacred completeness and simultaneity. Through the structural concept of “fourness,” he causes four distinct temporal moments—like four puffs on a pipe—to exist not as a narrative sequence but as a single act, a single pictographic instant. This relation-

ship to historical material is similar to the one N. Scott Momaday attributed to the Crow autobiographer Two Leggings in a 1985 interview:

I don't think that [Two Leggings] is recounting, in the way that we think of that as an activity, but he is creating. . . . He is really creating something. He is carrying the whole process forward. It is not dead matter that he is dealing with. He does not think of it in that way. Nor does the Indian within the oral tradition think of the story as dead matter. . . . Set him beside *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*: on the one hand you have the story that is being carried on, as opposed to the story that exists in the past and has an ending somewhere in the past.<sup>6</sup>

The historical moment is a piece of three-dimensional "matter"; by undoing it from its temporal sequence, bringing it into the present and connecting it with new associations, Two Leggings and Lame Deer make that matter live again.

Lame Deer's sense of the historical moment as a living, material object helps to explain why the text is swarming with narrative voices. If Muriel Waukazoo, Lizzy Fast Horse, and Lee Brightman did not say their piece about the Mount Rushmore protest, if Leonard Crow Dog and Pete Catches did not talk about their understanding of Lakota medicine, or if Frances Densmore were not cited in the description of the *yuwipi* ceremony, we would see these events from one angle only, as if they belonged, in some sense, to Lame Deer alone. "We Sioux are not a simple people," Lame Deer tells us. "We are forever looking at things from different angles" (p. 190).

Possession stifles the spirit of a thing; this is why, as Arnold Krupat says, Lakotas are "opposed to the privatization of property and discourse."<sup>7</sup> Since Lame Deer's goal is "making our old beliefs as pure, as clear and true as I possibly can, making them stay alive, saving them from extinction," he must try to present these beliefs from more than one perspective. In both *Lame Deer* and *Black Elk Speaks*, the use of multiple speakers releases the object under discussion from the grasp of a single storyteller and reanimates it as a living, changing thing. It reinvests history with mystery, by making it open-ended and refusing a final understanding. "If all were told," Lame Deer says,

“supposing there lived a person who could tell all, there would be no mysteries left, and that would be very bad. Man cannot live without mystery. He has a great need of it” (p. 160).

The effect of both these formal principles—spatial structure and multivocality—is to bring the object under discussion up close, to turn it in the light, to make it new by eliminating the sense of distance created by linear time and destroying the sense of private possession created by univocality. The attitude toward history and speech that these principles represent is often voiced within the narrative, as in the following anecdote about the Little Big Horn:

The books tell of one soldier who survived. He got away, but he went crazy and some women watched him from a distance as he killed himself. The writers always say he must have been afraid of being captured and tortured, but that’s all wrong.

Can’t you see it? There he is, bellied down in a gully, watching what is going on. He sees the kids playing with the money, tearing it up, the women using it to fire up some dried buffalo chips to cook on, the men lighting their pipes with green frog skins, but mostly all those beautiful dollar bills floating away with the dust and the wind. It’s this sight that drove that poor soldier crazy. He’s clutching his head, hollering, “God-dam, Jesus Christ Almighty, look at them dumb, stupid red sons of bitches wasting all that dough!” He watches till he can’t stand it any longer and then he blows his brains out with a six-shooter. It would make a great scene in a movie, but it would take an Indian mind to get the point (pp. 31–32).

Lame Deer reinvigorates the historical moment in two ways. He brings an 1876 moment jarringly into the present, and he takes an event that “the books” have seen only from a white perspective and re-envisions it through Indian eyes. The narrative style is geared toward making the moment visual and immediate—“Can’t you see it? There he is. . . .”—as is the mildly vulgar humor of the soldier screaming, “Goddam, Jesus Christ Almighty, look at them dumb, stupid red sons of bitches wasting all that dough!” By superimposing the modern Indian comic vision on the traditional white tragic vision, Lame Deer undoes our sense

of chronology—are we in 1876 or 1972, or both?—and our sense of a controlling univocal perspective. History is no longer a monumental record of tragic loss, as it is in *Black Elk Speaks*, but a series of embodied moments that can be remembered and revived in new ways.<sup>8</sup>

There is a close link between this philosophy of composition and the theme of barrier-breaking, which is the book's essential message. Just as the form of the narrative breaks down the fences that divide moments in time and differentiates voices from one another, so does the theme of the narrative attempt to break down the fences that are responsible for our typically American sense of rigid identity and private property. *Lame Deer* sees fencing, the division that conquers, as the source of white power, and he sees a free interpenetration of self, society, and universe as the essence of his peculiarly Indian power. The book imagines a spiritual war between these two forms of power, and it consciously presents itself as a sacred instrument in this "new-old" Indian revolution. It is important to recognize, then, that the book is not simply trying to say something, but to *do* something; both structurally and thematically, it presents itself as a prayer, an active contribution to the impending apocalyptic victory of Indian power over white power.

One of the most striking features of the book is the apparently unbothered inclusiveness of *Lame Deer's* self-imagination. Over the course of his life, he manages "to be both a Christian and a heathen, a fugitive and a pursuer, a lawman and an outlaw" (p. 68). Good and bad, for *Lame Deer*, are two sides of the same coin; or, as he describes it in his chapter on the *heyoka*, two forks of a lightning bolt, one of which protects and one of which destroys. The lightning bolt "is good and bad, as God is good and bad, as nature is good and bad, as you and I are good and bad" (p. 229). When he traces a picture of himself in the dirt at the end of "The Circle and the Square," he draws four forked horns sprouting from his head. "They stand for the four winds," he says. "They are forked at the end, split into a good and a bad part. This bad part of the fork could be used to kill somebody" (p. 106). Since the death instinct and the life instinct spring from the same source—since the bear sound, "harrnh," is identified both with killing and with sex—it would be unnatural for a human to identify exclusively with one or the other: "You can't be



so stuck up, so inhuman that you want to be pure, your soul wrapped in a plastic bag, all the time. You have to be God and the devil, both of them" (p. 68).

Identity, in *Lame Deer*, does not depend on culturally shared moral distinctions; it depends on a hidden individual force that gradually expresses itself through us. In Lame Deer's language, this divinely implanted force is the *nagi*, the "something within us that controls us, something like a second person almost" (p. 6). The *nagi* respects no externally imposed boundaries, because, Lame Deer says, "The Great Spirit wants people to be different. . . . He only sketches out the path of life roughly for all the creatures on earth, shows them where to go, where to arrive at, but leaves them to find their own way to get there. He wants them to act independently according to their nature, to the urges in each of them" (pp. 146–47). Such freedom could lead to lawlessness, as it does in the chapter on "Getting Drunk, Going to Jail," but Lame Deer believes we each have a sacred responsibility to obey our inner call, to "feel and taste the manifold things that are in us" (p. 146). Accordingly, he rebels against the obstacles to this self-realization—like schools, jails, fences, and dams—which give material power to whites and drain spiritual power from Indians. The most persistent symbol of exclusion and enclosure in *Lame Deer* is, for historical reasons, the fence.

Lame Deer tells us that the event that marked the beginning of his "find-out"—his father's departure after his mother's death in 1920—was due in large part to "a new rule the Government made about grazing pay and allotments. Barbed-wire fences closed in on us. My dad said, 'We might just as well give up'" (p. 27). According to Gordon Macgregor, the leasing and fencing of the reservation land allotted by the Dawes Act had a tremendous effect on Lakota society as a whole:

The livestock practice (between 1900 and 1917) was that of the open range, of allowing the herds to move over the reservation ranges with little supervision. Each spring and fall great roundups were held, which were important events to all the Indians. . . . With the beginning of World War I, cattle prices soared and the Indians were encouraged to sell their herds, and in 1916 nearly all the herds were sold off. . . . Only one small lease of reservation land had been made to a white man

in 1914, but by 1917 the large cattle operators had secured leases on nearly all the reservations.<sup>9</sup>

The white speculators soon checkerboarded the common ranchland with fences, and when it became possible in 1921 for Lakotas to sell their allotments—this apparently is the “new rule” that Lame Deer mentions—the whites began to take full possession of reservation land. Because this historic change in Lakota lifestyle coincides with Lame Deer’s painful coming of age, he associates the relative freedom and closeness of his childhood with the open range and the alienation and restrictions of his adult life with the whites’ fences. His life becomes a spiritual quest to recover the unbounded freedom of the open range by opposing the barriers that prevent the full expression of his Indian identity.

The story Lame Deer uses as the symbolic representation of his find-out is one in which he refuses to be one of the penned-in “sheep” on the reservation, and escapes punishment by transgressing an arbitrary white boundary. During the 1920s, while he is a member of an illegal peyote cult, his cabin is raided by reservation police:

The cabin was only a thousand feet away from the border line between the reservations. The Pine Ridge and the Rosebud police were in on the raid, but each had to stay on his own side of the line. They were not supposed to cross it. I ran along the boundary, the Rosebud patrol car on one side, the Pine Ridge wagon on the other. . . . If the Rosebud police came too close, I jumped across into Pine Ridge territory and the other way round, hopping back and forth across that line like an oversized grasshopper. Just when I was all tuckered out, my heart pounding like mad, I got into the pine hills where their cars couldn’t follow me (p. 53).

Soon afterwards, he says, “The find-out, it has lasted my whole life. In a way, I was always hopping back and forth across the boundary line of the mind” (p. 54). By refusing to respect boundary lines, like the distinction between good and bad, he demonstrates the unreality of those boundaries and exemplifies a return to a moral open range. Lame Deer says that, after bootlegging for three years, “[B]eing a kind of two-face, I then wanted to find out how it looked from the other side. When there

was an opening for a tribal policeman in the Black Pipe district, I went for it" (p. 54). In order to experience the full range of his identity, he plays outlaw and lawman and, by containing both roles, erases the distinction between them. This is why it is important to him to say that he was born between Pine Ridge and Rosebud, when in fact there is no neutral ground between the reservations; it allows him to ignore the whites' map line, to call himself "a real Sioux, an *ikce wicasa*, a common, wild, natural human being" (p. 38).

Lame Deer's true identity slowly emerges through wildness, through an antinomian surrender to his *nagi*. Lame Deer feels reborn after doing time for his "big tear" in the winter of 1930, because he has allowed his wildness expression, and this has made him "feel that my living was a matter of some importance, that it had a purpose" (p. 79). Again, he describes the unfolding of his identity in terms of fences:

I felt that I was only half a man, that all the old, honored, accepted ways for a young man to do something worthy were barred to me. Just as there was a fence around the reservation, so they had put a fence around our pride. Well, I had to invent a new way of making a name for myself, of breaking through that fence (p. 78).

"Reservations are like bird cages," he says later (p. 160). He fears that if he accepts the externally imposed limits to his identity, he will assume the qualities of those chickens that are "kept in low cages" in order to develop their breast muscles: "Having to spend all their lives stooped over makes an unnatural, crazy, no-good bird. It also makes unnatural, no-good human beings" (p. 109). His hatred of forced enclosure—whether in space or time—is what supplies the energy for his discussion of the square as a symbol of the whites' power to imprison and tame living things:

Square is the door which keeps strangers out, the dollar bill, the jail. Square are the white man's gadgets—boxes, boxes, boxes and more boxes—TV sets, radios, washing machines, computers, cars. These all have corners and sharp edges—points in time, white man's time, with appointments, time clocks and rush hours—that's what the corners mean to me. You become a prisoner inside all these boxes (pp. 100–101).

Only by breaking down these boxes, Lame Deer believes, can Indians return to their true natural state, like that of the animals he remembers from his youth, those "wild horses we rode, real cloud-hunters and sunfishers. . . (and) the wild cattle from the unfenced range" (p. 40).

Fences also are a symbol of the whites' lust to privatize and commodify the natural world. Part of the reason many Lakotas drink, Lame Deer says, is that "our fenced-in reservations no longer belong to us." Rather than belonging to the whole tribe, they belong to individual white ranchers "who fatten their cattle, and themselves, on our land" (p. 66). Because the town of Winner is "surrounded on all sides by white cattle ranchers," the Indian residents have to hold their sun dance inside the old rodeo fairgrounds. "Some communities are luckier," Lame Deer says, "not so fenced in" (p. 189). While on his find-out, he tells us, he frequently got into trouble for thinking of women as "a part of mother earth which no man should treat as just a chunk of fenced-in property" (p. 42). In Lame Deer's philosophy, to consider ourselves the owners and sole proprietors of any part of the earth, whether land, animal, or human being, is to suffocate the living spirit of that thing and to destroy ourselves spiritually.

If one way of combating the power of fences, in *Lame Deer*, is to eliminate the ones that others have created around our identities, the other way is to surrender our own fenced possessions. For Lakotas, the perfect state of the world is one in which it is continuously raining, in which all things are absolutely infused by *Takuskanskan*, the "power that moves what moves." By unfencing our possessions and giving them away, we free their spirits and enable new gifts to come into the space they leave within us. As Lewis Hyde writes:

The Indian giver . . . understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. . . . The opposite of "Indian giver" would be something like "white man keeper" (or maybe "capitalist"), that is, a person whose instinct is to remove property from circulation.<sup>10</sup>

Lame Deer tries to fight off the encroaching capitalist sense of property, represented by the "green frog skin" and hold to the ethic of the "old buffalo hunter": "Share your food, share your

goods, or the tribe will perish'' (p. 36). He says that his uncle, Poor Thunder, used to tell him:

''There's more to food than just passing through your body. There are spirits in the food, watching over it. If you are stingy, that spirit will go away thinking 'that bastard is so tight, I'll leave.' But if you share your food with others, this good spirit will always stay around'' (p. 36).

Or, as Lame Deer's neighbor says, ''The whiskey can't get away from me. The more I give away, the more it comes. I've got to be careful, or I'll drown in it'' (p. 36). Free gifts in one direction stimulate free returns from another direction; what goes around comes around. The essence of a gift economy, Hyde writes, is that ''our generosity may leave us empty, but our emptiness then pulls gently at the whole until the thing in motion returns to replenish us. Social nature abhors a vacuum.''<sup>11</sup> The only way to keep self, society, and universe alive is to give what we have freely and constantly, to resist the desire to possess. But if a single member of the system hoards his gifts, capitalizes on them, and does not pass them on, the economy of the open range begins to break down. In the myth of White Buffalo Calf Woman, this destructive greed is represented by the older brother who, ''overcome with a desire to possess'' the beautiful stranger, dissolves into dry bones. ''Desire killed that man,'' Lame Deer says, ''as desire has killed many before and after him. If this earth should ever be destroyed, it will be by desire, by the lust of pleasure and self-gratification, by greed for the green frog skin, by people who are mindful only of their own self, forgetting about the wants of others'' (p. 241).

Desire to possess leads to physical and metaphysical fences; in order to free space for his own individual life, Lame Deer tries to erase those fences by transgressing the boundary markers of law, morality, and property. But from a higher perspective, the best way to combat the spirit of possession is not by attacking its manifestations but its source. Toward this end, Lame Deer introduces sacrificial gift-giving as the Indian's counterforce in his spiritual war against the whites' selfish desires. Even more powerful than the free gift of one's property, in this context, is the free gift of one's body. In speaking of the Sun Dance, Lame Deer says, ''The way I look at it our body is the only thing which truly belongs

to us. When we Indians give of our flesh, our bodies, we are giving of the only thing which is ours alone. . . . How can we give anything less?" (p. 187). During the vision quest that opens the book, he is comforted and made to feel that he is not alone by a gourd containing "forty small squares of flesh my grandmother had cut from her arm. . . . (She) had undergone pain, given me something of herself, part of her body, to help me pray and make me stronghearted" (p. 3). Spiritual power derives from visions, and for *Lame Deer*, the truest way to achieve a vision is through sacrifice. Ultimately he resists the peyote religion, because its visions do not depend on painful offerings of self: "I want my visions to come out of my own juices, by my own effort—the hard, ancient way" (p. 206). For Indians, power comes from giving, just as the whites' power comes from taking. The collision of these two forces is the primary tension in *Lame Deer*; the ongoing war the author imagines, in which the future of the earth is at stake, is not really between Indians and whites, but between the respective sources of their power. The book is dedicated to building the force of Indian giving to the point where it can overwhelm apocalyptically the possessive power of the whites.

As *Lame Deer* explicitly states, the spirit that activates his book is the same spirit that activated the Ghost Dance. The Ghost Dancers of the late 1880s believed that by abandoning their bodies through lengthy ceremonies, they could "dance a new world into being":

They danced in this way to bring back their dead, to bring back the buffalo. A prophet had told them that through the power of the Ghost Dance the earth would roll up like a carpet, with all the white man's works—the fences and the mining towns with their warehouses, the factories and the farms with their stinking, unnatural animals, the railroads and the telegraph poles, the whole works. And underneath this rolled-up white man's world we would find again the flowering prairie, unspoiled, with its herds of buffalo and antelope, its clouds of birds, belonging to everyone, enjoyed by all (pp. 112–13).

When *Lame Deer* says, "I am trying to bring the Ghost Dance back, but interpret it in a new way," he refers to some significant differences between his faith and the faith of the Ghost

Dancers: He does not believe that dancing is the primary force for change, he does not believe that the world literally will roll up, and he does not believe, as many Ghost Dancers did, that all whites will be eliminated in the apocalypse. Only the source of their power and the manifestations of their power will be destroyed (p. 224). But he does believe that real prayer, real sacrifice, real faith in the "hard, ancient way" will lead to the spiritual triumph of the Indian way of life. In the following passage, he indicates quite clearly that he imagines his book as a sacred gift that will help to bring on the apocalypse:

[The Ghost Dance] is coming back, I feel it warming my bones. Not the old Ghost Dance, not the rolling-up—but a new-old spirit, not only among Indians but among whites and blacks, too, especially among young people. It is like raindrops making a tiny brook, many brooks making a stream, many streams making one big river bursting all dams. Us making this book, talking like this—these are some of the raindrops.

Listen, I saw this in my mind not long ago: In my vision the electric light will stop sometime. It is used too much for TV and going to the moon. The day is coming when nature will stop the electricity. Police without flashlights, beer getting hot in the refrigerators, planes dropping from the sky, even the President can't call up somebody on the phone. A young man will come, or men, who'll know how to shut off all electricity. It will be painful, like giving birth. Rapings in the dark, winos breaking into the liquor stores, a lot of destruction. . . . There is a Light Man coming, bringing a new light. It will happen before the century is over. The man who has the power will do good things, too—stop all atomic power, stop wars, just by shutting the white electro-power off. I hope to see this, but then I'm also afraid. What will be will be (p. 113).

Electro-power results from division—from atom-splitting, for instance, and from the six Pick-Sloan project dams on the Missouri River, which flooded over 202,000 acres of Lakota land and, in 1972, produced 13.2 billion kilowatt hours of hydroelectric power.<sup>12</sup> Lame Deer thinks of his book as part of the natural, flowing force which, when collected into the form of the Mes-

sianic Light Man, will burst not only dams, but all the sources of "white electro-power." In a general sense, the book tries to call forth the Light Man by adding its voice to the swelling cries for a fenceless imagination of identity, history, and property. But there is a more specific way in which the book acts as an apocalyptic force: In the final chapter, *Lame Deer* ask us to accept the pipe ceremony as the "new light" that can overcome and replace the white electro-power.

White power depends on fission, on damming rivers, fencing private property, and creating moral and civil laws that separate human beings from their inner selves, from one another, and from nature. The counterforce, as *Lame Deer* imagines it, is fusion. In the vision he receives after his mother's death, he is visited by the bird nation, and they tell him, "You have a love for all that has been placed on this earth, not like the love of a mother for her son, or of a son for his mother, but a bigger love which encompasses the whole earth. . . . (T)here is a great space within you to be filled with that love. All of nature can fit in there" (p. 126). This inclusive love is the source of his healing powers. A holy man sacrifices selfish power through the free gift of his love, and he is subsequently gifted with the power to heal, in a kind of spiritual systole and diastole: "From all living beings something flows into him all the time, and something flows from him. I don't know where or what, but it's there. I know" (p. 146). In the *yuwipi* ceremony, the holy man is bound tightly, "like a mummy," in order to symbolize inclusive connection: "This is tying us together, ending the isolation between one human being and another; it is making a line from man to the Great Spirit. It means a harnessing of power" (p. 183).

To *Lame Deer*, the greatest fusing power in the world, the most powerful opposition to the whites' selfish fission, is the pipe. He dreams of patterning his literary life after *Black Elk*, by following his autobiography with "a book about nothing but the pipe, because all Indian wisdom can be known through the pipe" (p. 240). He saves the chapter about the pipe, "Blood Turned into Stone," until the end, because of its sacredness: "It is so sacred that it makes me want not to tell all I know about it" (p. 240). The pipes are sacred because they are powerfully associated with the body of the tribe: They are quarried in southeast Minnesota, from a pipestone deposit that, according to legend, was formed from a pool of their ancestors' blood.



It is good that these ancient legends, passed along from generation to generation, all tell us that it is our blood, the blood of the Sioux nation, which turned into the stone from which the sacred pipe is made. Because this pipe is us. The stem is our backbone, the bowl our head. The stone is our blood, red as our skin. The opening in the bowl is our mouth and the smoke rising from it is our breath, the visible breath of our people (p. 239).

When the pipe is filled with red willow bark, "each tiny grain represents one of the living things on this earth. All of the Great Spirit's creations, the whole universe, is in that pipe. All of us is in that pipe at the moment of prayer" (p. 239). Through the pipe, which is the Lakota nation, the celebrant inhales the spirit of the entire creation and then gives that spirit back into the universe. Ceremonially, the celebrant becomes the connecting link between grandmother earth and grandfather sky, united with the tribe, the creation, and the sacrificial force that moves the creation.

The pipe is an especially powerful force for Lame Deer, because he is one of very few people to have prayed with the two most sacred pipes of the Lakota nation. There is no better representation in this book of the fusing power that overcomes selfish desire than the scene of this prayer:

I held the pipes. Their bowls were my flesh. The stem stood for all the generations. I felt my blood going into the pipe, I felt it coming back, I felt it circling in my mind like some spirit. I felt the pipes come alive in my hands, felt them move. I felt a power surging from them into my body, filling all of me. Tears were streaming down my face. And in my mind I got a glimpse of what that pipe meant. That Buffalo Calf Pipe made me know myself, made me know the earth around me. It healed the blindness of my heart and made me see another world beyond the everyday world of the green frog skin. . . . I knew that when I smoked the pipe I was at the center of all things, giving myself to the Great Spirit, and that every other Indian praying with his pipe would, at one time or other, feel the same. I knew that releasing the smoke to rise up to the sky, I also released something of myself that wanted to be free. . . .

It suddenly came to me that if I mingled my breath with the sacred smoke, I would also mingle it with the breath of every living creature on this earth, and I also realized that the glow in the pipe was the sacred fire of the Great Spirit, the same fire that is in the sun. I knew that in this pipe all small things were fused into one making an entirety. . . . (I can't) describe the power which flowed into me from the pipe, shaking me up. I can't do it. All I knew when I was holding these pipes in my hand was that this was changing my life (pp. 251-52).

Lame Deer's blood flows into the pipes and flows back enriched; he gives himself to the Great Spirit, and the Great Spirit gives new life back. The pipe heals Lame Deer's selfish blindness, allowing him to see that all things are "fused into one," like the raindrops that collectively form the river, "bursting all dams." In the vision inspired by the pipe, all membranes become permeable, all barriers evaporate, and Lame Deer enters a spiritual open range like the one the Ghost Dancers imagined. Fusion can overcome fission, as he tells us at the end of the chapter; the pipe is the weapon we can wield against the fence:

We must try to use the pipe for mankind, which is on the road to self-destruction. . . . (W)e, who know the meaning of the pipe, also know that, being a living part of the earth, we cannot harm any part of her without hurting ourselves. Maybe through this sacred pipe we can teach each other again to see through that cloud of pollution which politicians, industrialists and technical experts hold up to us as "reality." Through this pipe, maybe, we can make peace with our greatest enemy who dwells deep within ourselves. With this pipe we could all form again the circle without end (p. 255).

Selfish desire—the "greatest enemy who dwells deep within ourselves"—is what causes us to fence off the world, to eye ourselves, other people, and nature as objects to be possessed. It is what the Light Man must shut off if he is to eliminate the manifestations of "white electro-power." Lame Deer's final act, in this book dedicated to breaking down the barriers enclosing history, identity, and property, is to offer the pipe as a force for spiritual

revolution. The pipe has the restorative power of the Ghost Dance and the effectual power of the "new light"; by fusing us into the moving world, it recovers and activates the open range.

Much remains to be said about *Lame Deer*, especially about its relationship to other works of Indian autobiography and literature. It is a fascinating companion piece to *Black Elk Speaks*, for one thing, and its inclusive, fused sense of identity stands in sharp contrast to the Manichean self-imagination we find in Indian novels like *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*. And in a year when the two major historical trends are the ideological victory of capitalism and a renewed concern for the environment, *Lame Deer* provides a useful reminder that it will take a great deal of work to make those two trends cohere: Indians are "lousy raw material from which to form a capitalist," *Lame Deer* says, because "deep down within us lingers a feeling that land, water, air, the earth and what lies beneath its surface cannot be owned as someone's private property. That belongs to everybody, and if man wants to survive, he had better come around to this Indian point of view, the sooner the better, because there isn't much time left to think it over" (p. 35). But whether or not we heed *Lame Deer's* warning about the Light Man's advent, we should start giving his book more attention than it has received so far in the criticism of Indian literature.

#### NOTES

1. John (Fire) *Lame Deer* and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions* (1972; New York: Washington Square Press, 1976), p. 79. All subsequent page references are to this mass market paperback edition, which, though it is riddled with typographical errors, is the easiest one to find in stores and libraries.

2. Brief, isolated quotes from *Lame Deer* have been extracted and inserted as ethnographic documentation in articles by Clive Bush, *Journal of American Studies* 22, 1988; J. W. Schneider, *South Dakota Review* 24, 1986; J. Rice, *Western American Literature* 19, 1984; Ake Hulkrans, *History of Religions* 22, 1983; and Elaine Jahner, *Language and Style* 16, 1983. *Lame Deer* is listed, but not treated, in H. David Brumble's *American Indian Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Arnold Krupat's *For Those Who Come After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

3. Kenneth Lincoln, *Storia Nordamericana* 5, 1988, pp. 167-84. The article will be reprinted as a chapter in Lincoln's forthcoming book, *Indi'n Humor*.

4. The reviews were positive, but brief, and *Lame Deer* was generally lumped together with a set of other recent books about Indians. The responses in *The New York Times Book Review* (18 March 1973, p. 37) and *TLS* (6 July 1973, p. 780)

are typical. In 1973, the book was published in England by Davis-Poynter as *Lame Deer: Sioux Medicine Man*.

5. William K. Powers, *Sacred Language* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), pp. 142-44.

6. Quoted in Brumble, p. 173.

7. Quoted in Bette Weidman, "Oral History in Biography: A Shaping Source," *International Journal of Oral History* 8:1, 1987, p. 44.

8. To use M. M. Bakhtin's terms, *Black Elk Speaks* comes out of the epic tradition and *Lame Deer* out of the novel tradition. In the epic, the past is "walled off from all subsequent times. . . . It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy." Conversely, the novel focuses on "present, contemporary life" and brings the past, through laughter, into this "zone of maximally familiar and crude contact" (M. M. Bakhtin, "The Epic and the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, Slavic Series No. 1, 1981], pp. 16, 21, 23).

9. Gordon Macgregor, *Warriors Without Weapons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp. 38-39.

10. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 4.

11. Hyde, *The Gift*, p. 23.

12. Michael Lawson, *Dammed Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), pp. xxii, 184.