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## Letter

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*The following letter, printed with the permission of Richard Erdoes, is his response to Geoff Sanborn's review essay titled "Unfencing the Range: History, Identity, Property, and Apocalypse in Lame Deer Seeker of Visions," which appeared in the American Indian Culture and Research Journal, volume 14, number 4. Erdoes is the author of Lame Deer Seeker of Visions.*

Dear Geoff Sanborn:

Just about an hour ago I received your letter and treatise about my and John Fire's *Lame Deer* book. I am generally "going on Indian time," a procrastinator when it comes to answering letters, but in this case I had to sit down at my typewriter right away, because your interpretation of the book enchanted me, not only because it is flattering, but, unlike most white reviewers, you are one of the very few who *understood* the book. You are wrong in only one respect—I was *not* a journalist when I met Lame Deer. I describe myself as an "old moth-eaten artist and a young budding writer," because, at age 55, it was John who actually made me a writer, originally almost against my will. I got my education as a painter and illustrator at the Vienna Academy of Art and the Beaux Arts at Paris, and before I met John I was a freelance artist for *Life*, *Fortune*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and many other publications and had, as a matter of fact, a worldwide reputation as a book illustrator. I met Lame Deer in 1967 when he came with a group of Rosebud Sioux to New York to join Martin Luther King's peace march. They all wound up in my place, where my wife, Jean, managed to feed the whole crowd. We had a very large, sprawling, high-ceilinged rent-controlled apartment on the upper Westside. Lame Deer was pounding the drum in my studio. Old Henry Crow Dog doing the same in the living room. John reappeared a few weeks later, Indian-style—unannounced and uninvited, ringing our doorbell, standing there with a cardboard box containing his worldly possessions, saying with a

broad grin: "I liked you. I think I'll stay for a while." He stayed about two months that time. He enjoyed New York hugely. He was a good artist himself, spending many hours in my studio, sitting at one drawing table while I worked on another, grabbing my brushes and colors, producing drawings which somehow resembled his verbal storytellings. We became close friends, visiting back and forth endlessly. This went on for about two years. Then he began pestering me: "You are going to do my book." I protested: "John, I'm an artist, not a writer." "My medicine tells me. . . ." This went on and on until I could not stand it any longer. I told him: "John, by now I know your stories inside out. I'll do a trial chapter and an outline. I'll take it to an editor for whom I *illustrate* books. He'll throw us out on our ears because neither of us is a writer, but I'll have done my duty and from then on you'll leave me alone." We had a contract in forty-eight hours. These were the good, old, long-gone days of book publishing. Thus, thanks to Lame Deer and Wakan Tanka, I became a writer and am eternally grateful for this.

So began the strangest of collaborations between an essentially sophisticated European and an old Sioux medicine man who seemed to me to come from another century. What made it work was that we both had a sense of humor, his at the same time savage and pixie-like. He was often like a child, pouted like a brat when a woman refused him her bed (this didn't happen often). He also got occasionally *lila itomni*, that is, uproariously drunk. Another bond between us was our love for storytelling, painting, and drawing. Our art was, of course, different, but somehow related. I learned to speak the most god-awful Sioux uttered by any two-legged; however, I had the advantage of speaking German, which meant that I could pronounce the sound in the Lakota language which American anthropologists render as *h·* or *x·*, which is absolutely identical with the German *ch* as in *nacht* or *ich*. In the process I became more and more Indian and he more and more Viennese, if you can imagine such a thing.

Our friendship had a profound effect on myself, my wife, and our children. It cost me, first of all, our life savings as we became more and more involved with Native American families and their problems. We got involved in Indian civil rights and I almost got myself killed in the process. Our apartment became known as "Sioux East" and eventually served as eastern headquarters of the American Indian Movement. On the way to participate in the takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building, my sons picked

up a stray kitten on the Delaware Turnpike, saving it from being squashed by the onrushing traffic, and thus I stormed the Bastille with a purring kitten under my arm, which was anyhow my style. Whenever people had dreams, there were *yuwipi* ceremonies at 251 West 89th Street, NYC. As this is also a dog feast, old Henry Crow Dog once dragged me to one of our windows on the eighth floor, overlooking Broadway, pointing to a Yuppie type gent walking his dog. "There, there, look at that plump puppy! Go, get him!" "No way! Over my dead body!" "Tell the man what an honor it is! Tell the dog what an honor it is." I told Henry: "This is a New York dog, he has no sense of honor."

Dear Geoff Sanborn, do not be sorry because, as you say, the book has not gotten the reviews it deserved from the professional anthros. Some of them, I am sure, felt that, as a European artist and, in their view, amateur, I was poaching on their hunting grounds, but I count a number of very prestigious anthropologists as fans and friends, and the book is required reading in many Indian studies and anthropological classes. It has been translated into seven languages and, after some twenty years, is still making good royalties for myself and John's heirs. The book was taken most seriously abroad, particularly in France and Germany. A new American paperback edition has just come out, and I am now in the process of finishing a manuscript with John's son, Archie Lame Deer. Archie is a full-blood Sioux *Pejuta Wichasha*, like his father, has the same sense of humor, and the same aura about him of magic and mystery, but while John's horizon was the reservation, Archie gives sweats to the Dalai Lama, furiously argues with the pope, performs rituals for Zen senseis, sits in on Bear Ceremonies with Ainus, or argues religion with Lapplanders. And while my involvement led to temporary ruination, my latest book, *Lakota Woman*, has, to my astonishment, become a bestseller and landed me and Mary Crow Dog a movie contract. Also, John got all the Erdoes Tiyospaye out of the New York rat race. But for Lame Deer I might still be designing graphics for advertising campaigns for Young & Rubicam or B.B.D. & O.—a horrid thought. So, as it turned out, John's medicine was, indeed, *lila washte*.

With best regards, your

Richard Erdoes