

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Running from Coyote: A White Family among the Navajo. By Danalee Buhler.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/77s157rf>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 32(4)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

Marling, Lisa

### Publication Date

2008-09-01

### DOI

10.17953

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

narrator, that by “recursively working through memories, [he] discovers who he never thought he was,” applies equally well to his readings of the narrators of Momaday’s and Silko’s novels (109).

In attempting to track the direction of Native criticism in the last half century and key it to major developments in Native political life, Teuton is not trying something new so much as he is adding his voice to those of others who have come before him, especially those critics that he cites most often, Robert Warrior, Jace Weaver, and Craig Womack. Womack, especially, has compared the essentialist position and the trickster position and declared them limited, ahistorical, and politically ineffective. Teuton’s book, however, extends the existing arguments for a more tribally (or communally) grounded criticism that have been made by his predecessors and constructs, methodically and clearly, a coherent theory for reading and evaluating Native literature as well as for understanding Native selves. In the process, he offers powerful incentive both to turn back and reread the Red Power texts and to turn forward to the new writing that is giving us new, expanded ways to understand tribal histories, communities, and people. His book is a most welcome addition to a newly energized body of Native criticism.

*Lucy Maddox*

Georgetown University

**Running from Coyote: A White Family among the Navajo.** By Danalee Buhler. New York: iUniverse, 2007. 188 pages. \$15.95 paper.

Danalee Buhler began this book as a personal journal for her children. As she compiled her memories, the journal became a memoir of her childhood in the Southwest, and of the turmoil of a family faced with a father’s obsession with golf, a mother’s loss of self, and the straddling of cultural fences. Spanning approximately seven years, the author spins an engaging story of her family’s arrival in Shiprock, New Mexico, where her father is “going to teach Indians to play football and basketball,” through the adoption of her two Diné (Navajo) brothers and the deaths of her grandparents (8).

Following a linear progression, the book lightly touches on dysfunctional families, cross-cultural adoptions, bigotry and racism, identity issues, and the attempts by many people to find *hozhoni* (a sense of harmony and balance) in their lives. Living in a life full of extremes—from her parent’s behavior, to the Globetrotters at Window Rock’s Civic Center; from the announcement that the Navajo Reservation has been declared a disaster area due to the –25 degree temperatures and 14 inches of snow, to the hatred her grandfather has for his two adopted grandsons—Danalee and her sisters try to find meaning and *hozhoni* in a less than balanced world. An epilogue provides a rather rushed chapter on the outcomes of her brother’s lives, but it leaves us wondering what happened to the rest of the siblings.

Constructed around Diné taboos and counterpointed by what was happening in the “white” world, the language used is most definitely that of

the colonizer. Buhler states that one of the Navajo taboos is: *Do not tell a person to go to hell because it might happen*. The concepts of hell, and going there, are certainly colonizing concepts. However, the story is most often told through a child's eyes and voice, which gives some leeway to the childhood understanding of the experience.

Buhler's voice is at its best when she examines, often indirectly, her connection to the space and place that is the Diné Reservation. In a beautiful and memorable scene, Danalee, with pockets full of arrowheads, slips down into an arroyo where she shares: "I whisper to Monster Slayer as I walk, 'I am here. Please guard my arrowheads for me.'" She buries them under a lava rock and then attempts to memorize "every rock and bush so [she] will recognize [her] hideout when she returns one day" (139). Her father is moving the family away from the rez, and Danalee is feeling the loss of the land and people with which she identifies.

One of this book's strengths is the parallel developed between the struggle of the Diné as they try to cope with the effects of colonization and the struggles of Buhler's family as they attempt to cope with life in a culture they often do not understand. Danalee's childhood voice often speaks the thoughts and actions in a way that coats the bigotry and racism with that "innocent acceptance" of the truly unacceptable behaviors of those around her.

Although Buhler does not hold back where the explicit bigotry and racism are concerned, she does little to examine it from a present-day position. Throughout the book, we are privy to experiences that, at once, cause the reader to cringe yet fascinate in the way that watching the well-known train wreck does. In chapter 13, the reader is dropped into an experience at a Dairy Queen that emphasizes the ignorance of racism, and the power behind the statement of crushed Dilly Bars on a countertop. This scene is made more powerful by all of the other moments leading up to it in which there was nothing to be done but accept how things were and move away from them. The traditional Diné concept of accepting and finding the good in whatever occurs is suddenly overpowered by the anger the oldest sibling, Marilynn, feels when the woman at the Dairy Queen refuses service to her brothers. This scene goes a long way toward showing the constant struggle between living somewhere in between the white and Diné worlds.

This book was written as a memoir, and is obviously not a scholarly dialogue on cross-cultural obstacles, but Buhler misses several opportunities to examine the issues related to cross-cultural adoption, loss of the sense of self, and the effects of blatant bigotry on the entire family more closely. One of the weaknesses is not an uncommon one. It is an easy slip to generalize, and generalizations occur throughout the book. Although Buhler occasionally differentiates between traditional and nontraditional beliefs, it is obvious that her understanding is most certainly from a childhood perspective.

*Lisa Marling*

Miami University Middletown