

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

The Only One Living to Tell: The Autobiography of a Yavapai Indian. By Mike Burns. Edited by Gregory McNamee.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/80n7m56n>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 38(1)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

Brooke, Paul

### Publication Date

2014

### 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/>

Wild West shows set goals and take pride in the accomplishments, success, and fame that performing grants them.

*Native American Performers in Wild West Shows* offers an excellent in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Native American agency and performance that is much needed. Still, there are areas McNenly could have expanded on in this study. Even though McNenly acknowledges the structural forces that limit Native Americans' ability to be social actors, she does not explore the great body of theoretical work delineating how structural forces shape social action and thereby limit agency. Louis Althusser's work on the ideological state apparatus is particularly imperative when considering questions of agency and subjectivity. Additionally, McNenly does not complicate the question of subjectivity as it applies to deceased Native Americans in regard to her interviews of the descendants of Native performers and current Native performers in Wild West shows or her archival research. While the oral tradition can reveal a snapshot of what early twentieth-century Native American performers felt, McNenly does not ask whether their feelings can truly be revealed or represented either by studying archival documents or interviewing their descendants. In considering questions of subjectivity when writing about subaltern populations, as Gayatri Spivak has theorized, repressive historical forces limit what we can learn about Native American performers who have already passed on, even if we attempt to trace their oral histories by interviewing their descendants. Nonetheless, *Native American Performers in Wild West Shows* is an imperative contribution to understanding Native Americans as social actors with agency.

Gabriela Spears-Rico

University of California, Berkeley

**The Only One Living to Tell: The Autobiography of a Yavapai Indian.** By Mike Burns. Edited by Gregory McNamee. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012. 176 pages. \$17.95 paper.

After I taught Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* recently, my undergraduate students could not shake the novel's inherent violence: the senseless and repeated murder of American Indians and Mexicans by a marauding gang of white men. It was all too much for the students to imagine. Thankfully, they said, it was merely fiction. *The Only One Living to Tell*, however, is all true, a nonfiction account of Mike Burns (Hoomothya), a Yavapai who was the sole survivor of the Skeleton Cave Massacre in 1872. He writes jarringly of endless mistreatment, imprisonment, persecution, and murder of Indian people by the

hands of the government. Guided by the editorial hand of Gregory McNamee, Hoomothya's narrative is purposefully circular, disjointed, violent, philosophical, and incredibly haunting.

*The Only One Living to Tell* overwhelms because it is tightly packed into a scant 192 pages. The author's description of the violence against American Indians is almost too much to bear. This is embodied in his descriptions of John Benjamin Townsend, part-Cherokee and part-white, who Hoomothya believed murdered between ninety-eight and 155 Indians, and the Apache Kid, a scout who murdered Indians and whites alike. Hoomothya is deeply affected by their myth and status within the community, and he even succumbs to the fear: "the Apache Kid was shooting at anyone who crossed his path . . . they sounded pretty close . . . we found Indians everywhere, hiding in the thick brush" (150–151). Later he discovers that it was all a hoax, but this experience gives him an unusual historical perspective.

As with many American Indian narratives, Hoomothya's autobiography interweaves others' stories, his own tribal mythology, and historical moments as a way to sort out and understand his past as well as his own culture. It weighs deeply on the reader partly due to its style. The circularity of the narrative keeps spinning around to remind us of earlier atrocities and traumas, not only of whites against Indians, but Indians against Indians. In the first chapter, he bluntly states, "They [the whites] slaughtered men, women, and children without mercy, as if they were not human" (6). In chapter 12, he shows how even other Indians turn on Hoomothya: "They [Hualapai] had been hunting Apaches. . . . The first thing I knew, he [a Hualapai scout] had grabbed me by throat and pushed me against a post" (80). This deep emotional anguish in turn causes Hoomothya's disjointed narrative style, which is often difficult to read because of its straightforwardness and its truthfulness.

The real message of the book may be the author's philosophical stance. Hoomothya is rightly frustrated by his treatment by the government and whites alike. He works hard as a scout and laborer, saves his money, and attends college. Then he must leave college when the very people who have pushed him to pursue Christianity to convert the Apaches do not help him financially, making "promises that they cannot or will not fulfill" (128). He earnestly helps Captain Bourke with completing his book on General Crook, but never sees any share of the money: "Instead of being a wealthy man, I now live in poverty" (81). His own book is rejected by whites who felt it was too critical of the government while, as he points out, earlier in his own life government officials "did many dishonest things for a little side money. No, I am too honest to become one of those persons" (137). This continual disappointment and disillusion taints his view of the world.

*The Only One Living to Tell* is necessary and worthy to further our understanding of the Skeleton Cave Massacre, Arizona history, and above all Yavapai and Apache histories. Over the next decade this book will become required reading in many courses featuring such works as *Black Elk Speaks*; *Crashing Thunder*; *Mankiller: A Chief and People*; *Mountain Wolf Woman*; *Morning Dove*; and *The Names*. I plan to have my students read *The Only One Living to Tell* in order to truly internalize the struggle Hoomoytha felt as he is transformed into Mike Burns: to feel its first-hand account of violence, its jarring narrative structure, its philosophical moments, and its haunting insight into the genocide of the Yavapai people.

Paul Brooke  
Grand View University

**The Red Land to the South: American Indian Writers and Indigenous Mexico.** By James H. Cox. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 288 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

In a critical new study, James H. Cox illuminates the literary lives and works of a cluster of American Indian writers whose texts were published between 1920 and 1960, focusing on the ways in which these writers constructed indigeneity in Mexico. Cox argues that iterations of indigenous Mexico for a US market can be best understood as local and specific to the Mexican context, as well as transnational and “trans-Indian.” In bringing attention to these texts, *The Red Land* provides critical insight not only to a largely neglected corpus of American Indian writing, but to the historical conditions and politics at work within them. In argument and in structure, Cox stresses the continuity of political claims across generations of American Indian writers in the twentieth century.

The book responds to a puzzling gap in American Indian literary studies between the end of the assimilation era and the beginning of the Red Power movement. Focusing primarily on novels, plays, and nonfiction produced by Todd Downing, Lynn Riggs, John M. Oskison, Will Rogers, John Joseph Mathews, and D’Arcy McNickle, Cox explores how each of these major writers called upon indigenous Mexico as a real and imaginary site of transnational consciousness and political resistance in their writings. In the book’s final chapter, readings of more recent works by Leslie Marmon Silko and Gerald Vizenor remain rooted in indigenous Mexico and reveal the continuity of this transindigenous imaginary.