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RECASTING EPIC TRADITION THE DISPOSSESSED AS HERO IN SANDOZ'S CRAZY HORSE AND CHEYENNE AUTUMN

LISA R. LINDELL

Although Mari Sandoz is perhaps best known for the biography of her Nebraska pioneer father, *Old Jules* (1935), her two other biographies, *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* (1942) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953), equally convey her distinctive historical vision of the American West.¹ In these two works, Sandoz rewrites traditional epic formula, taking the perspective of the dispossessed Lakotas² and Cheyennes and recounting not the growth and expansion of a culture, but its conquest. In spite of material defeat at the hands of dominant white society, her Native American leaders assume heroic stature, striving against all odds to preserve their people and culture.

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IMAGES OF NATIVE AMERICANS

Sandoz's approach to the western settlement experience diverged from the then prevailing historical/literary convention of viewing frontier expansion as predominantly positive and progressive. At the time Sandoz wrote her Native American biographies, the attitude toward minorities implicit in Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis still reigned. Depicting the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," Turner declared that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Embedded in Turner's understanding of western development was a perception of the Indians as impediments to be overcome.³

To be sure, not every scholar and writer of the time period subscribed to this theory. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a small number of novelists, anthropologists, and historians expressed sympathy with the plight of the indigenous peoples, wrote respectfully of their varied cultures, and

called for government reform. Two nineteenth-century advocates of Indian policy reform were Helen Hunt Jackson and Alice Fletcher. In *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), Jackson strongly criticized government treatment of Native Americans, deploring the broken treaties, forced removal and resettlement, and general violation of individual and community integrity. Focusing on the government's mistreatment of seven Indian tribes, including the Sioux and Cheyennes, she called for justice and compensation for Native American peoples.⁴

If Helen Hunt Jackson's rhetoric was the reverse of Turner's, Alice Fletcher's was the obverse. An early ethnographer who worked primarily with the Omaha, Winnebago, and Nez Perce tribes, Fletcher portrayed Native American culture as complex and attractive but doomed. She believed the role of government and scholars alike should be the preservation of artifacts and the accounts of the cultures in museums and libraries as well as the rapid assimilation of the people themselves. Her career resulted in important publications, such as the Bureau of American Ethnology study *The Omaha Tribe* that she wrote with Francis La Flesche, himself Omaha, but also in the systematic removal of sacred objects of the Omaha people, which were placed in the Peabody Museum in Boston and which the Omahas only succeeded in beginning to repatriate in 1989.⁵

A half century later, historian Angie Debo chose, like Sandoz, to study and write about the experiences of American Indians, notwithstanding the comparative lack of interest in serious studies on this subject in the 1930s. She shared with Sandoz a passion for historical accuracy and an instinct for supporting the underdog, despite the potential repercussions and difficulties in getting published.⁶

Ella Deloria was an author and scholar who faced even more obstacles than Debo or Sandoz in getting her work published during her lifetime. Deloria, a Yankton Sioux, saw her mission as "[making] the Dakota people understandable, as human beings, to the white

people." Working under Franz Boas, a leading figure in anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century, Deloria collected, translated, and edited hundreds of Lakota and Dakota texts. From her inside perspective and as a linguistic and ethnographic scholar, she played an invaluable role in preserving oral narratives and conveying a sense of the dynamic culture of the Lakota peoples, though her own novel, *Waterlily*, was not published for more than forty years after it had been written, seventeen years after Deloria's death.⁷

The views of writers committed to reform and cultural preservation did not represent the prevailing attitude toward indigenous peoples in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not until the 1960s did the general historical perspective begin to shift, resulting in widespread reassessment of Turner's thesis as it related to minorities, particularly to Native Americans. Prior to this interpretive shift, Mari Sandoz was one of the few writers and historians who recognized and deplored the cultural devastation inherent in the process of westward expansion. Central to *Crazy Horse* and *Cheyenne Autumn* is condemnation of the exploitation of the vulnerable at the hands of the powerful.

CRAZY HORSE

In tracing the life of Crazy Horse from a pivotal experience of his youth through his betrayal and death in 1877, Sandoz firmly aligns her sympathies with the dispossessed Plains Indians. At the heart of her biography is the conflict and loss suffered by the Lakotas as the whites relentlessly dispossess the indigenous peoples of their land and livelihood. Torn between living in peace with the whites or fighting the power of the U.S. government, the characters in *Crazy Horse* experience the emotions and conflicts of a displaced people. Sandoz consciously set out to chronicle this period of cultural disruption on the Plains from what she reconstructed as the perspective of the Native American. A great admirer of the customs and lifestyle of the Lakota people, she

hoped to convey something of the vibrancy and richness of the culture threatened by white encroachment.

Upon its publication, *Crazy Horse* received mixed reviews. Reviewers focused almost exclusively on the extent of Sandoz's research and use of detail, her style and point of view, and her inclusion of invented dialogue. Opinions differed concerning the importance and interest of the book's protagonist and themes. Touching upon several of these issues, Clifton Fadiman, book editor for the *New Yorker*, charged Sandoz with "carrying on a fervent historico-literary affair with a dead Indian, the consequence of which is a curious, half-interesting, uneven book."⁸

Some western historians and writers were inclined to respond more favorably to *Crazy Horse*. Fellow Nebraska author John G. Neihardt, avoiding the rhetoric of Frederick Jackson Turner and his followers, regarded the book as "a glorious hero tale told with beauty and power." He commended Sandoz's exhaustive research and commented on her "rich background of sympathetic insight and understanding." Neihardt praised Sandoz's writing, observing that her "skillful use of characteristic figure and idiom creates the illusion that the tale is growing directly out of an Indian consciousness."⁹

Despite current critical interest in Native American topics, there is little recent treatment of *Crazy Horse*. Helen Stauffer, one contemporary scholar who has studied the book, focuses on Sandoz's sources and transformation of historical accounts into literary form; the language and point of view; and the qualities of the classical hero displayed by Crazy Horse. She emphasizes the affinity Sandoz felt with her protagonist and her perception of him as a vital symbol to his people.¹⁰

It is in the development of the Oglala warrior himself that Sandoz most aptly conveys her sense of the Great Plains region and the human forces that shaped its history. Sandoz identified Crazy Horse with the stories and land of her childhood. "The mystic turn of the man, and the exalted theme of his story" made

him her favorite historical character.¹¹ She creates a protagonist possessing both universal, timeless qualities and attributes in the fullest sense representative of the particularity of his Lakota world.

Sandoz presents Crazy Horse's heroic qualities and her vision of the grand themes of Great Plains history by borrowing and adapting elements of epic tradition, which she had discovered in the classical literature she read during her years of study at the University of Nebraska.¹² *Crazy Horse* abounds in parallels between the typical characteristics of the classical hero and the qualities exhibited by Crazy Horse. Like traditional epic, Sandoz's work centers on a figure of fundamental importance to his people who interacts with supernatural forces, endures great trials, is a superb leader, and demonstrates prowess in battle.

In a letter to Helen Blish, a friend who shared her interest in Lakota history and culture, Sandoz described the story of Crazy Horse as "tremendous, with all the cumulative inevitability of Greek tragedy."¹³ Sandoz's joining of epic and tragic elements reflects Aristotle's own definitions in *Poetics*. Tragedy is "a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude . . . and through the arousal of pity and fear effect[s] the *katharsis* of such emotions." Aristotle compares and distinguishes between tragedy and epic, ultimately choosing tragedy as the higher form, provided that it is unified and contains epic elements. In *Poetics*, as John Kevin Newman points out, "tragic drama is to be understood as in some sense the culmination of epic, and epic as in some sense the ancestor of tragedy."¹⁴

Although the *Iliad*, the prototypical example of tragic epic, records the victory of the warring Greeks, the tenor of the poem is ultimately tragic. Achilles' wrath, his alienation, his destructiveness, and, finally, his implied death (rendering futile the restoration of his humanity), establish him as a tragic figure. Underlying all of the tragic action of the *Iliad* is the destruction of Troy. Seth L. Schein notes: "Much of the tragic power of the *Iliad* derives

from a paradox: the activity that has the highest value, the individual and collective attainment of honor and glory by both Trojans and Greeks, involves destroying a city that represents all that is domestically and socially most humane and civilized."¹⁵

Crazy Horse clearly fits into this tragic form of epic. Sandoz also represents the devastation of a vital and humane culture, but she employs traditional epic conventions to assert her nontraditional epic vision: the displaced and ill-fated, the "Other," becomes the protagonist of the revised New World epic.¹⁶ While ancient epics do represent the sufferings of conquered peoples (the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* record the defeat and attempted assimilation of the Trojans and Italic peoples, respectively), it is the conquerors who are presented as the central figures in these works. As a rich and complex culture confronting forces that would oppress them, the Trojans elicit sympathy, but the victorious Greeks, and specifically Achilles, are the primary focus of the *Iliad*. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas and his band of Trojans are initially defeated but ultimately found a new civilization. Sandoz's attention on the defeated rather than the victors remains true to her vision of Great Plains history.

In *Crazy Horse*, Sandoz grounds her epic in history as well as tragedy. Not concerned with the specific task of creating an epic but rather with presenting the historical Crazy Horse accurately, Sandoz draws broad parallels between the themes and characters in ancient epics and the nineteenth-century Lakotas, using the epic framework to express her historical vision. The stories from her childhood, her extensive archival research, and her identification with her subjects were all instrumental in her interpretation of western expansion and Native American displacement. Blending epic style and themes with historically-based narrative, Sandoz seeks to capture the essence of her protagonist.

In Paul A. Olson's "*Black Elk Speaks* as Epic and Ritual Attempt to Reverse History," he characterizes epic as a mixture of religious-allegorical forces and historical actions. For

Black Elk, survival depends on restoring the ritual focus of traditional Lakota life. He is always attuned to the presence of the sacred in the natural world.¹⁷ Sandoz's Crazy Horse likewise relies upon supernatural powers to guide his actions, especially during the time of cultural crisis for his people.

Sandoz emphasizes the role of supernatural intervention in Crazy Horse's destiny. The centrality of vision in Lakota culture connects with but surpasses the traditional involvement of the gods in ancient epic. From his youth, Crazy Horse endeavors to live up to his vision. Deeply affected by the death of the Lakota peace chief Conquering Bear at the hands of white soldiers, Crazy Horse experiences a vision in which his potential as a great warrior and leader of his people is revealed to him:

It seemed he must have slept because he had a feeling of giving up and letting himself go, and almost at once his horse that was hobbled out there eating started towards him, his neck high, his feet moving free. A man was on his back, sitting well forward, only the heel fringe of his moccasin stirring as he rode. It was not like the world the boy knew but the real world behind this one, the sky and the trees in it, the grass waving, but all in a strange and sacred way. . . . And all the time the enemy shadows kept coming up before the man, but he rode straight into them, with streakings all about him, like arrows and lead balls, but always disappearing before they struck him.¹⁸

Accompanying an Oglala raiding party, Crazy Horse remembers the protection promised him and, like Achilles of old, rides unscathed through the battle.

Sandoz endows Crazy Horse with many other characteristics of the traditional epic hero, though in a specifically Lakota incarnation. The Oglala warrior, like Achilles or Aeneas, confronts numerous trials. Unlike their struggles, however, which commonly led to the subjugation of indigenous peoples and

the founding of a new civilization, Crazy Horse's efforts are geared toward cultural preservation. He eventually dies at the hands of his enemies, and it is never clear from Sandoz's account whether she believed that his moral victory would result in the spiritual—or even material—survival of the Lakotas. Crazy Horse not only has to defend against the soldiers but must deal with the growing division among the Oglala people, an internal friction variously precipitated by disregard for traditional ways, vying for positions of power, and disagreement on how to respond to the soldiers, settlers, and other intruders.

Crazy Horse must also undergo personal trials, such as his ill-fated love (a notable epic convention) for Black Buffalo Woman and his subsequent expulsion from the shirt-wearers' society. Crazy Horse's long love for Black Buffalo Woman, who exercises her Lakota right to leave the husband she had not wished to marry and elects to go with Crazy Horse, leads to dissension throughout the camp.

Like the traditional epic hero, Crazy Horse experiences great loss in his life. The deaths of his brother Little Hawk and his warrior friend Hump (calling to mind the death of Achilles' beloved Patroclus) deeply grieve the Oglala. He accuses himself of attending to his own cares rather than dedicating himself to the people (247, 262). Sandoz describes Crazy Horse's reaction to the death of his brother:

So Little Hawk was gone, the gay, brave younger brother, lost to the bullets of the whites while he had stayed behind with his woman plans. This thing had happened because a man thought of himself instead of the good of his people and so misery fell on all those around him. . . . And as Crazy Horse realized what had been done a dust-gray bitterness settled in his heart, a bitterness that would take a long, long time to be gone. (247)

Crazy Horse also suffers greatly at the death of his little daughter from the "choking cough" brought by the whites, and his cumulative sor-

rows are reminiscent of Aeneas's grief at the death of his wife, his father, and his faithful Achates. Mourning the loss of his daughter, the Oglala warrior undergoes a symbolic descent into the underworld. Deep in mourning, Crazy Horse visits his daughter's death scaffold: "The father could hold himself no longer. Face down beside the body of his daughter he let the sorrow locked in his heart sweep over him, the rickety scaffold creaking a little under his weight" (286).

Leadership is another quality Crazy Horse shares with the classical hero. As the Oglala people confront the perils and disorder of warfare with the white forces, they need strong direction. Respected older men of the tribe create a new chief's position and select Crazy Horse to fill it. Crazy Horse takes the responsibility of being leader and protector seriously. Fasting, seeking visions, and striving to draw strength from the natural elements, the Oglala warrior endeavors to learn what must be done to protect his people. He is particularly adept at formulating effective battle plans, calming and organizing the often impetuous young warriors, and fortifying the courage of the people.

In the midst of heated debate among the warriors, the Oglala leader quietly allays their anger and impatience, his persuasiveness reminiscent of that of Odysseus:

Finally Crazy Horse arose, looking slighter than ever in the open, fire-lit center of the great dark crowd.

"Wait, my friends," he said to the warriors. "There will be fighting pretty quick—"

"Hoppo! Let us go!" one called from far out, hearing only the repeated words, not knowing who had spoken them first.

But the quiet voice of Crazy Horse went on and slowly a silence came over the people, starting around him and spreading outward like the branches of a great tree, reaching far into the night, until every woman and child could hear or was told what he was saying. (314)

Despite his leadership abilities and his power to unite those under his command, Sandoz's Crazy Horse endures the isolation and alienation, both physical and spiritual, often associated with epic heroes. Known as "Our Strange Man" by the Oglalas, Crazy Horse possesses traits that set him apart within the community. With his light skin and hair, his disinclination to sing, dance, wear paint or feathers, and his habit of going off by himself to meditate or to attack those invading Lakota country, he is inevitably distanced from his people: "Sometimes it was days before visiting warriors saw the man they had come to follow, for often Crazy Horse kept far from the noise and the drumming, perhaps making a fast, hoping for a vision or a dream to tell him what must be done" (312). Unlike that of Achilles, however, Crazy Horse's isolation is not motivated by stubborn choice but comes from his concern for his people's future.

Crazy Horse's reluctance to boast of his feats is a further departure from Homeric epic convention. Whereas Achilles and Odysseus were expected to boast of their deeds of valor, Sandoz's Crazy Horse is modest by nature and cultural training. His selfless, community-inspired aims, arising out of his adherence to traditional Lakota values, stand in marked contrast to the self-centered, individualistic aspirations held by those overtaking his land and culture. By locating egotism and expansionist ambitions in the conquering civilization, Sandoz follows epic precedent, but in selecting a hero who is self-denying, faced with defeat, and seeking to recover old ways, she revises traditional epic formula. The variance between Lakota decorum and classical epic tradition (reworked into the notion of Manifest Destiny) underlines the clash of two cultural paradigms.

Not popular with all the people and, indeed, occasionally a source of divisiveness (such as that which results from his relationship with Black Buffalo Woman), Crazy Horse nevertheless epitomizes many of the qualities esteemed by the Great Plains tribes, and, ironically, by the Euro-American civilization

that would call him enemy and barbarian. As a visionary and a leader of the people, he serves as a heroic figure combatting all that converges to disrupt the traditions of his people.

Sandoz ended her work with the death of her protagonist. In the spring of 1877, Crazy Horse makes a fateful decision. Profoundly desiring peace and agonizing over the welfare of his people, he leads the Oglala band into the Red Cloud Agency in northwestern Nebraska. The confined, inactive lifestyle of the agency leads to high tension, broken promises, misunderstandings, animosities, and ultimately to Crazy Horse's betrayal, arrest, and death. As Sandoz explained in a letter, she disliked anticlimaxes and felt that the story was finished.¹⁹ She believed that she had recorded the end of an historical era.

The qualities Sandoz found and developed in the character of Crazy Horse are closely linked with her historical vision of the American West. She discerned a universal significance in the course of western development. Recognizing the seeming inevitability of the powerful overcoming the powerless, Sandoz viewed the events taking place in *Crazy Horse* as representative of the experiences of many other minority groups throughout history. In a letter to Adolph G. Kaufman, she maintained: "The pattern of expropriation of a minority by a covetous, and uncontrolled, majority, no matter what the greatness or the bravery of the minority leaders [is] always the same, always inevitably successful." She reiterated her views on the subjugation of minority cultures in a letter to Douglas T. Barker: "Any minority that possesses something the majority wants is in danger of dispossession, even extermination."²⁰ What Sandoz does not seem to have considered in these letters is that the conquest would not necessarily be complete. In her image of subjugation, Sandoz reveals a telling irony. Her depiction of the downfall of Crazy Horse and the disintegration of Native American epic possibilities shows white society to be unresponsive to the very values it claims to admire.

CHEYENNE AUTUMN

This irony is at the heart of her subsequent book of Native American displacement, *Cheyenne Autumn*, the story of the tragic 1500-mile journey of the Northern Cheyennes from exile in Indian Territory to their homeland in Yellowstone country, with the U.S. Army in pursuit. In writing *Cheyenne Autumn*, Sandoz drew upon the tales of the 1878 flight recounted by her father and aged trappers, traders, and Cheyennes at the Sandoz fireside. She wanted to convey to readers the heroism of the Cheyennes as they struggled for freedom.

Sandoz's account of this journey might appear to be a purely historical panorama, but beneath the factual narrative is a philosophical study of a clash of values and of cultures on an epic scale. During a time of physical and cultural dispossession, the Cheyennes find themselves simultaneously battling the encroachment of white soldiers and settlers and disputing with one another. Sandoz emphasizes the dissension within the Cheyenne tribe through her portrayal of the conflicting values of her two protagonists, Dull Knife and Little Wolf.

Unlike *Crazy Horse*, *Cheyenne Autumn* received mainly positive reviews. Although some reviewers questioned Sandoz's fictional technique and her rendering of Native American speech and point of view, they generally concluded by endorsing her work, praising her extensive research and her success in dramatizing a powerful story. Many noted the epic qualities of the book.²¹ Still, as is the case with *Crazy Horse*, current literary criticism of *Cheyenne Autumn* has not been extensive, focusing mostly on historical events and language and mythic patterns in the novel.²²

What is lacking in the criticism is analysis of Sandoz's Cheyenne protagonists and the function they serve in reshaping the epic of frontier expansion. In *Cheyenne Autumn*, even more than in *Crazy Horse*, Sandoz conveys her perceptions of the conflict in the Great Plains through character development. Dull Knife, one of the four tribal chiefs of the

Northern Cheyennes and a famed Dog warrior in his youth, is a revered leader and a man of absolute integrity. In spite of great suffering at the hands of the whites; sickness, hunger, and the loss of his people's land; and his witnessing many broken promises and much killing during the journey north, Dull Knife steadfastly believes that the white soldiers will not harm his people. Having been promised that the Northern Cheyennes would be free to return to their homeland if they were dissatisfied at the southern agency, Dull Knife takes the whites at their word. In the face of malaria, dysentery, and starvation, he is determined to go north while some of the people are still alive: "To this old-time Cheyenne the promise of the officers in the north was like iron, and so he was going home."²³

Little Wolf is also a tribal chief. The bearer of the sacred chief's bundle of the Northern Cheyennes, he is honored for his bravery and has been entrusted with protecting the people:

Soft-spoken and gentle, he could whip any unruly Elk warrior to his duty and still, at fifty-seven, lead him in any battle. The Wolf had fought so hard when the soldiers struck the Cheyennes up on the Powder Fork two years ago that it stopped the heart. . . . Under his arm he bore the bundle brought to the Cheyennes by Sweet Medicine very long ago, and so was selected as the dedicated one of all the tribe, the man who must always forget himself, as their culture hero had done, and remember only the people. (15-16)

Unlike Dull Knife, Little Wolf has learned to distrust the white man. Sandoz contrasts the attitudes of the two leaders:

[Dull Knife's] wisdom was of the old days—of the wool-blinded buffalo feeding with his nose always into the wind, snuffing out danger, of the young grass waiting under the winter snow, and the Powers of the earth and sky and the four great directions—the old wisdom of the time when a man spoke

what he believed and his word was his life. But long ago something new had come into this, the *veho*, the white man, and to Little Wolf it seemed that the whites had to be met on their own terms, for now the power of numbers and of guns and the twisted tongue was with them. (20)

Through her characterization of Dull Knife and Little Wolf, Sandoz explores the history of conflict on the Plains. The wide rift between the values that the Native Americans yearn to maintain and those that the whites impose leads to bitter conflict between the two cultures and to dissension within the Cheyenne tribe. By examining discord and greed, Sandoz offers a miniature portrait of a larger issue. As we have seen, she believed that the subjugation of the Native Americans resembled the suppression of any minority culture.

In the preface to *Cheyenne Autumn*, Sandoz cites "the discovery of gold and the rise of economic and political unrest over much of the civilized world" as reasons for the white usurpation of Native American lands, culture, and sovereignty: "With millions of men hungry for a new start, . . . the romantic Red Hunter [became] a dirty, treacherous, bloodthirsty savage standing in the way of progress, in the path of manifest destiny" (vi).

Both Dull Knife and Little Wolf wrestle with adapting to white values and demands. Dull Knife clings steadfastly to his own integrity, refusing to conform to white values or to accede to white demands that he and his people return to the south: "'No,' he said in his soft Cheyenne. 'I am here on my own ground and I will never go back'" (192). The old chief declares that he will never leave his homeland, even if he must die fighting. Ironically, it is his people who die, killed by the white soldiers after the Cheyennes break out from Fort Robinson, while Dull Knife is condemned to live, a disillusioned and defeated man: "'I am an empty man!' he cried to the Powers, 'I have become so weak that I cannot even die with my people!'" (246).

Little Wolf, torn apart "as though he were both the rabbit and the eagle who fed on the quivering entrails," sadly concludes that the old ways must be forgotten:

The Cheyennes could escape the *veho* only by the *veho* road. The white man had the power and the Indian must learn to smile too when his heart was bad, say "*Hou!*" when he meant a roaring against it, say the "Yes, yes, this will be done," when it is only for so long as the eye was there to see. (107)

Sandoz lamented the necessity of Little Wolf's cynicism and, likewise, Dull Knife's disillusionment. Although she respected Dull Knife's original idealism, she questioned the desirability, or even the possibility, of integrating Native American and white culture. The repression suffered by the Native Americans at the hands of the whites led her to fear that cultural genocide would result rather than integration. In the absence of any synthesis, Dull Knife and Little Wolf are left to follow their own judgment and principles as they struggle to lead their people to freedom.

Through her representation of these larger-than-life characters and their extraordinary odyssey, Sandoz creates an epic work. She consistently develops the heroic themes inherent in the Cheyennes' experiences and actions. In her preface, Sandoz refers to the flight of the Cheyennes as "the epic story of the American Indian, and one of the epics of our history" (vii). She gives her Dull Knife and Little Wolf many traditional epic heroic traits: they lead their people during a time of extreme adversity and suffering; they seek guidance and strength from supernatural powers; and they feel alienation and separateness. Despite their differing points of view regarding the whites, Dull Knife and Little Wolf share many goals. Both struggle with questions of cultural identity and destiny, and both are dedicated to the welfare of the Cheyennes. The two men pursue their visions in divergent ways, but they together embody Sandoz's vision of epic heroism.

As in *Crazy Horse*, however, Sandoz reformulates the classical epic to her own purposes. Seeking to convey her own historical vision, she departs from the epic formula of the growth and continuation of a culture to portray a struggle destined to material failure. Sandoz's elevation of the members of the suppressed society to heroes reverses the traditional focus. Not vitality and hope, but death and disillusionment, characterize Sandoz's epic. "The names of these dead men were like a song, a song of the sun dance bloodletting, a great red blanket spread upon the ground to plead for a vision to save the people. But nothing came of all their dying, only more blood" (107).

Of the nearly three hundred Cheyennes who begin the trek north, many of them women and children, most die before reaching their homeland. Those who do survive the journey must live under a white-imposed system that runs counter to their lifestyle and spiritual and cultural traditions. "With his crippled, orphaned band [Dull Knife] came to sit in this north country that had cost so much. But the beaded lizard of his medicine dreaming, of his power to save the people, no longer hung on his breast" (271).

Little Wolf's last years at Fort Keogh are filled with pain, remorse, and self-imposed isolation. Even so, his deeds as a bold warrior and his dedication to the people are not wholly forgotten:

When he died in 1904, there were some who still remembered and still loved him. They propped his body up tall on a hill and piled stones around him, drawing them up by travois until he was covered in a great heap. There Little Wolf stood on a high place, his face turned to look over the homes of his followers and beyond them, down the Rosebud that flowed northward to the Yellowstone. (272)

By casting the dispossessed Native peoples, rather than their conquerors, as protagonists, Sandoz, like John Neihardt, reshapes traditional epic to fit the Plains experience. Moral

superiority lies with the victims. Despite their internal conflicts, which indeed are largely brought on by the actions and threatening presence of the whites, Sandoz's Native Americans display a richness of culture and a nobility of character not exhibited by their antagonists. They live in communion with nature and champion an unfettered way of life. Yet the minority culture is inevitably overpowered by the majority culture, losing its autonomy. Ultimately, however, the vanquishing of the Native peoples does not diminish the greatness of their culture or character or the exalted nature of their struggles. Indeed, in Sandoz's eyes, it is the conquering civilization, through its willful destruction of a vital and heroic culture, that is diminished. Despite the tragic quality of Sandoz's epic, the Cheyennes survive and claim a moral victory.

What has too long gone unrecognized is Sandoz's contribution to elevating indigenous peoples to heroic status. In *Crazy Horse*, *Little Wolf*, and *Dull Knife*, Sandoz recasts the dispossessed as epic heroes; and a careful reading of her works shows that she was one of the first New Western historians, focusing on the cost of western expansion.

NOTES

1. Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (1935; rpt., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962); *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* (1942; rpt., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1953; rpt., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

2. The collective tribal entity known as the Dakota, or more popularly as the Sioux, is comprised of three distinct groups, each with its own dialect: the Tetons, speaking Lakota; the Yankton and Yanktonai, speaking Nakota; and the Santee, speaking Dakota. The Tetons, or Lakotas, the largest tribal group, are subdivided into seven bands, including Crazy Horse's Oglalas. For a more thorough study of tribal nomenclature, see William K. Powers, *Oglala Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), pp. 3-12.

3. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, 1920), pp. 3, 1. In "Turner's First Stand: The Significance of Significance in American History," William

Cronon writes, "Turner did acknowledge the historical role of Indians and he never intended his technical use of the term *free land* to deny their existence—but he certainly did read their history through a Eurocentric lens that saw them as savage obstacles to the civilized progress that was his main story." Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), p. 91.

4. Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes* (1881; rpt., Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1964). Through her novel *Ramona* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1884), Jackson hoped to draw even greater attention to the urgent need for Indian policy reform. Though the novel proved to be popular, readers failed to grasp Jackson's underlying reforming purpose. Composed in the tradition of nineteenth-century women's fiction, *Ramona* was generally read as historical romance rather than as social protest.

5. Unlike Jackson (or Sandoz), Fletcher also worked with the U.S. government, hastening "assimilation" by promoting and helping to shape the Dawes Act of 1887, which distributed reservation land to individual Indian owners and made the vast "surpluses" after the allotments available to Euro-American settlers. The net effect of the Dawes Act was the economic marginalization rather than the cultural and economic assimilation of most Native American people. The Turner thesis implied that the lands of North America should be redistributed to white settlers; Fletcher's attempts to secure land in fee simple for the Indians helped assure that the redistribution would take place. See Robin Ridington, "Introduction to the Bison Book Edition" of Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, *The Omaha Tribe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 1-8. *The Omaha Tribe* was originally published in 1911. For an account of Fletcher's role as a pioneer in American anthropology and as a shaper of Native American policy, see Joan Mark, *A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

6. Angie Debo wrote six books on Native American history, the most significant of which is *And Still the Waters Run* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), dealing with the widespread practice in Oklahoma of cheating the Native Americans out of their land. For Debo's difficulties in publication see Suzanne H. Schrems and Cynthia J. Wolff, "Politics and Libel: Angie Debo and the Publication of *And Still the Waters Run*," *Western Historical Quarterly* 22 (1991): 184-203.

7. Ella Deloria to H. E. Beebe, 2 December 1952, quoted in Raymond J. DeMallie, afterword to *Waterlily*, by Ella Cara Deloria (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 237; Agnes Picotte, "Biographical Sketch of the Author," in *Waterlily*, pp. 229-31.

8. Clifton Fadiman, review of *Crazy Horse*, by Sandoz, *New Yorker*, 5 December 1942, p. 100.

9. John G. Neihardt, "Crazy Horse, Who Led the Sioux at Custer's Last Fight," review of *Crazy Horse*, by Sandoz, *New York Times Book Review*, 20 December 1942, late ed., p. 4. Sandoz, in turn, acknowledged the great influence Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* had upon the content and style of her work. In a letter to Bruce Nicoll (director of the Nebraska University Press), Sandoz termed Neihardt's book "one of the three best . . . first hand accounts of American Indians" (12 June 1960, Mari Sandoz Collection, University of Nebraska Archives and Special Collections; hereafter abbreviated as UNA-SC). Sandoz's two other favorite Native American accounts were Frank Linderman's *American: The Life Story of a Great Indian, Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crows* (New York: John Day, 1930) and *Wooden Leg: A Warrior Who Fought Custer*, interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis (Minneapolis: Midwest, 1931).

10. See Helen Stauffer, "Mari Sandoz's Use of Sources," *Platte Valley Review* 5 (1977): 47-56; "Narrative Voice in Sandoz's *Crazy Horse*," *Western American Literature* 18 (1983): 223-37; and "Two Authors and a Hero: Neihardt, Sandoz, and *Crazy Horse*," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (1981): 54-66.

11. Sandoz to Charlotte Curtis, 11 March 1956, UNA-SC.

12. See Helen Stauffer, "Mari Sandoz and the University of Nebraska," *Prairie Schooner* 55 (1981): 257; Sandoz to Bernard DeVoto, 9 April 1936, *Letters of Mari Sandoz*, ed. Helen Stauffer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 102. The traditional epic is a long narrative poem in an elevated style celebrating the feats of a central heroic figure who plays a pivotal role in the history of a nation or race. Conventions include invocation of a muse, beginning in *medias res*, cataloging of names, and the use of epithets and epic similes. Sandoz's epic vision reflects the Renaissance conception of epic with the hero as its most important element. John Steadman, in *Milton and the Renaissance Hero* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), identifies five basic characteristics of the epic hero of the Renaissance: fortitude, sapience, leadership, *amor*, and magnanimity. Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, shifted the focus, by rejecting the image of the exalted human hero and ascribing greatness only to God. Sandoz's portrayal of her protagonists as exalted and endowed with Renaissance virtues and

her historically-based approach separate her works from Milton's conception of epic and the subsequent anti-heroic epic.

13. Sandoz to Helen Blish, 16 June 1941, UNA-SC.

14. Stephen Halliwell, *The "Poetics" of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 37; John Kevin Newman, *The Classical Epic Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 39.

15. Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's "Iliad"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 169.

16. Sandoz is not the first to perceive epic qualities in the characters and events of Great Plains history. In his examination of how Willa Cather, John Neihardt, and Ole Rølvaag use traditional epic, Paul A. Olson asserts that what is essential to epic is the sense that "civilization is at a turning point, and that it was turned by the deeds of a great one or a few great." Olson's three Plains writers (and Sandoz, too, I suggest) drew upon the stories of their region to elevate peasant peoples, women, and minority groups to heroic status. See "The Epic and Great Plains Literature: Rølvaag, Cather, and Neihardt," *Prairie Schooner* 55 (1981): 264.

17. Paul A. Olson, "Black Elk Speaks as Epic and Ritual Attempt to Reverse History," in *Vision and Refuge: Essays on the Literature of the Great Plains*, ed. Virginia Faulkner and Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 3-27.

18. Sandoz, *Crazy Horse* (note 1 above), pp. 104-05. All further references to *Crazy Horse* are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

19. Sandoz to Lone Eagle, 11 March 1956, UNA-SC. Lone Eagle was the son-in-law of Luther Standing Bear, author of *My People the Sioux*.

20. Sandoz to Adolph G. Kaufman, 25 February 1948, UNA-SC; Sandoz to Douglas T. Barker, 16 February 1954, UNA-SC.

21. Orville Prescott's review is typical. He objected to Sandoz's style and her "pseudo-Indian manner" of expression but acknowledged the authenticity of her work and admired the epic heroism the fleeing Cheyennes displayed (*New York Times*, 18 November 1953, late ed., p. 29).

22. See, for example, Stauffer's "Two Massacres on the Sappa River—Cause and Effect in Mari Sandoz's *Cheyenne Autumn*," *Platte Valley Review* 19 (1991): 25-43; Pam Doher's "The Idioms and Figures of *Cheyenne Autumn*," *Platte Valley Review* 5 (1977): 119-30; and Barbara Rippey's "Toward a New Paradigm: Mari Sandoz's Study of Red and White Myth in *Cheyenne Autumn*," in Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski, eds., *Women and Western American Literature* (Troy, New York: Whitston, 1982), pp. 247-66.

23. Sandoz, *Cheyenne Autumn* (note 1 above), p. xvi. All further references to *Cheyenne Autumn* are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.