Keeping It Real: Simon Ortiz Resists “The San Francisco Indians”

Jane Haladay

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A pervasive theme in Acoma author Simon Ortiz’s extensive body of literature across time is that of maintaining Indigenous identity in the aftermath of colonization, from its earliest predations to its ongoing assaults across seven centuries. “We can’t take Indigeneity for granted,” Ortiz insists in the foreword to *American Indian Literary Nationalism*. “It is hard and tough enough to be Indigenous, especially against such heavy political, social, and cultural odds. On the other hand, it is too easy to be Indigenous,” Ortiz continues, “especially to be the very image of the Indian who is a foil and fool to the dominant culture and society.”¹ To maintain authentic Indigenous identity is no simple matter, as Ortiz’s writing and speaking consistently express, and no single feature of Indigeneity—original languages, living within original homelands, even oral traditions—can be pointed to as representing an individual’s or a community’s “cultural authenticity.” Rather, it is the tightly woven fabric of some or all of these features, and others besides, which Ortiz understands to identify contemporary Indigenous peoples. The reasons for this, Ortiz asserts, are “because identity has to do with a way of life that has its own particularities, patterns, uniqueness, structures, and energy. Because Indigenous identity cannot simply be attributed to only one quality, aspect, or function of culture. Because identity has to be relevant and pertinent to other elements and factors having to do with land, culture, and community of Indigenous people.”² Ortiz’s philosophy connects directly with the United Nations
Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People’s Article 33, which states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions. This does not impair the right of indigenous individuals to obtain citizenship of the States in which they live.” Consequently, much of Ortiz’s writing—as with much Native American/Indigenous literature in general—may be read simultaneously as resistance literature and human rights testimony. This applies not only to his nonfiction essays and poetry, for which he is more internationally known, but also to his one collection of fiction, Men on the Moon.

“The San Francisco Indians,” Ortiz’s short story first published in 1974 and later collected in Men on the Moon in 1999, fits the description of resistance literature by humorously articulating Ortiz’s persistent belief in the power of writing as a fundamental medium through which Native peoples exercise resistance to colonialist aggression manifest through racist policies, discourse, and image-making. “The San Francisco Indians” appears to be set shortly before the 1969–71 occupation of Alcatraz Island, in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury hippie heyday. In this story, Ortiz’s Native male protagonist reluctantly becomes a short-term guest of “Chief Black Bear” and his “tribe,” a small clan of white hippies and unwashed flower children who wear “Indian” clothing, appear to have no jobs, and wander the streets of San Francisco hoping to recruit “real” Indians to “guide [them] in the ceremony.” In complete counterpoint to Ortiz’s remarks above regarding the difficulty and necessity of Indigenous peoples fighting to retain their identities on their own terms, the San Francisco “Indians” in Ortiz’s story are of that group of counterculture youth, specifically white, who are devoid of personal and collective identity to the extent that they attempt to appropriate the identity of others. The speech and actions of Chief Black Bear and his tribe perfectly embody what Ortiz’s remarks caution against regarding the sort of “easy” Indigeneity that allows some to exploit “the very image of the Indian who is a foil and fool to the dominant culture and society.” In her book Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power, historian Sherry Smith identifies these concepts as being precisely why many white hippies of the 1960s and 1970s found American Indians so compelling. “Many looked to Indians as symbols of, and even models for, alternative ways of life,” writes Smith. “Native Americans seemed like perfect foils, in fact, to all that these predominantly Anglo Americans disdained about their own culture.” As members of the hippie counterculture in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury district during the late 1960s, the fictional Chief Black Bear and his tribe embody that particular combination of vague yearnings, privileged meaning-seeking, and identity performance that editors Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle describe in their book, Imagine
Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. Braunstein and Doyle write that “the term ‘counterculture’ falsely reifies what should never properly be construed as a social movement. It was an inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, ‘lifestyles,’ ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations. These roles were played by people who defined themselves first by what they were not, and then, only after having cleared that essential ground of identity, began to conceive anew what they were. What they were was what they might become—a process more than a product—and thus more a direction or a motion than a movement.”

Ortiz’s satirical story emphasizes the instability described by Braunstein and Doyle through the antics of his white characters’ appropriations of romanticized “Indian” identity that erase the reality of authentic Indigenous presence. “The San Francisco Indians” provides a portrait of surreal cross-cultural communication in which the most reasonable response for the real Indian man “captured” by the white “tribe” is, ultimately, to flee its clutches.

Ortiz’s story opens with an ironic declaration of what seems to be a paradoxical situation: “The Chief and his Tribe went to the American Indian Center at Mission and 16th. They were looking for an Indian.” Why, readers may wonder, would a “Chief and his Tribe” need to look for Indians? Soon enough, we learn the reason: this particular “chief” and “tribe” aren’t Indians. Ortiz continues:

They had walked all the way from the Haight. A lock hung on the door of the Center. They stood by the door, wondering whether they should go back to Haight, wait around, or call somebody.

“I wonder where all the Indians are?” one of the Tribe said.

“Maybe it’s a day off or something,” the other Tribe member said.

The Chief pushed against the door of the center again. He searched for a notice, but there was nothing. Just a “Fuck FBIs” graffiti slogan.

While the “tribal members” here aren’t trying to be funny, Ortiz jokes from the story’s outset about the ignorance of these white Indians regarding Native life. The image of the young white chief and his tribe hovering around the locked Indian Center door wondering about their next move, and who they might “call” to locate Indians, adds an absurdity to this situation: who would be the “somebody” this chief would call to find out where the Indians are today who were presumed to be at the Indian Center? Further, with the white Indian’s remark that Natives
might be taking “a day off” (whether from being Indian, just from visiting the center, or from something else is not made clear), Ortiz humorously implies the degree to which these wannabes are dilettantes playing dress up. As they stand perplexed, none of the group considers going to one of what would be a number of lively cafés, shops, or apartments located in the bustling 16th and Mission District of San Francisco to ask where the “Indians” might be (and in which they would undoubtedly find actual Indians), or to ask for information about the Indian Center. Although heading to the Indian Center seems like a reasonable starting point for their quest, once they find it closed, these befuddled white Indians immediately run out of ideas about how to connect with living Native people. And this all takes place in the story’s first ten lines.

“Indians,” Gerald Vizenor has observed, “have been invented to represent the concerns and presentiments of each generation.” Parallel to Vizenor’s claim is the reality that, increasingly since the flower child era, Native/American Indian literatures have become more assertive in their insistence that both writers and various reading communities become more informed about the significant issues, histories, spiritual beliefs, and worldviews important to Native peoples and communities, just as readers of Shakespeare and Faulkner have long been presumed to have background understanding about Judeo-Christian literary references and significant Western European and Euro-American historical events. Yet the reeducation process around Indigenous experience, not exclusively but predominantly for non-Natives, remains very slow going. Seneca Faithkeeper Oren Lyons stresses the imperative for this cross-cultural education: “We’ve got real problems today, tremendous problems which threaten the survival of the planet. Indians and non-Indians must confront these problems together, and this means we must have honest dialogue, but this dialogue is impossible so long as non-Indians remain deluded about things as basic as Indian spirituality.” Lyons’s opinion is expressed in a somewhat different way through cultural historian Philip Deloria’s observation that white America “has enshrined a multiculturalism” over the past three decades in which “simply knowing about Indians” and other people of color “has become a satisfactory form of social and political engagement. As a result, the ways in which white Americans have used Indianness in creative self-shaping have continued to be pried apart from questions about inequality, the uneven workings of power, and the social settings in which Indians and non-Indians might actually meet.” “Playing Indian” in the scenario Deloria describes here is far easier, more controllable, and more ego-gratifying than the often contentious and always delicate work of non-Natives interacting with Native peoples on Native terms and in the service of self-determined Native purposes.

“The San Francisco Indians” speaks to both Lyons’s and Deloria’s
assertions by creating a “social [setting] in which Indians and non-
Indians . . . actually meet,” and allowing the elderly Indian protagonist
to express to a group of young non-Indians a “real problem”: his rela-
tive has gone missing. While the white hippies appear sympathetic to
the Indian man’s plight, the story reveals that they are ultimately only
interested in helping themselves. Ortiz uses humor and caricature to
teaseingly scold the San Francisco Indians, and in doing so registers his
resistance to unconscious white racism and attempted Native spiritual
appropriation and identity theft.

Within the opening five paragraphs of “The San Francisco Indians,”
Ortiz references Native outrage toward U.S. federal authority in the
“Fuck FBIs” graffiti, a rage about which Chief Black Bear and the tribe
remain clueless. Because he doesn’t know what he’s looking for as “he
searched for a notice,” Chief Black Bear is thus unable to see that “a ‘Fuck
FBIs’ graffiti slogan” scrawled on a gathering place for urban American
Indians is “a notice,” perhaps the most blatant one in Ortiz’s story. This
single aggressive, overtly political assertion of Native resistance under-
girds more coded play in the realm of representation throughout “The
San Francisco Indians.” Throughout the story, the phrase’s allusion to
specific political moments of the late 1960s and early 1970s (including
the imminent Alcatraz Occupation, Trail of Broken Treaties, Bureau of
Indian Affairs Takeover, and Wounded Knee II) is stitched to the theme
of ongoing white cultural appropriation of Native spiritual practices
by the sharp needling of Ortiz’s ironic humor. Although they see the
“Fuck FBIs’ graffiti slogan,” the white tribe’s blindness to Native reali-
ties renders them incapable of decoding the literal writing on the wall,
and causes them to disregard this defiant declaration against colonial
surveillance and U.S. governmental authority as “nothing.” There is
irony here, too, in that this phrase is the only written expression repre-
sented in the story, and written in the colonizer’s English, yet the white
English-speaking Indians register no response to this silent slogan that
fairly screams at them from the wall of the Indian Center.

Ortiz provides no explicit explanation for this graffiti, which is
part of what makes its outrage and defiance funny alongside “the young
white man with a blanket around his shoulders and beads around his
neck.”13 Chief Black Bear is just one more oblivious white boy in pursuit
of his fantasy of making the world a more peaceful, spiritual, ecological
place through imitating his image of an Indian. Deloria has observed
that white youth during this time period were frequently “influenced
by media saturation and the co-optive codes of fashion” so that their
outfits, like Chief Black Bear’s, became “the emblems of social pro-
test . . . plucked from different worlds and reassembled in a gumbo of
new political meaning. That headband might mean Geronimo, but it
also meant Che Guevara and Stokely Carmichael.”14

Cultural scholar Deborah Root also addresses the tenacity of
1960s-era white attachment to romantic images of Indigenous peoples, and she expresses her frustration with the dangers that this romanticizing caused and still causes in the lives of actual Natives. In her essay “White Indians: Appropriations and the Politics of Display,” Root describes her “disturbing” encounter with “Karma,” a white hitchhiker Root picked up in British Columbia, who “proceeded to announce that he did not consider himself white because his spirit was Native; he was, he said, a ‘white-skinned Indian.’” Root elaborates on the mass cultural white “fantasy of Native people function[ing] as a metaphor for the rejection of mainstream, bourgeois, white society. Native culture, or, more properly, the bogus version of Native culture that existed in white imagination, came to stand for authenticity and redemption.” Certainly in “The San Francisco Indians,” Ortiz plays with this notion of white belief in “authenticity and redemption” through contact with a single Native man who becomes a fetish object imbued with all the false mysticism the young hippies collectively project upon him, ultimately revealing only their own lack of connection to Indigenous realities. Echoing Oren Lyons’s earlier claim that true cross-cultural understanding cannot happen without white people’s recognition of Native peoples’ circumstances and concerns, Root states, “I understand that a fanciful image of Native people, conveniently located in the past, is less demanding than the reality, but what is truly troubling is how the image continues to be affirmed in a way that is removed from contemporary Native struggles around land rights and sovereignty issues. So many white people—hippies, New Agers, some environmentalists—continue to talk about Native people rather than to them and to affirm an idea of Native culture as a source of redemptive spirituality that can be taken up at will.” Similar to Deloria’s theories, Root perceives white romanticizing of Indians as majority culture’s acceptable alternative—one grounded in white privilege and a colonizing mentality—to authentic advocacy for Indigenous human rights.

The “Fuck FBIs” graffiti—as the only piece of written text represented in the story, and one that bears directly on Native–U.S. government relations during this time period (and before, and since)—immediately punctures the faux-harmony Chief Black Bear and his tribe appear to be seeking through their quest for a “real” Indian to serve as a spiritual guide into their neo-mystical Indigenous communalism. Further, by utterly disregarding this graffiti, Chief Black Bear and his tribe also unconsciously dismiss any association between the graffiti’s aggressive rejection of Native surveillance and investigation by white colonialist authority and their own stalking of Indians in the Mission District. Ortiz’s strategic insertion of “Fuck FBIs” early in the story consequently infuses all subsequent interactions between the white hippies and the Indian man they ambush at the American Indian Center. The phrase forever
gives the fictional finger to this federal institution that has played such a complex, controversial role in the lives of American Indian peoples.

Pondering their next move back on Mission and 16th, the questing Chief Black Bear and his tribe spot an Indian at last. “The Indian man was around seventy years old,” Ortiz writes. “His gray suit was wrinkled and dirty and his shoes were scuffed. . . . It’s an Indian,’ the other Tribe member said. ‘Yes, it’s an Indian,’ Chief Black Bear said. He straightened his posture and walked toward the Indian.”18 Ironically, “the Indian man”—that is, the real Indian in this story—is never named and throughout the story is referred to only as “the Indian” or “the Indian man” by both characters and author, while the white hippie “Chief” is named with a faux “Indian” moniker.

When I recently asked Ortiz why he left the Indian man unnamed, he did not recall having a specific reason at the time he wrote the story. “I think I didn’t think about it,” he replied. “Or I felt it was irrelevant.” Yet upon reflection, Ortiz went on to explain:

It’s important not to name him because the “Indian man” is a more powerful presence because he is unnamed. Because in a sense anonymity gives him power. In other words, the very fact of namelessness is assigned a significance. Or a special presence. Perhaps there’s a kind of subversiveness at work here. The old man is a very significant element in the story; without his presence, there is no story. If he did have a name, like Charley or Henry or Red Horse or whatever name, it would detract from the power that anonymity provides “the Indian.” He would be just some Tom, Dick, or Harry.19

In addition to empowering the Indian man through anonymity—Chief Black Bear and his tribe are never allowed to “possess” the man’s name, or any specific feature of his authentic identity—Ortiz states that in leaving this character nameless, he “was considering the story to be told in the style and mode of oral tradition. That doesn’t mean that oral tradition story characters don’t have names—they do—but in this case the storyteller, which is the author/me, felt it was more effective-impactful this way. And, besides,” Ortiz concludes, “maybe I even considered, while writing the story, the Indian to be me.”20 In keeping with the “effective-impactful” way in which the storyteller creates meaning in Native stories, Ortiz has written elsewhere that “the cultural aspect of story, namely, the power of language in the Indian oral tradition, is what makes the picture vivid and alive. And this is what creates an Indian image that is real.”21

In this way, just as many traditional Pueblo stories open with old
Coyote “just going along,” the nameless Indian man becomes and remains the powerful focus of Indigeneity in Ortiz’s story, in sharp contrast to the story’s hippie Indians. Thus, even as the Indian man’s namelessness on one level allows him to function as merely an objectified Other, a tabula rasa on which the San Francisco Indians project their extensive mishmash of stereotypical beliefs and romanticized desires, this same anonymity, as Ortiz articulates above, assures that the Indian man’s authenticity is not usurped by Chief Black Bear and his tribe. Partly because they never ask him who he is—not his name or his nation—the Indian man fully retains his identity in delicious resistance to their vampirish cravings that he somehow makes them “real.”

After the Indian man meets Chief Black Bear and his tribe, we learn that the elder Indian man is searching for his granddaughter, who “came to school in Oakland” months before and wrote to let her parents know. “Then one day a letter came to them from the school,” the Indian man explains. “It said she was not in school anymore. I came to find my grandchild.”22 Here, the story pivots on the Indian man’s simple, powerful declaration. Learning that the Indian man is searching for his granddaughter, the Black Bear Tribe has the opportunity to offer genuine help. To offer assistance, however, would require finding out what the Indian man might need or want to do at this point in the encounter by actually asking him. Instead, the tribe glides superficially over the moment by luring the Indian man to their Haight Street crash pad with vague suggestions of future help that never materializes. Their greater goal, we learn, is to utilize this Native elder as the centerpiece in their own identity affirmation. As Smith succinctly puts it in her analysis of the Summer of Love white hippie scene, “On the streets of San Francisco in 1967, the primary interest in Indians derived from what non-Indians thought they could acquire from them—rather than the help they could provide Indians.”23

Braunstein and Doyle’s description noted earlier in this essay, of members of 1960s “counterculture” being largely involved in a “process” of “what they might become . . . and thus more a direction or a motion than a movement,”24 has particular resonance at this point in “The San Francisco Indians.” Having successfully located “an Indian,” Chief Black Bear invites the tired man back to the Haight, because “Indians sometimes come to the Haight,” the Chief tells the Indian man, and those Indians might help the man find his lost granddaughter.25 Despite the Indian man’s obvious fatigue and age, “they walked up and down hills” back to the Haight, which is no short distance (over two miles) from the Mission District. The “direction” of Chief Black Bear and his tribe seems aimless as they march across town. Their motion back to the Haight, while it does have a final physical destination, has the ultimate, more nebulous purpose of seeking to legitimize the young
white hippies’ fantasies of becoming “Indian” by exploiting the Indian man they have “found,” a word Ortiz uses near the end of the story (and which we might easily associate with the loaded term “discovery”). The San Francisco Indians’ goal contrasts sharply with the focused direction of the Indian man, who had set out on the urgent business of locating his missing granddaughter. This grandfather’s actions arise from the timeless motion of long-standing family and community relationship responsibility.

At no point in the story does Ortiz directly name the BIA’s 1951 “Relocation-Vocational Training Act” (commonly known as “Relocation” and later called the Employment Assistance Program), whose goals, according to one child of relocatees, Ray Moisa, were patently destructive of Indian traditional values centered around tribalism and the support of reservation life. Yet through the character of the Indian grandfather searching for his lost grandchild, Ortiz may be alluding to two of the frequent consequences of Relocation: its deep failure to provide support to relocated Natives unfamiliar with urban living who had been promised a better quality of life in major U.S. cities, and its ability to fragment Native families, separating many from their ancestral communities, homelands, and relatives. We are also left wondering about the school this granddaughter had been attending. Throughout the story, the few pieces of information we learn about the Indian man’s life raise more questions than they answer, as Ortiz keeps the white Indians under much closer scrutiny.

In 1969, a series of articles on San Francisco Indian life published by the San Francisco Examiner reported that “a private San Francisco consulting firm working on a federally-funded Indian study estimates . . . that at least half of the Indians brought to the Bay Area on relocation give up on the program and return home, and only 69 percent of those who stay find jobs.” We might understand the fictional Indian man’s granddaughter in “The San Francisco Indians” to be part of these statistics. “But statistics don’t tell the story of San Francisco Indians,” the Examiner story continues. “The story is in the very old eyes of a young woman on 16th Street. And in some urine-stained alleys of the Mission District. It’s scrawled on the walls in the men’s room of a bar: ‘Indians Are the Original Americans.’” Considering these grim images from the Examiner creates additional questions for readers regarding the whereabouts and possible fate of the Indian man’s missing grandchild.

Not coincidentally, perhaps, the Examiner article highlights the same 16th Street and Mission District locales in which the bewildered white tribesmen of Chief Black Bear stand looking for Indians in Ortiz’s story, yet remain entirely unable to read the larger narrative (to say nothing of the smaller details) of those “San Francisco Indians” outlined by the news article. Reporter John Hurst writes in this article that
“the American Indian Center of San Francisco estimates that 90 percent of the City’s 9,000 Indians are poor. And the American Indian Association of Oakland says that the great majority of that city’s 8,000 Indians live in poverty.” Such realities, had Chief Black Bear and his Tribe been aware of them, might have been considerably more disturbing and discomfiting to Chief Black Bear and his Tribe than one rumpled Indian man alone in the big city. “In putting on feathers and fur,” Philip Deloria explains, “...Indian players were forced to acknowledge at some level the social reality of native peoples,” yet that acknowledgment has always been partial and self-serving. “Indian play was a temporary fantasy,” Deloria continues, “and the player inevitably returned to the everyday world,” just as the young, white San Francisco Indians will. Significantly, as Deloria further articulates and the Examiner statistics underscore, “The world to which [a white Indian impersonator] returned was not that of Indian people, and, in that sense, play allowed one to evade the very reality that it suggested one was experiencing. It offered the concrete ground on which identity might be experienced, but it did not call its adherents to change their lives.”

Understanding these complex experiences of thousands of Bay Area Native people during the period in which this story is set foregrounds the ways Ortiz resists chronic colonialist attempts at erasing Native presence by drawing attention not to Native absence but to white privilege and ignorance. Ortiz opens his story by placing the befuddled Black Bear Tribe at the very heart of urban Indian life in 1960s San Francisco, Mission and 16th Streets, yet as one white tribesman asks, “I wonder where all the Indians are?” With the Examiner estimating seventeen thousand Indian people in San Francisco and Oakland alone, Chief Black Bear and his Tribe only seem able to identify a single Native man, who just happens to walk directly up to them at the Indian Center.

Eventually, after trekking north from the Mission District, the Chief and his group at last arrive in the Haight. There, the older Indian man observes:

Haight Street was crowded. And noisy. And gaudy with color. The Indian saw mostly young people just sitting or just walking. Like the young men with whom he walked, some were dressed in Indian fashion.

Since no once seemed to be doing anything but sitting or walking, the Indian wondered if it was a day off.

In this last sentence, Ortiz references the almost identical line spoken earlier in the story by one of the Black Bear Tribe—“Maybe it’s a day off or something”—when the group initially finds no Indians at Mission
These cross-referencing lines call attention to the worldview of the white San Francisco Indians, who believe that an absence of Natives at the American Indian Center indicates some kind of holiday, rather than suggesting that people may be at work, that the center is open only during certain hours, or that a specific event might have resulted in the center’s closure at that time. The Indian man, by contrast, reasonably assumes that a superabundance of able-bodied white youth not doing anything but “just sitting or just walking” around Haight Street must indicate a day off, because otherwise these vigorous young people would certainly be at work . . . wouldn’t they?

This air of white entitlement was part of the confusion and/or contempt felt by many Native people toward hippie culture, specifically when Native people witnessed the ways in which white youth superficially adopted the appearance of what they perceived to be the “simpler” lifestyle of American Indians. The reality was that the majority of urban Indians struggled daily with poverty and a lack of access to many resources, as noted above by the Examiner. Consequently, as Braunstein and Doyle observe:

The privileged status of white hippies placed them at odds with their inner-city neighbors in the two largest hippie urban meccas, San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury and New York City’s East Village. The hippies’ adoption of virtual poverty . . . was often regarded as cruel mockery by the black, Hispanic, and immigrant residents of these neighborhoods, who dreamed of attaining entry into the very material world the hippie children had casually—and provisionally—repudiated. As a result, tempers flared in the various hippie “fantasy ghettos” as voluntary poverty met its hereditary other. As one black resident of New York’s East Village put it, “the hippies really bug us, because we know they can come down here and play their games for a while and then escape. And we can’t, man.”

While Braunstein and Doyle do not include Native people in their list of nonwhite urban residents critical of white hippie culture in San Francisco and New York, Smith notes similar responses from Natives, who were baffled by and impatient with white “Indian” impersonators like the fictional Chief Black Bear and his tribe. Smith notes that Diane Reyna, of Taos Pueblo, “did not connect with [hippies’] interest in becoming Indian-like,” because, as Reyna states, “There was no way they could be. There was no way they could have any idea what it really meant to be Indians.” That white hippie “Indians” had the privilege
of remaining ignorant of lived Native realities and experiences while choosing whether to "play Indian," to go barefoot and unwashed, to live in the type of crowded, provisional urban housing that Native people were often too poor to escape, or to return the comforts of their parents' middle-class homes, was at the very least insulting to many San Francisco Indians.

Chief Black Bear next leads the Indian man "into a two-story building," where the Chief offers his guest "a small cot" to rest on, and brings him "a cheese sandwich and a bottle of wine" for refreshment. Having thus taken care of his guest, the Chief gets to work and states, "I'll go see if I can find some Indians." This statement is both ironic and odd, since he is already in the presence of an Indian; in addition, wasn't looking for Indians what led the Chief out of the Haight and down to the Indian Center in the Mission District in the first place? Readers aren't especially hopeful of the Chief's success at this point, yet once he is left alone, the Indian man "wondered if he would find his grandchild here," indicating his belief that perhaps the seemingly well-meaning hippies might actually be able to help him with own quest. The man eats his sandwich—Ortiz does not write whether the man drinks the wine—then lies down to rest. The next and final scene in the story is at once hilarious and surreal:

He was almost asleep when a girl's voice startled him awake.
   It was a girl with blond hair who wore a colorful Indian necklace.
   "Hello," the Indian said.
   "Hi," she said. "I heard Chief Black Bear found an Indian. Are you the Indian he found?"
   "I'm an Indian," the Indian said.
   The girl looked at him. She seemed to study him. And then she smiled. "I'm so glad," she said. And then she studied him again.
   After a long quiet moment had passed, she said, "We have some peyote from Mexico."
   The Indian did not say anything.
   "We have songs," she said.
   The Indian still did not say anything. But he looked like he was also studying the girl.
   "I'm not a member of the Black Bear Tribe. But Chief Black Bear told me that when we have the ceremony, I will join the Tribe," the girl said.
   The Indian man saw that the skin of the blonde girl was very white.
   "I asked Chief Black Bear to find an Indian to guide us in the ceremony. So it can be real when I join the Tribe."
The Indian man did not know anything about peyote. He had heard some songs and prayers for the ceremony, but he did not know anything about the ceremony. And he did not know how a person could join a Tribe.\textsuperscript{37}

In this wonderful moment of cross-cultural mutual examination, Ortiz plays with the long history of white people’s “study” of Indians since first setting foot on Indigenous lands, and the resulting volumes these “studies,” observations, and descriptions have yielded of who qualifies as “real Indians” from colonialisit perspectives. As authors including Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., Philip J. Deloria, and Ward Churchill have discussed,\textsuperscript{38} white America has since earliest contact fantasized a mythic Indian “Other” to serve a complex set of yearnings, anxieties, and needs to justify colonization and nation building focused on Indigenous genocide and resource usurpation. At the same time, white “students” of Indians have consistently remained oblivious to the ways in which the “objects” of their study, living Indigenous/Native/American Indian peoples, have been studying them back in resistance to being objectified, commodified, and stereotyped.

In his essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Homi Bhabha writes that “if colonialism takes power in the name of history, it repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce.”\textsuperscript{39} Bhabha’s observation is enacted through the young white girl’s farcical attempt to “become” a member of Chief Black Bear’s Tribe through recruiting an Indian to make it “real,” an effort at once impossible, ridiculous, and a perpetuation of colonial dominance over defining Native peoples and their spiritual practices. “Mimicry is thus the sign of a double articulation,” Bhabha explains, “a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. . . . The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.”\textsuperscript{40} Thus the more beads, the more blankets, the more white Indian “tribes” who are able to manipulate Native participation in making them “real,” Bhabha’s theory suggests, the more continuing colonialist claims of ownership and comprehension of Native reality are assured. Ortiz’s story, however, exposes the travesty of this particular farce through its Indigenous lens, and consequently denies the farce’s appropriative power.

After the conversation between the white girl and the Indian man, Chief Black Bear returns to announce, “There are no Indians around the Haight today . . . I don’t know where the Indians are.” This remark—more telling than the chief is aware of—is followed by a text break in the story. We might read this beat as the Indian man realizing that now would be an excellent time to take his leave, since the next line in the
story is the first in which the Indian man asserts his own will in opposition to the desires of Chief Black Bear and his Tribe:

“I think I shall go now,” the Indian said. “Thank you for the food and wine.”

“Wait,” Chief Black Bear said. “We want you to be with us. We have the sacred peyote medicine and songs ready for the ceremony.”

“We want you to guide us,” the blonde girl said. She reached out to touch the Indian, but he had already started for the door.

“I don’t know anything about peyote. I do not know anything about the songs and ceremony. I shall go now,” the Indian man said.

Philip Deloria has claimed that, “whenever white Americans have confronted crises of identity, some of them have inevitably turned to Indians.” Yet here, on the verge of the blonde girl’s identity crisis, Ortiz’s story deliciously turns away from these hippies by having the Indian man politely remove himself from the Haight Street matrix of colonialist contradictions, leaving the young white Tribe to grapple with its identity anxiety without him. The Indian man’s leave-taking language shifts from tentative (“I think I shall go now”) to definitive (“I shall go now”), emphasizing the Native man’s clarity and resistance to becoming one more prop in this confused pageant of white questing for spiritual faux/fillment. Thus the Indian man consciously evades his white-scripted role in the pervasive impulse of “Sixties rebellion” to enact “a politics of symbol, pastiche, and performance,” as described by Deloria. Deloria explains that white meaning seekers deployed Indian performances and, at times, attempted to deploy actual Indian people, because “play was powerful, for it not only made meanings, it made them real. The donning of Indian clothes moved ideas from brains to bodies, from the realm of abstraction to the physical world of concrete experience. There, identity was not so much imagined as it was performed, materialized through one’s body and through the witness and recognition of others. Such performances did not resolve contradictions, but they did make their dissonances seem somehow harmonious.”

Despite hippie attempts to “bond” with Indigenous peoples through emulating white fantasies of Indian spirituality and ceremonialism, however, the majority of Native people found little value in hippie youth culture. Sherry Smith cites the reaction of Cree folksinger Buffy Sainte-Marie from an interview given during San Francisco’s 1967 Summer of Love, in which she reflects on white hippies “emulating and identifying with Indians.” Sainte-Marie states that the whole idea
“doesn’t make any sense to me. The white people never seem to realize that they cannot suck the soul out of a race. The ones with the sweetest intentions are the worst soul suckers. It’s the weirdest vampire idea.” Non-Indian Peter Coyote, himself actively involved with white hippie culture in San Francisco during the late 1960s, and who admired and interacted with Native peoples and communities, believed that most white Indian-adoring hippies were not seriously concerned with the larger historical and contemporary realities of American Indian experience. Smith writes that Coyote believed “the hippie culture was ‘neither deep enough or profound enough, or disciplined enough to interest Native people too much.’” Coyote concludes that, “basically, the hippies were not a culture; [they] were full of ideas and often half-baked sentiments and work ethics that left the natives uninterested in the long term.”

As readers, we never learn what happens to the Indian man in search of his missing granddaughter, a man who has appeared and disappeared within a story framed by the images and voices of hungry whites hunting for personal gratification through the capture of Indian bodies whose cultural resources they hope to plunder. Ortiz gives the young white “Indians” the first and last words in “The San Francisco Indians.” The story opens with one of the white tribesmen asking, “I wonder where all the Indians are?” and closes with the “anguished cry” of “the blonde girl who wanted to be a member of the Tribe” echoing off the page: “I want it to be real.” The symmetry of these two expressions resonates with the ongoing impulse of the white hippies to lay claim, in true imperialist fashion, to a sort of Indigenous authenticity that, even as it is inaccurately imagined, is nevertheless not theirs to claim. An additional irony in the white girl’s plaintive lament at the end of the story is, of course, that she has just had a “real” Indian encounter with a real Indian, yet like the white Tribal members earlier in the story, she is unable to comprehend a Native reality beyond her own narcissistic and stereotypical constructions. The blonde girl illustrates Deloria’s point that such “communalists” who attempted to adopt Indian lifestyles in fact “tended to value Indian Otherness and its assorted meanings more than they did real native people.” It is against such ongoing appropriations and erasures that Simon Ortiz has engaged in sustained acts of decolonizing literary resistance across an approximately fifty-year career of writing, speaking, educating, and activism.

In a personal communication, Ortiz has informed me that in 1967 he “hitchhiked to San Francisco to be sort of part of the be-in’s, happenings, and so forth. Now that was the real hippy scene, man! Haight-Ashbury, Golden Gate Park, grass, street wayze and haze!” “The San Francisco Indians,” one of a number of San Francisco stories that Ortiz wrote during or about those days, at once paints a humorous portrait
of the yearnings of white Flower Children for more meaningful spiritual systems than those in which they have been raised, and openly resists the continued theft of authentic Native spirituality to satisfy those colonist yearnings. Yet while Ortiz takes a lighter approach to scrutinizing and resisting white attempts at cultural and identity appropriation in “The San Francisco Indians” (and even in the language of his e-mail above, he clearly finds nostalgic pleasure in recalling the San Francisco “hippy scene” of his own younger days), in other writing on this theme Ortiz’s tone and language are neither gentle nor good-humored. His rage and frustration are explicit, for example, in the poem “Essentialism,” which pointedly forces readers to interrogate their essentialist notions of “racial” or cultural identity. Ortiz opens his poem with a statement followed by a series of questions, visually staggered on the page to convey the speaker’s confusion, a confusion that seems more pronounced with each added question:

Knowing about being Indian
just because
you're an Indian.

What?
Hunh?
Huh?

“No one knows/ about being white,” the speaker continues, “just like no one knows / about being Indian. / Or Latino. / Or black. / Or Martian.” Yet Ortiz asserts to those others with whom he is in dialogue in this poem:

But I do know more about being Indian
than being white or Latino or black or Martian.

And that means
I do know more about being Indian
than you do.

Have you ever heard anyone ask what does it feel like to
be white?

And what do you feel when you’re asked too frequently
about being
Indian, Latino, or black?

What does it feel like to be Indian?
Really, I want to know.

Seriously?

Is essentialism untenable? Or is essentialism tenable?

I don’t know everything about myself as an Indian but I do know a few things about it. That’s the best I can do, believe me. I’m not bullshitting you.

*man sometimes i feel like punching someone out or even killing it’s so crazy you know you just feel like it when you get those stupid ass questions like some kind of test not that they’re even serious queries but feel more like deliberate harassing and demeaning ones that get you so riled you squirm and fidget and think insane twisted thoughts your emotions tangling and twisting your face and making you swallow hard*

Absent is the tone of playful mockery Ortiz employs in “The San Francisco Indians”; here, the identity assaults by outsiders that the speaker (certainly Ortiz in this poem) endures have accumulated to a critical breaking point.

Simon Ortiz’s satirical deconstruction of white “Indians” in “The San Francisco Indians” is one weapon of many in his arsenal of literary resistance against outsider attempts to erode the authenticity of Indigenous voice, experience, and concerns. “More strongly than any other Native writer,” Evelina Zuni Lucero declares, “Ortiz articulates and demonstrates the oral tradition as a dynamic lifeway to resist, teach, integrate, guide, and map one’s way, particularly in navigating the treacherous minefields of colonialism laid upon the Indigenous landscape.”

In powerful postindian form, Ortiz’s story illustrates Gerald Vizenor’s claim that “the postindian conversions are in the new stories of survivance over dominance. . . . The postindian ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulation of survivance.”

While “The San Francisco Indians” was published in 1974, Ortiz stated in an interview with Janet McAdams as recently as 2010 that “there are [still] many misunderstandings about Indigenous peoples, their history, and their culture. Actually, that’s a vast understatement! And more, actually, than an understatement, so much so that it’s funny! Except that it’s not really funny.” So while readers are invited to laugh at the ridiculous behavior of the spiritually starving white hippies in
Ortiz’s story, what’s not so funny is the fact that even now, forty years after the publication of “The San Francisco Indians,” Indigenous peoples must still fight to assert and maintain their authenticity against colonized thinking that insists on attempting to define for them who and what is “real.” Simon Ortiz remains one of the most vigilant and influential warriors of the Native literary resistance, reminding us through teasing and through outrage that Indigenous identity isn’t a matter of braids and beads, but of blood, history, and community belonging.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jane Haladay is associate professor of American Indian studies at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

NOTES

1 Simon Ortiz, foreword to American Indian Literary Nationalism, ed. Jace Weaver, Craig S. Womack, and Robert Warrior (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), xii–xiii.

2 Ibid., xi.


4 Since the San Francisco Indian Center burned down on October 10, 1969, and the long-term occupation of Alcatraz began on November 20, 1969, “The San Francisco Indians” must be set prior to the occupation.


8 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 117.

9 Ibid.


13 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 118.

14 Deloria, Playing Indian, 164.

Notes

16 Ibid., 226.
17 Ibid., 230; emphasis added.
18 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 117–18.
19 Simon Ortiz, “Re: Question About The San Francisco Indians,” e-mail message to author, July 17, 2013.
20 Ibid.
24 Braunstein and Doyle, Imagine Nation, 10.
25 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 119.
29 Ibid.
30 Deloria, Playing Indian, 184.
31 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 119.
32 Braunstein and Doyle, Imagine Nation, 12.
33 Smith, Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power, 133.
34 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 119.
35 Ibid., 120.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 120–21.
38 Although by no means the only authors writing on this complex topic, Robert F. Berkhofer Jr. (The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present [New York: Vintage Books, 1979]), Philip J. Deloria (Playing Indian), and Ward Churchill (Fantasies of the Master Race) offer a productive range of theories around conscious and unconscious projections by Europeans and Euro-Americans upon Indigenous peoples to justify colonization and cultural appropriation, from earliest contact through the present.
39 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 85.
40 Ibid., 86.
41 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 121.
42 Deloria, Playing Indian, 156.
43 Ibid., 164.
44 Ibid., 184.
46 Ibid., 72.
47 Ortiz, Men on the Moon, 117.
48 Ibid., 121.
49 Deloria, Playing Indian, 159.
50 Simon Ortiz, “Re: The San Francisco Indians,” e-mail message to author, October 18, 2008.
Notes

51 From Out There Somewhere by Simon Ortiz, 14–15, © 2002 The Arizona Board of Regents. Reprinted by permission of the University of Arizona Press and courtesy of Simon Ortiz.


53 Vizenor, Manifest Manners, 4–5.