

Reshaping American Indian Autobiography

Elissa Washuta. *My Body is a Book of Rules*. Pasadena, California: Red Hen Press, 2014. 189 pp.

<http://washuta.net/index.php/book/purchase>

American Indian autobiographies have been a popular genre of American Indian literatures since the publication of William Apes' (Pequot) *A Son of the Forest* in 1829. Mainstream American readers from the 19th century through the present have had an ongoing fascination with the insider perspective on Indian life. However, there are in reality at least two different genres, perhaps three, that have fallen under this category. A number of Native-authored autobiographies would somewhat fit the usual definition of the word—writing one's own life story. Samson Occom's (Mohegan) "A Short Narrative of My Life," may be the earliest written in English dating back to September 17, 1768, though it lay unpublished in the Dartmouth archives until 1982. George Copway (Ojibwa) published his *Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh* in 1847. Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (Pauite), perhaps the first American Indian woman to do so, published her *Life Among the Piutes* in 1883.

At this point in the chronology of the genre, however, the definition of the word "autobiography" becomes more problematic in regard of the agency of the subject in creating the text, with the autobiography of Charles Eastman (Santee Sioux), whose non-Native wife Elaine acted as his collaborator on both *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916). She says of their process: "'Dr. Eastman's books left his hand . . . as a rough draft in pencil, on scratch paper.' She then typed copies, 'revising, omitting, and re-writing as necessary'" (qtd. in Brown Ruoff 56). Luther Standing Bear was similarly assisted by E.A. Brininstool with *My People, the Sioux* (1928). Zitkala-Ša (Gertrude Bonin) published her autobiographical pieces in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900-01, the ones reprinted in *American Indian Stories* in 1921, during her marriage to Raymond T. Bonnin, but her career in literature ends after their marriage, with the exception of a collaborative effort with William Hanson on *Sun Dance*, an Indian opera, leaving a question about the degree of collaboration on her earlier work. But for most scholars of American Indian literature, these still fall under the category of autobiography. They are categorized with later sole-authored works such as those of Francis La Flesche (Omaha), John Joseph Matthews (Osage), N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), Janet Campbell Hale (Coeur d'Alene), Gerald Vizenor (Ojibwa), Delphine Red Shirt (Lakota), and Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek). Indeed if Eastman's, Standing Bear's, and Zitkala-Ša's works and the later sole-authored works depart from the genre expectations of autobiography, those departures regard form and content rather than questioning whether the primary creator of the text is the self. American Indian autobiographies, like other Indian narratives, are not necessarily chronological in structure, and they have tended, particularly since the American Indian Literary Renaissance, to include stories of one's people and not just of the self, stories of tribe and family, oral traditions, and ethnographic accounts.

However, some texts considered American Indian autobiographies in reality make up a sub-genre of narrated autobiographies. In fact, according to Duane Champagne, “Native American autobiography is a unique literary form in that over 80 percent of what is usually referred to as American Indian and Alaskan Native autobiography has been collected and edited by non-Native[s]” (756). Much of the non-Native collected and edited material, usually gathered and prepared by anthropological method, grew out of the notion of the “Vanishing Indian,” the need to “preserve data” about these “dying cultures.” *Black Elk Speaks*, told by Black Elk to John Neihardt, published in 1932, is the most famous of these. Raymond J. DeMallie’s work has shown serious questions about whose text this really is, given the amount of shaping Neihardt did of Black Elk’s account. This has been true of a number of texts created in this manner. Unfortunately, the impact of this has been to validate for outsiders through this popular genre static notions of Indianness, the reinforcing of stereotypes cloaked in the deceptive forthrightness of autobiography. These texts purport authenticity, but are really designed to historicize and exoticize the other for mainstream consumption.

Cowlitz and Cascade writer Elissa Washuta’s *My Body is a Book of Rules* subverts all three of these genres as well as audience expectations, taking the reader on a discomfiting, but enlightening and ultimately healing journey through a painful reality, giving us a level of authenticity that we actually may be unprepared for, but need. Washuta has had enough narratives constructed by others attempt to control who she is or who she “should” be. Her innovation of this genre’s structure, mindbogglingly innovative, yet organic to her content, creates an unflinchingly honest self-portrait of an American Indian young woman in 21st century America. Moreover, her content has such import for an entire generation that I firmly believe it should be required reading for every college student, not merely those interested in American Indian literature. An Indian girl, it turns out after all, isn’t so different from other American young women today: objectified, vulnerable, confused, and abused both by those males who have been taught to internalize the dominant cultural narrative of conquest, seeing the female body as territory to exploit, and by herself. Washuta’s story utilizes the power of words in the tradition of Scott Momaday and endless generations of Indian storytellers to flip the script, change the narrative, and take possession of herself—body, mind, heart and spirit—as her own sovereign nation, both as an Indian and as a woman.

Washuta begins her book setting us up as readers to see the sharp contrast between traditional value systems and the struggles she faces as contemporary American Indian female college student, a survivor of genocide and assimilation. She juxtaposes a quote from Mourning Dove’s autobiography: “A girl who guarded her chastity was considered valuable in the eyes of our warriors. A man would willingly give many ponies and robes for such a wife” (1), with an account of the executions of several Cascade leaders on March 28, 1856 at the order of Colonel Wright, including one of her own ancestors, Tumalth. Washuta records her genealogy as “begats,” echoing the Bible carried to Indians by Christian colonizers, a “Book of Rules” that still greatly impacts lives such as Washuta’s today. Washuta’s life today plays out in a different relation to colonization and assimilation than Mourning Dove’s does in an earlier era. The “rules” have all changed.

Like many American Indian people and tribal descendants today, Washuta grew up almost as distanced by diaspora from her Indian self as from her land and people. Her mother's people were from the West Coast, Cowlitz and Cascade Indians, and Washuta was a non-phenotypically Indian Catholic school girl in Maryland, growing up in a good home, born to good people, doing well in school, but struggling like all young women do today with the messages that society and media continually scream into their brains, messages that dictate what one must do to be valuable to men, worthy of what is spun to young women as "love." Largely, these "rules" proscribe how young women must conform their flesh, mold their bodies and their actions for the pleasure of men. These rules are put in schizophrenic contrast with the values of the church that America holds up on the other hand as a purportedly Godly nation, rules that discipline and control female sexuality, that divide "good" women from "bad" based on its suppression or expression.

This volume focuses in on Washuta's college years, beset by bi-polarity, a prescription pill roller coaster with loops, bends, and sharp drops, and an eating disorder resulting from a societal preference for the sketal complicated by medication-related weight gain and loss. Sexual violence and alcohol overconsumption round out Washuta's schedule as she takes the course I call "Freedom 101," the class that makes or breaks eighteen year olds emancipated from home. Her story is all too common, an experience shared with many young women today, as academics know. Research tells us that one in five women are raped while in college (White House Council on Women and Girls). Likewise, we aren't surprised with the alcohol consumption detailed in the book. We know many rapes reflect an environment we see from the margins. Forty percent of college students report having engaged in binge drinking in the last thirty days. *Ninty-seven thousand* college students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four are victimized in date rapes and sexual assaults in situations involving alcohol abuse each year. More than one hundred thousand students of that age say they have been too drunk to know if they consented to sex or not at least once in the past year (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism). Elissa Washuta is far from alone, and her decision to speak out, to take control of her own story, is a cry for help from an entire generation.

Washuta's book traces her survival of ancestral genocide, assimilation, and misogyny through a unique structure. Washuta's travels through memory toward healing can be dizzying in their nonlinearity, but though there twists and turns along the way, we, like she, can see the light at the end of the tunnel. A numbered series entitled "A Cascade Autobiography" frames the book and separate the chapters, a miscellany of forms. It is in this series that Washuta mostly addresses the "histories embedded in [her] bones" (4), her connects to her ancestors, most directly. Nevertheless, the straight A student's highlighting of her ethnicity to "make [her]self special" during her interview with the scholarship committee along with her stated goal to "do something for [her] people" (7) force her to confront the complexities of her identity and *identifying* throughout both the book and her college years. "Part 2" says: "I look white. You might think that means I am white. You are wrong. I have a photo ID that says OFFICIAL TRIBAL above my Indian grin" (8). Despite this bravado, Washuta grapples, with cultural marginality and low

blood quantum and tries to reconcile these with her federal recognized status as she comes to terms with her identity, taking control of her colonized Indian body as she takes control of her raped female body through language.

The first chapter, “The Dread,” gives us our exposition in a standard enough form. The second, “Note,” however, consists of a barely edited and frank letter from the psychiatrist who treated her while she was in graduate school that acquaints us with her depression, anxiety, and PTSD, the latter stemming from a “sexual assault in January of 2005” (8). We begin to get a glimpse of the medication merry-go-round Washuta was subject to in treatment and the wide ranging impacts on her physical and mental well-being. Yet another chapter, “Please Him,” is an exploration of the antipodal influences of Catholic schooling and schooling in American popular culture via “sex tips from *Cosmopolitan*,” which includes, among other forms, a list of new “Commandments” Washuta internalized, such as “you will never snag a husband if you don’t know what to do with his dick” (17). This is paralleled with a Q and A *Cosmo*-style, questions Washuta thought were “important when she was twelves, eight years before [she] lost [her] virginity” (17). Both gave me pause as a reader, beginning to realize exactly how unsheltered young girls growing up twenty to thirty years my junior had been—even before taking into account the internet, even girls were sent to Catholic schools—and what a huge impact this has had on the psychology of college aged women today. The schizophrenic messages directed at her cause Washuta to contemplate: “To be a sinful woman is to be a whore” (24). She combats this message through tracing a more accurate history of figures such as Mary Magdalene and Jezebel as she reflects on her relationship with her high school boyfriend, with whom she stayed in a relationship two years into college, keeping her virginity intact (24).

The next chapter, “Faster Than Your Heart Can Beat” traces her encounters with the subsequent twenty-four men, “counting backwards” (28). As we work back to “#1,” we work our way back through compulsive behavior to initial trauma, realizing Washuta’s sexual choices had as much if not more to do with this date rape as they did with the dictates of media. “Preliminary Bibliography” details various literary influences on Washuta growing up, from books about mermaids—the only images of women sexualized subtly enough for Washuta to be allowed access to them as a “small girl” (40)—to books about sharks and shipwrecks. Washuta reveals a correspondence between danger and her attraction as a young girl to the female body that redirects to males as she reaches Joanna Cole’s *Asking About Sex and Growing Up*. Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone*, read prematurely at fourteen, makes Washuta say, “I wanted to be raped, too, so that people would know my pain was real and rooted” (41). We see the pattern. Literature in its varied forms, not just mass media, fetishizes the female body for all of us, transforms it as vulnerable to danger, makes it the territory to be conquered. As teenaged Washuta moves on to poetry with *I Was a Teenaged Fairy*, Francesca Lia Block glorifies “beautiful, underweight tragic girls . . . starved, mentally ill, tortured from the outside in and the inside out” (42). While Block led Washuta to conclude that society idolizes women as victims, Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Bigger’s decapitation of a woman’s body, read in the class where she was “teacher’s pet,” guide her to connect attraction to

her by “much older men” to “dismembered bodies,” making both Washuta and the reader connect societal obsession with young women with the victimizing of them. This is reinforced by her reading of diet books and a book on sororities. While each work she surveys fills in a gap in our understanding of her, I have to admit that the academic in me bemoans her youthful dislike of Silko’s *Ceremony*, of Shakespeare, and of Faulkner. Washuta was far more impacted by Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, his breaking of the “rules,” his use of different fonts and colors and alternative layouts. Other books, expectedly at this point in our reading, connect with her experience of rape—“When we are raped, we want to read about rape” (48)—move us through changes in psych meds, and take us across the continent with Washuta to Seattle for grad school in an attempt not merely to connect more with her ancestral roots, but also with the ground sacred to her erstwhile idol, Kurt Cobain.

At this point, the book turns more to treatment, as does Washuta when she relocates. We begin as readers to understand her attempts to control her body through eating as not just societal influence, but the result of the loss of control of one’s own body in rape. “Prescribing Information,” one of the chapters most disturbing for me as the parent of an adult autistic daughter and the daughter of a multiply victimized mother with bi-polar disorder, surveys twelve medications tried on Washuta by physicians, giving excruciating detail of the impact they had on her mentally and physically. As a woman who has experienced rape, the added complication of weight gain and loss caused by medications robs her yet further of control. When Washuta has an allergic reaction to the medication that had the best effect for her with the least negative impact, the reader mourns along with Washuta and her doctor, realizing that nothing that comes in a bottle can cure what ails her, whether the contents be alcohol with its numbing effect or something that professionals thought would “fix” her. We as readers, both as part of the world that has served Washuta and other young girls up for dinner and as victimized ourselves, know there’s no easy fix for us either.

Other chapters include series of diary entries; a mock academic study based on real interviews Washuta conducted with other young people about their sexual experiences (complete with citations and explanatory footnotes); and a *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* episode Washuta wrote featuring herself; her rapist, “The Villian”; Good Cop; Bad Cop; attorneys; and a Psychiatrist. This chapter not only clarifies the details of Washuta’s initial trauma, but also introduces us to a subsequent violation, an experience all too common to those who have been raped. Another includes an excerpt from Washuta’s first rapist’s blog, demonstrating that he considered their experience merely a failed relationship, and flash fiction pieces by Washuta that indirectly communicated her experience to others. However, the real heart of the chapter consists of the footnotes that detail the online conversation Washuta had with a friend after her first rape, the conversation that actually made her accept that rape is what had taken place. “Many Famous People Suffer from Bipolar Disorder” educates us on the depression of Kurt Cobain, long Washuta’s obsession, though she has repeatedly denied at this point in the book having been suicidal as he was. Washuta then turns to Britney Spears to demonstrate the effect of mania to us. Finally, she turns to herself, showing her own condition to be somewhat in between the two, “dysphoric mania, agitated depression, or a

mixed state” (139). She draws out comparisons to these icons of hers, then mock interviews Cobain before moving on to Saint Dymphna and reminding us of the Catholic roots of her outlook on sexuality. Dymphna, dismembered by her mentally ill and grieving father for resisting his attempts to rape her, stands as a metaphor for all young women in mainstream American culture, raped symbolically and literally on a daily basis by those who should protect them because of the systemic nature of the violent objectification and commodification of the female body in our society.

As Washuta moves toward healing, she includes longer interchapter sections in the series “A Cascade Autobiography,” able finally to write her Indian self whole despite her fractionated blood quantum. We see further healing in “I Will Perfect Every Line Until My Profile is Flawless,” a mock Match.com profile. Though we may be disturbed she would even consider going out with anyone she met online after we have learned of her experiences, the extensive commentary in footnotes lets us know she is in a much better space. By we reach “Please Him, Part 2” and “The Global Positioning Effect,” we see a Washuta who loves herself, who chooses herself over sainthood as she continues to wrestle with her complex relationship with God and the church, who chooses herself over dysfunctional behavior as she continues to seek “Mr. Right,” and most of all, who writes herself and her Indian life even though she continues to find no easy resolution to her own struggles with mixed, marginalized identity. Though the journey is traumatic as we follow Washuta down the winding paths of memory through multiple genres, it is worth it, as life, despite pain, is worth it, “the most important thing God gave you” (172). For both those who have experienced trauma themselves and those who are merely part of a world where we allow such things to happen, this book is a necessary read, particularly for those in their college years and those of us who parent or teach them. This book does what a book about the impact of rape and rape culture on a young woman’s life ought to do for readers: it makes us want to find a cure for all of us that parallels her own. It forces the realization that it is we who must fix ourselves.

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