

The Autobiographings of Mourning Dove

Why do we visit graves?

Why would we travel to a place we have never been to before, and stand at the foot of a grave in which lie the remains of someone we have never seen in the flesh?

In the summer of 1992 I drove to Omak, Washington, to visit the grave of Mourning Dove, the first Native American woman ever to write a novel. At the tourist bureau they had never heard of her, but they told me that the graveyard I had mentioned was in Okanogon, the next town.

The graveyard, white and dry under the hot familiar sun, was deserted. I parked my car and got out and stood where I could see the whole place. Then I walked to the area that looked 1930s-ish. The first grave I looked at was hers.

She had bought this plot out of her minimal wages from hard orchard work, a grave in a white people's cemetery. In Jay Miller's introduction to her autobiography, I had read that the words on her marker were only "Mrs. Fred Galler" (xxvi). But now I saw that someone had cut a rectangle out of the old stone and put a new marker in its place. It depicts a white dove flying over an opened book upon which are the words:

MOURNING DOVE

COLVILLE AUTHOR

1884—1936

There I was, a still living white male, standing, and eventually kneeling at the last narrow home of a great woman I had not heard of while I was being

educated there in that Okanagan Valley.¹ She died when I was seven months old. I did not read her books until I was the age that she had attained at her death. What did I think I was doing there? I was reading.

Why do we read autobiographies?

Reading is a cultural act, and our habits of reading will accumulate into a description of our culture. As Janet Varner Gunn puts it, “The truth of autobiography is to be found, not in the ‘facts’ of the story itself, but in the relational space *between* the story and its reader” (Gunn, 143).

Traditionally we have read male autobiography as a version of history, as the story told by those statesmen and militarists who have exercised power. Traditionally we have read female autobiography as *alternative*, the occluded life, domestic, personal and perhaps solipsistic. Perhaps concerned with the permission to write such a thing at all, with an identity. Estelle Jelinek writes: “In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women often depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image colored by a sense of inadequacy and alienation, of being outsiders or ‘other’; they feel the need for authentication, to prove their self-worth” (Jelinek, xiii). Of course many of the most successful female autobiographies have narratized the overcoming of obstacles, and the attainment of an identity that is quite satisfactory, thank you.

Of course if you were a woman, and if you were from the Interior Plateau country, and if you were an aborigine, you were triply marginalized. You might be exotic, but if you wanted to be a writer, you had to do your writing with whatever skills you had managed to develop, in a tent or a shack, after ten hours of working in an orchard and after cooking the meals for your husband and yourself at least. That is why a still living white male will think more than twice before trying to apply normal academic, theoretical or ethnographic methods to your autobiography.

There have been several versions of the main facts assigned to Mourning Dove’s life, the disagreements caused by her fictionalizing and by the errors made by white academics coming from their various angles to use her story. She was most likely born in 1885 in Idaho, the first daughter of Lucy and Joseph Quintasket (Dark Cloud). Lucy was the daughter of a woman from the Colville Tribe, one of the tribes who share the enormous Colville² Reservation in northeastern Washington, and of a

man who came from the Lakes people of eastern British Columbia. Mourning Dove's other grandmother was from the Nicola, a somewhat mysterious people who lived among the Okanagans near Merritt, B.C. Her other grandfather was probably an Okanagan, though for literary and political reasons Mourning Dove suggested that he was a white man named Haynes. There were white people named Haynes in the area. My mother used to work in Haynes's packing house in Testalinda, a mile from the Indian school at which Mourning Dove taught in 1917.

The Quintaskets usually lived on or near the Colville Reservation, among people of several Salish tribes³ who had been reduced to poverty and the meanest of jobs in agriculture by the policies of the powerful whites in the eastern States. Christine Quintasket managed to get some schooling. First she went to a boarding school, and was introduced to the English language by French-Canadian nuns. Later she went to the Colville Mission school in Fort Spokane. When her widowed father married a young woman, Christine went to Montana, to trade menial work for a chance to go to an Indian school there.

But she spent more time at home than she did at schools. At home she learned a love for narrative from her two most important teachers, an adopted grandmother and an adopted white brother.

These two instilled in the Indian girl a desire to be a story-teller and a writer. For her last formal schooling she went to a business college in Calgary, where she endured the typical racism of that city, and learned things such as shorthand and typing, skills that would prove handy later while she was gathering traditional stories or writing her life by coal oil light in the night cabin. The school in Calgary did not make her spelling and grammar perfect.

But Mourning Dove wrote three important books that are in print now: *Cogewea the Half-Blood*, a novel that has been aptly called a "protest romance," (Larson, 177), *Coyotes Stories*, her versions of tales she collected from elders on both sides of the International Boundary, and *Mourning Dove: a Salishan Autobiography*, which was not to be published until a half-century after her death. The three books are equally autobiographical, and they are all about something other than Mourning Dove's life.

Mourning Dove worked herself to death. She died at the age of about fifty-one, though by her own construction she would have been forty-eight. She left no children. In the grave she was for decades Mrs Fred Galler. Now

the name on the stone is Mourning Dove, and the occupation is author rather than Mrs. For any reader standing over that stone she has no age.

Sometimes I ask students in my classes what their first and last names mean. Hardly any of them know. So this is what a name means in non-aborigine society: a few words on an ID card. But in a Salishan world, a name means a great deal more, whether a name of a place or a name of a person, and everyone knows this. A name is a gift, or it is family property. It is bestowed or it is earned. It is an act of honour.

When she was a little girl her parents called her Kee-ten. When an old neighbour woman named Ka-at-qhu died without passing her name to a grandchild, Kee-ten became Ka-at-qhu. A few years later a shaman woman who was pleased with the girl's help gave her her name to carry on, so now Kee-ten was also Ha-ah-pecha. Mourning Dove said that people on the reservation still used those names when speaking to her decades later.

But by this time in history Indian girls were also carrying Christian names. In the white world she was known by equivalencies of her name Kee-ten. She was Christine and Christal and Cristal and Catherine Quintasket. At the convent school she was enrolled as Christine Joseph, because her father's name was Joseph. When she was first married she signed her letters Cristal MacLeod. During her second marriage she was Christine or Catherine Galler. But Christine Quintasket wanted to be a writer, and she wanted to be an Indian writer who would be read by white readers. She decided that as a story-teller she would take the name Humishu-ma. Then she decided that the English version of her writer's name would be Morning Dove, because that bird is, in Colvile legend, the faithful wife of Salmon, and welcomes him upstream every year. Salmon-fishing is the sustenance of life for the peoples of the great Interior Plateau. In a museum in Spokane, Christine saw that the proper spelling was Mourning Dove, and though she said that it was because of that connotation not the same bird known to the Indian people, she settled on Mourning Dove as her writing name. That is the story of Mourning Dove's name.

The name Haynes does not figure at all. But these names do: Lucullus Virgil McWhorter, Heister Dean Guie, and Jay Miller. They are the names of three white men who had, in their various ways, faith in Mourning Dove's importance, and helped in the preparation of her three books, the last of course unknown to her.

When an Indian person authored a book in early twentieth century America, she was (and often still is) met with two challenging responses. One: is this person really an Indian or another Grey Owl? Isn't D'Arcy McNickle really three-quarters European stock? What about Thomas King? Two: did this person really write that book, or was it done by a white anthropologist with an ear? Did Black Elk speak much?

Anyone reading *Cogewea*, especially in these latter days, notices that the language is folksy and out-westish when the spirited "half-blood" heroine is joshing with the ranch hands: "I'm a thinkin' yo' all'd make a good preacher woman. Them there kind what wants ter be made perlice wimin an' jedges an' th' main push. Wantin' to wear breeches an' boss th' hull shebang" (42). But often the reader will find a lecture about the conditions imposed on Native Americans by the U.S. governments, and that these passages are rendered in the language one expects from a school teacher who once had to read Cato: "They lacked the perceptive sagacity of a certain great reformer of nearly two thousand years ago; who, when carrying the Message to the benighted Athenians, 'stood in the midst of Mars hill' and declared that it was of their 'Unknown God' to whom he had noticed an altar erected, that he spake" (133). This is Cogewea in conversation with the opportunist easterner she resists and then unhappily falls for.

The novel is, as it says on the title page, "Given through Sho-pow-tan," the Indian name that she and others gave to McWhorter. It is pretty clear that it was McWhorter who added the didactic diatribes against white exploitation that delay the narrative. One wonders whether the undoubtedly good-hearted McWhorter thought that the stilted language was normal enough to be used by Mourning Dove the author or by her characters. Was McWhorter's grasp of fiction so poor? Of course he had a somewhat different agenda than that of his co-author. In later years, when Mourning Dove sent new manuscripts to McWhorter she asked him to stay away from the arch rhetoric, from what she called white people's big words.

It is a sad fact of life that when white anthropologists who are genuinely sympathetic with the cause of indigenous peoples become interested in their stories, they are interested in them for anthropological reasons and thus marginalize their literary qualities, hence exhibiting what could be called a very subtle racism. Jay Miller says that Mourning Dove's letters show that while she was working on the Coyote stories, "McWhorter was concerned that *Indian* themes and concerns be highlighted, whereas

Mourning Dove wanted to express her knowledge and literary talents” (*Autobiography*, xxiii). Intelligent people on both sides of the text understand that problem and work together to make the best of an imperfect situation. There are several such problems in the area of ethnobiography. Mourning Dove’s Coyote stories and autobiography would have been, perhaps, more interesting to read in scripted Interior Salish.

Mourning Dove was an Indian woman writing in the language of her white readers. Just about any of her readers was going to be more interested in her as a representative of her people than as a novelist. The same was likely to be true of her editors. Mourning Dove was also a politician. In addition to the long hours she spent on ladders in orchards, at laundry sinks in rooming houses and at her ill-lit typewriter, she spent a lot of time working for Native people who were caught in the hard machinery of liberal democracy. She rescued families from border police. She wrote illuminating letters to newspapers and the State house. She became the first woman on the Colville Reservation Tribal Council.

In all her books one can discern her two principal social purposes—to make certain that her people’s stories and the story of their life will be preserved in print while their way of life is being threatened by officially-induced poverty, and to make a bridge between the Indians and the whites on their land. It is easy to assume that these two ambitions are at odds with one another. But Mourning Dove, whose view must be taken as better qualified than ours, did not think so. She was aware of the dangers one must inevitably pass through. One of the most amusing scenes in *Cogewea* concerns the heroine’s anger at a white woman’s fanciful book about Indian life. Some of the ranch hands joke about the misinformation they handed to an eager female tenderfoot scribe: “Why, them there writin’ folks is dead easy pickin’ for the cowpunchers” (94). Finally “Cogewea found solace in consigning the maligning volumn [*sic*] to the kitchen stove” (96). Writing this novel during the second decade of the twentieth century, Mourning Dove seems to anticipate most of the arguments heard more recently about paternalism and misappropriation of voice.

In *Cogewea*, with its melodramatic plot and editorializing, the most interesting and accomplished passages are those in which Cogewea’s grandmother, sometimes in her sweat lodge, tells the stories and traditions of pre-contact Salishan life. They are interesting not only because of their ethnographic information but also because of their narrative skill. They are

clearly Mourning Dove's purest contribution to the novel.

And they are most clearly the nearly perfect conjoining of tradition and the individual talent. That conjunction is what Jay Miller has tried his best to produce in the autobiography. I like to notice the nice title: *Mourning Dove: a Salishan Autobiography*. Everyone has treated of that word "autobiography," and its constituent parts. James Olney has shown the way in which twentieth century reading has shifted attention from *bios* to *autos*, from life to self (Olney, 19). Miller's title tells us that in our approach here we have to look for something else, something created by the concepts of person and people among the aborigines of the Interior Plateau, and by the dynamic of Mourning Dove's doubled ambition. It is after all *a* Salishan autobiography, and thus promising of a singular life. It is also a *Salishan* autobiography, not just that of Christine Quintasket.

It is assembled from boxes of mismatched writings that Mourning Dove left to Dean Guie's attic. In the frantic and illness-filled years before her death she thought that she was writing two books—one an ethnographic description of Salishan life, and the other a narrative of her own upbringing and education. The book that Miller assembled from her papers is an admirable conflation of these intentions. Curiously, in this "autobiography" of America's first Indian woman novelist, there is no recounting of her writing *Cogewea*, nor of the tiresome twelve-year wait to see it published.

Miller arranges the papers in three main sections: "A Woman's World," "Seasonal Activities," and "Okanogan History." The first chapter is called "My Life," and is the most clearly anecdotal autobiography as well as the longest chapter in the book. Yet it is filled with seemingly impersonal lore, and the later chapters on such things as salmon-fishing, are narratized with memoirs of the Quintasket family and others. Miller admits his own anthropological bias, and allows that he helped to "create" the text. Perhaps the academic professionalizing of his trade has saved us from McWhorter's stentorian rhetoric. And maybe we could say that all three editors "milled" Mourning Dove's texts, somehow extending her process when she developed the Indian tales she gathered from elders. Miller says of the compromise he has fashioned: "the autobiography does represent a personal ethnography of lasting value" (*Autobiography*, xxxiv).

Mourning Dove said that she wrote to prove to her white audience that Indian people were not the savage stoics that had been created in the white romances, that Indian people felt strong emotions, just as strong as those

felt by the recently arrived aliens. She said that the Coyote stories were “set down by me for the children of another race to read” (*Coyote Stories*, 12). It was not only Indian education that she was interested in. Though any text can offer only a momentary joining of understandings, she hoped that each of these joinings would contribute toward a world in which tolerance and familiarity would replace the systemic racism that characterized official life in her part of the country.

What about the danger of appropriation that seems now to accompany more interracial knowledge? It is obvious that any autobiography invites appropriation: here is my life for your dollar. Appropriation, if it is a problem, is not the big problem. For the First Nations of America, the problem has been misappropriation, and expropriation. Autobiographies and autobiographical fictions are going to be read, one hopes. If the reader somehow then becomes a writer, his writing will be about his experience. His experience here will be reading the book.

Do you remember when we were kids and we wondered whether what other people called “green” might be what we would see as “red”? As kids we learned that we had to accept the fact that we joined in our understanding only through words, through the text. Reading Indian stories, having good Indian friends, putting headbands around our heads, will not make us Indians. If we try to write or rewrite Indian narratives we will not do it. Autobiography is a narrative of mortality, and we all have our own deaths to do. Yet the pleasant thing about autobiography is that old-fashioned closure is impossible. Perhaps the author is dead, in Roland Barthes’s sense, but she is also never dead. At the “end” of her book one is left hanging, alive, expecting the truth to be revealed eventually but perhaps by another. A Salishan autobiography, then, should imply that the Salishan peoples are alive, that no one has written their epitaph.

Remember what Barthes wrote at the beginning of his essay “The Death of the Author”: “in ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose ‘performance’—the mastery of the narrative code—may possibly be admired but never his ‘genius.’” (Barthes, 142) That is what we have to understand about Mourning Dove’s doubleness: when she wants us to appreciate her writing ability as well as the ethnographic information she is imparting, it is not originality she wants us to scrutinize, but performance.

She is not trying to get us to know that she has deep feelings, but that Indian people, the Okanagans and the Colvilles, have deep feelings.

Mourning Dove knew how important it was to the very lives of her family and tribe that she understand the function of the reader. She knew the principle that Barthes invokes near the end of his essay: “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. . . a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.” (148)

So how do we North American white men read Mourning Dove without looking for Pocahantas?

Pocahantas has always haunted American literature. And there has always been a kind of ethno-pornography in the response of white poets and other writers. First she was wild, savage, naked, lewd. Then she was romanticized, penny-dreadful, tom-tommed till her feet ached. In this century she was “redeemed” by poets such as Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams, becoming the essential Native spirit still alive in the Europeanized American continent. But always she was the image of desire, the exotic removed from her society to become the object of a male gaze. She was the literary equivalent of the naked model.

Certainly Pocahantas never wrote anything. One might as well permit women to become painters rather than the painted. In American publishing there was one kind of book about Indians that was always popular. This was the captivity narrative. It was especially successful when the captured and then rescued and then autobiographical person was a woman. The stories were usually religious in denouement, and filled with anti-Indian sentiments, filled with descriptions of cruelty, paganism and savagery. Reading them was not just a cultural act—it was a pornographic act as well.

There were no captivity narratives written by Indian women forced to live among the Christians. Not until recently.

Remember that there was in the nineteenth century (and still is in some quarters) a sentiment at large that says that all writing by women is autobiographical. Women, normally regarded as properly the object of the male gaze, would remain that in the reading of their writing. One would think that Gertrude Stein took care of that problem.

Early in the *Autobiography* Mourning Dove offers a story of her grandmother Pah-tah-heet-sa, a Nicola medicine woman. No one could make a

Pocantas of her. Once when the people were travelling over the high Nicola trail to visit in the Okanagan, Pah-tah-heet-sa went well ahead of them, gathering huckleberries.

When this brave woman drew near the berry patch, she saw a grizzly feeding. This did not stop her. She took her digging stick of dogwood and prepared to fight if the bear meant to charge at her, which the bear did not hesitate to do. With a howl that would have frozen the blood of any coward, it charged. She threw off her pack and held her stick to challenge the brute, saying "You are a mean animal and I am a mean woman. Let us fight this out to see who will get the berry patch."

The bear did not answer her but opened its mouth wide and came at a leap. She watched for her chance and drove the sharp stick into the animal's mouth. The bear fell back in pain, then jumped at her, even more angry. The fight went on long enough that the warriors approached, not expecting to see such a sight. When they drew their arrows to shoot, she commanded them, "Don't shoot. Wait! We are fighting this to the finish. He is a mean animal and I am a mean woman. We will see who is the strongest and conqueror in this battle."

The woman roared in imitation of the angry bear and drove her stick again into the wide, wide mouth. Every time it charged, this would drive it back. The people watched the fight until the sun lay low in the western sky. Only then did the grizzly walk away, broken and bleeding. The old woman had only a few scratches.

She picked up her basket and gathered the berries she had won, while the people stood in wonderment. She died very old when she and her buckskin horse rolled down a steep embankment near Oro-ville. She and the horse drowned and were both buried on the bank of the Similkameen River in an unmarked grave. Thus ended a brave, mean woman. (5-6)

Anyone of a comparative-literature mind will note the resemblance to European stories of the confrontations and deaths of noble knights. But I believe the story of Mourning Dove's grandmother.

I also think I know, as much as a white male reader in this latter time can know, what the story is for. I know that Pah-tah-heet-sa lives on in Mourning Dove herself, and that she continues to live in Okanagan stories. I think of Maeg, the rooted and political woman who appears toward the end of Jeanette Armstrong's novel *Slash*. Maeg is from the U.S. part of the valley, but has parents from the Canadian side. I think that she is seen to be Pah-tah-heet-sa, and Christine Quintasket and Mourning Dove and Jeanette Armstrong. I think that she may have had something to do with the transformation of that gravestone in Okonogan, Washington.

Beth Cuthand, a First Nations writer from the Prairies, put the question of autobiography this way: "Often when we are writing, it's not our words that are coming. The grandmothers, the grandfathers come and write

through us” (Dybikowski, 53). No need for a muse when there is a family around. And you do not need to be a writer to take part in the making of the family story, the tribal story, a story of the Okanagan land. Among the Okanagans and other peoples of the Interior Salishan, response was expected from the listeners, encouraging voices to keep the narrative going. Among the people of the Plateau, invisible property is more valuable and more lasting than visible property. Autobiography (if we post-Hellenic people can use that term here) is a care that would be failed if it were to fall simply to an individual with a unique story to tell.

But Mourning Dove’s *Autobiography* is also directed toward a non-Indian audience. What can we do to respond properly, to keep these stories alive among us too? Why do we bother visiting the banks of the Similkameen near Oroville?

Mourning Dove learned her double narrative task right at home in her Indian father’s house. Teequalt, the new grandmother she brought home taught her Salishan stories and taught her to pay attention to her own gift as a story-teller. Jimmy Ryan, the white boy her father brought into the family, was fond of yellowback novels, and taught his little sister to read the English found in them. Once her mother papered the walls with pages from a new one. Jimmy and Christine read the walls.

Mourning Dove decided that she would try to trust the white world. She knew that she was turning tales into text, the people’s property into information. Janet Gunn says: “What is made present is not merely a past that is past. What is presented is a reality, always new, to which the past has contributed but which stands, as it were, in front of the autobiographer” (Gunn, 17).

In front of the reader, too.

NOTES

- 1 On the U.S. side of the border the spelling is Okanogan, while on the Canadian side it is Okanagan.
- 2 The Colville Reservation in northeastern Washington is populated by several Salishan peoples. One group is called the Colviles, the spelling changed to avoid confusion between place and tribe.
- 3 The term “tribe” is used in the U.S. In Canada we tend to use such terms as “band” or “community.”

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I would also like to express my appreciation of the extensive work and publications of Dr. Alanna Kathleen Brown of Montana State University. Dr. Brown is the leading scholar of Mourning Dove's writing and life, and a trusted friend of the Quintasket family. I encourage readers to seek out her work; they might begin with her essay "Mourning Dove's Canadian Recovery Years, 1917-1919" in Canadian Literature 124/125 (Spring/Summer 1990): 113-22.

