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CRAZY HORSE: THE STRANGE MAN OF THE OGLALAS BY MARI SANDOZ
HISTORIOGRAPHY, A PHILOSOPHY FOR RECONSTRUCTION

MARY DIXON

HISTORIOGRAPHY: MYTH FOR ENLIGHTENMENT

Noted historians Will and Ariel Durant have outlined the importance of knowing, understanding, and celebrating history as a valuable heritage. They call historiography "an industry, an art, and a philosophy—an industry by ferreting out the facts, an art by establishing a meaningful order in the chaos of the materials, a philosophy by seeking perspective and enlightenment." A true evaluation of the history of the American West is an important consideration for Americans, because as the Durants claim, there is much to gain from a proper understanding of it. In order to gain perspective and enlightenment from an understanding of the peoples of the past, particularly Native Americans, whose way of life had been all but obliterated by the coming of white settlers, we must delve into past events and consider their impact on the culture and norms of contemporary society. If we are to gain a philosophic understanding of history, as the Durants insist that we must, then there must be those historians among us who diligently produce a reliable manifestation of that understanding.

Robert Dorman categorizes what Mari Sandoz does in this regard as "myth-making." His conception of myths is that they are "not make-believe constructs debunked by ‘true’ life . . . [but] instead, ordered, value-laden symbols and narratives communally shared and transmitted, that interpret an irrational world and provide guideposts for action within it." He considers Mari Sandoz a regionalist in the sense that she was able to take the events and substance of the western frontier and make them accessible to readers. He writes: "Regionalism, simultaneously an art and a religion, recovered the folk from the past as pure

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myth: the ‘high traditions’ of the regionalist civic religion. This myth-making recovery was . . . a self-conscious procedure of cultural reconstruction.”3 Sandoz provided a manifestation of historical events for her readers that went beyond a mere recitation of facts and ideas; in fact, her works consciously sought, as the Durants have noted all historiography should, to bring enlightenment and perspective to history. Her biographical books took liberties with standard elements of historical writing by partially fictionalizing conversations and events so that the symbols of culture could be read and evaluated. Betsy Downey points out that other historians considered these fictionalizations to be “serious flaws” in that they lacked the normal documentation needed for academic writing, that Sandoz was “terse” about providing bibliographies, and that only she could track the sources of her writing.4 Despite these criticisms, Julie Des Jardins acknowledges that Sandoz and other women like her had produced, from the margins of historical writing, “the hidden pasts of western women and native groups whose lives were irretrievable through traditional records alone.”5 Downey acknowledges that Sandoz “deliberately sought to correct the biases and to eliminate the omission that characterized traditional Western histories, particularly in her Indian histories,” and in this respect her writing could be valuable because of this “interpretive approach.”6

Sandoz’s works were produced to bring about a new perception of the events of the past and to shape the attitudes and actions of those who would read her work. Downey contends that Sandoz’s agenda was such that she exhibited a “bias” that reflected her social conscience identified with the “Populist/Progressive/New Deal political tradition.”7

The criticism of Sandoz’s works alleged, according to Downey, that they were “perspectivist” and “one-sided,” sometimes “distorted, by time and by language problems,” and dominated by the ideas of historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner, who believed that “complete scientific objectivity could not be reached and that historians naturally interpreted the past in light of their own experiences and the issues of their day.”8 Sandoz confronted social injustices experienced by women, cultural minorities, and the poor, including farmers in the Great Plains, and in a broader sense her interpretation of the past was influenced by the atrocities of two world wars, a catastrophic economic depression in the United States, and the diminishing population and marginalization of American Indians. Her fictional and historical works championed the marginalized and dealt with issues that were important to her within the context of the events of the early twentieth century.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CRAZY HORSE: CULTURAL TRANSLATION

In her Indian histories, Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas and Cheyenne Autumn, Sandoz is particularly interested in shaping attitudes about the Plains Indians and bringing about the changes she deems essential. Downey concludes that Sandoz will “not be remembered as a major Western historian, . . . [but] as a significant regional writer.”9 Perhaps in light of Dorman’s comments about Sandoz as myth-maker, it is more important to think of Sandoz as a regional writer (even though she resisted such a term) engaged in a task that was bigger than writing history, that was an interpretation of it, a reconstruction of it, and a guidance for change in response to it.

Sandoz, by these standards, was a historian who, through art and research, creatively and efficiently brought to light the cultural settings of various frontier peoples. Because Sandoz was unconventional in her historical writing, she was able to produce an experience for her readers that went beyond the recounting of happenings; her works often re-presented the happenings as intimate conversations, details, and events, though partially fictionalized, that still reverberated with the essence of the character and setting of their subjects. Sandoz was criticized, not just for the amount of fiction in her writing, but for her views toward the Native inhabitants of the Plains. Because she was intent on reconstructing the lives and voices
of the Sioux Indians, as Des Jardins asserts, she was "honest to the point of controversy," and she "remembered the West in ways the historical establishment was not ready to accept."\(^{10}\)

Des Jardins believes that Sandoz, along with other women writers, became the "translators for voices previously unheard by chroniclers of the West, in this sense occupying the role of intercultural broker for Native Americans, but also for themselves as women."\(^{11}\) Sandoz's attempt to provide insight into the culture of the Native Americans involved great effort, accountability, and detail. Her art is clearly evident in the arrangement of detail, stunning personalization of characters, and ordered precision of first-person accounts. Her historiography (in the Durants' sense of the term, i.e., a philosophy that promotes disclosure and discovery in the production of meaning) particularly showed a relevant and somewhat revolutionary understanding of the spirit of the Plains Indians. Her accounts have proven reliable, not just in the perception of them at face value, but in the recognition of the tremendous amount of effort that she poured into them.

Even though she was a white woman writing about Plains Indians, she was able to perceive and communicate their life experiences and aspects of their culture that had remained hidden from her readers. She was able to do this because she was more than a historian, she was an agent of change, and she was able to strongly identify with the Indian. Even though she called herself "a plug historian with a craving to write,"\(^{12}\) she was more likely a biographer who intelligently and diligently researched the details of her subjects' lives, the people who surrounded them, the places they inhabited, and the times in which they lived. Recognizing Sandoz's drive to identify with people, places, and times, Helen Winter Stauffer wrote that Sandoz was after more than authenticity in her writing, that she wanted to "capture the aura" of her subjects (LMS, xxi). In fact, Sandoz herself alluded to this when she wrote, "I should like to entice my viewer/listener to look upon the story of people first and events second . . . to give him by illustration, etc., a new or renewed eye upon the people of the past and present and thereby upon events in which these individuals participated" (LMS, 332). Sandoz's goal seemed to be more than that of an historian; she wanted to interpret and preserve the aura of the people about whom she wrote.

Sandoz commented that the attempt to write should not be done "without an understanding of the deep philosophical and mystical implications of the material" (LMS, 306). She exhibited this kind of a commitment and understanding in her book Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas. For her, it was not enough just to know the material or even to know its importance; it was essential to experience a passionate identification with the subjects, history, and place.
Des Jardins explains that this commitment to write about the Plains Indians was “not to make the extermination of Native Americans an accepted or static part of the canon, but, rather, to incite change in social attitudes and land allotment policies.”

The methodology that Sandoz used in her historical writing consisted of an intense effort to bring about change in policies and attitudes, born out of her own personal experience, her compassion, and her perception of injustice.

The urge to shape political policy and attitudes by capturing an aura of her subjects is best exemplified by Sandoz’s passionate intensity in the writing of the book Crazy Horse; in fact, she connected with him in a mystical way. As she researched the details of his life on a trek through his country, she wrote about this connection: “[I]t was at night, out upon the sagebrush plains of the Rawhide where the brown-haired, never photographed chief had hoped to establish a refuge for his people that we seemed closest to—the spirit of this silent, powerful war chief of the Oglalas” (LMS, 23).

As she began to ferret out the story of his life, she used the methods and objectives that served her in writing Old Jules: “I tried to bring some reason, some pattern, to make a book artistically and philosophically as well as historically true” (LMS, 29). The goal of her historiography (in keeping with the Durants’ model) was best exemplified in the methodology that Sandoz used in her attempt to create for the reader a discernible and sensual aura of the person of Crazy Horse and his people. Writing with this goal in mind required a disciplined approach, and Sandoz certainly exhibited this discipline. She was relentless in the pursuit of truth, with its historic, philosophical, and artistic components. The aura of truth produced by her writing was achieved through three important methods: meticulous research, personal experience, and instinctive artistic application.

**METICULOUS RESEARCH**

To understand the importance of Sandoz’s research is to understand the backbone of her stories. In general, her extensive resources included newspaper clippings, historical society documents, genealogies of Indian families, many of which she compiled, photographs, direct quotes, and oral histories from those who lived in the time. She used many resource materials from the National Archives and private collections, as well as relevant resources such as Craigie’s *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* and the *Dictionary of American English*, two volumes that did much to aid her use of correct colloquialisms common to the West (LMS, 370, 328). Creating a reality for the reader pertaining to place, people, and time was serious business for her. She amassed much of her own recollection three hundred thousand or more notes and cards (LMS, 310). She claimed that she never depended on secondary material when she had access to primary sources (LMS, 434). Furthermore, much of her material was “cross indexed by individual and activity” (LMS, 360).

For the Crazy Horse project, she spent a year of intensive work, including time at the National Archives in Washington, DC. She studied photographs and even obtained access to an Indian pictograph that illuminated events from the Indian’s perspective. Still, she was not happy with the results; her belief was that “there are still gaps, discrepancies and contradictions, and what look like deliberate evasions and omissions, particularly in the family relationships” (LMS, 185). In the process of writing, she counted research of all available sources first, then “with a terse, synoptic rough draft” she returned to the region (LMS, 310). So, in her typical investigative fervor, she journeyed to Pine Ridge, embarking on an extensive road trip through Sioux country to sort out the mysteries, eventually amassing a fifteen-thousand-card index for her files to be used for the book (LMS, 190).

At this point she turned to the oral testimonies of witnesses, the communal narratives that would interpret cultural attributes of the Sioux for her readers. She endeavored to “interview all the Indian scouts and military men available who were in any way connected” (LMS, 20).
She interviewed a Sioux named He Dog, who had witnessed the killing of Crazy Horse, and eventually amassed interview material numbered around two hundred pages (LMS, 349). She also conducted direct interviews with other friends and relatives of Crazy Horse. The trip across the Plains was a successful one; Sandoz was able to interview five other Indians who helped her by shedding light on the thinking and attitudes of this great people. Judith McDonald asserts that Sandoz used Indian storytellers as "learning resources for cultural preservation." Her preservation and transmission of the Indian culture figured prominently in Sandoz's drive to provide a link to these past inhabitants of the Plains and her mission to produce a contact point for her readers so that their enlightenment regarding the unjust treatment of the Indians would become an effective force for change in attitudes. Richard S. Grimes writes that Sandoz, along with a flood of others, including anthropologists, ethnologists, and popular writers in the 1920s and 1930s, were interviewing Indians on the reservations in an attempt to understand and preserve what was quickly vanishing. He believes that Sandoz and her companions Blish and Hinman were "inspired by the neoteric disciplines of anthropology and ethnology . . . [and, thus] offered a richer cultural and historical appreciation than those observers who had seen the Plains Indians as the antithesis of American civilization." In this climate of changing attitudes, Sandoz was determined to further the cause of the Indian, and her research had a definite bent toward animating that culture in such a way that those who were interested in the plight of the Indian would have ample evidence to justify allocation of resources to preserve it. By making the stories available, Sandoz was providing another opportunity for her readers to gain a perspective of historical accounts, a Native American perspective.

The interview process led her to the conclusion that she needed to develop a more thorough understanding of the language and culture of the Sioux Indian. She explained that it was necessary in terms of style and authenticity, to tell "some of the things . . . for which there were no white man words." As Barbara Rippey writes, Sandoz "searched for a language pattern that would convey the rhythm of Indian culture and reflect the Indian's oneness with the land." The passage from the book Crazy Horse that best illustrates the results of Sandoz's research into Indian language and culture, mostly through personal interviews with the Indians, is in the description of a ceremony in which two medicine men sought help against the white man's guns, illustrating the belief in a spiritual oneness with the land:

"[T]he people [were] watching, hungry for the sacred help. And after awhile the dancers truly became of another world, and then the drummers, the helpers and the people melted into one power, and finally the circle of the earth and sky about them too, all becoming one sacred whole, as many small rivers give themselves to one great roaring stream. (CH, 95)"

Sandoz exhibited a sensitivity to the Indians' spirituality as she listened carefully to their words in the interview process. She discerned more than just the words and the style of the language; she was able to recognize the philosophy behind it. The "many small rivers that give themselves to one great roaring stream" is the expression of not only a unique interpretation of a language style but a perceptive understanding of the Indians' spiritual beliefs. This aura of the Indian's presence, which she brought to her readers, was more than just physical or emotional; it was spiritual too. This reconstruction of the spiritual attitudes of the Plains Indians was necessary since Sandoz's goal was to open the eyes of her readers to the richness of their culture and thereby gain favor and understanding for them. As Sandoz became more acquainted with the Indian language patterns, she came to believe that there were some words that could not and should not be translated into English. In Crazy Horse, she insisted on using words from the Sioux language because they would
impress upon the reader the uniqueness of the Indian spirit. Her research led her to uncover the hidden meanings of Indian words such as *Heyoka*, which she said is a member of the contrary society “who had thunder and lightning in their puberty dreams and must do everything backward to avoid being struck by lightning and to make the people laugh when their hearts are on the ground” (LMS, 436; CH, 210). Examples of authentic language that she put in her book *Crazy Horse* contributed to a mood she sought to create around the Indians. Akicita was one such word, which represented the society of helper warriors, or *wasna*, referring to a buffalo bladder used to store food, and many others besides. She also used greeting words and words of acclamation that the Indians would have used, such as *hoye* and *hou*, to bring the sounds of the language to her readers. Stauffer points out that some critics believed her language was too “esoteric” and that her use of Indian metaphors or references “not well-known to the white-man reviewers and readers” was too foreign and inaccessible. Even though the words are foreign, they open the door for her readers to experience yet another aspect of the Sioux culture, thus enhancing the reader’s sensual perception of the Indians’ voice.

Just as the sounds of the language did not escape her notice, so, too, she thoroughly explored the physical appearance of the Plains Indian. She was able to vividly picture the person of Crazy Horse because of her diligent questioning of “old timers” (LMS, 319). She researched photographs and became such an expert that she was able to spot inaccuracies in labeling or inconsistencies in illustrations that included the style of clothing, face and body painting, the kind of feathers worn, and even the ways in which different groups of Indians rode or decorated their ponies (LMS, 305). She expressed a preference for the artwork that the Indians themselves painted, relying heavily upon the Indian pictograph of the Battle of Little Big Horn (LMS, 20). In her interviews, she discovered many of the characteristics of the Indian’s physical qualities.

Identification and specification of these and other small details in *Crazy Horse* became another way in which Sandoz reached the goal of creating an atmosphere that evoked the memory of the Sioux Indian. For example, a description of Black Buffalo Woman revealed details of the physical description of a Sioux woman in a coming-of-age celebration, but with cultural implications on the demeanor and place of women in the society.

She was sitting in the woman’s way, her feet to one side, and her hair smooth and shining, the part vermilioned, her slender young face too. Her dress was of white buckskin with a deep beaded yoke of blue, the wing sleeves and the bottom fringed, the leggings beaded too, and the moccasins. On her breast hung many strings of beads, blue, red, and yellow, and on her arms were bracelets of copper and silver. (CH, 114)

Such descriptions were meant to show the beauty of the Indian’s culture to readers unfamiliar with it or to readers who had been exposed to stereotypes of Indian women and Indian culture. The corrective force of passages such as these cannot be overlooked in Sandoz’s work.

Rich detail is also evident in her description of Crazy Horse going into battle, a thrilling exposition of the aura of a warrior:

The red-backed hawk was on his head, behind his ear hung the little stone, and on his cheek sat the white lightning streak. He had made his horse decoy medicine very carefully, sprinkling the bay with a little earth from a pile made by the secret-working gopher, and himself too. (CH, 198)

This kind of detail came from hours of painstaking research and personal interviews. The subjects covered in this little excerpt ranged from an accurate knowledge of what Crazy Horse would have worn and how he prepared his horse, as well as snatches of knowledge about his beliefs and his past dreaming visions. Stauffer identifies Sandoz’s treatment of Crazy
Horse in passages such as these as “mythic archetypes.”

Using Crazy Horse as a pattern for universal values, Sandoz evokes the empathy of her readers and helps them to identify with the challenges and values he represents, such as bravery and cultural identity. Stauffer points out that Sandoz’s use of myth here “is not in the sense of presenting legendary or imaginary adventures in literary form, but rather [she acts] as a historian.” Stauffer cites Richard M. Dorson’s comment that the historian must “piece together” the myth that “permeates a culture . . . and render it explicit.” Sandoz was attempting to bring to light, for her readers, this explicit rendering of the myth (in terms of Dorman’s myth as value-laden symbol and narrative) of the Sioux people. By accentuating aspects of Crazy Horse’s character that were culturally specific, she was recreating the essence of that culture in a person who becomes an archetypal hero. As such, he becomes a significant and “realized” representation of the Sioux people, allowing readers access to a cultural awareness not possible in a mere rendering of historical data.

When Sandoz wrote these descriptions, she was faithful to interpreting the truth; not just the kind of truth that produces facts but the kind of detail that conjures up images of a people’s appearance and voice. That she was concerned about preserving this exposition of the life and times of the Plains Indians is evident in the many passionate statements she made in her lifetime:

What concerns me now is that something more than a few moth-eaten war-bonnets and scalps should be preserved of this magnificent people. And if this is to be anything more than the noble Redman sort of thing, something that indicates his virility, the menace, the magnificence of his presence on the plains, it must be gathered now. (LMS, 47-48)

It was this passion that drove Sandoz to extraordinary lengths to obtain rare historical data, descriptive personal accounts, and accurate photos and representations. Lisa Lindell points out that Crazy Horse “epitomizes many of the qualities esteemed by the Great Plains tribes, and ironically by the Euro-American civilization that would call him an enemy and barbarian.” Lindell claims that Sandoz revises the traditional epic by making Crazy Horse a “dispossessed hero,” thus creating a “variance between Lakota decorum and classical epic tradition (reworked into the notion of Manifest Destiny),” out of her desire to “underline the clash of two cultural paradigms.” It is Sandoz’s intent to portray these magnificent people in their former virility, with many of the same valuable qualities as the white man possessed, and to show by the dispossession of the Sioux the terrible injustice done to them through the guise of manifest destiny. She reflected later, in the context of events marking two world wars and the attempted annihilation of another people group, that “we [Americans] did to the Indian what Hitler did to the Jew.” Because of this awareness, Sandoz became even more focused on her goal to expose the injustice done to the Plains Indian.

In light of this goal, Sandoz stubbornly refused to compromise on her version of truth. She would have no one in charge of crafting her books but herself. She once asserted, justifying her refusal to take grants for research from museums, government, or even Indian sources, “Nobody gets to look over my shoulder” (LMS, 344). This integrity of character stabilized her writing and ensured an objective point of view. Neither her characterizations of Indians nor of white men were totally positive or totally negative. Her portrayals were not flat, one-dimensional snapshots, but, because of her extensive research, they were elaborate, complicated, and true-to-life. She laid out the actions of wicked or greedy people, as well as the nobleness of men on both sides. She did not hesitate to portray Red Cloud and some of the other Indian chiefs that loafed around the forts unfavorably in relationships with other Indians. In Crazy Horse, she wrote, “All had seen that Red Cloud was reaching out to strengthen himself every
way he could, slyly, as a tree that sends its roots into the ground that others have kept shaded” (134). Even Crazy Horse was not idealized; his portrayal concerning Black Buffalo Woman contained the recognition of blame that he bore for endangering the peace of the people by putting his own desire for her before his desire for the people’s welfare. Sandoz wrote of his feeling of guilt, that the giving back of his hair shirt was “nothing to the black load of blame he had laid upon his own heart” (CH, 248). The depth of characterization in Crazy Horse was only possible because of the exhaustive amount of research Sandoz undertook. These characterizations of Crazy Horse are exploitations of the myth of the archetypal hero and his challenges, both his failures and his successes, another way that Sandoz makes him accessible to her readers.

Sandoz’s meticulous methodology, loaded with an uncompromising desire to fiercely portray realistic settings and characters, and her refusal to compromise or shade her perception of the truth, were passions that strongly shaped her narratives. Her drive to research every printed and oral source available yielded an immense amount of data, which she skillfully wove into a narrative that became not only an account of historical events but as accurate and true-to-life a portrayal as she felt was possible. Stauffer points out that Sandoz “does not invent; she does interpret.”28 As she wrote her narratives and fictionalized conversations, Sandoz’s interpretation of the data was meant to evoke the quality and presence of her subjects, thus serving her passion to promote an identification with and empathy for the Sioux.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Perhaps Sandoz’s passionate vision was rooted in her own experiences as a child growing up around Indians in northern Nebraska. Even though her research ability was important in shaping her narratives, revealing the essential character of her subjects and the feel of the times in which they lived, more significant for her emotionally was her early life experience when “she heard the great stories told over and over” by the Oglalas who camped on the Niobrara across the road from her childhood home (LMS, 319). In fact, Joyzelle Godfrey, an independent Dakota scholar, says that the Lakota Indians actually had much to do with Sandoz’s early life; that they actually shielded her on occasions from her father’s abuse, and that, in their way, she became as one of their own children.29 Her close relationships with the Indians when she was a child enabled her to communicate aspects of their intimate life that would have been difficult to discover for someone solely bound to research. Her encounters with the Indians in their daily lives must have inspired such scenes in Crazy Horse as the courting scenes between the males and females of the tribe, which she called “walking under the blanket,” and the nuances associated with them (123, 133).

Similarly, generalizations that Sandoz made about the Indians and their demeanor must have come from watching them in family gatherings. She was able to confidently assert that Black Buffalo Woman behaved “as was becoming in maidens of a good Oglala family” (CH, 123) because of her observations of their way of life. Scenes written for the book detailing the Indians’ camps must have been fond recollections of her childhood memories: “[S]ome of the women worked with awl and sinew at the moccasins or brushed summer flies from the nursing babies, making drowsy little talkings among themselves, like prairie chickens feeding” (CH, 7). She wrote that the older men of the tribe “sat in little circles, moving their eagle-wing fans slowly, the red willow bark in their pipes fragrant on the air. Here and there one sat off alone, perhaps to sing his holy song against some perplexity of the heart” (CH, 8). In this reflective way, Sandoz described the tranquility of the tribal customs she observed as a child with a kind of reverence and awe. Her observations of Indian behavior made her an expert at recreating cultural scenes that came to life for her readers.

Her personal interaction with the Sioux inspired in her a fierce loyalty that fueled her
writing and drove her to be faithful to her true vision of the people she knew and the stories they told, and to define their symbols and narratives for her readers. The Sioux taught her important lessons that she would reflect upon in Crazy Horse. She had fond childhood memories of her friend He Dog, an important source for Crazy Horse, teaching her to pronounce difficult Sioux words. The teasing way in which he interacted with her is reflected in her description of the training of the young boys in the camp (LMS, 320). “Yes, he [Crazy Horse] would try to teach his son to fight, to hunt, and to live as a good Lakota. . . . He told [the young boys] stories while they ate from the wooden bowls the women filled, and teased them a little as one would a puppy or a colt to make it gentle and yet give it fire” (265).

Sandoz’s relationship with He Dog, which she regarded as sacred, shaped her thinking and her writing. Dorman’s comments about regionalism as an art and religion apply in this regard, since Sandoz instinctively understood the value-laden myths that He Dog was imparting to her. She reflected on the value of these stories and the obligation she felt to impart them when she wrote about Crazy Horse: “I felt, years ago, when He Dog first called me his granddaughter, a sort of dedication to the man he looked upon as the greatest he would ever know” (LMS, 204). The admiration for Crazy Horse that He Dog communicated to Sandoz was reflected in her writing. It must have been from He Dog that she received the song Crazy Horse’s father sings at his naming ceremony:

My son has been against the people of the unknown tongue.
He has done a brave thing;
For this I give him a new name. . . .
I give him a great name.
I call him Crazy Horse. (118)

This intimate bit of knowledge came in part from the familiarity that Sandoz had with the people of the region. This familiarity enabled her to communicate the quality of their family life and culture, furthering her mission to make the “high traditions” of the Sioux come alive for her readers.

Sandoz’s ability to portray the Plains Indians went beyond her observations and her historical discoveries; her status as a woman on the Plains made her keenly aware of hardship and abuse. She has given details about women’s lives on the Plains in her other books such as Old Jules. The compassion and empathy that she has for the Sioux is one born of personal experience both with the Indians’ plight and her own knowledge of her position as a woman on the western Plains and her struggle as a woman writer with publishers who would not take her seriously. Out of this perspective, she sought to enlighten her readers to the injustices done to Native Americans, even as she knew intimately the injustices done to frontier women.

Another way in which her personal experience added the element of truth to her writing of Crazy Horse was in the familiarity that she had with the land. Her hand-drawn maps certainly contributed to the book’s achieving an aura of the beauty of the Plains, which she and the Sioux Indians shared as a heritage. She illustrated the places where she had grown up, using the stories from the Indians as an anchor for her drawings. The publishers for the book tried to add artistic flair to the map she had drawn, but she firmly asserted, “[T]he material is mine. No one else could have got that together” (LMS, 362). She was right; her childhood memories of the places and the stories of the Indians, combined with the fervor of her own research and her minute attention to detail, made her uniquely capable of such a task. The map she made for Crazy Horse not only contains major geographic information but it also contains battle sites, agency locations, and the location of the great Indian council of 1857. These places are reconstructed in Sandoz’s myth-making narrative to make readers aware of the setting of her subjects, thus adding one more context in her “realization” of the Indian’s environment and culture.

Stauffer says that Sandoz “described the places she knew, remembered, and returned to again and again. These places shaped her life
and molded her as a writer" (LMS, xxi). In one of the last scenes of the book, Sandoz exhibited her fine knowledge of the beauty and details of the landscape near Fort Robinson:

May, the Moon of Shedding Ponies, lay spring-warm over the plains of the upper White Earth River and the bluffs that rose here and there like walls against the wind. On a bank above the timbered little path of the stream was the stockade of Red Cloud agency. . . . A mile westward was the soldier town called Fort Robinson; to the east, rising alone beyond the greening slopes of the broad river valley, stood Crow Butte; and across the north stretched a row of the whitish bluffs with a straggling of pines along the top, the Indian horsemen among them dark and motionless as the trees. (CH, 360)

The description of the valley and the bluffs is artistic, authentic, and uniquely phrased to reflect the Indian point of view. In her description, there is not only an aura of truth about the place but also about the Indians who inhabited it. According to Stauffer, Sandoz knew that "places shape the memory . . . and that she saw her region as a microcosm of the world, history, containing within its boundaries prototypes of universal happenings geological, historical, and natural" (LMS, xxi). Her goal in making maps from her personal knowledge and her descriptions of scenery was to do more than give an accurate account; it was to communicate some meaning, to interpret cause and motivation, to show the pathos of the events. By showing the Indian's intimate connection with the land, Sandoz hoped to elicit changes in policies toward the Indians, especially those that involved land allocation.

The geography of the scene described above gives clues leading to the heart of Sandoz's intent: the bluffs like walls against the wind become a metaphor for the white man's wearisome invasion the Indians' world, and the Indian horsemen, dark and motionless, depict symbolically their fading glory and imminent decline in the face of the white man's progress through their beloved country. The sensitivity with which Sandoz described these scenes is a direct result of her personal experiences dwelling among the Indians in the majestic Plains. Since she lived among these hills and dwelled among the Indians, she was uniquely qualified to understand the connection between them and their land. Sandoz was able to communicate her intimate sensibility, made possible by her personal contact with the land and the people, so that her readers could vicariously experience this contact through her writing.

**ARTISTIC APPLICATION**

Perhaps the most significant way that Sandoz communicated the essence of her subjects was her instinctive artistic application of the words she used. As Malcolm A. Nelson points out in an essay on American literature and cultures, Sandoz's "version of the Sioux life rings true both poetically and anthropologically." She would have been pleased to hear that, and would have stressed that her faithfulness to poetics and anthropology came through intense training and diligent practice. In describing the evolution of her writing, she said that early on she told stories

> with American poverty of incident, with more introspection, and considerable emotional elaboration, [but] this method . . . seemed incompatible with my material and therefore I deserted it. Gradually I solidified the environment, objectified the point of view, and increased the restraint. (LMS, 62)

This more mature style is seen in *Crazy Horse* and is exemplified by the following passage:

> Slowly the great camp of over a thousand lodges moved up the Powder, the ponies fattening on the ripening short grass, the bullet-makers busy. . . . All the war things, the lances, shields, and war bonnets, were made fine and holy for this old-time war party, the few men remembering the sacred ways receiving many ponies for their help. . . .
When everything was ready the warriors rode the circles of the great camp, singing their war songs, their shields bright and new-painted, the spears flashing, those with guns carrying them ready for war. (163)

Here Sandoz described the “high traditions” of the Sioux with an artistry that illuminates the sacred nature of their war preparations. This description provides a solid environment, as it recreates both the spectacle of the preparation for war as well as the aura of a people ready to fight for their dignity. This passage gives the reader not only a strong field of sensual details but also a sacred vision of the attitude of the people.

Another passage that shows the command and restraint to which Sandoz alluded is one in which she described the burial of Crazy Horse’s daughter:

And on the scaffold, tied on top of the red blanket, was a deerskin doll, the beaded design of her cradleboard the same as on the dresses the little girl always wore, a design that came from far back in the family of Black Shawl.

When he [Crazy Horse] saw this the father could hold himself no longer. Face down beside the body of his daughter he let the sorrow locked in his heart sweep over him, the rickety scaffold creaking a little under his weight. (286)

Sandoz showed restraint, yet power, in this poignant description of a father’s grief. The details of the doll and beadwork provide the environment and the restraint is in the creaking scaffold. Sandoz artistically created a scene of intense emotion in an objective way. The words in themselves do little to describe the emotion, but in line with Sandoz’s purpose, they convey the fervent feeling of the father for the daughter without ever overtly stating it. This is what Sandoz did best, interpreting emotion and objectifying it by her descriptive action, thereby evoking an emotional response from her readers that would facilitate an empathy for the Indians.

The same carefulness that Sandoz used in her descriptions of events and emotions is also present in her choice of words. She was so committed to providing the feel of authentic language that she recast Crazy Horse word for word and rewrote it four or five times. She wrote:

I consider English a living, growing language, ... I try to use it as a live dynamic instrument. The language used in the ... narrative biography ... must rise out of the material and the life portrayed. Words are limited in meaning because they must carry approximately the same denotation to a great many people. The creative writer gives them special meanings by unusual usages and arrangements. This is particularly true of those of us who use rhythmic prose for special connotations and emotional impact. (LMS, 345)

With the dynamic medium of words, Sandoz wanted to create a design that would shape a “meaningful order” out of the “chaos” of her research. This elaborate and intense design is something that Sandoz continued to practice.

In Crazy Horse, in the scene of Conquering Bear’s death, Sandoz used the design of her rhythmic prose to provide emotional impact and to ferret out meaning for her readers.

After a while the man spoke again, slower, the words little more than his [Conquering Bear’s] breath. “I am killed now,” he said, “and in my place I put one you all know, a good man, with many good fathers before him. To Man Afraid I give my people—all the Teton Lakotas I give to him—”

“No, no, I am not strong enough to carry this thing,” the Hunkpatila cried out, the firelight red in the tears that stood like rain on his dark cheeks. (44)

The complicated sounds of the first line with breathy s's and w's, and the moaning m's give the prose a poetic sound. The unusual word phrasing of “I am killed now” demonstrates in an indirect way the urgency and emotion of the moment. Also, the use of the Indian words Teton Lakotas
and Hunkpatila demonstrates the vernacular, and as Sandoz pointed out, centers the reader in the time and place among the people.

This passage also demonstrates Sandoz’s concern for providing a feel for the emotions of the Sioux Indians by a compact use of words. She complained of the publisher’s mutilation of her Crazy Horse manuscript “whose foreword,” she said, “plainly says that the idiom and the rhythm are of great importance” (LMS, 190). The publisher had unnecessarily complicated her language by inserting hundreds of “hads” and altering numerous other words. These changes incensed Sandoz because her artistic sensibilities and feel for the language of the Indians was an important method of conveying emotional reality to her readers. She used ordinary words with ordinary connotations to become vehicles of expression. The words carry the reader beyond the time and place in which he lives and immerse him in the atmosphere of former times, exotic people, and culturally significant ideas. When Conquering Bear gave the Teton Lakotas into the care of Man Afraid, he was doing more than just naming a successor. Sandoz, by her language, helps us to see the extraordinary care of the Indian leaders in the expression of Man Afraid’s lament that he is not strong enough to carry such a responsibility. In the phrasing, it is also possible to see the value that the Indians place on ancestry. When Conquering Bear ties Man Afraid’s mission to the many fathers before him, he is calling upon the tradition and heritage of his people to strengthen Man Afraid. Sandoz remained true to her commitment to use rhythmic prose, unusual arrangements of words, culturally specific words, and emphasizing or placing special connotations on certain words to communicate an aura of a people’s values that was distant from her readers. With the simple yet loaded language combinations she created, she was able to draw the reader into not just the spectacle of historical events but the passionate intensity of a people’s heritage and pride. Downey acknowledges that Sandoz’s “vivid and dramatic narrative style” and the issues she identifies as western “have contemporary reso-

nance.” As Sandoz wove dramatic narrative, she became a bridge for her readers to a foreign Native American culture. She hoped that the aims of justice would be served for the Indians as new understanding for their ways and values came alive in the pages of her histories.

As Sandoz chose her words, she was conscious of their placement to develop “rhythmic prose for special connotations and emotional impact. This means placement of words by ear as well as by eye” (LMS, 345). Sandoz was able to provide a striking visual image and at the same time the sounds that evoke an urgency that matches the visual image. This strategy can be seen in the description of a scene from the Battle of the Platte Bridge: “High Back Wolf, reloading his revolver on his running horse, had put the bullet between his teeth while he poured the powder into the barrel” (CH, 166). The assonance and alliteration is striking here, and the rhythm carries the reader quickly through the scene, strengthening the strong visual image.

Sandoz also uses a shift in the placement of her words to render an emotional impact in the following passage in which Crazy Horse expressed his anger over the false way the whites portrayed the Indians in a newspaper. Crazy Horse’s father said, “[I]t would seem that the Indians had gone into the white man’s country and started to kill his women and children instead of the whites coming to kill ours. . . . Crazy Horse would not be quiet about this thing. ‘Lies, more white-man lies!’ he cried as he tore the paper through, his face pale as one of the sick women of the Holy Road in his anger” (CH, 227). Even though the words of Crazy Horse’s father are in perfect and normal English grammar, the feel of the language changes in the expression that Crazy Horse “would not be quiet about this thing.” The language continues to evolve, as the sentiment deepens, into the comments of the “sick women of the Holy Road,” becoming an authentic expression of grief and anger with the flavor of an Indian context. This was Sandoz’s genius: to mix the formal English of the first expression, then to use a slightly
altered syntactic arrangement, and finally, to draw the reader into the Indian expressiveness in the mention of the "Holy Road."

Sandoz commonly mixed perfect English grammar with expressions that she hoped would convey an essential suggestion of the Indian language. She wrote, "I have used the simplest words possible, hoping by idiom and figures and the underlying rhythm pattern to say some of the things of the Indian for which there are no white man words" (CH, x). Some of the expressions include the naming of months by Indian idioms: May, "the Moon of Shedding Ponies" (CH, 157), and August, "the Moon of the Cherries Blackening" (CH, 148). Other examples are "good-aiming soldiers" (CH, 167); anger making "a firing in his breast" (CH, 151); and the whites' coming back "like hungry dogs around the cooking pots or a wolf to a smelling stump on a hill" (CH, 209). These figures of speech communicated tangible expressions for her readers that helped them to hear the words of the Indians to more fully experience their presence.

In many other ways, the mechanics of writing were important to Sandoz, and she developed other stylistic qualities that communicated her vision of her subjects. She characterized her work as "understatement, no matter how lurid my accounts turn out I always keep a little back in the name of art and for special emergencies" (LMS, 316). There is much brutality in Crazy Horse, but Sandoz did not indulge in gore. Instead, she was faithful to her aim of understatement. She described and made clear but did not glorify. One scene from the book recorded with factual clarity the betrayal and revenge killing of a brother-in-law:

His own brother-in-law struck him down with his war club, tore off his clothes, cut a long gash up each leg from the ankle to the waist, and left him there outside of the death lodge. So it was done to the man who would give the Lakotas new ears to hear with, cut their hearts out to eat. A dozen struck him with their bows or their knives but none would take his scalp. (29)

The intensity of the moment was not emotion-alized by Sandoz, but she did give enough detail for the reader to recognize the heaviness of it.

Another way that Sandoz looked at the development of her stories was in the image of an artistic arrangement. She wrote, "[T]hink of the book as a string of beads, each incident a bead, some smaller, some larger, some shining gold, or sky blue, some murky grey or dark as night. Or think of it as a row of marbles, well arranged with agates and glassies between them, to set them off, those plain little glazed clay ones" (LMS, 284). She accomplished this design in Crazy Horse as she wove incidents of great drama among ordinary times. The whole book is full of the mix of simple daily tasks such as gathering wood and drying buffalo meat, then the excitement of the hunt for elk or buffalo, or the tension of preparations for war, and the battles and deaths of friends and relatives. Because life itself is made up of such an ordering of commonplace and extraordinary events, it is the combinations and ordering of descriptions that Sandoz used effectively to develop an aura of realism about the Sioux people.

Sandoz's writing is full of the stuff of life, the combination of everyday with extraordinary. It is not a surprise that she liked "muscle and bone in . . . literature" and certainly her writing reflected it (LMS, 94). The power of her words, the authenticity of her phrasing, and the sheer stubbornness with which she undertook any task, all lent themselves to the shaping of stories that not only reflected the subjects presented but produced a presence that lingered in the reader's mind. She wrote, "I try to take an artistic view, with some significance far beyond the local, some significance for the understanding of man" (LMS, 417). The philosophy that would undergird all of her historiographies involved the quest to comprehend and communicate the meaning of variant cultures, primarily the Native American but also the western Euro-American, as they impacted universal human understanding.

In her writing, Sandoz was concerned with the techniques that would enhance the aesthetic effect she sought. Her goal of making a
book about Crazy Horse that was artistically, philosophically, and historically true was always at the forefront of her mind, and the decisions she made in editing the book reflected this goal. The ideal in Sandoz’s mind was not just to compile an interesting factual account of a once glorious people but to have an effect on her readers’ thinking. She wanted to preserve the stories of the Plains Indians in a way that inspired respect for them. She wanted to leave a heritage. In encouraging Mrs. Elias Jacobsen to write down her experiences among the Lakotas, she wrote, “[T]hose times will never return and it would enrich the future of our country a little bit if you would put down some of the things you saw and heard and endured and did” (LMS, 320). The past, for Sandoz, was never irrelevant or even distant but a valuable part of the present and future. In all her narratives, she sought to bridge the distance between the past and the future by shedding light on ignorance and injustice as well as on nobility and strength. She felt a desperate need to enrich people’s lives, and in most cases shape their thinking, with her reconstructions of the past.

Sandoz expressed sarcasm about people’s desire to be “spared the necessity of facing actual reality” when she wrote, “[R]eality in literature is disturbing to the sheltered mind and is therefore bad for our whole scheme we seem to be trying to build up. As the hull is taken from our foods the hull should also be taken from any food for the mind” (LMS, 93). The extreme care that Sandoz took to develop her historical narratives brought out a disdain for those who would, to their own and others’ detriment, coat the past in sentiment, disdain, or obscurity. She seemed intent on presenting her concept of the truth, which she saw as an essential part of the diet needed to keep the culture healthy. She did not hold back the awful facts about the greed in the white man’s heart as he decimated the Indian way of life. She articulated this goal of her historical writing in a letter concerning an investigation of the facts in the matter of whether Bill Cody had killed the Indian named Yellow Hand:

[M]y purpose in running down such stories goes beyond my interest in the truth. What I am trying to do is to show that the technique for expropriating a minority is the same everywhere, in all times. Once the Sioux and the Cheyenne were a romantic, wondrous people, to be visited by foreign princes and lords and by sick and unhappy writers from Boston. Then came the time when the majority wanted their land. So we made them out as subhuman, as beasts, and men who killed them, or said they had killed them, became heroes. (LMS, 218-19)

Sandoz, implementing Turnerian historic design, was concerned with the Plains Indians’ plight, as she allegorized that plight to apply to the annihilation of the Jews, the suffering of the economic poor in the depression, and the oppression of women and other minorities in the early twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

The motive of Mari Sandoz’s truth-telling was not limited to setting the record straight; it was more along the lines of producing a faithful account that would illuminate the past in light of the motives of those involved, with a watchful eye directed toward her contemporary culture and the attitudes that tainted it. Dorman comments that in another work, Slogum House, Sandoz was “well on her way to a modernist conceptualization of history . . . in which culture—rather than fate, or Providence, or geography, or blind economic force—was the determinative factor in history.”35 In Crazy Horse, she resolutely sought to expose her readers to the culture of the Plains Indians, hoping that somehow through that exposure she could shape their future by educating the Euro-American population to appreciate that culture and not to obliterate it. Sandoz knew that the force behind the elimination of the Native Americans had everything to do with the clash of disparate cultures. She attempted in her historiographies to bring light to elements of the Native American culture that would highlight the value of preserving it.
The thrust of **Crazy Horse** is in the idea that understanding the past is important. Sandoz wrote, "I would like to stress that if you know and understand the story of your community you will know and understand a great deal of the story of man, anywhere" (LMS, 333). In this way, Sandoz was an educator who staked out the parameters of the past with her diligent, uncompromising research, her reliance and trust in her own personal experiences, and her intuitive sensibilities about communicating them to others. The reasons that drove her historical craft of writing were weighty indeed. Out of the foundation of the past and the lessons learned in an honest evaluation of it, she hoped to inspire interest in the enriching quality of a true appreciation of its events and people. This, she believed, would encourage her readers to endeavor to understand and appreciate the spiritual values of the people in the past. By her industry, art, philosophy, and enlightened perspective, she constructed a historiography that sought to convey meaning and bring about change. As she created the spiritual aura of the once majestic Sioux people for her readers, she hoped to provide an avenue of connection to the past, and in its preservation, answers would come to those who were willing to take the strong medicine of a "plug historian" whose craving to write shaped the thinking of her culture.

**NOTES**


3. Ibid.


6. Ibid., 13-14.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 25.


11. Ibid.


18. Ibid.


22. Ibid., 241.

23. Ibid., 244.


26. Ibid.


34. Downey, “She Does Not Write,” 25.