

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Family Matters, Tribal Affairs. By Carter Revard.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/29r684r9>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Bensen, Robert

**Publication Date**

1999-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

I very much like the intelligent interpretation of the photographs and the attitude that “many of the representations [i.e., photographs] that resulted from these moments of anthropological encounter were collaborative acts of theater” (p. 40). While it may be true that “like measurements, photographs were intended [in their creation] to supplement verbal description, not to serve as primary data” (p. 27), as used in this book, many of the images serve as primary data. This is exemplified in comparison of plates 24 and 25 showing a man wearing a trade cloth kerchief in a distinctive circular knot mimicking the shape of a cedar bark neckring traditionally worn during rituals as a sign of initiation. Such evidence shows the continuation of traditional culture along with the adaptation of modern artifacts, not something the original photographer was set on depicting.

The text describes effectively the use of the camera as an anthropological tool. First, the photographs were “invaluable guides to the reproduction of ‘typical scenes’” (p. 39) in museum exhibits that depicted the social context of objects. In some cases several photographs were used to compose scenes for these museum tableaux. Second is the role that anthropology played in hastening the demise of these living traditions. The photographic record clearly shows that the removal and retirement from active use of objects collected from indigenous peoples and their installation as museum artifacts, effectively removed these artifacts from use in daily life. “The ritual of the camera recorded the desacralization of these shamanic garments in the moment of their transformation from vestments of living power to inert artifacts for collection, study, and display.... Ironically, in ‘salvaging’ items for museums, anthropologists also hastened the demise of the very things they sought to preserve . . . the loss of traditions prophesied by anthropology thus became to some extent a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 24).

This is a rather serious condemnation of early field research and collecting, only tempered by the observation of the authors that through the salvaging of these artifacts all was not lost and today is being reclaimed by many of the tribal groups represented. Overall this is an effective, powerful book and I recommend it with pleasure.

*Joanna C. Scherer*  
Smithsonian Institution

**Family Matters, Tribal Affairs.** By Carter Revard. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998. 202 pages. \$40.00 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

After Carter Revard read his poetry at my college, two perplexed colleagues argued whether his manner was that of old-time Plains speaker or that of an Oxford don. And here I'd thought I'd heard the music of the spheres speaking through an Osage/Scots-Irish/Irish/French rez-raised Rhodes Scholar, gourd dancer, community activist, student of the stars he came from, medievalist, and specialist in Old French and Oxbridge and Okie, and all of the above in service to the poet who is in service to all the above: three vol-

umes in print and one in the oven, a busy schedule of readings, and a hugely devoted following, especially in the Indian country of cyberspace, where he's the Renaissance Indian Renaissance Man.

A reader may feel similarly perplexed who, expecting a companion to N. Scott Momaday's *The Names* and Leslie Silko's *Storyteller* (as the cover's blurb suggests), finds an index, bibliography, an abundance of footnotes, and pages and pages of austere text, most unlike the vibrant esthetics of Momaday's and Silko's photo-poem-story-memoir-family-scrapbook collages. The differences are more than skin deep. Momaday and Silko wrote when it was necessary to establish in writing the bringing of the self into the remembered circle—and perhaps to establish that writing *could* do such a thing. Revard moved through that moment in an early essay (as I will discuss shortly) and has, with truly vast learning and in a voice from down home, accompanied the people who came from the stars into the space age, reenacting the Osage creation story as its stellar illumination spreads through his enlarging field of vision.

A more apt literary lineage than Momaday and Silko for Revard's book is the Osage work of Frances La Flesche and John Joseph Mathews. Drawing upon La Flesche's studies of ceremony, Mathews resolves the theory of evolution with the origin story of the people who came from the stars, upstreaming toward a plausible explanation of Osage belief and identity (*The Osages*, 1961). After his naming ceremony, Revard wrote "Traditional Osage Naming Ceremonies: Entering the Circle of Being," which followed Momaday's and, to a degree, Silko's relocating the construction of identity from the collective to the individual, from the idea a people have of themselves to the idea a certain person has of him- or herself (in Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat, eds., *Recovering the Word*, 446–466). That essay is omitted from this book, possibly because it is the fundament of these essays, which grow out of having been named into that circle. Now Revard refracts that individual beam back through *Family Matters*, *Tribal Affairs* to illuminate the circle of being that begins with family and tribe, and ultimately encompasses the world that, ironically, continues its agenda of confining and defining Native people, against which the naming, creative power of these essays is asserted.

Revard maps his early family portraiture over Mathews' depiction of the "People from the Stars" (*The Osages*, 3), though Revard's revision of that title, "Walking among the Stars" (p. 3), acknowledges where he comes and from whom, writing his people back into stardom. Along the way he traces a pattern of dislocation, struggle, and restoration that governs his reading of Osage history—a history that Mathews called "the tragedy of long adjustment to earth and its disorder" (*The Osages*, p. 9)—his place in it and his task as a writer to further that adjustment.

This pattern of Osage life is typified most by family stories Revard loves to tell, none more than that of his cousin Roy, who as a thirteen-year-old "sat across from the Pawhuska courthouse with his squirrel rifle, . . . waiting for the cop to come out who had killed his dad, our Uncle Aubrey, the cop who beat Aubrey to death in the cell and then said he fell out of his bed and hit his head on the floor: the cop came out of the courthouse and Roy had him in the sights but just could not pull the trigger, and went to California the next

week instead...." (p. 10). That's only a quarter of the sentence that encompasses Roy's life of relocation to California, his struggle as a migrant worker and family man who finally achieves poetic justice: building a house, planting fruit trees, and hunting and fishing such as "Grandpa would have loved to do in Indian Territory no doubt if there'd been some honest way to do it and feed the family" (p. 10). Building a nearly paradisaical life out of disruption embodies the toughness of spirit and sense of self that Revard treasures among his family and people. It is the very "ponderous self-esteem" and "self-importance" that Mathews attributes to the Little Ones sent down from the stars as caretakers of the Sacred One (*The Osages*, p. 9), the same "enduring awareness of its place in the universe" that Revard wrote belongs to the ceremonially named child, as to the Indians of earlier days when they were taken by train to Washington "to be awed," an awareness that allowed them "to keep their composure, their sense of their own worth and place" (*Recovering the Word*, p. 460).

The fearlessness and hunger for the world that drives Revard and that he admires in his Buck Creek neighbors who have "stayed local" but who "have also got around quite a lot" (p. 54) admits us to the central project of Revard's work, which I would call, with irony that needs to be erased, the appropriation of the world to Indian ways. It is an appropriation different from that of European discovery doctrine, which he satirizes in a parody of exploration journals, "Report to the Nation: Repossessing Europe" (which begins, "It may be impossible to civilize the European," p. 76). Rather, it is the power of naming to assert a right relation to the world, to describe and apprehend it, that he investigates in this book, especially in the essays that follow the more autobiographical ones. In the naming ceremony, acquiring a name brings one down from the sky and makes one a person, and in the Revardian ceremony of writing, being a person means using the power of naming in the crucial enterprise of taking one's place. In "Family Reunion," Revard, his brother Addison Jump, and his brother's children climb Monk's Mound at Cahokia, where they match wits in renaming the Gateway Arch with political metaphors, calling it "a Titan's handcuff [that] locks the city into the dream called Forever Westward," "a gunsight," and "a one-way mirror" (pp. 100–102). When they had gone up in the Arch an hour previously, their view of the city had notably not included Cahokia, and the irony of that double vision strikes Revard—"As Indians, we saw St. Louis. As whites, we didn't see Cahokia" (p. 104)—with renewed reason to make what is invisible visible.

The power of naming to revise and revive—to see and live again—animates the sequence of essays in "Tribal Affairs." His discussion of Charles Eastman's account of learning to name birds reveals the power of observation to create language and the power of language to create ways of seeing. His critique aims at the "ethnic cleansing" of American naming practices, ultimately reviving histories embedded in American place-names (p. 121). Much of that memory might be recovered in attending to the "undiscovered writers" (p. 183) of Native America, some of whom he contrasts favorably with canonical writers, pairing Simon Ortiz with Wallace Stevens, Wendy Rose with John Milton, Louise Erdrich with Robert Frost. He also explains his use of "tribal" Anglo-Saxon riddles in composing his "Birch Canoe" and "What the Eagle

Fan Says” to “call before the reader certain astonishing created beings in this universe and let them speak their spiritual dimension...” (p. 179). Whether expressed in the tight discipline of the riddle or in the open-ended amble of the essay, his purpose is to accord everything its voice, its vitality, and its place. Such is the literary act of naming that brings into being that which was lost or might be, an act essential to the health of the American psyche.

In the beginning of the book, in “Walking among the Stars,” he describes the neighborhood of his childhood with all the symbolic resonance of Momaday’s Plains or Silko’s pueblo. Recalling the “cultured, responsible mansion” of John Joseph Mathews’ family, Revard imagines his mother (pregnant with Revard and his twin sister Maxine) and his revered Scotch/Irish Grandpa Camp gazing “one way at the Mathews house, the other at the jail” and wondering “which way we’d go, if we lived?” (p. 5).

Scholar’s mansion or jail: the likeliest paths open for the unborn children of 1930s Pawhuska. But these essays invite us to follow the more complex life of the poet’s mind, wild and disciplined, faithful to the tradition of creation, attentive to children and to the voices of elders in ceremony and scholarship alike, and voracious in his hunger for wide open pages; in this way he has chosen to send his voice among us.

*Robert Bensen*  
Hartwick College

**Ghost Dancing the Law: The Wounded Knee Trials.** By John William Sayer. Cambridge: Howard University Press, 1997. 310 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

John W. Sayer is an Honorary Fellow at the Institute for Legal Studies, University of Wisconsin Law School. He holds a juris doctorate from the University of Houston (1970) and a Ph.D. in history from the University of Minnesota (1991). Sayer served as the director of Leech Lake Reservation Services, Cass Lake, Minnesota, in 1978 and 1979. He was directly involved in the Wounded Knee Legal Defense/Offense Committee (WKLDOC) during the 1974 trials of American Indian Movement leaders Russell Means and Dennis Banks for their leadership roles in the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Sayer states that he does not intend to provide a single truth or definitive history of the trials. Instead he hopes to “amplify voices from the past and identify structures and procedures that altered or silenced those voices, both as the events unfolded and over the course of time” (p. 8). Sayer maintains that legal institutions and the media tended to suppress political dissent, as illustrated by the numerous legal difficulties encountered by AIM leaders and the failure of the media to present their legitimate grievances fairly. The significance of the Wounded Knee leadership trial, nonetheless, was that it served as a political forum in which to air injustices against the American Indian, rather than a criminal trial, which is how the government tried to define it. “In my narrative of the trials, I emphasized the spoken record and people’s later reflection on that record,” said Sayer (p. 8). His access to pre-