

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Bernie Whitebear: An Urban Indian's Quest for Justice. By Lawney L. Reyes.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4c52089f>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(1)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Author

Clark, D. Anthony Tyeeme

### Publication Date

2007

### 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/>

tension. It is focused on efforts to examine both the potential and limits of rhetoric that attempts to challenge and adapt to the limits imposed by the dominant culture. It thus focuses on “pan-Indian” rather than tribally specific rhetoric, which points attention to the crucial importance of audience to these rhetors. Yet audience seems to remain a bit undertheorized in many of the chapters.

In addition, I wish that the authors made more consistent use of theories and ideas that have considerable currency among rhetoricians in communication (as opposed to those who inhabit English departments). There are places where Darsey’s prophetic tradition, for instance, would be useful or where Burke’s perspective by incongruity could inform the analyses. There is a reliance on Krupat, Vizenor, and Gunn Allen that recurs in many chapters, and reference is often made to the usual historical figures with considerable frequency—Zitkala-Sa, for instance, appears often. The authors assume that readers are aware of these canonical texts and people, and this book is probably not for those who aren’t.

But these are quibbles. All of these essays make good use of the theories they do wield. They stick close to the texts under consideration while placing those texts firmly in their appropriate political/social contexts and provide considerable insight into the exigencies faced by indigenous rhetors in the United States. This collection does what it ought to do: it provides very few answers and opens up a wide array of topics and issues for further research. It is going to be a very important book in the area of indigenous studies and especially for American Indian rhetorical studies.

*Mary E. Stuckey*  
Georgia State University

**Bernie Whitebear: An Urban Indian’s Quest for Justice.** By Lawney L. Reyes. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006. 160 pages. \$35.00 cloth; \$17.95 paper.

Made from twelve million cubic yards of concrete, Grand Coulee Dam is the largest concrete structure in the United States and the third largest hydroelectric facility in the world. Sharing the Columbia River with ten other dams on the US side of the border separating Washington State from British Columbia, Grand Coulee is the first dam located downstream where the river enters the United States from Canada. Lake Roosevelt, the reservoir created by the dam and memorializing the well-known Indian hater, stretches over 150 miles north to the international boundary line. When the United States began construction of the Grand Coulee Dam in 1933, white people welcomed the project as a marvel of modern technological resourcefulness. For numerous indigenous peoples along the Columbia River—from Kettle Falls, Washington (north of Spokane) to north of Revelstoke, British Columbia, high in the Monashee Mountains—however, the dam did not signal flattering ingenuity but rather provoked further disruption and displacement, distress, disrespect,

and debilitating maltreatment. In the words of Sin Aikst artist and author Lawney L. Reyes, “the completion of the Grand Coulee Dam had changed the homeland and the old lifestyle of our people forever” (*White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy: Learning to Be Indian*, 2002, xv).

It is this context of ruin created by a dam and in the wake of a decades-long invasion of Sin Aikst territory that activist Bernie Whitebear came into this world at Colville Indian Agency Hospital in Nespelem, Washington as Bernard Reyes. In *Bernie Whitebear: An Urban Indian’s Quest for Justice*, Lawney Reyes writes against artless, teary-eyed depictions of assimilating Indian victims to offer an affectionate memoir of and adoring tribute to his younger brother’s noteworthy life. The short book’s eleven chapters follow his brother over time, chronologically, from his birth in September 1937 through his passing over in July 2000. After summarizing much of what he wrote about the Sin Aikst (the name in the Salish dialect the so-called Lake Indians use to refer to themselves) in his first book, *White Grizzly Bear’s Legacy*, in chapters 2–5 Reyes goes on to recall his brother’s childhood years living with their parents from his birth in Nespelem to his graduation from Okanogan High School in 1955.

Chapter 6 transitions the reader from Whitebear’s first eighteen years in Eastern Washington through his thirty-four years as an urban Indian leader in Seattle and surveys Whitebear’s unsuccessful postgraduation pursuit of employment in Tacoma, his lackluster year at the University of Washington in 1956, the several months he spent salmon fishing in the Puyallup River and at Commencement Bay with Puyallup activist Bob Satiacum, his two-year enlistment (1957–59) in the US Army’s 101st Airborne Division, and his seven postenlistment years living and learning in Tacoma. In 1966, Whitebear moved to Seattle, where, in less than three years, his life took a dramatic turn from employment with the Boeing Company to what would result in three decades of ethnic leadership.

Chapters 7–11 document Whitebear’s three decades as an influential Indian leader in Seattle. It devotes substantial attention to the three years of his life following a diagnosis of colon cancer in September 1997 and a prognosis of five months to live. Three decades earlier, when he moved to Seattle, “Bernie was aware,” Reyes argues, “that the locations of battlefields with the white man had changed. Fighting for Indians’ rights would now take place in . . . the corporate headquarters or in the halls of the ways and means committees. Sometimes they would be fought in courtrooms” (107). Whitebear became the first director of the Seattle Indian Health Board in 1969. He was the first executive director of the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation in 1970, a position he held for the next thirty years. From these positions of organizational leadership, according to his brother, Whitebear provided the vision through which Indian people successfully battled with white governments and non-Indians to acquire resources for much-needed health services and build a cultural and community center where Indian people could share their unique cultures.

Lawney Reyes is not an academic who deliberately is engaged with the dominant intellectual conventions of American Indian studies. He does not

intentionally contribute to the history of Indian activism. He is not positioning himself to offer fresh ideas and new direction to the traditions of a twenty-first-century academy. Instead, he pursues something more modest and perhaps more important. Relying upon his memories and the recollections of other family members, close friends, classmates, and colleagues, and using his mother's diary, family papers, and organizational files (for example, correspondence, meeting minutes, and other written materials), he tenderly recalls his younger brother's productive life. He does so for his mother and father, and for family and friends. Thus, Reyes offers a complimentary tribute to Bernie Whitebear's widely acknowledged humor, imagination and farsightedness, people skills, and selflessness. Fittingly, for the rest of us, what emerges from the dozens of personal stories in *Bernie Whitebear* is a flattering vision of an extraordinary Sin Aikst man, a precious human being, someone worthy of enduring emulation and far-reaching respect.

Among the many empowering stories about his younger brother that Reyes shares, none is more emotionally charged than one used to illustrate the significance of Whitebear driving around looking for Indians needing help. "His concern always was for others," Reyes writes. On one of these evenings Whitebear found Mike Quill whom he helped by delivering him to a home for young Indians in trouble. "The young boy," according to Reyes, "was in awe that a leader such as Bernie Whitebear would take the time to do this for him" (132). Months later, Quill spoke in front of a large audience at the Daybreak Star Center, the cultural and community facility that Whitebear and hundreds of others had fought to build years earlier. During Quill's talk, Reyes recalls, "he said Bernie's effort helped him to see the good in people and trust their intentions. Bernie, he said, not only offered help but instilled a feeling of hope" (132).

Stories such as this enable Reyes to offer important insight into Whitebear's character and values. Unfortunately, the University of Arizona Press improperly advised Reyes. Depicting his brother's imprint on particular events, regrettably, he likely overstates Whitebear's influence. In certain cases, the consequence of his overstatements could be read as offensive. For instance, in recalling Whitebear's trip in 1985 to speak to the court in Vancouver, British Columbia on behalf of the Puyallup activist Bob Satiacum, Reyes recalls that "he impressed the Indians there," who, "after meeting Bernie . . . improved in expressing themselves and stating their cases." According to Reyes, "they had *never* heard an Indian who could express himself so well" (125; my emphasis). This credit Reyes gives his brother is unlikely because First Nations peoples long have led the way as role models for their cousins south of the border to emulate in our relationships with the US government and colonizers. Regrettably, *Bernie Whitebear* is inundated with garish depictions of Whitebear's wonderful human qualities, the sorts of personal characteristics that made him engaging for such a wide variety of people, Indian and non-Indian. Thus, when his older brother relies on absolutes such as "always" and "never" to characterize Whitebear, his recollections seem implausible.

For readers able to forgive distasteful attributions and an overreliance on absolutes (or exaggerations), Reyes offers something of indispensable value:

numerous empowering stories of an individual human being who offered hope to young Indians like Mike Quill. For this reason alone, *Bernie Whitebear* deserves wide attention in history surveys and American Indian studies introductory courses. It puts a human face on wounds inflicted by the construction of Grand Coulee Dam (a concrete representation of colonization and constant reminder of white privilege) and how one family survived, and blossomed, nonetheless. *Bernie Whitebear* ought to be read in Indian communities and by Indian kids. Bernie Whitebear, the Sin Aikst human being, should not be forgotten.

*D. Anthony Tyeeme Clark*

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

**Black Silk Handkerchief: A Hom-Astubby Mystery.** By D. L. Birchfield. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. 350 pages. \$26.95 cloth.

The cover of D. L. Birchfield's new novel states that it is a mystery, yet the first page quotes two treaty passages: the first from the 1802 treaty with the Choctaw and the second from the 1803 treaty with the Choctaw. This reviewer thought that the mystery must involve the Choctaw tribe in some way. Beyond the fact that the protagonist of the novel is a Choctaw from Oklahoma, and he mentions an ancestor who was around at the time of the treaties, this novel is not a mystery that takes place on tribal land, concerns tribal beliefs, or entails tribal spiritual or cultural practices in conflict with contemporary society.

In many ways, Hom-Astubby (aka William, or Bill, Mallory) is reminiscent of Robert J. Parker's Spencer: a strong yet vulnerable man who is concerned with the complexities of society, treats women respectfully, and rights wrongs at whatever cost. Like Spencer, he has a strong woman who supports him without question, sexually attracts him, and brings out his softer side. He is sometimes accompanied by his trusty sidekick who never questions what he does yet always has his back. The only thing missing is the violence. Like Spencer, Birchfield's protagonist is always on the go, traveling many miles and many days without question, his pockets somehow filled with the money necessary to fund his activities in support of the weak, downtrodden, and righteous.

Spencer has deep philosophical thoughts, as does Hom-Astubby, who ponders politics, the media, economics, Indian-white relations, and photography. Like Spencer, Hom-Astubby is also a victim of luck—sometimes good, sometimes bad. There is a brooding quality to both of the men that does not allow them to be truly happy. Always waiting for the other shoe to drop, never happy with the present, both men are always planning for a future that anticipates all the possible contingencies and usually focuses on the negative ones.

Hom-Astubby is a lawyer who does not practice but looks at everything from a legal perspective. However, he claims that the reason he does not practice law is because it isn't compatible with doing things the Indian way. The aloof way he often looks at situations, however, as if from an objective legal perspective, is in conflict with his reasoning. He decides to become a