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## **Sylvester Long's Lies:**

**Redfacing in *Long Lance: The Autobiography of a Blackfoot Indian Chief* (1928)  
and *How to Talk in the Indian Sign Language* (1930)**

**Yukari KATO**

W. Douglas Burden set out for *The Silent Enemy*, a silent documentary drama about the Canadian Ojibwa tribe, sometime around 1927. Burden meant to record this disappearing tribe in the realistic and entertaining enough way and he casted the indigenous people for all his characters. Chetoga, the sage chief of the tribe was played by Chauncey Yellow Robe, a Souix and the grandnephew of the famed Sitting Bull; Neewa, the beloved daughter of the chief was performed by Molly Spotted Elk, a Penobscot performer; and Baluk, the young handsome hero who wins the heart of the princess and saves the tribe from the starvation was played by Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, a celebrated full-blood Blackfoot chief. The “all-Indian” naturalist film shot on location, however, did not make a hit partly because of a rumor about Long Lance’s racial fraud circulated widely during the film promotion. They said that he was a black from the South passing for an Indian. As it turned out, he was not at all what he claimed to be. Yet, this muckraked racial masquerade cannot be simply and accusingly ascribed to Sylvester Long’s lies, spoiling the decent movie. As Nancy Cook points out, in the film production, the authentic Indianness was constructed by its directors, producers, actors, and the expected audience. In the midst of the creation, according to Cook, Long Lance represented the “ideal” of the Indianness: “Although compulsively represented as ‘black,’ Long Lance also remains the ‘ideal’ Indian, an almost mythic figure around whom fantasies of racial identification have been constructed” (126). Furthermore, this attempt at representing the “ideal” Indian might be at work also off the screen, or in his writing before the film production. This paper focuses on two of Sylvester Long’s writing before the film, his 1928 autobiography and a 1930 advertisement booklet on the Indian sign language, and

examines how he redfaced, or created his ideal Indian face.

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Donald B. Smith has built a good profile about Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, based on extensive research. Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance was born Sylvester Long in now Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1890. He was the third child of Joe Long and Sallie Carson. Joe, born in 1853, had worked in a plantation in Yadkin County and Sallie had been born slave in 1865. They married and lived as colored or black in the segregated Winston-Salem, but they claimed that there were Scottish and some Cherokees in their ancestors and identified themselves as Indian (Smith 22-23). Joe's father was John Vestal who was said to be a white man and mother was Mary from the Cherokee; while in Sallie's family, there was William Carson, an immigrant perhaps from Scotland, and his great-grandson Adeline Carson, who would be Sylvester Long's grandmother, was half-Native American often called the Croatan (Smith 26-27, 23-24, 40-41). Although their claim to be white and Indian was never legally admitted, Joe worked as a clerk and a janitor at the white only West End School while Sallie worked as a nurse and a midwife in both white and black households, which enabled them to secure educational opportunities for their children to some extent (Smith 32-33). In this circumstance, what made Sylvester Long attracted to Indianness was, according to Smith's research, an itinerant circus in which Sylvester joined to do odd jobs for months in 1904 and found himself "easily mistaken for an Indian" (Smith 33-34). His experience and possible excitement of being seen as an Indian rather than a black would cast a spell in his entire life. Sylvester Long's life might be divided into three phases of schooling, military service, and journalism; at each phase, he was daring to refashion and decorate himself with pieces of usable past at hand.

Sylvester Long kept inventing his life while making the best of chances he met. After working a couple of years as a janitor at a public library, he entered a private school for blacks so that he would educate himself more and work as a lawyer in the black community in the future, but he soon quitted the school. Then, he joined another circus where he met a registered Eastern Cherokee, Allen Whipporwill, and learned much from him about Cherokee culture which would benefit Sylvester Long later in his Cherokee-facing (Smith 38-39). After working in the circus, he seized a chance to attend the Carlisle Indian Resi-

dential School in Pennsylvania. One day in the summer of 1909, Sylvester Long was caught sneaking into a main office at West End School. The principal, however, did not call the police and instead suggested him and his father to apply Carlisle for more schooling because the principal had known the Native American background of the Long and acknowledged Sylvester's diligent talent and Joe's loyalty. In application for the school, Sylvester Long for the first time made a change to his CV; in order to meet the qualification, he modified his birth year and claimed to be a "half-Indian" of the Cherokee (Smith 40). He succeeded in entering Carlisle, where he acquired remarkable grade, a new Cherokee-sounding nickname, Sylvester Chahuska Long Lance, and a variety of tribal legends and traditional Indian customs. As Smith remarks, at Carlisle, "[a]s many of the others struggled to shed their Indian identity, Sylvester absorbed their stories, seeking to become all that they were being taught to deny" (58). Long Lance here was picking up what was being discarded as the savage past at the residential school which is, as Joel Pfister terms it, under "the strategic flexibility of Carlisle's attempt to establish control" over its children as a potential labor force (37). On top of self-discipline, English, history, and labor skills, the school sometimes had its children to perform the Native American on some occasions such as ceremonial events and photo shooting for school's promotional advertisement, which meant to show "the Indianness in the process of its being posed, staged and framed as a commodity for consumers" (Pfister 34). In this milieu, Sylvester Chahuska Long Lance, who was fond of circus shows and Wild West Show, might have learned how to stage the denied but simultaneously often asked Indianness at the white community's demand.

With his good reputation at Carlisle, he attended St. John's Military Academy where he enjoyed the remarkable dedication and another new nickname, "Chief," as the only Native American student (Smith 64-66), but this was merely one of chances of uplifting for Long Lance. Two years later in 1915, Long Lance was permitted to apply the United States Military Academy at West Point and made the headlines. For instance, *The Washington Post* praised in an editorial that "a full-blooded Cherokee" appointed to West Point was national honor (Smith 69). Now as "a full-blooded Cherokee," which means he had changed his racial affiliation again, took the entrance exam but failed. Whatever the reason for his unlikely failure, Long Lance then left for Canada to enlist in the army (Smith 73). He participated in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and from the summer of 1916 to the summer of 1918, he

fought in the battlefields in England and on the frontline in France. When he got injured for the third time, he was moved to a military hospital and served in the Intelligence Section of the Canadian General Staff (Smith 74-80). Back to Canada, Long Lance was discharged in Alberta, where he started working as a journalist with handsome modification to his military career in his profile.

Since the autumn of 1919, Long Lance wrote articles for papers and magazines and gradually took interests in the Native American issues. Meeting Samuel Henry Middleton, a missionary who worked for the Blackfoot, Long Lance learned the Blackfoot culture and in 1922 was given a Blackfoot name, Buffalo Child, from Old Mountain Horse, a respected Blackfoot chief (Smith 121). Long Lance adorned himself with this new name and began writing on the Blackfoot people and their issues along with his forte topics such as boxing and flying. His articles on the Native Americans include “The Sun Dance” in *Good House Keeping*, “My Trail Upward” and “The Secret of the Sioux” in *Hearst’s International-Cosmopolitan* to name a few. In the meanwhile, he moved several times from Alberta to Calgary where, as Karina Vernon analyzes, “de facto segregation” required Long Lance to keep passing for an Indian (39), to Vancouver and then to New York, where he reinvented himself again and found it fascinating to perform a Blackfoot of blue-blood, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance. He made his name soon as an amazingly sophisticated Indian, enjoying meeting celebrities and media influencers such as Irvin S. Cobb, a writer at the peak of his popularity, or Ray Long, an editor-in-chief at *Cosmopolitan* working for William Randolph Hearst’s organization. In March 1927, Ray Long asked Long Lance for an adventure book targeted young boys whose working title was “The Story of an Indian Boy.” They signed a contract to publish the book by the autumn of 1928 (Smith 195). In writing his book, Long Lance conducted research at public libraries and interviewed some local Indians, but basically he used what he had already learned from his Indian friends and acquaintances such as Mike Eagle Speaker, a young Blood who Long Lance met at St. Paul’s Missionary School and whose childhood, according to Smith, Long Lance heavily appropriated as his own (Smith 203). The book was published in August 1928 with a new title, *Long Lance: The Autobiography of a Blackfoot Indian Chief*, and laudatory forewords by Cobb, attracting good reviews from Ernest Thompson Seton or Paul Radin, for instance. The success of this autobiography brought fame and other chances to Long Lance; in 1930 when Long Lance’s

redfacing reached the apex, he worked with a shoe company to publish an advertisement booklet, and featured in a documentary drama, *The Silent Enemy*. The film, however, as we already know, ironically spoiled Long Lance's racial masquerade. After the rumor about his racial origin, Long Lance gradually distanced himself from the world of journalism in New York, but at the same time sought to save his face as the sophisticated Blackfoot chief. In 1931, he was employed by Anita Baldwin as her security guard, moved to California, and in October accompanied her on a trip to Europe. However, during and after the trip, Long Lance was sometimes witnessed to be unsettled, inattentive, and drunk for some reasons and in March of 1932, he committed suicide to bring the curtain down on his life-long redfacing (Smith 302-03, 312-13).

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Although *Long Lance* is agreed to be a fake autobiography constructed upon collected pieces of information, his fabrication shows what is at work in his narrative redfacing: a Blackfoot mask by way of self-effacement among the tribe. In the autobiography, Long Lance recalls his fictional childhood at the turn of twentieth century, which witnessed the legendary Indian bravery, the inter-tribal wars, and one of the last Indian stands against the U. S. and Canadian governments. His introduction identifies this period as to be "dramatic" and "the most colorful period in the history of the North American Indian," during which "the old tribal conflicts" were pacified and "the coming of the new white race" brought about drastic changes (*Long* 2). Long Lance offers collective experiences of his tribe in this period of drastic change rather than his own story, standing in for the "old warriors who are still living, but who cannot tell their own stories because they do not speak the white man's tongue" (*Long* 20). Long Lance supplies informative episodes from the tribal history and custom, which was perhaps meant to have educational effects on an imagined readership of young boys. At the same time, his narration on behalf of his tribal forerunners sounds a little too informative as if the fact that he can offer the tribal experiences in detail endorses his authenticity as a full-blood Blackfoot chief more effectively than telling much about himself. In the most of the autobiography, he uses "we" in explaining various experiences and poses himself as representing the tribe of Blackfoot.

What is also interesting about this book is its overall structure that endorses the shift

from the old Indian traditions to the new white values. Such structure nostalgically renders the recent violent conflict and the ongoing changes among the Blackfoot or any other indigenous tribes into the finished past, no matter what episode Long Lance tells in each of chapters and no matter how acute his criticism against the white colonialism becomes. While relating the legendary experiences of the tribal medicine man or warriors, he sometimes poses straight criticism upon the missionary, the U.S. and Canadian governments, and white pioneers, which is possible partly because each attack comes from the old past. In the chapter “The White Man’s Buffalo Robe,” for instance, Long Lance remembers one of the white men’s visits to his tribal camp. The white men came to persuade the tribe into selling their land and leaving for the designated reservation, but the chief refused. The dollar bills the white men offered were teased and the chief answered: “. . . our land is more valuable than your money. It will last for ever. It will not even perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give life to men and animals. We cannot sell the lives of men and animals; therefore we cannot sell this land. It was put here for us by the Great Spirit, and we cannot sell it because it does not belong to us. . . . As a present to you, we will give you anything we have that you can take with you; but the land, never” (*Long* 94-95). The visitors had to leave the camp at the chief’s adamant dignified refusal to give up the tribal land this time, and the negotiation over the land prolonged and met brutal violence from time to time. Long Lance always explains the process from the Native American point of view and thus echoes his dissenting voice against the white settlers, but all from the past.

The second to the last chapter, “Outlaw” offers the most outspoken criticism of the white expansionism in the autobiography. Before giving a full account of Almighty Voice, a famous die-hard Indian warrior who put up the last resistance, Long Lance recollects how weird he himself and his tribal people felt about the government officials, the white missionaries, and “the settlers who were squatting” (*Long* 109). The white missionaries, as Long Lance remembers his boyhood experiences, told them to convert and change clothes, which made them “feel uneasy” (*Long* 109). To illustrate his uneasiness, he makes a contrast between what it used to be in his boyhood and what it became after the white settlement in the North-West. For instance, he explains the eloquence of face painting that the missionaries coerced them to quit and the comfort of reticence that the tribe is gradually giving up: “If we felt angry, peaceful, in love, religious, or whatever the mood was, we painted our faces

accordingly, so that all who should come in contact with us would know how we felt at a glance. It saved a lot of useless talking. And when I was a youngster the Indians did not like to talk very much. They used to like to go about quietly and think a lot. We would sometimes sit in our teepees for hours at a time without saying a word, yet we were all enjoying ourselves. It was just our custom--and it made us feel good inside" (*Long* 108). Long Lance laments not only the abandoned custom of face painting but also the loss of silent fluency and implies that they are, or at least he himself is, now engaged in "a lot of talking." His focus then further develops into clothes: "We thought that the Indian looked funny in white man's clothes, with his hair short and without paint, and I remember that whenever we youngsters saw an Indian like this we used to laugh at him. The Indian never has looked well in white man's clothes, because he does not take the pride in them that he does in his native dress, which he fusses with a lot and keeps immaculately clean and neat" (*Long* 108). He again uses the phrase "used to," which contrasts the past and the present. The before-after contrast further indicates the difference between the young Long Lance who used to be unfamiliar with the white customs and the grown-up Long Lance who does not laugh at an Indian in white man's clothes perhaps because he has adjusted himself well in the white customs. His lamentation over the lost Indian tradition sounds powerfully railing against the imposed language, clothes, and other white customs; yet at the same time, it is the other side of his confirmation of the fact that he has become accustomed to the white customs and their "days as rovers of the plains were now to come to an end" (*Long* 108). His criticism on the white exploitation is thus accompanied with the sense of the end of the tribal past; or, to put it in another way, he can criticize the white because everything has done. What follows this elegy-confirmation is the detailed description of the life and death of Almighty Voice, whose resistance to save the tribal life on the traditional land was virtually the last stands against the white among the related tribes. The episode of Almighty Voice told in a heroic and respectful way perhaps poses decisive criticism on the white expansionism, but it sounds from the past.

The concluding chapter, "No More Roving" completes the shift from the tribal traditional lifestyle to the whitened one through over-viewing the peacemaking after the death of Almighty Voice. Almighty Voice's last resistance resulted in trans-tribal councils that finally agreed to make peace with the U.S. government and to move to the reservation. Hinting at the tribal negotiation and promises hidden from the white people, Long Lance

explains that he would reveal the details some day when all the related retire; this is again the manner of commenting on what has been done. He says: "One of these councils was held. It is well known to the Assiniboines and Northern Blackfeet, but it has never been known or recorded by the white man. And since some of the principles are still living, I shall not comment upon it further. However, some day, when these old warriors have gone on, I shall write and leave the story for history. It will surprise many to learn by just what hair's-breadth the North-West escaped what would have been the most terrible massacre in the history of America" (Long 122). He seems to exercise the tribal sovereignty by implying the refrained attack that would have brought about the wreck, but in effect he confesses that such a fatal attack both in reality and in history is possible only when it comes from the past. His recollection on behalf of the tribe revolves around the sense of ending of the tribe and its tradition, as he now states: "Our day as free rovers of the open plains had ended" (Long 122). His final words furthermore show the sense of shift from the tribe to the white: "But the new day is here: it is here to stay. And now we must leave it to our old people to sit stolidly and dream of the glories of our past. Our job is to try to fit ourselves into the new scheme of life which the Great Spirit has decreed for North America. And we will do that, keeping always before us the old Blackfoot proverb: *Mokokit--ki-ackamimat--Be wise and persevere*" (Long 122). Long Lance in this autobiography thus constructs himself as a newly updated Indian who can fit himself well in white man's clothes and therefore represent his forerunners of the sovereign tribe, which in turn endorses his authenticity.

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Two years later in 1930, Long Lance published a booklet, *How to Talk in the Indian Sign Language*, which tells some aspects of Long Lance's redfacing when read along with the autobiography. The booklet was published by the B. F. Goodrich Rubber Company as a special promotion of new sneaker shoes Long Lance and the company created in collaboration. With the foreword by the editor Kenneth Williams which was followed by a detailed advertisement, the booklet would seduce the youth to have a new pair of Indian shoes. A visualized catalogue and a recommendation from the top-class baseball player Jim Thorpe at the end of the booklet would further kindle athletic boys' fascination for the lithe supportive rubber-sole shoes which promised them to help run fast and develop healthy muscle, like

the Native American moccasin. A blend of the modern technology and the Native American wisdom in this advertisement, which sounds enchanting even today, indicates the appetite for the updated Indianness among American people.

Bookended with these commercial lures, the booklet offers brief lessons on the Native American sign language that had been used in inter-tribal communication. In “Author’s Preface,” Long Lance says that the Native American people had used the common sign language in order to communicate with different tribes and that the European also learned the signs which enabled them to negotiate with the indigenous people from different tribes. In the autobiography, he presents an episode from his childhood that shows the sign language spared avoidable conflicts and eased communication: “When they saw us they did not act like other Indians: they smiled and looked friendly right away. And their children did not stand around aloof and look stolidly at us as the ‘stranger Indians’ on the plains did; they came right up to us and began talking to us, though we could not understand them. Our chief started talking to them in the sign language, but one of their men who seemed to be a chief waved that he did not understand that language” (*Long* 70-71). Then, a man who could use the signlanguage came and the tension eased. In this booklet, Long Lance introduces some basic signs from the dying corpus of the inter-tribal sign language, which he hopes to be taken over from the diminishing indigenous population by American boys, his selection being “enough so that American boys can learn to talk to each other without uttering a word” (“Author’s” para. 3). What follows the preface is a lesson on sentences, “Making Sentences,” which Long Lance starts by declaring that “[t]he Indian do not waste words” (“Making” para. 1). In seeming contrast to informative eloquence that endows him the authentic voice of the Blackfoot chief in the autobiography, Long Lance in the booklet emphasizes the importance of verbal parsimony. Instead of wasting words, he actually implies delightful communication via sign language as the one he remembers in the autobiography: “We could not talk with one another except through the sign language, but we shouted our glee just the same” (*Long* 39).

Following the two-page lesson on sentence, Long Lance gives a small lecture on names, “Names of People,” which is an abridged version of “What’s in an Indian Name?” of the autobiography. In both, he explains that an Indian man takes at least three names in the course of his life and that if necessary and lucky enough he can upgrade his name. In “What’s in an Indian Name?” of the autobiography, he makes an interesting, contrastive comment on

names of the indigenous and the white people: “In the civilization in which we live, a man may be one thing and appear to be another. But this is not possible in the social structure of the Indian because an Indian’s name tells the world what he is: a coward, a liar, a thief, or a brave” (Long 20). He first implies that he has already civilized himself and participated in the white world of “civilization.” Then he defines names of the indigenous people as representing “what he is,” thus making it impossible to lie about himself with his name. The comment might sound ironical, given his redfacing or lying about his racial affiliation. Yet, what Long Lance repeatedly emphasizes about is that there can be chances to “improve” one’s name; in the autobiography, he says that “a man was given many opportunities to improve his name as time went on” while in the sign language booklet, he states that “if he gets a bad name he has the opportunity to improve it in some future battle or expedition” (Long 20, “Names” para 7). His emphasis is certainly self-justificatory, but at the same time, it tells a lot about his deceitful passing for an Indian. Long Lance’s continuous updating of his racial title, from a tri-racial “colored” to a “half-Indian” of the Cherokee in applying for Carlisle, to a full-blooded Cherokee at starting military service, and finally to a full-blood Blackfoot chief representing the indigenous people, can be a series of improvements rather than a mille-feuille of lies. Indeed his life-long fraud did harm more or less to his mentors, friends, colleagues, or especially those related to the film. However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that he chose his slightest unidentified heritage of the indigenous in his youth, made up his name and kept updating it, as he addresses young boys in the sign language booklet: “Of course it is impossible to translate many of your names into the sign language, therefore you might take Indian names such as Sun Eagle, Winter Buffalo, Crazy Snake, Little-Rain-In-The-Face. You can make up your own, if you wish (“Author’s” para 3). Thus in conversation with the autobiography, his brief call for inventing an Indian name further suggests his own attempt at constructing his own racial face, freeing himself from the biologically determined race.

Two works, *Long Lance* and *How to Talk in the Indian Sign Language*, shows how Sylvester Long wears a mask of an Indian and enhances his authenticity as the indigenous chief. His redfacing in writing is not separated from his physical performance as Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance; for instance, the frequent use of “we” further echoes in *The Silent Enemy* in which different tribes are ignorantly mixed in the making of the collective and therefore “ideal” Indianness. The indigeneity is not only the postcolonial legal issues but also

a matter of performance to some extent; and yet what is distinctive about Sylvester Long's case is that masquerading a full-blooded Blackfoot chief at the height of pursuit of the real and authentic Indianness ends in supporting biological determinism about the Indian and defacing Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance himself.

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