

**On Becoming Apache.** By Harry Mithlo and Conger Beasley Jr. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2020. 160 pages. \$29.95 paper.

Among the most famous genres in Native American literature is the composite, or “as told to” autobiography—texts relaying the life stories and perspectives of an Indigenous person as mediated by an interpreter or non-Native editor. *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), in which Black Elk’s son recounts the story of Black Elk (Oglala Lakota) as told to white author John Neihardt, has been one of the most popular of these. Neihardt took a significant role in editing, shaping, and authoring this text, which scholars examining the context of its production and draft versions of the manuscript have made clear. Questions about accuracy and artistic license are present in any nonfiction writing, but are especially vexing in the case of these highly mediated, collaborative texts. In a similar “as told to” narrative, *Geronimo: His Own Story* (1906), Geronimo (Chiricahua Apache) relays his life story to S. M. Barrett through the Apache interpreter Asa Daklugie. Such composite autobiographies raise vexing interpretive questions, which only at times can be answered from extant documents or explanation by the authors. For instance, are the words presented the actual words uttered by the Native author or storyteller? To what extent has the non-Native author or editor changed or silenced certain material, or inserted their own point of view? In cases when an interpreter was used, how reliable was that interpreter’s translation from the Native language into English?

*On Becoming Apache* is just such a text. It results from collaboration between Conger Beasley Jr, a non-Native author, and Harry Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache and Comanche) to tell the story of Harry and his father Watson Mithlo. As the back cover blurb indicates, “This story is a composite, a mosaic, a song.” There is much to commend it. In engaging and often poetic prose, we learn about Watson Mithlo’s life (1886–1993) during a period of dramatic change in Chiricahua Apache history and Harry’s experiences as part of the next generation growing up in Oklahoma. The book conveys the stories Watson was told of pre-reservation Apache life, as well as Watson’s experience as a prisoner of war of the United States in Florida and Alabama. In additionally presenting the perspectives of Watson and Harry Mithlo in later times, readers are exposed to the ongoing endurance and dynamism of Apache life. We are taken inside an intertribal Indian Methodist Church, for example, and ride alongside Harry and Conger as they traverse Apache farms in Oklahoma. Attention to spiritual traditions and stories is also welcome, and an important corrective to the many histories of Chiricahua Apaches focused on militarism and a chronological recounting of key events in Apache–United States relations.

The title, “On Becoming Apache,” reflects the work’s dual focus. On one hand, it is a story of Watson and Harry Mithlo’s lives. It recounts the experiences, stories,

and lessons by which they came to understand what it means to be Apache. We learn about the martial prowess of Apache men that Watson heard about in childhood and his own experiences of survival as a prisoner of war in harsh circumstances at Fort Marion, Florida, and Mt. Vernon Barracks, Alabama. We learn about Harry's military service in World War II, and what this service meant to him. It is also, however, the story of Conger Beasley's education in Apache history and culture. The book concludes with an adoption ceremony of sorts in which Conger is asked to carry forward what he has learned: "and now you are one of us. When they ask you who you are, you tell them you are a Chiricahua Apache" (144). Beasley's asides about his life story and transformation from outsider to adopted insider are never boring, even if they are also at times tangential to the subject matter.

As compelling as it is for general readers, *On Becoming Apache* will prove vexing to an academic audience. For those familiar with Apache autobiographies and oral histories, much of the material covered here will be familiar. Within Apache studies, it evokes the work of Eve Ball, famous for the oral histories she collected from the relatives of Geronimo, Victorio, and other Chiricahua Apaches during the mid-1900s. While Ball's work was incredibly valuable in presenting Apache perspective on their own history, her decisions regarding editing and stylizing their narratives also generated criticism. Ball did not record her interviews, but rather took notes in shorthand. She then wrote her informants stories in the first person, adding rhetorical flourish and historical context. Yet if anything, her notes and recordkeeping mean we know more about how Ball worked than we know about Conger Beasley's role in writing *On Becoming Apache*. The book's lack of explanation of the interview, research, and writing process raises concerns about the extent to which the portions credited to Watson and Harry Mithlo represent their actual words.

Indeed, I could not help but wonder to what extent Beasley and Harry Mithlo, in crafting Watson Mithlo's account of his experience as a Chiricahua Apache prisoner of war, drew upon existing published works. Watson, born around 1886, must have been an infant and young child during the period Apaches were in Florida and Alabama; portions of the book in his voice, perhaps for this reason, quote from historical records and also provide anecdotes closely paralleling those in published works such as Betzinez's *I Fought with Geronimo* (1959) and Ball's *Indeh: An Apache Odyssey* (1980). The significant focus on Chiricahua stories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also raised questions for me about editorial intervention. Although the second half of *On Becoming Apache* provides valuable accounts of Chiricahua life in Oklahoma and New Mexico, I wish there had been even more of a focus on Watson and Harry's firsthand experiences in the second half of the twentieth century. This is a history that remains less well known to outsiders and deserves more attention. Was this focus driven by Harry and Watson Mithlo, or by Beasley's interests and questions? For an academic audience and others seeking ways to understand passages credited to Watson and Harry Mithlo, it would have been helpful had explanatory notes on the research and writing process, at the very least, been included.

Such questions are intrinsic to the composite autobiography as a genre. For this reason, the trend in recent decades has been away this type of writing and towards

recording and presenting oral histories as transcribed, or, alternatively, writing scholarly biographies. Within Apache studies, Bud Shapard's *Chief Loco* (2010) provides a good example of the latter. In the end, however, likely to a popular audience these concerns will matter little. For general readers, Beasley and his informants' engaging writing and storytelling will hold their attention and likely teach them something new about Chiricahua Apache history and culture.

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