

Walking Two Paths:
Code-Switching and Formation in Charles Eastman's Education

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Introduction

Charles Eastman gives a thoughtful account of his education across cultures in *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*. As a Dakota author writing for mostly white readers, he shares his story with care, letting meaning come through metaphor, specific details, and physical reactions instead of open emotional statements. When he praises parts of civilization or Christianity, he does so carefully, often explaining new systems using Dakota moral ideas rather than replacing them. Eastman's background in Dakota values like discipline, endurance, and service shapes him before he even enters white Christian boarding schools. His grandmother's love and strict teaching give him the ethical guide he uses in mission and school life. As he faces new institutions, his father's hunting images, his tiredness from strict routines, his calm in moments of distrust, and his discomfort with public prayer all show that learning is an uncertain journey, not a simple success. This essay argues that Eastman uses narrative restraint, self-control, and code-switching to show his education as a moral test, not just assimilation or conversion. These methods help him keep his ethical direction and judge white Christian civilization by both Dakota and Christian values.

Eastman initially frames literacy through Dakota categories rather than as a civilizing replacement. His father explains white schooling as learning "the signs by which you can make out the words on their books," casting letters as another system of tracks to be read. The word "signs" belongs not to print culture but to a hunting and scouting world in which reading is already an embodied skill. By describing the alphabet this way, Eastman presents literacy as a familiar Dakota practice rather than as a superior or foreign form of knowledge. Letters become analogous to footprints or trail marks, and books become another terrain to navigate.

Eastman's reliance on metaphor at this early stage is not accidental. By explaining literacy through hunting imagery, he refuses to let reading appear as an entirely foreign skill. The metaphor does more than soften the transition into white schooling; it protects intellectual continuity. Rather than presenting the alphabet as the beginning of knowledge, he situates it within an already existing Dakota practice of reading land, movement, and intention. In doing so, he subtly resists the civilizing narrative that portrays Indigenous people as illiterate until introduced to print. The ability to read signs, whether on a trail or on a page, becomes part of a continuous moral and cognitive tradition. Education, then, is not depicted as rescue but as translation. This framing allows Eastman to accept new forms of knowledge without conceding that his earlier formation was deficient.

Eastman shows that English adds to Dakota ways of thinking instead of replacing them. This choice is careful and intentional. He pushes back against the idea that white schooling must erase Indigenous knowledge. By letting his father use metaphor to explain reading, Eastman treats education as translation rather than capitulation. Eastman's later recollection of his first recitations at Santee confirms that, even as he acquires English, he uses code-switching to describe the experience in Dakota terms of endurance and pain, rather than in terms of victory. He writes, "for a whole week we youthful warriors were held up and harassed with words of three letters... until not a semblance of our native dignity and self-respect was left."¹ Calling themselves "youthful warriors" shows the boys already have training in courage, self-control, and honor.

Words like "rat" and "cat" might seem harmless in a white classroom, but Eastman calls them "raspberry bushes in the path," causing pain and shame for those forced to learn them.²

¹ Eastman, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, 34.

² *Ibid.*, 35.

This comparison turns classroom learning into a challenge like moving through a forest, using nature imagery to show how hard and humiliating it feels. Outwardly, Eastman accepts the discipline of learning to read, but inside, he sees it as a test of Dakota endurance and strength. The loss of dignity he describes is a temporary shame from white schooling, not a rejection of his old life. Even when he feels defeated, he still calls himself a ‘youthful warrior,’ keeping the moral values that shaped his dignity.

When he cannot protest openly, Eastman lets his body show the strain. He describes his first days at boarding school as moving “with a wearisome regularity, like walking railway ties—the step was too short for me.”³ This image shows how the school’s routine feels unnatural and physically limiting. The railway ties symbolize a forced, mechanical rhythm, and the short step indicates he has to hold himself back. Instead of directly criticizing the school, Eastman shows the mismatch through his physical experience: the school’s schedule interrupts the natural movement he learned from Dakota life. This early discipline helps him stay calm later in times of danger.

During the Ghost Dance crisis, as troop movements and rumors of violence circulate, Eastman reflects, “As I was still too new to the situation to grasp it fully, I concluded that in any case the only thing for me to do was to apply myself diligently to my special work, and await the issue.”⁴ His language is notably bureaucratic rather than fearful, presenting himself as a disciplined worker fulfilling assigned responsibilities even as his community confronts existential threats. The choice to “apply myself diligently” signals more than composure. It reflects the professional identity he has learned to inhabit within government structures. He responds to crisis not with visible outrage but with procedural steadiness. That response aligns

³ Ibid., 43.

⁴ Ibid., 60–61.

with expectations placed upon Native professionals in federal service, who were often required to demonstrate loyalty and restraint under scrutiny. Eastman's language performs that loyalty outwardly while leaving unspoken the emotional cost of such restraint.

While Eastman initially employs the elevated rhetoric of Christian progress, his later reflections critically interrogate this ideal. He observes, "When I reduce civilization to its lowest terms, it becomes a system of life based upon trade. The dollar is the measure of value and might still spell right; otherwise, why war?"⁵ The use of "reduces" indicates analytical detachment, as if simplifying an equation to reveal underlying assumptions. Civilization thus becomes a subject for examination rather than an unquestioned promise. Eastman's critique intensifies when he notes that Christians "are anxious to pass on their religion to all races of men but keep very little of it themselves."⁶ Without rejecting Christianity, he highlights the disparity between professed beliefs and actual practice. His rhetorical restraint enables him to engage Christian moral discourse while holding Christian societies accountable, drawing upon both Dakota ethics and Christian ideals. In Eastman's narrative, education does not eliminate Dakota ethics; instead, it equips him to evaluate white Christian civilization by both Indigenous and Christian standards. The result is a voice that navigates white institutions with moral clarity, employing code-switching to sustain and assert Dakota moral authority.

Conclusion

Eastman's story presents his education as a sustained negotiation between moral systems, not just a simple move toward civilization. By calling letters "signs" and comparing spelling lessons to "raspberry bushes" in the path, he shows that English adds to, rather than replaces, Dakota ways of thinking. His self-control, seen in how he adjusts to the "railway ties" of school

⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁶ Ibid., 259.

time and chooses to “await the issue” during the Ghost Dance crisis, shows the same pattern. Instead of making his struggles dramatic, Eastman deals with them quietly, keeping the core values that shaped him.

This discipline ultimately serves as a means of critical evaluation. Employing the measured language of Christian reform, Eastman reduces civilization to economic exchange and criticizes Christian nations for failing to embody their professed values. The education he receives does not eliminate Dakota ethics; rather, it refines and strengthens them. By acquiring the ability to communicate within white institutions while preserving his foundational moral orientation, Eastman demonstrates that cross-cultural movement does not necessitate self-erasure. His narrative proposes a more resilient model: education can broaden one’s perspective without undermining one’s core identity.

Bibliography

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