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## FROM THE EDITOR

*aya aya niihkaania!*

On behalf of the officers of the Association of American Indian Literatures (ASAIL) and the editorial board of *SAIL*, I would like to thank our 2005 patrons and sponsors for their support of ASAIL, *SAIL*'s parent organization, as their generous contributions assist us to continue to our mission: "to promote study, criticism, and research on the oral traditions and written literatures of Native Americans; to promote the teaching of such traditions and literatures; and to support and encourage contemporary Native American writers and the continuity of Native oral traditions."

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## Poem and Tale as Double Helix in Joy Harjo's *A Map to the Next World*

ANGELIQUE V. NIXON

We climb and keep climbing, our children  
wrapped in smallpox blankets to keep  
them warm. Spider shows us how to weave  
a sticky pattern from the muddy curses of our enemy  
to get us safely to the Milky Way.

We had to leave our homes behind us,  
just as we were left behind by progress.

We do not want your version of progress.

Joy Harjo, "Returning from the Enemy"

Honest, unmerciful, and direct, Joy Harjo's poetry engages in the complex social and political issues of not only Native Americans but also other marginalized and oppressed peoples. Harjo writes her poetry using a unique narrative style, and the role of storytelling is prominent in her work.<sup>1</sup> Her diverse style and complex subject matter opens up her work to numerous theoretical readings. For instance, the ecological and ecofeminist studies of Harjo's work present intriguing connections between ecofeminism and Native American literature while exploring the history of colonization and domination.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the social, cultural, and historical critiques using feminist and postcolonial theories examine how she brings awareness to the Native American struggle by incorporating the past into the present in her poetry.<sup>3</sup> And feminist readings of Harjo and other Native American writers analyze the complexity of culture and voice

within this literature.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, Harjo's work can be read from a variety of perspectives, and I would assert that it is difficult to simply apply one approach to her poems because of the array of issues she touches upon in her work. As many Native American scholars, such as Paula Gunn Allen and Craig Womack, among others, have argued, Native American literature must be understood in the Native context. Therefore, Harjo's poetry (as with Native American literature in general) must be read through an understanding of Native American culture, history, cosmology, myths, traditions, and philosophies.<sup>5</sup> Like many other Native writers, Harjo offers a look into the history, culture, beliefs, and sufferings of her people, and the social, political, and cultural implications of her work resonate as she offers new insights and perceptions into these issues.

In her collection *A Map to the Next World*, Harjo's distinctive style continues to complicate the notion of poetry and prose poems. In a review of the book, Zoë Anglesey states that Harjo's fifth collection of "poems, tales, and recollections lift the lyric into storytelling like sweetgrass smoke" (66). The review praises Harjo for her brilliant work in writing the truth while balancing "the celebrated and condemned" (67). Skillfully, Harjo incorporates several dimensions of the Native landscape in the work by delving into social, political, and historical issues, as she empowers women (particularly Native women), crosses cultural boundaries, celebrates nature, and defies Western ideologies. In this study, I will show how Harjo constructs the poems and tales in *A Map to the Next World* to be multidimensional and nonlinear through what I describe as complex interplay and interchange. Specifically, I posit that each poem and tale operates as a double helix within Harjo's collection, which I see as a metaphor for the unique relationship between poems and tales that are circular, interdependent links, not simply connected but rather intersecting, mutually dependent, and perpetually moving in and out of each other. The most apparent connection lies in the titles, where the poems' titles are uppcased and the tales' titles are lowercased. More importantly, the titles of certain poems and tales when transposed assist in clearly envisioning the circular, interdependent links that

reflect the relationship between each poem and tale. As I elucidate in the textual analysis later, the narrative of many tales focus on a detail or an event, which is then illuminated by the corresponding poem to a broader yet elusive perspective or insight. Moreover, a poem precedes each tale; therefore, in order to engage in the interdependence between poem and tale, a circular reading is required to see the double helix created by this unique relationship. By reading Harjo's collection through this double helix, we can achieve a greater understanding of the multidimensional perspective she posits of the world.

The poems and tales included in *A Map to the Next World* contain a distinctive melding of narrative, storytelling, and songlike lyrics. The running themes in the collection, in particular those of history, myths, legends, the feminine, nature, land, different cultures, and the nonhuman natural world, among others, resound throughout each poem and tale, and these cannot be understood in terms of Western dichotomies. Harjo's work, as well as other Native American writings, is grounded in Native American philosophies. Such philosophies are characterized by worldviews that are nonhierarchical and nonlinear and that reveal the interconnectedness of all living things (humans, plants, animals, the earth, land, air, oceans, planets, rocks, etc.).<sup>6</sup> To understand Native American writings, readers must comprehend them within the context of these philosophies. In her introduction to *Song of the Turtle: American Indian Literature 1974–1994*, Paula Gunn Allen traces the history of these writings by placing them into historical and cultural contexts of the atrocities that Native Americans have faced: genocide, forced removals from tribal lands, colonization, and forced assimilation. In her introduction to *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*, Allen explains the necessity of context for Native American stories:

Context is important to understanding our stories, and for Indian people that context is both ritual and historical, contemporary and ancient. We are contemporary because we survive in the face of a brutal holocaust that seeks to wipe us out, and our context is as much historical as it is tribal. (2)

Furthermore, she argues that tribal aesthetics utilize elements of both oral and Western traditions because of the historical context involved; therefore, this mixing of literary conventions may appear confusing and degrading to those who uphold the boundaries of genre (2–3). Native American literature continues to blur, combine, and mix various elements of literary conventions with oral storytelling; Allen asserts:

Native writers write out of tribal traditions, and into them. They, like oral storytellers, work within a literary tradition that is at base connected to ritual and beyond that to tribal metaphysics or mysticism. What has been experienced over the ages mystically and communally—with individual experiences fitting within that overarching pattern—forms the basis for tribal aesthetics and therefore of tribal literatures. (5)

In other words, Native American literature must be read through a Native lens that acknowledges the historical and cultural context of tribal life from precontact to European colonization and domination to present-day struggles. These experiences influence tribal aesthetics along with storytelling, ritual, and mysticism. Consequently, to understand Native American writing, one must have a keen awareness of the context in which most contemporary Native American writing grounds itself. My analysis of Harjo's book provides a way of reading and understanding the Native worldview that Harjo maps throughout her collection.

In *A Map to the Next World*, Harjo expresses a circular vision through the poems and tales; they continually lead back into each other, as each poem and tale becomes a double helix that serves to reinforce the story inside the tale, which then curves back to the poem. To fully envision this relationship between poem and tale, the last poem of the collection shall be considered first because it initiates a circular reading of the entire book. With two poems in one, "In the Beautiful Perfume and Stink of the World" contains two-line stanzas with alternating italics to indicate the separation of the two intertwining poems, which read like songs. The title alone presents two sides or realms of the same world, which can be seen as both oppos-

ing and complementary. These poems together create a vision of the world as multiple, varying, and changing. To see the intertwining and double nature of this poem, I quote at length, starting at the beginning, to provide a context for analysis:

In these dark hours of questioning everything matters:  
each membrane of lung and how wind travels,

*I had been traveling in the dark, through many worlds,  
the four corners of my mat carried by guardians in the shape of  
crows.*

the french fry under the table the baby dropped,  
my son grieving far away in a land of howling trains and  
enemies.

*Above me was the comet, a messenger who flew parallel to my  
heart.*

*The speed of light translated my intimate life as seconds*

Here loss is measured in tons, not ounces. And what-I-should-  
have-said

and what-I-should-have-done are creatures of habit

*as a newborn star shimmering there, and then I stopped counting  
and began to comprehend the view.*

sitting on the bed, blocking my view of the sleeping moon.

If I get up to play my horn I'll awaken the neighbors.

*My Son was my dark-eyed baby again, kicking his legs after a bath,  
And then he was a man with fire in his hands.*

If I get up to pee I'll lessen my chances

of catching the wave of remembering and forgetting. (133)

The speaker establishes a specific Native worldview through multiple connections between the earth and humans, as we enter several stories of journeys undertaken almost in a dream state. Each of the poems, read separately, creates its own circle, which turns back on itself and begins again, thereby prompting a rereading. Reading the two

together as positioned in the text jars the notion of linear reading because the alternating double lines are positioned in such a way to evoke a nonlinear perspective, as they can be read both together and separately. These two poems in one are in fact linked through a circular interdependence because each circle depends on the other for meaning. The speaker travels through diverse worlds searching and hoping for answers to the destruction and devastation that surround the darkness of the poems:

*And there were other trails through the dark; children began killing  
each other and humans had forgotten*

In the wake of gods who spiraled to earth unaware they were  
falling.

They fought and destroyed each other.

*the promise to see the gods in any stranger who came to their door  
for food.*

*I found myself on the Nile in a felucca*

Now we think we are left to our own devices, no one to slay the  
monsters devouring us, no one to translate the din of the spin.

(134)

While two varied worlds are presented in these two poems, they also entwine to form one poem that shares the story of a world in turmoil with mass devastation, as utter disregard and disrespect grew among the humans who could not follow the simple peaceful messages of the “gods,” who could be the earth spirits. The “monsters” (as per Harjo’s notes at the end of the book) reside in the “Lower World” of the “three worlds in Muscogean cosmology” and “roam this earth when humans set loose destruction by way of their negligence” (137). Once we know the meaning of “monster” for the Muscogees, the poem reveals multiple meanings within the world that the speakers share. As the collection ends with this poem, readers are guided back to the beginning of the book, thereby creating a loop, which then creates complex relations between the poems and tales upon rereading.

Having laid the foundations of a circular reading, I will now ex-

plore the relationship between specific poems and tales with regard to the circular, interdependent links that create a double helix of each poem and tale.<sup>7</sup> I will describe the tale first and then the poem, opposite to the way they are presented in the text, in order to explain how each tale is indeed based on a detail or event that inspires the broader perspective of the corresponding poem. In “the psychology of earth and sky,” the speaker tells the story of watching the dawn, while traveling through her past and present as she connects coming home with dawn:

And dawn arrives, no matter the struggle of the night and how  
endless that night might be.

We are part of an old story and involved in it are migrations of  
the winds, of ocean currents, of seeds, songs and generations of  
nations.

In this life it seems like I am always leaving, flying over this  
earth that harbors many lives. I was born Indian, female and  
artist in the Creek Nation. It is still grey out as I follow the out-  
line of memory. (14)

The speaker expresses the fluidity of Native storytelling through migrations and generations, as the past through memory becomes an intricate part of the present. The story unfolds as this woman travels through her past to share moments that reflect her Native American heritage, and the interconnectedness of the human and natural world resonates.

As the speaker remembers her teenage self arriving home after being out all night, she appreciates dawn: “I can still breathe it, that awareness of being alive and part of the ceremony for the rising of the sun. I often lived for this moment of reconciliation, where night and morning met” (14–15). The speaker relates these moments to her feelings of hesitation in leaving her daughter and granddaughters, and the poem is dedicated to them “as a guardian spirit” (15). After reading this tale, the corresponding poem “Songline of Dawn” reveals a deeper perspective into the significance of story being told:



The narrative presents a story about a Native American birth, and the speaker tells us of spirits visiting and butterflies that flew in circles around them, which meant the girl child was on her way. This child was born with “the gift of being able to see sharply into the belly of the earth, and with that ability comes the responsibility to speak of what she sees, no matter the difficult truth of it” (23). The granddaughter is empowered by this relationship with the earth, and her voice can “reveal a map of destiny” (23). This “map of destiny” is only fully illuminated through the parallel poem, “A Map to the Next World,” which provides the message from the deity mentioned in the related tale.

The poem on its own reads like instructions or advice from some wiser source, whereas after reading the tale, the poem becomes a complex interchange among those in the tale:

In the last days of the fourth world I wished to make  
a map for those who  
would climb through the hole in the sky.

My only tools were the desires of humans as they  
emerged from the killing  
fields, from the bedrooms and the kitchens.

For the soul is a wanderer with many hands and feet.  
The map must be of sand and can't be read by ordinary  
light. It must carry  
fire  
to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit.

In the legend are instructions on the language of the land,  
how it was we  
forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in  
it or of it.

Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and  
malls, the alters of  
money.

They best describe the detour from grace. (19)

The voice of the deity speaks through this poem and tells of the prophecy mentioned in the tale, with criticism of what humans have done to the earth. Continuing with a list of “the errors of our forgetfulness,” including pollution, devastation of forests, and losing our connection with birds and other animals, the deity offers a vivid description of human destructions: “What I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles and wasted blood” (19). Humans have forgotten how to respect the earth and have failed to see the consequences of this act; both poem and tale reiterate this idea in two different ways—through the story and the deity’s message. The rest of the poem appears to be directed toward the granddaughter in the tale, as the “message” carries on with “An imperfect map will have to do, little one. / The place of entry is the sea of your mother’s blood” (20). This entry refers to the birth, which happens in the tale, further reflecting the interdependent connections between the two. Moreover, the deity directs the grandchild: “You will travel through the membrane of death, smell cooking from the encampment where our relatives make a feast of fresh deer meat and corn soup, in the Milky Way” (20). With references to ancestors who will assist on the journey, the poem incorporates several elements of Native American tribal life, culture, and history, which serve as a guide for the granddaughter in the tale.

The multiple perspectives within this double helix relationship are revealed after engaging with both poem and tale, and as the end of the poem aptly combines history, earth, humans, and a circular vision, it is clear that the deity’s voice travels to all those who can hear:

Remember the hole of our shame marking the act of  
abandoning our tribal grounds.

We were never perfect.

Yet, the journey we make together is perfect on this earth  
who was once a  
star  
and made the same mistakes as humans.

We might make them again, she said.

Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no  
beginning or end.

You must make your own map. (21)

The girl child of the prophecy must make her own map, just as Native Americans must and all humans of this earth should in order to see our circular existence. The female earth “who was” a star is powerful, as she gives advice to the travelers and explains a nonlinear and nonhierarchical viewpoint. The association of women and nature in the poem reveals interconnectedness and the sharing of important stories. At the end of the tale, a clear link back to the poem occurs with the speaker’s discussion of what could be the deity, the earth, the sacred, or all three: “Her appearance here with us marks a convergence of all of us, yet she is ultimately, definitely, herself” (23). Hence, both tale and poem share a story, as the poem reveals the “map of destiny” through the voice of “the sacred” and the tale provides the sacred, or deity’s, story and the context of the map. This interplay between poem and tale further reveals how the metaphor of the double helix allows for a more complex reading.

“The Whirlwind” and “all your enemies will be vanquished” exhibit a similar relationship even though at first glance they appear unrelated. They do, in fact, create a circular interdependence because the story in the tale directly inspires the poem. The narrator of the tale tells of a trip to Madras, India, and a visit with a Vedic astrologer, who offers predictions, one of which is “By 19\_\_ all of your enemies will be vanquished” (67). In explaining the Vedic science, the speaker implies the similarities of this science to Native American thinking and philosophy: “Forming the basis of this science is the understanding that we are all heavenly bodies in a dynamic interchange with the earth, sun, other planets and virtually all life. . . . We are a community together, breathe together” (67). The speaker indicates a Native American ancestry through references like this one and another one that points to “my people” being mistaken for sun worshipers by Europeans. As the speaker reacts to the prediction by the Vedic astrolo-

ger, the story continues as the narrator waits for the prediction to come true. And it does but only through the “Mvskoke shape of possibility”: “Fear is the potent elixir that motivates enemies. And there can be no enemies when there is no fear. Fear makes an illusion of separation” (68). After making this allegorylike statement, the narrator then shares a story of “being attacked by a monster in the dream world” (68), which provides a context for the statement about fear as she fights the monster by letting go of any fear of this frightful entity: “His hand went through me because there was no fear to keep him there. Then he was gone” (68). Thus, the speaker actually holds the power to vanquish enemies and must experience it in the dream world to see the possibility of the prediction coming true. This perspective about fear aligns with a Native American worldview and circles back into the corresponding poem, assisting in a clearer interpretation.

After reading the tale, “The Whirlwind” becomes a dynamic struggle with the forces of nature and rhythm of the earth fighting fear, power, and destruction. The “she” in the poem represents nature under attack, while at the same time “she” represents the human emotions of power, greed, and fear when they have taken control of a person, which then adversely affects the environment.

Faster and faster  
 she whirls in the dark, the jealous  
 green dark, the make-witchcraft-  
 in-the-holes dark. Faster and faster.  
*Here is a hole made by a cigarette.*  
*I couldn't stop it then, she said,*  
*and I won't stop it now.*  
 Faster and Faster.  
*I want that lover of sweet madness,*  
*That powwow prancer*  
*I want prettier than you,*  
 faster and faster. (64, italics in original)

Her struggle is made apparent through the shift between her voice in italics and the speaker, and she explains what has happened: “*I can't stop now, she said, see how / beautiful I am. / I am brighter than you / in*

*my green clothes of power*" (64, italics in original). Power and greed in the form of control and material possessions have consumed her, yet we can see her fighting through the poem with fear of what she has become. Her voice should also be read as both the enemy and fear of the enemy described in "all your enemies will be vanquished" because of the following scene in the poem:

She tries to enter my breathing,  
 and then the gates  
 of believing,  
 to the place of let go.  
*Faster and faster*, the thing urges her  
 on. This thing made of acid  
 of heartbreak and hatred. (65, italics in original)

These lines become illuminated through the tale; the "thing" is the fear driving the monster in the dream world, as fear "feeds on itself, decay / and disaster" (65). The speaker reconciles with fear through traveling into the past, "through forced migrations / and starvation of relatives"; the present, "To the truth of the matter / it is turned back"; and future, "To the hole of *if only* / it is back" and "To the place before / and after / you" (65–66, italics in original). The nonlinear descriptions throughout the poem, along with complex and ambiguous visions of the feminine and nature, ultimately illustrate a Native American worldview where change and interconnections are a constant, thereby crossing boundaries and presenting a view of the world that is counter to the exclusionary and destructive practices of the West. Through the correlation made with the tale, this poem not only allows the earth to "speak" of destruction but also engages with the "enemy" (the dominant culture, colonizers, and oppressors), as the speakers in both tale and poem search for answers. However, fear is also the enemy, which creates the circular interdependence between the poem and tale as they become linked through the images of fear and the defeat of fear.

Similarly, the relationship between "threads of blood and spirit" and "Protocol" presents another dimension to the circular, interdependent links between poem and tale because they are fully im-

mersed in each other. The narrator of the tale shares a few events and details that can be seen as sparking the poem: a visit to Hawaii, where an offering is made to the female fire deity Pele; Mvskoke storytelling by relatives; and a greeting written by a Native woman. These events twist and turn through the story with moments of reflection about the importance of protocol: “When traveling to another country it’s important to recognize the spirits there, and acknowledge them with prayers, so that you won’t inadvertently offend or hurt by ignorance of protocol of that place. . . . Protocol translates as respect and reverence” (118). The narrator learns different perspectives of protocol through Mil in Hawaii, who explains “the protocol of prayer” and opening “with a songline of ancestors by naming your mother, then her mother and all the way back” (118). Recognizing this idea of naming in the Creek Nation, the narrator travels through the past to remember how “storytelling was a ritual of making a pattern of relatives, naming who was related to whom and the evolution of those lines of meaning until there was a web of intricate sense” (118–19). Another act of protocol occurs when the speaker receives a note from a Native student introducing herself by naming her ancestors and tribe, and the narrator says, “I was honored and impressed protocol had not been lost or discarded as unnecessary in the post-colonial world” (119). Such protocol “provides a thread of meaning that goes back generations, thousands of years, like the naming of ancestors in Okmulgee or Hawai‘i” (119). Thus, protocol maintains the “threads of blood and spirit” among Indigenous peoples connected to the land and knowing the earth.

Just as the tale reveals multiple layers of story, the poem “Protocol” encompasses several dimensions of Native American life and connections to other Native peoples, while revealing how humans are connected through blood and spirit. Upon engaging the tale, the speaker in the poem is not only talking to ancestors and other Indigenous peoples but also the friend Mililani from Hawaii spoken of in the tale. This creates a complexity and depth to the circular reading because one could not know this without the tale. The speaker travels with the intricacies of communication through time and space, past and present:

I do not know your language though I hear the breaking of  
 waves through vowels.  
 It is blue and if I am to follow protocol I will introduce myself  
 through my mother and hers until you know the liquid mass of  
 ancestors  
 and in that you might know that I did not find myself  
 here on your island by some coincidence.

[.....]

When the Mvskoke emerged from that misty original place  
 we were led by four young winds, and a star who took the form  
 of talking fire. (116, lines 7–12 omitted)

As the speaker incorporates tribal past and history with the present, the circular interdependence between tale and poem become clear through knowing the significance of “you,” knowing what the proper protocol is, and understanding its necessity, which is revealed through the tale. These specifics are illuminated through a second reading of the poem after engaging the tale, as we travel through tribal stories and history—through the world of unjust history, “when treaties were forced with blood. / Those who signed were killed. / Now I have a gas range and there is no end to the war” (116), and simultaneously through the world of other Indigenous people who have suffered similar atrocities, “the tyranny / of false rulers and how though they appear to dominate / your island they are small and brittle and will break” (116). These perspectives become fully realized through the tale, as readers are taken through many dimensions of this history. The immersion of tale and poem continue at the end of each as the two not only reflect each other but also become mutually dependent. In “threads of blood and spirit,” maintaining Native peoples’ existence lies in “protocol” as “a key to assuming sovereignty,” and from a symbiotic perspective, the speaker of “Protocol” pronounces a melding and sharing between Native peoples of Hawaii and America through protocols of offerings, which “will make us vulnerable / to the shimmer of the heart” (117). This sharing ties into the story of Hawaii in the tale and correlates to the meaning of protocol and Native relationships: “This is how I know myself. / This is how I know

who you are” (117). Harjo asserts a strong and necessary connection between Indigenous peoples and the importance of tribal culture and protocol. Through a circular reading of poem and tale as a double helix, we can see the multi-dimensional, nonlinear, inclusive worldview that Harjo expresses in this story that connects different cultures and perspectives.

In studying Harjo’s poems and tales as linked through circularity and interdependence through the metaphor of the double helix, *A Map to the Next World* incites a world-making journey that encourages readers to be active participants in knowing and learning. Captivating and powerfully stirring, Harjo’s work resonates with Native American philosophies, Muscogean cosmology, the real world struggle of Indigenous peoples, and various historical situations and events. These daring combinations demonstrate the ways in which Harjo participates in and is connected to Native traditions of storytelling. In the essay “Kochinnenako in Academe,” Paula Gunn Allen posits a feminist tribal approach to reading tribal stories, and she asserts that tribal women’s “literature and philosophies are more often accretive than linear, more achronological than chronological, and more dependent on harmonious relationships of all elements within the field of perception than western culture in general is thought to be” (2125). Furthermore, she explains that “traditional peoples perceive their world in a unified-field fashion that is very different from the single-focus perception that generally characterizes western masculinist, monotheistic modes of perception” (2126). Harjo’s writing exemplifies much of what Allen posits as being indicative of Native American literature and tribal aesthetics: accretive, achronological, and dependent on harmonious relationships and unified perceptions. Through complex interplay and interchange between poems and tales, Harjo creates awareness of the Native struggle from the past into the future, while also projecting the nonhierarchical, nonlinear tribal worldview that defies Western ideologies, dualism, and binary thinking. Native American writing such as *A Map to the Next World* engages readers in diverse ways of thinking and perceiving our existence, which I would argue creates the

possibility for change. Ultimately, each poem and tale suggests a double helix, each strand assisting in comprehension of the other, where both prose and lyric reside in *A Map to the Next World*.

#### NOTES

1. In “An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo’s Poetry and the Survival of Storytelling,” Mary Leen focuses on the complexities of storytelling and its role in Native American writing and explores the role of the storyteller in Harjo’s poetry. She uses discussions by a variety of scholars and writers, including Simon Ortiz, Richard Erodies, bell hooks, Kenneth Roemer, among others, in order to analyze the theme of survival in Harjo’s poetry. Leen discusses the different types of narrative and storytelling in Harjo’s poetry, ultimately revealing the lack of borders between humans and nonhumans and nature, nonlinear time lines, and the various subject-positions in her work. Additionally, in “Notes toward a New Multicultural Criticism: Three Works by Women of Color,” John F. Crawford analyzes the themes of survival and techniques of ceremony in Harjo’s *She Had Some Horses*, discussing them in terms of the social and political.

2. Joni Adamson Clarke examines how “Nature has been socially constructed since the seventeenth century to support colonial objectives” by placing American literature into the context of marginalized literature. Using feminist, literary, and cultural theory of the likes of Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Julia Kristeva, Clarke argues that contemporary Native American writers make their readers question the preconceived notions of “Nature.” Through the works of Leslie Silko, Louise Erdrich, Simon Ortiz, and Joy Harjo, she explores the interconnectedness of all forms of domination. Jia-Yi Cheng-Levine focuses on “the relationships between environmental racism, gender-biased colonial ideology, and ecological imbalance.” Studying writers like Leslie Silko, Joy Harjo, Pat Mora, and Ana Castillo, Cheng-Levine addresses their “representations of the land” in contrast to the culture of “the dominant European tradition.”

3. For works that focus on historical perspectives in Native American writing, see Perreault, “New Dreaming”; Jahner, “Knowing All the Way Down to Fire”; Donovan, *Feminist Readings of Native American Literature*; Bezner, “A Song to Call the Deer in Creek”; Hussain, “Joy Harjo and Her Poetics as Praxis”; and Scarry, “Representing Real Worlds.” Jeanne Perreault discusses

three Native American writers and how, in their work, “dreaming constitutes a semiotic field in which realities are made in naming” (120). She argues that their poetry reveals how the horrid realities of the past must be addressed in order to face the present and the future as they intersect in the poetry and how dreams become transformations that are acts of resistance. Perreault recognizes Harjo’s images of survival, as she sees Harjo’s poetry embracing the past, surviving the present, and facing the future. In her conclusion Perreault argues that white readers and critics must analyze and question the way they read minority literature. Both Elaine A. Jahner and Kathleen Donovan use feminist theory to analyze Harjo’s work, as they too discuss the difficulties of reading multicultural literature. Kevin Bezner discusses Harjo’s Creek background and ancestry within her poetry. He analyzes the ways Harjo incorporates myths and stories into her poetry along with the present. Azfar Hussain discusses Harjo’s poetry as praxis through a postcolonial reading, and John Scarry demonstrates how Harjo’s poetry represents reality.

4. For feminist perspectives on Harjo, see Jahner, “Knowing All the Way Down to Fire”; Ludlow, “Working (In) the In-Between”; and Holmes, “This Woman Can Cross Any Line.” Elaine A. Jahner engages in the difficulties of reading multicultural work, particularly Native American women’s poetry, because of unfamiliar cultural histories that are grounded in the work. She thinks that critics should discover better ways of discussing metaphors that mediate between cultures. Examining the work of two Native American women poets, Harjo and Linda Hogan, Jahner uses the theories of Julia Kristeva and Gayatri Spivak to discuss metaphoric significance and cognitive style with regard to social context. Kathleen Donovan explores the issue of voice in Native American literature from different feminist theoretical perspectives. Her chapter focusing on Helene Cixous and Harjo explores the complex link between darkness and femaleness in their work with regard to the transformative power of language. Jeannie Ludlow analyzes Harjo’s “The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window” and Louise Erdrich’s “The Lady in the Pink Mustang” using H  l  ne Cixous and Luce Irigaray. She proposes that these poems by “mixed-bloods” tell stories about how Native Americans can find identity in isolation being “in the in-between without a choice, without a community, and often without will” (24–25). Her argument focuses on “one interrogation of the in-between as a symbolic location for these poets, for Native American women, for readers, and for critics (especially for Western critics working with Nonwestern texts),” with the critic always being in the position of the in-between (25). Kristine Holmes studies

the female trickster characters in the poems of Harjo and Nora Naranjo-Morse. While acknowledging the difficulty in using the term “feminism” with regard to Native American writing, she argues that these authors provide “a feminist revision of tricksterism” (46).

5. Norma Wilson, in *The Nature of Native American Poetry*, discusses the deep roots that contemporary Native American poetry has within the land, oral tradition, and history. In a chapter discussing Harjo’s writing, Wilson explains that in Harjo’s poetry, “the ground speaks through voices of people intimately related to the earth” (109). In analyzing many aspects of Harjo’s poetry, Wilson articulates how Harjo writes the past, present, and future, while “condemning injustice, lamenting suffering, and speaking for this earth” (122).

6. Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen, in their article “Earthly Relations, Carnal Knowledge: Southwestern American Indian Women Writers and Landscape,” discuss and explore the meaning of land in Native American writing, particularly in Native American women’s writing. Smith and Allen assert that “American Indian people—even urban dwellers—live in the context of the land. Their literature thus must be understood in the context of both the land and the rituals through which they affirm their relationship to it” (176). They study the relationship between ritual and American Indian literature and then discuss how women and nature factor into this relationship. The article also explores the diversity in Native American Women’s writings, in particular how the land is presented in the work of Luci Tapahonso, Leslie Silko, and Harjo. They reveal how in all three of these women’s writing the land is connected to the people and the people connected to the land.

7. *A Map to the Next World* is divided into four parts. I have chosen key poems and tales from each part for analysis in an effort to offer a way of reading the collection as a whole.

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# Elaboration Therapy in the Midewiwin and Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*

BENJAMIN V. BURGESS

The purpose of this article is to use the Midewiwin conceptual framework of stories and apply it to Gerald Vizenor's novel *The Heirs of Columbus* (1991). Elaboration therapy is based on three major concepts within the Midewiwin: stories can house spirits; stories can heal; and the power to heal directly coincides with the ability of the healer to elaborate on the story. I will first discuss elements of the Midewiwin creation story and then apply them to the novel. Kimberly Blaeser, in *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, makes reference to elements of the Midewiwin in several of Vizenor's early works. She states, "His use . . . of vocables, then, works to place his own writing in the oral tradition of the *midewiwin* songs and alludes in a broader sense to the belief system inherent in that religious society" (23). I should mention that Arnold Krupat, in *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*, argues, "In view of the intercultural formation of these writers' texts, *only* an intercultural criticism, some variant of an ethnocriticism, has any hope of providing insight" (63). While I agree that an intercultural approach to Vizenor's text is valid and worthy of exploration, I disagree that an Anishinaabe reading of the text will fail to provide insight. I will argue that by using the Midewiwin framework of stories, the story of Columbus can be seen as the creation story of European dominance in America. Vizenor's novel is a level of elaboration to the Columbus story. Before he can elaborate the story he must capture it. He does this by not setting the novel up as an opposition to the dominant narrative. The dominant narrative is very much alive in his novel; it is

the levels of elaboration that make it a story of healing. My contribution to this topic is to tie all these elements together to reflect the complexity of a changing narrative and to show how elaboration acts to reshape the dominant narrative of Christopher Columbus.

#### MIDEWIWIN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR STORY

Before I begin I should explain that my interest in the subject of the Midewiwin medicine society began while I was a camp participant in the Future Teachers Institute at the University of Wisconsin at River Falls. The program was designed to encourage Native American students to become teachers. Students and counselors came from the reservation of Lac Court Orielles in Wisconsin and the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul in Minnesota. During the program I met a student who was being initiated into the Midewiwin medicine society. He wore a *miigis* shell on his shirt, which symbolized his status as a Midewiwin initiate. At the time I didn't know what the *miigis* shell meant. Edward Benton-Banai, who is from Lac Court Orielles, says "Gitche Manito . . . took four parts of Mother Earth and blew into them using a Sacred Shell. From the union of the Four Sacred Elements and his breath, man was created" (2-3). The shell that the creator blew into was the *miigis* shell. Benton-Banai also states, "The *Miigis* was to appear and reappear to the Ojibway throughout their history to show them the Path that the Creator wished them to follow" (4). The shell is a signifier that the initiate is on the path the Creator has made for her or him to follow. After camp ended I returned home and asked my mother about the Midewiwin. She replied, "They are medicine people." She added, "Your aunt was Mide; she was taken aside at a very young age. They kept her out of school. They hid her from social workers that would have taken her away for sure." The conversation ended there, and we haven't talked about it since. My point is that although I'm Yankton/Anishinaabe, I want to situate myself as having an outsider's view of the Midewiwin.<sup>1</sup>

Growing up I was taught that stories can house spirits. I was told that they are like people. Stories should be treated with respect and never abused. There are stories that you cannot tell when there is no

snow on the ground because it would offend the spirits in the stories. I never fully understood this idea; I don't know if I understand it today. But while I was reading *Heirs*, the story of Columbus came alive, and I took notice.

Stories can also heal. According to Benton-Banai, George Copway, and Ruth Landes, the Midewiwin was given as a medicine, and stories are integral to the healing process. A Mide shaman will learn about roots and the medicinal uses of plants, which is the physical part of the Mide practice. What is symbolized by the creation story and required to heal sickness is the ability to elaborate on the creation story. The level of the healer will be reflected in his or her ability to elaborate on the origin story. The greater the Mide healer, the more pieces of the story he or she will know.

In the nineteenth century George Copway wrote about the Midewiwin. He was a religious convert to Christianity, and his purpose was humanitarian in focus. It is evident that Copway believed Christians could learn from the Midewiwin. But mostly, he wanted the Christian reader to feel sympathy toward the Indian. He said the Ojibwes "hold a key which will unlock a library of information. . . . It is for the present generation to say, whether the last remnants of a powerful people shall perish through neglect and as they depart bear with them the key" (ix-x). It is apparent that Copway believed in the "Vanishing Indian" ideology of the nineteenth century. He is speaking about the vanishing Ojibway way of life but also understands that Midewiwin knowledge is something that the Christians can learn from.

Copway explains how the origin story is related to initiation. He writes, "The origin of the Indian's belief in the Medicine Worship is to be found in the following traditional story, which is usually revealed to any one when about to join the clan. I received it myself upon passing the mysterious ordeal" (163). The Midewiwin origin story reads like the Bible story of the Garden of Eden. There is harmony and abundance disrupted by an act against the creator, and as a result sickness and death are introduced. However, Copway's story differs in that the people ask the creator for help, and the creator gives the Midewiwin to help them deal with sickness, but death remains.

Copway concludes, "The Indians instituted a dance, and with it a mode of worship. These few . . . were the first who composed the medicine lodge: they received their charter from the Great Spirit, and thus originated the Medicine Worship" (168).

What Copway describes is a single event and not the religion itself. The reader remains an outsider to the religion, which may be intentional. One interpretation could be that Copway had not experienced much more than a single event within the Midewiwin. A second interpretation could be that the intention was to only allow readers to see tip of the iceberg, thereby keeping the secrecy and integrity of the Midewiwin intact.

Ruth Landes was an anthropologist who studied the Midewiwin in the 1930s. She says of the origin story, "For many weeks I studied the origin tale with Hole[-in-the-Sky] (Will Rogers) [not to be confused with the prominent Ojibwe Chief Hole-in-the-Day or the famous Cherokee satirist Will Rogers], transcribing text from his speeches and the pictographs of his scroll, working out the allusions" (96). Copway gives a story of Midewiwin origin that is singular and complete. In contrast, Landes states that there were eight levels to the origin story, adding that a healer told as much of the story as was needed to cure the patient: "For the first mide grade where the cure was simplest and the fees smallest, the origin tale was only sketched out" (96). Serious illness requires the higher levels of the story to be told.<sup>2</sup>

#### DOMINANT NARRATIVE AND COUNTER-NARRATIVE

The dominant narrative of Christopher Columbus is the most basic level of the creation story of America. It is told by those who celebrate the legacy of Columbus as if he were merely a great adventurer who freed the New World from its primitive institutions and gave the Indigenous people their first taste of civilization. The dominant narrative is the absence of elaboration; we are taught to believe so little about what actually occurred that it makes the people sick.<sup>3</sup> This is a direct contrast to the purpose of storytelling between the two cultures (Euroamerican and Anishinaabe). One culture tells stories to heal the sick, and the other tells stories that make one sick.

The function of the dominant narrative of Christopher Columbus is to drown out or marginalize the Indigenous voice. Indigenous writers continue to engage in reshaping the history of Columbus and his legacy to more accurately reflect the views of the marginalized voice. It is not enough that non-Indigenous writers speak for us. Teachers of the dominant narrative will talk about Columbus in the past tense, and many of us feel that this is a very deliberate attempt to silence the atrocities that are occurring at this moment; Columbus is not an issue of the past for us. Blaeser says of Vizenor's novel *The Heirs of Columbus*, "His humor takes on Columbus, not by relegating him to a closed history, but by bringing him into the present. Custer may have died for the sins of the colonizers, but clearly Vizenor's Columbus lives. And those who think death is the final revenge haven't read *The Heirs of Columbus*" (99). This is why Indigenous writers speak on the subject: to take the power from those who wish to ignore our views and from those who would like to speak as if they represent our views.

It is Columbus's discovery frame of mind that has persisted into the present times and contributes to the problems that Indigenous people in the Americas face today. We are still being exploited; the "American Dream" has its foundations in "Manifest Destiny." Manifest Destiny is still alive; it did not end after the clash of two worlds, nor did it end in 1890 with the massacre at Wounded Knee. Our mineral rights, sacred "artifacts," graveyards, water rights, land rights, and identities are all wrapped up in the clash between the American Dream and the tribal worldview. We are still facing attacks on our sovereignty, the same attacks that began with Columbus in the "Discovery Era." That is why it is important for Indigenous writers to engage in the subject.

In the 1990s an abundance of material was written about Columbus. Vizenor refers to the anti-Columbus material as the "word war" or "counter event" (111, 123). Many Indigenous writers addressed the subject. Journal articles, anthologies, art, and novels were just a few of the media in which they voiced their perspectives. Mixed-blood was a major theme in many of the works. Consequences of European mono-crop agricultural systems on the land also permeated Indig-

enous works. Another major theme was the consequences of oppressive social and political structures on Indigenous cultures. It became apparent that writing about Columbus was not limited to listing forgotten atrocities or “fixing” the truth; it meant so many other things.

#### TRICKSTER NARRATIVE

I went back to my initial reading of Vizenor’s *Heirs*, which demonstrates how Columbus can have a positive effect on today’s Indigenous situation. The novel for me has been a way of creating interest in both the dominant narrative and the counter-narratives that have developed. For instance, before reading the book, I had no idea that there was a debate on Columbus’s religious affiliation. I believed that he was Catholic because that is what the dominant narrative states. The loss of the original copy of Columbus’s journal and the letter that he sealed in a barrel with wax and threw overboard from his ship on the way back from the first voyage are just two of the mysterious elements Vizenor brings into his novel. They are elements that make the dominant narrative grow and become elaborated with meaning.

If you add the questions, mysteries, controversies, and mythology to the dominant narrative of Christopher Columbus, it becomes similar to a trickster narrative. Phyllis Eckelman, a Columbus scholar who headed a quincentenary celebration project, points out, “He was one of history’s most controversial and shadowy figures with mysteries surrounding his birth, his character, his career, and his achievements” (2). She also states, “There is convincing evidence that he had not studied navigation before he became The Admiral of the Sea . . . that he simply told tall stories in order to convince people of his qualifications to carry out his destiny: TO FIND THE LAND TO THE WEST” (3). In this sense Columbus is like the tribal trickster because his deception comes before and facilitates the creation of the dominant culture. Tricksters transcend all boundaries of human definition and understanding. We can discuss the characteristics of tricksters, or trickster narratives, but we cannot pin down one all-encompassing definition. For this reason Christopher Columbus makes a good trickster story. Columbus is at the same time a creative

and destructive force; he is divine and mortal; he is a fool and a genius; he is a hero and anti-hero; and he is celebrated and mourned. Like the trickster for many tribal peoples, Columbus is an integral part of the dominant culture's identity.

#### CAPTIVE NARRATIVE

As stated earlier, Vizenor must capture the spirit of the dominant narrative before he can elaborate on it. Therefore, I also argue that *Heirs* is a captivity narrative but not in the traditional sense that captivity narratives are told, where the captive tells the narrative. Captivity narratives were very popular throughout early contact and into the nineteenth century. Some captives came away praising their captors' way of life, and others came away abhorring it. In Vizenor's captivity narrative, it is the narrative itself that is being held captive. The fate of the captive rests solely on its captor(s). According to Blaeser,

The most compelling and ultimately most rewarding literary representations of history by Native American writers are those which, by their humor, work to unmask and disarm history, to expose the hidden agendas of historiography and thereby remove it from the grasp of the political panderers and return it to the realm of story. It is among this group that Vizenor falls, among those who have approached the deadly serious business of history with trickster humor. (85)

He appropriates, inverts, and, most important, elaborates the narrative. He does this with a trickster's humor and a tribal imagination.

How does Vizenor capture the Columbus narrative? The novel itself is pockmarked with historical references written by major Columbus biographers. In chapter 3 he informs the reader of what the major Columbus authors have to say, and he includes the authors that hold opposing views. In addition to opposing views, the historical documents contain many unknowns. The unknowns serve as openings for transforming the narrative, and they are a place where the oral tradition can enter. Blaeser, in her discussion of oral tradition in written form, points out that Vizenor doesn't believe it can be

done but that the goal to incorporate elements of oral tradition into his written work is a worthy one (16). She states,

What this interest has meant in Vizenor's work is involvement, not only in the reexpression and reimagination of traditional stories, songs, and ceremonies, but also in the attempt to invest in the written form and his own creative works with the qualities and the power of the oral. (16)

Oral tradition is symbolized in the novel by the heirs of Columbus gathering at the Stone Tavern and telling stories about their namesake, and it is the vehicle for changing the dominant narrative through elaboration. The heirs never directly challenge the dominant narrative in the novel because the dominant narrative works as a backdrop. Consider the dominant narrative the skeleton and the trickster narrative the flesh. Or in terms of the Midewiwin concept of story, consider the dominant narrative the first level of the creation story and Vizenor's novel another level of that story. The dominant narrative is a story about death, and the trickster narrative is the story of life. So too does the Midewiwin creation story explain the origin of death and sickness and the Mide rite as a cure. Each level of story in the novel contains a death and resurrection.

Other parallels can be drawn between the heirs and the Midewiwin. Both hold an annual gathering to tell their origin stories and heal: The heirs recite the story of Columbus's arrival along with the elaborations; the Midewiwin recite the creation story of the Anishinaabe and the migration from the shores of the Atlantic to the Great Lakes. Both groups have limited membership. They are also alike in the tension that exists between them and their tribes. For many years the Midewiwin had to keep their practices underground because of the religious persecution by the U.S. government. Indian agents and tribal people at times worked alongside each other to oppress the Midewiwin.<sup>4</sup>

Vizenor's novel opens with a description of the moment Christopher Columbus sees a faint light in the distance but dismisses it as not being a sign of land. This incident was recorded in Columbus's journal, and Vizenor refers to that document. He inverts the scene by

making it a blue light in which a shaman is calling forth Columbus's ship from the sea. He writes, "That light was a torch raised by the silent hand talkers, a summons to the New World" (3). In this manner agency has changed hands by making the first encounter an act of shamanism. Indigenous presence becomes active, whereas in the dominant narrative Indigenous people are always passive.

Agency is further removed from Columbus in the encounter between Columbus and Samana. This is the first level of elaboration. Within the dominant narrative Columbus invites six people to board his ship, which he intends to take back to Spain. The next day in his journal he mentions seven people. Vizenor identifies the seventh person as Samana, the silent hand talker. My interpretation of a silent hand talker is a person who uses signs to communicate across cultures and languages. Stone Columbus, one of the main characters in the novel, is telling this encounter story on the radio. He explains, "Christopher Columbus, you remember, was enchanted by a golden hand talker on his first voyage to the New World. . . . Samana was a silent healer, she touched the great adventurer and his spirit landed here on the stones at the headwaters" (19). During their first encounter, Samana captures Columbus's spirit and brings it to the headwaters of the Mississippi.

We find out later in the novel that Samana leads Columbus up the mouth of the great river (Mississippi) and makes love to him at the headwaters. Vizenor writes,

Columbus lost his soul to a hand talker and puppets that night at Bahia de Bariay, the beauteous harbor and river he named San Salvador. The blue radiance of his birth and the stories in his blood were liberated at last in a burst of passion on the warm beach. (39)

The heirs of Columbus are descendants of that union. This scene is important because it is a reversal to violence against Indigenous women at the hands of the Spanish. Paolo Emilio Taviani, in *Columbus: The Great Adventure*, identifies the first sexual encounter between an Indigenous woman and a Spanish man as rape (171). Vizenor's Columbus suffers from a twisted penis, which I read as a

symbol of the desire to rape. Whereas the rape of Indigenous women strips them of their dignity, in the encounter with Samana, it is Columbus who is stripped of his essence. She takes the signature of survivance, a genetic code he inherited from the Maya people, from him. Therefore Christopher Columbus cannot be resurrected through the signature. He becomes cured of his twisted penis, but he also becomes a shell of himself. The Columbus of the dominant narrative was destroyed at the headwaters, and his body was then put back together by a shaman.

After that encounter Columbus shows up in the stories and laser shows as a shadow and image, not an active presence in the novel. In this way Vizenor undermines the currency of the image; it has been made impotent by the encounter with the shaman. Only the heirs themselves have agency in the retelling of the stories. The scene also brings Columbus into the territory of the Anishinaabe and reinforces the theme of death and resurrection.

Samana sees the signature of survivance in Columbus and associates him with tribal people. Changing Columbus's national identity is another level of elaboration. Vizenor writes, "The Maya brought civilization to the savages of the Old World and the rest is natural. . . . Columbus escaped from the culture of death and carried our tribal genes back to the New World . . . he returned to his homeland" (9). That Columbus is a descendant of the Maya people is an elaboration that is possible because there is no record of Columbus's place of birth. It is an inversion of the dominant narrative because instead of Columbus arriving for the first time, he is returning to America. Also the dominant narrative credits Columbus with bringing civilization to the Americas, and Vizenor is making the Maya people the source of the Old World civilization. Columbus cannot discover the Indigenous people of the Americas; he can only discover himself on arriving in the New World.

Christopher Columbus loses his signature of survivance and with it his stories in the blood and the ability to be resurrected. On the other hand, Stone Columbus is able to be resurrected multiple times because he has the signature. Stone's first resurrection symbolizes an important event in Native American history. It occurred at a board-

ing school. Boarding schools are a site of great pain and suffering. They represent the loss of language and culture because they were set up to extinguish both. However, many authors today have demonstrated the tremendous resilience of the boarding schools' survivors. Stone's second resurrection is briefly mentioned. He fell through the ice and drowned and was revived by the Ice Woman. His third resurrection occurs when the *Santa Maria* bingo caravel sinks during a storm. Stone is helped by Samana, the same shaman who brought Christopher Columbus to the headwaters.

I believe Vizenor is sending a clear message about casino wealth: When it is not coupled with healing, it will fail the people. In the second half of the novel he does couple casino wealth with healing. Alongside their resurrected casino is a genome pavilion to heal wounded and lonesome children. The heirs use the remains of Columbus to isolate the signature of survivance. In the second half of the novel the heirs set up a bingo casino/hospital to heal with stories in the blood. Vizenor writes,

[The] . . . Dorado Genome Pavilion, the heart of the genetic research . . . scientists had isolated the genetic code of tribal survivance and radiance, that native signature of seventeen mitochondrial genes that could reverse human mutations, nurture shamanic resurrection, heal wounded children, and incite parthenogenesis in separatist women. (132)

Arnold Krupat argues that the phrase "stories in the blood" is an unusual stance for Vizenor and that it reinforces the dominance of *natio-* over *ratio-*.<sup>5</sup> He states, "As I read *The Heirs*, then, the complicitous side of Vizenor's project is the acceptance without criticism (without, that is, the usual undercutting irony) of a logic of *natio-*, a logic oriented, however, toward the critical effect of upholding a logic of *ratio-*" (64). Krupat's point is that because the *natio-* of the person can be changed through gene therapies, Vizenor is still arguing for *ratio-*. I agree with this reading, but if the argument is carried further the next step is the end of blood-quantum nationalisms because blood, specifically Indian blood, is free for anyone to have. I'm reminded of Dr. Seuss's allegorical story of the Star-belly Sneetches,

where those with stars discriminated against those who lack “stars upon thars,” until of course the man from out of town comes in with a machine that can put stars on anyone, and then everyone can have a star belly. The whole system of identification is thrown into flux, and soon it is the behavior of the being that is used as a basis for identity, not the symbol. I do think it is ironic that anyone can come to the Genome Pavilion and have stories, or a *natio*-, injected into his or her blood—ironic because it is unexpected of Vizenor’s views of blood quantum and ironic because by injecting the *natio*-, the *natio*- is destroyed, and the destruction of blood-quantum nationalisms is very much a Vizenorian stance. Vizenor is using the dominant narrative to heal, where it has been a source of pain for so long.

One could argue that Vizenor is replicating the old story of the “white savior” that plagues the dominant narrative. But if you take into account that the genetic code of tribal survivance comes from mitochondrial genes, then you have to consider that Columbus was merely a carrier and not the originator of the gene. Vizenor writes, “This signature is neither neoteric nor fortuitous, as the genes are a tribal code inherited from hand talkers over five thousand generations” (133). Mitochondrial DNA comes from the mother and not the father. It was Samana that saw Columbus was bringing something back to the New World, and she appropriated it for the heirs. Furthermore, the scientists could not heal with the genes alone. It would take the stories that were told by shamans to make the therapy effective:

Pir [a scientist in the novel] had developed the in vivo genetic therapies of survivance, the implanted genes of the heirs, but only shamans and tricksters were able to stimulate the trickster opposition in the genes, the ecstatic instructions, and humor in the blood. The scientists delivered the genetic signatures, the tribal healers touched the wounded and heard their creation stories. (Vizenor 144)

Only a shaman can make the cure work, and without the stories the genes won’t heal.

Part of healing is also the recovery of culture. Anishinaabe “artifacts,” along with many other Indigenous “artifacts,” have been stolen

from the people that created them and are part of many public and private museum collections. In the novel, one of the heirs, Felipa Flowers, finds out about four medicine pouches and goes on a mission to repatriate them, to “undiscover” them.<sup>6</sup> She takes the pouches from a group called the Conquistador Club. While infiltrating the Conquistador Club at the Brotherhood of American Explorers (a thinly veiled reference to Bureau of American Ethnology) in New York, Felipa finds out they also house the remains of Columbus. This is an inversion of the dominant narrative because in today’s America many Native Americans are trying to repatriate sacred items from museums, and in the novel it is Columbus’s heirs that are trying to save his bones from his own legacy.

Felipa appropriates the medicine pouches and the remains of Columbus with the help of a graduate school shaman. The heirs are tried in court, not for stealing the pouches or the remains but for stealing the crime itself. Even with all the video surveillance at the Conquistador Club, they still can’t convict Felipa or the graduate school shaman. This inversion of the dominant narrative works in two ways. First, many Natives today feel robbed of the crime of Columbus by the dominant narrative. The crime is buried in the celebration of civilization; we are taught only the glory of Columbus in schools, not the genocide and colonization. This is changing, of course, but the change has been a long time coming. Second, we have to remember that Vizenor has “stolen” the dominant narrative, and he is transforming it. To talk about the genocide and colonization is to elaborate on the dominant narrative of Columbus.

The dominant narrative, which is a source of identity and pride for many Americans, is challenged and transformed by new perspectives. It is no longer a rigid story. Fluidity comes from the opposing perspectives that now begin to shape and reshape the narrative. If it is viewed from the perspective that stories can house spirits and stories can heal, then what is important about Vizenor’s novel is not whether it is truthful or a valid look at Columbus but whether it contains the power to heal. *The Heirs of Columbus* is a radical inversion on the Columbus narrative. If the dominant narrative of Columbus is reshaped, then, in turn, the identity of the dominant culture will be

reshaped. This I believe is an underlying theme that challenges the dominant narrative of Columbus. If you take away the rhetoric about heroism and patriotism, what you have left are a lot of unanswered questions—therefore becoming a fecund site for elaboration therapy—making Columbus the center of a creation story that heals instead of destroys.

#### NOTES

1. With the exception of the idea of stories being able to house spirits, the information about the Midewiwin presented in this article is derived from published documents.

2. Although both stories involve a gift of power from the *manitous* (spirits) to the people, the origin story told by Hole-in-the-Sky is different from the story told by Copway. In Hole-in-the-Sky's version, the Bear, "pushed the mide tree up [to the second earth layer]" (Landes 98–99), which is similar to Copway's story in that both had a passage between layers of sky. However, in Hole-in-the-Sky's version of the story, the Bear continues up through multiple layers of the sky. In addition to journeying through layers of sky, the Bear journeys through layers of earth. Many of the other animal *manitous* are also part of this origin story; the Bear gathers power from each of them and confers the power unto the Indian people. Another contrast is that passage from one layer to the next was forbidden in Copway's version, but in Hole-in-the-Sky's account it was not.

3. I am speaking of two types of sickness here: anger and fear. Indigenous people, when confronted with the dominant narrative become sick with anger because their pain, the very real historical trauma, is ignored. Euroamericans that celebrate Columbus become sick with fear that their celebrations of civilization over savagery will be negated by Indigenous protests. In the film *Bimaadiziwin: A Healthy Way of Life*, Sonny Smart, a Bad River Ojibwe, explains the meaning of *aakozi*, the Ojibwe word for "he/she is sick." He says that an older man told him that the literal translation is "to be out of balance." He goes on to say that "one of the things that can create *aakozi* could be physical, could be spiritual, intellectual process too, [and] emotional." The last two causes are relevant to this discussion because the dominant narrative sets in motion an intellectual and emotional response. I truly believe that the sickness of anger and fear can be balanced or healed through story.

4. Rebecca Kugel, in *To Be the Main Leaders of Our People*, discusses the

tension between several tribal factions in depth. Although her discussion does not specifically involve the Midewiwin, a parallel argument could be made.

5. Krupat gives the definition of these terms: *natio*:- the Latin verb means “to be born” and carries with it all the filiative and racial claims of birth, descent, and blood inheritance; and *ratio*:- the verb means to “reason” and carries affiliative, cultural, and consensual claims of chosen values (56–57).

6. The name Felipa is important because it was the actual name of Columbus’s wife.

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# The Mouse That Sucked

On “Translating” a Navajo Poem

ANTHONY K. WEBSTER

Single Algonkin words are like tiny imagist poems.

Edward Sapir, *Language*

In the final chapter of his 1921 classic book *Language*, Edward Sapir makes the oft-quoted statement that serves as my epigraph. Earlier in that same chapter on language and literature, Sapir offered what I take to be a caution to erstwhile translators: “Every language is itself a collective art of expression. There is concealed in it a particular set of esthetic factors—phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological—which it does not share with any other language” (225). I take this as a caution because it implies a degree of incommensurability between languages, a position Sapir also advocated.<sup>1</sup> More generally, Sapir’s caution seems to focus our attention on what Paul Friedrich has termed “poetic indeterminacy.” And Friedrich wishes to call our attention to the importance of poetic language, which he argues “is the locus of the most interesting differences between languages and should be the focus of the study of such differences” (17). This article is a brief foray into such terrain.

In this article, I present a short poem in Navajo by the Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim and an English translation that I did in consultation with Jim. The purpose is to explore the difficulties of translation, on precisely the grounds that Sapir enumerated above (e.g., phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological). I present the Navajo poem together with my English translation. My subsequent analysis of this transla-

tion enables me to demonstrate the problems involved in translating from Navajo to English. The poem is deeply embedded within Navajo semantics, sound symbolism, and phonology, and as such it offers an extreme example of the inherent incommensurability one encounters when attempting to translate across disparate languages. I then conclude by returning to issues raised throughout this article, namely, that the process of translation needs to be complimented by the use of exegesis (or critical analysis, by way of linguistic and ethnographic background knowledge). Ethnographic and linguistic knowledge are crucial components of any translation project. Ultimately, though, even with such background knowledge, when one approaches poems that are based on the poetic potentials of a specific language, such as the one I will analyze below, something will, by default, be lost in any translation. This article is, then, also a cautionary tale.

#### THE POEMS

The poem to be presented is from Jim's Navajo language collection of poems titled *saad*, which glosses as "word, language."<sup>2</sup> The book is from the Princeton Collections of Western Americana, and the author is listed as Mazii Dinéłtsoi. The book is especially interesting because it is written entirely in Navajo, including its page numbers. Thus the poem to be discussed appears on page *tádiin dóó bí'áq tsosts'id* or roughly page 37.<sup>3</sup>

Jim has published two other books of Navajo poetry: *Áhí Ni Nikisheegiizh*, also published by Princeton Collections of Western Americana, and *Dúchas Táá Kóó Diné*, a trilingual book of poetry in English, Irish, and Navajo. The difference between *saad* and the other two books is apparent even to a non-Navajo reader. The poems in *saad* are short, haiku-like poems, whereas the poems in the other two books are longer and more narrative in quality. The poems in *saad* seem to take a certain pleasure in their brevity, their quickness.<sup>4</sup>

I want to pause here and make clear that I have provided *an* English translation and not *the* English translation. I follow Ofelia Zepeda and suggest that translations are approximations of the feelingful quality,

the emotive force, the sparseness, the quickness of the Navajo (or Tohono O'odham) source language original. The following translation is similar to the versions one finds in Jim's trilingual collection, where poems in English and Navajo may differ quite a bit. Other translations may be created to highlight other features of the poem, but in so highlighting they must necessarily obscure certain parts as well. This is true, of course, of my translation. Further, I want to be clear that I do not conflate the quality of Jim's poem with my translation. Jim is an accomplished poet. I am not.

I have chosen the following poem by Jim because it evokes the use of sound and meaning to realize a sense of "quickness" and as a "thought poem." I will expand on both these points later. Here is the poem in Navajo:

na'asts'qqsí  
 ts'qqs, ts'qqs  
 yiits'a'go  
 íits'qóz

Here is an English translation:

mouse  
 suck, suck  
 sounding  
 kiss

ON QUICKNESS AND THOUGHT POEMS, OR WHY THINK  
 ABOUT A SUCKING MOUSE?

I want to begin with sound, with phonology. What should be obvious even to non-Navajo speakers is the intense use of assonance and consonance, the repetition of the sounds /ts'/ and /o/. Most of Navajo speakers who have read this poem and I have talked to have commented on the sounds of the poem. Indeed, it was one Navajo woman who, after reading the poem aloud in my presence, noted that it was the sounds of the words that were especially salient to her. She pointed out further that she liked the ways the sounds went to-

gether. At a live performance of this poem at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona, on July 18, 2001, a number of Navajos laughed during this poem. When I asked several Navajos why they had laughed, a common response was that they liked the way the sounds went together in the poem. In fact, one Navajo said that the poem evoked the humorous image of a mouse going around kissing. There is, then, an aesthetic quality to the repetition of sounds.

Beyond phonology, there is also much to say about the meaning of words. First, the word for “mouse” in Navajo means literally “the one who goes about sucking.” This is the play on words used in line 2, where the onomatopoeic word *ts’oqs* is repeated. However, *ts’oqs* has two connotations: One is the sound of sucking through a straw, and the other is the sound of a kiss. This is followed by the third line, which is a standard way to acknowledge that what has just been said is onomatopoeic. Yet that line is also implicated in the alliteration that tumbles through the poem. One suggested translation of this line was “that’s how it sounds”; however, Jim, in discussing the translation, recommended “sounding.”<sup>5</sup> I follow his suggestion. The fourth line means something like “it kissed,” “it sucked,” or “to perform a sucking rite.” Notice that Jim is playing with the meaning of *ts’oqs* and the sound /ts’/, and in doing so he is drawing on the various connotations and the semantic relations those connotations may evoke within the poem. Through the highlighting of sounds, he is making ambiguity of meaning maximally salient.

The fact that Jim’s poem contains four lines resonates with a Navajo rhetorical and ritual focus on four (see Witherspoon 22, 166; Reichard 46). In Navajo cosmology things tend to happen in fours. By employing such a framework, the poem connects, obliquely, with other Navajo rhetorical styles. Likewise, the intense use of sound is clearly a form of parallelism. Parallelism is quite common in Navajo oral poetry, especially curing ways (see Reichard 35–49; McAllester; Matthews, *Night Chant* 269–304; Matthews, *Mountain Chant*, 73–85). As has been widely discussed, Navajos have a set of curing ways, which consist of a number of complex songs, chants, and narratives. As Gary Witherspoon has pointed out, such ways ideally should be performed verbatim (see also Reichard 12, 49). A key feature of these

curing ways is the pervasive use of parallelism. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Jim connects his poetry, often explicitly but sometimes implicitly, with curing ways (Webster 76–78). For example, Jim’s long poem “*saad*” circles around in a chantlike fashion. His poem based on *Sq’ah naaghái bik’eh hózhóón* has strict parallelism in both the English and Navajo versions and relates—intertextually—with various curing ways (Jim, “A Moment” 236–37). His poem “Hunting/*Na’azheeh*” concludes with a line from a curing way (Jim, *Dúchas Táá Kóó Diné* 8). These are rhetorical and implicational devices that are always difficult to translate. It is hard to translate the poetic tradition or the implicational history across poetic traditions that are so widely disparate. One can only suggest these issues. However, an understanding or at least an appreciation of Navajo oral tradition is crucial in understanding the work of Rex Lee Jim. Jim’s literary influence is an oral literary influence.

In translating the poem from Navajo to English, I attempt to retain something of the sound quality of the poem. “Suck” and “kiss” were chosen because of the consonance of the /s/ and /k/ found in both words. Also, “kiss” reverses the order of the sounds from “suck.” Such reversals express the interweaving of sounds and meaning I feel is the hallmark of this poem. The word play between *na’asts’qqsí* and *ts’qqs*, however, was lost in the English translation. Indeed, the various manifestations of the stem—*ts’qqs*—that roll through the poem cannot be replicated in the English version. This point, the inability of a truly “literal” translation, is a point Alton Becker has repeatedly made. Becker argues that all translations are both “exuberant” and “deficient” (298–99). By “exuberant” Becker means that all translations add something that is not in the original. For example, in Navajo there is no gender within the pronominal system. Anytime one translates from Navajo to English and adds a gendered pronominal, he has been exuberant, adding something not in the original. On the other hand, Navajo has a fourth person pronominal, which marks “persons” who are socially distant. Any translation from Navajo to English that uses the third person English form will be deficient because it will fail to mark the special social meaning of the fourth person pronominal in Navajo.

In the English version, I take care to approximate the sound quality of the poem—intensive use of /s/ and /k/—but it lacks the rich, layered meanings of the Navajo version. When this translation, this stimulus translation—a translation of feeling, not words (see Werner)—was presented to an audience, the form “suck” was questioned; one Navajo speaker suggested a translation of “nuzzle.” I presented this translation outdoors at McGaffey, New Mexico, in front of a mixed audience of Navajos and non-Navajos. The audience was composed of non-Navajo academics, students from the Northwestern Ethnographic Field School, and invited Navajo guests. The Navajo woman who suggested the change to “nuzzle” also said that by translating *ts’qqs* as “suck,” I was implying a sexual meaning to this poem. However, I think that Jim is playing on that potential “sexual” reading of this poem. That, I believe, is one more example of the ambiguities of meaning he is drawing into relief with this poem. I respect her concern and her translation. However, I need to state again, I am not trying to give *the* translation, only *a* translation.

I should also note that at that earlier presentation of this article and translation, one Navajo person remarked that they had not heard of *na’asts’qqsí* as anything other than “mouse”; thus, the etymology of the word “mouse” appears to be frozen. Jim is attempting to reinvigorate or revive the etymology, to get Navajo people thinking about language, semantics, and the history of meanings in Navajo. The play on words becomes productive when Navajos examine the morphology of *na’asts’qqsí*. Jim draws the reader/listener into the etymology of the word by way of contrasting it with the onomatopoeic form.<sup>6</sup> Here again we see speech play revealing key features of language (phonology, morphology, semantics, etymology), putting language up for contemplation (see Sherzer, “Play Languages” 32–35).

The frozen nature, the inscrutability of words, is neither new to Navajo people nor to speakers of any language more generally. Sapir, in an early article concerning the northern origins of the Navajos, describes in some detail the phrase *bił sits’ánákééh* (“sleeplessness always bothers me”) and the verb stem *kééh*.<sup>7</sup> Sapir quotes his consultant Albert Sandoval as suggesting that there was a “gliding” move-

ment to the verb, or as Sandoval says, “sleep glides (slips) away from me” (“Internal Linguistic Evidence” 231). However, Sandoval could not state explicitly what the verb form meant. Sapir, through comparison with Chiricahua Apache and Northern Athapaskan verb forms, argues that the form once meant “to travel by canoe” (233). Sandoval, to his credit, was able to tap into the underlying metaphor even if he could not state explicitly the etymology of the phrase. Again, we see a frozen or archaic form whose etymology does not reveal itself readily to Navajo speakers (nor to non-Navajo linguistic anthropologists).

As a translator and a linguistic anthropologist, I also attempted to retain the “quickness,” or economy of expression. In *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, a collection of five insightful essays on the qualities of literature, Italo Calvino argues that quickness is essential to literature. The trick then is to not overburden the translation but to retain the feel, the expressive economy of the source language version. In this respect, “kiss” was used in favor of “it kissed” (explicitly changing tense), “sounding” was chosen over “that’s how it sounds,” and “mouse” was used in favor of “the one who goes about sucking.” While this final example may be, to borrow from Sapir, a tiny imagist poem in its own right, Sapir’s caution that “we must be careful not to exaggerate a freshness of content that is at least half due to our freshness of approach” (*Language* 228) seems warranted. *Na’asts’qqsí* is the conventional way to express “mouse” in Navajo. Jim has seized on its poetic potential and then amplified it through the tight interweaving of sound and meaning found throughout this poem.

In discussing my translation with him, Jim made a number of interesting comments. He pointed out that one cannot “really translate” the onomatopoeic words into English. This raises the question of translating sound symbolic words across languages. As Janis Nuckolls has pointed out, sound symbolic forms “communicate not by referring but by *simulating* the most salient perceptual qualities of an action, event, process or activity” (235, emphasis in original). While it could be argued that the Navajo forms simulate the salient aspects better than the English forms, I would argue that the English forms simulate an action as an action. If I have failed to translate the

precise salient quality of the action, at the least I have “translated” an action for an action. Therefore, I retain the English translations because I feel they are a crucial piece of information in the poem. In fact, “sucking” is the linchpin of the poem.

William Hanks has written that “poetic language has a fundamental impact on the imagination of speakers” (192). In discussing this poem with me, Jim pointed out that “most of my poems are written to stimulate thoughts, and that involves thinking about semantics and etymology.” In a sense, Jim’s poems are “thought poems,” attempts to inspire readers to imagine in complex ways. For example, the place of the mouse in “traditional” Navajo beliefs as an “omen of evil, the spirit of death,” Jim noted, can be compared with the contemporary place of the mouse in Navajo society, as the bearer of the deadly Hantavirus. These complex imaginings, the ways that Navajo language evokes such connections, are lost in the process of translation. They can be recuperated, however, through exegesis.<sup>8</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Recently, a number of scholars in the ethnopoetic tradition have begun grappling ever more seriously with the problems of translations (see Sammons and Sherzer; Swann). And while written poetry has generally been excluded from these experiments (but see Gnerre; Friedrich 84–104), there seems no *a priori* reason to hold to this view. This article is an initial step in understanding Navajo poetry in its written guise. Some scholars have termed this literary guise a “hybrid” genre. I hesitate to call this a hybrid genre, because some Navajo poets I have spoken with—Jim, for example—dislike the term. On the other hand, some Navajo poets actively use the terms “hybrid” and “hybridity.” Sherwin Bitsui, at a performance in Blanding, Utah, on December 8, 2000, declared that his work—his poetry—was a hybrid.<sup>9</sup> He also suggested that he was a “hybrid person.” However, for now I prefer to refer to Navajo written poetry as a growth out of a broader poetic tradition. I see this larger poetic tradition as akin to Sapir’s “collective art of expression, a summary of thousands upon thousands of individual intuitions” (*Language* 231). Sapir was speaking of language when he

wrote this, but the formulations of Roman Jakobson, Dell Hymes, and Paul Friedrich remind us that language has a set of inherent poetic potentials. These potentials are actualized in both poetry and in everyday language. They are at times language specific and, as this article has attempted to illustrate, often difficult, if not impossible, to translate. I would argue that ethnopoetics as a method of analysis has much to say concerning the rhetorical-poetics of written poetry in what were putative oral cultures. Barre Toelken, in discussing Navajo rug weaving, summarizes this point well:

So the real tradition is not the artifact itself, for it is a particularized statement of traditional premises and assumptions. The tradition is that dynamic process by which these premises are shared, performed, understood, and transmitted through time and space among members of a close group. (245)

My argument concerning the persistence of poetic forms, even as the “medium” changes, resonates with this perspective concerning Navajo “tradition” as a kind of practice.

Jim’s poems are “thought poems” or, perhaps better, “experiments in the imagination.” The poems in *saad* rely heavily on the poetic potentials of Navajo. These potentials include phonology, sound symbolism, morphology, rhetorical structures, implicature, etymologies, and the semantic indeterminacy and overlaps found in Navajo and exploited by Jim. Joel Sherzer once wrote, “When two languages are relatively close in culture, time, and language, it is possible to maintain a degree of literalness in translation while at the same time capturing the spirit of the original. But the more distant the two texts are, the more difficult translation becomes” (“The Kuna and Columbus” 908). Sherzer argues that translators should err on the side of literalness. I agree. In this respect, my translation has meant to hint at the dynamics and poetics within the Navajo original. The full realization of Jim’s “experiments in the imagination” can only be achieved in the Navajo original. This distinction is crucial for two reasons: 1) Navajo poetry needs to be valued on its own terms (i.e., Navajo poetry is not trying to be English poetry; *it is* Navajo poetry); and 2) today there is a general language shift occurring on the Navajo Nation from Navajo to English (Slate;

Lee and McLaughlin; House). It is much too early for Jim to become the Cicero of Navajo.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there is a methodological point to this article. Jim, as a poet, relishes in the use of references to curing ways, in the use of archaic etymologies, to references that are both current and a part of a larger Navajo stock of knowledge. To approach Jim's poetry, especially poetry written in Navajo, requires, I believe, skills that linguistic anthropologists bring to the field. Linguistic anthropologists need to take seriously the literature (both oral and written) that people are creating, and we must be willing to actively engage the authors and critics of Native American literatures.

#### NOTES

I wish to thank Rex Lee Jim for a number of insightful conversations concerning Navajo poetry and this poem in particular. I want to also thank Leighton Peterson, Joel Sherzer, Pauline Turner Strong, and Oswald Werner for useful comments concerning this article. I thank two anonymous reviewers for a number of useful suggestions. I also thank Jonathan Hill for help with the editing process. I further want to thank all those in attendance at McGaffey, New Mexico, and the Northwestern Ethnographic Field School, for whom I worked as a consultant in 2001. The paper was presented July 7, 2001, before a mixed audience of Navajos, students, and scholars. I have tried to incorporate some of the comments from that event. Research for this article was done under a Navajo Nation permit. Funding was provided by Wenner-Gren and the University of Texas at Austin. I thank them all. Mistakes that remain are my responsibility.

1. See Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics," 209–10.

2. See Witherspoon 42–43 for a discussion of some of the problems in translating this word.

3. Navajo phonology differs from English on a number of points. However, certain phonemes are roughly equivalent to English orthographic conventions. In the poem that follows, these phonemes are roughly equivalent to the English system:

Consonants:  
n as in noon  
s as in soon

y as in yellow

z as in zero

Vowels:

a as in art

i as in hit

o as in mode

The sound /ts'/ does not have an equivalent in English. For our purposes the /ts/ sound is similar to the /ts/ in "hats." The glottal ejective that follows /' is the release of air that forms the whole consonant. Thus, /ts'/ is one sound based on a push of air through the sounding of the consonant. /' on its own is the glottal stop. This sound is similar to the catch in the voice in the phrase "unh-huh," represented here by a hyphen but in Navajo orthography with /'.

The other significant contrasts between Navajo and English in this poem concern the vowels. In Navajo a distinction is made between high tone and default, or low tone. High tone is marked with an acute accent /á/. To replicate this sound, raise the voice on vowels marked with high tone. Vowels with a "hook" under them are nasalized /ǎ/. Pronounce these vowels as if you were about to add an /n/. The quality of the vowels is similar to the quality of /a/ in "man." A final difference occurs between long and short vowels. Long vowels are marked by the duplicating of that vowel /oo/. Hold the vowel a fraction longer than normal to create a long vowel (for a more complete discussion and pronunciation guide to Navajo sounds, see Goossen; see also McDonough on Navajo phonology).

4. See Calvino on the notion of quickness.

5. All quotations from Rex Lee Jim are from an interview I conducted with him at Tsaille, Arizona, on June 18, 2001. The interview was tape-recorded and later transcribed by me. Also, for the purposes of this article, and this article alone, I am using the phrase "Navajo poetry" in a very narrow sense. I mean by this term only poems written in Navajo. The use of English, Navajo English, and code-switching in poetry written by Navajos goes well beyond the narrow point I am trying to make in this article.

6. Jim performed this poem, to some laughter, at Window Rock, Arizona, on July 18, 2001.

7. I have updated Sapir's orthography.

8. These comments were made at a public performance at the Edge of Cedars Visitors' Center in Blanding, Utah, on December 8, 2000. I video-taped and recorded the performance. I later transcribed the recording.

9. Two of the best works on exegesis as opposed to translation among Native American verbal art both involve personal names. Kendall's (1980) discussion of Yuman names as text in need of exegesis is still one of the best of its kind. Whiteley's (1998) discussion of Hopi names follows in this tradition as well.

10. This is why I would argue that an exegesis, or "translation," of Navajo poetry warrants linguistic and ethnographic research. It also warrants ethnopoetic attention.

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Special Section  
Language and Literature

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GUEST EDITOR, FREDERICK H. WHITE



## INTRODUCTION

### Language and Literature

FREDERICK H. WHITE

I am privileged to offer these three articles in this *SAIL* special section focusing on Native American languages. While it is complicated to address the significance of Indigenous languages, it is definitely worth our effort to see how language and literature intertwine. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, though discredited for various reasons, still bears witness that according to the first premise, linguistic determinism, our thinking is determined by language. While many people, especially Americans, do not like the idea of determinism in any form, Whorf's linguistic determinism simply addressed the issue of how thought and action incur social and linguistic mediation, in other words, how culture and language influence what we think and do. Whorf suggests that

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory;

we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (213–14)

Avoiding the extreme linguistic determinism that argues that language molds or governs all thought and behavior, it is essential to see how cultural conventions affect expression, both verbal and literary, whether or not one ascribes to deterministic language principles.

According to the second premise of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, linguistic relativity, people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently. Sapir suggests,

The fact of the matter is that the “real world” is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

It is Sapir’s attention to diversity that is appealing because, within this paradigm, he validated languages and cultures with differing perspectives. Though Sapir’s point refers to discourse (including such elements as grammatical, morphological, and syntactical complexity) as a whole, it certainly is valid to include literature as well, “We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (Sapir 69). It is the final thought that is most compelling when I consider Native American and First Nations languages and their literatures.

As you read this, many a tribe’s once overflowing Indigenous language now barely boasts a trickle in its own community. Too often, the last fluent speakers in Native American and First Nations communities depart this world with the precious linguistic knowledge and skill we have failed to learn and master. The result is language death. Learning the ancestral language as a second language remains the only option after our elders have died, but this option entails much controversy. It is rare for any of our children to learn any for-

eign language in school, let alone an Indigenous language. The problem is that when children study a language in school, it remains in school and rarely goes beyond the classroom walls. Joshua A. Fishman warns that any goal or effort to revitalize a dying language must not rely solely upon classroom efforts (368).

While the state of Indigenous languages falters, the impact of Indigenous language and thought on literature deserves our attention and admiration. This special section serves that purpose. In John Peacock's contribution about learning Dakota, we see the importance of struggling to learn an Indigenous language as well as issues of identity, empowerment, and insight to the stories and narratives we seek to share with the world. This essay explicitly situates Peacock as a language apprentice and reveals the tremendous effort that is necessary to learn and use the language but also the satisfaction of learning, speaking, and thinking like his ancestors did.

The other two articles address Indigenous language influence in Native American literature. Catherine Kunce explores Zitkala-Ša's resistance to the societal ban—an all too common theme in U.S. and Canadian history—on speaking her own language. Kunce explores Zitkala-Ša's effort to invert the biblical account of the garden of Eden as it applies to her and her own people and wonderfully captures Zitkala-Ša's efforts to validate her language, literature, and culture. It is an important contribution that acknowledges Zitkala-Ša's resistance at a time when boarding and residential schools were devastating many a young child. My article is more generic in scope but with a proposal that in Native American literature, authors consistently lament their language skills. I briefly survey the earliest written texts, where the Native American authors' lament focuses on English and their lack of language skills, but by the time we read modern authors, the lament is no longer about a lack of skill in English but in their ancestral language.

Language is a gift, and we must honor our creator for this wondrous ability for expression and creativity. Language captures and instantiates our communities, values, and histories. If we only have translations of our narratives, too much of our culture remains hidden as a result of the process of interpretation into English. The intri-

cacies of morphological, syntactical, and discourse structure suffer as we tend to lose such complexity when translating into English or another Western language. In this sense, both Sapir and Whorf were correct in emphasizing the uniqueness and worldview evident within each language.

Indigenous languages and research on their influence on Native American authors and literature and even on English in general deserve attention. This special section serves to underscore what we know but all too often take for granted—that we owe much to our Indigenous languages. I offer *haw'aa* (a Haida term for gratitude and respect) to the authors for sharing their insights and to Malea Powell and *SAIL* for this opportunity to forefront the salience of Native American languages in Native American literature, in our academic pursuits, and especially in our daily survival.

*demanu haw'aa*

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## Wañna Dakota ŋkiapi kte!

JOHN PEACOCK

I spent the summer of 2004 at my own and two other Midwestern Dakota communities unsuccessfully trying to learn to speak the language my grandparents spoke, my uncles and aunt were prohibited from speaking, and my mother was never taught. When I returned to Baltimore and Washington, DC, where I work and live, there were no Dakota speakers with whom to practice, but even if there had been, I had not acquired a foundation in the language to build on from three fluent elders who agreed to teach me. I learned a lot *about* the language and about linguistically traumatized individuals and communities, but the vast majority of the time we spoke in English. In this article I attempt to understand why, before resuming work with all three teachers and a fourth, new teacher in summer 2005.<sup>1</sup>

First, a little about my teachers and our time together. I traveled a great distance to study with my oldest teacher, one of my tribe's most trusted spiritual advisors. After an inauspicious start (I got lost on the way to his house), doctor's appointments and ceremonial commitments kept him from meeting me during the two weeks I had prearranged with him to be on the reservation. He was friendly when we ran into each other at a Sun Dance and later at a tribal conference when he said prayers, but hearing him respond in English to another elder speaking a mixture of Dakota and English, I suspected he was not always comfortable conversing in Dakota. "Sometimes today when I see a Roman Priest," he announced in the presence of a Catholic archbishop at a "reconciliation" ceremony we attended in a white town, "I'd like to go out and punch [him] in the nose for the

things they have done to us” (qtd. in Bauske). One of those things was the prohibition on speaking Dakota in the reservation Catholic mission school.

My second teacher, a sixty-five-year-old college- and seminary-educated Dakota Presbyterian minister, spoke a little more Dakota in my hearing during the several weeks I lived with him, though I didn’t hear him speak Dakota to his family (his wife is Choctaw). In his Dakota culture class at the tribal college, I heard a few words but not many. When he Sun Danced, I heard him speak Dakota; in his backyard sweat lodge, we sang Dakota songs with other speakers; and at his church, we sang Dakota hymns. To each other, however, we communicated almost entirely in English.

My third, most experienced teacher, an ex-journalist in his fifties, changed careers after a near-fatal car accident. While unconscious, he witnessed his own death, he said, but the ancestors instructed him to come back to life and teach the language, which he had grown up on a Canadian reserve being encouraged to speak. We spoke every day, concentrating on things in the here and now, according to an excellent teaching method he used with kids at the Dakota community center. But with no structured variation-on-a-pattern progression, every conversation was a new one, and I wasn’t developing a repertoire. He kept saying I knew more than I thought and was just in a phase beginners in any language experience of absorbing without speaking. Moreover, in order to learn Dakota, he told me, you must heal of the trauma you suffered from not learning the language as a child. He recalled a two-year language seminar he taught in which selected members of his Dakota community had been paid to learn the language, but only one actually made real progress in speaking it.

In addition to my three teachers, for a week I visited with two other fluent elders at the senior center on my reservation and a Dakota teacher at the tribal school. I observed the protocol of bringing the elders tobacco, and they shared stories and tied prayer ties with me, which I took to hang on the upcoming Sun Dance tree for them. To the elementary school teacher I brought Dakota language materi-

als I had collected. She told me an interesting story: To get accredited to teach Dakota in the K–12 tribal school, she had had to go to Bismark, North Dakota, take a written exam in English, and appear before a board of examiners, none of whom knew Dakota. Before leaving Bismark, she waited for two hours to complain directly to the governor—in Dakota, which she then translated into English. The next day before checking out of her hotel, she got a call from the governor’s office, asking if he could send his limousine to take her to a special meeting he had called so that she could repeat her remarks, in the same way, to the board of examiners. They ended up not changing the procedure, just extending by one year the length of time before she would have to be reaccredited.

In my sessions lasting several hours with her and the elders, I would at various points coax them to speak Dakota, and I even boldly announced once or twice “Waŋna Dakota unkiapi kte!” (“Now we’re going to speak Dakota!”). We never did. To make sense of all this, I consulted a fluent Dakota student—a fellow tribal member, aged thirty-three—who had encountered the same problem of some fluent speakers not speaking Dakota to him. Of those that did, he says, some were nice about his mistakes; others, nice but blunt; a few, blunt and not nice. He learned by conversing with these elders to supplement the Midwestern university Dakota language classes he took (mostly in English) and now teaches, using little English, building just the sort of foundation I needed. It took him about ten years to move from beginner to teacher. Today he only speaks Dakota to his four- and six-year-old sons. He and I have just started speaking Dakota across the thousand miles between us, using free cross-platform (Mac-PC) Internet telephone software that we downloaded from Skype (<http://www.skype.com>). It is too early to report on the success of this endeavor.

Though I can hardly speak Dakota, I taught myself to read and write by combining phrases into poems and sending them to the ex-journalist for editing. Several have been published with my English translations. They’re about things I usually don’t talk much about, even in English, such as feelings for my wife:

## Hınhanğağa Saŋ Winohınça Wazısaka Okıyake

Waniyetu wikcemnayamni ikiyedarı hehanyarı  
 wažupi-wi ohna  
 isto nitawa ekta wahdi.  
 Maŋpiya iwanŋam manipi  
 k'a can tokeca ayapi,  
 tka hutkan sutaya he k'a ohıñni to uñ,  
 can hañpi nitawa ohıñni wanŋan ye.  
 Şınaokıpatapi tahiñşpaçııadan ği wan ihukuya  
 uñkiyotahedan  
 cınca uñkitawa istinme,  
 can waniyetu akewanzi ıcağe,  
 can hañpi pahın,  
 inyan ha ista hoŋhoŋa.

## Gray Owl to Fir Tree Woman

For almost thirty winters  
 in the rice harvest moon  
 I have come back to your arms.  
 Clouds walk overhead  
 and other trees change,  
 but you stay rooted and green,  
 your sap ever rising.  
 Under a brown needle quilt  
 between us  
 sleeps our only son,  
 eleven rings of growth,  
 resin hair,  
 shale eyes.

My wife's last name, Sapin, means "fir tree" in French, which made me think about those French traders most people on my reservation don't talk about being related to:

## Mni Šota

Paha heciyatahaŋ  
 Mni šota iwaŋkam  
 Mdote ed  
 Makosmaka taŋka waŋ yaŋke  
 Wašicuŋjikceka k'a Saḡdašin hed wahmuŋkapi  
 Uŋkaŋ Isantaŋka hiŋ opeton cee he  
 Dakota Capasiŋte cažeyatapi kiŋ he  
 Cuŋwiŋtku tawapi yuze.  
 Ciŋhiŋtku wiwazica ieska tuŋkansiđan mitawa sam yuze.  
 Takožakpaku tawa uŋci mitawa Zitkatataŋka, wamdenica heca  
     itewicahdohdokapi  
 woyazaŋ etahaŋ awaŋyaŋke kta icu,  
 hiŋ wopeton cee Fred yuze. Detahaŋ we saŋpa šota.

## Cloudy Waters

From high bluffs  
 Over cloudy waters  
 Where 2 rivers fork  
 Runs a wide prairie valley  
 Trapped by French, British,  
 & an American Fur Company Trader  
 the Dakota called Cha-pah-sin-tay (Beaver Tail)  
 after his country marriage to one of their daughters.  
 His son's mixed-blood widow remarried my great grandpa.  
 His grandson adopted my Blackbird grandma, a smallpox  
     orphan  
 Who married Fred the furrier, my grandpa. Cloudier than water  
     is blood.

Writing in Dakota flooded me with memories of other languages  
 I can read and write but not speak. I remembered thirty years ago  
 standing in line at Con Ed in Spanish Harlem to get gas and electric  
 for my first apartment. I had no more credit history than the man

turned down ahead of me, but he was from Columbia and couldn't speak English, whereas I was a graduate student at Columbia University. To learn Spanish so I could talk to my building superintendent was not a good enough reason for my PhD advisor. He said scholars needed to read academic research, which there was more of in German, the language I then spent a year acquiring but had forgotten from disuse a year after the exam. Twenty years later I taught myself to read Spanish, which I still can't speak.

I remembered trying to learn Flemish in the early 1990s for a semester in Belgium, a country that had been occupied by the Spanish, the Germans, the French, and the Dutch. Flemish, a dialect of Dutch, was suppressed for years. It and French are now spoken on alternate days in Brussels government offices. On the street, addressing a French or Flemish speaker in the wrong language can still be a serious faux pas. Before going to Belgium, I spent six months in the United States studying Dutch language tapes—there were none in Flemish—taking a Dutch class, and being privately tutored. In Belgium I continued studying in the Flemish language program of the University of Antwerp, where I was a Fulbright lecturer in American studies. I taught in English. When I tried my Flemish on a plumber who came to my apartment, he said he'd never met a foreigner who tried to learn his language. When I tried my Flemish on the street, people sized me up and started speaking English. By the bell downstairs in my apartment building, the Flemish landlady had put a brass plaque—Herr Professor Doctor Peacock, PhD. Such was my status that she forbade my entering the laundry room. My neuropsychologist wife did the laundry and took our two year old to the playground, where he was so self-possessed and free with the language that other parents thought he was Flemish and started speaking it to my wife. Shoppers helped her when she couldn't figure out the difference in Flemish between whole and skim milk. Unlike me she never studied before arriving in Belgium, and she skipped the language classes I attended. At semester's end, she spoke playground and laundry room Flemish. All I could do was read the newspaper. To this day she remembers what she learned, while I've forgotten it all. My son, now thirteen, has long forgotten what he knew when he was two, although when he first got back to the States and

started preschool, he was diagnosed for a short time with an English articulation disorder. He had a Flemish accent. As a toddler, he owned the language. As an adult, I never did.

Who owns Dakota? Nineteenth-century missionary linguists Stephen Riggs and John Williamson took ownership by first creating a writing system for the originally oral-only language in 1834 and later enforcing government sanctions against it being spoken. My first act as a Dakota student was to own Riggs's and Williamson's still-standard Dakota-English and English-Dakota dictionaries.

In Williamson, the English *assimilate* is translated *tawaiciya kaga*. Riggs translates *tawaiciya kaga* into English as "to own oneself; to be free." By contrast, one of my teachers told me that the Dakota expression for assimilation literally means "to make nothing of."

In both Williamson and Riggs, the word *colony* in Dakota is *ospaye ahitipi*, meaning a company separated from the main group that comes to pitch their tents. The late chairman of the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Community translated *ospaye ahitipi* as "sitting herd." A sitting buffalo herd can neither flee nor charge, its two defenses against predators.

An *ikce wicasta* is a common man, a man of the tribe, but in Riggs's Dakota translation of the Bible, *ikce wicasta* translates the English word *heathen*.

Missionary mistranslations are the subject of another of my "unspoken" poems:

Daḳota Wowapi Wakaŋ Waŋŋspeiciyapi

Caŋ yapasusuze k'a yumdapi owihaŋkewanica yakage,  
 qa winahtagye toksupi kiŋ en he yapehaŋ,  
 qa wowapi wakaŋ nitawapi duieskapi qa  
 Daḳota iapi caŋ se  
 caŋicipawega waŋ Wakantaŋka oyakatanpi iyecen.  
 Iye Marie qa tokan he hduhpapi nunwe.  
 Iapi de kakiza kiŋ awaŋmdake kte  
 qa odowaŋ iapi he sdawakiya kta,  
 uŋmanna wakaŋ k'ais tehiŋdapi ŋni,

niyawage nahañhiñ spaya šni,  
 nakun̄ mii wipažaža ahna yužažapi šni.  
 Wicoie dena woyaco anpetu sunktaŋka,  
 ma wa nuñ kta, ake.

### Dakota Bible Study

You pulped our timber into an endless page,  
 rolled it in the carriage of a typewriter,  
 and translated the Bible  
 into a Dakota as wooden  
 as the cross upon which you hammered God.  
 Let Mary and the others take Him down.  
 I will take down this tortured language  
 and anoint it poetry,  
 neither sacred nor taboo,  
 my breath not yet wet with it,  
 but neither has my mouth been washed out with soap.  
 These words, horses of the apocalypse,  
 I will steal them back.

Other missionaries translated into Dakota the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and Catholic Catechism—both of which I own, as I do Williamson’s translation of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (after the Bible, the book most frequently translated into American Indian languages and into many other non-Western languages that nineteenth-century missionaries learned in order to convert people around the world). The Dakota Bunyan I found in the Library of Congress rare book room had a penciled inscription on the title page saying that this particular copy had been recovered from the flames of the 1862 Dakota War by a white soldier.

I asked a teacher of mine, who, like Riggs, was a Presbyterian minister, how he reconciled being a Christian with Sun Dancing. His reply, “I don’t,” was exactly two words longer than any discussion I had with him of my own Presbyterianism. He edited, but we never discussed, my poem:

Toked Christ Tawokeye Hemaca O'wakihe hwo?

Miye, ca wowinape uŋ wati, wowapi ska akan,  
 Iyuyeskapi topa dena—  
 Daḡota Wowapi Wakan kiŋ,  
 Wocekiye Ikceka Wowapi kiŋ,  
*Mahpiya oicimani yapi kiŋ,*  
 Siŋa Sapa wowiŋwange—  
 icipahyapi okatanpi waŋ Daḡota wicohaŋ yapi,  
 Daḡota iapi kiŋ nipi, wotaŋiŋ wašte dena kapi.  
 Wowapi woyakapi, toked wakiye ŋni,  
 ʔais, wa wi haŋgyapi sica, caze uŋ ecoŋpi,  
 Miye ca, wicoie ed otokahe ekta wicoie heca,  
 Waŋ iye qa iyohi Daḡota wicoie wašte.

How Could I Be Christian?

To me, living in exile on this white page,  
 these four translations—  
 the Dakota Bible,  
 Book of Common Prayer,  
*Pilgrim's Progress,*  
 and Catholic catechism—  
 once the cross of Dakota culture's crucifixion,  
 have become the gospel of the resurrected Dakota language.  
 I don't care what these books say or mean,  
 or what atrocities are still committed in their name.  
 To me, in the beginning was the word,  
 and the word,  
 each and every Dakota word,  
 is sacred.

The missionary Dakota in which I wrote these poems, indeed writing itself, was ultimately intended by missionaries first to own and then to disown the Dakota language. “What is it we do when we borrow?” asks Acoma poet Simon Ortiz. “How correct, accurate, and appropri-

ate is it? [U]sing one language's written script for another is a poor way to represent spoken language. Yet that's all we have" (101).

Opinions differ about the resilience of endangered languages: Sisseton Wahpeton College president William LoneFight thinks that the Dakota language is "an independent sacred being. Language is not dying, it's leaving us. It can be called back. We can ask it. That's why despite everything, our languages are so resilient." The late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), however, wrote in *Language and Symbolic Power* that

language no more contains within itself the power to ensure its own perpetuation in time than it has the power to define its extension in space. Only the process of continuous creation, which occurs through the unceasing struggles between the different authorities who compete for the monopolistic power to impose the legitimate mode of expression, can ensure the permanence of language and of the recognition accorded to it. (57, ellipses deleted)

Bourdieu did not deny that different languages have different intrinsic virtues and mental structures: In France, "conflict between the intelligentsia and the dialects was a struggle for symbolic power in which what was at stake was the *formation* and *re-formation* of mental structures" (48, ellipses deleted). But neither mental structures nor intrinsic spiritual virtues guaranteed perpetuation of a community of speakers, Bourdieu believed: "One cannot save the *value* of a competence unless one saves the whole set of political and social conditions of producers/consumers" (57, ellipsis deleted).

Only majority language education, writes Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Gabrielle Strong,

can focus on individual proficiency because the community context of language use exist[s]. Language proficiency can be taught in the classroom [and] the practice of the language will be nurtured and supported in an active language community. This of course is not the case for Indigenous languages. The language community is either endangered or largely nonexistent. (5, ellipses deleted)

Between the “two principal factors produc[ing] competence, the family and the educational system,” Bourdieu believed, “the educational system has the monopoly in the large-scale production of producers/consumers, and therefore in the reproduction of linguistic competence” (63, 57–58, ellipses deleted). The centrality of schools does not rule out the contribution of home, clubs, and community centers, especially in the development of beginning conversational proficiency. Nor did Bourdieu ignore the damage that schools can do:

Instead of telling the child what he must do, tell[ing] him what he is, and thus lead[ing] him to become durably what he has to be leaves dominated speakers “speechless,” “tongue-tied,” “at a loss for words,” as if they were suddenly dispossessed of their own language. (52, ellipses deleted)

But school is not the only place where linguistic hierarchies prevail. Why might a fluent speaker respond in English to a nonfluent speaker trying to converse with him in Dakota? According to Bourdieu,

the competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be *listened* to, likely to be recognized as *acceptable*. [S]ocial acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality. Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are *de facto* excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence. What is rare is not the capacity to speak, which, being part of our biological heritage, is universal, but rather the competence necessary in order to speak in all the situations in which there is occasion to. (55, ellipses deleted)

Why might some elders seem more interested in teaching colors and numbers than in producing speakers? Could it be that teaching anything more conflicts with an unspoken or unconscious desire to preserve their own distinction as fluent speakers? “Competition [for] linguistic competence produc[es] *distinction*,” based on scarcity (Bourdieu 55, ellipsis deleted). “Oh, he thinks he knows the language,” one elder confides to me about another. The other tells me the

first merges dialects when he speaks. Distinction will lead to extinction unless speakers stop being such purists.

In some cases, effort put into language revitalization by tribes and individuals “may exceed the minimum ‘technically’ required in order to ensure the transmission” of the language. “Duration of study tends to be valued for its own sake, independently of the result it produces.” The tribal chair of a nonfederally recognized Dakota tribe studied the language two hours every morning for seven years without ever learning how to converse. “This conspicuous consumption of training (i.e. of time) [is] an apparent technical wastage which fulfills social functions of legitimization” (Bourdieu 55–56, ellipses deleted). Another tribe constitutionally requires its tribal chairperson but no one else in the tribal government to know the language. What good is that distinction if no one else on the tribal council knows how to talk to the chief?

Tribal elites often want to learn Dakota, but their college and, in some cases, graduate school education may predispose them against learning from mother-tongue speakers who (at least in Canada, where statistics are available) are 30 to 50 percent illiterate in English and 99 percent illiterate in Dakota (*ethnologue*). Some (certainly not all!) who were forced to learn English at boarding school might also unconsciously tend to teach Dakota to second language learners with an eye to mistakes rather than with a loving heart—a contributing factor to the failure of the two-year seminar one of my teachers team-taught with a well-intentioned but sometimes too stern colleague.

“Even fluent speakers make mistakes,” my new teacher reassured me when I said that as a professor it was easier for me to learn grammar than to risk mistakes in conversation. But it was really Bourdieu who helped me understand the basis for my obsession with correctness: I was like a French *petit-bourgeois* who, intent on acquiring cultural capital, is hyper-correct, whereas the self-possessed aristocrat can flaunt his linguistic competence by occasionally violating it with uncouth and incorrect expressions. Another of my teachers, to his great credit, taught me Dakota slang. “Ecas” has replaced “dang” muttered under my breath. Talk to yourself, my new teacher recommends. It’s more efficient and less pretentious than writing poetry.

And “pretension,” writes Bourdieu, “is greatest in the intermediate

regions of social space” (63). Introducing ourselves with Indian names but *using* English ones or saying a few words in Native languages at the start of conferences papers otherwise delivered in English, such speech acts ultimately demonstrate the domination of English. Neither intentions nor content are as important as what we actually *do* with words, and what are we doing when we use English 99 percent of the time?

“It is rare for language to function as a pure instrument of communication,” Bourdieu writes (67). It is also an instrument of ritual in which “the agent does not act in his own name and on his own authority. *Hedge* and *filler phrases*, superfluous in terms of strict communication, affirm the speaker’s capacity to keep his distance from his own utterances [and] to observe formalities” (Bourdieu 115). “The communicative function can disappear as long as the performative logic of symbolic domination operates” (Bourdieu 85, ellipses deleted). As Indigenous languages fall into disuse as instruments of communication, they continue to be (almost exclusively in some cases) instruments of ritual. Ritual speakers do not always speak in their own name but on higher authority, and they sometimes consider it inappropriate for ritual language to be spoken by just anybody in any way on any occasion. “Be careful how you teach the language and who you teach it to, for it has been abused,” my new teacher was warned by the tribal elders who certified him to teach Dakota. This warning bodes well for the sacred language but not necessarily for the conversational one that my teacher encourages me to make mistakes in. Speaking of mistakes, I was wrong when I wrote *each and every Dakota word is sacred*: The lack of distinction between sacred and conversational language should be reconsidered by those who think their language will become more popular if people understand it is sacred. Latin and Hebrew are ritual languages used in sacred rites, but Latin is a “dead” language with no ordinary speakers, whereas Hebrew was revived so that it could again become a language of communication for millions of Israelis.

Dakota will not survive if it ceases to be an instrument not only of communication but also of *profane* ritual. My tribe’s former chair, an accountant, won the last tribal primary election so handily that many people did not vote in the general election, which was won in an upset

by a man who, instead of communicating facts and figures, presented tobacco to his many relatives and spoke to them in Dakota. He served less than a full term before being unseated in a recall election. I heard him criticized as incompetent, uneducated, and alcoholic. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that all this is true, why did I enjoy meeting him and other tribal council members in a Washington, DC, pizzeria when they were in town on tribal business? We were not drinking, but it was not hard to imagine him as one of those habitués who

does not go to the pub only to drink, but also to participate actively in a collective pastime capable of giving the participants a feeling of freedom from daily necessities, and of producing an atmosphere of social euphoria and economic freedom which, obviously the consumption of alcohol can only enhance. One goes there to laugh and to make others laugh, and everyone must do his best to contribute to the exchange of comments and jokes, or, at the very least, make his contribution to the fun by underlining the success of others in adding his laughter, and his shouts of approval. The possession of a talent for being “the life and soul of the party,” capable of incarnating, at the cost of a conscious and constant labor of research and accumulation, the ideal of the “funny guy” which crowns an approved form of sociability, is a very precious form of mastery of the expressive conventions [of] jokes, funny stories, and puns . . . names, nicknames, habits, oddities, specialities and talents. (Bourdieu 99)

The chief reminded me of my Anishinaabe relative Wimpy Wilke, who runs a reservation bowling alley bar, and of my white father, who disappointed my Dakota mother’s hopes that he would be more sober than her own father. Despite their flaws, I prefer these men’s way with words to that silent

cult of virility, i.e. of harshness, of physical strength and surly coarseness, established as a chosen refusal of effeminate refinement [that] is one of the most effective ways of struggling

against the cultural inferiority which unites all those who feel deprived of cultural capital, whether or not they might be rich in economic capital. (Bourdieu 100)

Bourdieu describes without endorsing the dynamics of men's reserve and women's talkativeness, "a man can rest content with a silence which enables him to preserve his virile dignity, for it is often incumbent upon women to make the effort." "Mistakes' are mostly made by women." (My wife's imperfect Flemish versus my perfect silence.) "Women 'by nature' create fuss and embarrassment." (The schoolteacher and the governor?) About men's relationships to each other, Bourdieu writes that sometimes they "abandon ready-made phrases and show the force of [their] sincerity and feeling" (101–02, ellipsis deleted). After our emotional reunion at a language revitalization conference in April, the ex-journalist convinced me to submit a still-pending application to be his community's tribal education and language program director. In such a position, Bourdieu says,

an "educated" city-dweller will only encounter [English] or silence; and if he uses [the Indigenous language] himself, this may well ease the tension of the exchange, but, whatever his intentions, it cannot fail to create a situation no less artificial than the initial relationship. (Bourdieu 78)

I did not get the job, but if I had, would I have spoken Dakota with my teacher part of every work day? Would this have created a situation no less artificial than my present relationship with him? Or would it have eased the tension of our now too infrequent exchanges in the language? All I know is had I gotten the job, my first words to him would have been "Waŋna Daḳota unkiapi kte!"

#### NOTES

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1. For an update on how summer 2005 went, see my “Healing Dakota Language Loss,” proceedings of the 2005 World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education, forthcoming.

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# Fire of Eden

Zitkala-Ša's Bitter Apple

CATHERINE KUNCE

In the largely autobiographical “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” (1900–1901), Lakota Zitkala-Ša tells of missionaries enticing her to attend their mission school, promising the eight-year-old her fill of apples if she left her Yankton reservation. What appears to be a textual detail actually signals Zitkala-Ša’s retelling of the Garden of Eden story. In casting her mother as God, her brother as Adam, the missionaries as the Serpent, and herself as Eve, Zitkala-Ša reveals the catastrophic consequences of forced relinquishment of her language, and subsequently of her culture. Fighting fire with fire through her subversive and extended metaphor, Zitkala-Ša articulates, through the oppressor’s own language, the hypocritical and sadistic underpinnings of an attempted silencing of her native tongue.

Zitkala-Ša (“Red Bird”) was born as Gertrude Simmons in 1876 on the Yankton reservation in South Dakota. There she lived with her mother (her white father abandoned the family before his daughter’s birth). Missionaries, following radical assimilation policies of the day, coaxed the young girl away from her home. She attended the Quakers’ boarding school, White’s Manual Labor Institute, in Wabash, Indiana, for a year and a half. While attending Earlham College, Zitkala-Ša excelled in debate. It seems deeply ironic that she would later teach at the Carlisle Indian School, where children were brutalized in order to “Kill the Indian and save the man!” (Davidson and Norris xvii). As a talented violinist and writer, the young woman made a big splash with East Coast society when she began performing and writing works for the *Atlantic Monthly*, which first featured

her autobiographical stories over a period of three months in 1900. Although after her 1902 marriage to Raymond Bonnin she never again wrote for the *Atlantic*, Zitkala-Ša continued to write, to produce an opera, and to promote Indian rights.

Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris point out that conspicuously absent from Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical works is mention of the massacre at "Wounded Knee and the murder of Sitting Bull, [which] occurred while she was at home on the Yankton reservation on a school break" in 1890 (xii). But to decry the atrocity would have marked Zitkala-Ša as an enemy of the culture committing the atrocity. Additionally, other writings reveal Zitkala-Ša's cognizance of the importance of calculation in administering effective counterattacks.<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Smith alludes to Zitkala-Ša's strategy, noting, "In order to fight back against the white cultural powers which threaten her, [Zitkala-Ša] [learns] that she must fight in their medium: spoken and written English" (55). So too does Zitkala-Ša fight back with allusions to a religion that justifies silencing Indigenous languages. Zitkala-Ša's frequently veiled yet persistent connecting of her own experience to the biblical Fall displays her ingenuity in reconciling her white audience's sensibilities with the more urgent need to instruct that audience about the cataclysmic results of religious hypocrisy. In short, Zitkala-Ša offers her white audience a brilliantly subversive recitation of the missionaries' own teachings.

Before the invasion of missionaries, Zitkala-Ša enjoyed an Edenic existence, marred only by her mother's memory of white barbarity, which not only incurred the deaths of Zitkala-Ša's uncle and sister but defrauded Lakotas of their land. In spite of her mother's resultant taciturn and frequently somber demeanor, Zitkala-Ša at seven was "as free as the wind that [blows her] hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer" (8). As Martha J. Cutter observes, "Zitkala-Ša portrays a type of Eden, a world of perfect peace and cooperation between humankind and nature, a world where food is not earned by the sweat of the brow and language is not distorted" (n.p.). Untouched by cruelty, Zitkala-Ša was taught "no fear save that of intruding [herself] on others" (8). Drawing water from the river, roaming the hills, and playing with friends, the young girl lived close to the

land, her mother, and the local elders, one of whom, in his affection and respect of Zitkala-Ša, did not correct her when she graciously served him coffee “made” over cold ashes. Neither the elder nor Zitkala-Ša’s mother, stifling smiles and not wishing to embarrass Zitkala-Ša, ever alluded to her error. Perhaps the depiction of an “Indian Eden” prompted Paula Gunn Allen to anticipate dismissal of Zitkala-Ša’s autobiography as an “overly romanticized account . . . of Indian life” (*Studies* 141).<sup>2</sup> But apprehension of this Eden’s function—in part to amplify the irony of a “religious” hell, where missionaries brutalize children for inconsequential infractions and for their ignorance of English—should stave off hasty conclusions about Zitkala-Ša’s merely “model[ing] [her] stor[y] on the sentimental novels of the day” (Allen, *Studies* 141).

In Zitkala-Ša’s paradise, her mother presides as God.<sup>3</sup> Margaret A. Lukens observes, “Despite the realities of friction between [Zitkala-Ša] and her mother, the mother is represented as a nearly prophetic voice of truth” (145). The “nearly prophetic” attributes of the mother might be considered marks of a flawed deity of the Old Testament, for Zitkala-Ša refuses to abstract beyond redemption the truth of her own existence. As a benevolent yet austere deity, Zitkala-Ša’s mother teaches her daughter how to do beadwork while requiring that the girl finish any pattern she starts, thereby training her to focus first on simpler patterns. Zitkala-Ša confesses, “My original designs were not always symmetrical nor sufficiently characteristic, two faults with which my mother had little patience” (20). But her mother’s silent disapproval encourages Zitkala-Ša to “feel strongly responsible and dependent upon [her] own judgement” (20), just as Adam and Eve relied upon their own judgment in managing both flora and fauna of Eden. Additionally, Zitkala-Ša writes that her mother treated her daughter “as a dignified little individual as long as [Zitkala-Ša] was on [her] good behavior” (20). Although adored by her daughter, Zitkala-Ša’s mother commanded respect and obedience. Zitkala-Ša writes of “how humiliated [she] was when some boldness of [hers] drew forth a rebuke from [her mother]!” (20). In her “prelapsarian” existence, Zitkala-Ša’s day revolved around her mother. Indeed, the first section of her narrative begins with the story “My Mother,” and

almost all subsequent sections before the coming of the missionaries begin with the mention of her mother. Like the God of the Old Testament, Zitkala-Ša's mother granted her "creation" free will even while exacting compliance to rules. When excitedly running to invite elders to supper, for example, Zitkala-Ša pauses to reflect on her mother's "commandment": "Wait a moment before you invite any one. If other plans are being discussed, do not interfere, but go elsewhere" (13). Her godlike mother additionally educated Zitkala-Ša. After returning from inviting the elders to their teepee, Zitkala-Ša tells her mother "almost the exact words of the answers to my invitation. Frequently, [my mother] asked, 'What were they doing when you entered their teepee?' This taught me to remember all I saw at a single glance. Often I told my mother my impressions without being questioned" (14).

As Paula Gunn Allen maintains, "Traditional tribal lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not, and they are never patriarchal" (2); furthermore, "mothers . . . implied the highest degree of status in ritual cultures" (*Sacred Hoop* 28), superseding "the kind of respect for motherhood that is reflected in Americans' Mother's Day observance" (29). But a clear comprehension that Zitkala-Ša granted her mother the status of God would have triply outraged an early-twentieth-century white audience, for her god is Indian, female, and human. By likening her mother to the Judaic-Christian God, Zitkala-Ša simultaneously unsettles the foundation of racism, patriarchy, and theological hierarchy. Had more definitive lines between her mother and God been drawn, the work might never have been published. As it was, Zitkala-Ša sustained criticism for the far less offensive "crime" of ingratitude. One review of her "Soft-Hearted Sioux" drew the following from the Carlisle school's *The Red Man and Helper* 1901 review:

All that Zitkalasa has in the way of literary ability and culture she owes to the good people, who, from time to time, have taken her into their homes and hearts and given her aid. Yet not a word of gratitude or allusion to such kindness on the part of her friends has ever escaped her in any line of anything she has written for

the public. By this course she injures herself and harms the educational work in progress for the race from which she sprang. In a list of educated Indians whom we have in mind, some of whom have reached higher altitudes in literary and professional lines than Zitkalaša, we know of no other case of such pronounced morbidity. (qtd. in Fisher viii)

Even if circumspectly veiling her mother's connection to deity, Zitkala-Ša hints at the connection by juxtaposing in her "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" two stories of forbidden fruit, the first of which occurs in her "idyllic state of harmony," before the coming of the missionaries (Fisher ix). Just as the Old Testament God prohibits Adam and Eve from eating of fruit of a specific tree, so Zitkala-Ša's mother enjoins her daughter never to eat the fruit a specific plum bush, for "its roots are wrapped around an Indian's skeleton. A brave is buried there," she explains. "While he lived he was so fond of playing the game of striped plum seeds that, at his death, his set of plum seeds were buried in his hands. From them sprang up this little bush" (32). Even though yearning for the plums, after hearing her mother's decree, Zitkala-Ša remembers that "Eyeing the *forbidden fruit*, I trod lightly on the sacred ground, and dared to speak only in whispers until we had gone many paces from it" (32, emphasis added). In this instance, Zitkala-Ša upholds her mother's commandment, and the noncatastrophic result contrasts dramatically with the second temptation, as we shall see. Cutter believes that the two "forbidden fruit" stories serve to show that the "'edenic' image . . . actually has its roots in Native American culture" (n.p.). I would further add that the juxtaposition not only underscores the corrupting influence of the Serpent but also reveals that only such malevolence could induce a breaking of divine commandment of the Mother. When the missionaries attempt to persuade Zitkala-Ša to leave her Eden, her mother commands, "Don't believe a word [the white men] say! Their words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter. . . . Stay with me, my little one!" (41). Revealing her omniscience, mother tells daughter, "You will cry for me, but they will not soothe you" (41). The narrative fulfills her mother's prophecy. Since Zitkala-Ša and her mother later

would engage in a legal battle against one another, and since the two would never reconcile, it might seem odd that Zitkala-Ša casts her mother as God in her retelling of the Eden story. Yet this failure of reconciliation not only matches the failure of unifying Adam and Eve with their God but also relates to Zitkala-Ša's inability to reconcile with her mother in her autobiographical writings. Expelled from the Garden through her own breaking of her mother's commandant, Zitkala-Ša, in her fallen state, confesses that when she was able, "my pride kept me from returning to my mother" (81). When she does return to the Yankton home from time to time, full reconciliation eludes mother and daughter; cast from the Garden, Eve can never return. That Zitkala-Ša intentionally drew the parallel seems certain in her placement of a specific biblical allusion. Lamenting her estrangement from her mother, Zitkala-Ša writes, "Often I wept in secret, wishing I had gone West, to be nourished by my mother's love, instead of remaining among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice" (76). Recounting her isolation, she remembers, "During the fall and winter seasons I scarcely had a real friend" (76). We wonder why she does not then write to her mother. As if anticipating that question, Zitkala-Ša explains, "My mother had not yet forgiven my rudeness to her, and I had no moment for letter-writing. By daylight and lamplight, I spun with reeds and thistles, until my hands were tired from their weaving, the magic design which promised me the white man's respect" (76). The direct allusion to Genesis 4:18 relates to God's rebuking Adam and Eve after their eating the fruit: God reminds them, "I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field." The result of the Zitkala-Ša's fall from her mother's grace echoes Adam and Eve's: All shall work by the sweat of the brow.

Even as Zitkala-Ša's mother grants her daughter free will and thus guarantees her certain expulsion from Eden, so Zitkala-Ša's brother Dawée fails to prevent his sister's departure to the missionary school. His role in Zitkala-Ša's "temptation" appears analogous (even if tenuously) to Adam's in Eve's temptation. As Zitkala-Ša's older

brother, Dawée, the first “creation” of the divine mother/god, has greater experience of the world, and in fact has spent three years being educated in the East. As Adam, Dawée neglects to prevent Eve’s partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and his negligence fails to prevent Zitkala-Ša’s serving as scapegoat for the Fall.

Even if the pairing of Zitkala-Ša’s brother and Adam appears veiled, certainly the missionaries’ likeness to the Serpent does not. As Cutter argues, “it is white men who play the serpent in Zitkala-Ša’s recasting of the Fall” (n.p.). Genesis reveals that “the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (3:1).<sup>4</sup> The missionaries tempt Zitkala-Ša with the knowledge of the “wonders” of the white world, where she will learn another language. But at first, “the ambition for Letters” does not tempt the girl (41). Significantly, the missionaries’ premiere enticement involves the promise of the apple. Zitkala-Ša’s friend, having returned from a missionary school, tells her “how [children] could reach out [their] hands and pick all the red apples [they] could eat” (41-42). Zitkala-Ša explains,

I had never seen apple trees. I had never tasted more than a dozen apples in my life; and when I heard of the orchards of the East, I was eager to roam among them. The missionaries smiled into my eyes and patted my head. I wondered how mother could say such hard words against him.

“Mother, ask them if little girls may have all the red apples they want, when they go East,” I whispered aloud in my excitement.

The interpreter heard me, and answered, “Yes, little girl, the nice red apples are for those who pick them; and you will have a ride on the iron horse if you go with these good people.” I had never seen a train, and he knew it. (42)

Because they intercede between mother and daughter, mislead Zitkala-Ša about the accessibility to the apples, and play upon a child’s natural curiosity, the missionaries’ craft stands out here. Since Zitkala-Ša will have to obtain her mother’s permission to join the missionaries, they recognize the value in persuading the child to

bring pressure to bear on her parent. As if to highlight the correlation of apples to Eden's forbidden fruit to language, Zitkala-Ša titles the chapter in which the missionaries "came . . . saw . . . and . . . conquered" (41) (significantly, this relates to Latin recitation, the former mainstay of white linguistic instruction) "The Big Red Apples." The chapter commences: "The first turning away from the easy, natural flow of my life occurred in the early spring. It was in my eighth year; in the month of March, I afterward learned. At this age I knew but one language, and that was my mother's native tongue" (39). The missionaries' temptation takes Zitkala-Ša from her timeless existence in "paradise" and from her knowledge of "one language," that of her godlike mother's "native tongue."

If the native tongue relates to paradise and to godliness, then English, the devil's language, relates to torture and evil. In fact, the mother tongue contains no words for the kind of evil found in the white man's cosmology: In "The Devil," Zitkala-Ša writes,

Among the legends the old warriors used to tell me were many stories of evil spirits. But I was taught to fear them no more than those who stalked about in material guise. I never knew there was an insolent chieftain among the bad spirits who dared to array his forces against the Great Spirit, until I heard this white man's legend from a paleface woman. (62)

The picture of the devil the white woman shows Zitkala-Ša has "bearded cheeks, like some [she] had seen palefaces wear" (62). The white woman's hope that the devil would terrify the girl is realized, and "that night, [she dreams] of this evil divinity" (63). Zitkala-Ša's dream reveals the connection between language and evil: Although the devil chases her, her mother sits serenely, unaware of her daughter's danger. The devil does not molest the mother, "because he did not know the Indian language" (63). In her dream, perhaps more real and honest than the muddled impressions of the waking state, evil and English are intertwined.

Zitkala-Ša's story is not just her own. Incorporating the Garden of Eden myth into her autobiography points to an experience of cosmic proportions and reveals the rotten plank of a theology that supports

misogyny, hypocrisy, genocide, and savagery. Few attempts have been made to redress the horrors perpetrated by sanctimonious oppressors of Indigenous people. Therefore there is little wonder that today some members of religious organizations continue their so-called holy missions. One hundred years after writing of her autobiography, Zitkala-Ša instructs us about one way to counter such delusion.

#### NOTES

1. In "A Warrior's Daughter," for example, Zitkala-Ša writes of a woman who executes an ingenious plan for rescuing her lover from enemies.

2. Allen places Sarah Winemucca Hopkins in the same "sentimentalist" camp as Zitkala-Ša, explaining that both women's audiences mandated such sentimentality (*Studies* 143).

3. For a discussion of the removal of feminine primacy from American Indian culture, see Allen, *Sacred Hoop*.

4. Linda Hogan counters the berating of the snake in her essay "The Snake People."

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# Language Reflection and Lamentation in Native American Literature

FREDERICK H. WHITE

Imagine what most people think about when they hear the terms “Indian,” “Native American,” or “First Nations.” Do they have images of loincloths, teepees, war paint, or nomads? Now consider Native Americans and their languages. Would most people determine that English has become a first and only language for many Native American communities? The issue of English language dominance is all too common among the First Nations communities and Native Americans in the United States. Ancestral language loss, prevalent in most Native American and First Nations communities, has been occurring since European contact began. This article explores how English dominates most First Nations and Native American communities, not merely in daily communication but in all aspects, most notably in all literary forms, especially novels and poetry. We must first consider what history reveals in this sociolinguistic milieu in which we find ourselves. A fascinating pattern emerges as we explore historical Native American literature and trace that pattern to the current literature produced. It is a pattern related to authorial language reflection and lamentation.

It is necessary to contextualize how language reflection and lamentation emerge in Native American literature in three settings: 1) Precontact phase: Ancestral languages prior to Columbus; 2) Transitional phase: Linguistic contact and transition; 3) Modern Phase: Linguistic shift to English. The first phase briefly illustrates pre-Columbian linguistic diversity in North America. The transitional and modern phases address the impact of language shift socially and

in terms of literature, particularly how English has affected and continues to affect the Native American corpus of literature. From early testimonial and autobiographical texts first produced to modern poetry, Native American literature resounds with language reflection and lamentation.

PRECONTACT PHASE: ANCESTRAL LANGUAGES PRIOR TO  
COLUMBUS

Edward Sapir argued that language was the greatest cultural asset about which the human race could boast (*Language*). Prior to Columbus's visitations, numerous languages prospered in North America. Though scholars differ concerning exactly how many languages there were, numbers range from five hundred to one thousand different languages (Cutler 23). Even considering the lower number, tremendous linguistic diversity reigned on this continent. One of the more common myths about that time is that all the inhabitants understood each other no matter what language was spoken. The truth, however, is that these languages varied dramatically in structure, and it was not necessary to go great distances before any given language could no longer be understood by neighboring tribes. Mary Haas, commenting nearly five hundred years after Columbus visited the first time on the prehistory of Native American languages, reports, "We have truly begun to discover the New World, a world of wealth of linguistic variety beyond our most extravagant expectations" (43). Despite her problematic "New World" comment, her assessment of the languages is significant. Those who have any appreciation of and wonder for language must concur with her notion that this was a land of linguistic extravagance (and, for the time being, still is). As with the number of languages, there are also various views on the number of language families in North America. Early scholars suggested there were many linguistic families. Franz Boas, the leader in the field of Native American language study, proposes fifty-five different families (82–83). J. W. Powell, a colleague of Boas, suggests there were fifty-eight different families (121). Some current scholars prefer to be minimalists, such as Joseph Greenberg, who categorizes

the languages into only three families: 1) Eskimo/Aleut; 2) Na-Dene, which includes the Northwest Coast and Athapaskan; and 3) Amerind, which includes all others in North, Central, and South America (38). Scholars Charles Frederick Voeglin and Florence Marie Voeglin have approximately eight different linguistic categorizations on their map produced by the American Ethnological Society. However, whether there are only three Native American linguistic families, fifty-eight, or some number in between, the multiplicity of languages within those families is undeniable.

The precontact linguistic stage is preliterate for almost all the tribes in North America—that is, before tribes or members of tribes were writing in script—and though some tribes had systematic mnemonic capacity, for the purposes of this article, I consider this stage largely preliterate in terms of writing in any tribal language or any European language. An obvious note concerning this stage is that the European languages have yet to come ashore and stay. Once Europeans arrive and stay, the next phase ensues.

#### TRANSITIONAL PHASE: LINGUISTIC CONTACT AND TRANSITION

During the 1500s and the early 1600s, the transitional phase began, with Spanish, French, and English spreading throughout the continent and an eventual division of French to the north, in what is now Canada, and Spanish to Mexico and Central America. Within the first quarter of the 1600s, English found settlement in the United States and then in Canada by the end of the century. The later part of this phase has two aspects relating to language shift to English, both found in the modern phase as well. The first aspect involves volition, that is, freedom in choosing to learn English, and forced acquisition, that is, involuntarily learning English (I explore this forced linguistic and cultural assimilation in more detail in the modern phase section). The second aspect involves the implementation of English-language learning on reservations. This article focuses on a comparison between those who voluntarily learned English and those forced to learn English. Those who learned English voluntarily were gener-

ally individuals from various tribes who willingly learned the language, assimilated enough to the ensuing culture to be a spokesperson for their people, and functioned as ambassadors to the British, Canadian, and American governments that had rule over their land. These people usually served as interpreters and go-betweens for the governments and their respective tribes. Those that learned English involuntarily were eventually confined to reservations. Of course there are exceptions to these, but generally, the pattern applies to most tribes and individuals associated with them.

The transitional phase began soon after the colony in Jamestown and the subsequent colonization of eastern continental America. There are significant considerations and characteristics that emerge from Native American writers of this phase. Well into the latter part of this phase Samson Occom, one of the first Native Americans to publish, set the precedent concerning style and content. The first prominent characteristic of his writing concerns his English usage assessment. Most Native American writers follow his example and admit or lament their own shortcomings in English usage. Another characteristic of Native American writers in this phase, most interestingly, is that the intended audience of their writing often excluded their own people. Many of the earliest Native American writers wrote for an audience other than their own people since few Native Americans could read English. Ultimately, the writers became advocates of and for their tribes and communities, often using the newcomers' language to protect their people and land, to promote fair, honest communication with the ensuing governments, and to provide examples of acceptable moral standards to the oncoming expansionists.

Many Native Americans became fluent in English through missionary or settlement contacts. Samson Occom exemplified missionary contact. Known as the "Mohegan Jonathan Edwards," he became famous because of his preaching style, and converting to Christianity served as his impetus to publish. He published his most famous message, *A Sermon, Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian*, in 1772. Nevertheless, his initial effort to publish was not easy. Occom ruminated, in the same manner that the author of Ecclesiastes did, that

such an undertaking was “folly and madness” because it would “expose my ignorance to the world” (472). He explains,

But there are two or three considerations that have induced me to be willing, to suffer my broken hints to appear in the world. One is, that the books that are in the world are written in very high and refined language; and the sermons that are delivered every Sabbath in general, are in very high and lofty stile, so that common people understand but little of them. (473)

Occom summarizes his abilities and efforts as being folly, madness, and broken hints. He also criticizes the esoteric language found in literature and then, in the same breath, criticizes the sermonic language for the very reason that few understand it. He then offers a comparison of his own sermons and the language he uses, stating, “But I think they can’t help understanding my talk; it is common, plain, everyday talk: little children may understand me” (473). Occom claims his language is simple, such that “the poor Negroes” and his “poor kindred, the Indians” could understand his sermons. This comment, when looking a little closer, reveals the situation in which both the slaves and Indians were most likely listening to the sermon in a language other than their mother tongue. Thus, the simpler the language, the easier it is to grasp, even for a second-language learner/speaker, though it is certainly feasible that many slaves and Native Americans may also have been multilingual, and not only bilingual. Occom lived a life promoting transition to the new American society by raising funds and establishing Dartmouth College. He died a leader in both the religious and educational realm of a newly emergent American society.

In 1829 the first Native American autobiography set a precedent, not only for the transitional phase authors nor only for his North American audience but for the whole world. William Apess, in his *A Son of the Forest*, addresses an issue that remains problematic to this day, the issue of identification. Apess’s publication addresses the issue of identification on various levels. First, on the matter of tribal identity, Apess notes that he is from the “royal family of Philip, the

king of the Pequod tribe" (3). Then he identifies himself in Judeo-Christian terms, saying that he is an offspring of Adam. And most important, he addresses the term that the newcomers have applied to him: "Indian."

As is the human practice, giving names to people groups involves various elements, but perhaps most common are those names related to some aspect of physical features, linguistic peculiarities, or geographic location. Sometimes, as in the case of Christopher Columbus, naming is a case of mistaken identity. Thinking he was in India, Columbus named the people "los Indios," or "the Indians." Apess responds to this case of mistaken identity very passionately: "I thought it disgraceful to be called an Indian," he declares. He explains further that "it was considered as a slur upon an oppressed and scattered nation." He elaborates, "I have often been led to inquire where the whites received this word, which they so often threw as an opprobrious epithet at the sons of the forest." And he ultimately concludes, "it was a word imported for the special purpose of degrading us" (10). Apess's aversion to the term "Indian" brings him to suggest a more appropriate label: "The proper term which ought to be applied to our nation, to distinguish it from the rest of the human family, is that of '*Natives*'" (727). His plea to the world fell and continues to fall on deaf ears because even to this day the most common term to name the original inhabitants of North America (whether in Canada or the United States) is "Indian." Apess argues that English has defined and labeled his people, and he cannot agree with the subsequent definition or the label. "Indian" is a powerful example of an English term's capacity to distort and impose identity upon the inhabitants of this continent.

Apess's disdain is also fitting to the final phase of language reflection. Apess's writing exemplifies and argues for a transition to a new language, that is, not only speaking but also reading and writing English. Occom reveals a hesitance to write and communicate in English because of a self-assessed limitation of expression and ability in English. His hesitation also represents a reflection of how dominant the language will be and how English descriptions and labels of Native Americans are detrimental to Native identity, as we see in Apess's

assessment of English terms applied to himself and his people. As stated earlier, one of the most important aspects of the transitional phase is the intended audience for the texts the writers produce. Rarely is the audience the writer's own tribal community. For the most part, the audience is mainstream America (or even European audiences) and not their own people. Largely Christian-based or autobiographical in content, or both, the writing in the transitional phase represents early efforts of Native American writing. The next phase, the modern phase, represents a fusion of Native American writers' lamentation and reflection of language ability with a twist in which language is lamented or pondered.

#### MODERN PHASE: LINGUISTIC SHIFT TO ENGLISH

Arriving at the current phase has been no small task. The early part of the third phase represents many who had to learn English because they were taken as children, often forcibly and without the consent of their parent, to a boarding or residential school. Often, the only time the students went home was during the summer, though many did not go home until after they had been in school for ten to twelve years (Bell 8). In some cases the return home meant being unable to speak to family and friends because they no longer remembered their ancestral language. Older family members who did not go to school did not speak English, thus creating a linguistic barrier. This transition represents the dark period of assimilationist efforts to annihilate all vestiges of ancestral languages and customs with a strict and punitive English-only policy. Various punishments followed for the violation of speaking ancestral languages, including whippings, mouth washings, and verbal put-downs (Achneepineskum 2). The schools were often hundreds of miles away from students' homes, and upon arriving to the school, the children had their hair cut, had to wear uniforms, and lost their names due to being renamed with Anglo or Christian names (Friesen, Archibald, and Jack 64). Such is the milieu into which the current Native American writers' transition.

A number of distinctions occur between the writings of the transitional and modern phases. First, as a reaction against the condi-

tions of forced assimilation, the modern writers embark upon the task of expanding borders of their literary pursuits beyond the autobiographical accounts and the Christian testimonial limits. The boundaries expand to included poetry, short stories, drama, and novels. Alan Velie comments that though there is little difference in current American poets and Native American poets stylistically, the “subject matter is usually Indian in nature” (212). Second, there are many characteristics that have changed from the transitional phase to the modern phase, but four are worthy of noting:

1. Most writers are no longer so self-conscious about their English language fluency, style, or competence.
2. Many writers are now in an English-dominant society, even within their own communities.
3. The writers’ audience no longer excludes their own people.
4. The issue of cultural identity have become increasingly problematic.

The modern phase will produce a great number of Native American writers who effectively incorporate these four aspects within their writing.

Within these changes, self-effacement for poor English usage no longer dominates the introduction of Native literature. Perhaps tied to this confidence in English usage is the fact that on most reserves and reservations, English is the dominant language of the whole reservation population. Secondly, though many current writers know their ancestral language, both the older and the younger writers are dominant English speakers, especially if they are involved in the literary or educational fields outside of their communities. Thus, the shift to English dominance even in the writers’ home communities allows inclusion of their own people as an audience of their art. While it is possible that an author’s audience includes his or her own community, it is not necessary that the community will read the texts that the authors write. Since most of the members of the community are

literate, the authors are not intentionally excluding their community, whereas in the transitional phase the audience was, for the most part, intentionally and solely non-Native.

One of the most important aspects and differences of this modern phase concerns the issue of identity. The writers' sense of identity in the previous transitional phase represented images and accounts of people seemingly well adjusted and comfortable with their identity. The modern phase represents a dominant three-fold theme of identity loss: personally, communally, and tribally. But just as the earlier writers addressed land rights, citizenship, cultural, and reservation issues, current writers address these issues as well. The relationship of language loss to the loss of identity has tremendous sociological and psychological import, especially as the writers begin to shift to English as the language of wider communication.

Reflections about English in modern writing remain, but the nature of these reflections is not based on stylistic and usage apologies as it was in the previous phase. Many current tribal writers address the English language dominance issue as well as loss of their ancestral language. Some authors (and their tribal communities) have transitioned completely to English, and throughout their works there is no direct or indirect reference to their tribal language. This represents death or dying of the ancestral language and permanent, irretrievable cultural loss (Boas 56). Such language loss represents burned bridges to cultural knowledge and practices that, once the language is dead, can never be recovered. And though many people have recorded tribal ceremonies and stories in English, some ancestral language skills, both grammatical and discourse features, become lost in the translation process (Boas 58). Communicating the issue of language loss seems only to be the lot of a select few. First of all, the very people that should be interested—the community where the language should be spoken—have mainstreamed to English. Second, the publishing community does not really want to hear about the loss of language (perhaps because it does not reflect their own experience) but will appreciate the struggle to produce a bilingual story or text as long as it represents their notions of being “Indian” or

“Indigenous.” But a few tribal authors have woven the issue of language loss into their texts, and in this modern phase, novels, autobiography, and poetry provide the venues for such expressions.

Richard Wagamese exemplifies the modern phase in his novel *Keeper'n Me*. Speaking the ancient language becomes a bridge to the past, often with memories of the elders speaking the old language as well as English. The lament now comes from the elders as they reminisce about when everyone could speak the old language, but now only the elders do, and only on certain occasions. Wagamese embodies this lament during a narrative interruption: “But there’s not many of us old traditional people left walkin around. Not many of the young ones to come to no more. That’s why you hear more English than Anishanaabe around here” (101). The tone suggests not only a lamentation but also the observation that the language loss is not limited to his own community, “Same other places too. Other tribes, other Indyns. S’why it’s so important for old guys like me to be passin’ on what we know” (406). The speaker is older and the lamenter is aware that other Indigenous languages are experiencing the loss as well. Language loss is not just local; it is widespread across this land.

Richard Aitson and Marilyn Dumont are two examples of Native American writers who aptly illustrate the poetic aspects of this modern phase. Aitson’s poem “The Sun Is Blue” provides insight into the theme of loss, exemplifying both linguistic and cultural loss. Aitson begins his poem with the same words as the title, “The sun is blue,” indicating the something in the universe is not right, then remarks, “And I have forgotten all the words to make it red” (297). The speaker knows how to correct his problematic universe—he needs the crucial and yet profoundly simple elements; he needs words, but he cannot remember them. Many Native Americans adhere to the concept similar to the ancient Greek concept of *logos*; they believe language finds its power in all aspects of expression, including silence and ceremonial repetition. But, if one does not remember the ceremonial words, its efficacy diminishes. It is even more difficult to remember the words if they are in a language one knows only superficially.

One of the most common ceremonial rituals is singing, but the speaker in Aitson’s poem cannot remember the words and thus cannot

perform the ceremonial song to harmonize his universe. The power and authority inherent in language elude the speaker as he resolves, "I do not sing today, I do not sing tomorrow." As the poem continues, eagles and hawks try to invite him to chant, but he refuses to chant, admitting, "It is evil." Ironically, he rejects the very words, from ritually and culturally significant symbols, that may turn the sun red again. Even more revealing is the response of the birds: "they reply, 'it is dead'" (297). The vital elements needed in language, through words and songs, represent the loss the speaker expresses, and though he never explicitly mentions any language, it is surely not a lament over the loss of English. Implicitly, the speaker addresses ancestral language and cultural loss through English, the language he knows.

In contrast to Aitson's veiled expression about language loss, Marilyn Dumont presents an overt commentary on both English and Cree. Her poem "The Devil's Language" ponders how the "great white way," a standard of measurement, has judged her all of her life "by its / lily white words / its picket fences sentences / and manicured paragraphs." The speaker sardonically comments that "one wrong sound and you're shelved in the Native Literature section." And not only shelved but labeled, as she observes, "use the wrong order or / register and you're a dumb Indian / dumb, drunk or violent." The speaker notes that the unwavering standard "could silence us all, if we let it" (391). The speaker also addresses the silencing control in the process of learning English and rejects the "great white standard" because of mispronunciation or wrong word order. Interestingly, she does not reject English, only the rigid standard that restricts and pigeonholes her.

The speaker's rejection of the "great white standard" culminates in a mock standard she creates for Cree. She asks, "Is there a received pronunciation for Cree?" Her comments refer to "RP," or the received pronunciation of the King's or Queen's English, the ultimate model of English because it comes from the highest ranking person in the British Empire, that of royalty. The speaker contrasts the fact that her father speaks Cree, "not the King's English, but the Chief's Cree." She continues her diatribe by stating such petty violations of English are not like talking backward. And here in this section, it is finally possible to understand the title, to see that her ancestral language is the

devil's language. She argues that her language is not backward, confesses that Cree is merely an echo in her memory, and then divulges that she doesn't speak Cree, "and syllables / that echo in your mind now, now / that you can't make the sound of the voice that rocks you and sings you to sleep / in the devil's language" (392). Dumont's poem rejects the standard that mislabels and misidentifies but also laments not knowing Cree. She has satisfaction in the fact that her father and mother speak Cree, but her own world centers on English and understanding Cree through English.

In summary, the modern phase expands the genre boundaries of Native American authors. While many of the issues of the previous phase still remain, the lament about language has changed from one's poor English skills to not knowing the Indigenous community language. Regardless of the genre of the text, a pattern of lament usually reveals the fact that parents or grandparents are the only ones to speak the "old" language now. The inability to speak the ancestral language has created an unbridgeable gap among the family members. Thus, the lament encapsulates not just a loss of identity, culture, and history but also a great loss of intimacy that knowing the language creates between all the members of the community.

#### CONCLUSION

One main difference between each phase concerns the volitional language shift to English. The writers of the transitional phase represent a small group of bilingual and multilingual speakers who added English to their repertoire. They willingly learned and used the language during their lifetime, often teaching it to their children. The unwilling ones—from the later transitional period and all those in the modern period—represent governmental efforts to have only monolingual English speakers. The goal of complete language and cultural shift has not been completely accomplished, at least not as of this date. There are currently over two hundred Native languages still extant, but linguists and scholars predict that less than 10 percent of these will survive beyond the second decade of the new millennium

(Brandt 235). And of these two hundred or so languages that still remain, only 10 percent have a chance of enduring beyond the second decade in the new millennium because the children are not learning their ancestral language as a first language (Leap 283). In some cases, they are not learning their ancestral language at all.

Though both the transitional and modern phases have instances of this language shift, the modern phase represents the shift in terms of a dominant English-speaking society, including Native American communities. At present, if the English dominance in Native American communities continues unchallenged, it will end with a complete shift to English unless children begin to learn their ancestral language at home again as they did in the past. As dire as this statement is, for many communities, the dominance of English merely produces psycho-linguistic discomfort sufficient to passively continue in English without regard to their ancestral language. Simon Ortiz suggests the shift to English has already made English a Native American language (2), and unless things change soon, it will be the only Native language that Native Americans and First Nation communities speak, read, and write. However, the teleological culmination of English as the only Native American language seems imminent since few Native American children are learning their Native American language, whether as a first or second language.

Jeanette Armstrong provides tremendous insight to the current angst of Native American writers. She explains, "I write because oral literature is now extremely vulnerable" (494). A section from her poem "Threads of Old Memory" provides a wonderful summation of this article. In the following fragment, Armstrong embodies the modern period characteristics that evidence the painful transition to her new "native language," English. A familiar lament embedded here concerns limited ability in the ancestral language, and often, the lament includes apologies to elders for mistakes in using the ancestral language or for not knowing the language at all. The poem's reference to history provides context for the speaker's dejected reflection about English and her native language, but it is also a very current condition. It is noteworthy that the speaker has transitioned from

hearing the sounds of singing and words in the ancient language and must express the bewilderment not in terms of hearing but in terms of sight. The language that was once auditory has now become visual, like a dream or, worse, a portent, so she warns,

Speaking to newcomers in their language is dangerous  
 for when I speak, history is a dreamer  
 empowering thought  
 from which I awaken the imaginings of the past  
 bringing the sweep and surge of meaning  
 coming from a place  
 rooted in ceremonies  
 wrenched from the minds  
 of a people  
 whose language spoke only harmony  
 through a language meant to overpower  
 to overtake  
 in skillfully crafted words  
 moving to surrender  
 leaving in its swirling wake  
 only those songs  
 hidden  
 cherished  
 protected  
 the secret singing of which  
 I glimpse through bewildered eyes  
 an old lost world  
 of astounding beauty. (231)

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## Major Tribal Nations and Bands

This list is provided as a service to those readers interested in further communications with the tribal communities and governments of American Indian and Native nations. Inclusion of a government in this list does not imply endorsement of or by *SAIL* in any regard, nor does it imply the enrollment or citizenship status of any writer mentioned; some communities have alternative governments and leadership that are not affiliated with the United States, Canada, or Mexico, while others are not currently recognized by colonial governments. We have limited the list to those most relevant to the essays published in this issue, thus, not all bands, towns, or communities of a particular nation are listed.

We make every effort to provide the most accurate and up-to-date tribal contact information available, a task that is sometimes quite complicated. Please send any corrections or suggestions to *SAIL* Editorial Assistant, *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, 235 Bessey Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1033, or send email to [sail2@msu.edu](mailto:sail2@msu.edu).

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