Voice, representation, and dialogue: the poetics of Native American spiritual traditions

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Abstract:
A survey of Native American vision quest stories highlights issues of voice, representation and authority in representing Native spiritual traditions. The most successful approach is based on dialogue, as dialogue and relationship are fundamental to Native American spirituality. The best writing on Native American spirituality is intelligent and respectful; less welcome are works that appropriate spiritual traditions for ethnographic monologue. Some works are actually fraudulent misrepresentations, betraying a lack of respect that is antithetical to the traditions they seek to appropriate.

Full Text:
Monologue is finalized and deaf to the other s response, does

not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force.

Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some

degree materializes all reality ... Life by its very nature is

dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue. (Mikhail Bakhtin

1984:292-293)

During the past five-hundred years, a substantial literature representing Native American spirituality has come into being as outsiders and Native Americans themselves sought to explain, objectify and analyze what participants have known through direct experience. The best of these representations are the product of dialogue. They are reports of the conversations through which Native Americans communicated an understanding of their spirituality to one another or to an interested outsider. Like the conversations that constitute Native American spirituality itself, successful representations speak to the reader as a sentient and intelligent person. They speak from a position of respectful mediation between the Native voice and that of the reader. Writing in this Americanist tradition is of necessity multivocal, reportorial, and reflexive. Its authors are most successful when they have documented and interpreted Native American spiritual traditions in conversation with them.

Concerns about voice, representation, and ethnographic authority are prominent today in both academic and Native American communities. A volume on contemporary issues in Native American spirituality should articulate the purposes of its own enterprise in relation to what has gone before. As a contribution to that end, this paper reviews some of the writing strategies that Native and non-Native authors have used to represent Native American spiritual traditions. It concludes with a discussion of voice, representation, and authority in contemporary writing about Native spirituality.

Spirituality is both intensely personal and distinctively cultural. As an experience, it needs no representation and carries the authority of its own voice. As a cultural phenomenon it has become the subject of scholarly crosscultural comparison. For Native Americans, spirituality is at the core of an identity that is deeper than ethnicity. Native American spiritual traditions are as indigenous to this land as are the First Peoples themselves. Native spiritual traditions live in song, story, and ceremony. They live in the experiences of those who bring them into being. They live in the dream-space intensity of personal vision and in the shared cosmic ordering of words and actions that people of knowledge perform in ceremony. Songs, stories, and ceremonies have an internal consistency. They represent the way things are. They constitute a language of performance, participation, and experience. They represent the cosmic order within which the world realizes its meaning.

Native Americans did not have to address the issue of representation as we now think of it until they were confronted by people whose traditions were radically different from their own and often radically opposed to them. Indian Nations have both honored differences and celebrated similarities as they met and communicated with one another. As Tagish Athapaskan elder Angela Sidney told Julie Crulkshank, "Well, I've tried to live my life right, Just like a story" (Crulkshank 1990:1). Native Americans have always shared stories of spiritual experience between individuals and between nations. They have lived in a world of storied experience. They have lived in conversation with the spiritual. They have brought a world into being through discourse. Movements such as twentieth century pan-Indianism, the Native American Church, and the nineteenth-century Ghost Dance undoubtedly have analogs in earlier sharings of spiritual and cultural traditions. The Southeastern Ceremonial complex of Mississippian times, for instance, probably reflects a set of social and spiritual symbols that spread throughout the Southeast and Midwest at the end of the first millennium A.D. (Galloway 1989).

Traditions flow from aboriginal Nation to Nation through conversation, not through proselytization. As Dennis Tedlock has pointed out (1995), Native creation stories bring the world into being through dialogue, while the Judeo-Christian story of creation is a monotheistic monologue. In an article on "Creation and the Popol Vuh," he writes that, "the continuing growth of creation requires not a series of commands from a single source but an ever-widening discussion" (Tedlock 1983:270). Similarly, he says, ethnographic reporting is often monologic.

The ethnographer typically retains strict control over the reader's access to the Native voice and masks the ever-widening discussion that is the ethnographic experience. It is common to hear only what the ethnographer has heard or what he or she wants you to hear, rather than the conversation out of which an understanding emerges.

Ethnographic writing about spirituality inevitably reflects the author's bias as much as it does the aboriginal experience on which it is based. Much of it is uncritical of its own purposes and underlying assumptions. It Is framed, consciously or unconsciously, in the discourses of Western religion, science or spiritual curiosity. As Sherzer points out, Boas, Sapir, and their students insisted on the collection and publication of texts about Native American spirituality but, "they were not analyzed as discourse per se" (Sherzer 1987:296). More recently, he says, researchers such as Hymes, Tedlock, and Friedrich are recognizing that discourse is "an embodiment of the essence of culture" (op cit:297).

NATIVE AMERICAN DISCOURSE

The conversations that create and sustain the world of Native American spirituality "embody the essence" of a different discourse than that of the people who came here from elsewhere. Hymes writes that Native American texts "display ways of speaking, of narrating, that are themselves simultaneously linguistic and cultural" (Hymes 1981:8). "In vain," he reports, Native Americans have "tried to tell" about themselves to outsiders who fall to understand their ways of speaking. He writes:

If we refuse to consider and interpret the surprising fact of

device, design, and performance inherent in the words of the

texts, the Indians who made the texts, and those who preserved

what they said, will have worked in vain. (Hymes 1981:5)

Scollon and Scollon (1979:186) point out that fieldworkers in the Subarctic often "find it virtually impossible to follow a discussion or argument" because they lack a shared context of knowledge and experience within which conversation becomes meaningful. In particular, outsiders are unprepared to understand the spirituality of conversations that create a world that is alive with storied voices. Conversation is possible only when storyteller and listener respect and understand one another through shared knowledge and experience. It is possible only when every person can realize a place in every other person's story. It is possible only when the circle of stories includes all the relations of a world that is alive with meaning.

On the other side of the cultural divide, Native Americans often experience the discourse of non-Indians as insistently pushing toward monologue. They resent being interrupted by people who do not recognize the moments of silence that punctuate a speaker's narrative. They are surprised at what appears to be a lack of respect for the sharing that brings a story into being. They are shocked at having their spirituality regarded as primitive. In schools, Native American children are often uncomfortable with the assertive style of discourse their teachers identify as the mark of a It good student." Their skills as respectful listeners go unacknowledged. Sto:lo First Nation scholar and educator Jo-ann Archibald writes about the empowering circle of conversation that characterizes Native American spiritual knowledge:

The movement of power is not hierarchical, as from the

teacher (the top) down to the student (the bottom). I picture the

movement of power as flowing between concentric circles. The

inner circle may represent the words, knowledge itself that

expands and moves as It is taught to and shared with others. The

other circles may represent the individuals, family, community,

nature, nation, and spiritual realm that are influenced and in

turn influence this power. I call this knowledge-as-power movement

cultural reciprocity grounded in respect and responsibility.

Respect is essential. Everyone has a place within the

circle. Their place, their role is honored and respected. All also

have a particular cultural responsibility to their Place, their role:

the storyteller-teachers to share their knowledge with others; the

listener-learners to make meaning from the storyteller's words and

to put this meaning into everyday practice, thereby continuing

the action of reciprocity. (White and Archibald 1992:161-162)

The circle of discourse Archibald refers to is at the core of Native American spirituality. Respect operates at every level of conversation. Listening and speaking are of equal importance. What might appear to be a storyteller's monologue is in fact a contribution to the conversation; what Richard Preston has called, "soliloquies [that are] often eloquent and personally expressive as well as culturally meaningful" (Preston 1975:18). The reciprocity, as Archibald writes, is "to make meaning from the storyteller's words." Listening and speaking are equally authorial activities. Respect for the authority of a speaker prevails across a wide range of First Nations cultures. Words have a physical quality that bridges the space between communicants. First Nations such as the Sto:lo have well-crafted conventions about the circle's formal properties. A speaker's place in relation to others is determined by his or her spiritual authority.(1) In Native American cultures generally, conversational communicants include all sentient beings; animal persons, the voices of natural places and forces, and the voices of those who have gone before. Coyote may there, too, making fun of it all.

STORIES OF THE VISION QUEST

I can think of no better place to begin a survey of texts representing Native American spirituality than with stories of the vision quest. As Ruth Benedict observed in her 1923 monograph on The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America, the quest for empowerment through visionary transformation is at the heart of spirituality in many Native American societies. What Benedict did not address was the meaning of visionary experience. Her interest was in the distribution of a cultural pattern, not in its reality as an experience. That reality may best be approached through an understanding of Native American oral tradition.

The experience of visionary transformation is fundamental to Native American spirituality. Although it is ultimately personal and begun in isolation, the quest for it is fundamentally conversational and social. Power comes from a person's conversation with the supernatural. It comes from an encounter with sentient beings with whom humans share the breath of life. It appears when a human makes contact with the non-human persons of the cosmos. It comes to a person when he or she is humble and pitiable. It comes to children and it comes to adults who make themselves like children. Power comes to people who listen carefully to the storied world around them. It comes when the story of a person's life joins the circle of conversation. Power comes when a person realizes a story that already exists. Power comes when he or she adds a new episode to that story. It comes when the story of a person's life becomes that of life as a whole.

DUNNE-ZA TEXTS

Although I had read about the vision quest and guardian spirit complex as a graduate student in anthropology, my first personal knowledge of this tradition began during the first month of anthropological fieldwork with the Dunne-za of northeastern British Columbia. I was privileged to witness an elder named Japasa tell the story of his childhood vision quest a week before he died. I learned later that, in Dunne-za tradition, a person normally communicates information about his or her spirit friends through symbolically coded action, rather than through direct narrative.

This story was special because the old man was letting go of the helpers he had known most of his life. His son translated the narrative for me, and I wrote it down in the form of fieldnotes. Later, in a narrative ethnography (Ridington 1988), I described the experience of hearing the old man s story as a pivotal moment in my evolving understanding of Native American spirituality. When I wrote about Japasa's story, I chose to present the text in poetic line-for-line transcription. Johnny Chipesia, the old man's son, narrated the story for me in the third person. The story begins as follows:

My dad said that when he was a boy, about nine years old,

he went into the bush alone.

He was lost from his people. In the night it rained.

He was cold and wet from the rain,

but in the morning he found himself warm and dry.

A pair of silver foxes had come and protected him.

After that, the foxes kept him and looked after him.

He stayed with them and they protected him.

Those foxes had three pups.

The male and female foxes brought food for the pups.

They brought food for my dad too.

They looked after him as if they were all the same.

Those foxes wore clothes like people.

My dad said he could understand their language.

He said they taught him a song. (Ridington 1988:57)

Japasa's story went on to describe how the wind came to him as a person:

That person said,

"See, you're dry now. I'm your friend."

The wind has been his friend ever since.

He can call the wind. He can call the rain.

He can also make them go away.

In Japasa's story, power comes through conversation with natural and spiritual beings who appear as people. It is negotiated as a social relationship. The spirit helper is a friend, not a superior. Among the many other stories relating to vision quest experiences that Dunne-za people told me, I recorded one from Mrs. Mary Pouce-Coupe. Her story touches on themes that are similar to Japasa's, but Mrs. Pouce-Coupe's is more generic and archetypal than the one I heard from him. It describes a man's initiation into the powers of a "medicine man."

One time there was a boy who married young.

Maybe he was ten or twelve.

Then his wife and children all died and he was very lonely.

I will go in the bush," he decided.

"Maybe some monster will kill me there."

He went out.

Every night he would sleep on some animal's trail

without fire.

He wanted to get killed.

"If I had been a medicine man

my wife and children wouldn't have died," he said.

For ten years he stayed out in the bush.

The people all thought he was dead

so they didn't look for him.

But no animals would kill him

so he decided to try to be a medicine man after all.

But no animals would talk to him.

One night he went to sleep in a moose lick.

While he was asleep something woke him up.

He looked up and there was a big fat man.

"What are you doing here," he asked.

"My wife died. My children all died.

For ten years I have been in the bush

hoping some animal would kill me.

For ten years I haven't seen people."

The big fat man leaned down

and put his lips to the man's forehead.

He sucked and drew out blood.

He did the same thing on the back of his head--and

again he drew out blood.

"That's why no animals like you," he said.

"Now you can make friends."

The big fat man took him with him

and he opened a doorway in the lick and they went inside.

The next day he told the man to hunt

and he went out hunting.

Mrs. Pouce-Coupe's story takes the form of conversation reported by a narrator. This genre of narrative with embedded dialogue is typical of Native American oral literature. The form itself is emblematic of the experience of empowerment. Native American oral tradition truly tells of life "lived like a story."

GEORGE NELSON'S NARRATIVE

Because vision quest stories are at the core of Native American spirituality, they occur in narratives by non-Native writers as well as within Native tradition. In 1823, Northwest Company trader George Nelson wrote a journal letter to his father in Montreal describing the spiritual traditions of the Cree-Ojibwa people with whom he lived and worked. He assumed the voice of a third-person narrator, describing the Cree in terms of their difference from his own culture.

They make themselves a bed of Grass, or hay as we term

[redacted]

Here they remain and endeavor to sleep, which from their nature

is no very difficult task. But during whatever time they may

remain, they must neither eat or drink. If they want to Dream

they may remain, then must neither eat or drink. If they want to

Dream of the Spirits above, their bed must be made at some

distance from the Ground--if of Spirits inhabiting our Earth, or

those residing in the waters, on the Ground. Here they ly for a

longer or shorter time, according to their success, or the orders of

the Dreamed. (Brown and Brightman 1988:34)

George Nelson touches here on the simultaneously solitary and conversational nature of visionary empowerment. In order to come close to the spirit world, a person must be alone and removed from ordinary events. The spirits that come to a person in dream, he says, deliver messages such as "You will see many winters! Your head will grow quite white" (ibid). In an editorial aside, Nelson ventures the opinion that, "the language is not very dissimilar to that of our version of the Bible. But the stile [sic] seems to me to be the language of Nature" (op cit 35). In that language, Nelson observes, "Every thing in nature appears unto them, but in the Shape of a human-being" (Ibid). He goes on to describe a typical conversational encounter:

They dream they meet a man who asks them (after some

preliminary conversation, of course), "Dost thou know me? (who

or what I am)?"

No."

Follow me then," replies this stranger. The Indian

follows--the other leads him to his abode and again makes the

inquiry--the answer is perhaps as before. Then the Stranger

assumes his proper form, which is perhaps that of a Tree, a Stone,

a fish &c, &c. and after rechanging several times in this manner,

till such times as the 2nd becomes perfectly to know him, then

this stranger gives him to smoke, learns him his Song, &c, thus

addressing him: "Now don't you remember my Song? ... Whenever

you will wish to call upon me, Sing this Song, and I shall

not be far--I will come and do for you what you require" (ibid).

Nelson writes about spiritual empowerment using what appear to be novelistic genre conventions. Against the background of his own voice as omniscient narrator, he inserts a dialogic representation of the conversations that constitute spiritual encounters. Nelson's writing strategy, however, probably reflects the style of Cree narrative as much as it does that of the eighteenth-century novel. Nelson adapted the letter-writing of his own culture to the task of representing Cree and Ojibwa narratives. His work is best when it is free of his own interpretive voice.

Nelson's editors, Brown and Brightman, include a commentary on "The Ethics of Publishing Historical Documents" by First Nations scholar Emma LaRocque in their publication of his Journal. LaRocque takes Nelson and Western authors generally to task for writing within a framework she calls the dichotomy of civilization versus savagery " which, she says, "is pervasive in scholarly and popular literature on native peoples." While praising Nelson for the accuracy of his ethnographic detail, she faults him and scholars at large for failing "to accept native thought and organization as of equal worth to European thought while acknowledging the differences" (LaRocque in Brown and Brightman 1988:201). Cree writer Stan Cuthand takes a more charitable view in an essay also included in the volume. It is possible, he says, that Nelson "did not understand the background of these stories in the context of the Atayohkanak [mythical beings called to the shaking tent] because it is almost another language which is used to describe the sprit world." Still, he says, "the events and stories he relates are compelling ... George Nelson's text is like a voice out of the past reminding us of our spiritual history" (Cuthand in Brown and Brightman 1988: 197-198).

HARRY ROBINSON'S STORIES ABOUT NATURE POWER

Nelson wrote in 1823. He identified the style of Cree stories as "the language of Nature." More than a century and a half later, Anthropologist Wendy Wickwire used the term "Nature Power" to title the second volume of stories by Okanagan elder, Harry Robinson. Nature power, she says, is "the life-sustaining spirituality that guided Harry throughout his life" (Robinson 1992:10).

According to Wickwire, "the very concept of fiction was foreign to him" (Robinson 1992). Robinson's stories, like all stories of spiritual encounters, are true. Robinson describes these encounters as follows:

You got to have power. You got to, the kids, you know. They got

to meet the animal, you know, when they was little. Can be

anytime till it's five years old to ten years old. He's supposed to

meet animal or bird, or anything, you know. And this animal,

whoever they meet, got to talk to'em and tell'em what they

should do. Later on, not right away. And that is his power.

(Robinson 1992:10)

Robinson's work is remarkable because he told the stories in English, using the Okanagan narrative style with which he was familiar. His work is also remarkable simply for his mastery of the genre. Native author Thomas King says of Robinson:

I couldn't believe the power and the skill with which Robinson

could work up a story, in English, (they weren't translated, they

were just simply transcribed) and how well he understood the

power of the oral voice in a written piece. (Interview with Peter

Gzowski, CBC Radio, April 5, 1993)

Robinson's stories embed direct discourse dialogue within the text of an omniscient third-person narrator. As in the story told by Mrs. Pouce-Coupe, Robinson uses his own voice to carry the narrative line and cites the voices of characters in the story as directly quoted dialogue. The result is vivid and compelling. "I can go for twenty-one hours or more when I get started," Harry told Wendy, "because this is my job. I'm a storyteller" (Robinson 1992:7).

One of the stories in Nature Power tells about a boy who was taken out to gain power from a stump that had survived for centuries in an avalanche-strewn gully. The hunters he was traveling with told the boy:

You stay here.

You wait here.

It's too far for you to walk.

You stay 'round here.

We can hunt that way, make a turn

and a circle

and then we come back.

Towards evening we come by

and then you can go back with us to the camp.

Harry's story is vivid with the authority of narrated first-person discourse. The boy stays until he sees a chipmunk who appears to him as another boy. The boy/animal speaks to him as a friend and guardian spirit.

You my friend.

You boy, and I'm a boy.

We both boy.

So, it's better to be friends

instead of making fun out of me.

Now, I'm going to tell you something.

This stump -- you think it's a stump--

but that's my grandfather.

He's very, very old man.

Old, old man.

He can talk to you.

He can tell you what you going to be.

In Harry's story, the boy gains power and identity from an animal, from a boy like himself and from a grandfather. Because the stump has survived for a long time, it has the authority of an elder. Because it is home to a chipmunk, it shares in that animal's life. Because the boy is open to its conversations, the stump is also a boy like himself. The empowering conversation is multivocal. From the old man, the boy learns of the stump's power to ward off bullets:

You see me.

You see my body.

It was hit by the bullet for many, many years.

Hit by the bullet.

That's why you could see, all smooth.

That's the bullet marks.

And the bullet, when they hit me--the bullet--

they never go through my skin.

They never go through my body.

For a long, long time.

You know how old I was.

I been hit with a bullet for many years.

I never get killed. (Robinson 1992:27-29)

In Harry's narrative, spirit helpers appear as voices in conversation. As in the other vision quest stories, power comes through a person's storied conversation with the spiritual powers surrounding him. All Harry's stories are true. As Wickwire explains, "the truth and accuracy of Harry's words in Nature Power have made me think anew about what is `real' and what we `know' . . . The people in Harry's stories experienced nature deeply and directly in a way that I cannot know, but that Harry wanted me, and others, to appreciate" (Robinson 1992:20).

STORIES TOLD BY ETHNOGRAPHERS

Ethnographers are professional narrators. Their Job is to find a language in which to explain the life of another culture. More often than not, as Tedlock and others have observed, that language has tended to be a monologue that masks the dialogue from which it derives its information. Mikhail Bakhtin writes that "monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities." While he is writing about novelistic literary strategies rather than those used by ethnographers, his observations provide a critical perspective on conventional ethnographic writing. Monologue, he says, "pretends to be the ultimate word. It closes down the represented world and represented persons" (Bakhtin 1984:292-293).

Ethnographic monologue is almost a contradiction in terms. Unlike fiction, ethnography is by definition a communication between cultures. Like Harry Robinson's stories, ethnographic narratives must be true stories. To illustrate this point, I will cite only a few examples of monologic ethnographic writing about Native American spirituality. I chose them largely because I think they were original and important at the time they were written. I also will cite some examples of ethnographic writing that are the product of shared ethnographic authority and a freer use of the dialogic imagination.

One of the first professional ethnographic studies of a Native American spiritual tradition was Frank Hamilton Cushing's Zuni Fetiches, published in 1883 in the Second Annual Report of the Bureau of [American] Ethnology. Cushing began his study with an attempt to explain what he called "Zuni Philosophy." He was unusual for his time in recognizing that Native American spiritual

traditions can be understood as a systematic philosophy, but his opening words are a dense authorial monologue compressed into a single sentence.

The Ashiwi, or Zunis, suppose the sun, moon and stars, the sky,

earth, and sea, in all their phenomena and elements; and all

inanimate objects, as well as plants, animals, and men, to belong

to one great system of all-conscious and interrelated life, in which

the degrees of relationship seem to be determined largely, if not

wholly, by the degrees of resemblance. (Cushing 1883:9)

This kind of writing requires careful study, in the way that a complex Latin passage is worthy of study. This is a written text, not a spoken one, although Cushing's mentor, Spencer F. Baird, reports that he may have dictated it to a stenographer (Green 1990:222). His study of Zuni Fetiches is important, for it is the first attempt by an anthropologist to represent a Native American philosophical system in terms of its own conceptual categories. What it lacks, however, is the Zuni poetics through which these categories become real to "the represented world and represented persons."

More than a century later, Dennis Tedlock published a volume of Zuni narrative poetry, Finding the Center (1972). In contrast to Cushing's self-centered monologue, Tedlock's work is the product of an ethnographic authority he shares with storytellers Andrew Peynetsa and Walter Sanchez. Tedlock conveys a sense of orality and actuality in his written presentation of translated Zuni oral texts. He invites the reader to lend his or her own voice to a reading of them. In Tedlock's rendition, you hear the verbal styling of Andrew Peynetsa. You experience him as "another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities," not simply an ethnographic other. A scene from the story of "The Boy and The Deer" describes the spiritual encounter of a deer mother entering a Kachina village:

And their mother went to Kachina Village, she went

o--n until she reached Kachina village.

It was filled with dancing kachinas.

"My fathers, my children, how have you been passing the

days?" "Happily, our child, so you've come, sit down,"

they said.

"Wait, stop your dancing, our child has come and must have

something to say," then the kachinas stopped.

The deer sat down

the old lady deer sat down. A kachina priest spoke to her:

"Now speak.

You must've come because you have something to say."

"YES, in TRUTH I have come because I have something to

SAY

(Tedlock 1972: 7-8)

Tedlock's Finding the Center presents Deer woman as a person with "something to say." Almost twenty years later, his essay, "The Speaker of Tales Has More than One String to Play On," (Tedlock 1991) playfully and respectfully presents both scholars and Native American storytellers as people in conversation who have something to say together. As a way of critiquing Albert Lord's thesis that Homeric narrative is the archetypal form of oral discourse, Tedlock braids his own voice with a canonical Zuni text, about "a time so remote that newness was being made."

`The Word of Kyaklo'

which is recited every four years or so

is the official, canonical version of the story of newness

not produced by oral formulaic composition

but repeated verbatim

by a masked performer who studies for the part for a year.

The other is a hearthside interpretation of the story of newness

and partly redrawn, or resounded, edited and elaborated

by a particular narrator

Andrew Peynetsa

on a particular occasion.

He concludes:

Tales have no canonical versions

no Kyaklo who recites them verbatim.

They exist only

in the form of interpretations

and it takes a multiplicity of voices to tell them.

Andrew Peynetsa was skilled at telling tales, and that's why

he was able to change the monotonous chant of Kyaklo

into a decent story. (Tedlock 1991:338)

THE OMAHA TRIBE

The Omaha Tribe by Alice C. Fletcher and Francis La Flesche (1911) is another important classic ethnography. It is a comprehensive documentation of a Plains tribe's ceremonial life during the nineteenth century. It also is important because it is Jointly authored by an Omaha anthropologist and an outsider. Passages written by Fletcher assume the voice of a third-person narrator, while La Flesche gives a first-person autobiographical narrative. Fletcher wrote, like Cushing, in an attempt to explain Native American philosophy. Her prose is powerfully evocative when she writes about a universal life force the Omahas know as wakon'da. In a particularly beautiful passage, Fletcher describes her understanding of this central concept of Omaha spirituality. I have chosen to render it poetically, line for line, because it deserves to be read as Fletcher's engagement with Omaha spiritual principles. While monologic in form, it clearly reflects a respectful dialogue with Omaha spirituality, mediated by her co-author and adopted son, Francis La Flesche.

An invisible and continuous life

permeates all things, seen and unseen.

This life manifests itself in two ways:

first, by causing to move;

all motion, all actions of mind or body,

are because of this invisible life;

second, by causing permanency

of structure and form,

as in the rock, the physical features

of the landscape, mountains, plains, streams,

rivers, lakes, the animals, and man.

This invisible life

is similar to the will power

of which man is conscious

within himself,

a power by which things are brought to pass.

Through this mysterious life and power

all things are related to one another

and to man;

the seen to the unseen,

the dead to the living,

a fragment of anything

to its entirety.

This invisible life and power

is called wakon'da.

(adapted from Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:134)

In contrast to Fletcher's statement of abstract principles, La Flesche's contribution to the co-authored ethnography is a narrative from his memory of ceremonies he participated in as a boy. In his wistful first-person "boy memory of these ancient ceremonies of the Sacred Pole, now forever gone," La Flesche identifies himself as "the only living witness who is able to picture in English these far-away scenes" (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:245). He leaves generalization to his reader:

When every family in the tribe excepting those of the hon'ga gens

had thus been called upon to make an offering, the priests began

to sing the songs pertaining to this peculiar ceremony. I was now

very much interested and watched every movement of the men

who officiated. Four of the fattest pieces of meat were selected

and placed just at the foot of the Sacred Pole. A song was sung

and a man stood ready with a knife near the meat; when the last

note died out the man made a feint at cutting and then resumed

his position. Three times the song was repeated with its accompanying

act, when on the fourth time the man in great haste carved

out all of the fat from the four pieces of choice meat and put it

in a wooden bowl. After the fat had been mixed with burnt clay

and kneaded into a paste, another song was song, and the same

priest stood ready with bowl and brush in hand beside the Pole.

At the close of the song he made a feint at the Pole with the

brush and resumed his former position. Four times this song was

sung, each time followed by a feint. Then a new stanza was sung,

at the end of which the priest touched the Pole lightly with his

brush the entire length. This song and act were repeated four

times. Then a different song was sung, the words of which I can

remember even to this day: "I make him beautiful! I make him

beautiful!" Then the priest with great haste dipped his brush into

the bowl and daubed the Pole with the paste while the singing

was going on. Four times the song was sung, the anointing was

finished, and the Pole stood shining in fresh paint. Then many of

the people cried: "Oh! how beautiful he is!" and then laughed,

but the priests never for an instant changed the expression of

their faces. I did not know whether to Join in the merriment or to

imitate the priests and maintain a serious countenance; but while

I stood thus puzzled the ceremony went on.

STORIES TOLD BY NATIVE AMERICAN WRITERS

Beginning with the pioneering novels of D'Arcy McNickle, Native American novelists and biographers have told true stories about how the lives of individuals continue to exist in conversation with spiritual traditions. Those well-known today include N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens, Thomas King, Tomson Highway and Greg Sarris. I will focus on two members of this group, Silko and Sarris.

LESLIE MARMON SILKO

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, Ceremony, begins with the lines:

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman

is sitting in her room

and whatever she thinks about

appears

.....

She is sitting in her room

thinking of a story now

I'm telling you the story

she is thinking.

(Silko 1977:1)

The idea that thought and substance combine in the creation of storied lives Is central to Native American spirituality. Interspersed between episodes describing the life of Tayo, a young Laguna man who has been damaged by World War 11, Silko inserts episodes of Laguna narrative, many of which may also be found in Boas's 1928 Keresan Texts. Unlike Boas, who collected the stories but did not contextualize them, Silko weaves them into Thought-Woman's narrative creation of the world. Like Harry Robinson's stories of nature power, those of Thought-Woman must be taken as true stories rather than fiction. Silko's novel takes the reader through stories of creation and destruction. She blends episodes from stories of Fly and Hummingbird with those of Tayo's quest to restore the rains. This quest leads to a visionary encounter with Yellow Woman, a spiritual being who dwells on the sacred mountain that centers the Laguna universe.

Mythical and personal stories become one when Tayo speaks to elders in the Kiva at the time of winter solstice. Once again, narrative re-creates the world:

It took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him

frequently with questions about the location and the time of day;

they asked about the direction she had come from and the color

of her eyes. It was while he was sitting there, facing southeast, that

he noticed how the four windows along the south wall of the kiva

had a particular relationship to this late autumn position of the

sun. (Silko 1977:257)

GREG SARRIS

On the dust jacket of Mabel McKay (1994), by mixed-blood author Greg Sarris, Leslie Marmon Silko writes:

Greg Sarris's biography of Mabel McKay is wonderful, and. is

urgently needed in these days of confusion of Native American

identity and Native American spirituality. As charlatan "medicine

people" proliferate, and make huge profits from their chicanery,

Mabel's story shows us the truth about the ways in which the

spirit voices manifest themselves.

Sarris titles section three of this four-part weaving of biography and autobiography, "Medicine Woman," thus reclaiming the fraudulent and appropriative use of the phrase by Lynn Andrews (see below). Like the other stories of spirituality cited above, Sarris writes about Mabel McKay's empowerment as an authorial narrative embedded with direct discourse dialogue. The following passage illustrates Sarris's style and the conversation through which Mabel McKay gained her power.

Mabel slept for days. Sarah couldn't wake her. It was hot, summertime

in the valley, and Mabel was feverish. Sarah prayed. "Oh,

if my father was living you wouldn't be like this," she kept saying.

Then, in the middle of a hot afternoon, Mabel heard the

screen door slam. She opened her eyes and saw a hummingbird

fly In. It hovered over her. She saw that it had the face of a man.

"Hello, Mabel," he said. He introduced himself, telling her his

"You've seen me before. I've been following you, hiding

here and there. Spirit told me to watch until you were ready."

"Where did I see you before?" Mabel asked, uttering her

first words in days. She squinted her eyes and studied the man's

dark wrinkled face. She was certain she didn't know him.

"When you were little I came and took you to a cave

where an old woman ground poison on a red rock ..."

Mabel nodded, remembering the small colorful bird that

appeared before her on a willow branch while she sat by the creek

waiting for Sarah. A hummingbird, she thought, looking up at

the scarlet throat and metallic green body of the bird flying in

place above her.

"... Yes, and you refused me ... You need to know

about the poison and lots of other things. You're ready now to

become a doctor. So now it's time. You need someone to help

you with things on earth. So here I am. Will you accept my help

now?" (Sarris 1994: 69-70)

Sarris's work is both biographical and novelistic. It engages outsiders in the discourse of Native American spirituality in a way that ethnographic monologue seldom achieves. Silko is correct in calling for writing that "shows us the truth about the ways in which the spirit voices manifest themselves."

FRAUDS AND DECEPTIONS

Not all of the books purporting to represent Native American spirituality are true stories. Indeed, some of the most popular "new age" books about Indian spiritual tradition are patently fraudulent and shamelessly appropriative. Medicine Woman by Lynn Andrews (1981) is a case in point. In a typical passage, she claims to represent her own empowerment by the "medicine woman," "Agnes Whistling Elk."

Agnes smiled at me. "You are a black wolf." She watched my

reaction and then put out a hand and touched my forehead.

"Waken within yourself" She took her finger away. The touch

gave me a peculiar sensation throughout my body. (Andrews

1981:106)

Both internal and external evidence suggest that Andrews and her then partner, David Carson, set out to create "the next, female, Castaneda," perhaps even consciously loading the narrative with anachronism and cliche (Adolph and Smoley 1989:26). Native American activist Russell Means has reacted to such commercialization of Native American spirituality by saying:

When they wanted our land, they just announced that they had a

right to it and therefore owned it. Now, being spiritually bankrupt

themselves, they want our spirituality as well. (quoted in

Adolph and Smoley 1989:97)

More subtle examples of the genre are Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions (1972) and Lakota Woman (1991) by Richard Erdoes and Native co-authors James Fire Lame Deer and Mary Crow Dog respectively. As Julian Rice points out in an article called "A Ventriloquy of Anthros: Densmore, Dorsey, Lame Deer, and Erdoes," ghostwriter Erdoes "speaks less to enlighten than to preserve the illusion of a heroic presence with whom everyone will identify and whose wisdom everyone will buy." He uses "a Euroamerican journalistic tradition with an antithetical agenda--to create characters and events that will sell as many books as possible" (Rice 1994:169-170). What is particularly interesting, according to Rice, is that "the real authors of much of the culturally authentic material in Lame Deer" are ethnographers James Owen Dorsey, Francis Densmore and Eugene Buechel, all of whom collected compelling first-person accounts of Lakota ceremonial life and spirituality. Rice observes, "whereas an oral narrator uses story elements from the past to enlighten the present, Erdoes uses the written record to preserve an image and to fulfill the yearnings of the disaffected youth he projects" (Rice 1994:170).

Even a Native American author can appropriate and misrepresent Native American spirituality, as Hyemeyohsts Storm's recent Lightningbolt (1994) amply demonstrates. In an act of astonishing appropriation, Storm reworks virtually every Native American tradition to his fancifully autobiographical monologue. At one point in the narrative he claims that "the early settlements and Kivas found throughout Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico are the work of the intermarried peoples of the Temple Doors [people he claims brought "the Great Circle of Law and all the Medicine Wheels to the North"] and Sweet Medicine ["blue-eyed fair-haired" Vikings whom the Cree and Northern Cheyenne referred to as "White Water Spider"] (Storm 1994:314-323). The synthesis is brilliant, creating as it does the opportunity for "new-age" white people to claim, authorship of even the most venerable of Native American spiritual traditions. Storm puts it all up for sale but pays the heavy price of losing touch with the real story of his own life.

A REPRISE OF REAL VOICES

The sun, moon and stars, the sky, earth, and sea, in all

their phenomena and elements; and all inanimate objects, as well

as plants, animals, and men, to belong to one great system of

all-conscious and interrelated life. (Cushing 1883:9)

An invisible and continuous life permeates all things,

seen and unseen. (Fletcher and La Flesche 1911:134)

"Now speak. You must've come because you have something

to say."

"YES, in TRUTH I have come because I have something

to SAY. (Tedlock 1972:7-8)

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman is sitting in her room

and whatever she thinks about appears. (Silko 1977:1)

Respect is essential. Everyone has a place within the

circle. Their place, their role is honored and respected. All also

have a particular cultural responsibility to their place, their role:

the storyteller-teachers to share their knowledge with others; the

listener-learners to make meaning from the storyteller's words and

to put this meaning into everyday practice, thereby continuing

the action of reciprocity. (White and Archibald 1992:161-162)

CONCLUSION

As Bakhtin observed, "Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue." Native American spirituality manifests itself as an ordered, sometimes ecstatic, always respectful conversation with the myriad persons of a sentient universe. It comes into being when an individual's experience becomes part of that storied life. Respect is essential to the act of creation. The boy in Harry Robinson's story respects the chipmunk who tells him that a weathered stump is his grandfather. The spirit helper is a respected friend, not a superior. The wind came to Japasa as a person. It has been his friend since they first met. Silko's Thought Woman creates a story that a troubled young man can realize in the ceremonial directions of his own storied life. Mabel McKay remembers "the small colorful bird that appeared before her on a willow branch while she sat by the creek." Much later, she knew that it was time to resume the conversation and accept "someone to help you with things on earth" (Sarris 1994:69-70). The dialogue of Native American spirituality takes place through respectful listening and learning. As Jo-ann Archibald observed, listener-learners "make meaning from the storyteller's words and ... put this meaning into everyday practice" (1992:161-162).

Writing about Native American spirituality is successful to the extent that it is both intelligent and respectful. It falls when it appropriates spiritual dialogue to an alien monologue. It does worse than fall when it fraudulently misrepresents Native American experience to satisfy the romantic fantasies of people who lack the knowledge and understanding required to be good listeners. Whether reported by anthropologists or set out by Native American writers themselves, the best representations have been those that give voice to people who try to live their lives right, "Just like a story." The stories that have come down to us tell about a circle of relations. They tell about a respectful circle of dialogue. In Indian Country today, events are often punctuated with the words:

All My Relations

NOTES

(1) Some of the ideas in this section came from a conversation with Ed Labenski regarding documentation of the stories of Sto:lo war veterans.

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