

Beginner's Mind:  
Learning to Read the  
Ghost Dance Songs

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Recently, while delivering a paper on Margaret Sam-Cromarty at a writer's retreat for the alumni of a well-known American MFA program, I was appalled at my colleagues' lack of interest in this East James Bay Cree poet's work. Only four people showed up, while numbers flocked to such topics as "How to Get More Humour in Your Poetry" or "Prozac, Mood Swings, and the Contemporary Poet." Finally, an apologetic friend admitted she found Native writing flat and inaccessible. She just couldn't relate.

Unlike her, I have taught on Cree, Algonquin, and Mohawk reserves — an initiation that has led me to approach Native texts and culture with what Zen poet Margaret Gibson calls a "beginner' mind" — as when: "Suddenly I hold everything / I know, myself most of all, / in question" (90). Such a mind requires a sort of never-ending readjustment to things — blizzards that strand you in remote, northern communities, or that sleep-inducing lesson plan (the one that worked so well down south) that must be overhauled completely on the spot. Often I have prayed for John Keats's "negative capability" — in order to face the inevitable "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (62). This desire to face what makes one uncertain and, at times, "irritable" leads me to say something about the way I had unconsciously structured this essay. While editing it for publication, I suddenly realized that its end — the place of greatest emphasis — did not stress the vitality of "a continuing tradition" that Creek/Cherokee critic Ward Churchill points to in the Ghost Dance Songs (162). Rather, it emphasized what is less threatening to whites — that tone of lamentation and despair that expresses the underside of Native assertion and prophecy. Before the final rewrite, I had ended this text with a song that portrays the saintly Native who, in spite of his or her poverty, offers up a prayer "for every living creature" (Mooney 316)! Was this my

bid to be forgiven for what my forebears had done to Native peoples? Thus, with a kind of reverential bafflement, I offer up this, my socially constructed reading of a Native classic — the messianic Ghost Dance Songs. In so doing, I want to apologize to Native readers for my blind spots while, at the same time, inviting non-Natives, like myself, to read a highly undervalued and misunderstood discourse. According to Churchill, the spirit of the Ghost Dance continues to be a primary source of inspiration for contemporary Native poetry. As such, it encourages a "call to active resistance" (164), and a "continuous assertion of Indianness" (165). The Ghost Dance Songs, then, are as important to our understanding of Native literatures as Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is to our study of English poetry.

Do my American friends dismiss Native texts because they feel indicted by them? And, do they disregard the Ghost Dance Songs because the communal chant rhythms found in such traditional orature have dwindled away to all but a ghostly whisper in contemporary mainstream poetry? Some chantlike reverberations do occur in the biblical cadences of Whitman, the near-tribal catalogues of Ginsberg, and the curses and beats of the mean-streets poetry of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). But in most contemporary poems, as critic Andrew Welsh points out, one finds "the Image rather than a rushing rhythm; the precision of careful thought rather than repetition, catalogue, or incantation; autonomy . . . rather than *participation mystique* of the communal voice" (187).

In our postindustrial culture, we too often dismiss Native discourse because our literati espouse a poetics of self-expression. As Native literary critic Paula Gunn Allen explains:

The purpose of Native American literature is never one of pure self-expression. The "private soul at any public wall" is a concept that is so alien to Native thought as to constitute an absurdity. The tribes do not celebrate the individual's ability to feel emotion, for it is assumed that all people are able to do so, making expression of this basic ability arrogant, presumptuous, and gratuitous. Besides one's emotions are one's own: to suggest that another should imitate them is an imposition on the personal integrity of others. (174)

In his book *Roots of the Lyric: Primitive Poetry and Modern Poetics*, Welsh stresses that we must consider the communal chant an important source for our modern lyric poem. One of the examples

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he alludes to but does not develop in detail is the Ghost Dance Songs. And, although unwisely calling the chant a “primitive” genre, Welsh does offer an instructive definition.

For Welsh, one characteristic of the chant is that its “words are strongly controlled by rhythms derived from music and dance” (162). For example, parallelism and repetition create strong, regular cadences to steady a dancer’s steps. And often these incantatory rhythms supersede the precision of a chant’s meanings. This can be seen in the following Arapaho Ghost Dance Song, where sounds, such as the “*He’eye’i*” act primarily as rhythm markers:

O, my children! O, my children!  
Here is another of your pipes — *He’eye’i*  
Here is another of your pipes — *He’eye’i*  
Look! thus I shouted — *He’eye’i*  
Look! thus I shouted — *He’eye’i*  
When I move the earth — *He’eye’i*  
When I move the earth — *He’eye’i* (Mooney 206)

Welsh writes that the chant’s hypnotic rhythms act as “a public power which joins together the members of a society” (165) addressed in these quoted lines as the “O, my children! O, my children!” Although tribal members undoubtedly possess a wealth of information about the society that inspired these Ghost Dance Songs, whites like myself continue to rely on such accessible documentations as those compiled by Irish immigrant and pioneer ethnologist James Mooney. Employed by the Bureau of American Ethnology, Mooney went west in the late 1880s to study the Ghost Dance phenomenon. The bureau also instructed him to assess the dreaded possibility of another Sioux uprising like that of the Minnesota and Santee Sioux that took place between 1862 and 1864 (Champagne 44). Highly sympathetic to these dispossessed Plains tribes whose plight was not unlike that of his own disinherited Irish forebears, Mooney spent some twenty-two months collecting songs and other ethnographic data not only from the Sioux, but also from other Siouan speakers such as the Omaha, Crow, and Winnebago (*Native Tribes* 66, 32). He also collected Ghost Dance Songs from such Caddoan peoples as the Pawnee and Wichita, from the Algonkian bands of the Arapaho and Cheyenne, as well as from the Shoshonean-speaking Comanche, among other Plains peoples (*Native Tribes* 66, 85).

To further complicate our growing bafflement, Mooney, our source

for Plains culture in the late nineteenth century, is obviously a white ethnographer. Having worked with a number of unnamed Native informants, he offers us at best a rough translation of the Plains peoples’ dialects and ways. Nevertheless, his detailed documentation is still regarded by many as one of the primary sources of information about the Ghost Dance phenomenon. Clearly, Mooney’s research delineates white civilization’s violent encroachment upon these prairie peoples. The Siouan-speaking tribes, for example, had reigned supreme on the Great Plains for centuries, ruling territories stretching “from Minnesota to the Rocky mountains and from the Yellowstone to the Platte” (Mooney 69). “Millions of buffalo to furnish unlimited food supply,” continues Mooney, “thousands of horses and hundreds of miles of free range made the Sioux, up to the year 1868, the richest and most prosperous, the proudest, and withal, perhaps, the wildest of all the tribes of the plains” (69).

Railroads, migrant settlements, and buffalo-hunting whites began swallowing up Native land and laying waste to their game supplies. “By the late 1880s,” reports *The Native North American Indian Almanac*, “there were only about one thousand buffalo left” (Champagne 47). And, by 1868, some of the Sioux and Cheyenne chiefs had signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie (Champagne 45), which relegated them to a reserve “which embraced all of the present state of South Dakota west of the Missouri River” (Mooney 69). The gold discovered in the Sioux’s “Paha Sapa” (Champagne 45), or sacred Black Hills, led to “the Custer war and massacre” in 1876 and resulted in the Sioux’s loss “of one-third of their guaranteed reservation, including the Black hills” (Mooney 70).

Commissioner of Indian Affairs Morgan, in his 1891 annual report to the American secretary of the interior, describes the Sioux’s dismal state at the time of the Mooney study:

Within eight years from the agreement of 1876 the buffalo had gone, and the Sioux had left to them alkali land and government rations. It is hard to overestimate the magnitude of the calamity, as they view it, which happened to these people by the sudden disappearance of the buffalo and the large diminution in the numbers of deer and other wild animals. Suddenly, almost without warning, they were expected at once and without previous training to settle down to the pursuits of agriculture in a land largely unfitted for such use. The freedom of the chase was to be exchanged for the idleness of the camp. The bound-

less range was to be abandoned for the circumscribed reservation, and abundance of plenty to be supplanted by limited and decreasing government subsistence and supplies. Under these circumstances it is not in human nature not to be discontented and restless, even turbulent and violent. (qtd. in Mooney 70)

The Sioux, along with numerous other disinherited Plains peoples, began to seek solace in the messianic promises of the prophet Wovoka (Mooney 2), whose Paiute name meant “the Woodcutter,” and whose English one was “Jack Wilson.” Wovoka possessed the same strong medicine as had his father, Numunraiv’o, “who could make rain and was ‘bulletproof.’” Wovoka soon set about reviving the Ghost Dance Movement that another Paiute elder, Wodziwob, had started in 1870 (*Encyclopedia* 700–01). Wovoka told the Plains tribes who sought his council to abandon the futility of the warpath for his Ghost Dance religion. He asked them to lay down their war clubs and take up such mystical weaponry as the rituals and songs inspired by his night dreams and trance visions.

“During the solar eclipse of January 1, 1889,” Wovoka received “his Great Revelation,” a vision that became the cornerstone of his ministry. Stricken with fever, he allegedly died and ascended to heaven, where his deceased ancestors “lived.” After they welcomed him enthusiastically, he met with God, who gave him certain instructions along with these “twin-powers: control over the natural elements, and the political status of the co-presidency of the United States” (*Encyclopedia* 700).

Returned to Earth, Wovoka promptly told his people that God wanted them to stop fighting the whites and to resume practice of “the traditional Round Dance” (*Encyclopedia* 700). If they followed this council, all their dead ancestors, reaching back to the beginning of time, would reawaken. Amassing as spirit armies, they were to arrive in our world accompanied by earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters. As his predecessor Wodziwob had promised, the cataclysmic return of these ancestral spirits would destroy white North America. Natives who carefully followed Wovoka’s ritual prescriptions would sleep through this three-day apocalypse, awakening to “the restoration of the game and the return of the old-time primitive life” (Mooney 4). And, in this longed-for utopia, all born-again “were to be white” (Mooney 4)!

In 1890, the Office of Indian Affairs banned the Ghost Dance, and the Seventh Cavalry brutally ended the Native resistance movement

affiliated with it when they massacred some “three hundred Indian men, women and children” at Wounded Knee. Disturbed by how the Sioux had distorted his words to violent ends, Wovoka soon stopped his public proselytizing, but quietly continued his shamanic practices. He did offer to assist President Wilson during World War 1 “by freezing the Atlantic and sending Indians over to fight the Germans with ice.” Finally, he predicted that an earthquake, signalling his ascent to heaven, would rock the Smith and Mason Valleys of western Nevada that had been his lifelong home. On 29 September 1932, Wovoka, the “weather prophet,” died at the age of seventy-four. Three months later, the earthquake occurred (*Encyclopedia* 49, 701, 702).

Let’s return now to 1889. It was the height of the Ghost Dance craze. While Wovoka was causing rain to fall on drought-stricken fields and rivers to ice over on hot July days (*Encyclopedia* 700), the rhythms of his Paiute songs were galvanizing a people, as Welsh sees the chant doing. Reinterpreted by the more warlike Siouan tribes, these traditional round-dance chants were forging a religious alliance based on the promised restoration of Native supremacy.

Given that the chant usually serves to rally members of an already somewhat homogenous society, Welsh explains that it draws on “the shared knowledge” of a group (175). Gunn Allen, while theorizing about literature in general, points to the fact that a particular genre, be it a lyric poem or a chant, “is a facet of a culture. . . . [A]nd its purpose is meaningful only when the assumptions it is based on are understood and accepted” (173). These Ghost Dance Songs, as we shall see, are founded on many cultural suppositions not immediately intelligible to someone unaccustomed to Plains Native ways. Mooney says the songs containing “special tribal mythologies, together with such innumerable references to old-time customs, ceremonies, and modes of life long since obsolete, make up a regular symposium of aboriginal thought and practice” (201). This Kiowa refrain shows that Wovoka’s resurrection theology was not a new idea for the Plains peoples:

I shall cut off his feet,  
I shall cut off his feet;  
I shall cut off his head,  
I shall cut off his head;  
I shall cut off his head,  
I shall cut off his head;  
He gets up again, He gets up again. (Mooney 320)

The song refers to a custom whereby if one kills a buffalo, one must leave behind its feet and head from which a new animal will spring.

This practice of displaying carcass tokens stems from a need to show respect for the dead animal, as well as from a belief commonly held across Native America that when a species, such as the buffalo, becomes scarce, it is not endangered but has chosen to disappear beyond the “horizon or in caves” in order to restore itself (Mooney 163). Thus, the ritual display of carcass parts mentioned in the preceding song was meant to encourage the buffalo’s return.

The following Arapaho song also speaks of a practice based on a legend common to many North American Aboriginal groups:

The sacred pipe tells me — *E’yahe’eye!*  
The sacred pipe tells me — *E’yahe’eye!*  
Our father — *ya he’eye!*  
Our father — *ya he’eye!*  
We shall surely be put again (with our friends)  
*E’yahe’eye!*  
We shall surely be put again (with our friends)  
*E’yahe’eye!*  
Our father — *E’ya he’eye!*  
Our father — *E’ya he’eye!*  
Our father — *E’ya he’eye!* (Mooney 207)

Mooney reports at length about the ritual importance of “the *seicha*,” or sacred flat pipe. A “medicine keeper” passes it “sunwise” around a prayer circle (208). Its smokers automatically associate the *seicha* with a well-known creation story in which Turtle swims up from the depths of the void, a bit of Earth resting upon its back. This piece of mud metamorphoses to become the Earth’s landmass, symbolized by the *seicha* or sacred stone pipe.

As one can see from these two examples, non-Natives would have difficulty connecting such sparsely epigrammatic Ghost Dance chants to the Plains rituals and legends that underlie them. Karl Kroeber explains that most Native songs are never complete in themselves, “each depending,” he writes, quoting Frederick Burton, “upon something external, a story or ceremony.” Kroeber offers this Papago explanation: “the song is very short, because we understand so much” (105).

Jeffrey Huntsman, in his essay “Traditional Native American Literature: The Translational Dilemma,” also emphasizes the need to understand the living situation from which an oral text comes, especially in relation to “the more close-knit, more systematized societies” (89). For example, to appreciate fully the following Arapaho

song one needs to understand how it encodes the social rituals of a close-knit hierarchy:

Little boy, the coyote gun —  
Little boy, the coyote gun —  
I have uncovered it — *Abe’e’ye’!*  
I have uncovered it — *Abe’e’ye’!*  
There is the sheath lying there,  
There is the sheath lying there. (Mooney 234–35)

Mooney writes that this song “has to do with an interesting feature in the sociology of the Arapaho and other prairie tribes.” The “coyote men,” a caste of middle-aged bachelors, acted as “pickers or lookouts for the camp.” They often faced grave dangers armed with a “coyote gun,” or “club decorated with feathers and other ornaments and usually covered with a sheath of bear gut” (235).

Based on tacitly understood Plains lore and learning, these Ghost Dance Songs imply or point to things rather than describe or explain them. This may help clarify why there is an absence of metaphor and simile, the predominant tropes of Eurocentric literature, in such oraliture. Kroeber writes: “Let us observe how rare in any form of Indian literature are metaphoric figures, similes, for instance, being so unusual as at times to be touchstones for an inaccurate translation” (103). Instead, Native discourse relies primarily on what Western poets would call synecdoche (Kroeber 104; Krupar 231), a trope in which the part usually stands for the whole. Examples of synecdoche appear in this Sioux chant:

I know, in the pitfall . . .  
I know, in the pitfall . . .  
It is tallow they use in the pitfall,  
It is tallow they use in the pitfall. (Mooney 242)

The parts “pitfall” and “tallow” stand in for the whole, an elaborate eagle-trapping procedure. A solitary and fasting hunter would dig out, then roof over, a “pitfall” in which to await his sacred prey, baiting it with “tallow” stripped from buffalo ribs (Mooney 243–44).

The following also contains two instances of synecdoche: “The buffalo head — *Ya’ha’ya’i’!* / The half buffalo —” (Mooney 273). Again, such parts as the “buffalo head” and the “half buffalo” symbolize the whole, a Cheyenne-Arapaho “Crazy Dance called

*Psalms*.” In this healing ritual, participants often donned a robe consisting of “the upper half of a buffalo skin, the head portion, with the horns attached, coming over the head of the dancers” (Mooney 273). In another song, synecdochic “fruit,” a part of the Great Plains harvest, signifies the abundance given to the whites by the now regretful spirit father, who will soon take back his gift:

My children, when at first I liked the whites,  
My children, when at first I liked the whites,  
I gave them fruits,  
I gave them fruits. (Mooney, 209)

Noted American critic Kenneth Burke writes that synecdoche builds relationships of association by convertibility between its terms, while metaphor constructs those of association by comparison. I. A. Richards defines metaphor as a trope fuelled by tensions, juxtapositions, or even a collision of “disparate and hitherto unconnected things” (240). And C. Day Lewis concurs, describing it as a “collision rather than the collusion of images” (72). Examples of such a collision can be found in the following stanza from Sylvia Plath’s poem entitled “Wuthering Heights,” where sheep, who seem to be more in the know than the poet, are compared to clouds, and their eyes, even more surprisingly, to mail slots that reduce the alienated speaker to “a thin silly message”:

The sheep know where they are,  
Browsing in their dirty wool-clouds,  
Gray as the weather.  
The black slots of their pupils take me in.  
It is like being mailed into space,  
A thin silly message. (167)

Unlike the jarring surprise of Plath’s metaphor comparing sheep eyes to a mail slot, a synecdoche results in a much smoother energy flow between macrocosm and microcosm that manifests as a seamless recapitulation of part for whole. An excellent example of synecdoche appears in this excerpt from Sioux medicine man Lame Deer’s discussion of the cosmological significance of an old, sooty stewing pot:

What do you see here, my friend? Just an ordinary old cooking pot, black with soot and full of dents.

It is standing on the fire on top of that old wood stove, and the water bubbles and moves the lid as the white steam rises to the ceiling. Inside the pot is boiling water, chunks of meat with bone and fat, plenty of potatoes.

It doesn’t seem to have a message, that old pot, and guess you don’t give it a thought. Except the soup smells good and reminds you that you are hungry. Maybe you are worried that this is dog stew. Well, don’t worry. It’s just beef — no fat puppy for a special ceremony. It’s just an ordinary, everyday meal.

But I’m an Indian. I think about ordinary, common things like this pot. The bubbling water comes from the rain cloud. It represents the sky. The fire comes from the sun which warms us all — men, animals, trees. The meat stands for the four-legged creatures, our animal brothers, who gave of themselves so that we should live. The steam is living breath. It was water; now it goes up to the sky, becomes a cloud again. These things are sacred. Looking at that pot full of good soup, I am thinking how, in this simple manner, Wakan Tanka takes care of me. (Fire 171–72)

Here in this metamorphic soup, bubbling water transmutes into sky; fire into sun, meat back into its animal forms, while the stew’s rising steam merges with the living breath of all beings and turns, as well, back into clouds journeying across the sky. Lame Deer’s pot of simmering beef provides us with a near cosmological vision of the recurrent flow of synecdochic parts into wholes, cycles within cycles, rhythmic, continual, “an incredibly complex matrix of interpenetrating connections in which a small effect may lead to a large one” (Dunn and Scholefield xxxiv).

The worldview from which metaphor comes appears to be a more piecemeal one. Kroeber, who draws on Monroe Beardsley’s notion “of metaphor as ‘a poem in miniature’” (134), sees this trope existing as a self-contained, smaller poem within an equally self-sufficient larger text (104). Examples of these smaller poems-within-a-poem can be found in British poet Craig Raine’s “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home.” Here, a young Martian tries to describe our alien planet to the folks back home:

Mist is when the sky is tired of flight  
and rests its soft machine on the ground:

then the world is dim & bookish  
like engravings under tissue paper.

Rain is when the earth is television.

It has the property of making colours darker.

Model T is a room with the lock inside —  
a key is turned to free the world. (1)

Used by Raine to explain such Earth phenomena as “mist,” “rain,” “the world,” and the “Model T,” these metaphors exist as small yet self-contained lyric statements. The fact that each metaphor appears as a separate couplet further reinforces its sense of momentary enclosure.

Synecdoche, on the other hand, is much more open-ended:

Given this contrast between poem as isolated artifact and poem as means by which energizing power flows between man and world, divine and natural, individual and cultural community, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the vivid, original metaphor crucial to our poetry, and central to our critical theorizing, may not be essential to *poeticité*, but may be a phenomenon of our culture. (Kroeber 108)

Kroeber's preceding comment rang true to me when I recently went to the small subarctic community of East Main, Quebec, to offer a creative writing course to a group of Cree literacy teachers. They quietly discussed my definition of a metaphor among themselves in Cree, gave it a lot of thought, and then, as a group, unequivocally resisted my instructions. They refused point blank to create metaphors to describe the butchering and preparation of game for a feast. “Our animals are sacred,” they told me. “We can't speak of them in that way.” Did they fear that my metaphor exercise might demean their animals, turning sacred totems into cartoonish Wiley Coyotes? “We were brought up not to lie,” one of them politely explained. Does our metaphor—a trope foreign to East James Bay Cree oraliture—appear as a sacrilegious lie produced by the collision of hitherto unconnected things? Does it rupture the flow of sacred parts into the immense cosmological matrix?

If, as Kroeber (104) and Beardsley (144) have pointed out, a metaphor is a small, self-referential poem contained within a larger

art object, then according to the mainstream practice, such an object must first be published singularly in a literary magazine before being collected into a book, along with other equally self-sufficient texts. Thus, a poem and its metaphorical tropes appear to stand alone, while a synecdoche contrastively amalgamates into a synthesis of composite parts. Gunn Allen explains that a Native ceremony contains “compositional elements,” such as “songs, prayers, dances, drums, ritual movements, and dramatic address.” Such elements do not exist as separate artistic statements, but relate “to one another in various explicit and implicit ways, as though each was one face of a multifaceted prism” (178).

More polarized and dialectic, a metaphorical bias struggles instead to unite separate, individuated things. If synecdoche stems from a close-knit world of tacit assumptions, then metaphor springs from a more culturally diverse one that encourages not only self-expression, but also self-questioning. Susan Mitchell, in “Experience Falls through Language like Water through a Sieve,” encourages her mainstream students to insert five or more metaphors in the draft of a poem in order to discover “what we can't articulate, but feel pressured to say” (51). Metaphor, for Mitchell, abets the “pure self-expression” that Gunn Allen finds “so alien to Native thought” (51). Here, Mitchell counsels her creative writing students to use metaphor as a tool to help “write ahead of our understanding.” She continues: “Then it becomes our job to understand what we have written, and with that new understanding write the poem further and deeper. Simile and metaphor require a new way of thinking where the writer leads with unconscious or irrational thought processes, then waits for conscious thinking to catch up” (52).

Such process writing allows one to “clarify, define, and explain” (Mitchell 52), to describe, compare, and contrast. Taken to an extreme, such analytic modes of thought lead to a sort of hubris or presumption that they can be used to decipher the meanings of the vast universe completely. For example, contemporary Mesquakies poet Ray A. Young Bear subtly pokes fun at our querulous, Euro-centric mind-set in the following:

Who is there  
to witness the ice  
as it gradually forms itself  
from the cold rock-hard banks  
to the middle of the river?

Is the wind chill a factor?  
 Does the water at some point  
 negotiate and agree to stop  
 moving and become frozen?  
 When you do not know the answers  
 to these immediately you are afraid,  
 and to even think in this inquisitive  
 manner is contrary to the precept  
 that life is in everything:  
 Me, I am not a man;  
 I respect the river  
 for not knowing its secret,  
 for answers have nothing  
 to do with cause and occurrence.  
 It doesn't matter how early  
 I wake to see the sun shine  
 through the ice-hole;  
 only the ice along  
 with my foolishness  
 decides when  
 to break. (183)

Here, in a poem that contains no metaphors, Young Bear questions the role of the witness who focuses primarily on factors and negotiations. He, himself, does not try to fathom the river's particular intelligence. His manhood does not depend on being able to explain away the river's fickle power to break up ice when and where it chooses. Subverting the scientist's propensity to theorize about causes and their effects, Young Bear prefers to replace the word "effect" with "occurrence." Like certain of the "new" chaos advocates, he suggests that events occur with less predictability than traditional science once anticipated. Preferring not to force metaphors onto the natural phenomena that surround him, Young Bear may well be cajoling readers to stop our interminable intellectualizing and learn some basic survival smarts: respect the river's icy caprice.

Be this as it may, metaphor, given its ability to assimilate disparate things, will undoubtedly remain the central trope of our Eurocentric literature. It will do so because its mainstream readership is heterogenous in comparison to the more homogenous audience of a Native oral performance. As discourse theorist Paul Zumthor explains:

In principal, if not in fact, the oral message is up to public consumption: writing, in contrast, isolates. This notwithstanding orality functions only in the midst of a limited sociocultural group: the need to communicate that sustains it does not spontaneously look towards universality, whereas writing split between so many individual readers, buttressed on abstraction, moves freely only at the broad, social level, if not at the universal. (28–29)

We have seen how Native chants rely on synecdoche rather than metaphor to confirm a communal identity. Affirming group solidarity in this way, chants often develop around a common theme — "the journey of The Visionary, a man who travelled with the gods, learned the ceremonial from them, and brought back its powers of healing and fertility" for the good of all (Welsh 170). This definition describes the Ghost Dance ceremonies perfectly. Their repetitively hypnotic cadences abetted participants on their travels to a shadowy spirit realm. Mooney places the Arapaho spirit world, for example, "in the West, not on the same level with this earth of ours, but higher up, and separated also from it by a body of water" (233). Ghost dancers, both men and women, performed a dragging, near-broken-footed step of lamentation in the hopes of entering an oceanic trance state typified by a loss of individuality. Often a medicine man whirled sacred crow and eagle feathers and/or a handkerchief in front of their eyes. This mesmerization continued until their bodies began shaking violently or became rigid. Then they would drop, unconscious, to the ground, remaining there undisturbed for minutes or even hours (Mooney 198–99). In this altered state, a dancer undertook "the journey of The Visionary" (Welsh 170). He or she would fly to the spirit world to procure his or her own Ghost Dance Song — a song that could heal its composer and others as well.

Mooney cites numerous examples of this visionary journey motif. In the following Arapaho chant, a dreamer rides on a whirlwind to meet deceased relatives:

Our father, the whirlwind  
 Our father, the whirlwind —  
 By its aid I am running swiftly,  
 By its aid I am running swiftly,  
 By which means I see our father,  
 By which means I see our father. (Mooney 219)

And in this song, the crow, messenger from the land of the dead, is offering to guide the dancer on a vision quest:

The crow is circling above me,  
The crow is circling above me,  
The crow having come for me  
The crow having come for me  
The crow having come for me. (Mooney 234)

A Pit River refrain points to the Rockies' snowy peaks and beyond to the Milky Way, the spirit road traversed by wayfaring seekers. In spite of its simplicity, this chant must have been powerful when intoned under the myriad, lucent constellations illuminating the prairie night sky:

The snow lies there — *ro'rami!*  
The snow lies there — *ro'rami!*  
The snow lies there — *ro'rami!*  
The snow lies there — *ro'rami!*  
The Milky Way lies there,  
The Milky Way lies there. (Mooney 289)

Like Welsh, Zumthor likens the chant to a journey. He writes that, in general, oral poetry does not emphasize an Aristotelian sense of proportion and measure, but rather "*monivance*" (202). A chant concentrates on progress, on the movement of a current episode. Oral time, Zumthor adds, is "fleeting" (102), what with its lack of description, perspective, and strong sense of closure. Via repetition, recurrence, and the interweaving of numerous threads, as in a Navajo tapestry, the oral becomes "'inscribed' in the fleeting nature of the voice" (Zumthor 113). Thus, Ghost dancers repeated their brief texts, round upon round, as if to incise them into a canyon or mesa such that the geography itself became a sacred script.

We already have seen many examples of *monivance*, or, as Welsh calls it, "mythological action," in these Ghost Dance Songs (178). Writing in the 1970s, Welsh could not foresee that he might be taken to task in the 1990s by Canadian literary critic Penny Petrone for his use of the word *myth* in relation to Native texts. Petrone writes that non-Native readers usually consider myth to be but a fiction. Native orature defies the Eurocentric tendency to classify things in terms of such binary oppositions as myth and history, or fiction and fact. Welsh does avoid such extreme polarization, showing preference

instead for a bipolar continuum. Here he describes ceremonies joining: "a continuing rhythm and community, both of which 'stretch unbrokenly through the ages and on interminably into the future.' 'Now as at all times,' Years said: '*sa'a narai*,' the Navahos say. . . . [This movement] joins the rhythms of time and human experience to continuing rhythms of eternity" (178).

For Welsh, the chant moves along a continuum extending from history towards eternity. In his view, this lyric genre approximates a fluid and continuous intermingling of past, present, and future tenses. The following Ghost Dance Song seems suspended in such a continuing lyric moment of radiant simultaneity. Here, the dreamer is visiting — or has visited — the spirit world where people are *still* making the pemmican that he is *still* using:

The pemmican that I am using —  
The pemmican that I am using,  
They are still making it,  
They are still making it. (Mooney 242)

The following chant refers to knowledge found in some of "the oldest traditions of the Cheyenne [who] locate their former home at the headwaters of the Mississippi in Minnesota" (Mooney 269). Here, the dreamer stands at the eternal site of tribal origins:

My children, my children  
Here is the river of turtles,  
Here is the river of turtles  
Where the various living things,  
Where the various living things  
Are painted their different colours,  
Are painted their different colours,  
Our father says so,  
Our father says so. (Mooney 269)

These repetitions serve to suspend the onrush of time. The repeated "Our father" not only creates a reverential tone, but also alludes to the prophet Wovoka, the "spirit" fathers and grandfathers, and to such elemental elders as Crow, Eagle, Thunderbird, Four Winds, and so on. All of these beings, combined with "my children, my children," accrue to a present plenitude encompassing past, present, and future generations, totemic turtles, elemental forces, and many

other "various living things" painted in "their different colours."  
Here is a final favourite that illustrates the omniscient lyric present:

I hear everything,  
I hear everything.  
I am the crow,  
I am the crow. (Mooney 245)

Crow, the great totemic father of the Caddo peoples, is expressing his omnipresence throughout all of time. Crow is hearing everything simultaneously. And, as a friend and hot-air ballooning aficionado once pointed out to me, "High up in the air like a crow, you can hear forwards and backwards over great distances."

The continuous present of the chant is not always a pacific one. Welsh mentions a type characterized by "a rushing movement, the feeling of events sweeping down on us, for which prophecy is especially suitable" (184). Many Ghost Dance Songs simulate this headlong rush. Some were doubtlessly inspired by the ever restless elements sweeping across the Great Plains. Many also stem from the cataclysmic tumult of history that was causing the late-nineteenth-century demise of Native civilizations in the Americas. In many such chants, one feels a great gust of wind, which "makes the head-feathers sing" (Mooney 214). In others, awesome yet beneficent whirlwinds circle around, stirring "the willows . . . the grasses" (291), and shaking the tent flaps. This urgent chant would call up the prophesied maelstrom of elements to destroy white civilization: "Fog! Fog! / Lightning! Lightening! / Whirlwind! Whirlwind!" (Mooney 291). In this song, a whirlwind rushes down, raising clouds of dust:

There is dust from the whirlwind,  
There is dust from the whirlwind,  
There is dust from the whirlwind,  
The whirlwind on the mountain,  
The whirlwind on the mountain,  
The whirlwind on the mountain. (Mooney 292)

In another such refrain, a tornado roars over a mountain, making the rocks ring (292). Often crows, eagles, thunderbirds, and actual dancers fly or circle about. Dice are rolled, songs resonate, while the Earth itself rises, trembles, and hums, suggesting the prophesied arrival of the Messiah, the spirit hosts, and the new world.

This Crow Nation song represents the tumultuous approach of millennial forces and summarizes the underlying hopes of the Ghost Dance religion:

The whole world is coming,  
A nation is coming, a nation is coming.  
The Eagle has brought the message to the tribe.  
The father says so, the father says so.  
Over the whole earth they are coming.  
The buffalo are coming, the buffalo are coming,  
The Crow has brought the message to the tribe,  
The father says so, the father says so. (Mooney 307)

Here, the totemic Eagle and Crow outride the vanguard to announce the oncoming herds of resurrected buffalo and spirit armies.

Unfortunately, the underside of such hopeful prophecy is lamentation and despair, for, as Welsh points out, "prophecy is also lamentation and the two are tied to the sense of community" (185). Alicia Ostriker, in a recent talk entitled "Howl Revisited: Allen Ginsberg and Prophetic Lamentation," spoke about how the Book of Jeremiah, which inspired *Howl*, is both a "literature of catastrophe" and a "vehicle for survival." Written at the end of the Jewish monarchical period during the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah's prophecies promised a new covenant for the Jews who were fleeing into exile, as were the Plains Natives of the late nineteenth century. Wovoka's prophecies and the Ghost Dance Songs that they inspired became a similar "vehicle for survival" that oscillates, as does the Jeremiah, between the pathetic and the sublime, between catastrophe and its transcendence. Mooney writes that dancers who sang the following often wept openly:

Father, have pity on me,  
Father, have pity on me;  
I am crying for thirst,  
I am crying for thirst,  
All is gone — I have nothing to eat,  
All is gone — I have nothing to eat. (Mooney 226)

And, this vision of a sweat lodge stirs up sad longings for lost ways:

When I see the *thi'äya*,  
When I see the *thi'äya*

Then I begin to lament,  
Then I begin to lament. (Mooney 231)

Finally, I will close with this elegantly stark Kiowa Ghost Dance song, whose generosity of spirit towards the suffering of all sentient beings reminds one of the compassion often expressed by the late-eighteenth-century haiku master Issa:

*Heye'heye'heye' Aho'ho'!*  
*Heye'heye'heye' Aho'ho'!*  
Because I am poor,  
Because I am poor,  
I pray for every living creature,  
I pray for every living creature.  
*Ao'nyo! Ao'nyo!* (Mooney 316)

I hope I have underlined some of the textual differences that might at first perplex a mainstream reader of these Ghost Dance Songs. Not only does their reliance on synecdoche rather than metaphor challenge our textual expectations, but also their grounding in communal ritual, music, and dance, and their close-knit worldview of tacit assumptions can initially try our patience. If, though, we approach these messianic songs with a beginner's mind, their sparsely epigrammatical surface will soon begin to reveal the visionary contours of a vitally resistant text. And, if we persist, we will soon realize that during our short, turbulent stay on this continent, we have, through our naivety, been too quick to relegate this Native classic to the margins of our literary canon.

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