Anthropologica

Anthropologica

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Henry Green, Navajo Poetry, and Dialogical Ethnopoetics

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Volume 65, numéro 1, 2023

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109814ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica65120232594

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Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (imprimé)
2292-3586 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Webster, A. K. (2023). A Verdant Ethnography: Henry Green, Navajo Poetry, and Dialogical Ethnopoetics. *Anthropologica, 65*(1), 1–34. https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica65120232594

Résumé de l'article

L'objectif est d'écrire une ethnographie avec un sens de la vie. En utilisant les travaux littéraires et les théories de Henry Green, ainsi que les préoccupations de l'anthropologie dialogique, une approche de la langue et de la culture centrée sur le discours (réunies ici sous le nom d'ethnopoétique dialogique), et les pratiques rhétoriques navajo, je présente un ensemble de transcriptions de plusieurs conversations avec des poètes navajo au fil des années. Ce sont les transcriptions qui donnent vie à l'ethnographie. La première partie situe cette entreprise dans un contexte intellectuel ; la seconde partie, beaucoup plus longue, donne l'ethnographie verdoyante. Une ethnographie verdoyante repose sur un fondement empirique (les transcriptions), mais aussi sur une certaine obliquité (la matière du discours).

A Verdant Ethnography

Henry Green, Navajo Poetry, and Dialogical Ethnopoetics

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Abstract: The endeavour here is to write an ethnography with a sense of living. Using the literary work and theories of Henry Green, as well as concerns with dialogical anthropology, a discourse-centred approach to language and culture (conjoined here as a dialogical ethnopoetics), and Navajo rhetorical practices, I present an aggregate of transcripts from several conversations with Navajo poets over the years. It is the transcripts that give life to ethnography. The first part places this endeavour in an intellectual context; the much longer second part gives the verdant ethnography. A verdant ethnography is predicated on an empirical foundation (transcripts), but also on an obliqueness as well (the stuff of talk).

Keywords: Navajo poetry; dialogical ethnopoetics; ethnography; transcriptive practices; Henry Green

Résumé : L'objectif est d'écrire une ethnographie avec un sens de la vie. En utilisant les travaux littéraires et les théories de Henry Green, ainsi que les préoccupations de l'anthropologie dialogique, une approche de la langue et de la culture centrée sur le discours (réunies ici sous le nom d'ethnopoétique dialogique), et les pratiques rhétoriques navajo, je présente un ensemble de transcriptions de plusieurs conversations avec des poètes navajo au fil des années. Ce sont les transcriptions qui donnent vie à l'ethnographie. La première partie situe cette entreprise dans un contexte intellectuel ; la seconde partie, beaucoup plus longue, donne l'ethnographie verdoyante. Une ethnographie verdoyante repose sur un fondement empirique (les transcriptions), mais aussi sur une certaine obliquité (la matière du discours).

Mots-clés : poésie Navajo ; ethnopoétique dialogique ; ethnographie ; pratiques de transcription ; Henry Green

Now is the winter of our discontent
made glorious summer by this sun of York
—William Shakespeare, Richard III

Retellings blend into interpretations, for in
resaying what someone else has said or even
what you yourself have said on another occasion there
is always an implied interpretation.
—Joel Sherzer (1983, 205)

Introducing

How might one bring life—or at least a sense of living—into ethnography? And in bringing this sense of living into ethnography, how might we make visible our very doing of ethnography? And how does one do it, then, in a way that makes visible those that we work with, that treats them as the centre of the ethnographic endeavour and not the anthropologist? This article is an exercise in writing such an ethnography. My points of departure, before I turn in full to that exercise in a verdant ethnography, will be the work of the modernist novelist Henry Green (the penname for Henry Yorke [1905-1973]), a concern with dialogical ethnopoetics (Jim and Webster 2022) that builds on the work of a discourse-centred approach to language and culture (Basso 1995; Hendricks 1993; Palmer 2005; Sherzer 1987; Valentine 1995) and dialogical anthropology (Tedlock 1983; see also Facey 1988), and a concern with a preference for quoted speech instead of indirect reported speech in Navajo narrative traditions (Toelken and Scott 1981). It responds, as well, to my own attempts to write in a way that makes visible the voices, the intellectual contributions, of those whom I have worked with over the years (Jim and Webster 2022).

Mary Black (1982, xvi) once suggested that she could envision a book of Ojibwa narratives, or more precisely, a book of a narrative told repeatedly, "a book with just one story in it, over and over—and no explanation at the end." Ultimately, Black (1982, xvi) concedes that "this experiment is probably impossible." The goal of such an experiment, for Black (1982, xvi), was to replicate the way that the "uninitiated" had to "sink or swim—theirs is not to ask questions or receive explanations, but just to hear more tellings until things finally fall into place." Something like this, as many an ethnographer

knows, is often how we come to know in the doing of ethnography. People tell us things. They tell us things repeatedly (see Cruikshank 1998; Palmer 2003). We sink sometimes. We swim sometimes. Sometimes we think we are sinking, only to discover we are swimming. Other times, we think we are swimming, only to discover we are sinking. Instead of stories, as Black suggests, I will present the transcripts of how Navajo poets tried to tell me things about, among other things, their poetry. I quote them at length because I want to see what an aggregate of transcripts, an "aggregate of words" (Green 2020, 141), might mean for the ways that I write ethnography. Such a project, of course, leaves much unsaid. It demands something from the reader as well—an attention to the transcripts, not as something to be glanced at or skimmed, mere examples of something more pressing, but as the epistemological foundations of our ethnographies.

Greening

"What's he at now?" Mr. Middleton asked.
"An anthology of love poetry he's to call 'Doting.'
Don't you agree it's a marvelous title?"
"Well, you know doting, to me, is not loving."
—*Henry Green, Doting*

Lately, having read the novels of Henry Green, and seen the arc of his work—from novels with rather dense and beautiful descriptions (see *Loving*) and his dropping of articles in some of his early novels (*Living*), to his later novels, *Nothing* and *Doting* (published in 1950 and 1952 respectively), which eschew almost all description, and, instead, are novels of dialogue (though the seeds for such an approach are already evident in *Party Going*)—I have been thinking about how such an approach, the dialogue novels of Green, may inform my own ethnographic writing. In a set of reflections on his own changing practice as a novelist, Green (2020, 140) suggests how one might "fire" the imagination has changed,

> For a long time I thought that this [firing the imagination] was best lit by very carefully arranged passages of description. But if I have come to hold, as I do now, that we learn almost everything in life from what is done after a great deal of talk, then it follows that I am beginning to have my doubts about the uses of description.

Indeed, his final two novels are dialogue novels. Very little description can be found in them. As he says about *Nothing*, the novel he was then working on,

> what I am trying to write now, is a novel with an absolute minimum of descriptive passages in it, or even directions to the reader (that may be such as, "She said angrily", etc.) and yet narrative consisting almost entirely of dialogue sufficiently alive to create life in the reader (Green 2020, 140).

Green here eliminates metapragmatic terms that might suggest a capacity to read other minds. Quoted thought is not a device used by Green in the dialogue novels.

For Green, ultimately, we cannot enter other peoples' minds, we can only attend to what they say—and what they say is often fraught with misunderstandings (Green argued for a kind of opacity of mind [see Duranti 2015]). Misunderstanding, often based on the mishearing of words, becomes a recurring feature of Green's novels. Green (2020, 239) says about his work, "my characters misunderstand each other more than most people do in real life." Misunderstanding, as many an ethnographer knows, is also one way that an anthropologist comes to know things (see Fabian 1995; Webster 2017). Finally, as Green (2020, 141) writes, "it is only by an aggregate of words over a period followed by an action, that we obtain, in life, a glimmering of what is going on in someone, or even ourselves." It seems to me that an ethnography that presents dialogues, conversations, and an aggregate of such conversations, might be one way to breathe life into ethnography. Such an approach, of course, and as Green (2020, 147) notes, is an "oblique approach." We must be willing to take up that oblique approach. This oblique approach, I should add, is something that a number of Navajo poets suggested about their own poetry (see Webster 2016; Jim and Webster 2022). But to say that is to already look ahead to the transcripts.

What struck me in reading Green's work, besides the sheer delight of reading it and his reflections on his work, is the ways that it connected both with the discourse-centred approach to language and culture that I was trained in (Sherzer 1987, 1998), and with the dialogical anthropological approach that Dennis Tedlock (1983) promoted (an anthropology as a talking across and not above) and, of which lately, I have been trying to engage with (Jim and Webster 2022; Webster nd). Tedlock (1983), in the epilogue of his book, presents a conversation that he had with don Andrés about what don Andrés meant by the shining world. He formats the transcript according to pauses—as he had

done for the narratives that he discusses. This was, for Tedlock, a way to do dialogical anthropology (I would call it dialogical ethnopoetics). Joel Sherzer (1998) introduced the various Kuna performances of verbal art that make up the chapters of the book and then presented the transcript and translation after each introduction. In the introductions, Sherzer included discussions of the genre, metaphors, something of the issues of translation, a discussion of some of the social and cultural context, but he did not try to explain the narrative or chant, to close it off; rather, he left that open. He provided, then, some of the things one needed to know to appreciate what was being said. For Sherzer it was the texts, the transcripts, in Kuna that were the centre of each chapter (see Epps, Webster and Woodbury 2017). In other work (Urrutia and Sherzer 1997), Sherzer includes in an article he co-wrote with Anselmo Urrutia, a transcript of a conversation that Sherzer and Urrutia had about the "the way of cocoa" that is the centre of their paper—this makes visible something of the dialogue that informs how Sherzer came to understand something about Urrutia's knowledge of "the way of cocoa." In both cases, an emphasis was placed on presenting the transcripts of what people were saying. Too much anthropology, for both Tedlock and Sherzer, was of the anthropologists speaking, too little anthropology was of the voices of those we work with. I have written elsewhere about this view of a dialogical ethnopoetics (Jim and Webster 2022), a view of ethnopoetics as the ethnography of poetic practices (Webster 2020a), and the way our transcripts make visible the epistemological foundations of our ethnographic knowledge (Webster 2021; Jim and Webster 2022). Such work seeks to make visible the ways that anthropologists come to know in and through situated talk—it makes visible that talking across (Tedlock 1983, 322). A dialogical ethnopoetics is a way of foregrounding the dialogical emergence of knowledge of and about forms of verbal art (Jim and Webster 2022).

It has long been noted that many Navajo narratives are often narratives of talk (Toelken and Scott 1981). Narratives are often built around much-quoted speech—characters talk to each other and they misunderstand each other. Indeed, in many Navajo narratives there is little to no indirect reported speech, rather it is direct reported speech (quoted speech). Linguistically, it has been argued that Navajo does not normally code for indirect reported speech, rather direct reported speech is the norm (Li 1986, 39 and Toelken as Scott 1981, 84; see also Samuels 2004; Collins 1987; Webster 2015). There is, even in narratives told in English, a preference to use quoted speech instead of indirect reported speech (Webster 2006). Stylistically then, the use of transcripts—a form of

quoted speech—aligns with narrative conventions among Navajos that I am familiar with. We come to know listening to these narratives through the words of others—through their quoted speech. So too, a number of Navajos whom I have talked with have cautioned me against attempting to read other peoples' minds. To attempt to do so is to engage in a kind of "bossy" behaviour—to limit the creative capacity of others, to assume more knowledge than one has a right to claim (Webster 2015, 2019, 2020a; see also Basso 1996 for Western Apache views that echo what Navajos have told me).

Transcribing

> We must remember that the transcribed words were once embedded in a dialog to which an anthropologist was one of the parties.
> —*Dennis Tedlock (1982, 161)*

One of the salutary efforts of ethnopoetics has been that it makes explicit the motivations for transcribing a stretch of discourse in particular ways (see Kroskrity and Webster 2015). Let me do so here. In the formatting of the transcripts below, I have followed Tedlock (1983) and Molina and Evers (1998) in representing what people say based on pauses. This is an approach that Toelken and Scott (1981) and Benally (1994) have also taken with regard to Navajo narratives. Each line ends with a pause. An extra space between lines indicates a longer pause. Such a mode of presentation makes the transcript appear like poetry, broken into lines. Whether or not conversations, the talk of people, is poetry or prose, is not the issue at hand here (see Tedlock 1983). There is poetry in the following transcripts—Mitchell will perform his poetry for me during our conversations—and there are poetic features in our talk—one can see, for example, a fair amount of parallelism in certain transcripts. The goal here is to make clear something of the cadence and rhythm of talk, to highlight something of the time talk takes as well. Forms of parallelism also become more visible. Such a presentation, as Hymes (2003) remarked many times, slows the eye. I have also indicated loudness (ALL CAPS) and length (a colon after the sound). Again, these are done to show the way such talk moves, the way it has life. Brackets represent contextual information (I have tried to keep such things to a minimum). Contexts can be seductive—making us think we know more than we do (Fabian 1995). As Fabian (1995) has usefully shown, misunderstandings

cannot always or merely be solved by appeals to contexts, because it is often the contexts that make possible the misunderstandings. We learn from misunderstandings—not just how to correct them, but how misunderstandings are generative of knowledge (Fabian 1995; Webster 2017). Talk, then, isn't just embedded within a context, it is also context-creating. Finally, Tedlock (1983) saw his work as presenting scripts for people to read aloud, and I am genuinely sympathetic to that perspective—but here, and following a point made by Green (2020), I would suggest not reading the transcripts aloud—for in doing so, one adds their own powerful sensibility to the transcripts. For Green (2020, 139), reading aloud, like including certain metapragmatic terms to introduce quoted speech, made one out to be "a demi-god, a know-all"—telling us, or asserting anyway, what others think or feel. It takes some of the life out of what is written. And so, as an indulgence, I would urge the reader to read the transcripts silently.

The transcripts tell a story (or stories)—though I am not exactly sure what that story is. I have chosen these transcripts because I have written extensively about them elsewhere (Jim and Webster 2022; Webster 2015, 2016, 2020b, 2021, nd; see also Belin et al 2021), so the interested reader may consult those works as well. They were not chosen as representative of something—but rather, as an aggregating of another person heard from (Webster 2021, 17). The transcripts are in chronological order—the reader comes to the transcripts in the same order that I came to the conversations. Most of the transcripts come from my early fieldwork in 2000–01. The last set comes from 2008, when I was again living on the Navajo Nation and doing research on theories of translation and working with Blackhorse Mitchell on a project about his book he had published in 1967 and which was reissued in 2004 (Mitchell 2004; Webster 2015). All conversations were primarily in English (or the local variety of English known as Navajo English). Finally, I have called these conversations, and that may be open to doubt. The talking with Jim and Mitchell was more conversational. I have had a number of conversations with them over the years (see Jim and Webster 2022; Mitchell and Webster 2011; Webster 2016, nd;). The talk with Estelle Begay ranged widely—partly because, as she explained to me, she had recently lost her sister—so there was, at least as I reflect back, a kind of reminiscing going on. The talking with Kay was framed as an interview—and it was the only time I recorded a conversation with her. I did not know her well. I had interacted more with Estelle Begay, Mitchell, and Jim. Mitchell would often tell me to start recording our conversation because he was going to say something important and I should record it. Often this meant, for me, beginning the recording by

restating what he had just said before he told me to turn on the recorder. Having the transcripts, as I did, allows the reader to return to earlier conversations as well. To recall and to be reminded.

Long ago now, Fred Myers (1994, 679) wrote that, "translation *is* the ethnographic object" (emphasis in the original). This seems a truism in much anthropology (see Maranhão and Streck 2003; Severi and Hanks 2015). My point, building on the tradition in ethnopoetics and a discourse-centred approach to language and culture, both of which were deeply concerned about transcriptive practices, and overstating it ever-so-slightly, is that transcription is the ethnographic object, or at least central to it (see Sherzer 1992, 426; Fabian 2008, 126). A verdant ethnography—an ethnography that provokes a sense of living (and perhaps also loving)—might make that clearer. It might light the fire of our imagination. Failing that, it might at least highlight the importance of the people who talk with us about the doing of anthropology, the doing that is, of ethnography.

A Verdant Ethnography of Navajo Poets

19 October 2000

Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim (RLJ) and I (AKW) were at Tsegi Overlook at Canyon de Chelly National Monument on the Navajo Nation and near Chinle, AZ. We were outside. It was a cool October evening. The stars were visible. Jim was in his 30s then (see also Jim 2000).

AKW: Well one of the things you do in the poems, at least that I
saw, was that you use a lot of alliteration in a in the poems
a lot of homophones as well
words that sound same
you know
do you think that's an English thing or do you think a
alliteration is common in Navajo

RLJ: I think
alliteration, whatever that means [laughter]
is how the human mind works
it's sorta like associations

AKW: mhm

RLJ: You think of something

tree
then you think of the branches
and that looks like broccoli
then it goes to broccoli
that looks like food
you know how it starts connected, I think

AKW: Right

RLJ: for me the alliteration it's something similar to that
that there's certain words
and yet they look like something else
or they sound like something else
and there just connected different thoughts
and it's sorta like a spider web
seems like they're very connected
they're fine lines where

I guess in a sense
the whole idea, for me, of alliteration is like
something that's fragile like a cobweb
that
that you could read it one way
and have a totally different interpretation
but if you read it a different way
you'll have a different meaning, a different experience
and that life is like that
there are these interconnections
that
you go into a situation
you could think of it as hardship
or you could think of it as a great challenge

AKW: mhm

RLJ: you think of the situation and say
give up
or you could say
"how do I resolve this"
or go into a situation and say, um
"I can't do this."

Or you could say, “This is a great chance for me to learn something new.”
There’s always that.

And so I think of some these alliterations
works that way
allows you to go either this way or this way or another way
regardless of what will be up or down
but when you begin to
understand how that works
then you can go
any direction and come back to the center again

And I think for me the idea behind the earth is round
if you can go deep down into it
you get to the core where it’s all the same
and if you know
if you get to the core you can surface on any part of the earth
and you’ll understand the situation there

people always say you need to go beyond language, beyond culture
you need to go beyond the personal things to understand others
I disagree with that
I think
we must go through culture and language
we must go through ourselves
to get to the core

AKW: mhm

RLJ: and that means going deep and within
and once we do that we can surface
anywhere
and understand
the heart of things
that
an example is the more and more Navajo I think I become
the more and more genuinely Navajo I think I become

AKW: mhm

RLJ: people like my work more
even though they're not Navajos
and I've come to the realization
that in doing that
I become more and more human
and when I get to the core of humanity
through my own language and my own
biases and prejudices and preferences
I come to realize
"Hey, I'm a human being and this is who I am"
and what I speak and write out of that
others understand that
the language may be different
the images may be a little bit different
maybe more desert coyote images
but
when you really get to the heart of it
you ask them they say, "Yes I understand that"
and so I think alliteration
allows
that to take place
if you want to get at the heart of the poem
then you can go either way
and
that's the way it is

AKW: mhm

2 February 2001

Rex Lee Jim and I were sitting in his office at Diné College, Tsaile, AZ. The door was slightly ajar. The two transcripts are both from that conversation. The first transcript is from the middle of our conversation. The second from the end.

RLJ so somebody could be killed in this country for their art

AKW hmm
see I say that
I say that not because I think that America is such a liberal
and open place

that that would never happen
but because I think the arts are so devalued in this country
that no one would care

RLJ mhm

AKW and so my my take is actually a rather cynical perspective

RLJ that's what makes being an artist such a courageous act
that there's always that possibility that no one will give a shit

RLJ [Overlap]

AKW [Overlap] no go ahead

RLJ but I think
I still that that art
any kind
is powerful enough to do a lot of damage
it intimidates threatens
it's probably true that a high percentage of the population
doesn't care

but it doesn't negate the possibility

AKW ah

RLJ and as long as that possibility that hope is still there
then artists will continue to create
they will continue to
express
I mean if you really look at that poem
that 'Hunting'
that ceremony is used when you're thought of as a ghost
ch' ịdii and evil and all that
and then you throw out
and that simply says
talks about anthropologists
that's what you think of my language
that's what you think of my culture
that's what it comes down to
that's why you're recording it
so you can analyze it
as what it is

and run out with it
and be useless to the people here
that's what that poem is all about
taking photographs
recording
asking questions
with the idea that you want
to think this through and learn from it
and then share that learning with others
but no
you just going to blow it the way you did with those teachers
in that shuttle
[SIDE A ends]
[SIDE B begins]

RLJ white anthropologists
we should add linguists too [laugh]

AKW [laugh]

RLJ well not only anthropologists
just
when you begin to seek other peoples' knowledge
and the way they do things
if you're really really interested in it
why not
go and get yourself a doctorate and live there
and if you don't commit to that level
then you're just interested in doing a
little intellectual exercise
that's what that poem is [laugh]
AND I'm glad you LIKED it

AKW well thank you

RLJ [laugh]

2 February 2001

RLJ so yes I think um
the words themselves
you would think that it's ceremonial all this stuff

but when you really begin to think about it
the outcome of this expression
will touch people in certain ways
and they will because of their own design of language
they will begin
to talk about it in different terms

of course that doesn't mean my intent isn't political

AKW right

RLJ it could be totally political

AKW right

RLJ I think that's one of the good things about poetry
you make it
you can
disguise it in many ways
where when it finally surfaces
it hits hard like that
[hits fist against his other hand]

AKW well and that's

RLJ and sometimes that approach is sorta sneaky but
it's a preferred approach in many ways
and it's a much more forceful approach in many ways
because the person end up talking about it
and discover for him or herself

AKW mhm

RLJ rather than say it directly
I mean I could say it so did I really just give it to you straight
and you could say
"Well, you're not supposed to say that, and well it won't be
the last too bad" whereas the other way it begins as way of
self-exploration
and that process again the reader
it many ways begin to say "Hey wait a minute"
and becomes more convincing
it becomes a little bit more
I don't want to say more important

I guess it becomes more meaningful
because of the experience that that person the reader goes through
the hearer
the listener
do I think through all these things I'm talking about when I write?
absolutely not [laughter]

AKW [laughter]

RLJ it more than enough to keep me from writing

AKW when do they come to you? after you've written it?

RLJ when you ask me the questions [slight laughter]
no I think they are all at play
at a certain level that you're not aware of
but later on when you really think about it
"yeah, I know
and this is why I'm doing it"
and then you say
"Oh okay, to make it a little bit more satirical
or bit more strong or political
or whatever
and then I'm going change this word
so it connect with this specific this other set of stories"

AKW mhm

10 February 2001

Navajo poet Kay (a pseudonym) and I were sitting outside at a picnic table on a cold day at Diné College, Tsaile, AZ. I had met her the previous night (a Friday) at an open mic at the college and she had agreed to sit down and talk with me. She was a student at Diné College at the time.

KAY: What is poetry
hmmmm
poetry is a secret

AKW: a secret
KAY: yeah
I think it's a secret

like you write about something
but you're not outright saying something
you're not saying "I'm pissed off"
you know, you'd write something, saying
you know, about how you're pissed off
why you're pissed off
and if you read it
somebody would think, "Wow this person was pissed"
or maybe they'd say, "Hm, this person was sad" you know
maybe the person was sad
maybe the person was pissed
but you know
it's a secret that only the person knows
the person knows
how the person was feeling when they wrote that
so that's how I look at it
it's a secret
it's a mystery
whatever it reveals to you, you know, go with it

AKW: do you think there's anything unique about Navajo poetry

KAY: I do
because um
we're, you know, um
I'm the last generation
um people who are about my age are the last generation to get raised
by um with the traditional ways
growing up speaking Navajo
and then going into the white society and saying, "Whoa"
you know
"This is a different language," you know
and I think I'm the last, the last generation to have that in Navajo society
and actually be really really affected by it
because it's a really hard thing to get used to being um among
in the white society when you're raised traditionally growing up speaking Navajo

you know growing up with your grandma
having your grandma raise you
stuff like that
being taught their morals
their traditions
stuff like that
it affects the poetry because
there's kind of an anger sometimes
kind of a sadness
there's a border line
it's kind of hard to explain
cuz, I guess you've really got to live it or something
it's sad because, you know,
you know you're the last of the generation to actually have felt that way, you
know
and it's a great feeling when you look back at it, you know
cuz, you know, I look back
and I think about my grandma and stuff like that
and some of the things she did for me
and I talk about her sometimes with some of my younger friends
and they're just like, "No, what are you talking about" you know
"My grandma never did that"
and I'm like, "I guess it was only me" you know
and that's the way I feel about it
um, it really takes effect on your poetry, I think
I know it has on mine
it's made me angry a lot of times
it's made me made me sad
it's always in between those two
of course there's happiness there
but, I don't know, I don't think I've ever written happy poetry

AKW: really

KAY: I don't think I ever have

22 February 2001

Estelle Begay (a pseudonym) and I were sitting in her office at Diné College, Shiprock, NM (which is on the Navajo Nation). The office door was closed and she sat behind a large desk. She was an older Navajo woman and she wrote poetry that she kept in a three-ring binder.

AKW: Do you think poetry has to be written?

EB: No
poetry can be your
trip down memory lanes some what
and then when it becomes paper then we call it poetry
but it doesn't have to be
on paper
it's like me and my sister laughing
about silly things we did
instead of talking [weeping begins]
in the two weeks before my sister's death
our evenings were full of reminiscences about things we did
together
a:h
throughout
our childhood

9 July 2008

Navajo poet Blackhorse Mitchell and I were sitting in his home near Shiprock, NM, on the Navajo Nation. I was staying at his house while I was conducting interviews with a number of Navajo writers. In the mornings and in the evenings, we had settled into a routine where we talked about his writing. Mitchell was in his sixties at the time. The transcripts that follow all come from that day. The first two from our morning conversation. The third from a conversation we had in the evening. Mitchell's (2004) book is still essential reading.

AKW: when you first started writing poetry
that was because
you were in school

BM: mhm

AKW: and you were I assume learning to write English

BM: RIGHT

AKW: and so poetry was a way to learn to write English?

BM: I think it was mostly describing
or my thinking was I was trying to say something
because a lot of times
when you're in a boarding school
your teacher does not allow you

AKW: mmm, I see

BM: they kind of don't allow you
and there you're trying to say
you want to speak a:nd
you don't, you don't have MUCH
you're, you're to sit there and learn

AKW: mhm

BM: that was the kind of thing
SO:
the best way was I'm gonna write about
like the dormitory
NOBODY sees what
what what what horrible things
or what the impact is to stay in the dorm at the time

the bell rings and then they say, "Stay in you can't get out"
you go to your room
and you're sittin there
you're restless
only thing you can do is look out the window

BUT HERE
look I can go in and out
and you can too
so: it's the whole freedom
but in the boarding school
you have to
you have TIME limit

so those were just some of things that I:'m
talking about

and then when I'm WRITING
it always has to do with
freedom

and a:h I think the first first ah
[BM gets up, walks across room and gets *Miracle Hill*]
first ah poem that I was working on
there was no chances
[BM comes back and sits]
there was no chance of like
to ASK question
even though the instructor say, "You need to ask question"

AKW: a:h

BM: And so hunh
if you're
if we're FREE to ask questions
in my
it may be different
but in this case
there was none

and after writing this
the first poem
that I ever came up with
she thought this was great

she didn't see what I'm trying to s:
STILL she didn't see what I was trying to say
as a student
so I wrote
because I saw this
cotton
somehow it came past the window into the classroom
and it was just
I was watching it
and then I thought, "wo:w"
so this is what I did
I put

the DRIFTING lonely seed
FROM the casein dark blue sky
through the emptiness of space
A sailing wisp of cotton
NEVER have I been so: thrill
the drifti:ng lo:nely: see:d
came past my barred window
whirling orbit
it land before me
as though it were a woolly la:mb
see where I'm thinking
UNtouch, UNtame, and alone
walk atop my desk
stepping daintily
REACHING out my hands I found you
gentle, weightless, tantalizing
I blew you out through barricaded window
you prance
circle around me
sharing with me your airy freedom

now if she was intelligent
she would have found what I'm saying
and she thought that was a gre:at pi:ece of writing

AKW: what did she think it was about

BM: she thought I was learning my tense

AKW: ah

BM: grammar skills

AKW: she thought you were learning your tense grammar
I see

BM: she didn't see
my thinking is:
listen to me
again
as an instructor
she did not see what I'm saying

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AKW: You once said to give an imagination to someone
an that's
so that's

BM: I WANT people to really see it
like "The Beauty of Navajoland"

AKW: Mmhmm

BM: You can go on the road
an saw saw those things then
I I want
I want somebody
to laugh an say
"god damn it this guy's r:ight"

AKW: Mmhmm

BM: Not
just to say o:h:
the WAY it's written is awesome

AKW: Right

BM: That's not
that's
that's not
THAT'S no good
I want uh people actually
o:h look out there an say
"look at that dirty sky
oh Jesus I read that somewhere I think Blackhorse wrote it
about it"
OR AT LEAST somebody was standin out there an says
"I'm glad it's raining"
an then they start scratchin

AKW: Hh

BM: And then they say "What's wrong" and they might
maybe the doctor says
"you you should stay outa the rain because it had a lot a acid"

AKW: Hh hh

BM: I DON'T WANT my
my poem to
to be
said
I want it proven sayin
it is true
I want somebody to go down to
San Juan River take their shoes off an
just swarm their feet around an then all of a sudden uh shit
crosses the feet
[2-second pause]
an say, "What is this
there's a lot a salad in it
I think it's a white man's"

AKW: [laughter]
A lot of salad in it

BM: Y:eah

AKW. [laughter]

BM: SO
THAT'S
that's what I'm
lookin at [2-second pause]

AKW: Hh hh [5-second pause]

BM: THAT'S what my poem:
I want my poem
to say
I don't want it just read

AKW: Hm

BM. I don't wanna stand there tuh in the poetry sla:m an jus
just
giving action:
body movement an hands

that's
poetry slam

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: Kinda make people
see
the gesture an all this
I don't wanna do it that way
so when I'm reading my poem I rather have that
ugly facial expression [2-second pause]

AKW: But you don't wanna be me:an:

BM: Hm mm

AKW: Or co:ld

BM: No
just medium
I don't wanna be like [name of non-Navajo poet]
uh
not [name of mutual Navajo acquaintance with similar name] yeah
[name of non-Navajo poet]
he: doesn't like
Americans
"THAT'S COLONIALISM
U:H:
WHITE SO-CALLED WHITE THEY CAME ALONG TAKE AWAY ALL THE INDIAN LAND"
that's the way he talks

AKW: Hh hh hh [2-second pause]

BM: But
I don't wanna say that
I can say that but

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: But it's just
the way of putting it
an

so eh in this case
it's jus:
it's just something that I wanna say
an
something that
people
should begin to think about
that's all
that's what I'm sayin

9 July 2008

BM: So it's just like
the way I would write
the this is just one good example
an:
the only way I would write my poem is in the middle uh
a chaos

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: Meaning
I would find
uh people
WHOLE LOT A people, not just one

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: That's
the only way
if I get bored
if I get distract
maybe at a conference

AKW: Ah ha

BM: Maybe at a gathering an:
it's what people say
it just so happened that [clears throat]
this [clears throat]
lady was
called in:
to attend a writer's conference

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: [community name]

AKW: Okay

BM: An:
she comes in
an she stands there
an she reads
a couple of paper I forgot the name a the lady
she said [2-second pause]
"MY GOD
YOU NAVAJOS
when I was coming in from
Tuba City
OH MAN
HO:W beautiful your Navajo land is
you got all that nice open country"
and what was I thinkin
I'm just sittin there I say
"oh: my God
what is she saying
haven't she looked around
hasn't she seen
what's
alongside of the highways
oh Jesus
what was she looking at
WHERE WAS SHE LOOKIN"
and SO
my poem
I went an put
"BEAUTY
of NAVAJOland"
plastic bags
blowing in the wind
aluminum
beer cans
shining in the country

fli:es enjoying WASTE on
Huggies disposals
AND
an empty bottle of Zima ornaments
the roadside
the BEAUTY a Navajoland
little a big trashes drifting in the gale of wind
run-over dogs and coyotes
v:ultures
feasting on deteriorating smell a meat
AND
the crows
flying away with the eyes of the kill [2-second pause]
"the beauty of NAVAJOland,"
you: say:
THOSE polluted dark clouds are not the real clouds
the rivers
an streams contaminated
by redneck piss and dungs
AND
uranium in the flowing innocent r:iver
the BEAUTY of Navajoland
bra: strap
hanging
on the roadside guidepost
crucifix with plastic bouquet of FLOWERS
STANDING an remi:nding in humiliations
AN
coal stripping of M:other Earth
an
flood of acid rain
is not the beauty of
Navajoland

AKW: Ah

BM: That's
what I wrote

AKW: Can I have a copy of that?

BM: It'll cost you

AKW: That's fine

BM: [laughter]

AKW: [laughter]

BM: ANYWAY
THAT'S
what I WROTE
an that's what I mean
if you
look at this
it's something I see
that
people don't see
so:
whoever said
the word *beauty* [said with stress]
I go, "By golly if
there's beauty on Navajoland
how come you
you have this
we HAVE this"
is what I'm saying

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: An I was just hoping that
whoever: read this
an it's true
I I:
I got real
real:
I got to the grip
Like
bra strap hangin on the roadside guidepost would be:
I see that
eh ya you know guidepost and somebody thinks that's
that's something great to hang
somebody:

maybe they throw the poor
they use the old lady or:
screw for half of the night an then throw her bra strap up there
Navajo
uh either the new Navajo is thinking ah that's
that's cool
to me that's not cool
an then
[clears throat]
crucifix with plastic bouquet of flowers
whenever somebody died along the roadside they put all a this
this decoration of plastic bouquets
and I don't like that

AKW: Right

BM: I don't like lookin at it
that's not nice
they should put it
in a cemetery where it belongs

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: But
people don't
why
why do we get in
into this bandwagon
so:
ALL ALL a this
and then
[laughter]
we
you find
councilmen
you find great people
they always stand there says
"MOTHER EARTH"

what did they know a Mo:ther Earth
you know
so:
a lot a things that happen
a no nobody pays attention to
what Mother Earth wants
THAT'S
that's why I wrote it like that I was
mad
at that point

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Rex Lee Jim, Kay, Estelle Begay, and Blackhorse Mitchell for taking the time to talk with me and to try to explain something about their lives and their poetry to me. A version of this paper was presented at the De Krook Library in Ghent, Belgium, in December 2022. I thank Rix Pinxten for the invitation. Thanks as well to Esther Belin for her encouragement then to follow this line of thinking forward. I thank Aimee Hosemann and Leighton Peterson for conversations about the topic and approach taken up here. I want to thank the two reviewers for *Anthropologica* for a number of thoughtful comments. I especially thank Reviewer B for a number of useful suggestions that may not have found their way into this paper, but are certainly things I will continue to grapple with. All research on the Navajo Nation was conducted with a permit from the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Office. I thank them.

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