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An Ensemble Performance of Indians in the Act

Native Theater Past and Present

THE CAST

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Craig Howe, Ceyakton Institute
Dean Rader, University of San Francisco
LeAnne Howe, Choctaw, author, playwright

AN INTRODUCTION

“Indians in the Act,” a panel presentation was conceived as a theatrical moment, an academic play in four acts beginning with historical essays on Lakota performance and culminating with discourse on contemporary Native theater. Our panel performed at the Native American Literature Symposium on November 30, 2000, at 7 P.M. in the all-inclusive resort, Inter-Continental Hotel, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. What is presented here—for the page—is not accurate in the sense in which “performance” is used by academics. The title has been slightly altered. Edits made. The performance, while relevant to the conference, may not at first be obvious to a reader.

Translating the oral tradition, or a Native performance has always proved difficult. Oral stories seem stilted on the page and often require a great deal of teacher preparation for students to become fully engaged in the material. We encountered similar difficulties in reproducing “Indians in the Act” for *SAIL*. We had to remove most of the humorous asides and the singing by certain members of the cast (panel presenters). We also recognize that readers will just have to imagine our *big finale* when the entire audience on November 30 broke out into song: a parody of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Our purpose was to create

an interactive experience so scholars of American Indian literature could become “framed” as active participants in an oral event. During the performance the cast could sense that our audience was responding emotionally, spiritually (read psychologically, if you must), physically, and intellectually. Admittedly, by 9 P.M. many conference attendees were smashed, but the cast of “Indians in the Act” continues to revel in the belief that the audience’s euphoria was a result of the performance.

Our unconventional panel performance tried to demonstrate how much “insider knowledge” is necessary to engage an audience in an oral event. We also wanted our audience to consider that within tribal cultures, there are many “performative acts” that can be thought of as historical antecedents of contemporary Native theater. Finally we suggest that a great deal of cultural engagement has been sustained by American Indian communities and passed on to contemporary tribal storytellers. Just how signals and codes are passed on, and whether they indeed bind a particular tribal culture over time became part of the continuing dialogue after our panel presentation. What follows is our presentation on historic Native acts and their contemporary counterpart, Native theater.

We wish to thank Gwen Griffin, English professor at Mankato State University for her improvisation in bringing Dorothyhontas to life in our staged reading of a scene from the play *The Shaman of OK*, at the end of “Indians in the Act.”

STAGING NOTES

It is the last day of November 2000. The smell of the ocean hangs heavily in the conference room at the all-inclusive resort, the Inter-Continental Hotel in Puerto Vallarta. The audience wants to leave and walk along the beach and feel the warm sand and water between their toes. For some reason they stay. The performance benefits from a pared-down style of presentation. Scene changes are done rapidly, (no blackouts) forcing the panel to be actor-driven. More precisely, academic-driven.

OVERTURE

LEANNE HOWE: It is my pleasure to introduce Harvey Markowitz, singer, actor, and performer, born in Tupelo, Mississippi, on January 8, 1935.

He graduated from high school in Memphis, Tennessee; drove a truck for Crown Electric Company. His first commercial recordings were “That’s All Right, Mama,” and “Blue Moon of Kentucky” for Sun Records. He appeared in several films including *Jailhouse Rock*, 1957, and in 1963, *Girls, Girls, Girls*. (*Audience laughs and realizes—at last—that Harvey Markowitz’s biography sounds suspiciously like Elvis Presley’s. They intuit the cultural cues and quickly adapt to the rhythm of the banter.*)

Next Craig Howe, former star and director of *Indians on Ice*, a musical comedy about reincarnated European fur traders. (*Audience guffaws.*) Craig left a perfectly good career in show business to teach postcolonial theory at Princeton University. (*Audience rolls with laughter.*)

Next Dean Rader. (*Long pause for dramatic effect. Audience reads cue and grows quiet.*) Where to begin? When I first met Dean, he was going by the name of Deanna and working as a cocktail waitress at the Red River Lounge in downtown Austin. It’s amazing what you can do with the money from a National Endowment for the Humanities grant these days, huh? (*Audience spits up. Their laughter momentarily stops the show.*)

One last comment about Dean. Because his undergraduate university in Waco was bought by the Moonies, he has been forced to relocate to New York to finish his Ph.D. (*Audience slaps knees. Howls with laughter. With no break in the action, narrator continues.*)

My name is LeAnne Howe, and today I come before you to announce my candidacy for President of the United States. I plan to give George W. Bush a run for his money! (*Audience roars. Applause rocks the conference room at the all-inclusive resort, Inter-Continental Hotel, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Howe takes a bow and exits, stage right.*)

SCENE I: LAKOTA WINTER COUNTS AND PERFORMANCE

Harvey Markowitz takes center stage and grasps the microphone. He sings the opening lines of “Love Me Tender.” Audience applauds. Harvey suddenly stops singing and begins lecturing in a serious tone. Audience reads their cue and becomes thoughtful and quiet.

HARVEY MARKOWITZ: In his seminal 1988 essay, “The Native Voice,” Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday paid tribute to humanity’s first great

literary master. He invited the reader to “Imagine: somewhere in the prehistoric distance a man holds up in his hand a crude instrument—a brand, perhaps, or something like a daub or a broom bearing pigment—and fixed the wonderful image in his mind’s eye to a wall or rock. [. . .] In our modern, sophisticated terms, [that man] is primitive and preliterate, and in the long reach of time he is utterly without distinction, except: he draws. And his contribution to posterity is inestimable; he makes a profound difference in our lives who succeed him by millennia. For all the stories of all the world proceed from the moment in which he makes his mark. All literatures issues from his hand” (5).

Now, it might seem ironic, even perverse, that Momaday, the quintessential “man-made-of words,” would trace the origin of literature to the imagination and craft of a prehistoric cave dweller. However, his mythopoeic reconstruction teases us with the irony that, with regard to world literature, in the beginning it was the picture, not word, that told stories.

In fact, there was probably never a time when pictures alone told stories. Rather, from the outset, they were necessarily complemented by the spoken language of oral tradition. Remarking on the paramount importance of oral tradition among non-Western peoples, Michael Dorris once observed that it is “the cornerstone of every tribal society [. . .] the vehicle through which wisdom is passed from one generation to the next and by which sense is made of a confusing world. It is responsible in large part,” he continued, “for the education, entertainment, and inspiration of the community” (156–57).

As part of their function of “making sense of the world,” the literary traditions of tribal societies create stories that are place and event centered: here something happened and a particular person was present. The trigger for the recollection of traditional oral narratives might be a place in the landscape, or a particular word, the mention of someone’s name, even a picture or song. Often, as the storyteller recites history, another trigger is tripped and another narrative begins. No pre-established sequence determines the recitation. Rather, using their imaginations and creativity, narrators make connections between stories on the spot, incorporating a wide array of information that pertains to an

incident and that tailors the presentation of this information to the particular circumstances of each recitation.

The tribal histories of peoples of the Great Plains were originally a recounting of events that in some fundamental sense related tribal communities to their surroundings—to other humans, to plants and animals, to landmarks and constellations. Such histories recognized and reinforced circles and webs of relationships that connected all entities of a spatial domain and then related those entities and that domain to the cosmos. These events were communicated in both pictographs and speech, with the pictographs serving as mnemonic devices for recounting the stories pertaining to each incident.

During the seventeenth century, at least five peoples of the Great Plains—the Blackfeet, Kiowas, Mandans, Poncas, and Lakotas—developed a unique method for organizing such pictographic-oral (or, if you will excuse the shorthand, “pict-oral”) representations. The Lakotas called such representations *waniyetu iyawapi* or “winter counts.” Annually the council of each Lakota extended family band or *t’iyospaye* would convene to select the outstanding event of the recently concluded *waniyetu*, or year, that would henceforth serve as the group’s name for that period of time. Following this decision, an individual who was respected for his wisdom and artistic abilities would create a pictograph symbolizing the event and then sketch or paint it on a tanned animal skin to accompany those images that he or former winter count keepers had drawn for previous years. By this method, winter counts established a chronology of community-specific events which simultaneously enabled *t’iyospaye* members to organize, remember, and recount stories of their past.

Among the Lakotas, the oral traditions associated with winter counts were part of the wider cultural category *woyakapi*, or “things told.” Within this category, Lakotas identified a sub-category comprising stories that they considered to be true. These they called *ehani woyakapi*, a term commonly translated into English as “histories.” Such histories the Lakotas again considered of two sorts. The first of those were of a cosmological character, dealing with the origins of the *wakantankapi*, or Lakota deities, animals, plants, and human beings, and first and foremost the Lakota people. The emergence of the Lakotas from under the earth, as many believe, through wind cave is one such story.

The second type of history included stories of incidents from more recent times. While some of these narratives were the common legacy of all the Lakota bands, for example, the White Buffalo Calf Woman's gift of the sacred pipe (of which more shall be said later), most centered on events peculiar to the remembered past of particular t'yospayes. Stories belonging to this second sort predominated in the oral-literary traditions associated with winter counts.

What qualified events for inclusion in a t'yospaye's remembered past was their expression of values, themes, and concerns of central importance to the group. The death of important leaders, epidemics, the triumphs and failures of t'yospaye warriors in battle and horse-raiding parties, periods of starvation and plenty, treaty negotiations, the origin and celebration of rituals, and mysterious and awesome occurrences, such as giant meteor showers or the discovery of an old woman in a buffalo stomach, comprise merely a small sample of the myriad of subjects treated by Lakota historians.

The essential role of social values and interests in Lakota historiography sets it apart from the Euro-American, post-Enlightenment historical tradition which is centered on generating reputedly objective, chronological descriptions and analyses. Although, as already stated, chronology was not absent from Lakota histories, it cannot be said to have been a major principle of their structure and content. Neither was it the aim of Lakota historians to describe or explain events. Rather, their goal was to create among their listeners a sense of participation, empathy, and personal stake in the stories they told. As one astute student of western Sioux culture has observed, for the Lakotas, "historical fact was valued not according to its chronological accuracy but according to its relevance to the people" (DeMallie, *Lakota Society* 113).

Beginning with one event—perhaps captured in a winter count pictograph and its accompanying story—a t'yospaye historian might pass it on to another and then to another, selecting and linking them into an extended oral performance by means of a calculus that matched group situation, Lakota values, and stories. Given the great quantity of narratives available to a t'yospaye historian and their possible combination and recombination in relation to changing needs and situations of the group, the number of possible histories was infinite. It would

have been inconceivable for a Lakota to think of his or her band's history, let alone the histories of the Lakota people or the American Indian in the singular, as Western historians commonly do. It was only because history was constantly changing and sensitive to the situation and needs of a t'iyospaye that it remained relevant and could perform its intended function.

Unless one is aware of this function, a t'iyospaye's decision to include particular incidents on its winter count may at times seem perplexing. In order to be properly understood, these pict-oral representations of remembered past must be interpreted within the context of Lakota lifeways, values, and circumstances.

In essence, the Lakota historical tradition, including its winter counts, may be considered an aspect of the great Lakota custom of wowahunkukiya through which respected elders instructed members of their t'iyospayes on the wicohan or life affirming values and customs of society. Lakota historians performed a similar role by disclosing the values embedded in past events so that the members of their bands might achieve a lived experience of what it meant to belong to those t'iyospayes and what made the Lakotas a great, enduring people. It is here we arrive at the fundamental significance of the Lakota maxim that "a people without history is like wind on the buffalo grass." The Lakotas recognized that in the acts of recording and telling histories, values were reinforced and transmitted that imbued their lives with meaning and purpose. Given the important function of history, it is hardly surprising that, according to Oglala holy man Nicholas Black Elk, many of the history tellers were medicine men. "They have," he observed, "the power and they know" (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 334).

From our knowledge of Lakota oral tradition, there is good reason to trace the origins of wowahunkukiya to the story of ptesanwin, White Buffalo Calf Woman, an incarnation of wohpe, beautiful woman, one of the sixteen Lakota wankatankapi or sacred beings. Among the loveliest and most detailed versions of this story was that told by the Hunkpapa elder, Loneman, and that anthropologist Frances Densmore incorporated in her monumental work, *Teton Sioux Music*. The narrative begins with the mysterious appearance of ptesanwin to a pair of Lakota scouts to whom she announces that she comes bearing a gift

from her nation, the buffalo people. The story's climax arrives with her presentation of this gift, a sacred pipe, to the assembled band of Sans Arc Lakotas whose leader had been chosen to receive it in the name of the whole Sioux tribe. "Your tribe," she tells him "has the distinction of being always very faithful to promises, and of possessing great respect and reverence toward sacred things" (Densmore 66).

While much of Loneman's narrative is concerned with reporting ptesanwin's instructions on the functions and appropriate use of the pipe, an even greater portion memorializes her loving exhortation to the band's men, women, children, and leader that they adhere to the prescribed patterns of behavior for their place in Lakota society. As is fitting, she delivers her wowahunkukiya, as a relative, a sister, who is possessed with a deep and abiding concern for the welfare of her family. She states, "my relatives, brothers and sisters: Wakantanka (the Great Spirit) has looked down, and smiles upon us this day because we have met as belonging to one family. The best thing in a family is good feeling toward every member of the family. I am proud to become a member of your family—a sister to you all. The sun is your grandfather, and he is the same to me" (Densmore 66).

By her act of hunkaye, adoption or the making of kin, White Buffalo Calf Woman not only established her own ties of kinship with the Lakotas, but served as a mediator, extending these ties to the entire buffalo nation and, still further, to all of the gods. In order to remain on good terms with the buffalos and their other spirit relations, it was imperative the Lakotas comport themselves in ways pleasing to the gods and that had been instituted by these deities—again as good relatives—to give the Lakotas life. White Buffalo Calf Woman's counsel provided the Lakotas with a model of how respected members of the band, especially Lakota historians and winter count keepers, could help to instill and encourage the practice of these wicohan, these life-giving traditions and standards.

SCENE II: COUNTING COUP LAKOTA STYLE: BRAVE ACTS
AND DRAMATIC REENACTMENTS

Harvey Markowitz exits stage right. Craig Howe enters. He looks closely at his paper, as if he's never seen it before, then begins speaking in a serious tone. The audience remains silent and respectful.

CRAIG HOWE: Thank you LeAnne for organizing tonight's panel, "Indians in the Act: Native Theater Past and Present." This paper glances at six scenes from the Native American Old World that perhaps represent examples of early Native theater. Drawn from a limited corpus of Lakota literature, they are suggestive analogs to contemporary theatrical performances. So tonight we will catch a couple Indians in the act. NOT THAT act, but rather the act of counting coup Lakota style.

Act One

Bravery on the Battlefield

In this act, a Sioux warrior named Spotted Horse recounts to his son how he achieved his first brave deed, and also how the Sioux acknowledged the bravery of an enemy Pawnee warrior.

Act one. In his book, *My People the Sioux*, Luther Standing Bear recites a story told to him by his father about a time when Pawnees came into Sioux country and hunted buffalo. While the Pawnees were scattered about butchering their kills, Standing Bear's father, Spotted Horse, and his comrades rushed at them headlong on their horses and surprised them into a hasty retreat. One of the foreign hunters had not, however, time to escape:

When I got there, the [Lakotas] were all in a circle around one Pawnee. His horse had got away from him in the excitement and he was left on foot. But he had a bow and arrow in his hand and was defying any of the [Lakotas] to come near. He was a big man and very brave. When our men would shoot an arrow at him and it struck, he would break the arrow off and throw it away. If they shot at him and missed, he would pick up the arrows and defy the [Lakotas] to come on.

Then I asked the men if anyone had yet touched this enemy. They said no; that the man appeared to have such strength and power that they were afraid of him. I then said that I was going to touch this enemy. So I fixed my shield in front of me, carrying only my lance.

The Pawnee stood all ready for me with his arrow fixed in his

bow, but I rode right up to him and touched him with my lance. The man did not appear excited as I rode up, but he shot an arrow at me, which struck my shield and glanced off into the muscles of my left arm.

Behind me rode Black Crow. The third man was Crow Dog, and the fourth man was One Ear Horse. We four men touched this enemy with our lances, but I was the first. After the Pawnee had wounded me, the other men expected to see him get excited, but he did not lose his nerve. As soon as I had passed him with an arrow through my arm, the Pawnee had a second arrow all ready for the next man.

The second man was shot in the shoulder, and the third man in the hip. As the last man touched the enemy, he received an arrow in the back. In this manner the Pawnee shot all four men who had touched him with their lances. We had all gained an honor, but we were all wounded. Now that four of our men had touched the enemy, he was so brave that we withdrew from the field, sparing his life. (*My People the Sioux* 4–5)

Act Two

Becoming Brave

This act examines how young Lakota boys such as Luther Standing Bear and Bull-Standing-with-Cow were constantly encouraged to comport themselves in a brave manner. Even when in the womb, their mothers would sing songs of courage and praise in their name. Thus, when on the battlefield, they were eager to demonstrate their bravery.

Act two. When Lakota communities still exercised traditional decision-making authority within their homelands, young men had four paths to follow in their quest for honors: the healer, the hunter, the scout, or the warrior. Luther Standing Bear in his work, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, wrote that “most young men at some time in their lives tried to become medicine-men, [but] to become a great brave was, however, the highest aspiration” (39). In choosing the warpath, Lakota warriors sought to garner honors by performing one of three categories of courageous acts on the battlefield: namely, loyalty to their fellow

warriors, bravery by touching or couping an enemy, and generosity by sparing the life of an enemy warrior.

When just boys, young Lakotas were admonished to be brave and thereby bring honor to themselves, their relatives, and their tribe. They also witnessed sisters, mothers, and fathers of warriors praising their brothers and sons on certain occasions. Standing Bear noted that

at these ceremonies, praises were sung for all our braves and it was there that the boys determined to be braves themselves some day. They wanted to be men of courage and to merit praise and honor. [...] Mother further interested me by sometimes talking about the braves. She would tell me what they had done and why they were honored. (*Land of the Spotted Eagle* 25)

Bull-Standing-with-Cow's father told him: "When you go on the warpath, look out for the enemy and do something brave. Do not make me ashamed of you" (Vestal 8). In the summer of 1865, Bull-Standing-with-Cow was sixteen years old and began his distinguished career as a warrior. In August of that year he again joined a war party and went on the warpath a second time. Concealing themselves in the hills surrounding Pumpkin Buttes in what is now Wyoming, the war party watched a portion of the Bozeman Trail south of what would later become Fort Reno. Bull-Standing-with-Cow told the story of his second warpath to Stanley Vestal who recorded it this way:

Hiding there, the [Lakotas] soon saw enemies riding south along the trail—seven mounted scouts in blue uniforms, driving four spare horses. When they came near, the Sioux mounted and swept from their covert [hideout] at a run, whipping their horses on both sides. Bull-Standing-with-Cow was riding his fast gray [horse], "Swift Hawk." He got a good start and dashed far ahead of the main party, riding with the foremost. At first the scouts did not see the [Lakotas] coming. When they did, they halted, turned tail, and raced back toward the tents and buildings of their camp with the blood-curdling war-cry of the [Lakotas] loud in their frightened ears.

By the time the foremost [Lakotas] drew near the scouts, the

latter had become considerably strung out. They galloped along as fast as they could, with the frightened spare horses plunging through the dust at their sides. Charging-Bear was first to overtake the last of the scouts. He struck the man smartly across the shoulders with his bow, then wheeled away, veering from the threat of the bluecoat's gun. Bull-Standing-with-Cow, plunging through the dust right at his friend's heels, counted the second coup on that scout with his lance . . . [and then] dashed on to attack the other [scouts]. He was now the foremost of the [Lakotas].

As the boy plunged forward, yelling, he raised his lance to strike the blue back before him. But the second scout heard him coming, turned in his saddle and raised his revolver, firing point-blank at the boy behind. Tchow! The white smoke almost concealed the scout for an instant. But Bull-Standing-with-Cow did not turn back. The bullet had missed him. He was unhurt, and plunged on. The scout, riding half-turned around, kept threatening his pursuer with the gun. But Bull-Standing-with-Cow was too eager to be scared away. His blood was up, his horse was fast, he was right on the tail of his enemy. At any moment now he might count his first "first" coup and win the coveted right to wear an upright eagle-feather in his hair.

The scout, finding that he could not run away from, or bluff his enemy with the revolver, fired again; but at the same instant the boy stabbed him with his lance in the shoulder, shoving him from his saddle. With a cry he fell from his horse into the dust. The riderless horse plunged on after the others with swinging stirrups. Thus Bull-Standing-with-Cow was the first to strike this enemy, Cloud Man struck second. (43-45)

Act Three

Where's Your Feather?

This act examines the relationship between counting coup and wearing feathers. In Lakota society, feathers symbolized with a considerable degree of precision how brave their wearers were on the battlefield.

Only those who had preformed brave deeds were entitled to wear a feather, and they did so in a conventionalized manner.

Act three. Warriors were entitled to wear an eagle tail feather in a manner corresponding to the type of coup they counted. In counting coup, Lakotas recognized the first four individuals to touch the same enemy with their hands or something held in their hands. Individuals attained honors that corresponded to the order of their coup. The coups were ranked; the first person to strike an enemy achieved the highest honor and was entitled to wear an eagle feather upright at the back of his head. The second person to strike could wear his feather slanting upward to the right. The third to count coup wore his feather parallel to his right shoulder, while the fourth man's feather sloped downward to the right. Thus the position of feathers indicated at a glance to all Lakotas which warriors were bravest in battle. Counting coup was rated higher in bravery than stealing horses and killing, scalping, or taking personal possessions of an enemy.

Act Four

Dramatic Reenactments

Whereas brave acts were preformed on battlefields in front of enemy and friendly warriors, those same deeds were subsequently reenacted within the warriors' home community and included the participation of their families, friends, relatives, and horses. Black Elk and Standing Bear describe these dramatic theatrical performances.

Act four. When warriors returned triumphant from the warpath, there immediately began preparations for the victory dance, called either waktegli wacipi or iwakiciwacipi.¹ If an enemy scalp was taken, this is how Black Elk described the prelude to the victory—or kill come back—dance:

When [the warriors] come back, they stop near the camp and all blacken their faces with charcoal. [. . .] Then [those that had made a kill or coup] get together and the rest stay behind. They gallop into camp and circle around the camp [saying what they had done . . .] and then rode back to where the others were, and

then they all came back, with the women first and the scalps. [...] The second time they came they sang. They paraded around with the women in the lead, then the braves with their scalps. Then over and over again, they sang the[ir] songs.

The relatives of the men in the party, after the first group went around the first time, blackened their faces, too. As soon as they came to the place prepared for that, they had the victory dance. (DeMallie, *Sixth Grandfather* 369-70)

Standing Bear witnessed a number of these dances and described them as

very dramatic performance[s] given by the braves who took this opportunity to display strength, bravery, war skill, and to decorate themselves a great deal. Some of them used their favorite war horses in order to give a faithful and dramatic picture of what took place on the battlefield. The animals, too, seemed to sense the meaning and glamour of the occasion and I have seen them prance, snort, and act with their masters in a most marvelous way. The acting in these dances was sometimes very fine—the receiving of a wound, the rescue of a friend, an escape with the assistance of a friend, all being enacted with realism. (*Land of the Spotted Eagle* 220)

Standing Bear continued:

All the men who had been in the battle took part, each man dressed in the clothing he had worn in the fight. Those who had been wounded painted the spot a bright red, to represent blood. [...] If a horse had been wounded, the animal was brought into the dance and painted where it had been struck by a bullet. Even the horses received praise for the part they had taken in the battle.

Those who had worn war-bonnets in the fight also wore them in the dance. Some carried scalps. There were no false credits given at this dance, but every warrior received his just merits. One could easily tell just what the standing was of those who participated in the dance. Several days were consumed before the victory dance was finished. (*My People the Sioux* 57)

These dramatic reenactments were staged in the hocoka of a Lakota village, witnessed by the entire community and encircled by their lodges. Young warriors who had counted their first coup were given an adult name at this time, their boyhood name being put aside. Scalps often were given to a warrior's sisters or mother, or sometimes to the relatives of a warrior killed by enemies. If a warrior captured horses, he distributed them to relatives, but foremost to his sisters.

Act Five

Oh Sister, Where Art Thou?

Upon returning from the warpath with captured horses, a warrior distributed them to relatives, but foremost to his sisters. This act is a song that was composed and sung by a man named Two Shields upon returning from the warpath (Densmore 362–63). Act five.

tanke'	older sister
hina'pa yo	come outside
sunka'wakan	horses
awa'kuwe	I am bringing home
tanke'	older sister
hina'pin	come outside
na	and
wanzi' oyus'payo	you may catch one of them

Act Six

Count Coup Lakota Style

Act six. Lakota coups were recorded in many media. Brave deeds were dramatically danced by warriors who simultaneously scripted a descriptive narrative. Feathers were affixed to their hair and colored to indicate the order of coup and whether or not the wearer was wounded. Songs were composed and sung in praise of brave warriors, both by themselves and by their relatives. And some warriors depicted their daring deeds in drawings.

In the Native American Old World, the intended audience for these

multimedia accounts was the warriors' own community. As much as the accounts praised the exploits of individual warriors, a primary purpose of recording the perilous acts was to perpetuate the people. The exemplary behavior ensured that the community continued, but moreover validated the virtues of the Lakota way of life:

wo'ohitika	bravery
wo'wacintanka	fortitude
wacan'tognaka	generosity
wo'ksape	wisdom

A warrior's highest calling was to contribute to his community's act of being and becoming on its own terms. In some sense, those brave acts and dramatic reenactments were unique community-based, theatrical expressions, setting the stage, perhaps, for contemporary Native theater. And that is . . . counting coup Lakota style.

SCENE THREE: POETRY AS PERFORMANCE

Craig Howe exits. Dean Rader enters, stage left. Fuming, he covers the microphone and says something to Harvey Markowitz. The audience shifts in their seats. Given his reputation, it is clear they think the speaker may be cueing them for a humorous scene. There is tension. When he begins to recite poetry, the audience again reads his cue and listens.

DEAN RADER:

The October night is warm and clear.
 We are standing on a small hill and in all directions,
 around us, the flat land listens to the songs rising.
 The holy ones are here dancing.
 The Yeis are here.

In the west, Shiprock looms above the desert.
 Tsé bit'a'í, old bird-shaped rock. She watches us.
 Tsé bit'a'í, our mother who brought the people here on her back.
 Our refuge from the floods long ago. It was worlds and centuries

ago,

Yet she remains here. Nihimá, our mother.

This is the center of the night
and right in front of us, the holy ones dance.
They dance, surrounded by hundreds of Navajos.

Diné t'óó àhayóí.

Diné t'óó àhayóí.

We listen and watch the holy ones dance.

Yeibicheii.

Yeibicheii.

Grandfather of the holy ones.

They dance, moving back and forth.
Their bodies are covered with white clay
and they wave evergreen branches.
They wear hides of varying color,
their coyote tails swinging as they sway back and forth.
All of them dancing ancient steps.
They dance precise steps, our own emergence onto this land.

They dance again, the formulation of this world.
They dance for us now—one precise swaying motion.
They dance back and forth, back and forth.
As they are singing, we watch ourselves recreated.

Éí álts'íísígíí shil nizóní. The little clown must be about six years old. He skips lightly about waving his branches around. He teases people in the audience, tickling their faces if they look too serious or too sleepy. At the beginning of each dance, when the woman walks by to bless the Yeis, he runs from her. Finally, after the third time, she sprinkles him with corn pollen and he skips off happily. 'éí shil nizóní.

They Yeis are dancing again, each step, our own strong bodies.
 They are dancing the same dance, thousands of years old. They
 are here

for us now, grateful for another harvest and our own good health.

The roasted corn I had this morning was fresh,
 cooked all night and taken out of the ground this
 morning. It was steamed and browned just right.

They are dancing and in the motion of songs rising,
 our breathing becomes the morning moonlit air.
 The fires are burning below as always.

We are restored.

We are restored.

You have just heard a poem entitled “Motion of Songs Rising” by Luci Tapahonso, a Navajo writer living in Arizona.²

This piece is a short musing not only on Luci’s poem but also on the act of reading the poem—both the act of reading the poem as you just did and also the act of reading the poem aloud, as you might do in front of your class, or, if we were actually with each other, as I might do at a conference presentation. More precisely, I am interested in questions surrounding what happens when we enact performative texts by American Indian writers. For instance, let’s say I made a visit to your class and read this poem aloud to you and your students. To what degree is my reading of the poem a performance? And, more importantly, how would the performance be different if Luci were in your class to read the poem instead of me? Perhaps even more interestingly, what would happen if LeAnne Howe or Craig Howe (both of whom are and perhaps even look “Indian” but are not Navajo) magically appeared in your classroom and read Luci’s poem? These simple but plausible scenarios dramatize some critical issues that attend the questions of this collaborative essay in particular and both Native studies in general. In the conference version of this essay, I began my presentation by reading this poem—both in Mexico at the Native American Literature Symposium and later in Washington DC at the American Studies Association meeting. The simple act of reading Luci Tapahonso’s poem

at a Native studies conference and then again at an American studies conference foregrounds provocative questions about what is at stake in our work and in our classes when we enact or reenact Native texts, especially those texts in which something magical or sacred transpires. So for the next few pages, I'd like to explore these questions of authenticity, performance, and poetry.

Let's begin with Luci's poem. If Ms. Tapahonso were in your classroom or in your home or in your office, if she had read or *performed* this text, I am willing to bet that the experience of hearing the poem would have been considerably different for you than if I read you the poem. No doubt, you would have found her presentation of the text not only more authentic but more powerful than my own performance. Certainly, she would not have butchered the Navajo; certainly, the immediacy, the poignancy of her poem would feel more palpable; certainly there would be moments—perhaps extended moments—in which the boundary between Luci and her poem was invisible; certainly, you would feel as though the poem were part and parcel of the author who spoke it, before you, to you. Perhaps you would have felt as if something tribal, something magical, something wholly “Indian” was happening before you, to you.

On the other hand, I suspect that all of you would have felt weird if Adam Sandler read this poem, and something altogether different if I did. In this scenario, I doubt you would have felt as though something genuinely “Indian” was unfolding in your presence. Where you may have participated in the poetic if Luci were with you, you now might feel as though you were given the academic. As I struggled to pronounce “*ei alts iisigii shil nizhoni*,” as I read as opposed to enacted Luci's poem, a notable incongruity may have emerged. If you were not thinking about your own work or wondering what the hell I was doing in your home or office reading this poem, you may have been puzzling over a *seemingly* Anglo male reading a poem by a Navajo woman. Imagine now that I am reading this poem at a conference on American Indian literature in Mexico. There are many Indian writers and scholars in the audience. How might my “performance” of Luci's poem appear to them? Now imagine that I am, as I was, reading this poem very early on a Saturday morning as part of a panel on performance at a conference

on American studies in Washington DC, a city in which many decisions about Indian removal and murder were set into motion. Of the possible incongruities in this moment, which is the most puzzling? And do these incongruities create a kind of distance between the poem, the performer, and the audience that would otherwise be minimized or entirely absent if Luci Tapahonso read her poem instead of me? In short, what happens to the poem, to the moment, when someone who is *not* Luci reads it? If there are satisfactory answers to these questions, I don't know them.

What I do know: Luci Tapahonso's poem was written in the early 90s, probably in long hand, mostly in English, partly in Navajo. It was published in 1993 in a book entitled *Sáani Dahataaʔ: The Women Are Singing* by the University of Arizona Press. The book is ninety-five pages and 0-8165-1351-1 is the ISBN for the hardback edition, and 0-8165-1361-9 for the soft cover. The poem appears on pages 67–68. The book was printed on acid-free paper in what appears to be a Palatino font. Even reduced to this tedious level, I would argue that the poem is still a performance—though, one could argue, as much from the University of Arizona Press as from Luci Tapahonso. When read though, silently or aloud, something happens. The poem ceases to be merely an impressed two-dimensional document and becomes something altogether different, a heightened performance that transports the reader and/or the listener out of one world and into the world of the poem, the world of the *Dine*—metaphorically this happens merely by engaging the poem, literally this happens when the Yeis are sung into being.

Indeed, “The Motion of Songs Rising” links the motion of life and language with the motion of the Yeis's dance. Here, the Yeis literally dance the world into existence through the performance of ritual. For the speaker and the “hundreds of Navajo” surrounding the dancers, their participation in ceremony transforms the experience into participatory truth. My hope is that my reading of this poem transforms the typical distancing conference setting into an atypical, even uncanny moment. If this is the case, then what can happen in our classes and in our work? What are the real differences between?

reading the poem silently to yourself?

reading the poem aloud to yourself?

watching another Native writer read the poem?
 experiencing another Native writer *perform* the poem?
 watching Luci read and sing her poem on television?
 listening to a tape of Luci performing her poem?
 having Luci visit your class and perform the poem to you and
 your students?
 watching me read the poem to no one in particular as we stand
 outside a Hogan in the middle of Navajo?
 Listening to me recite the poem to Luci as you, she, and I walk to
 Starbucks?

Of course, the possibilities are endless, and in each scenario, we can imagine a different poetic experience with varying levels of authenticity, immediacy, and immanence. What's more, we would probably not experience these nuances of performance and ritual if we were talking about Adrienne Rich or, say, John Ashberry. So, again, what is at stake when we perform Luci's poem? What does this experience say about Luci, us, the poem, and the world? How does the poem engage those not participating in the act of reading the poem?

In the world of the poem, one finds no distinction between the *Dine* watching and those participating. Perhaps, as I moved through the poem something similar happens here. Perhaps my reading of Luci's poem is what I would call a mediated performance—an interlocutory act in which a text's immediacy gets mediated through another performer. But to a certain degree, every book, every website, is a mediated performer; they stand in for the poet, the author, the original speaker. Perhaps, then, it is inaccurate to think of "The Motions of Songs Rising" as entirely Luci's poem. Perhaps if Luci were to sing her poem to you, then it would no longer have been hers but yours. Perhaps now, after reading the poem, it is your responsibility to make out of the poem your own performance. I think Tapahonso would agree. In her introduction to the book, she writes:

Many of the poems and stories have a song that accompanies
 the work. [...] When I read these in public, the song is also a part
 of the reading. [...] The combination of song, prayer, and poetry
 is a natural form of expression for many Navajo people. [...] It is

with this perspective that I share the following stories, poetry, and prayers. Once, my older brother said about my *nálí*, my paternal grandmother, who died decades ago: “She was a walking storybook. She was full of wisdom.” Like many other relatives, she had a profound understanding of the function of language. (xi–xii).

The function of language in the poem is performative. More than any other poet I know, Tapahonso remains keenly aware of the authority of language, whether it is written on the page or spoken from the human body, and she knows that if one speaks correctly and powerfully, the world responds. This type of speech is performative because it makes things happen. As Jonathan Culler notes, “[p]erformative utterances [. . .] are statements which themselves accomplish the acts to which they refer” (108). Thus, in “The Motion of Songs Rising,” Tapahonso and her act of poetic performance, not only speaks the ritual into being; the poems *become* the ritual just as the ritual becomes that to which *it* refers. As an actual performance itself, the poem personifies the dance, and the shared rhythms and pulsations of these expressions with the pulsations of the body reinforce the manifestation of the word. So, when David Biespel claims that Tapahonso “speaks the observed and spiritual world into existence,” he is not exaggerating (40). Tapahonso—whether she or I read—revitalizes language and experience through a ritualization of the poetic endeavor and restores the site of the poem to its most ancient energies—even in a room in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, even at an academic conference, even in an academic journal.

At least that is what I believe. Other things I believe: Luci’s poem works regardless of who reads it, and the forces that make it work—connection, relation, enaction—are the forces that draw both Natives and non-Natives to Indian literature. Simon Ortiz claims “the narrative style and technique of oral tradition can be expressed as written narrative and that it would have the same participatory force and validity as words spoken and listened to” (9). In a rare moment when Tapahonso and Ortiz would find themselves in agreement with Jonathan Culler, what emerges is a kind of cross-cultural consensus that on some level even a mediated performance can make things happen.

Of course, it would be ideal if Luci could always magically appear to give us her poem, but for the time being, you are stuck with me, and for the most part, you are stuck with yourselves. And while this may not be the best of all possible worlds, thankfully you are not stuck with me only. You have the eternal performance of Luci's poem, and in that, we are all restored.

SCENE IV: CIRCLING THE WAGONS: CONFESSIONS OF A
NATIVE AMERICAN THEATER TROOP

Dean Rader exits. LeAnne Howe takes center stage. Because she has a reputation for being a comic—in certain circles—and because of her wild introductions, the audience is prepared for action. She breaks the “fourth wall” and mingles among the audience passing out song lyrics for a group sing-along. When she tells the audience they are the evening’s big finale, they cheer.

LEANNE HOWE: Before we begin the final portion of our evening's program, I want to say that our panel can be thought of as an ensemble performance; like a play, one thing has led to another. *Winter Counts, things told*, as Harvey Markowitz points out is a Lakota performance involving pictures and words about events in the Lakota past. Craig Howe has shown how counting coup, a dramatic reenactment by Lakota warriors, persuaded their tribal audiences of their future abilities in warfare. Dean Rader has given examples from Native poets who conflate poetry, prayer, song and ritual, into one powerful performance that enacts language, stirs the emotions, and engages an audience. For my part, I'm going to talk about contemporary Native theater and the processes American Indians use to create plays and perform them.

First however, I want to say something about the way I was taught to tell stories. It wasn't by studying a speech or rehearsing a performance, but by practicing the art of listening. My grandmother taught me to listen intently when an elder was speaking. I listened to the narrative rhythm embedded in a particular story, like the refrain of a song. I also learned to anticipate the rise of drama or comedy by the sound of a narrator's voice.

By the time I am six, maybe seven years old, I know Grandmother's routine. The phrases she used to cue me go something like this:

“Listen! Did you hear something?”

“No,” I would answer.

“Listen, Listen, Listen!” she’d coaxed.

What follows are some of the stories I remember well. “Aunt Sally and the Comanches who stole her cow in Fitztown and butchered it right before her eyes.” “The Jewel-T man who killed a red bird, and shortly afterwards got himself run over by a reckless Nazarene preacher.” “Our grandmother who walked on the Trail of Tears.” “Why we came to Oklahoma.”

As you can see by my grandmother’s stories one thing leads to another. Concerning the first story, she wanted me to know that we were newcomers to Indian Territory. Analogs were endless. “Locals” she would say, “always extract a toll.” Regarding the second story the lesson was like a headline. “Nature Fights Back; Uses Christian To Get Even.” The last two stories, the Trail of Tears, and why the government forced us to move from our homelands were very popular and repeated often, generally after she’d read the Saturday afternoon newspaper and some politician had made her mad. In other words, my grandmother was a kind of political commentator and quirky storyteller. She always connected the past with the present. I can still hear her speaking through my own stories—whether they are plays, prose, poetry, or essays—I am a carrier of her voice.

All tribes have storytellers and performers. My historical contribution to tonight’s discussion comes from the Choctaw anoli(s). The anoli would perform a story for an audience, and eventually call on their listeners to interact with what was being said. At large Choctaw gatherings dramatic oratory tended to have a specific political function: to inform the audience about injustices and the action that must be taken. A dramatic Choctaw oratory reported in Cyrus Byington’s diary, dated 1865, serves as an historical example:

There was a well-known, solemn style appropriate to all speeches delivered in public by captains, councilors, and Chiefs. It abounded in serious words, called by some, “speech-terms.” One part of a sentence was nicely balanced by another. It was poetic in style and manner of delivery. At the close of his paragraphs that

orator would invite the people to listen to him, and to consider what he had said, pausing a moment. The audience would give loud responses of appropriate sayings, Yummah, “that is it”; alhpesah, “it is right.” (8)

What I believe Byington is trying to describe are tribal performance stories. He describes the men as political leaders but it should be noted that the Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion, Vols. I–V dating from 1701-1763 are replete with examples of speechmakers. These speakers or anoli(s) cue their audiences to recollect “insider knowledge” or a certain historical event that members of the tribe are familiar with. The emotion those memories instigate causes the audience to respond appropriately. Choctaw anoli(s) would continue extolling current realities but implore the people to consider questions of the future. The performance worked on orator and audiences alike to create the cultural glue that binds future tribal actions.

The orators would approach their themes gradually. After saluting all present, according to their rank and office, they complimented the dignitaries present, the inhabitants of the village, or those living on the neighboring streams, and their long line of forefathers. Thus preparation was made for the announcement of the main subject. While speaking they rarely look anyone in the face. Some of their most frequently recurring archaisms consisted of lengthened pronominal suffixes *to* verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc., as Nanta hochá, “What is it?” for Nana Hona, “something.” A few of the venerable men of the nation are still fine examples of this class of orators. It is truly a pleasure to hear one of these orators when fully prepared speak before a large council. (Byington 8)

While Byington describes the orators as “captains, councilors, and Chiefs,” those positions of speech-maker are held by men or women who were highly trained in the art of performing before large tribal and inter-tribal audiences. The documents also mention Choctaw children who are “adopted out” to another tribe in the Southeast in order for the child to become fluent in another’s tribe’s language. As young bilingual

adults when they return him they are further trained as cultural and political translators for both communities.

Nanta hochá, "What is it?" the orator asks.

Nana Hona, "Something" the audience replies.

Craig Womack in his introduction in *Red on Red* insists that "Native artistry is not pure aesthetics, or art for art's sake: as often as not Indian writers are trying to invoke as much as evoke. The idea behind ceremonial chant is that language, spoken in the appropriate ritual contexts, will actually cause a change in the physical universe" (16-17). In other words, a Native performative act is a way cultural growth of a tribal community can develop. Womack goes on to ask scholars to search for "a deeper investigation of narratives that goes beyond the simple structural categories of creation, hero, journey, monster slayer, and so on, in which the stories most frequently get cast" (17).

Which brings me back to my role in our academic performance this evening. I'm here to talk about my experiences in writing and performing contemporary Native plays. My first experience was working with the late Choctaw author Roxy Gordon and urban Indian students. My later experiences were with Indians in specific tribal communities: Durant, Oklahoma, home of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma; and Mission, South Dakota, home of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

I began writing plays with Gordon in 1986. Our first play, *Big Pow Wow*, was produced in 1987 by Sojourner Truth Theater in Fort Worth, Texas. It is a play about a Choctaw woman in dire straights. Blossom BirdSong is overweight, on welfare, and she drinks too much. In short, she is a stereotypical mess. However, once her ancestor, an old Choctaw ghost named Tullock Chishe Ko appears and admonishes her by using lines he's memorized from top forty hit singles, Blossom decides to take charge of her life. *Big Pow Wow* was reviewed as a political comedy and ran for six weeks in the summer of 1987. Our two lead actors were Choctaw and Cherokee.

In 1988, Gordon and I cowrote *Indian Radio Days*, a radio play that tells Indian history since the beginning of time. The play ends in the future when American Indians build an off-world gaming casino on Mars. In 1993, when I was working at the University of Iowa, I gathered together American Indian students at UI and WagonBurner Theatre

Troop was born. We were a community of urban Indians mostly from the five largest Southeastern tribes in Oklahoma. WagonBurner Theater Troop really created *Indian Radio Days*. The performers worked on the script, wrote new scenes, created music and new characters. However, what we discovered while performing throughout the Midwest was that our non-Indian audiences NEVER reacted to the humor. They didn't seem to know the code, or the cues to be able to react. When we performed before American Indian audiences, the reaction was much different. The audience laughed in most of the places we (playwrights and performers) expected. To compensate we wrote audience cues for non-Indian audiences and made them part of future performances. What we learned boils down to this: if audiences don't know tribal histories, or even "pan-Indian history" they can't read the cues. They lack insider knowledge.

My next experience came from a theater workshop at Red River Arts Academy in Durant, Oklahoma. The students were ages 14–18 and we had nine days to write, direct, and perform a play. Not only did the students accomplish this; they wrote three plays. The titles were: *Madame Oklahoma*, *The Love Story That Brings Three Lonely People Together*, and *Two Catfish, An Indian Barber/Photographer/Clerk/Sheriff's Deputy who live life in a small Oklahoma Town*. In the final scene, everybody dies. Again, comedy juxtaposed with tragedy.

When I took the job, I did so thinking all the students would be Choctaw. It wasn't the case. Five students were of Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Caddo, and Comanche ancestry, and there were four non-Indian students. (One student was learning to speak his tribal language.) The students quickly decided they wanted to write about Indian and white conflicts in Oklahoma *and* love affairs. They went to the library and found stories about an Indian postman in the late nineteenth century in Caddo, Oklahoma. All three plays involved the Indian postman and his hazardous job. Some of the same trends occurred among the Red River Arts Academy students, as did with WagonBurner Theater Troop members. They wanted to write together and collaborate. Although they didn't know each other previous to the workshop, they refused to work alone. The process became an interactive team effort. It should be noted that there are no feathers in the three plays,

but land, and events in Caddo, Oklahoma, are central themes. A political statement in itself.

Jeffrey F. Huntsman writes:

Without such centering in sacred time and place, Native American dramas would be mere displays, robbed of their meaning. Sometimes a special place is created for the drama, either permanent, like the kivas of the Southwest, or temporary like the Sun Dance Lodges of the High Plains. Sometimes the stage is the people's ordinary living space, like the Northwest Coast family houses, the Southwest village plazas, or the Plains lodges. (86)

I would argue that tribal colleges have created spaces that are "telling places." In the fall of 2000 Jeff Kellogg, theater professor at Sinte Gleska University in Mission, South Dakota, invited me to be their artist-in-residence for three weeks. I worked with students in theater, and in the creative writing classes. Professor Kellogg and I used a variety of approaches to begin the playwriting process. We invited students to write outside of class and bring their scenes to workshop. Then we tried writing scenes collaboratively in class. This became the students' method of choice. They wrote two plays. *Rosebud* is a play that pokes fun at the film *Citizen Kane*, and uses Rosebud (land) as a reference to engage and cue a Lakota audience. The Hearst's infamous Home Stake mine, Indian land claims, and problems associated with the environment since the white man arrived, are all issues raised by the characters in the play. The students also used a series of contemporary advertising slogans that became the "ceremonial chants" creating segues between scenes.

Eyaphha, The Black Hills are not for Sale!

The tribal audience read the cue and began to repeat the chant, the slogan. Other chants the students used in their play were:

Peabody Coal—the ecology company. Also repeated by the audience.

Lakota Lullaby, the second play, is about a Rosebud family who questions Columbus Day celebrations at their local school. Sinte Gleska students gave two staged readings of their plays. Nearly seventy people from the reservation attended the performance at the school's student lounge.

My aim has been to show that American Indian students, whether

urban or reservation, tend to draw on their tribal traditions, land tenure, and their tribal histories to write and perform contemporary Native plays. I suggest that many “performative acts,” especially storytelling, can be thought of as historical antecedents of contemporary Native theater.

Now as a way to close this evening’s performance I would like you to join us in performing a scene from *The Shaman of OK*. First we’ll have the sing-a-long. You know the tune, and the words are on the sheet of paper.

Audience sings. “Somewhere over the rainbow, way out west. There’s a land that I long for once in a treaty tale . . .” Applause rocks the conference room at the all-inclusive resort, Inter-Continental Hotel, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, November 30, 2000. There is no weeping . . .

The End.

NOTES

1. The particulars of these dances undoubtedly differed in each of the Lakota communities. Waktegli is the Lakota term for Victory Dance (Black Bear 60–61).

2. “Motion of Songs Rising” from *Sáanii Dahataak: The Women Are Singing* by Luci Tapahonso ©1993 Luci Tapahonso. Reprinted by permission of the University of Arizona Press.

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