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“NATIVE LITERATURE, NATIVE SPIRITUALITY AND THE AFFECTIVE TURN”

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Native Literature, Native Spirituality and the Affective Turn

It is a real pleasure and an honor to be back at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to participate in this this lecture series. My sincere thanks for Karen and Bruce Baker as well as Chuck Johanningsmeier.

When I received the invitation to present this lecture, I began reflecting back on my experiences here at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The English Department has shaped me in many ways, certainly as a teacher and a scholar. So it does take a department to raise a college student.

I thought, taught and wrote about Cather, with a particular interest in sociological approaches, particular class analysis, and when my focus shifted to Native literary studies, I continued this approach. I was interested, for example, in how Louise Erdrich depicts class conflicts both on and off a reservation, and how class interests shape the way Greg Sarris’s characters tell traditional stories or experience their sexuality.

More recently I have become interested in the ways religious experience is engaged in modern and contemporary Native literature. Robert Warrior (Osage) in Tribal Secrets asserts: “[O]ne of the problems of the modern condition is its loss of the impulse to seek direct, unmediated religious experience” (72). In spite of this common loss, certain Native writers have been drawn to expressing more-than-material ways of being. I would like to consider key works of three of them: Tlingit poet Robert Davis Hoffman; Mvskoke poet Joy Harjo; and Cherokee novelist, poet and playwright Diane Glancy. Each expresses the struggle for spiritual apprehension. Almost uniquely, they explore experiential difficulties inherent in the nature of the spiritual world itself. However, before developing this I want to consider the ways the Affective Turn offers new interpretive possibilities for Native studies.

Here was my transition to this perspective. Reading the journals of 18th century Mohegan missionary Samson Occom, I thought I could develop a quick, smart paper on the economic discrimination of his Anglo missionary board. He was getting about a tenth of the salary that Anglo missionaries received. As it turned out, I found that much more than unequitable pay was at stake in this conflict. The more I read, the more I became aware of the complex intersection between his Christian beliefs and the Mohegan cultural values he grew up. The intersection was experiential as Occom lived out his Christian beliefs while facing poverty, lack of respect and occupational insecurity as a result of his Christian practices of his superiors.

Two texts further shaped my thinking about Native spirituality by challenging easy and uplifting clichés I had assumed and then by drawing me toward an Affective Turn in my critical analysis. First was a reviewer’s report, a quite harsh commentary on work I submitted. The reviewer stated,

The author argues that we Indians need to include spiritual practice . . . into everyday life and literature and implies that is the answer to American Indian problems and challenges within the modern world. I don’t buy that [he wrote]. First of all, it smacks of the essentialist notion that all Indians are ‘spiritual’ or should be if they are real Indians.

I was taken aback by these comments. I didn’t think I had stated my claims quite so prescriptively or categorically, but I recognized that I needed to change my conceptualizations.
And clearly for the reviewer, I touched a painful psychic spot that had larger significance. The review then asserted that a return to traditional practice, particularly spiritual practice, is a backlash, a way to assert identity in the one free place it is most allowable. [However,] there are many, many Indians who never set foot inside a sweat lodge, for instance. . . .

We often stereotypically associate Native peoples with spirituality, as I did, yet Native secularization should not be surprising. Historian of religion Robert Orsi explains, The modern world has assiduously and systematically disciplined the senses not to experience sacred presence; the imaginations of moderns are trained toward sacred absence. So while it is true that religious faith has not gone away, sacred presences have acquired an unsavory and disreputable aura, and this clings to practices and practitioners of presence alike” (12).

I came to recognize that much, maybe most, Native writing is basically secular, as is most U.S. literature.

But by no means all.

A second textual encounter prompted a new way of thinking about those works that do include expressions of Native spirituality. John McClure’s seminal book Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison provided a framework for analyzing Native literature from an experiential perspective. McClure argues that secularism as a belief structure is no longer convincing to most people. He defines secularism as modernism’s secular promise of peace and progress and philosophy’s confidence in secular reason’s claim to exclusive authority (11). McClure finds much contemporary culture and literature reengaging religion, but not in a traditional way. He offers this list of characteristics for postsecular belief (4-7):

---Conversions do not deliver persons from worldliness
  (i.e., it is not about the afterlife or immortality);
---there is a distrust of permanent structures and fixed locations—no certainties;
---traditional scriptures are used selectively and are questioned;
---there is a rejection of institutional religious authority (i.e., individuals retain the authority to cobble together their own belief systems); and
---the world is a good and mysterious place
  (celebration rather than condemnation).

People who are “religiously unhoused but spiritually hungry” are turning to a “worldly and mortal redemption” rather than traditional beliefs.

In a chapter on contemporary Native fiction, the book Partial Faiths explains that contemporary Native spirituality as expressed in literature is similar. [Native] characters, disenchanted with secularization, stumble back toward religiously inflected modes of being that are marked by key features of postsecular spirituality: polytheistic pluralism, attention to the Earth, an emphasis on spiritual practice, and a distrust at once of sweeping claims for salvation and dogmatic rigidities (133).

Native characters who turn to postsecularism do so in particular contexts. The “colonial experiences of secularization . . . are distinct,” McClure explains. His test case is Louise Erdrich’s novel Love Medicine. In it, the possibility of a return to traditional spirituality is difficult and uncertain. Traditional ceremonies as well as cultural structures are no longer available on this fictional reservation, and so the protagonist Lipsha individually adapts
cereemonies and beliefs. For example, he wants to use a traditional love medicine ceremony to heal the marital rift between Nector and Marie. A goose heart is required in this ceremony because geese are monogamous and mate for life. After a miserable and failed hunting expedition, he goes to the supermarket and buys a turkey heart instead. Just in case, Lipsha then brings it to the priest to have it sprinkled with holy water. Yet this improvisational, individualistic healing is effective. Although his Uncle Nestor chokes on the turkey heart and dies, his restless spirit is healed (152). And Lipsha gains healing as well. This novel of postsecular spirituality ends hopefully as Lipsha gains new experiential insight and cultural belonging.

Other works, however, present significantly different, much less hopeful stories about Native spirituality. They express doubt as much as certainty, frustration rather than fulfillment, cosmic indifference more than spiritual comfort, and imagined stories instead of direct apprehension of the more-than-material world. These are topics not discussed in theological books like Joseph Epes Brown’s *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* or the more recent *A Native American Theology* by Native writers Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley and George Tinker.

* * *

Joanna Brooks, writing about Samson Occom, explains that “like sexuality, religion and spirituality also constitute intimate domains of feelings where ‘traumatic events’ are collectively processed and made meaningful, especially in colonial contexts” (25). Her concern with spiritual experience in a time of trauma is part of a shift within Native religious studies away from theology or abstract beliefs and “towards close analysis of lived practice. . . .” This developing change is part of the broader Affective Turn, with its emphasis on experience rather than abstractions. This shift is taking place in much social and cultural research (Wetherill 139). Scholars have turned to affect as a corrective for what they see as significant limitations in contemporary theory, particularly poststructuralism and deconstruction. In focusing on feeling, this approach challenges the Linguistic Turn while extending the Cultural Turn into a new domain (Fischer 810).

The relationship between bodies and emotion is one of two key directions the Affective Turn takes (although this may be overly schematic). Some scholars focus on differences between emotion and affect, finding emotions to be “culturally scripted,” a performance that is learned. In contrast, affects are understood as immediate, bodily responses, having thus “biochemical and neurological components” (Jensen and Wallace 1252, 1253). Work in this area borrows from “non-linear biology, quantum physics, cognitive science and cognitive and affective neuroscience, as well as . . . developmental psychology.” It is a project fraught with transdisciplinary difficulties. It turns away from the social construction of identity to the “biological constitution of being.” The body here is not destiny, however, but “a creative space, a field of potentiality that, crucially *precedes* the overwriting of the body through subjectivity and personal history.” Because of this it has “emancipatory potential,” a least to some (Papoulias and Callard 33, 32, 34, 35, 46-50). In the half second between stimulus and our socially shaped response, the body acts with a kind of authenticity or individuality. This clearly is a challenge to the Linguistic Turn with its emphasis on the mediating quality of language, but this approach is under considerable debate.

The other key direction that the Affective Turn has taken, the one I am interested in, more broadly challenges abstract reason with a focus on experience. It depends more on description than critique (Staiger 9) and on inductive rather than deductive imagination. Related to
As already noted, one thing going on is secularization, “the theft of the sacred.” Much or most contemporary Native literature does not develop characters directly engaged in the struggle for spiritual apprehension. I agree with my anonymous reviewer that Sherman Alexie, one of the most widely read Native writers today, does not engage this problematic. Neither do David Treuer or Gerald Visenor. And much of James Welch and Louise Erdrich’s work is basically secular as well. If these writers’ characters do experience religion, it is culturally rather than spiritually significant.

However, a number of Native writers do engage spiritual experiences in their writing. Generally their works depict characters’ spiritual disorientation because of the colonial conditions they must live within. Often, though, these novels conclude with characters overcoming their alienation by returning to traditional spirituality. Examples are N. Scott Momaday’s House Make of Dawn and Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony.

A few Native literary works recognize colonialism’s devastating effect, but offer a further explanation for spiritual disorientation and frustration. They challenge standard theological understandings by recognizing a fundamental difficulty in the nature of the cosmos itself: the inaccessibility of the spiritual world to those who desire it. Often enough the assertion is made that, from a Native perspective, the distinction between material and spiritual realms is misconceived.¹ The Native cosmos is a unified whole that brings together earth and sky, the seen and the unseen, ancestors and present people.² Yet certain contemporary Native writers
offer experiential reports that challenge these theological certainties. The works of Robert Davis Hoffman, Joy Harjo and Diane Glancy that I will now address are more about spiritual desire than fulfillment, glimpses of the other world rather than cosmic apprehensions. The Spirit Beings are often unwilling to help characters in hard times. There is a recognition that stories are not transcriptions of life. Recognizing that spiritual experience is always mediated, these writers find that stories must be constructed, communally, and not simply discovered. These three writers express an affective sense of spiritual disorientation caused not only by social and historical conditions, but by the nature of the cosmos itself as their characters apprehend it.

* * *

Robert Davis Hoffman’s poetry collection SoulCatcher reminds us of the dark side of the Native, specifically Tlingit, cosmos.

Raven, gather us to that dark breast.
Call up another filthy legend.
Keep us distracted from all this blackness, (329, L 1-3)

Davis Hoffman’s mythical descriptions, transposed into the present, intersect with contemporary cultural experiences. His speaker struggles imaginatively to confront the challenges of cosmic apprehension. One difficulty is that Raven, the mythical figure that dominates the collection, is two-faced:

Raventracks lead every direction.
Shifty. That he’s got this game
of intrigue down

. . . .
There’s no way out
of his two-sided setup (50, L 5-7, 12-13)

Raven is difficult to both apprehend and comprehend.

SoulCatcher concludes with “Raven Dances.” “You never know what they’re up to anyway” (51, L 6), the speaker explains as he describes a “performance” or transformation of a child dancing himself into a raven.

Ravens flash in his eyes,
Beat him to the ground. You hear a crunch
Of shattered skull
And in that instant
Black shadows escape
Leave you with this fragile form,
A small human dance rattle. (51, L 14-20)

The speaker does not explain this terrifying ceremony. Instead he concludes it with the sense of being overwhelmed by the mystery he has become a part of:

You withdraw and find
Your head too is full
With raven wings beating. (51, L 21-23)

“. . . And so you tell stories,” states the book’s epigraph from Simon Ortiz. Yet this method of making sense, storytelling, is also not simple. The opening poem “Raven Tells Stories” explores the human desire for cosmic reassurance, even at the cost of blindness (1). The speaker makes the ironic supplication just mentioned: “Keep us distracted from all this blackness” (L 3). We can choose to deny this conception of the cosmos, Davis Hoffman’s speaker explains, and instead call on Raven for stories that tell us that all is well in the Native cosmos.
. . . Answer us
our terror of this place we pretend to belong,
the groping spirits we’re hopeless against
from where this bleakness keeps arising. (4-7)

These are some of the darkest lines in contemporary Native poetry, addressing human homelessness within a cosmos housed with spirits that overpower rather than nurture. This darkness seems not just the destructiveness of colonialism; it is older and deeper, part of the cosmos itself.

Like many (but certainly not all) characters in contemporary literature, the poems’ speaker struggles to construct Indigenous meanings that are rooted in the past yet contemporary in orientation. Recently Davis Hoffman sent me an explanation of the personal context for these poems.

I was . . . struggling to make sense of my cultural identity, attempting to piece together the bits and pieces I thought would give me clearer vision. Because of the disconnect to so many vital parts of those "bits and pieces," such as my father, history, place among my people, and so on, I wrote mainly from a place of anger and blame. . . .

Eventually, the angry years took quite a toll on me. My epiphany came when I went back to Kake [an island village in Alaska] and lived with my tribal uncle with whom I explained my perceptions, my struggles. He helped me arrive at clearer perceptions, and corrected many of my misunderstandings - about my father, about traditional ways of being.

So thirty years after writing these poem, Davis Hoffman recontextualizes them. He particularizes them by historicizing them. In doing this, he makes them experiential rather than theological. The focus now becomes the speaker’s experiences, his way of imagining the cosmos because of the particular traumas that created his sense of alienation. With the speaker central, what is spoken seems less transcendent or universal. We now hear the poems as an author’s imaginative recreation of experiential apprehensions, an accusation that is a plea.

Are the spiritual experiences evoked in the poems construed or constructed, to use Stanley Fish’s terms? That is, do these poems tell readers what the poet has discovered or what he has imagined? Davis Hoffman argues for construing or discovering since he writes in his email about “clearer perceptions” and “corrected . . . misunderstandings”. In bringing up this issue, I want to note that within this affective form of analysis, culture and linguistics or awareness of the mediating effect of language is still important.

* * *

Joy Harjo’s poem “Deer Dancer,” addressing the same problematic of apprehending the spiritual world, leans in the other direction, toward the necessity of constructing or imagining meanings rather than finding them. This poem is part of her collection In Mad Love and War, a powerful report of the spiritual consequences of Native peoples’ material losses. Characters in these poems have often lost their cultural rootedness, and yet in unpromising circumstances some create spiritual renewal. Problems are not supernaturally solved in Harjo’s poetry, but characters do gain awareness of a world beyond their material circumstances but that is closely linked to them. At least that is the way the speaker offers her story.

"Deer Dancer" is thick with descriptions of harsh historical and contemporary conditions. These provide the framework for apprehensions of the spirit world. The setting is a bitter winter night, with the "broken survivors" finding something of a communal home in an Indian bar.
These "hardcore" can tough out a cold night with the help of alcohol and each other. Their confidence, however, falters as a beautiful woman walks in, apparently as hardcore as they are and yet so different. Her presence pushes them to self awareness: they are “ruins” but also “Indian.”

The poem offers their individual accounts of insight (Henry Jack) and blindness (Richard and his wife) as they respond to this unexpected deer/woman. And this in turn prepares us for the speaker’s own struggle for apprehension (3).

The speaker becomes a central presence as she makes the process of telling a part of the story itself. She confidently asserts that her Native language would be adequate for apprehending the spiritual reality of “the sacred mounds,” but her present language cannot. Harjo’s speaker imagistically resolves this dilemma by juxtaposing and yet integrating the stars with "this strange city" from which she sees them. The promise of spiritual reality that she finds in the stars potentially solves her language problem because they suggest unmediated access to the world she longs for. What she has, though, is a promise, an act of faith, rather than the experience itself.

A traditional story of Harjo’s Mvskogee people suggests that the problematic of spiritual apprehension is not just a contemporary concern. In this story a hunter is visited by a woman and little child. She tells him that she is the doe that he had killed last year. They are attracted to each other and marry. Although warned by his deer/wife that he must not tell how they met, years later the hunter does just that. Immediately the wife "took off with her white tail sticking up, and with her child, too, they went in the same way, it was told long ago" (Gouge 87-88).

This story implies that a spiritually-engaged life has always been precarious and uncertain. It is a secret and personal, although tribally-structured, experience. The story suggests that the “long ago” people struggled with their own version of uniting the apparent incongruity Harjo’s poem brings up: a woman entering the bar in "a stained red dress with tape on her heels" who is also "the deer who entered our dream in white dawn" (14).

Midway through the poem, the speaker recognizes that seeing more than the material world requires taking the risk of “stepping into thin air,” a leap of faith. Taking the risk and making the leap, the dancer offers the hope of continuance and sustenance represented by the baby inside her (9). Dancing naked, her physical degradation stripped away, the deer/woman suggests a fragile sign--and the deconstructionists have shown us just how fragile a sign is--from the other side: "deer breath on icy windows" (12, 9). Beginning with a reference to Led Zeppelin’s "Stairway to Heaven" about spiritual disillusionment, the speaker then quotes the chorus to Kenny Roger’s classic country song “Lucille” (10, 11). It’s a sly choice, a song about another woman in a bar looking for what the other life could bring, here sexuality rather than spirituality. With this song of abandonment and desperation, the poem immerses the deer/woman in the hardness of contemporary culture while also suggesting more. Stripping away material accoutrements, she can offer both the love these broken survivors need and the spiritual connection that they long for. And by watching her, the Indian ruins become more than they appear to be because the woman is also more, the contemporary embodiment of "the ancestors who never left."

After this reassurance, the poem’s concluding stanza jolts us by revealing that, in spite of seeming to be a participant, the speaker was not actually there at the bar. She only heard the story. The promised healing seems cast into doubt: imagined rather than experienced. This last stanza opens abruptly: “The music ended.” The song of sentimental desperation stopped spinning in the jukebox and so did the dancer. The next sentence echoes the first but the tense
changes: “And so does the story.” Stories are always in the process of coming to their conclusion because they are constructed meanings of the past that must resonate in the present.

“I wasn’t there,” the speaker states, and we now realize that she is not an eye witness to spiritual transformation but rather its creator. She is the one who imagines the story’s transcendent possibilities. With this last stanza, Harjo transforms a good story lesson into an interpretive challenge, a leap of faith. But that is the point. Harjo’s poem embodies Momaday’s understanding that “. . . stories are true in that they are established squarely upon belief. . . . Stories are not subject to the imposition of such questions as true or false, fact or fiction. Stories are realities lived and believed” (Man Made 3). That is a distinction that should not be glided over since it address fundamental differences in the nature of spirituality.

Self-consciously constructing meaning within a fractured world may seem typically modernist, but this poem has a Native difference. For Harjo does not, as W. H. Auden writes, "find the mortal world enough" (27). Her speaker calls on community spiritual resources, strained though they may be, in order to create transformative belief as imagined experience. And the speaker finds this form of spiritual apprehension enough.

* * *

Diane Glancy’s short play "The Woman Who Was a Red Deer Dressed for the Deer Dance" also takes up the problematic of apprehending the spiritual world, but with a significant difference from Robert Davis Hoffman’s SoulCatcher and Joy Harjo’s “Deer Dancer.” As Davis Hoffman explained, his earlier apprehensions were in need of correction, and he gained that through a cultural homecoming. Harjo’s poem troubles us, but it also dazzles us with its puzzling yet profound juxtapositions, everyday language mixed with memorable phrases, pop culture references and self-conscious narration. We are challenged to follow conceptual leaps that can distance readers from the immediacy of her characters’ pain. Harjo mediates the action with self-conscious poetic strategies even as her striking language awakens us to disturbing conditions and spiritual possibilities. The cosmos is apprehended by the speaker through her ability to create meanings of both material and more-than-material experiences through language.

In contrast, Glancy's play develops a sense of immediacy and urgency by directly presenting the everyday language of her two characters, the Girl and her Grandmother. It creates a dramatic world unmediated by a speaker and so less layered as characters express their spiritual frustrations with a directness unmatched in Native literature. I don’t mean to imply that the play gives an unmediated account of spiritual experience. And the play is not short on complexities, as this problematic of apprehension seems to demand.

Like the speaker in Harjo’s “Deer Dancer,” Glancy’s characters self-consciously link spiritual apprehension and storytelling. However, the Girl’s concluding monologue constructs a much less confident account of her spiritual meaning making. In essays, Glancy explores the role of stories in cosmic apprehensions. She explains that "[c]ontemporary native poetry carries the loss of culture, the loss of a way of life, and the bare spots that annihilation and acculturation left. . . ." Along with exposing these conditions, Native literature also “carries the knowledge of silence and shadow outside or beyond the loss. . . .” Her play depicts the Girl’s efforts, almost like an alchemist, to transmute the absence of “silence and shadow” into spiritual presence. Yet Glancy’s language for spiritual reality is much less certain or transparent than what most Native authors use. For her, “Language is creator as well as trickster that robs meaning” (“Naked Spot” 279). Like a deconstructionist within the Linguistic Turn, Glancy finds language to be unreliable because it is never the thing itself. It can suggest transcendent realities but not embody them.
Her essays can leave one with the same sense of being unmoored that I experienced first reading a Derrida essay in grad school. The difficulty is that “the word does nothing but manifest our nothingness. In fact, speech itself is a separator” (“Dance Lessons with the Spirit World,” 99). Glancy does not state whether this separation exists in Native languages or if it was part of the pre-invasion world. However, the Mvskogee story of the hunter marrying the deer/woman suggests that there has been no time before language as we know it. Glancy calls for healing that comes through facing this gap. She concludes her meditation by asserting, “Our life is a migration of tribal separations-from, until we face the Great Nothingness, the Great Coyote & say to him who we think we are” (“Dance Lessons” 102). In this strange accounting, troubling uncertainty seems evident. In acknowledging the mediating and thus potentially alienating role of language, Glancy further complicates the problematic of apprehending the spiritual world. This is the condition the Girl engages as she creates her own red dress, “a dress of words” (18).

In the play, Glancy presents an ongoing dialogue that can seem like twin monologues as Grandmother and the Girl strive to understand the meaning of each other’s spiritual experiences while coming to terms with her own unmet needs. No visions or supernatural transformations have taken place by the end of the play.

Absence is as much a part of spiritual experience, the Girl learns from her Grandmother, as is the glimpse through the crevice to “the next world” (18). This is another complication to the material/spiritual problematic, the fleeting and uncertain connection between the two realms when they do come together. Both for the Girl and her Grandmother mainly experience disappointments and frustrations. The Grandmother at one point explains, "The spirits push us out so we'll know what it's like to be without them. So we'll struggle all our lives to get back in" (15, emphasis added). She exclaims in an accusatory internal monologue, "Damned spirits. Didn't always help out. Let us have it rough sometimes" (17). Grandmother even wonders if the ancestors’ voices are actually her own imagination (9, 17). An expression of uncertainty, disappointment and even abandonment makes up the Grandmother's concluding lines in the play (17). She is not the wise elder we have come to expect, and yet her enigmatic openness offers important lessons for her granddaughter.

The Girl engages this spiritual struggle in her own way and also finds the results frustratingly meager. Intensifying her frustration is the feeling of being trapped in a world of low-wage jobs and self-centered lovers. The Girl’s penultimate speech reveals her state of mind. It is a wild rant against the mechanic repairing her still-unpaid-for, 180,000-mile-old truck. She desperately mixes the spiritual and material as she first threatens the mechanic that if he tries to cheat her, her Grandmother will "stomp you with her [deer] hooves." Then she mocks him by saying that her truck, unlike the ones he sells, comes with visions (17). This strange and uncharacteristic affirmation of faith is expressed as she is caught off guard. It is an almost unconscious statement that does not answer her conscious questionings. This experience helps prepare us for the play's conclusion.

The final section begins with the Girl reporting to the audience on a series of job interviews after she has been fired from a soup kitchen. Although the interviews fail to land her the job she needs, they prompt spiritual introspection and insight. She incongruously reports to one interviewer that she has the skill to make a red dress.

This dress is a “dress of words,” a phrase that echoes the title of Momaday’s seminal essay, “Man Made of Words.” She has experienced the “psychic dislocation,” the “deep psychological wound” that Momaday describes (“Man Made” 54, 57). Her spiritual desire and
only limited fulfillment suggests the extent to which she is shaped by "the theft of the sacred" (Momaday, *Man Made* 76), the givenness of a communally-enabled cosmic engagement. Momaday explains that wounds like the Girl has experienced can only be healed through "the imagination of meaning" ("Man Made" 57). That is the work that Joy Harjo’s speaker is doing. Similarly, Glancy’s play can be understood as a response to Momaday’s question, "What happens when I or anyone exerts the force of language upon the unknown?" (“Man Made” 55). Language allows her two characters to create spiritual meaning for their lives within the structures of traditional belief. Through communal belief, language can sidestep the referential limitations of the Linguistic Turn and in some sense present a construing within the Cultural Turn. For Momaday, meaning is created through imagination, including imagining one’s ancestors ("Man Made" 54-55). He clarifies this by stating, “We are concerned here not so much with an accurate representation of actuality, but with the realization of the imaginative experience” (“Man Made” 88). Again, that seems to me a significant clarification.

However, the Grandmother’s concerns are with “actuality,” with material manifestations as much as imaginative transformations. Imaginations of the spiritual world do not put food on the table for her in rough times. The difference between the apprehensions of the Girl and her Grandmother echoes the hermeneutic differences between religious fundamentalism and liberalism within many traditions. As a member of the older generation, the Grandmother’s grasp of the cosmos is close to Vine Deloria, Jr.’s in his posthumously published *The World We Used to Live In*. He offers accounts of medicine men making a corn stalk literally grow from a seed in a few hours or changing the path or severity of a storm (126, 139). Yet unlike any of Deloria’s accounts, the Grandmother’s story includes disappointment with the spirits because "[m]ostly we were on our own" (17). Nevertheless, this disappointment does not create a crisis of faith for her. The Grandmother has seen Ahw’uste (13), the spirit deer of Cherokee stories, and believes it has wings, even if you can’t see them (8).

The Girl, however, lives in a world much less sustained by communal belief. When the Grandmother explains, “We’re carriers of our stories and histories,” the Girl responds, “We carry ourselves. Who are you besides your stories?” This is the disturbing corollary to Thomas King’s oft-quoted statement, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are” (2). The Girl questions the connection between stories and experience just as Glancy questions the trustworthiness of language by describing it as a trickster (279). She must more directly engage a modern secular world, and so she apprehends the spiritual world more tentatively. The Grandmother is frustrated by the partial abandonment of the spirits. For the Girl the illusiveness of the spiritual world is not fundamentally about the amount of access but the nature of it. She comes to realize that she must create her own red dress, an emblem of the spiritual world she wants to believe in. It is her self-conscious leap of faith. This seems much like what both Momaday and the speaker of Harjo’s “Deer Dancer” describe, but without their sense of certainty that the leap will land her on the other side.

This uncertain leap alerts us to the inherent instability of the Girl’s apprehensions. This is a typical conclusion for Diane Glancy. Critic James Mackay observes that all her work offers “a questioning, uncertain idea of healing . . .” (6). Similarly Cherokee literary historian Daniel Heath Justice explains that "Glancy is distrustful of firm pronouncements," but he also affirms the importance of her perspective by stating that she is part of the "vitality of contemporary Cherokee literature" (197).

The play’s last line affirms the Girl’s reconciliation with her Grandmother’s silence and belief. Paradoxically rather than ironically, through this silence—whether it is meditative silence
or silence as absence, Glancy does not say—the Grandmother “causes stories to happen” (18) and the granddaughter sews her dress made of words.

Let me quickly conclude by noting that in the Preface to her play, Glancy explains that she has tried “[t]o combine the overlapping realities of myth, imagination, and memory with spaces for the silences” (4). This is what Robert Davis Hoffman and Joy Harjo also strive for in the writings I’ve discussed. In doing this, all three offer remarkable perspectives on Native spirituality that few other writers explore.

There is a fundamentally experiential quality to the spirituality these writers engage. They present characters desiring cosmic connectivity, and so imagine stories that are improvisational and individually created while also shaped from communal traditions. To effectively apprehend their stories, we need to engage all three critical turns. The Linguistic Turn helps us recognize that we live in language, whether we call it stories or systems of knowledge. We cannot get outside of it. Language is the social substance out of which characters and some individuals imagine the material and spiritual stories that create meanings for their lives. However, as the Cultural Turn suggests, we do not create our stories by ourselves. And the Affective Turn shifts our focus away from abstractions, ideals and theological or propositional beliefs to instead grasp characters’ language-oriented, culturally-shaped experiences as they try to figure out, in a time of crisis ordinariness, what’s going on. Robert Davis Hoffman, Joy Harjo and Diane Glancy each in their own way offer experiential reports, mostly dark and uncertain, that surprise and provoke reconsiderations of the nature of Native spirituality.

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Notes


3 The poem later plays on the double recognition, ruins and Indian, when the speaker turns a pickup line into a troubling inquiry, "what are we all doing in a place like this?" Kathleen Ann Pickering’s Lakota Culture, World Economy helps us understand the answer by linking Lakota reservation experiences to broad economic and social forces. She considers, for example, the economic consequences of racism that can trap Indians in bars like the one Harjo describes. Pickering explains that "[t]he imposition of a negative social identity ultimately restricts Lakotas to limited wage work opportunities on their reservations or confines them to the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder when they do venture beyond the reservation" (97). Something more than individual choice brought Harjo’s characters to this Indian bar. The contemporary Lakota experience is not so different from other reservation Indians’ lives. See, for example, Dean Chavers’s (Lumbee) chapter “Border Towns.”

4 Parenthetical references refer to stanza rather than line numbers for Harjo’s poem.

5 Parenthetical references refer to sections in Glancy’s play.
Works Cited


