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The Uses of Oral Tradition in Six Contemporary Native American Poets

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> I mean to say that the oral tradition, which in some real measure informs the character of contemporary Native American poetry, is itself a reflection of certain fundamental attitudes with respect to language and therefore to literature, and that above all it is a reflection of man's persistent belief in the efficacy of words.
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> This is surely an idea which informs to one degree or another the poetry of all places and times. But it seems to me especially relevant to contemporary Native American poetry, where it is perhaps closer than anything else in our time to the surface of human experience and the center of the human spirit.

With this insight, N. Scott Momaday introduces *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry*. In pointing to the oral character of contemporary Native American poetry and welding it with a poetic art truer to the human spirit than other poetic expression, Momaday pledges Native American poetry to a distinctly high goal. Yet, along with Momaday, I would maintain that the uses of oral tradition, both in substance and form, distinguish contemporary Native American poetry from other contemporary poetry and that, through the uses of oral tradition, contemporary Native American poetry has influenced and will continue to influence American poetry.

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Perhaps the most difficult aspect of dealing with oral tradition is the immensity of the phenomenon, existing simultaneously in the minds and lives of many people. The poet / singer draws his strength from the ceremonies and sacred stories, variations of secular materials, oral history, personal reminiscences, place names, charms, prayers, lyrics and laments, and popular characterizations of places and animals, just to mention a few. It is essential that the writer gives back and enriches these. The dynamic between the writer and this varied, growing cultural material helps define the writer and his relationship to the community. Consequently this paper will reflect the wide spectrum of the material and the various artistic dynamics created by the uses of oral tradition among six contemporary Native American poets. Through an exploration of the work of Maurice Kenny (Mohawk), Peter Blue Cloud (Mohawk), Wendy Rose (Hopi), Liz Sohappy Bahe (Yakima), Ray Young Bear (Mesquaki), and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Sioux), I hope to confirm Momaday's insights into the relationship between oral tradition and contemporary Native American poetry, as well as contend that oral tradition does survive the onslaught of modern culture: poetry as an art form, nurtured in the rich soil of oral tradition, offers us a look into its continuance. I hope to clarify some of the fundamental attitudes Momaday notes concerning song, the word, the spirit, the story and history. I have tried to use poetry that was readily available—especially work in contemporary anthologies. I believe that only through a broad look at contemporary work will we gain insight into the future forms of oral tradition, into the integration with or alienation from oral tradition as expressed in the works of contemporary Native American poets.

Maurice Kenny, publisher of Strawberry Press and Co-editor of *Contact II*, among his many talents has developed a finely-tuned lyric voice. Kenny's background includes a seeking out of the works of Whitman, Williams and Louise Bogan after which he "returned with their teachings to my proper place. . .home / north."[1] But to their world of things, men and especially nature, Kenny brings an atavistic self. He sees his role not so much as a storyteller, but as a singer of spirit. His song / poems express him as a medium for the voices he hears, the voices of the spirits of creation: plant spirit, animal spirit and human spirit. His poetry does not directly assume a *persona*, rather he sings the songs of everything and every thing. In assuming a *persona* we explain and explore character, whether personal, social, or mythical. Kenny wants to sing the songs, to praise and celebrate individual things, while a poet like Peter Blue Cloud may desire to pierce the web of spirit in nature or pick up the false-face to mask his own. Kenny at times becomes the nature he expresses. He has said "I am one of those pieces of sage"[2] to indicate the extent of his unity with natural things.

vines crawl across the grassy floor
of the north, scatter to the world
seeking the light of the sun and innocent
tap of the rain to feed the roots
and bud small white flowers that in June
will burst fruit and announce spring
when wolf will drop winter fur
and wrens will break the egg

my blood, blood berries that brought laughter
and the ache in the stooped back that vied
with dandelions for the plucking,
and the wines nourished our youth and heralded
iris, corn and summer melon

Here Kenny's fusion with the natural is so complete that it is almost unnoticed, a fusion and communion not achieved by Whitman's excellent, though "I" studded verse. His life and the life of the strawberry are irrevocably fused. The renewal of one is the renewal of spring which is the renewal of both, of all. Memory renews in recreating the past and the present. In creating an image, Kenny is exact in the memory of names—the names of animals, plants and minerals, for in naming those things he is in a sense calling on them, giving them a chance to speak. Here he reveals a commitment to Williams' "No ideas but in things" because his use of natural imagery communicates elegantly its intellectual wisdom to mankind. Kenny's approach "through image, symbolically" lets him sing of natural objects such as the strawberry—a plant with a snow white flower which bursts into blood red nourishment in spring—and still tie those objects into the web of nature which incorporates us. His natural images may help us see the plant as plant, its place and voice in nature, its social use and symbolic significance and perhaps for the perceptive reader, its cultural significance. A complex web of meaning is created. In creating this web, he loans his voice to nature to carry back to the village so that nature, the song and the village will remain tied together and endure.

Primary among the concerns in his song / poems is the need for endurance and survival, which the songs help make possible by being a medium for wisdom and knowledge. One feels little sense of separation between man, animal and plant. There is no dichotomy of nature in a human world or humans in a natural world. He wants to let his words carry that unified spirit so vital in oral tradition, instead of structuring the composition of a poem to force the capture of spirit. As a medium for song, the universal pushes through the personal, words "ride blood into song" and all Kenny asks is that we listen closely and think.

Sweetgrass

Seeded in the mud on turtle's back
Greened in the breath of the west wind
Fingered by the children of dawn
Arrowed in the morning sun
Blessed by the hawk and sparrow
Plucked by the many hands in the laughter
 of young girls and the art of old women
You hold the moments of the frost and the thaw
You hold the light of the star and the moon
You hold the darkness of the moist night and
 the music of the river and drum[4]

Kenny's poetry is rich with the use of cultural and oral material pertaining to the old stories, to the clan animals—Turtle, Bear & Wolf, to the traditions of the Longhouse and to individuals still alive in oral history. Often these emerge through childhood remembrances, for in touching those important moments the singer and the listener participate in a personal renewal. This moment of renewal, which figures so significantly in his work, is best expressed in *Dancing Back Strong The Nation*, where the personal journey becomes a collective one for the Mohawk nation and by extension, all Indian nations. Through his song and poetry, Spirit —the motivating force behind Native American oral tradition—is expressed and confirmed; it re-animates the world. For Kenny, song / poetry is always religious since its origin and strength lie in the ceremonies of the Longhouse, where the lyric, narrative and dramatic are woven together to praise and infuse spirit. Song / poetry of today must be seen in that light.

> For thousands of years, verse-prayer has not been far from the Great Spirit. It has gathered together in ceremony not only its thanks to the Great Spirit, but composed the chronicle of time itself, the calendar of events of an historical culture, and includes love songs, victory songs, healing songs, the joy of creation, the surety of death and reunion with one's ancestors.[5]

Kenny's work returns continually to this heart of oral tradition: "I believe that dramatic event, where poetry sprang from, was in the Longhouse or the altar."[6]

Interestingly, the poems in this book are the most purely oral in form of Kenny's work. Kenny's chant, "I Am The Sun," based on a Lakota-Sioux Ghost Dance Song, however, may be in performance a more powerful example of oral form and oral material. The songs that followed the spread of the Ghost Dance consciousness were designed to help the singer / dancer achieve a trance-like state through a whirling song and a

whirling motion. In this state the singer saw visions of the future and gathered power to aid the driving out of the Whites. In performance the chant builds through the disasters of the past to visions of strength for the future. On the page, the poems in *Dancing Back Strong The Nation* show a conscious expansion of the oral song form into contemporary poetry. He seems concerned with introducing on an extended basis the repetition and two-step beat of the dance in the Longhouse into his work. "Drums" is an example:

DRUMS

listen . . .
drums drum
                dance dance
rattles rattle
                sing sing

drums dance
rattles sing
pause and
      dance and

drums drum
to the song
               of the young
                                warriors

listen . . .
thunder thunders
                      shakes
thunder shakes the floor[7]

Here the consistent way in which the two-step beat is worked into the poetic line may herald a break-through in oral form in writing. His claim to be a singer of the spirit of things is confirmed by his commitment to oral form as well as cultural material. In much of his work, he becomes a traditional medium for the voices he hears around him.

II

Gary Snyder's preface to Peter Blue Cloud's *Turtle, Bear & Wolf* says that "Blue Cloud's poems are living proof that the power and beauty of the Old Way cannot be lost."[8] In this quote Snyder pierces to the heart of Blue Cloud's vision, because Blue Cloud is deeply concerned with the spirit of that old world heralded in the stories and songs which tell of the

days when man and animals lived together, talked to each other and understood each other. His poems try to grasp that spirit as it lives today in the natural world and survives through today with a promise for tomorrow. As a poet, he is a seeker, a crier of visions, a meditator on the world spirit. His poems are songs of vision and illumination. Though his vision may be of the interweaving of the world of activity, or of the cycles and balances that bring endings back to beginnings, they are still highly personal visions born in meditation. The poem is a recreation of a poetic and spiritual penetration.

eyes searching through hills of gravel
seeing through to the other side
stars,
carrying a burden basket of wind
and red-ochred forehead pressed
by a burden strap of night sounds,
swift feet wrapped in oak leaves
and a walking stick of barking
coyotes[9]

The poems are highly structured to recreate the penetration and the resulting incorporation of spirit into the mundane world. "Milkweed" is a good example of a poetic structure that shifts the focus and point of view to create a path for the reader to follow the penetration while framing it in the seasonal changes of the plant. As the poet moves out from the poem, he brings the spirit touched by his fusion back into contact with the world around us and divines the milkweed spirit's importance in gluing the changing world together.

milkweed

your blood mixed with air
holds the world together,
with your fiber sinews
the bowstring hums
to slightest wind,
your grey-green leaves
are signals of a friendly camp,
and then your seedlings
float gently
like first flakes of snow
and your empty pods are fashioned
into rattles,
or taken by children

to become canoes
with pebbles for passengers
taken to far-away lands,
and now your yellowed leaves
rustle the music
of another snow
and your seedlings
lie sleeping.[10]

The poem ends with the spirit of the milkweed seeds and the spirit of the world sleeping under the snows of winter, ready to burst forth. The insight at the beginning of the poem is made possible by the observation of the narrator at the end after he has gone on the travels of the milkweed. Blue Cloud's poems, in this sense, are very artistic, revealing great care in composition. His ability as a wood-carver may be carried over into poetry and language; the outlines of his poems are clearly seen. The form and structure reveal the essence of the thing presented, as if each strike or line helped define the composition more clearly. By contrast Kenny's poems seem to grow from seed until the image is complete.

At many points in his work, Blue Cloud attempts to merge with things and float off, speaking from inside another creature or thing. In such poems the voice may move from observation to description to *persona*, or may center in one. Yet, through this voice he finds unity and completion: all is merged in one and spirit is everywhere. The expression of the poem is the experience, and Simon Ortiz's comment about true songs being "the complete voice of a person"[11] gains more support: experience is expression.

I shiver, feel a choking
        my chest aches
        as I gulp down steam
        breathe through nose a pure darkness
I am snake stream winding downhill
      belly-slithering among trees
lying in moss I watch companions
      float
above and beyond mind's beginnings[12]

Perhaps the most powerful example of language expressing spirit is in the poem "Turtle" where a *persona* of Turtle from the old stories tells of his perceptions and experience while imparting knowledge to strengthen us all.

I am turtle
and the earth I carry is but
a particle in the greater Creation,
my mountains, plains and oceans,
mere reflections in a vaster sea.[13]

With a highly visual and intellectual approach to the song / poem, one of the recurrent themes is the loss of self in things of the spirit. In some poems like "Composition," there is a deep sense of frustration at the inability actually to experience the past and to put the self into the past. However, the spirit of the "thing" can speak to us of the past. History becomes a questioning of spirit through things. Spirit, penetrating and becoming, is the past and present. Finding spirit usually results in renewed insight into the interweaving of spirit and creation, of the process of death and rebirth as it incorporates the individual into the continuation of spirit. In this world of all spirit, the poet has merged with the oral tradition and the world that nurtured it; he has become an idea, a song, a chant that expresses and is the essence of his being.

Then all is fading
is going
my selfness
fading slowly
through self and into beyond self
wandering among spirits
among seeds which are thought,
are pure feelings,
then a chanting, a song
and far back
from a cavern back
(whisper)
"Grandfather,
I am home."[14]

As this close identification with the oral tradition indicates, Blue Cloud uses many elements from Mohawk oral tradition. His most accessible book, *Turtle, Bear & Wolf*, is divided into sections of the three animals, all characters in the old stories. These animals seem to be used not in their mythological contexts primarily nor in their cultural contexts—for they are the major clan divisions. Blue Cloud uses them as instruments—paths into the self—into people around us and the unified spirit of man and nature. He is ever the seeker of that spirit of old ways and juxtaposes the spiritual poverty of today with it. The poems experiment with form; some picking up the beat of the dance or the chant, some swirling in the

space of the page, still others with no punctuation, running lines together to reflect the weaving of all creation with each other. Still, the use of oral song form does not reflect a determining element in the verse, rather a form for insights ill-suited to the normal poem pattern. Blue Cloud feels that spirit is song is word, while it is his penetration and merging with this equation that creates his song, his poetry.

III

Wendy Rose's poetry outlines a growth process through which song becomes an important and determining aspect of modern Native American experience. The task posited is to find for the urban Indian a modern correlative to the traditional functions of song. In this she tries to merge the directions of the personal lyric with the communal song. Implicit in this endeavor, as with most of the poets here, is the assumption that the processes of modern poetry and the traditions of song are similar.

The initial position of the growth process is one in which Indians of today—especially urban Indians—find themselves without the knowledge and cut off from song and the oral tradition; they are metaphorically dispossessed of the elements of the tradition which would connect them firmly to an intact culture and place them inside social structures: "it is I / without learning, I without song, who / dies and cries the death time."[15] Imagistically the traditional songs seem thrust into non-receptive space, powerless. The sense of the lost force of the songs looms large because of the remnants of culture and song that now lie in ruin. "We die in granite scaffolding / on the shape of the Sierras and lay down / with lips open thrusting songs on the / world. Who are we / and do we still live? The shaman sleeps / and says no."[16]

Here in the present the poet discovers she has been left out: she has not only missed the impelling continuity of an intact oral tradition, but personally she is too late, too old to be "kiva-whipped" and thus incorporated into the communal life, taught the songs and welcomed into the tradition. The poet dwells with a dual depletion, both of the individual and of the oral tradition as expressed by the present condition of the tribes. The poet sees the world animated by frozen words that confine growth and retard understanding. These words are politically powerful, but the result is devastating for the tribal cultures. Songs can only crawl out of the confines like worms out of the stomach of a decaying body. "The whole world is made-up / of words, mountain-thick, that wait / to cave in with edges that squeeze / hurt and reason into separate sounds / The songs become tons / of bilingual stuff to reckon with."[17] To the poet the songs are almost like painful understandings and knowledge that she

shies away from because of the extreme effort needed to build on them. The effort would make her vulnerable while she tried to master the words and subsequently herself. The poet retreats internally. However, an important insight has been wrought away from the conflict—words are life, or bits of life, of food that sustains life, growth and insight. The function of the frozen words must be turned around. Indian poets must become what Vizenor calls "word warriors" fighting the "word wars" with "word arrows" to bring language back into the service of tribal cultures and the oral tradition.

As the poet moves inside herself, she sees that songs and words are integral to changes and growth and that the relationship between the two is dynamic. In "How I Came to be a Graduate Student," the songs lie just under the surface of her life, ready to burst forth as growth and understanding blossom. Here the poet realizes a modern equivalent to the older use of song as a codifier and guide for growth and change in a social setting. Personal changes such as birth, puberty, marriage, initiation and death are encouraged and structured by song, and the poet begins to identify her insights and changes with words and song. One might say that the poet is making herself out of words.

As this goes on internally, the image of the oral tradition changes. The songs trail after the people like whispers wherever they may go. Those who hear are tied back to the old understandings. As in "For a few Hopi ancestors" the songs are not lost, but ready to affect those who listen because they are an undercurrent of power and strength. It is left for the poet to discover the true power of the word and of song through the influence of other singer/poets. In two poems in "Long Division," the poet is instructed by other singers outside the dominant word structure who effect miracles: one brings a dead child to life, another drags the stars around. Their language is powerful and effective. It expresses their cultural values and harkens back to the power of song in oral tradition.

The poet has now been instructed by her own growth process, by other word warriors and by those whispers of traditional song. Her own song is now brought back to the crucible of the people, for here it must be tested. It must stand with the people, help them understand the world, give them words to use, give them power, and bring them together. In "Hopi Overlay" her unfinished songs are given to those who are most purely oral—the children, and it is they who weave them into a final shape.

> My songs seem undone
> when they stomp-dance naked
> in the moonlight but
> children peeping from under
> dark porches laugh all
> the ups and downs in together.

I'll take my old age early
and watch them
play my poems into
cat's cradles.[18]

The interaction with the people tests and solidifies the words. They are true and strong. The poet's growth is confirmed in song, and as the individual grows the tradition becomes stronger. The miracle has been accomplished, for the understanding of one is the understanding of the many. The words and songs guide and confirm. The songs let all participate in the process. We humans have achieved harmony with each other in song and with the world around us.

This is where we must learn
to sing as we walk
because our skin is
red sand, because our pain
is made up of burdens
bound in corn husks,
because our joy
flows over the land,
because
touching ourselves
we touch everything[19]

IV

Liz Sohappy Bahe has little sense of the oral tradition as lost or destroyed. Though little of her work is accessible, the poems in *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* reward close attention. Of course, she is conscious of the breakdown of the previously intact cultures, the natural glory in which they lived, but the oral tradition always seems reachable in her poetry. For her the word is very much alive; still, she does make the distinction between words—printed and oral. In the poem "Printed Words" she is placed in the curious situation of all American Indian poets, by a use of printed words to speak of the oral. She notes that the words in a book about Indians are "killing words" that come from one source: Civilization, the word and the fact. These words cover reality. The real threat of these words is that they forget living beings; perhaps they are too abstract. The real words, that speak of living beings, that guide, complete and explain, that sing their songs, can come from almost anything that incorporates living energies. In "Talking Designs" the poet inquires of the handcrafted articles of the people what story they would tell of their makers. Their words would speak of the real concrete experiences

of people and things. The close association between people, their tools, their handiwork and their identity is often a subject in oral tradition. These are the things through which people live and express themselves. The poem "Grandmother Sleeps" shows Bahe's appreciation of the grandmother's constancy and close relation to her crafts. The Grandmother epitomizes the old ways and their sense of how time is associated with the work to be done and how these two elements create a third—identity. Bahe unconsciously underscores the continuity of the generations, while for Wendy Rose this continuity is a very conscious process and a goal, a source of her art.

In "The Ration Card" we see the oral tradition working in a modern setting, where the unity of various Indian groups finds natural manifestation in song and dance, which expresses and completes the emotions of the group and the individual.

Dressed in buckskin and beads
I walked past design-painted tipis
to a huge tent where drums and bells battled —
uniting ancient war parties —
Paloos, Crows, Shoshones . . .

I was not hungry for bread,
but I was not to refuse
another Indian's way of giving.[20]

Her desire at the end of the poem is more than just a return to the physical place "where emotions are rationed / in dance, in song, in that little taste," but to "last year's muses" because this experience triggered off personal illumination. Perhaps here the goal of modern poem and of song is similar. A poet involved with the oral cannot become too personal. While personal experiences may be apparent in her poetry, they do not dominate. They are used unselfconsciously. The personal experiences that are important are the moments of poetic insight born out of the fusion with the song experience. The poem "Once Again" expresses this well. The poet readies herself and others to again give themselves up to the purely oral, the chant experience. They know they must forget time and its child, death. Through the songs they will touch all, become one with all, meet the grandfather already there and be instructed and completed. The songs are timeless and eternal, but are also inside the singers, so the singers are also timeless and eternal. This experience informs her poetry and is the core of poetic inspiration.

ONCE AGAIN

Let go of the present and death
Go to the place nearest the stars,
gather twigs, logs;
build a small fire;
a huge angry fire.

. . .

. . .

. . .

Remember the smoke,
the chants, the drum,
the stick grandfather held
as he spoke in the dark
of his fathers' power.

Gather your memories
into a basket; into a pot;
into your cornhusk bag.
Your grandfather sings for us
beyond the dry rustling cornstalks.[21]

Here Bahe goes to the song, while with Wendy Rose the song comes to the poet. For Rose the song is the result of personal illumination, for Bahe it is the agent of personal illumination.

As with most poets discussed here, the question of identity and identification arises. Perhaps as a result of contemporary acculturation or a sense of self necessary to modern poetry, the complete unification with the old ways and the oral tradition is questioned. In the poem "And What of Me" she describes a ceremony where the sins of an individual are removed and the people "sigh another year of life." The regeneration and absolution obtained by the people is questioned for the poet's case. While she feels one with the man with the feather, the center of the ceremony, a very self-conscious voice questions her personal renewal. The question is the source of the poem. She is uncertain as to whether her identification, her unity with her people and the feather-man is complete. Is the ceremony efficacious for her? The question remains and is only stilled when she is able to go with the Grandfather outside of time and life to sing the old songs.

V

Ray Young Bear's poems are markedly different. They do not speak of the old days, of a story world of "a long time ago" or "in the beginning"; rather, they bring that world into our reality. The old story world is a place and time when humans were finding out the power that other beings held—how they acted, and how that power and those unique creatures created the world as we know it today. Beings with power could transform themselves, separate parts of themselves, dominate time and space, create and destroy on a grand scale. While Blue Cloud tries to put us in the *persona* of those story beings, Young Bear tries to have us experience that world—the powers, the perceptions and amazing occurences germane to it. The time and world of the oral tradition is now, if we will just realize it. Not that the reader defeats monsters, but the powers and perceptions of that story world, those things that define it and give it meaning, are alive and rediscovered in the world today. This is the goal of many Native American poets, but Young Bear's uniqueness lies in his evocative use of composition and elements of the oral story as a form for his work. His poems use the fantastic events and perceptions of the story world to make new stories, rather than using these elements solely as subject.

In poems like "The Cook," the woman has supernatural powers and is instructed by her contact with those powers. She seems to have a direct power over the weather and an indirect power over any human that may come in contact with her. The poem "The Way the Bird Sat" presents a wind that is jealous, a bird that keeps watch and divides the season with song, and blue hearts in the form of a deer. In the animated universe of this poem, an unidentified narrator is guided by animal spirit power into visualizing and thus participating in a ceremony that transforms him into a hummingbird, the originator of his personal power. These occurrences are not unusual in oral tradition, nor are they unusual in Young Bear's work. Dogs climbing down from the sky on a cord of sunlight, a sun growing on someone's back, a face existing in a mouth and rocks with mouths are occurences typical to Young Bear's poetry. Through these we feel that spirit, the power that accomplishes these miraculous occurrences and incredible transformations, is still here. It lies under the surface of our daily lives. We can touch that world and experience the story reality if we look hard enough, seek visions and believe. Young Bear's poems seem aimed toward changing those who he says, "think that all they see is all they will ever see."[22]

Many of Young Bear's images occur and recur in several poems as if they were resonant oral material trying to find an appropriate niche in

the cultural mind. Many of these are hauntingly surreal images. However, the images come more from the story reality, the dream and the vision—peyote and otherwise—than from a European art form. Through this imagery, his poetry becomes vivid because the power of the story and the dream is present, an active force in the events and processes of the poem and the world. The visionary quality of the poetry is as haunting as the ghosts that seem to linger around his verbal campfires. The world of his poems is active, in the process of making itself.

> She combed my hair with wings of the seeking owl
> she sang of spring birds and how brown running
> waters
> would be a signal to begin family deaths by
> witchcraft,
> she showed me a handful of ribs shining a land dry[23]

These actions are not so much metaphors as magical occurrences.

As the world is being created in poetry, there are two clear paths that help us achieve that old story world: (1) old traditional songs; since these songs have links to the old ways that are historically strong, they guide and train the listener, complete this world and tie us to the older oral one, (2) even more importantly for Young Bear's poetry, dreams and visions. Dreams put us in the experiential framework of the old culture and are an important part of the imaginative life of the oral. Dreams are life, or at least life on a special level. Visions are messages from the story reality and those who inhabit. They always imply implementation in the present, so they form an important link for us. Underneath it all lies spirit and the possibilities of transformation and power as real as in any story world.

While the stability of the songs in oral tradition is of vital importance, the songs of spirits, animals and winds remain incomplete, having never been completely translated into human language because they belong to those beings. The songs are their experience and their expression; they contain the essence of the story being. The poet speaks of these songs of the non-human, defining their domain and indicating the power these have through their songs. While Young Bear's central aim is to recreate the story world here, to guide us through new and sometimes inexplicable worlds, he is concerned with the songs of animal spirits, but not to the point where he will sing their songs. It is human song that is more central to Young Bear's poetry. In "4 songs of life" we explore the place of the old songs in life. For those who have them, they are sources of strength and pride; for those who don't, they are a teacher, the guide

they need. Through them, they will grow strong. As one grows strong, his words will be released into various parts of the world. In this manner, the songs, the words carry on and are imbedded in new people. The word, as Momaday sees it, is then carried on and spread; it becomes the life of the people and quenches their thirst. Literally, in "Rushing" the mother's words are associated with the rushing spring she finds; both gush forth and fulfill.

While the songs and words guide life, they also have the ability to guide the dead. In "The Last Dream" the old man, who spends his time singing the old songs and learning the ones he does not know, uses his talent to speak to the relatives of the dead, helping them understand and direct their lives. However, his real role is to direct the dead, to give them the "last dream" as they start on the ghost road. He must touch spirit, and in touching that, touch the other world.

> . . .he knew it was wrong
> to ask them to go on, but he
> couldn't refuse lives that were already lost.
> Everybody
> counted on him. Each knew that
> if they died within his time,
> he would be the one to give away
> the last dream,
> the grandfather of all
> dream.[24]

While Young Bear is interested in the dream and vision as an experience of the spirit world, he also sees it as a link between various levels of existence.

In the oral tradition, the dream or vision is often a message or precognition of events significant either to the individual or a people. Young Bear develops this in his poem "From His Dream" where the events of a man's dream are fulfilled in the subsequent death of his son. However, for Young Bear, the dream or vision isn't just one-way communication; we get the sense that each level of life is a dream and that they can communicate with other:

> at the funeral,
> the dead sorts you out
> from the rest and knows
> you are only pretending,
> tells you it is no
> longer important
> and sends you on
> to another dream
> of lesser importance.[25]

The poem ends with the dream triumphing over death, since the dream is existence on whatever level you happen to have found yourself. For the woman with child in "Waiting To Be Fed" the dream is so real that she is seduced into the river's dream and passes that dream on to her daughter; however, her existence in the normal human level becomes an impossibility. The ability of the dream to create transformations makes a world of all possibilities for those in it and a confusion as to identity for those not in it. It is difficult to tell the creature one confronts in Young Bear's poems; it changes.

Moreover, there is a recurrent question of identity for the poet, as well as about the nature of things. Since transformations and movement between dreams seems possible, since we can enter and participate in the older story reality and recreate it here, who are we? Story or Reality? Where are our roots? Which world is our home, our place? There are so many possibilities, or as he says, "I am always surprised at how many different minds drift across each other."[26] In many of his poems it is difficult to know who the narrator is because the "I" transforms into various characters from everyday reality to dream and vision. "In Dream" is a poem that begins and ends with dream. The poem almost reads like an origin story, yet the focus on the narrator shifts in and out, as if he were transforming. A Young Bear-like narrator admits to a certain confusion:

> I found myself between the airs
> of changing weather
> unable to distinguish
> what to kill, layers of wind over my eyes.[27]

The poem exists somewhere between reality and dream / vision. The question of identity is more directly stated in another poem; "I will never know who I actually am."[28]

Young Bear's total dedication to the form and substance of the old story reality is a distinguishing characteristic of his poetry. His poems are dreams and visions. They ask us to experience a spiritual reality in the manner of the oral tradition, yet if the transformation of our reality is complete, we lose the boundaries of self. Often it is hard to tell the visionary from the vision.

VI

Of all the writers in this paper, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is the most purely concerned with history, both as experience and as a determining factor in cultural identity. Some of her book, *Then Badger Said This*, contains purely descriptive passages as well as oral history, but like Momaday's

The Way to Rainy Mountain, her approach to history is not the cold, unimaginative one of literal history, but a highly oral process where the personal and the cultural merge. Reflective of this holistic approach to Sioux culture and history, she includes old stories, contemporary poetry, oral history, song, personal narratives and art work.

For Cook-Lynn, the past is not a cold stone tablet; it is a living vital force. As she watches the changes of the present world, it becomes easier for her, and subsequently for us, to understand and believe the changes of history and legend. The personal leads to understanding and confirmation of the mythic, for they are not as separate as some would think. In her description of the flooding behind the Missouri River Project, section II, we are brought to that understanding as we see the people and the land sharing the same fate. They are tied together under the flooding of the dominant culture as they have always been tied together. Section XIII tells of a scene, timeless in location, where a woman, her child and the child's father are fixed in a confluence of the ritual and the personal. The ritual, itself timeless, patterns their perceptions as it does their movements. As the woman contemplates her past, the man and the child, she comes to the painful realization, "The past is always past as it is always present."[29]

This requires a change in perception for those of us who look on history as the rational accumulation of facts. In her preface we are warned to open our minds, ears and eyes to the insight, clear in oral cultures, that history also consists of memory and imagination. To understand history is to imagine, but also it is to hear, to listen. Young Bear's emphasis on imagination as a tool to understand personal and cultural histories, and Bahe's sense of the history in the story that things tell us, both clarify and develop Cook-Lynn's approach. She proposes that literalist history is flawed because it has no sound. However indefinite sound may be, it is essential to identity and survival. Survival may depend on listening to sounds around one and this important process eventually gives one language and history. Cook-Lynn tells a variant of the story of the arrowmaker in his shelter. Swan, the young warrior, is working on his arrows while in enemy country. He hears the hoot of an owl nearby and sees the reflection of an enemy in a bowl of water. He lines his arrows up, pointing them in all directions until he surprises the enemy and slays him. The gathering of sensory detail (and attention to it) allows the warrior to survive. The Sioux would agree that the owl spoke to Swan, and "the gathering of sensory detail available to you gives the process of language."[30] The history of the young warrior requires imagination and the memory of sensual detail on the listener's part. A literal historian would not understand where the Sioux would.

History and words are even more closely tied in the poem, "The Last Remarkable Man," which starts with the photograph of one of the ancestors. This remarkable man seems to become alive as the poem continues. His words still hold power. In the Council, the words of others carefully recreate him, bring him back. If the present and the past live simultaneously, then the old man still lives or is continually reborn. With the loss of the literal sense of history we come into a richer, if more difficult world. Cook-Lynn fears that this vision of history has been lost by some contemporary Indians. While she notes that some hold out hope for all mankind because the "universal spread of the myths of men" will reintroduce the oral, she fears that the vision is being abandoned:

> We have walked away from history
> and dallied with a repetition of things
> to the end of the bar and booze
> Like a time bomb it ticks as rapidly
> for White Hawk as for Little Crow
> or me[31]

Song plays a large role in holding this vision intact. Music and the word are always past and present, simultaneously held in a traditional relationship between land and culture. In "Flute Maker's Story" the song of the flute player expresses the "mythic pulse" and embodies it in the moment. These songs have power and they etch that power on the land. The flute player's song "interleafs the shadow of the past with standard lines of life and grief."[32] As the song embodies the vision of history as present, it teaches "the word and belief." The land is charged with sound, ready to speak, and the human is taught culture and history, or at least the vision necessary for both. On the next page in section V, we find the rocks speaking to an old Sisseton woman and through them she listens and knows the past. She is able to find the body of a young boy drowned many days previously. It is as if all history still lived in the world around us, if we could but hear it speak. Unfortunately all this could be lost. The section "History of Unchi" suggests that the death of the old storyteller, and those like her, could eventually lead to the sky ceasing to talk. When all things cease to talk, history will be no more.

While sound and song are the life of history, they are also the strength and potency of individuals. The Sioux speak of Meadowlark who, because she is on the ground and open to predators, uses her song to build her strength and survive. Her song speaks to men of all things in the lives of mankind. Cook-Lynn tells of individuals who though they seem Westernized on the surface, still use the songs to bring them strength and identity, and help them survive. Those who can't sing, as in the poem,

"Room of God and Door to Heaven," are lost to continual searching and unfulfillment. The poems in this book, which at many times read like songs, give the author a sense of strength and identity. They help make history as they express it, such as in "When you talk of this," where how we speak of people and events creates a history for them.

Cook-Lynn observes that "the response to sound is evident in all Sioux art forms." The book as a whole seems to bear this out. The artwork, poems, stories and legends are all alive with sound and spirit. The two move together, as she reveals in the first poem in the book, "The spirit lives / when it moves and sings your name."[33] The position of the listener is one of hanging by fingernails at the ridge of words. It is here we achieve spirit. The poem breaks up and is scattered throughout the book with only strategic words repeated: "it moves—and sings—your name—at the ridge of words—seedlike and shiny." By falling into words, we fall into the world of oral history, song and spirit. In many ways the book is an attempt to confirm and recreate the continuance of song, spirit and history. The companion piece to this poem is the last poem where the old uncle "sings the unreal songs" and mends the wind. The uncle seems to live in that world of spirit and song, and when others think of him, it is always in the context of the old stories. It is he who comforts the little girl, renews her in a time of sadness, by telling the old story of the Sun Gazer's death and the sunflower that sprang from the burial mound to turn its face to the eternal sun. In telling, she believes and touches spirit.

Conclusions

First of all, I think we can conclude that the oral tradition is carried on in a variety of ways by contemporary Native American poets. Momaday is correct in assuming that it informs the character of their poetry, but the ways it does this are as varied as the writers themselves. Still, some parallels exist. It seems that as the oral becomes transformed into the written, the emphasis shifts from process to product. The poets become more concerned with transferring the vision and wisdom of the oral, than in duplicating oral transmission. Generally they take their inspiration from the oral tradition as subject rather than medium. This is not to say the poets do not use oral form. Perhaps Kenny's use of the lyric, Blue Cloud's use of *persona*, Young Bear's surreal imagery, and Cook-Lynn's retellings with commentary count as oral forms in written langauge or perhaps as transitional forms, yet they are forms that already exist in written English. They may have had oral backgrounds, but now are assimilated. Perhaps these offer a Native American poet a good chance to mediate between the demands of the oral and the written. Of course the

problem is that the multiple encoding that exists in oral transmission is almost impossible to duplicate. The form of modern poetry also pressures the poets to talk of themselves, and the poets tend to use their contact with the oral tradition as a source of inspiration and subject. On the other hand, the poets are concerned that "the people" accept their work as a true expression of experience. If the oral lives on in each individual, as well as in a people, then perhaps it is strengthened by the incorporation of an art that seeks a dialogue with the people.

Some of the poets assume roles that are recognizably oral in their aims. Kenny sees himself in the role of singer of the songs of things. Through this lyrical stance, he becomes a namer, a bringer of spirit into language or print, if you will. Blue Cloud's work places him as a seeker, a crier of visions, a meditator on the intricate web of spirit and things, and a revealer of those intricacies. The poem is his instrument, powerful insofar as it carries on through the illumination of the poet. Young Bear is a story-maker more than a story-teller. He guides us and places us in the experience of the stories of the oral tradition. Cook-Lynn takes on the role of tribal historian. She wants to assure us of the continuation and power of the old ways and of spirit. All these are ways by which the contemporary poet may explore an oral shape in his/her poetry without exact duplication of the oral, as in a chant structure.

Secondly, all of the poets are concerned with identity. They seem to be trying to define their identity through their art. While this is common in all modern poetry, Native American poets are also concerned with the degree of their identification inside the all-encompassing vision of tribal societies and oral tradition. This dual sense of identity can lend some confusion to the writers. In this paper the poles could be formed by Wendy Rose, who in many poems appears to start from outside the oral tradition, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, who tends to downplay the whole question. Some poets explore a cultural distance from the old ways. Paula Allen's excellent essay analysing the half-breed's experience of identity comes to mind here.[34] To overcome isolation and find identity, the half-breed must reject simplistic, internalized dualisms which divide the world and themselves into good and bad, White and Indian, traditional and contemporary. While none of the poets here draw these rigid dichotomies, they are all concerned with the question of identity, and the note of melancholy that colors their voices as they speak of the old days may give subtle testimony to this process. Perhaps even more deeply, the searching for identity, common to poetry as written today, clashes with the all-encompassing demands of a true participation in oral and traditional ways, and with an anonymity that runs counter to the act of writing itself.

While these larger concerns may run at a metaphysical depth, the immediate sense one gets from the poetry is that the poet becomes an instrument of spirit. In revealing and loaning his voice to spirit, the poet implicitly effaces himself. A similar situation occurs if the writer is retelling traditional stories and wisdoms. The active artist has given himself / herself over to a "they say" situation. Consequently the poets find themselves in the position of a storyteller, and the poem becomes more of a performance than a personal illumination. The efforts of Native American poets who placed themselves in this position, through their work in the sixties and early seventies, have already had an influence on Contemporary American Poetry's revitalization of the story and the story-poem.

Lastly, the poetry is essentially religious. The poems praise and celebrate spirit while they endeavor to infuse the world with spirit. As Maurice Kenny says, "Indian poetry across the long travel of time has been essentially spiritual."[35] Contemporary Indian poetry is no different. For all, song is the means to realize spirit in the world. Song is thus a path into a spiritual vision always inherent in Native American oral tradition. As a revealer of spirit, the Indian poet tries to give back and strengthen the oral tradition instead of merely exploiting it. In this religious aspect, contemporary Indian poetry veers from the path of other third world literatures. While the Indian poet is often politically aware, his / her poetic goals are frequently also spiritual.

While contemporary Indian poetry may be influenced by the continuing, agonizing scrutiny of the individual that has dominated American poetry since the beginning of the psychological age, it most certainly has much to give through its introduction of elements of the oral tradition and its concern with spirit. Its attempts at oral form may also prove influential when contemporary poets begin to see Indian poets as contemporaries interested in improving the craft. Indian poets' concerns with spirit may inform the artistic search for meaning in our lives. Many new or renewed possibilities for voice exist in the experiments with *persona* and with singing the songs of everything and each thing. Lastly, Indian poets' concerns with the story may have already had an effect on the current movement in American poetry to reestablish the narrative line and the story in general.

NOTES

1. Recorded personal interview with Maurice Kenny, 23 April 1979.
2. Interview with Kenny, 23 April 1979.

3. Maurice Kenny, "Wild Strawberry," in *Dancing Back Strong the Nation* (Marvin, SD: Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1979), n.p.

4. Maurice Kenny, "Sweetgrass," in *North: Poems of Home* (Marvin, SD: Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1977), n.p.

5. Maurice Kenny, "Adowe: We Return Thanks," in *The Remembered Earth*, ed. Geary Hobson (Albuquerque: Red Earth Press, 1979), p. 13.

6. Interview with Kenny, 23 April 1979.

7. Kenny, *Dancing*.

8. Gary Snyder, "Preface," in *Turtle, Bear and Wolf*, by Peter Blue Cloud (Rooseveltown, NY: Akwesasne Notes, 1976), p. V.

9. Peter Blue Cloud, "shady creek," *Turtle, Bear and Wolf*, p. 28.

10. Blue Cloud, "milkweed," *Turtle, Bear and Wolf*, p. 27.

11. Simon Ortiz, *Song, Poetry and Language—Expression and Perception* (Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College Press, 1977), p. 3.

12. Blue Cloud, "Sweat Lodge - The Afterwards," *Turtle, Bear and Wolf*, p. 46.

13. Blue Cloud, "Turtle," *Turtle, Bear and Wolf*, p. 35.

14. Blue Cloud, "Sweat Lodge," *Turtle, Bear and Wolf*, pp. 48-49.

15. Wendy Rose, "Vanishing Point: Urban Indian," in *Long Division: A Tribal History* (New York: The Strawberry Press, 1976), n.p.

16. Rose, "Long Division," *Long Division*.

17. Wendy Rose, "Trickster 1977," in *The Remembered Earth*, p. 384.

18. Wendy Rose, "Hopi Overlay: Turquoise Words Going Home," in *Academic Squaw: Reports to the World from the Ivory Tower* (Marvin, SD: Blue Cloud Quarterly Press, 1977), n.p.

19. Rose, "Walking on the Prayerstick," *Academic Squaw*.

20. Liz Sohappy Bahe, "The Ration Card," in *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*, ed. Duane Niatum (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 8-9.

21. Bahe, "Once Again," *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*, pp. 12-13.

22. Ray Young Bear, "For the Rain in March: The Blackened Hearts of Herons," in *The Remembered Earth*, p. 349.

23. Young Bear, "Through Lifetime," in *From the Belly of the Shark: A New Anthology of Native Americans*, ed. Walter Lowenfels (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 72.

24. Young Bear, "The Last Dream," in *The Remembered Earth*, pp. 341-42.

25. Young Bear, "The Place of O," in *Voices on the Rainbow: Contemporary Poetry by American Indians*, ed. Kenneth Rosen (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), p. 215.

26. Young Bear, "For the Rain in March," in *Remembered Earth*, p. 347.

27. Young Bear, "In Dream: the Privacy of Sequence," in *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*, p. 267.

28. Young Bear, "For the Rain in March," in *Remembered Earth*, p. 347.

29. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Then Badger Said This* (New York: Vintage Press, 1977), p. 19.

30. Cook-Lynn, *Badger*, p. 34.

31. Cook-Lynn, *Badger*, p. 38.

32. Cook-Lynn, "Flute Maker's Story," in *Badger*, p. 4.

33. Cook-Lynn, "The Bare Facts," in *Badger*, p. 1.

34. Paula Gunn Allen, "A Stranger in My Own Life: Alienation in Native American Prose and Poetry," *Newsletter of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures*, vol. 3, nos. 1 & 2 (Winter 1978, Spring 1979).

35. Maurice Kenny, "Adowe," in *Remembered Earth*, p. 13.