

# A Verdant Ethnography

## Henry Green, Navajo Poetry, and Dialogical Ethnopoetics

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### Résumé de l'article

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

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# A Verdant Ethnography

## Henry Green, Navajo Poetry, and Dialogical Ethnopoetics

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Introducing

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

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

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

## Greening

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Transcribing

We must remember that the transcribed words were once embedded in a dialog to which an anthropologist was one of the parties.

—Dennis Tedlock (1982, 161)

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

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

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

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

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

## **A Verdant Ethnography of Navajo Poets**

**19 October 2000**

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

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

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

AKW: mhm

RLJ: You think of something

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

AKW: Right

RLJ: for me the alliteration it's something similar to that  
that there's certain words  
and yet they look like something else  
or they sound like something else  
and there just connected different thoughts  
and it's sorta like a spider web  
seems like they're very connected  
they're fine lines where  
  
I guess in a sense  
the whole idea, for me, of alliteration is like  
something that's fragile like a cobweb  
that  
that you could read it one way  
and have a totally different interpretation  
but if you read it a different way  
you'll have a different meaning, a different experience  
and that life is like that  
there are these interconnections  
that  
you go into a situation  
you could think of it as hardship  
or you could think of it as a great challenge

AKW: mhm

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

Or you could say, "This is a great chance for me to learn something new."

There's always that.

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

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

people always say you need to go beyond language, beyond culture

you need to go beyond the personal things to understand others

I disagree with that

I think

we must go through culture and language

we must go through ourselves

to get to the core

AKW: mhm

RLJ: and that means going deep and within

and once we do that we can surface

anywhere

and understand

the heart of things

that

an example is the more and more Navajo I think I become

the more and more genuinely Navajo I think I become

AKW: mhm

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

AKW: mhm

**2 February 2001**

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

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

AKW hmm

see I say that

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

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

RLJ mhm

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

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

RLJ [Overlap]

AKW [Overlap] no go ahead

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

AKW ah

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

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

RLJ     white anthropologists  
          we should add linguists too [laugh]

AKW     [laugh]

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

AKW     well thank you

RLJ     [laugh]

**2 February 2001**

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

but when you really begin to think about it  
the outcome of this expression  
will touch people in certain ways  
and they will because of their own design of language  
they will begin  
to talk about it in different terms  
of course that doesn't mean my intent isn't political

AKW right

RLJ it could be totally political

AKW right

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

AKW well and that's

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

AKW mhm

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

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

AKW [laughter]

RLJ it more than enough to keep me from writing

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

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

AKW mhm

**10 February 2001**

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

KAY: What is poetry  
hmhhh  
poetry is a secret

AKW: a secret

KAY: yeah  
I think it's a secret

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

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

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

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

AKW: really

KAY: I don't think I ever have

**22 February 2001**

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

AKW: Do you think poetry has to be written?

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

**9 July 2008**

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

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

BM: mhm

AKW: and you were I assume learning to write English

BM: RIGHT

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

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

AKW: mmm, I see

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

AKW: mhm

BM: that was the kind of thing  
SO:  
the best way was I'm gonna write about  
like the dormitory  
NOBODY sees what  
what what what horrible things  
or what the impact is to stay in the dorm at the time  
the bell rings and then they say, "Stay in you can't get out"  
you go to your room  
and you're sittin there  
you're restless  
only thing you can do is look out the window  
BUT HERE  
look I can go in and out  
and you can too  
so: it's the whole freedom  
but in the boarding school  
you have to  
you have TIME limit  
so those were just some of things that I'm  
talking about

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

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

AKW: a:h

BM: And so hunh  
if you're  
if we're FREE to ask questions  
in my  
it may be different  
but in this case  
there was none  
  
and after writing this  
the first poem  
that I ever came up with  
she thought this was great  
  
she didn't see what I'm trying to s:  
STILL she didn't see what I was trying to say  
as a student  
so I wrote  
because I saw this  
cotton  
somehow it came past the window into the classroom  
and it was just  
I was watching it  
and then I thought, "wo:w"  
so this is what I did  
I put

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

AKW: what did she think it was about

BM: she thought I was learning my tense

AKW: ah

BM: grammar skills

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

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

**9 July 2008**

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

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

AKW: Mmhmm

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

AKW: Mmhmm

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

AKW: Right

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

AKW: Hh

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

AKW: Hh hh

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

AKW: [laughter]  
A lot of salad in it

BM: Y:eah

AKW. [laughter]

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

AKW: Hh hh [5-second pause]

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

AKW: Hm

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

that's  
poetry slam

AKW: Mm hmm

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

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

BM: Hm mm

AKW: Or co:ld

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

AKW: Hh hh hh [2-second pause]

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

AKW: Mm hmm

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

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

**9 July 2008**

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

AKW: Mm hmm

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

AKW: Mm hmm

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

AKW: Ah ha

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

AKW: Mm hmm

BM: [community name]

AKW: Okay

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

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

AKW: Ah

BM: That’s  
 what I wrote

AKW: Can I have a copy of that?

BM: It'll cost you

AKW: That's fine

BM: [laughter]

AKW: [laughter]

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

AKW: Mm hmm

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

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

AKW: Right

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

AKW: Mm hmm

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

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

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