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Native American Myths Reconsidered

Barre Toelken

As I looked over the program for this meeting, I was at first a little concerned, because I realized that I will be using the word “myth” in a somewhat restricted – perhaps even old-fashioned – way; that is, in a manner aligned rather with anthropological and folkloristic usage than with the current understanding of the term among literary scholars. Basically, I will refer to actual, performed narratives that are thought by their tellers and audiences to be spoken embodiments, or dramatic articulations if you will, of greater-than-everyday truths. And I will not be dealing with idealized ancient stories that are believed never to have changed their meaning through time but – to the contrary – culturally constructed narratives that are continually adjusted, discussed, and re-examined by Native peoples to accommodate the perceived realities of life. All of us, Native and non-Native, experience the ongoing events that surround us, and usually process them, understand them, talk about them, and participate in them through the expressive, vernacular forms provided by our culture – that is, by reference to our shared cultural worldview. If it can be said that knowledge, information, and – hence – history are socially constructed, then I would say that our perceptions and mythic narratives are culturally constructed, and it is to constructed “texts” (in the Latin sense of “woven objects”) that I would like to direct your attention.

That said, perhaps the topics I will address are not so far away after all from the metaphorical sense of “myth” used widely today in literary discussion. And the issues are in many ways similar to those raised by the post-modern critique of history – which recognizes not only the fictional, creative aspect of history, but as well rejects the exclusive way “standard” histories have privileged or foregrounded certain important events by implied contrast to those of less-important Others. As you know, histories of the United States have been primarily concerned with the adventures of the White invaders more than with the longstanding cultural systems of the Natives. American Literature (until the last few years) has been understood comforta-

bly as the written expressive record of immigrants and settlers, but not the oral expressions of Natives at home on the land for thousands of years. Indeed, most of the papers at this conference are focused on issues of importance to the latecomers, not on the abiding interests of the Natives. Feminists have reminded us that *History* and *Herstory* are not the same thing – a nice play on words that might allow us to overlook the fact that the same principle holds true outside the discussion of gender. But I will not pretend to lecture you on recent literary and philosophical theory by leaning on the back of Native American myth (for one thing, I am not competent to do so). Rather, I want to explore the dynamism in Native American myths that I have learned to recognize over the past 45 years of my own studies in this area, by reference to expressions and comments from the Native peoples themselves.

Let me begin, though, with a poignant example of how close we came to not even having such a topic to discuss. In 1891, Franz Boas collected a number of stories on the southwest coast of Washington from a Kathlamet Chinook man named Charles Cultee. In his 50s or 60s at that time, Cultee was an extremely talented narrator who commanded several Native languages; sadly enough, he was at that moment one of the last three people alive who could speak the Kathlamet dialect of Chinook. Within a few years, all three speakers had died, and if it had not been for Boas's interest, their amazing oral literature would have disappeared without a trace. As it is, we have only a fragment, but one text in particular gives us a startling view of the depth and richness in Northwest Native myth.

Cultee chose to tell Boas "The Sun's Myth" because he felt it was important – a point to which I will return later. In this story – which, like many Native narratives, is divided into two mutually reflective halves – a chief of five villages (each of which is populated by his own relatives) becomes compulsively fascinated by the sun, as it almost shines through the heavily overcast skies of the northwest coast. In spite of his wife's sensible comment that it would be impossible to actually go there, he decides to leave home and travel to the sun. On the long journey he uses up ten sets of moccasins and ten pairs of buckskin pants – at the rate of one per month. When he finally arrives at the Sun's house, he finds only a very young girl sitting there, surrounded by massive amounts of robes, spears, blankets, shields, and shell money – in short, a treasure of the sort usually given away to others at a potlatch or any ceremony celebrating an important event such as a naming, or a wedding. As a chief whose responsibility it would have been to preside over the distribution of such material wealth under ceremonial circum-

stances, he would have known what the girl means when she tells him, "These are my and my grandmother's things; she saves them for my maturity." The audience understands by this remark that the girl has not yet reached puberty, and is therefore not eligible to marry. Nonetheless, as the myth so tersely puts it: "He took her." A chief with responsibilities to five villages has now wandered away, following his own compulsive urges. A chief who would normally enforce tribal taboos and values has now broken an important one. A chief who would normally distribute wealth to others has now taken someone else's wealth – designed for distribution at a proper ceremony – for himself. Now, living with the girl and her mother/grandmother (the Sun), he becomes hypnotized by yet another bright, shiny object; the text never describes it precisely, but whenever he looks at it, his eyes roll back in his head. As the story moves into part two (his return journey), he insists on taking this bright thing with him. After offering him all sorts of other treasures in vain, the Sun finally, but with misgivings, hangs the bright object on him like a blanket, gives him a stone ax, and sends him on his way.

The return home is depicted swiftly, as if he were flying toward his doom: instead of taking ten months for the journey, he arrives almost immediately at an uncle's village, and immediately the bright object makes him shake. It takes him over emotionally and physically, and with the stone ax trembling in his hand, he destroys the town and all the people in it. One after another, he destroys all his five villages, the last being – of course – his own town, where his wife lives. At the end of the story, as the chief stands there alone, traumatized by his uncontrollable destruction of his entire world, the Sun comes up to him from behind, relieves him of the bright object, and reminds him that *he* was the one who insisted on carrying it. She leaves him and then, totally alone in the world, he builds a small house – a proper moral contrast to the large house whose contents and inhabitants he had tried to obtain for himself in selfish violation of his culture's values.

We can "read" this story as a kind of dramatic equation: the egotism and selfishness of the chief who defects from his responsibilities to his people in Part I are acted out in Part II in such a close parallel that we cannot miss the physical enactment of the widespread Native moral abstract: personal selfishness is culturally destructive. Less passively stated: if you forget or abandon your culture's value system in a selfish pursuit of personal material wealth, you will be responsible for the destruction of your people, and you will end up totally impoverished. The question for us to ponder is why Charles Cultee thought this story was an important one to tell Boas. We will

never really know, but Dell Hymes – the scholar most familiar with the story from his thirty-plus years of work on it – is more and more convinced that Cultee saw the myth as an ancient anticipation, a dramatization, of the frightening world in which the narrator now found himself. His people, having chosen the bright, hypnotic objects offered by the White world, had actively participated in their own destruction, and he himself – through the myth narrative – was the last to give voice to the terrible result: a man alone, his world and family lost. This possible meaning is supported, unfortunately, by stories from a number of Northwest coastal tribes about their own naivete when they first met the Whites. Several tribes tell of their first encounter with a White hunter and his rifle: believing their personal magic to be stronger than that of this new weapon, they insist that the (obviously petrified) hunter shoot at them. Only after five or six have offered their chests to him, yelling “Try me! Try me!” do they realize that they are actually killing themselves. Whether such an incident actually occurred, the recitation of the legend by contemporary Natives gives expression to the ongoing perception of the dangers in cross-cultural relations. Madronna Holden provides a great number of similar stories from the coastal Salish peoples of Washington state, noting that many of the motifs dramatizing first contacts with the Whites ironically match traditional tropes within Native traditions, which means that the new and traumatic (and sometimes humorous) contacts were being viewed and expressed from the standpoint of older beliefs and values (Holden).

Working with Navajos over the past 45 years, I have been struck by their consistent reference to two totally different narratives concerning their location in the desert southwest. Anthropologists are not unanimous about it, but the general opinion today is that the great northern Athabascan migration into the southwest deserts was more or less complete by 500 to 600 years ago (for my own sarcastic purposes, I like to imagine the date of October 12, 1492, the date when Columbus thought he had reached the shores of the Indies). Interestingly, though, if one asks a Navajo, “Where did Navajos come from?” one is usually told either the whole story or at least a synopsis of the Emergence Myth, in which all living beings emerge onto the surface of the present world after having moved upward from previous levels of existence underneath and within this one (Zolbrod). However, if we ask “What was this area like when you Navajos first arrived?” we are likely to hear comments like “Oh, when we first came here, we didn’t know how to get food, but there were these little people living up in the cliffs who had gardens out on the flat areas below. All we had to do was throw rocks at them and drive

them out of the fields. When they'd go up into the cliffs, we could just take whatever vegetables we needed."¹ The first story is easily recognizable as the typical pueblo origin story, and is no doubt modeled on the agricultural metaphor of life emerging like plant growth from below ground. The Navajos, originally hunters and fishers from the far northwest (interior Alaska and western Canada), had migrated southward, arriving in southwestern deserts which offered them none of their accustomed animal food supply. They survived at first, apparently, by harvesting the gardens of their new pueblo neighbors (some of whom, the Anasazi ["ancient" or "previous" peoples], were already moving southward to newer pueblos along the Rio Grande River), but eventually they learned the pueblo way of agriculture, including the sacred story which dramatizes its principles, and settled into the area by adopting much of the associated pueblo worldview, including the matrilineal and matrilocal societal structure which privileges female fertility over male hunting as a central feature of cultural reality. For all this may indicate about Navajo syncretism or readiness to adapt, the cultural history of this shift is still vividly archived in the Navajo word for corn, *naadaa'* – literally, "enemy food."

Another, somewhat more humorous cultural archive of older attitudes can be found in the contemporary jokes told about each other by Navajos and Hopis. In these culturally-situated vignettes, the Navajos still describe the Hopis as small and ineffectual (What's one meter tall and 50 meters long? A Hopi parade.), while the Hopis characterize the Navajos as aggressive lawbreakers (Why do Navajos like to buy used police cars? So they can see what it's like to ride in the *front* seat). And indeed, the Hopis in general maintain the stereotype of the Navajos (whose reservation now totally surrounds theirs) as rude and aggressive, even though in fact many Navajos and Hopis intermarry and have cheerful personal relationships. Hopis know how deeply the Navajo culture has borrowed from theirs, but most Navajos do not mention the fact. Many are not even aware of it, although the singers ("medicine men") certainly are, and can talk about it at length. On one occasion when I referred in a forum on the Navajo Reservation to the Navajo borrowing of the Hopi Emergence Myth, sandpaintings, and the sacred ritual plants of the southwest (tobacco, beans, corn, and squash), two medicine men came up to me later and said, "You got it wrong; we never borrowed all those ideas from the Hopi. We paid a good and fair price for everything we ever learned from them!" – a reflection of the Navajo concept that ritual

¹ Condensed from conversations with Hugh Yellowman, 1960s and 1970s.

knowledge is a kind of valuable commodity whose importance is recognized by reciprocal payment. But so solidly have the Navajos "invested" in the mythic story of Emergence from the earth right there in the southwest that they now jokingly claim that it was the Hopis, and not themselves, who migrated into the area. One Navajo told me, "Your anthropologists think that we came here by way of the Bering Straits land bridge, but actually it was the Hopis, you know. Their own story is that they were on a long migration, and they got caught somehow at the place called the Gate of the North. They were snowed in and they didn't know what to do. Finally, they noticed some animals swimming by in the ocean, and they shouted, 'Hey, can you tell us if the Bering Straits land bridge is around here anywhere?' and the seals answered, 'Aoo!'" Not immediately apparent to non-Navajos is that 'Aoo' means "yes" in Navajo; at the same time, of course, it sounds like the grunt of a seal, so the scenario depicts the lost Hopis arriving in the Arctic to find even the animals already speaking Navajo. Obviously, this mythic joke is not found in the Hopi mythic repertoire.

But for all the humor in contemporary discourse – much of it occasioned by modern political and economic oddities that both tribes consider to be the penalty of living among the Whites – the Navajo culture over the past 500 years has indeed experienced a dramatic shift from lush northwest forests full of animals and fish to dry southwest deserts full of sand, from male to female orientation, and from hunting to planting for survival (which of course entails a shift from a concern with death – the killing of animal relatives – to a concern with life and fertility – the encouragement and nurturing of food plants in a fragile environment), and their myths dramatize that change.

Jerrold E. Levy has argued that the resultant change in mythic perspective was so powerful that the newer system (typified by the text and logic of the Blessingway ceremony) virtually demoted the earlier hunters' shamanic system to the level of shame and embarrassment (as typified by narratives dramatizing the humorous antics of Coyote). I would suggest that the picture is more complicated than that, since animals like the bear, cougar, lynx, and coyote, which would have been common in the far north (and might also have been totemic ancestors in addition to sources for food and skins), are still included as sacred symbols in contemporary Navajo healing ceremonies, and are thought to be still resident in the Navajo world – albeit in the higher elevations of the four sacred mountains. As well, there is an even stronger sense of shamanism, especially with respect to control over death, in the Navajo witchcraft (*yenaaldlooshi*) complex.

But Levy's position is certainly valid: a new story, a newer mythic rendering of the Navajo world, articulates and celebrates this relatively new reality. And the Emergence Myth itself is still adjusted from time to time to accommodate the culturally expanded world in which the Navajos continue to live. Several times over the past few years, I have had the opportunity to speak with *hataali* (literally, "singers," usually referred to crudely in English as "medicine men," though they are not all male) and hear them sing their versions of the Emergence during appropriate parts of healing rituals. Many of them now include horses, cattle, sheep, and goats among those beings who came up from the lower worlds. When I asked about this apparent anachronism on one occasion, I was told by one very gifted singer, "Of course I know that cows and sheep came here with the Spaniards. I myself never mentioned them in the ceremony until recently. But then I realized that these animals have become a part of us (as you know, we even call sheep "the mothers of our children"), and I thought, 'how can it be a sacred story if it doesn't include all the important beings in our world?'"²

In effect, the Navajo use of myth has been the means by which they could narratively claim the world into which they moved, and to adjust that claim as the world has subsequently moved in on them. This would appear to complicate Clifford Geertz's notion of "agricultural involution," in which cultural change is *inhibited* by traditional patterns which have become fixed (Geertz), for although the Navajos have retained some traditional patterns, they have not been inhibited in changing others (not the least example of which would be the almost total abhorrence shown toward eating fish by elderly Navajos whose northern ancestors specialized in catching and preparing fish). This possibility (should we not suspect an inherent capacity?) to adjust and reconstruct mythic constellations is a feature to which we have not paid sufficient attention.

The Kiowa origin myth, which describes people coming out of a world below through a hollow log, presents – among other things – a birth image, a movement from dark to light, from restricted to open space. N. Scott Momaday's reading of the image as the dramatic articulation of the Kiowas' emergence from the dark forests of the Yellowstone country out onto the open plains can be seen as a modern literary conceit, but it may also be an example of the ways in which Native intellectuals have always seen the myths as richly-laden icons of their world and its meanings (Momaday 16-17). Since the emergence of the Kiowas onto the plains actually did result

² Private conversation during a Navajo "sing," with Tully Benally, singer, December 13, 1993.

in the “birth” of a new culture which had not existed before, there is no reason why a contemporary Kiowa like Momaday should not see the story as resonant with the ongoing dynamics of his culture. And it is significant that the story still ends with the detail that someone – a pregnant woman – got stuck in the hollow log; that is, not everyone got out, an image reflecting the accurate information that the Kiowas have relatives who did not come along on their migration (indeed, linguistically-related groups like the Tiwa, Tewa, and Towa are well-known for long-term habitation in faraway pueblos). We may have a tendency to dismiss such modern Native interpretations of older myths as anachronistic wishful thinking, but if the examples above are even a small indication of what has been transpiring in the cultural interpretations of Native people, I think we should at least entertain the possibility that such revisions are not modern intellectual games but evaluative traditions in themselves.

With perspectives like this in mind, I have been discussing contemporary attitudes toward myth with a number of Native peoples in the Pacific Northwest, notably George Wasson (Coquelle elder), Gordon Bettles (Klamath cultural leader), Loren Bommelyn (Tolowa religious leader), and Verbena Green (Warm Springs elder). I found that there has been not only a significant reference to myths and rituals in the ongoing litigations leading to re-recognition of terminated tribes, but that older stories are now used to locate former villages, fishing weirs, and ritual locations. These places are then studied by archeologists, biologists, and other consultants and colleagues to enable the tribes to reclaim their cultural past. It turns out that tribal anecdote, myth, story, and personal recollection of elders’ conversations have been exceedingly accurate about the location of specific sites – even long after the local languages (in the case of the Coos and Coquelle) have been driven out of existence and tribal members dispersed. The tenacity and the accuracy of these narratives is remarkable enough, but along with the “data” of such stories come cultural perspectives which are equally noteworthy.

For example, the Coquelle tribe, now financially sound because of its casino, commissioned an archaeological excavation at a site where tribal legend claimed a village had been totally destroyed by a flood because its inhabitants had not followed tribal custom. Although there were few surface clues indicating a village at that place, scientists following tribal directions unearthed the remains of a village and using modern dating processes were able to determine that the site, inhabited since at least 1600 AD, had been flooded catastrophically by a tsunami on January 26, 1700, at about 9:00 p.m. – the exact computation made possible by the meticulous earthquake

records kept by the Japanese at that time (Hall). After the date and time of day had been established by geologists, the Coquelles were able to describe what was happening in the village at the moment the wave had struck because they still know the myths and ritual conventions that would have dictated the behaviors of the people at that time of year and that time of day.³ If the villagers there had followed the seasonal custom of moving inland and tying boats to higher ground, if they had performed certain rituals that would have necessitated being outdoors at that time, at least some of them might have been able to escape the catastrophe.

Thus, when we hear a serious story being told about a natural phenomenon said to have happened long ago, we are ill-advised to discard or devalue it just because it does not initially seem to make sense. Coquelle elder George Wasson tells the story, learned from older people in his family, of a summer in which the sun never came up in the morning for more than ten days.⁴ The sky remained dark (and the sky along the Oregon coast can be dark enough indeed under normal circumstances), the sun appearing rarely and only late in the day, in the south just before sunset. What could such a story mean? Why would anyone continue to tell it? Why is it told with the gravity of myth? The last of these questions is in some ways the easiest to answer: for the tribes along the Oregon coast, weather phenomena were closely observed and remembered, because they were the key to survival and were considered an indication of whether the world was in order. But that would not account for anyone telling the story today. On one hand, it is clear to me that Wasson tells this story because he heard it from his father, and thus considers it, in and of itself, an important cultural inheritance. But he also tells it because in recent years he has learned from Klamath friends inland that they have a story about the explosion of Mount Mazama, the event about 7000 years ago which led to the formation of Crater Lake, and he knows enough about the effects of volcanic clouds of ash (everyone in the Northwest does, especially since the explosion of Mount St. Helens in 1980) to conclude that the Coquelle account of a dark summer is their narrative record of that momentous volcanic explosion. According to University of Oregon volcanologist William Orr, the ash from the Mazama explosion far exceeded that of the Krakatoa eruption, and would have caused wintry con-

³ The exact timing of this flood was reported by a team of scientists at the 1999 annual Coquelle tribal gathering at Coos Bay, Oregon. The Coquelles held a symposium in January, 2000, to commemorate the event.

⁴ The same story is recorded in Frachtenberg 1913, 135.

ditions over much of the world.⁵ Locally, because of southwesterly coastal winds, it is doubtful that the ashes would have covered the Oregon coast, but the column of ash immediately eastward of the Coast Range would have prevented sunlight from coming through until the sun was low in the southwest. Now, whether this story details the particular explosion which formed Crater Lake, or one of the many other volcanic events which occurred in the area, the significant point for Wasson is that the story is not as opaque as it might have seemed, for the Coquelle tribe (as for the Klamaths, obviously), it is one more eyewitness account which testifies to aboriginal tenure – not only in North America generally, but in this particular area which has been under dispute in the ironic legal arena in which tribes are required to prove in our courts that they were present before we came along. Stories like this are used routinely today in the establishment of tribal rights and recognition.

The Crater Lake story told among the Klamaths and Modocs is phrased in terms of a fight between two mountains (the other one is Mount Shasta, also a volcano) over possession of a beautiful young woman, Loha. But whatever the myth might suggest about courtship, beauty, and competition, it is quite articulate about the volcanic explosions: mountains shake and crumble, red-hot rocks are thrown in all directions, burning ashes fall everywhere, and fire, described like a river or ocean of flame (lava, no doubt), consumes the nearby forests. Finally, the top of the mountain falls in on the chief of the underworld and next day the tall mountain is gone. The whole account is a startlingly accurate description of the event that formed Crater Lake, and ends by recalling that after the eruption, rain fell for years, filling the crater – a phenomenon which (like accompanying lightning) has been observed in connection with other great eruptions. Coincidence? Or eyewitness account?⁶

Another story (which echoes a motif found throughout the northwest, and which might initially strike us as fiction rather than the recollection of an actual event) describes Old Man Coyote dismembering himself after being caught in a hollow tree. The narrative, which Coquelle elder George Wasson and I have discussed elsewhere (Toelken and Wasson), features a hailstorm as well as a field of fully ripe wild strawberries. Since hail would not normally occur in that area when strawberries are ripe, Wasson believes the story is at least in part a dramatization of a year in which a weather anomaly

⁵ In private communication.

⁶ A Klamath account of the origin of Crater Lake, recorded by a soldier who collected it from Chief Lalek, is given by Ella Clark in somewhat romanticized language (*Pacific Northwest* 53-55). A Coquelle version is provided by Susan Wasson Wolgamott (in Jones and Ramsey 287).

(a so-called "el Niño") occurred which the local people may have attributed to the selfish or immoral actions of people inattentive to the requirements of taboo or cultural practice (those features epitomized by Old Man Coyote in Coquelle narratives, which focus not on control of resources but control of human demands). Among other things, then, the myth continues to dramatize or enact a world in which the actions of people have a direct relationship to weather and environment, and hence to the food supply.

In another Coquelle story, Old Man Coyote argues with a small plant about which of them is more powerful, finally triumphing (he thinks) by eating the plant. But the plant continues to argue from inside his belly, and eventually causes such a traumatic case of diarrhea that the resultant pile (now of course fossilized into a rock formation) still indicates the whereabouts of that purgative medicinal plant. Moreover, the story also suggests the amount of dosage by dramatizing that a little of this plant goes a long way; and it asserts that we should not assume that in nature small things are powerless.⁷

A Coos/Coquelle story of the woman who marries a sea otter (also found among the myths of other coastal tribes) utilizes the marriage assumptions of these cultures (marriage creates obligations for reciprocation among the larger extended families involved) to dramatize the long-standing Native right to harvest sea otters, fish, and beached whales as symbols of family relationship and interactive responsibility to the food supply (our relatives in the ocean want to supply us with food; we want to supply them with gifts, prayers, stories, ceremonies). The function of such a myth as a model for assumed relationships to "food resources" is as important today as ever – probably more so since the premises have been challenged by a government obsessed with its presumed obligations to commercial and sport fishermen. As well, the model of cooperative interaction with one's relatives in nature also nurtures a cultural – perhaps even spiritual – sense of being at home in this place (Wolgamott).

Thus far, I have been discussing the kinds of mythic interpretation and reassessment through which the members of a tribe feel they can extend and enrich their sense of themselves and their place by taking a new, renewed, or revised view of the ideas available to them from their own older oral traditions, from scholarly studies done of their tribes, and from developments in their contemporary situations. But there is yet another, more investigative and philosophical mythic discussion taking place among Native Americans.

⁷ Told to the author by Will Wasson near Sunset Bay State Park, Oregon, in the winter of 1970.

At a Native conference at the University of Oregon in 1997, George Wasson and Loren Bommelyn, Tolowa religious leader from Smith River Rancheria in northern California, invited Dell Hymes and me to lunch to ask what we thought of a certain Lower Umpqua story they had found while searching through old Bureau of American Ethnology publications for coastal materials from the turn of the century. Since neither of these Native leaders is Siuslaw or Lower Umpqua, their interest was not in drawing the text into their own cultural domains, but in learning how the brief (but apparently mythic) text might provide a way for them to “read” myths more thoroughly. In particular, since the story depicts a massive accumulation of ice and snow along the southern Oregon coast – where ice and snow are seldom encountered – they wondered if this text might be another indication that “el Niño years” are referenced and described in coastal myths the way some weather variations are recorded on the “winter count” buffalo robes of the Plains Indians. They were intrigued by the very fact that one of the half-dozen speakers of the Lower Umpqua/Siuslaw language still alive at the turn of the century chose this story to tell anthropologist Leo Frachtenberg. I supply here my own provisional rendering of the interlinear text published by Frachtenberg (Frachtenberg “Siuslawan” 627-29; see also Frachtenberg *Coos Texts* 76-77) for practical reference. I understand that Dell Hymes has been working with this piece as well, and his more linguistically grounded interpretation is certain to uncover still more levels of meaning and nuance in this densely-packed narrative.

Ice was everywhere.

The ground was covered with snow.

Everything became cold, everywhere ice.

How could all the people drink?

There was only a well to drink from.

Everyone drank from it. Although there were many people, they all drank there.

Then ice appears on the water [of the well, presumably].

They didn't know where to go, those inhabitants.

All those people go on top of the ice.

Now then, old people know it, that ancient custom.

Then they shout constantly for that Racoon,

And also shout constantly for that Coyote.

He is beseeched constantly:

“Racoon, Racoon, make it rain everywhere!

Tell this to Coyote!

You two make it rain everywhere!

Poor us! Our bodies are very cold!”

Now then, he is called continually:

“Racoon, Racoon, make it rain everywhere!
Coyote, you two make it rain everywhere!”
Then, finally, it starts to rain all over.
All the people believe in this custom.
That’s why those two are shouted at continually;
then finally it rains.
Thus it is shouted when that river freezes over.
There it [the story? the ice?] ends; it ends there.
That’s the way I know it.

Why is there a belief or a ritual custom to get rid of ice and snow in an area where snow is rare and rivers “never” freeze over? And why did the Native speaker find this particular story appropriate to tell the visiting linguist?

Bommelyn and Wasson recognized that it is the old people in this narrative who know the custom, and they took that to mean that the exercise of this invocation must have been rare. First conclusion, then: weather events like this occurred so seldom that only the oldest people knew anything about them. Younger people would not have had experience with this sort of dilemma, thus, old people are valuable, because they are the tribe’s only help when rare occasions like this arise. Bommelyn’s and Wasson’s further conclusions? Tribes other than their own have narratives which not only record “el Niño years,” but dramatize the intimate relationships between the weather, certain animals, and people’s ritual practice. In other words, even though we do not have a firm idea about how Racoon and Coyote functioned in Lower Umpqua myth and ritual, the narrative nonetheless gives us an insight into the logic of that tribe’s cultural worldview, and this in turn gives us a glimpse of how people resolved life crises on the northwest coast.

Another possible conclusion suggested by Wasson was that the story could recall an even older set of circumstances, that is, occasional and erratic freezing periods connected to the last ice age – which would of course suggest not only a great antiquity for the story but again the delicious prospect of human eyewitness testimony to events establishing a very early tenure in the land. In a paper prepared for his tribe’s annual publication on Coquille cultural researches, Wasson points out the existence of plants along the southern Oregon coast which survived the last ice age by being in a kind of protected pocket. Such plants as myrtlewood, Brewer or “weeping” spruce, *kalmiopsis leacheana* (a Pleistocene azalea), and Port Orford Cedar are not found anywhere else in the world except on the southern Oregon coast, and their environment may thus represent a refugium where early human migrants would also have been able to establish long-term habitation (Wasson).

It is worth mentioning that this area is just south of the lower Umpqua location where Frachtenberg collected the "Invocation for Rain."

Still more can be said about this text. Rain is the common denominator along the Oregon coast (along with wind), and thus the logic of the invocation calls for the restoration of the norm, not simply an end to the freezing weather. We can guess, then, that Coyote and Raccoon have not only a strong connection with rain, but they function as exponents of balance in nature, or as powers who can be persuaded to provide succor, relief, or redemption to people who remember the proper ritual. Was this piece, then, recited as a subtle counterstatement to the Christian messages with which the Native populations were being bombarded? Could it have become a metaphor for a people who were feeling "frozen" and powerless, and whose only relief lay with their (by now very few) old people, ancient rituals, and animal helpers? In any case, it was clear to everyone by the 1920s that there were only a few Native people left at the mouth of the Umpqua River, and so it seems that one poignant irony lurking in this particular performance is the lament, "How will we cope with rare and traumatic events without the old people and the traditions to guide us?" Ongoing Native discussion and speculation about myths like this are testimony to a growing consciousness about the capacity of these old narratives to embody important information and perspective once feared totally lost: models of worldview, recollections of settlement, testimonies of early habitation, speculations about the relationships between humans and the environment, medicinal information, culturally constructed attitudes about health and healing, and dramatizations of cultural change, to name a few of the most obvious ones.

I am well aware that some will respond to current Native intellectual interests in myth as irrelevant to the question of what the myths "originally" meant. But since most of our studies use texts generated and published by our culture and its scholars without real collaborative engagement by Natives, I don't have the confidence we really know what most of these narratives originally "meant" anyway. When I asked George Wasson why he was interested in telling and discussing his tribe's myths, he answered that in large part he considers the stories to be not only narrative expressions, but ongoing critiques and commentaries about the nature of life: "They're like your principles of evolution: they help us understand and cope with the continual changes of earth and nature around us – and especially the changes that have come about since your people started invading us. But beyond all that, these stories let us experience ourselves as a people."

Myth continues to exist because it – like good poetry – engages its audiences in several levels of meaning at one time. And for that reason we are unlikely to come up with a neat single definition for myth, or a single, simple description of its functions. Nor do we need to. The lively examination and reassessment of myths going on among Native American intellectuals, religious leaders, and writers offers proof that – despite murderous campaigns of cultural annihilation exercised upon them in the past – Native mythology is alive as it moves into a new millennium not of its own making. Indeed, the earnest discussion of their myths by Native people, and their parallel reinvigoration of certain rituals, suggests a critical vitality undreamed of by many scholars. I think myth persists because reason and philosophical reflection are inadequate to the task of producing a moving dramatization of the deep complexities of natural relationships, moral responsibilities, cultural obligations, and human needs. I suggest that the Native reassessment of myths, like talmudic discussion, will continue energetically because the myths and their capacity to embody culturally constructed issues will become more intensely meaningful as tribal systems and lands are further threatened and as the relationships between these elements are transformed in the flow of function and history. Moreover, as non-Natives continue to borrow and commodify Native ideas (ranging from “dream-catchers” to sweat lodge seminars to sacred pipe healing sessions), Native peoples are becoming more and more engaged in enriching their knowledge of, and extending their control over, their own mythic heritages (Whitt).

I hope I have shown that Native myth constitutes not only a repository, a living library if you will, of cultural abstractions distilled by previous generations, but also functions as an articulate response to contemporary issues, stresses, and anxieties by using dramatic images of cultural integrity and power. I think it is this level of culturally charged discourse and reassessment that modern Native writers and artists like Leslie Silko, Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, James Welch, Wendy Rose, and Lucy Tapahonso bring into play – not for local color, tribal trimmings, or ethnic display – but to bring about an engagement between the mythic world and the experiential world. In both roles – that is, as religious, historical, political documents and as concrete dramatizations of cultural value – Native American myths have every reason to persist and to be continually re-examined, both by Native peoples and by anyone who wants to hear the enduring Native voice more clearly. But why should anyone – especially we scholars of American Studies – need to hear this voice? To satisfy our curiosity about the now-

fashionable Other? To feel good about the new inclusivity? To ratify our timidly expanded Canon of Acceptable Works?

Well, yes, perhaps. But honesty requires us to go further into a rather uncomfortable set of considerations. There is a process we may call *mythic revolution* or *mythic replacement*, by which one cultural system ritually and narratively invades and coopts another. One example would be the replacement of sacred groves and wells in northern Europe by Christian churches and chapels, along with the cooptation of pre-Christian virgin birth and dying savior myths (e. g., the Mithraic system). Another example would be the substitution of English names for Native places in America which already had names; it is not only a desire to simplify that accounts for the change from “Chargaugagog-manchaugagog-chabunamunamaug” to “Lake Webster” in Massachusetts, for the change also obliterates the text of a treaty agreement between two tribes who used the lake as legal text (the name is said to mean “You fish on your side, we’ll fish on our side, and nobody will fish in the middle,” but the local Natives who might have given us a better gloss have been exterminated in the meantime). Among more modern examples would be the skewing of Native concepts to suit the purposes of the European invaders: the Lakota term *wakan tanka*, which is made up of two adjectives (“holy immense”), has been conveniently altered to a noun phrase in English, “The Great Spirit,” which replaces the indefinite abstractness of the original with the idea of a being more compatible with the agendas of Christian missionaries.

The idealistic New Adam trope we so frequently employ – as we heard in Professor Elliott’s eloquent presentation – may certainly have functioned as a powerful image of separation from the old order of Europe and a fresh start in the New World. But it is also an image of exclusivity, for in our own mythology, no people or civilizations precede Adam, and none succeed him except his heirs (at least in the main story line; there is of course that nagging question of whom Cain marries, but it’s left unresolved). In our employment of the New Adam idea, we ever so poetically suggest that everything before his arrival was of little consequence, and that everything after his arrival will proceed from his presence. Given the current demographics of the Americas, one wonders if we should not be considering the New Black Adam, the New Hispanic Adam, the New Asian Adam, and so on – not just on the principle of fairness, but because each of these peoples (and hundreds more) also left an old order behind and started new. Why focus on just one of them? And while we are at it, why not consider the New Eve(s) as well? More to the point for our topic here, would all of these considera-

tions reveal anything about Native American realities, which are founded not on starting anew in a new land but on the responsibilities attendant to long-term residence in an ancient land?

The sinister dimension of the New Adam idea is that it can function as a convenient image of separation from – perhaps even a denial of – the significance of previous civilizations in America. It prepares the way for a whole new set of narrative assumptions: principally northern European. But, as I have shown, the land already has ancient and still-valid narrative claims on it. I think the Native voice needs to be heard because it provides us with the deeper – pre-Adamic, so to speak – contexts out of which and against which the topics and themes of meetings like this ought to be defined and understood, especially if we want to understand the complexities of “foundational myths.”

I once proposed to a colleague in Political Science at the University of Oregon that a proper political history of the Americas should start with the Six Nations Confederacy and with the complexities of Montezuma’s court, and not with the Mayflower Compact. His stunned response was “My God! I couldn’t do that! I’d have to re-think my entire field!” Am I now rudely suggesting we re-think the entire field of American Studies?

Well, yes. Certainly. It’s about time.

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