
“Carried in the Arms of Standing Waves:” The Transmotional Aesthetics of Nora Marks Dauenhauer¹

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In October 2012 Nora Marks Dauenhauer was selected for a two-year term as Alaska State Writer Laureate in recognition of her tireless efforts in preserving Tlingit language and culture, as well as her creative contributions to the state’s literary heritage. A widely anthologized author of stories, plays and poetry, Dauenhauer has published two books, *The Droning Shaman* (1988) and *Life Woven With Song* (2000). Despite these contributions to the ever-growing body of native American literary discourse her work has been overlooked by scholars of indigenous/native literature.² The purpose of the present study is to bring attention to Dauenhauer’s significant efforts in promoting Tlingit peoplehood and cultural survivance through her writing, which also offers a unique example of transpacific discourse through its emphasis on sites of dynamic symmetry between Tlingit and Japanese Zen aesthetics. While Dauenhauer’s poesis is firmly grounded in Tlingit knowledge and experience, her creative work is also notable for the way it negotiates Tlingit cultural adaptation in response to colonial oppression and societal disruption through the inclusion of references to modern practices and technologies framed within an adaptive socio-historical context. Through literary interventions on topics such as land loss, environmental issues, and the social and political status of Tlingit people within the dominant Euro-American culture, as well as poems about specific family members, Dauenhauer merges the individual and the communal to highlight what the White Earth Nation of Anishinaabeg novelist, poet and philosopher, Gerald Vizenor, conceives as native cultural survivance.³

She demonstrates her commitment to “documenting Tlingit language and oral tradition” in her role as co-editor, along with her husband, Richard, of the acclaimed series: *Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature* (47). In this groundbreaking cultural revitalization project, the Dauenhauers reinforce the importance of Tlingit language in the shaping of specific cultural practices. Because indigenous knowledge is commonly conceived as an interpenetrating totality, which eschews the systems of categorization

and disciplinary division between history, oral tradition and fiction, or the sacred and secular that typifies Western knowledge, the relationship between such research and Dauenhauer’s creative production remains much more fluid. In both *The Droning Shaman* (1988) and *Life Woven With Song* (2000), Dauenhauer addresses time-honored themes from Tlingit storytelling, such as their relationship to the natural environment and the life forms that dwell there, the importance of traditional cultural and spiritual practices, the nature of mortality, and the ways in which the Tlingit have adapted to the changes brought by colonialism. She is also able to cultivate a poetic voice that is generative of a transnational literary aesthetic through an engagement with the work of non-native writers, including Han Shan, Setcho, Bashō and e.e. cummings. The unexpected and varied array of literary interests produced by native and non-native writers that influence Dauenhauer’s work is reflected in the production of a cosmototemic aesthetic that, nonetheless, remains grounded in her own Tlingit subjectivity. For Vizenor, “the visionary and totemic stories of creation are instances of literary transmotion, and the continuous variations of origin stories create a discrete sense of presence and survivance” (“Literary Transmotion” 17). Dauenhauer’s poetry demonstrates a similar approach through her capacity to adapt Tlingit narratives of totemic and visionary transmotion to contemporary concerns and create new modes for the expression of indigenous knowledge. The engagement with Tlingit historical experience with colonialism in the past and present that is evinced through Dauenhauer’s work offers valuable insight into the function of Tlingit literary expression and allows readers to better understand the multivalent role of contemporary native writers as storytellers and tribal historians who, according to Vizenor in *Fugitive Poses*, testify to “that sense of presence in remembrance” (15). The ephemerality of memory gains traction through what he goes on to term, “the connotations of transmotion,” which are encapsulated in “creation stories, totemic visions, reincarnation, and sovenance” (15).

In the poem, “Anchorage,” by her friend the Mvskoke Creek poet and songwriter, Joy Harjo, in which Dauenhauer is also present, the legacy of intergenerational trauma implicit in colonial history becomes an anchor for the manifestation of native sovenance through the image of “someone’s Athabascan / grandmother, folded up” on a park bench, “smelling like 200 years / of blood and piss ” (14). As Harjo and Dauenhauer walk

together along the streets of this Alaskan city “made of stone, of blood, and fish,” Harjo’s narrative poem bears witness to the ineffable nature of colonial experience signified by the anonymous native woman, “her eyes closed against some / unimagined darkness, where she is buried in an ache / in which nothing makes / sense” (14). Through the emblem of collective trauma that this woman characterizes, along with “the 6th Avenue Jail of mostly native / and Black men,” the poem further testifies to the injustice and oppression to which native people have been subjected since contact (14). Refusing to relegate native people to the role of victims, however, the poem ends with an invocation of morose humor and ironic astonishment:

Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,
but also the truth. Because who would believe
the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival
those who were never meant
to survive? (15)

The intensity of this poem, which illustrates the vital importance of native literary production as a means of decolonization, lies in Harjo’s reinscription of the despair and hopelessness that many native people experience into an affecting narrative of cultural survivance. The active sense of presence conveyed in the work of Dauenhauer, Harjo, and Vizenor combines to give renewed emphasis to the critical importance of sovereignty and amplifies the emancipatory potential of native literature to serve as a corrective to the “literature of dominance” that seeks to define native people through the tropes of tragedy and victimry.

While the works of Joy Harjo and Gerald Vizenor⁴ have been long afforded canonical status in native American literary studies due to the contributions they have made to tribal communities and the causes of intellectual and political sovereignty, Nora Marks Dauenhauer’s contributions carry these concerns into new theoretical and geographic locales. The invocation of these simultaneous qualities allows Dauenhauer to formulate a more thorough picture of Tlingit aesthetics that serves as a framework for the expression of cultural survivance and the imperatives of decolonization within a storied cartography. One that also acknowledges the important value of transpacific cultural exchange.

Dauenhauer’s utilization of Tlingit cultural memory as a prominent feature of poetic work that evokes connotations of transmotion is especially prominent in her first collection of poetry, *The Droning Shaman*, acting to transgress overdetermined social and cultural categories. This book is divided into seven sections with the first six consisting of original poems that reflect on Dauenhauer’s experiences and the importance of family, which necessarily recall broader themes that are vital to Tlingit identity and culture. Dauenhauer draws on these creative insights in the final section to inform Tlingit translations of works by non-native poets, giving the whole a cosmopolitan appeal. For the purposes of this study, my primary focus in regards to these translations will concern Dauenhauer’s sustained engagement with issues vital to native American cultural expression as manifested through aesthetic reciprocity between Tlingit and Zen philosophy. The first section will explore the influence of Bashō’s work on Dauenhauer’s poetic style, necessitating a fuller exploration of the sense of native transmotion that is operant in her work. From this methodological foundation I move on to a consideration of the ways in which Dauenhauer developed a unique poetic style by drawing on Japanese haiku and imagistic poetry to conceive of Tlingit memory and experience within a more holistic transpacific aesthetic independent of “mere comparitives and performative acts” (*Fugitive* 183). The appeal to both native and non-native epistemological frameworks and aesthetics in Dauenhauer’s work further operates as an effective counter-discourse and critique of the stagnant conceptions of traditionalism in which native cultures are viewed as anchored to an irretrievable past that is widely perpetuated by social science discourse and the legacy of colonial subjection.

Tlingit and Zen Poetics: Permanence and Change Along the Pacific Divide

Before I move on to an examination of Dauenhauer’s work some preliminary words about haiku and its development seems useful. The development of haiku into a distinct poetic form was the result of a process that took place over the period of nearly a thousand years involving both Chinese and Japanese poets. One of the earliest ancestors of modern haiku in Japan can be found in the form of the waka,⁵ which was structured by lines of 5-7-5-7-7- syllables (“Disuse” 711). The next forerunner to the haiku was the renga, which Koji Kawamoto explains as “a linked poem . . . which comprises of 36 or

100 verses composed in turns by two or more persons at one sitting” (“Basho’s Haiku” 246). According to R.H Blyth, the renga “thus became an extended waka, and in intention a very high and difficult art” (*History* xiv). The haiku as a distinct form was then created out of the renga by separating the opening section of the renga, which retained the waka 5-7-5 arrangement (xii). Developing out of this more rigid and aristocratic form of the renga in the late sixteenth century, as Kawamoto further notes, the haiku’s “very raison d’être, was . . . its flashing divergence from the traditional genre, not in form but in vocabulary and subject matter” (“Disuse” 711). The divergence in form was driven by a desire among poets to liberate themselves from the restrictive conventions of these previous classical forms. The primary way that this distinction was emphasized was through the use of a language that in its suggestiveness was more accessible and open to comic insights and associative play, while continuing to engage with the themes of “seasonal changes, love, grief for the dead, and the loneliness experienced on journeys” (“Disuse” 711). Of these, it is the enduring presence of the natural world as a unifying foundation where force, sentiment, memory, and desire are deftly melded within a haiku to create meaning. “Its peculiar quality,” asserts Blyth, “is its self-effacing, self annihilative nature, by which it enables us, more than any other form of literature, to grasp the thing-in-itself” (*Haiku* 980). This function was made explicit by Masaoka Shiki, who, as Carl Johnson notes, “coined the term ‘haiku’” in which the goal of this new form was the “depiction of objects as they were” (172).

Within less than a hundred years the haiku was well on its way to overtaking the waka and renga as the favored mode of poetic expression in Japan. This shift was made evident by the refinements in style and spiritual resonance of works produced by Bashō following the travels throughout Japan that served as the subject matter for his most famous works, with the first of these published in 1684 as *The Record of a Weather-exposed Skeleton* (Yuasa 29). Among the most significant features of Bashō’s work, according to Nobuyuki Yuasa, was the insight into the relationship between change (ryūkō) and substance (jitsu), which figure prominently in the foremost concerns of the haiku (37-38).

While the meaning of such terms may initially seem self-evident, as Keiji Nishitani points out, the notion of substance presents the human mind with a particularly

fraught set of other questions. “Whether animate or inanimate,” Nishitani observes, “man or even God, insofar as an entity is considered to exist in itself, to be on its own ground, it has been conceived as substance” (110). The critical insight that Nishitani brings to our attention, however, is the indispensable role that human subjectivity plays in this matter, requiring a consideration of “the field where the mode of things as they are in themselves is grasped eidetically and where the concept of substance comes into being” (113). Thus, when thinking about substance and its disposition towards change, whether that be through the forces of entropy or temporality, this problem is of “a twofold character: on the one hand, it is the field on which *things* come to display why they are in themselves; and on the other, the field on which *we* grasp what things are in themselves” (113). It is this critical awareness that lies at the center of haiku, and provides the dramatic effect of the *kireji*, the cutting word, that opens the natural world to new associations and intuitive insights.

It is the poet’s ability to seamlessly combine the force of change upon substance within the fragile unity that allowed haiku to develop beyond its strictly reactionary and parodic origins. Bashō is a significant figure in this development because it is in his works, culminating in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, that the substance (in this case, the words themselves) was deftly combined with the essence (*kyo*) of the work in an elegant unity that reflected “the hidden vital force that shapes the work into a meaningful whole” (Yuasa 38). The conception of the natural world as an inherently interrelated system of elements created out of substance and change—an understanding shared between Zen Japanese and native cultures—serves as a generative space for artistic exchange and transcendent intuition. As Vizenor observes in his introduction to *Favor of Crows*, “Haiku from the start turned my thoughts to chance, ephemerality, and impermanence, the very traces of a creative tease and presence in nature” (ix).

Dauenhauer’s *The Droning Shaman* presents the incipient development of a similar poetic voice that highlights the relation between Tlingit culture and the land, while providing a dynamic venue for exploring the intersections between native and Zen philosophy and literary expression. She displays a serious interest in formulating a transpacific aesthetic in this work through the bilingual composition of works in both Tlingit and English, in addition to Tlingit translations of the work of the Zen poets Bashō

and Setcho. The presence of these translations distinguish Dauenhauer as an innovative storier within the context of native literary production in which the exploration of Tlingit culture and its relation to the flows of transmotion are shown to be prominent features in her poetic work. Dauenhauer further extends the reach of Tlingit storytelling and poetic form in her second collection of poetry and prose, *Life Woven With Song*, in which poetry and prose operate in a similarly organic way to the *haibun* composition style as refined by Bashō in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* where “prose and *haiku* illuminate each other like two mirrors held up facing each other” (Yuasa, 39). A strong sense of literary synthesis is created in Dauenhauer’s work through the incorporation of the unifying themes of seasonal change, mortality and human interactions with the natural world, which are central to the philosophical foundations of both Tlingit and Zen cosmologies. Presented within a cohesive whole, her aesthetic vision explores the elemental function of storytelling that binds the interrelations between people, temporality and the land through personal meditations on the themes of human presence and absence.

Far from being derivative of Bashō’s style, however, Dauenhauer indigenizes the imagistic poetic form by grounding it in Tlingit experience and native peoplehood, highlighting fertile sites of transnational literary exchange. Although Tlingit oratory and storytelling convey a precise expression of Tlingit indigeneity, Dauenhauer asserts, as with Bashō’s poetry, it “is also universal in its concern for grief and the ability of the human spirit to transcend death” (xi). Furthermore, Dauenhauer’s poetry and creative non-fiction testifies to what Vizenor calls the “shadow survivance” of indigenous peoples and exemplifies the specific ways in which the Tlingit have negotiated cultural disruptions wrought by colonialism and technological change. Interestingly, Vizenor goes on to associate this capacity to persist with a fundamental element of the haiku form, noting that it “ascribes the seasons with shadow words: the light that turns a leaf, a bird, a hand. Shadow words are intuitive, a concise meditation of sound, motion, memories, and the sensation of the seasons” (*Manifest* 65).

Dauenhauer’s Tlingit translations of the haiku of Bashō, whose influence is perceptible in many of her own poems, seems natural given the emphasis on the conception of holistic interconnectivity prominent in their perceptions of the natural world. The poems appearing in the opening section of *The Droning Shaman* display

similarities to the haiku translations, drawing attention to inherent points of intersection with her own Tlingit subjectivity. In the poem, “Kelp,” for instance, Dauenhauer succinctly moves from the substance to the essence of the Arctic Ocean by ascribing to it animate qualities that are further highlighted and reinforced in subsequent poems: “Ribbons of iodine / unrolled by fingers / of waves” (7). The juxtaposition created by the use of “fingers” as a cutting word between kelp and the ocean allows readers to better understand the significance of this time-honored natural resource, which is rendered as passive, ephemeral “ribbons of iodine” that drift in the literal grasp of ocean currents. The attribution of both the ocean and kelp with its own totemic and transmotive force, which Vizenor would distinguish as “an active spiritual presence,” offers a subtle reminder of Tlingit ecological practices that are demonstrative of the connection that is maintained with their coastal environment. Growing to lengths as long as three hundred feet and once commonly used throughout the Northwest coast as receptacles for the storage of dogfish oil, kelp has been an essential resource for Tlingit people for generations, and by including such a description in her poetry, it remains so in the memory and stories of the people.

Dauenhauer, of course, is not the only native writer who has displayed an aesthetic appreciation for Japanese haiku and imagistic poetry. More than two decades before the publication of *The Droning Shaman*, Gerald Vizenor explored the latent transpacific philosophical and aesthetic linkages between native American and Asian cultures, and has most recently published several new volumes of haiku and imagistic poetry including *Almost Ashore*, *Favor of Crows*, and the privately published *Calm in the Storm/Accalmie*.⁶ As Vizenor explains in his *Favor of Crows* “haiku scenes are similar, in a sense, to the original dream songs and visionary images of the *anishinaabe*, the Chippewa or Ojibwe, on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota” (xi). He elaborates on the indelible influence the haiku form had on the development of his own literary aesthetic stating, “truly, haiku enhanced my perception and experience of dream songs, and my consideration of Native reason, comparative philosophies, and survivance” (xix). Reflective of these implicit cultural connections, other Anishinaabe writers such as Kimberley Blaeser and Gordon Henry have also employed the haiku to great effect in their works. One crossblood Anishinaabe character in Henry’s *The Light People*, for

instance, uses haiku as a means to reclaim the ability to speak after having “lost” his voice “in a distant government boarding school” (61).

Within a broader transnational literary context, the poetry of Vizenor, Blaeser, Henry and Dauenhauer serve as vital bridges that span geographic and temporal boundaries, native oral tradition and written literary discourse. The connection to the land conveyed in Dauenhauer’s poetry parallels the personal engagement with the natural world found in haiku, and reflects the amaranthine nature of the interrelationship between human beings and the natural world that is exemplified in every aspect of Tlingit experience. As translator and poet, Dorothy Guyver Britton, observes, “a good haiku should rouse in the reader’s mind a deeply subjective response and set in motion a world of thoughts” (17). For Dauenhauer, however, there is no need to distinguish an orientation in and with the natural world, as such already comprises an inherent feature of Tlingit cultural identity and peoplehood. Dauenhauer testifies to the vital role of the concept of interconnectivity that is evident in *Life Woven With Song*, stating, “I am trying for a more quiet ‘inner dialogue,’ and for conflict not among the characters, but within the individual, as the individual finds himself or herself in the natural and cultural environment” (xii). Given the similarities between Tlingit and Zen conceptions of the natural world, it is not surprising that the manner of literary expression Dauenhauer articulates in this passage displays many points of correspondence with the deeply reflective aesthetic vision that is imbued in Bashō’s work.

Like other native writers, such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Dauenhauer grounds her literary aesthetic in a culturally-specific sacred cartography. In one such example she utilizes the image of a woven basket as a central metaphor that informs and intensifies the power and meaning of her work. Returning to *Life Woven With Song*, a traditional basket operates as a metaphor of the life-affirming nature of artistic creativity and the cultural survivance of native people, while emphasizing the indelible connection the Tlingit maintain with their natural environment. Recalling memories of a childhood outing with her grandmother in the rainforest of southeastern Alaska to gather spruce roots from which these baskets are fashioned, Dauenhauer writes, “this is the earliest I remember going for natural materials to be made into art” (31). The remembrance of this occasion formed such a significant experience in Dauenhauer’s maturation that it remained a

“haunting image” that “kept coming back” (31). The relationship between the people and the land revealed through the Tlingit art of basket-making functions as a unifying narrative motif, while subtly reinforcing an imperative philosophical principle common to indigenous culture, while also reflected in Zen cosmology

Dauenhauer’s creative work enacts a transnational, transcultural exchange of ideas and experience, while reinforcing her critical role as a tribal storyteller. She successfully combines these discursive roles through the integration of many of the themes and narrative techniques employed in oral storytelling since the beginning of Tlingit history. The sort of literary fluidity that these congruent roles engender contribute yet another level of meaning to the metaphor of basket weaving. Dauenhauer brings emphasis to these connections in her descriptions of childhood experiences with storytelling within her own family: “This is when I would be pulled in and woven along into the stories. I imagined every incident and tragic ending as real. If we listened carefully, we kids could practice telling the stories to each other later. I usually fell asleep listening to the storytelling” (33). It bears noting that the notion of veracity expressed here is fundamentally different from the function afforded to literature in Western culture. Stories are not *just* stories in Tlingit culture, but a people’s shared reservoir of knowledge where the distinctions between literature and history have little significance. Tlingit stories, whether found in oral tradition or written literature, convey and confirm the epistemological system that forms the very foundations of reality itself.

Conjoining the literary traditions of her own Tlingit culture with those of Japanese Zen poets such as Bashō, Dauenhauer deftly traverses the space between national and cultural boundaries by accentuating a shared sense of historic immanence, totemic association, transmotion and holistic reciprocity. In another of the austere imagist poems appearing in *The Droning Shaman*, “Alux the Sea,” for example, the cold, uncompromising waters of the Bering Sea are brought to life and personified as “a droning shaman,” who “puckers spraying lips” (3). The poetic transfiguration of the arctic sea into a benevolent spiritual being that showers the Tlingit with kisses conveys an affirming recognition and appreciation for the ocean’s power and spiritual force. “We Tlingit have always been eating salmon,” declares Dauenhauer in the essay that opens *Life Woven With Song*, and it is the life-giving ocean, this “droning shaman,” that has

provided the Tlingit with this vital source of food since time immemorial (3). As Dauenhauer's description of the Bering Sea reveals, however, the relationship between people and the environment is not one predicated upon the exploitation of resources, but founded upon the principles of reciprocity and mutual respect.

The practice of salmon fishing is viewed by Tlingit as an act of sacred communion with the ocean, and one of the primary means by which this relationship is maintained is through creative acts of storytelling. The critical standpoint of both Tlingit and Zen epistemology conceives non-human species as possessing equivalent standing to human beings, a view that contrasts sharply with hierarchical conceptions of non-human sentient life in Western epistemology. John Bierhorst, writing in *The Way of the Earth*, notes that in Tlingit culture one does not just speak of fish, "One speaks of *xat qwani*, 'fish people'" (23). The implication of this axiomatic epistemological distinction is that not only are salmon and other creatures understood to be a type of "people" of equivalent status to humans, but that salmon, like humans, are inherently dualistic, consisting of both physical and spiritual elements that are specified by the word "*qwani*."

Moreover, Dauenhauer's use of the Eastern Aleut word *Alux* as a signifier for the Bering Sea emphasizes a Tlingit conceptualization of place. Much more than representing a direct translation, however, Dauenhauer's use of *Alux* is intended to emphasize the complexity of Aleut linguistic practice and its broader philosophical implications for native people who maintain long-standing historic connections to specific landscapes. The complex ways in which language, place, and storytelling operate in both Tlingit and Zen poetry reveals yet another intriguing instance of transpacific, transhistoric, transmotive ecological synergy between these two cultures. As Yuasa observes, "in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, we often find that even place-names are made to contribute to the total effect" of the poetry (38). This is illustrated in one episode in which Bashō traveled to Mount Haguro, a place he described as "one of the three most sacred shrines of the north" (125). Meditating upon the spiritual significance of this place, Bashō observes, "indeed the whole mountain is filled with miraculous inspiration and sacred awe. Its glory will never perish as long as man continues to live on the earth" (125). While Mount Haguro may be viewed as inherently sacred in Zen culture, it is the reciprocal relationship that is implied and enacted through Buddhist ceremonial and

storytelling practice that makes the sacredness of the mountain most clear and meaningful.

Similarly, the landscape of Alaska accumulates sacred cultural meaning from a Tlingit perspective through the interconnected activities of storytelling and ceremonial practice, activities that serve to reinforce attachments between human populations and particular sacred places. One way that merging of the physical and metaphysical is achieved in Tlingit culture is through the concept of *at.óow*, which denotes an “owned or purchased thing or object” (*Haa Shuká*, 25). *At.óow* takes the form of many different substances and essences in the unity of things that form Tlingit reality such as “land (geographic features such as a mountain, a landmark, an historical site, a place such a Glacier bay) a heavenly body, a spirit, a name, an artistic design,” as well as, “an image from oral tradition such as an episode from the Raven cycle on a tunic, hat, robe or blanket” (25). Within this deeply animated ontological framework, according to Thomas F. Thornton, “clans or their localized segments, known as house groups, owned and maintained rights of exclusive use to physical property (including salmon streams, halibut banks, hunting grounds, sealing rocks, berrying grounds, shellfish beds, canoe-landing beaches and other landmarks)” (296). The complex organization of knowledge illustrated in this practice creates a site of resonance and unity with Vizenor’s conception of the world in which “native memories, stories of totemic creation, shamanic visions, burial markers, medicine pictures, the hunt, love, war, and songs are the transmotion of virtual cartography” (*Fugitive* 170). Viewed from within a Tlingit worldview it becomes apparent that while the place name for the Bering Sea can be translated into Aleut as *Alux*, due to the complexity of the meaning that is inherent to this term the reverse simply does not apply. For speakers of the Tlingit language the mere mention of this place name would likely call to mind an entire body of associated and interrelated stories that serve to anchor it in Tlingit culture and history in much the same way that haiku plays on the inherent linguistic and metaphorical connections between substance and essence in linked verse.

Perhaps one reason that Dauenhauer’s poetry is so compelling lies in her capacity to produce multiple layers of meaning through unexpected associations within a field of natural imagery. For poets like Bashō, the capacity to succinctly distill the fundamental

essence of reality and experience was viewed as the highest measure of artistic achievement. In another of Dauenhauer's imagistic poems found in *The Droning Shaman* titled, "Fur Seals," the notions of a holistic natural environment and the play of natural motion and transmotion is made explicit through a vivid description of seals in their natural environment:

Carried in the arms of
standing waves,
gliding to the head, breaking
through the frothing mouth. (4)

As with the significance of kelp discussed previously, the fur seals simultaneously function as the subjects of the poem, swimming, hunting and playing in their natural environment, while also the implied objects, seemingly cradled like sleeping infants in the sea's, the droning shaman's, protective embrace. Here again, Dauenhauer directs her poetic energy to a vital constituent of the marine ecosystem that the Tlingit have relied upon as a natural source of sustenance and as a material resource for centuries. The custom of imbuing things in the natural world, such as oceans, streams, mountains and trees, with human qualities and emotions is commonly characterized in Western literary terminology by the pathetic fallacy. In many indigenous and non-western ontological systems, however, such a designation would itself be a fallacy. For the Tlingit, as well as other native groups of the Northwest coast, who have cultivated a reciprocal relationship with the natural world, which is reinforced through storytelling and ceremonial practice, it is only natural that the Bering Sea would be characterized through such dynamic and even sanctified totemic associations. The manner by which Dauenhauer honors the life-giving force of the ocean in her poetry, as well as the other life forms that share its space, conveys a deep sense of respect and gratitude. Such a perspective also seems to affirm what Vizenor calls "native sovenance," which is "a sense of presence in remembrance" vital to the interpenetrating matrix of sacred reciprocity that persists beyond mere written history (*Fugitive* 15).

Crossing into the World Beyond: Tlingit Elegy as Regenerative Poetic Form

The comprehension of a virtual cartography where the physical and spiritual

world merge forms the basis of Dauenhauer’s writings and is also reflected in the work of Zen poets, leads naturally to issues concerning life, death, and mortality (171). This concern is particularly apparent in the haiku Bashō produced following his journeys throughout Japan, which includes numerous poems that memorialize people who have died. In one such poem inspired by his experience at a memorial for a promising young poet, Bashō writes: “Move, if you can hear, / Silent mound of my friend, / My wails and the answering / Roar of autumn wind” (133). The statement composed by Bashō in honor of the deceased poet, and imbued with powerful emotion by the interplay between his weeping and the rushing wind, draws attention to a cyclical conception of human mortality where death is posited as a transformation rather than a cessation. Likewise, in Tlingit spirituality, death is not viewed as the end of one’s being-in-the-world, but instead as an inviolable feature of the infinite cycle of existence in which the distinctions between past, present and future are understood in ways much different from those posited in the scientific rationalism or religious doctrines of the West. As the ethnologist, Frederica de Laguna, observed, according to Tlingit spiritual belief, the soul maintains an “indefinite temporal extension, comprising not simply the present life, but running through the after-life and pre-life to include other incarnations” (172). In a note accompanying “a cycle of poems about grandchildren,” Dauenhauer refers to the Tlingit understanding of “reincarnation,” which is best understood in the context of a cyclical conception of time (*Shaman* 71).

In the poem, “Don’t Grieve,” Dauenhauer addresses the nature of kinship and interconnectivity as the focus of major concern. Keenly aware of the divergence of cultural viewpoints on mortality brought on by the forces of assimilation and deculturation, Dauenhauer’s work functions to assuage the grief felt for relatives who have passed away.⁷ All such relatives are, as Dauenhauer expresses in the poem, “present even now” in the spiritual dimension of reality and, thus, always by our sides (*Shaman* 36). The concise articulation of Tlingit spiritualism in this poem provides readers significant insight into Tlingit culture, epistemology and storytelling. This poem also transcends the local and particular to address the broader concerns of a wider pan-indigenous audience. By urging readers “not to grieve” for the loss of loved ones, Dauenhauer illustrates the ontological principle of spiritual immanence that de Laguna

ascertained from his Tlingit contacts, which included Dauenhauer's own great grandfather, Frank Italio.

In addition to her response to the encounter with grief, in another poem titled, "Grandpa Jakwteen In Eclipse," the poem's narrator suggests that death should not be met with fear or dread, but embraced. Here, Grandpa Jakwteen recalls a day hunting on the beach when "he was caught in a midday / eclipse of the sun," which "according to Tlingit folk belief . . . could turn you / into a stone" (*Song* 58). Dauenhauer's re-telling of this family story is notable as the meaning does not rest solely upon the nature of Tlingit spiritual belief, but more importantly, upon Jakwteen's reaction to it. Instead of pitying himself for his bad luck or, still worse, fleeing the beach in terror, the poem continues, "so he climbed up / on a high rock / where he could easily be seen" (*Song* 58). His calm acceptance and sacred reverence for the merging of vital energies serves as an instructive example of how to maintain dignity in the face of impermanence and mortality, as the narrator adds parenthetically: "(If he had to be a stone, / he wanted to be seen)" (*Song* 58). While Grandpa Jakwteen displays a clear acceptance of his journey upon the Tlingit path of life, however, his transmutation into stone was not to be. The poem concludes, instead, with an expression of Dauenhauer's appreciation for the stories through which Jakwteen continues to live:

Lucky for us,
he lived to tell the story.
No stone,
and his descendants
are like sand. (58)

Through the subtle play on the idea of a stone overlooking the beach and its inevitable erosion into sand—its natural offspring produced from the forces of the wind and ocean—Dauenhauer transforms what is in itself an extraordinary personal experience into one with deeply spiritual significance. This poem emphasizes the dialogic function of storytelling, which as Trinh T. Minh-ha evocatively suggests, maintains the "power both to give vividly felt insight into the life of other people and to revive or keep alive the forgotten, dead-ended, turned-into-stone parts of ourselves" (123). The layering of complex meaning that Dauenhauer creates in her poetry through the interplay of

substance, words and essence illustrate the immediacy and continued relevancy of native American oral tradition and indigenous knowledge. On a more intimate level, the use of conventional storytelling themes within modern poetics allows her to demonstrate the complexity of Tlingit thought concerning their spiritual and material orientation, while celebrating the richness of kinship relations, environmental connectedness, community and tribal sovereignty.

Readers familiar with both volumes of Dauenhauer’s poetic works may notice that many of her poems are written as dedications or take as their subjects various family members and close friends. Although this very personal feature of her work may help readers to identify the literary relationships she maintains and the influence of fellow native writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko and Joy Harjo, it also functions to reinforce Tlingit kinship patterns and conceptions of indigenous spirituality, binding her work to traditional Tlingit oratory. “Eva, *Ax Kéek*, My Younger Sister,” presents readers with a particularly poignant example:

Eva,
 waiting for you,
 calling to you,
 “Hurry, Papa, Hurry!”
 Laughing, happy to see you
 following her
 into the land beyond. (*Shaman* 37)

Although similar in style and substance to the elegy form, this example resists the function of bringing closure through the poet’s use of images that evoke spiritual resolution and persistence. Despite the deeply personal subject matter that addresses the ostensible death of one’s sibling, Dauenhauer reinforces the fragile balance between life and death, the physical and metaphysical worlds in which Eva greets their father in “the land beyond” (37). The reference to “land” here acts as a subtle reinforcement of the shared immanence between these worlds, and the ability of people to transition from one to the next in the cycle of unceasing existence. Poems such as these work to reinforce the dynamic of transmotion that binds people, the land and each other, while evoking feelings of continuation and anticipation rather than of loss and mourning. In an effort to

span the distance between historic and contemporary native experience, as Peter Nabokov observes, such poems dealing with the nature of death represent modern adaptations of traditional mortuary speeches, which “affirm the Tlingit sense of historical continuity, provide therapy for close relatives, and integrate social subsets of the community” (50).

In the introduction to *Life Woven with Song*, Dauenhauer appeals to the universal experience of loss and extends notions of mortality beyond the culturally specific conception of kinship and oral tradition to one that is transnational and emancipatory in nature:

I think that everyone is left with memories of their heritage, and these memories continue to teach us. They are a gift that keeps giving. In a way this is what my writing is, my poems, plays, prose. My family left me these images and memories, and I would like to keep them alive. (xi)

As these examples illustrate, words are inherently powerful and Dauenhauer’s creative work provides further testimony to Tlingit cultural survivance and acts to preserve the sacred history of her own family, clan and tribe, while offering insights that reflect the collective experiences of other native and indigenous people as well. Through the use of memory in the service to storytelling, Dauenhauer’s work traverses the boundaries between oral tradition and written literature to bring about the dissolution of an artificial dichotomy between stories about the world and stories as being *of* the world.

Closing the Circle

In a broader literary context, Dauenhauer’s poetry also confronts fundamental challenges that threaten indigenous knowledge and sovereignty through the use of irony and scathing social commentary. A particularly effective example is found in her poem “Cross Talk:”

When asked by the
census taker
how old she was
Gramma replied,
“Tleil dutoow, tleil dutoow.”
The census taker says,

Fifty two. (*Shaman* 32)

In a scenario all too familiar to native people throughout the United States, the census taker’s dismissal of Gramma’s reply seems indicative of the systemic repression of native languages exacted through the deployment of colonial power relations. The footnoted translation of Gramma’s response, *tleil dutoow*, meaning, “it’s not counted,” is indicative of a different relationship to time, while reinforcing the sense of persistent cultural insensitivity and ambivalence experienced by indigenous people in their interactions with Euro-American culture (32). As a not-so-subtle reminder of the continued repression of native languages, this poem also underscores the vital importance of language preservation, for as Vizenor starkly reminds us, “when a language dies, a possible world dies with it” (“Survivance” 20). The strong sense of indifference to Tlingit knowledge and being evoked by the official’s reaction in this poem, while documenting the common experience of Tlingit people, reveals a deeply entrenched colonial consciousness that sublimates native culture into a monolithic group with little agency or relevance in the modern world.

The attendant consideration of the subaltern status of native writers *vis-à-vis* the American literary establishment is confronted in “Listening for Native Voices,” and dedicated to Joy Harjo. Drawing parallels to the census taker’s inability to communicate with Gramma in the native language of the place, in this poem native writers are presented as: “Trapped voices, / frozen / under sea ice of English” (*Shaman* 28). While this poem articulates a succinct but potent critique of the lack of esteem afforded to native writers within the literary establishment, it serves also as a commentary on the challenges inherent to producing work in a colonial language. For many native and indigenous people, the imposition and adoption of English and other European languages is inextricably tied to the devastating effects of colonialism and assimilation, whereby native, First Nations and aboriginal languages in the United States, Canada, Australia and elsewhere were systematically oppressed and eliminated. Dauenhauer experienced the effects of these policies first hand at the age of eight when she began attending a parochial boarding school where “the first memories are of being rapped across the knuckles with a ruler for speaking Tlingit, and of always being blamed and punished for reasons I didn’t understand, for which I didn’t know enough English to explain or defend

myself” (*Song* 42). Despite the cruelty of such acts, neither Dauenhauer, nor other native writers of whom she speaks, were reduced to passive subjects or stripped of agency by such actions. Instead, native writers who speak out against colonialism and oppression represent courageous voices of decolonization engaged in active resistance against the force of colonial hegemony, and are always “surging to be heard” (*Shaman* 28). The assertion of literary and intellectual sovereignty Dauenhauer brings to bear in all of her work encapsulates what Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird have famously called “reinventing the enemy’s language” (24). Just as Dauenhauer’s choice of the active verb, “surging,” functions to reveal the effort by native writers to produce anti-colonial counter narratives, the poem simultaneously makes an appeal to non-native audiences to be more responsive to both native subjectivities and the natural world in which we all live: “Listen for sounds. / They are as important / as voices” (*Shaman* 28). By extending the interpretive register with associations to the Tlingit interconnection to the coastal environment of the Pacific Northwest, the denotative potential of the poem is opened to diverse readerships. This strategy gives Dauenhauer’s play on the inherent ambiguity between words and meaning, whereby the invocation of the “sounds” of nature becomes a referent to a foreign language such as Tlingit, as well as the hum of the droning surf, effectively transcribes the idea of transmotion as “a spirited and visionary sense of natural motion and presence” into the linguistic and aesthetic realms (“Transmotion” 17).

The emphasis placed on multilingual exchange apparent in Dauenhauer’s poetry is indicative of the resiliency that native people have displayed in order to persist as distinct peoples. What makes Dauenhauer’s work so effective is her ability to address the traumatic legacy of oppression and cultural misunderstanding while eschewing the politics of victimry that might otherwise seem a natural response for native American people burdened with the weight of more than 500 years of colonialism. In a poem entitled “Genocide” Dauenhauer is able to render the shared traumatic experience of native and indigenous people by reference to a strikingly mundane, yet compelling, example:

Picketing the Eskimo
Whaling commission,
an over-fed English girl

stands with a sign,

“Let the Whales Live.” (*Shaman* 26)

The stinging irony displayed in the message on the protester’s sign is not lost to native peoples facing high rates of unemployment and poverty, along with the continued and systemic suppression of traditional ways of life. Written ostensibly in response to events surrounding the Makah whaling controversy and the affirmation by the U.S. Supreme Court of the Treaty of Neah Bay, this poem provides an excellent example of the use of satire and juxtaposition as a means of bringing attention to the ongoing suppression of native cultural practice and political sovereignty. Implicit in the “over-fed English girl’s” appeal to the Eskimo whaling commission is her well-meaning but utter ignorance concerning the devastating historical effects of commercial whaling on native cultures and the essential role that whales have in the maintenance of sustainable environmental practices of the Northwest coast. This poem serves as a sobering reminder that acts of cultural genocide are not confined to the violent events that took place in centuries past, but are deeply embedded in contemporary policies and beliefs that fail to discern the essential cultural practices from commercial destruction of natural resources that threaten to deprive native peoples of their ways of life.

Dauenhauer acknowledges the centrality of everyday experience when reflecting on the writing process, recalling “memories of seasons, and of stories that were told at many places: in clan houses, in hunting and trapping camps” (*Song* xi). In both form and content Dauenhauer’s poetry shares much common ground with Bashō, whose work celebrated “the humble and unpretentious imagery of everyday life” (Yuasa 24). As Kawamoto similarly observes, Bashō’s poetry stands out for his ability to invest the mundane and up-to-date with the deep meaning of serious poetry,” and it is likewise Dauenhauer’s capacity to reconcile the sacred with the profane, tradition and modernity that is most striking in her work (717). The events and memories that inspire and give meaning to Dauenhauer’s writing belong not just to herself, or even the Tlingit, but to a broader indigenous consciousness that challenges colonial hegemony and seeks to (re)define native experience on its own terms. In the preface to *Life Woven With Song*, Dauenhauer meditates upon the relationship between memory and identity, stating, “most of the memories recalled here are happy ones. Where the images are neutral, negative, or

discouraging, I like to think that they reflect our ability to continue as individuals, as a family, as a community, as a people” (*Song xi*). Implicit in her role as a Tlingit storiator, Dauenhauer ensures that the memories and local knowledge contained in her writings will not be lost or forgotten, but passed on for the benefit of future generations, while also serving as a source of inspiration for other native writers and storiators.

“Salmon Egg Puller—\$2.15 an Hour,” Dauenhauer’s most anthologized poem, exemplifies what it means to be a Tlingit person in contemporary American society where native people struggle to maintain cultural continuity and the system of interconnections that have defined their experience in a socio-historical context marked by rapid technological change and adaptation. Just as Dauenhauer and other native writers have adopted and appropriated foreign languages and literary forms to their own purposes, the ongoing cultural survivance of native peoples necessitates constant adaptation to a rapidly globalizing world. This situation is exemplified by the experience of modern salmon egg pullers who must, “learn to dance with machines, / keep time with the header” (*Song 63*). Whereas the activities of previous generations of Tlingit fishermen and storytellers took place during particular time periods that were aligned with the changing of the seasons in both fishing camps and clan houses, these activities have now undergone radical transformation. Through the ever-shifting contexts of indigenous knowledge and experience, the practice of storytelling continues in village tract homes and automated processing plants, requiring a constant negotiation between the responsibilities of work and family:

Go home for lunch.
Attend to kids, and feed them.
Work four hours in the afternoon
with a fifteen minute coffee break.
Go home for dinner.
Attend to kids, and feed them. (63)

Despite the disruptions to native cultures wrought by modernity, environmental destruction and globalization, as the work of writers such as Harjo, Vizenor and Dauenhauer testify, native nations will continue to persist and thrive. Although many of the activities related to salmon fishing will continue to be effected by the tension between

traditional knowledge and the advent of modern ways of life, the cultural traditions that connect indigenous people to the land and each other will remain, just as storytelling practices are extended across different literary and linguistic frontiers. It is this resiliency and determination, enacted through acts of native self-expression and cultural survivance that animates the memory of the past in the present:

Next morning, if your fingers are sore,
start dancing immediately.
The pain will go away
after icy fish with eggs. (64)

While some might consider the monotonous routine of the contemporary egg puller’s existence an ignoble one, through this poem it can be more productively read as an answer to Vizenor’s call in celebrating native cultural continuity and survivance. “The first European and Euro-American explorers to southeast Alaska,” as Dauenhauer reminds her readers, “found us Tlingits in various places drying salmon,” emphasizing the sacred covenant implicit in their relationship with the natural world that defines them as a people (*Song* 3). In a sublime articulation of the effects of colonial oppression and the ongoing challenges of ecological preservation and assimilation, “Egg Puller—\$2.15 an Hour” embodies the capacity of native people to persevere and confront these challenges on their own terms. As one who, perhaps, sometimes laughs herself “at the impossibility of it, but also the truth,” Nora Marks Dauenhauer creates a unique vision of native transmotion, demonstrating that life and experience in a world defined by interconnectivity really are woven with song.

Notes

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² Aside from reviews of Dauenhauer's work the critical attention to her poetry has thus far been scarce. See, Russell Caskey's “Tools of Self Definition: Nora Marks Dauenhauer’s ‘How to Make Good Baked Salmon,’” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16:3 (2014): 29-46; and James Ruppert’s “‘Listen for Sounds’: An Introduction to Alaska

Native Poets Nora Marks Dauenhauer, Fred Bigjim, and Robert Davis,” *The Northern Review* 10 (Summer 1993): 86-90. A note on terminology: Gerald Vizenor originally initiated the use of *indian*, lowercase and italicized, to denote the “absence of real natives—the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance” (*Manifest Manners*, vii). He has also commonly rendered the term “native” in reference to people and culture as lowercase, and I follow these practices throughout this essay.

³ Vizenor coined this term to signify a combination of survival and persistence/resistance as a means of highlighting the historical agency of Native people in the face of centuries of colonial oppression. In his essay, “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” he defines survivance as “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (1). This concept also figures prominently in several of Vizenor’s other works, including *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), *Fugitive Poses: Native American Scenes of Absence and Presence* (1998), and *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance* (2009).

⁴ Craig Womack offers a strong reading of Joy Harjo’s contribution to Creek national literature in his widely influential work, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999). Robert Warrior provides an insightful analysis of Harjo’s poetics and native conceptions of space and place in “Your Skin Is the Map: The Theoretical Challenge of Joy Harjo’s Erotic Poetics,” in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*. Eds. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton (2008). For some excellent discussions of the work of Gerald Vizenor, see for example, Kimberly M. Blaeser’s, *Writing in the Oral Tradition* (1996) and Deborah Madsen’s *Understanding Gerald Vizenor* (2009).

⁵ A classic verse poetic form popularized by aristocratic poets in Japan that thrived from the eighth century well into the twentieth. With its 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic pattern, it is also the source of the more open and inclusive comic form of the haiku. See Donald Keene’s *The World Within Walls* (1976) for a comprehensive account of the history and development of these related genres.

⁶ For an analysis of Vizenor’s adaptation of the haiku form see, Kimberly M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in Oral Tradition* (1996), and Karen Ford Jackson, “Marking Time in Native America: Haiku, Elegy, Survival,” *American Literature* 81.2 (June 2009): 333-359.

⁷ From a Tlingit and native perspective, this would not only include members of one’s immediate family, but also those of the same clan as well.

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