

## Whitman's Song Sung the Navajo Way

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### I

For decades, controversies have roiled over the implications of analyzing indigenous texts, particularly Native American texts, with EuroAmerican critical theories. The Winter 2005 issue of *The American Indian Quarterly* exposed many of these antagonisms in its review section. There were no less than six reviews (that must be a record) of one book (316-40)—Elvira Pulitano's *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* (2003)—and several of those reviews were review-essay length. There is praise for the book. Chris Teuton thinks Pulitano is “at her best” when she examines the critical approaches of Greg Sarris, Louis Owens, and Gerald Vizenor. But the reviewers in general argue that Pulitano “privileges a postcolonial theoretical notion of cultural hybridity to the exclusion of ‘separatist’ critical movements” (Teuton 336). Barbara K. Robins speculates that Pulitano favors Native critics such as Sarris, Owens, and Vizenor because she “seems less threatened” (324) by critics who favor “crosscultural mediation, aimed at embracing differing discourses and world views” (Robins 117). James Cox proposes that Pulitano’s criticism of nationalist/separatist critics such as Paula Gunn Allen, Craig Womack, and Robert Warrior, who “foreground Native sources in their analyses,” indicates that Pulitano “is responding to the repatriation of Native authority from the possession of non-Native people” (318). As wide-ranging as the arguments are in Pulitano’s book and the reviewers’ responses, they don’t include major emphases on some of the many other issues about appropriate theory for studying Native texts raised by feminist and transnational scholars, including Shari Huhndorf and Chad Allen.<sup>1</sup>

The *American Indian Quarterly* review fest is just one example of the ongoing debates about using non-Native interpretive approaches to analyze indigenous oral and written literatures. There has been much less discussion of turning the looking glass in the opposite direction: what might be the implications of using concepts of form and function characteristic of traditional oral texts as theoretical and critical lenses for analyzing canonical non-Native texts written in English? There certainly have been American poets and critics who, at least indirectly, championed the use of indigenous concepts of literary form as the true or original American

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literature; for example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Imagist poets who praised indigenous songs and images, cultural critics like Mary Austin who imagined indigenous “American rhythms,” and, in the mid- and late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the leaders of the ethnopoetics movement.<sup>2</sup> And I have made a minor foray into using concepts derived from oral narratives as interpretive tools (Roemer, “Women and Violence” 97-117).

But compared to discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of using non-Native criticism and theory to interpret Native texts, discussions of using indigenous concepts of form and function to interpret non-Native literature have been rare. There are obvious reasons for this. Not many introductions to theory courses in English departments include Native oral narratives or books such as Gary Witherspoon’s *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (1977). Even if a critic is attracted to using traditional Native forms as a critical lens, there are challenges, especially for a non-Native who is not fluent in relevant indigenous languages. If s(he) has to depend on translations, there will always be mediation, even, as Robert Dale Parker argues, if the text is performed and filmed with subtitles, or, I might add, Skyped, or performed live in standard or “Red English” (97-100). Even if the critic is fluent and Native, the assimilation process of taking English courses can condition critics to privilege certain questions and emphases that can distort, obscure, or render invisible important characteristics of the indigenous forms and functions.

I am aware of these limitations, especially since I do not claim a tribal affiliation, and I am not fluent in any Native language, including Navajo, the language relevant to this article. But at least I have been fortunate enough to have read extensively about Navajo practices, including the observations of the late Navajo educator and Nightway celebrant (*hataalii*), Andrew Natonabah (Natonabah, “By This Song”); have taught parts of courses and directed an M.A. thesis (Lightfoot) that included Navajo Nightway-Whitman comparisons; have been employed by the Gallup Indian Community Center, which was run by a Navajo and served many Navajo; was briefly instructed about the importance of Navajo ceremonialism by a Navajo, Will Tsosie, who is fluent, has sung in many Nightways and is related to a Nightway *hataalii*; and have been invited to attend parts of several Nightway ceremonies that are open to non-Navajos (“Nightway Questions” 819, 828, 829, n. 7, n. 14). These elements of my background and the surface similarities between particular sections of the complex nine-day Navajo Nightway and Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” led me to consider the implications of using major elements of the

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Nightway's forms and functions as interpretive lenses for reading "Song of Myself." (For a brief introduction to the Nightway [*tl'ééji hatáál*], see Roemer "Nightway Questions" 819-20).<sup>3</sup>

First, I need to clarify what this article does *not* intend to do. It is not an examination of Whitman's contact with Native Americans or possible influences of indigenous forms and functions on "Song of Myself." Readers interested in excellent brief introductions to the former should consult the entries entitled "Native Americans" by Ed Folsom and "Racial Attitudes" by George and David Drews in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (1998). For a more complete study of the contacts with Native Americans, see Folsom's *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (1994). For an examination of similarities between Native oral stylistics and Whitman's poetry, see James Nolan's *Poet-Chief: The Native American Poetics of Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda* (1924), especially his discussions of "repetition, direct address, spells, prayers, antiphony, parallel construction and enumerative and associative organization" (Wong 228).

My intent is to use significant characteristics of the Nightway as critical lenses to interpret the forms and functions of "Song of Myself." Examining similarities and differences between the two texts invites speculation about how "revolutionary" Whitman's use of repetition was, the impact of intended or implied audiences, the possible curative nature of Whitman's poem, the extent to which innovation and conservation are privileged in criticism and theory, and the degrees to which curative agency and definitions of illness and health are community or individual based. The primary representation of the Nightway I use is the most complete English translation, Washington Matthews's *Night Chant* (1902). I use the version of "Song of Myself" from the 1881 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>4</sup>

My foray into comparative criticism is certainly not intended to suggest that the primary reason for studying indigenous literatures is to enhance our understanding of non-Native literature. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that one of the many ways to expand awareness of the importance of studying Native literatures, especially traditional oral literatures, is that they can offer sophisticated ways of representing and seeing reality, within and beyond their cultural origins. Of course, this claim is "nothing new." Almost fifty years ago, in *We Talk, You Listen* (1970), Vine Deloria, Jr., advocated using indigenous worldviews to evaluate non-Native realities.

## II

We certainly don’t need to know the Navajo Nightway to be aware of the repetition in “Song of Myself.” According to James Woodress, “[s]ome 41% of the 10,500 lines of *Leaves of Grass* contain initial reiteration” (320). Teachers and scholars typically present Whitman’s multiple uses of repetition as innovative, even revolutionary, in comparison to his pre-*Leaves of Grass* poetry and to the conventional stanza, meter, and rhyme forms of nineteenth-century poetry in America and England. Matthews’s often anthologized translation of one of the four long prayers that precede the first dance of the *Atsálie Yei-be-chai* on the final night of the ceremonial exhibits complex progressions of exact repetition, repetition with variation, parallelism, and balance of binary opposites (Matthews 143-45). An awareness of this prayer reveals the impact of Navajo forms of expression on contemporary Native American fiction. For instance, N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* title came from a similar Nightway prayer performed earlier in the Nightway. But an awareness of this prayer and other songs and prayers in the Nightway also demonstrates to readers unfamiliar with Native oral texts that, long before Whitman wrote “Song of Myself,” complex uses of repetition were performed in what is now the United States. James C. Faris observes that on rock drawings created in the late seventeenth century “in the caches of the San Juan drainage,” there is evidence of performance of the Nightway (18). Within the specific context of written poetic genres in English in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Whitman’s use of repetition was inventive. But an awareness of the Nightway gives us a much broader performance context, one that demonstrates that Whitman’s use of repetition was centuries old and quite conventional for the North American continent.

A Nightway *hataalii* would, however, consider Whitman’s use of various forms of repetition quite untraditional from a traditional Navajo ceremonial viewpoint. Consider the contrasts, for example, between two sections that both dramatize travel: lines 771-817 from section 33 of “Song of Myself” (47-48) and lines 15-35 in Matthews’s version of the prayer mentioned above (143). The motion in Whitman’s poem begins with “Through patches of citrons and cucumbers with silver-wired leaves” (line 771). “Through” begins the next two lines, which are each followed by the specific natural and human environments passed through and include internal repetition of “through”: “...salt-lick or orange glade, or under conical firs... gymnasium, through the curtain’d saloon, through the office or public hall” (lines 771-73). Then Whitman drops the initial repetition of “through,” the motion proceeds with a series of unrepeated action

word lead-ins to the lines: “Looking,” “Wandering,” “Coming home,” “Voyaging,” “Hurrying,” and “Walking” that build to a triple lead-in repetition of “Speeding” followed by “Carrying” and “Storming” lead-ins (lines 779-95).

In the Navajo prayer, the words of the *hataalii* move a Holy Being (*diné diyinni*) who is one of the four thunder beings traveling from the “house made of dawn” to the earth to bring help (restoration of balance, *hózhó*) to the one or ones “sung over” (143). This momentous journey takes fewer lines (lines 15-35) than the on-going journey in “Song of Myself” (which doesn’t stop at line 817). In the Holy Being’s journey, every line begins with “With your”; the images used to describe the Holy Being are much less specific than in Whitman’s poem; and the motion is expressed in incremental stages in the middle and the ends of the lines. For example, here are lines 15-22:

With your moccasins of dark cloud, come to us.

With your leggings of dark cloud, come to us.

With your shirt of dark cloud, come to us.

With your head-dress of dark cloud, come to us.

With your mind enveloped in dark cloud, come to us.

With the dark thunder above you, come to us soaring.

With the far-darkness made of the dark cloud over your head, come to us soaring. (lines 15-22; 143)

The prayer continues to build, balancing he-rain (downpour) and she-rain (light rain) and adding, among other images, “zigzag lightning flung out” and “the rainbow hanging high over your head” until the *hataalii* replaces “far darkness” with “near darkness” (lines 23-35). The journey ends on the earth.

With the rainbow hanging high on the ends of your wings, come to us soaring.

With the near darkness made of the dark cloud, of the he-rain, of the dark mist and of the she-rain, come to us.

With the darkness on the earth, come to us. (lines 33-35; 143)

The narrative of the journey of the Holy Being places much less emphasis on the specificity of what is traveled through than the narrative in “Song of Myself” and much more on two vertical axes (from lower extremities to upper and above for the Holy Being’s body and the downward movement from “house” to “far darkness” to “near darkness” to “earth”) and one horizontal axis

(the appearance of the wings and then their extension to the “ends of your wings”) (lines 1-35; 143).

Reading the repetitive language of this travel section of “Song of Myself” through the journey of the Holy Thunder Being invites us to ask significant questions about audience and evokes feelings of expansiveness. Whitman’s audience was becoming increasingly diverse; witness the catalogues of different people he enumerates in “Song of Myself” (for example, see Section 15, lines 264-329; 31-33). Whitman could not assume that his diverse audience shared common worldviews. They certainly didn’t all share common experiences. In order to create the illusion of grand expansiveness for this particular journey in section 33 and the poem in general, he obviously assumed that he had to shower the readers with a wide variety of specific visual, sound, and tactile images in hopes that some of the images would resonate with some of the readers at least some of the time.

The *hataalii* of the Nightway performs before very different sizes of audiences. At some points in the Nightway, only the patients and a few helpers attend; at other times there are hundreds attending, particularly on the final night. The nature of these audiences is strikingly different from Whitman’s diverse audience. Definitely before the forced removal of the “Long Walk” in 1864 and probably continuing through the boarding school era that extended well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and much later for many Navajo living on the Diné reservation, a substantial portion of these audiences shared and still share common traditional stories and similar worldviews, as well as common language—“Navajo is the most widely spoken indigenous language in America” (S. A. P.).

Compared to the narration of the journey in section 33 of “Song of Myself,” the Holy Being’s journey’s brevity and relative vagueness can be explained by an observation offered by the most famous collaborator in a Tohono O’odham life narrative, Maria Chona: “The song is very short because we understand so much” (Underhill 51). The traditional Navajo audience would know many songs and stories, whole communities of songs and stories or, as T. C. S. Langen termed them extensive “collections” (6). The *hataalii* in a Nightway had in the past and still today for traditional Navajo, the authority of speaking or singing words given by Holy Beings and the reassurance of performing before an audience with a shared language, knowledge, and worldview, a worldview that includes the importance of directionality (vertical and horizontal) and motion (“to go” in Navajo is in many ways the equivalent of “to be” in

English<sup>5</sup>). And of course the rituals, dance, and regalia all give additional meanings to the words. Hence, what may seem vague in an English translation on the page in comparison to the travel descriptions offered by Whitman's speaker/singer is full of detail and complex meanings to a traditional Navajo audience.

Reading the traveling lines of Section 33 of "Song of Myself" through the comparative brevity and vagueness of the repetition and parallelism of the traveling section of the Thunder Beings' descent to earth can enhance readers' awareness of the importance of assumed audience; in this case, the impacts of the diversified evolving audiences of Whitman's "Song of Myself" and the evolving but much less diverse and more culturally traditional audiences of a Navajo *hataalii*. Another potential result of reading "Song of Myself" through the Nightway would be to invite readers to rethink the functions of Whitman's poem, specifically the curative functions. I am not straying into an argument that turns Whitman into a "shaman," an approach that Nolan in *Poet-Chief* was tempted by when he presents Whitman as a "shamanic personae" whose poems take him on "shamanic journeys" (184). That could take us down the road of controversies about "white shamans," a persona attacked with vigor by Leslie Marmon Silko ("Old-Time Indian Attack" 213-15). Instead, I'm raising the possibility that reading the Nightway, even in the highly mediated form of Matthews's translation, invites readers to remember that the origin of poetry was oral performance and many of the performers used their words with an intent to cure people. Certainly, this is the case with the Navajo Nightway's hundreds of songs and thousands of spoken lines and rituals, which the Holy Beings gave to the Diné to help people whose state of imbalance is manifested in paralysis or illnesses concentrated in the head, for example, eye and ear disorders, headaches, or mental disorders (Roemer, "Nightway Questions" 819-20).

Whitman's speaker/singer does not explicitly claim physical curative powers for his song.<sup>6</sup> But he does perceive an illness in the reader as s(he) reads the poem and, very early in his performance, claims that he can cure that illness. A crucial part of the illness is the inability of the reader (and by implication most people) to perceive reality directly; all is seen "second or third hand" or "through the eyes of the dead" or through the "specters of books" (line 35; 24). The process of reading his poem will cure this perceptual illness. Not only will the reader come to "possess the origin of all poems" (line 33; 42), s(he) will also no longer perceive reality mediated. This transformation of perception is not even sullied by the speaker/singer as an

intermediary: “You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (lines 36-37; 24).

This curative process, reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s experiencing the “transparent eye-ball” epiphany (*Emerson—Texts, Nature* ch.1), involves surrounding the reader with the speaker/singer’s words. Readers of Matthews’s translation of the *Nightway* or listeners at a *Nightway* performance may have a heightened awareness of a process that also surrounds listeners with words. Many of the powerful songs and prayers conclude with an often anthologized ending similar to the penultimate lines of the prayer spoken before the first dance of the *Atsálie Yei-be-chai* on the final night:

With beauty before me, I walk.

With beauty behind me, I walk.

With beauty below me, I walk.

With beauty above me, I walk.

With beauty all around me, I walk. (lines 92-96; 144)

The *hataalii* surrounds the patient(s) with a form of the powerful word *hózhó*, which Washington translates as “beauty.”

Again, because of the difference in the audiences and Whitman’s love of piling on a pounding of word images, his speaker/singer’s performance of the surrounding with words uses more words and space. But the above, below, and all around is evident, and is placed, as in the *Nightway*, at the conclusion of the poem:

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world (line 1333, 66)

....

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,

I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift in the lacy jags.

I bequeath my self to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your boot soles. (lines 1337-40, 66)

....

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you.” (lines 1344-46; 66)

An awareness of the Nightway also fosters an awareness of significant differences between the agencies “behind” the curing. This awareness can, furthermore, highlight a fundamental difference between Navajo, and indeed many indigenous curing performances, and the healing process in “Song of Myself” and many non-Native physical and psychological healing processes: the difference between community- and individual-focused agency.

Despite the compulsion Whitman’s singer/speaker has to enlarge his individual identity by aligning himself with many types of people, including children and women, and despite his claim that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (line 3; 23)—despite these transcendental creations of a community of selves, the agency of the curing comes from the one ecstatic speaker/singer. The final version of the poem’s title is, after all, “Song of Myself,” and that self, though capable of denigrating his identity, has the power to cure the readers’ perceptual illness, in part, by the authority of his divinity: “Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from” (line 524; 40).

The Navajo *hataalii*’s power comes from communities of people, of Holy Beings, and of the rituals and words given to the Navajo by the Holy Beings. The *hataalii* must perform with assistants—singers, sand painters, dancers, hundreds of witnesses during the last night, and the patient(s), since s(he)/they must repeat words and ritual actions in order to be cured. The powers of the words themselves are just as or possibly more important than these visible performers and performances. Certainly Whitman’s speaker/singer would claim power for his words, and the reader must “perform.” S(he) must read. And it is true that if the performance of the sender and receiver of “Song of Myself” is done correctly, the reader will, according to the speaker/singer, be cured. But the emphasis is still on the agency of the individual speaker/singer; not hundreds of people, some of whom have highly specialized duties in the Nightway.

Even more important are the differences between the agency of the communities of words and their goals. There is certainly a large community of words in “Song of Myself”—1,345 lines of words, and the speaker/singer would claim that these words have power to cure readers. There is an even larger community of words spoken and sung over the nine days of the Nightway. But the differences are more profound than suggested by simple contrasts in word counts. As the previous comparison of the traveling in Section 33 of “Song of Myself” and the traveling in the prayer delivered on the last night of the *Nightway* reveals, a knowledge of the assumed audiences of the speaker/singer and of the Navajo *hataalii* invite an awareness of

difference in the specificity and repetition of the words. During that discussion, I omitted mention of one crucial part of the *Nightway* audience—the Holy Beings. They gave the Navajo the songs and words, but in one sense the words they gave are more powerful than the Holy Beings. If the *hataalii* performs the words properly, not only do the Holy Beings delight in hearing them (Natonabah, “By This Song”), they must also do what the words say. Whereas Whitman’s speaker/singer words have the power to describe his travels and those descriptions can help to cure the reader, the prayer words spoken by the Navajo *hataalii* literally move the Holy Being from his “house” through the “far darkness” to the “near darkness” to the earth. Once there the Holy Being can directly help cure the patient(s) physical and psychological ills. The Navajo community of words have direct agency far beyond the power of the individual *hataalii*.

Reading “Song of Myself” through the *Nightway* thus raises awareness of the emphasis on individual agency in Whitman’s poem as differentiated from communal human/divine agency in the *Nightway*. The “red reading” of “Song of Myself” also highlights the privileging of innovation over conservation and restoration as the goal of literary agency. In the tradition of Emerson’s liberator poet,<sup>7</sup> Whitman’s speaker/singer hopes to free the reader from his or her mitigated epistemologies. The ultimate goal of the *Nightway* is to restore the type of balance in the patient(s) that the Holy Beings created before the creation of the human Diné. This difference, highlighted by the comparison of the two curative texts, may help to explain one of the reasons why Whitman’s “Song of Myself” is almost always part of the American literary canon, whereas the *Nightway* and other indigenous songs, narratives, and ceremonial texts are often not. Despite the move away from New Critical criteria for “great literature,” one of the dominant criteria for most critical scholarly interpretive communities (and by implication for most Americans who celebrate America as the land of change and “The New”) remains evidence of innovation, not conservation. Becoming aware of the beauty and power of the *Nightway* juxtaposed with the beauty and power of “Song of Myself” invites students, teachers, and scholars to consider restorative literature as great literature.

### III

As I conceded at the beginning of this article, we don’t need to read “Song of Myself” through the *Nightway* to discover its general characteristics of repetitive language, implied

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diversified audience, curative qualities, and concepts of agency. Nor is the Nightway the only indigenous lens that could invite the types of readings I have offered. We could use many South American, African, Asian, or South Pacific indigenous performance texts as interpretive lenses. But using the Nightway as a critical lens to interpret “Song of Myself” does suggest that in order to “answer” the criticism of the over-use of EuroAmerican literary, historical, and anthropological critical approaches to interpret Native American literatures, we need to go beyond considering the usefulness of indigenous concepts articulated by, for example, the Native American intellectuals examined by Robert Warrior<sup>8</sup> and beyond the concepts offered by contemporary 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Native critics like Warrior, Weaver, Womac, Allen, Owens, Saris, Teuton, Huhndorf, Vizenor, and many others. We need to consider how the aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural concepts articulated by Navajo *hataalii* like Andrew Natonabah and the concepts imbedded in other indigenous performance texts can help us to understand meanings in non-Native texts we might not otherwise have emphasized if we had only seen them through well-known EuroAmerican critical lenses.

Another obvious advantage of this comparative approach is that, potentially, it could expand an awareness of the importance of indigenous literatures. Native literature is no longer “in the margins” the way it was forty years ago. My website archive of the tables of contents of American literature anthologies and histories demonstrates the significant increase of Native texts in the American literary canon during the past three decades (*Covers, Titles, and Tables*). It is crucial to teach these texts separately in order to place them in relevant historical, legal, and cultural contexts. I have done this many times. But if they are never presented comparatively, they may be relegated in survey courses and histories of literature to separate, historically time-bound sections. The worst-case scenario is the “Ok-we’ve-done-the-Indian-unit-now-we-can-move-on” attitude. If, on the other hand, in our classes and scholarship, we can demonstrate how indigenous concepts can help us to understand and evaluate many types of literature, historical periods, and cultures, then we can expand the appreciation of indigenous literature and do it without undermining crucial concepts of sovereignty and nationalism. Again I return to the model offered by Deloria’s *We Talk, You Listen*. His arguments are firmly grounded in his Yankton-Standing Rock Sioux worldviews. But he realized that there was a need (a desperate need) to read/evaluate contemporary American culture through his worldviews. I think we still need to listen to that message.

*Notes*

I would like to thank Lucy Tapahonso for introducing me to Will Tsosie, who helped me to understand the Nightway. Scott Andrews and the anonymous reader for *Transmotion* offered valuable suggestions for revising the article.

<sup>1</sup> See Huhndorf’s *Mapping the Americas* (2009) and Allen’s *Blood Narratives* (2002). One of the first book-length feminist studies was Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop* (1986).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, the “Indian Songs” section in the February 1917 issue of *Poetry*, Austin’s *The American Rhythm* (1923), Jerome Rothenberg’s *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972), and Dennis Tedlock’s, *Finding the Center* (1972).

<sup>3</sup> For an intensive study of the Nightway, see James Faris’s *The Nightway* (1990). John Farella’s “Forward” to *The Night Chant* (1995) provides an excellent introduction. A master’s thesis I directed offers interesting insights about canon formation and “Song of Myself” and the Nightway: Kody Lightfoot’s “Expanding the American Literary Canon” (2000).

<sup>4</sup> The 1881 version I use appears in the Ninth Edition of *The Norton Edition of American Literature 1865-1914*, edited by Michael Elliott (2017), 23-66.

<sup>5</sup> See Larry Evers’ “Song and Traveling” subsection of *By this Song I walk with Andrew Natonabah* website: [http://parentseyes.arizona.edu/wordsandplace/natonabah\\_intro.html](http://parentseyes.arizona.edu/wordsandplace/natonabah_intro.html).

<sup>6</sup> I designate Whitman’s speaker/singer as male, though arguments can be made for considering the speaker/singer as a voice that transcends gender binaries.

<sup>7</sup> See Emerson’s essay “The Poet” (1844).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Warrior’s *Tribal Secrets* (1995).

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