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Andreas Kriefall

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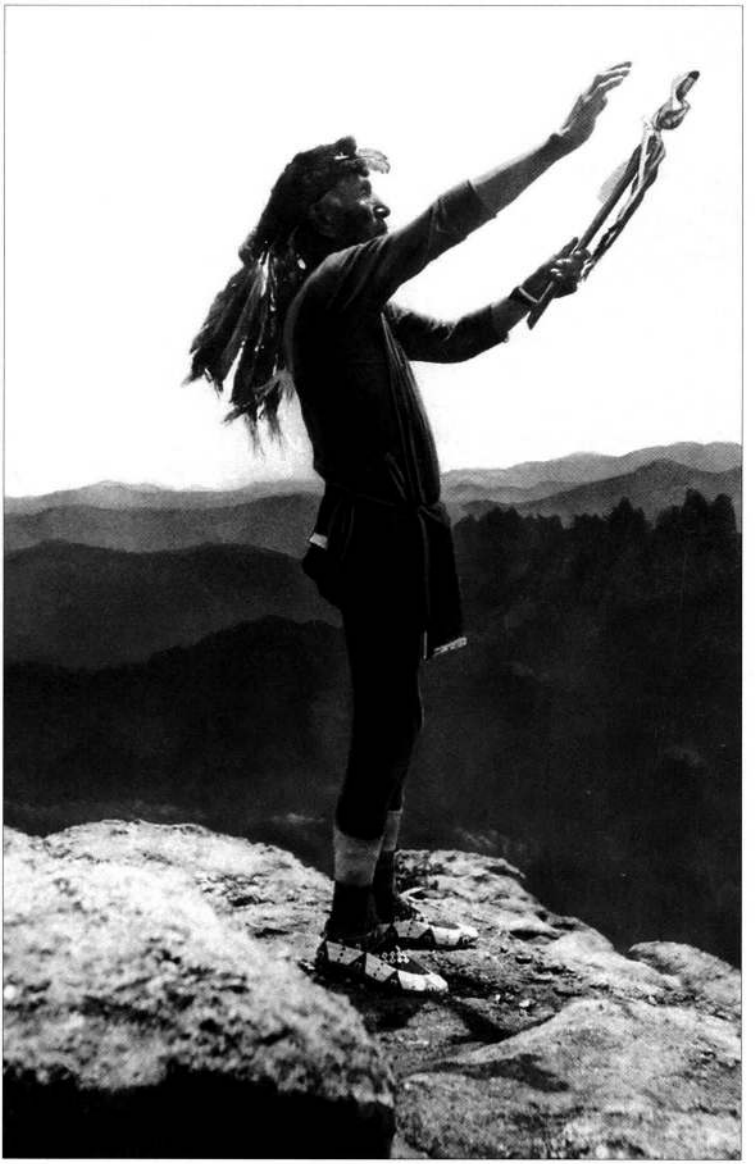

Black Elk prays to the six grandfathers, reenacting a scene from his Great Vision. He wears red long underwear to represent the red body paint he wore in his vision. Black and white photograph by John Neihardt.

John G. Neihardt Papers, c. 1858–1974. Reprinted with permission from Hilda Neihardt with the assistance of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection–Columbia, University of Missouri/State Historical Society of Missouri.

Ethics of Polyphony: The Example of *Black Elk Speaks*

Andreas Kriefall

Polyphony as an Ethics of Multiculturalism

In 1930, a self-styled singer of the grand drama of western expansion, a poet spurred both by an archivist's passion for gathering oral authentication of his epic verse and a traditionalist's flight from modern alienation, visited the Pine Ridge Lakota reservation looking for a "genuine" Indian perspective. In connection with his research for a narrative poem on the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee Massacre, someone had given him the name of an obscure ex-shaman said to have figured prominently in those fateful episodes of Sioux history. In seeking to contact this shadowy figure, the white author was unaware that his potential source on mysteries of Indian religion could not read or write and spoke little English, had converted to Catholicism, had renounced his weapons and shamanistic practice, and had been active as a lay catechist for Jesuit missionaries on the reservation for over twenty-five years.

Given only this generalized background to the meeting between John Neihardt and Black Elk, it would be hard to imagine a set of circumstances and persons less likely to promote the emergence and transmission of a Lakota perspective on history. What chance was there for an Indian voice to be heard through the ramified overdeterminations of a Manifest Destiny metanarrative, another use of Wounded Knee as Lakota apocalypse, a white poet's persecuted sense of mission, and an aging, illiterate convert's relation to the "satanic" religion of his deeply troubled, pre-Catholic youth? Recent scholarship in the analysis of cultural domination would lead us to expect yet another example of the lethal misrecognitions and expropriations so prominent in the grim record of white-Indian relations.

But here lies the surprise that this essay will explore and the claim it will attempt to justify: far from confirming our growing skepticism about the possibilities for positive intercultural communication, these unlikely characters and their highly improbable collaboration actually produced an exemplary polyphonic text, *Black Elk Speaks*. This book's combination of visionary power and unflinching witness to social and psychological trauma makes it

invaluable as an enduring monument of Indian history and spirituality as well as a promising example to critics seeking to celebrate cultural diversity without minimizing the complex consequences of violence. *Black Elk Speaks*, John Neihardt's heavily edited, written rendering of Black Elk's orally recounted life story, points us toward what I will call an "ethics of polyphony," an ethics defined with the help of Bakhtinian concepts but moving beyond his specific formulations and applications.

By linking Black Elk and Neihardt's polyvocal testimony with the rich Bakhtinian metaphor of polyphony, I attempt to articulate the need for, and one possible version of, an ethics of multiculturalism. The postmodern age confronts critics of western writing with proliferating differences and the concomitant potential for proliferating conflict. But the example of *Black Elk Speaks* suggests that we can learn to bring these pluralized perspectives into unfinalized ethical dialogue, into polyphony, rather than viewing them as brutish Foucaultian givens of our condition tangled in an endless game of domination and subversion. As a critical practice, an ethics of polyphony provides us with a moral vocabulary of responsibility and (potential) reconciliation in the face of the multiple violences and oppressions which define western history. It addresses two issues of broad import for western studies: first, it suggests a responsible, responsive mode of writing and reading that remains possible even in the wake of terrible cultural destruction, and second, it provides models of time and literary history that can help us strengthen the potential for cross-cultural communication more generally.

What do I mean by polyphony? Combining a number of Bakhtin's insights, I read it as a metaphor suggesting that meaning and truth cannot be contained in a single consciousness but exist only in the encounters among people. Each individual involved in such a dialogical relation is defined by and through it and yet retains a separate existence. Voices are always responsive to other voices, but they must remain distinct to participate in the exchange. In the encounter between consciousnesses each "I" recognizes an "other" and becomes, through that recognition, more than it was, acquiring new understanding. Such exchanges generate meaning, which is an *event* that enriches being, and this enriching interaction suggests that it is possible to find words and actions that do not objectify or finalize the other, but question, provoke, answer, agree, or object, and thereby enhance the other person's capacity for self-expression and judgment.

The polyphony metaphor is both spatial and temporal, and both of these aspects are vital to the idea of an ethics of polyphony. As the following quotation from Bakhtin suggests, "I" and "other" occupy irreducible yet inherently related spaces:

> I live in a world of others' words. And my entire life is an orientation in this world, a reaction to others' words. . . . Everything that is expressed in the word collapses into the miniature world of each person's own words (words sensed as his own). This and the immense, boundless world of others' words constitute a primary fact of human consciousness and human life. (*Speech Genres* 143)

In order to say anything, I must stake out and orient the necessarily limited, or "miniature," borrowed space of my own words, my own intention and inflection, within the infinite, "immense, boundless" space of others' words. This portioning of verbal territory is the spatial aspect of polyphony.

Because it points to moments and structures of encounter, however, polyphony also constitutes a temporal metaphor, an image of the coexistence, the meeting and unfolding, of multiple time frames in language. Bakhtin's model of meaning in plural, relational space is thus also a model of multitemporality, an interaction among differing dimensions of time, which Bakhtin calls "great time." This idea expresses the analogy between a *word's* generation of new meanings in the endless negotiations between I and other, on the one hand, and a *work's* new meanings in its relation to both the unfathomable past and the unknowable future:

> Trying to understand and explain a work solely in terms of the conditions of its epoch alone, solely in terms of the conditions of the most immediate time, will never enable us to penetrate into its semantic depths. Enclosure within the epoch also makes it impossible to understand the work's future life in subsequent centuries; this life appears as a kind of paradox. Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time* and frequently (with great works, always) their lives there are more intense and fuller than are their lives within their own time. (*Speech Genres* 4)

One can trace a direct analogy between the miniature reality of "one's own word" and the narrow reality of works bounded by "their

own time," and conversely between the boundlessness of "others' words" and the "more intense and fuller" lives possible in the generous spaces of great time. Great time is thus essentially a concept of the multitemporality of culture and artistic works, a multitemporality intimately bound up with the multivoiced character of polyphonic art. In this essay I explore the ethical implications of this aesthetic theory of polyphony and multitemporality.

Though Bakhtin himself does not develop this point, I will argue that these notions have the potential to do more than broaden our critical epistemology of time and context: they open a region of ethical encounter with other cultures and a realm of meaning in which the ravages of political oppression can be countered with "more intense and fuller" memory, griefwork, and new sources of hope. In the next three sections I will examine how the polyphonic text of *Black Elk Speaks* facilitates such positive effects by opening narrow time into great time: first, in the multicultural, multitemporal scene of narration where Neihardt and Black Elk (and others) came together to produce their work; second, in the relation between the narrated dream time in which voices were "sent" in Black Elk's vision and the times in which we "receive" or read them; and last, in the literary structure crafted by Neihardt, in which different, noncoincident moments of closure are brought together to create different senses of time, crossing and mitigating the finality of the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Polyphony in the Scene of Narration

I would like to begin by emphasizing my reliance on example, the example of Black Elk, of John Neihardt, and especially of the work they produced together, *Black Elk Speaks*. I see in the intercultural dynamic of their collaboration a mutual transformation that points us toward an ethics of polyphony. This example has already exercised considerable effects on Indians and whites, religionists and scholars alike, and hence it merits careful attention. Again I emphasize how surprising it is that a collaboration between Neihardt and Black Elk produced what has since become, according to Vine Deloria Jr.'s impassioned characterization, "a North American bible of all tribes," a guide for younger generations of Indians "searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality," "the central core of a North American Indian theological canon which will someday challenge the Eastern and Western traditions as a way of looking at the world" (*Black Elk Speaks* xiii, xiv).

Juxtaposing these affirmations of spiritual significance with John Neihardt's definition of the project that led him to seek out Black Elk suggests something of the powerful, transformative character of their encounter. Seven years before his interviews with Black Elk, in the 1924 preface to *The Song of the Indian Wars*, John Neihardt wrote,

> My purpose in writing this cycle is to preserve the great race-mood of courage that was developed west of the Missouri River in the 19th century. The period with which I am dealing is beyond question the great American epic period, beginning in 1822 and ending in 1890. The dates are neither approximate nor arbitrary. In 1822 the first Ashley-Henry band ascended the Missouri and, after Lewis and Clark, the most important explorers of the West were Ashley-Henry men. . . . The year 1890 marked the end of Indian resistance on the Plains. (7)

In our contemporary context, such celebrations of "the great race-mood of courage" and "the great American epic period" appear irredeemably ideological and complicit in justifications of violence, and most critics have agreed that not much in Neihardt's epic cycle itself can rescue him from this judgment. And yet, for all of this project's obvious liabilities, Neihardt did not renounce it in working with Black Elk. As I will examine in my final section, Neihardt's own intentions and program are by no means simply detrimental to the finished shape of *Black Elk Speaks*; 1890, the date of the Wounded Knee Massacre, fixes the end point of the narrative, and the enigmatic character of Black Elk emerges in Neihardt's editing of the testimony as one of Neihardt's courageous, racially representative, tragic heroes. On the other hand, a world of difference lies between Black Elk as a Neihardt hero and a much less compelling figure such as, for instance, Crazy Horse in Neihardt's *The Song of the Indian Wars*; unmistakable evidence points out how profoundly the substance of Black Elk's testimony deepened Neihardt's power as a storyteller.

The mingled, conflicting layers of time, culture, and intention involved in Neihardt and Black Elk's scene of narration are complex, and yet they did not prevent a remarkable friendship and collaborative effort from taking shape. In 1930, having chronicled the death of Crazy Horse (which took place in 1877) in *Indian Wars*, Neihardt sought out Black Elk for background testimony regarding the events and ideas of the next work in his epic cycle, *The Song of the Messiah*, in which he intended to narrate the climactic episodes of apocalyp-

tic, messianic expectations among the Lakota and their devastating disillusionment at Wounded Knee. Whatever suspicions we today might harbor about the imperialistic underpinnings of Neihardt's project, Black Elk appears to have sensed in him not a foreign threat but a kindred spirit worthy of an astonishing trust. In a manner abundantly confirmed by the rich results of their subsequent meetings, Neihardt's retrospective account has Black Elk declaring, "'What I know was given to me for men and it is true and it is beautiful. Soon I shall be under the grass and it will be lost. You were sent to save it, and you must come back so that I can teach you'" (*Black Elk Speaks* xviii). Whether or not Black Elk actually said this matters less than the fact that it expresses something essential about the relation between the Lakota shaman and the white poet: neither Neihardt nor Black Elk feared the gaps that separated them. Their faith in the possibilities of communication was reflected in the ceremonies, gifts, and promises that passed between them even before Black Elk's narration began. In November of 1930 Neihardt wrote to Black Elk with a new book idea, a book that would not be the epic poem he had been planning but instead a record of Black Elk's life: "I want to do this book because I want to tell the things that you and your friends know, and I can promise you that it will be an honest and a loving book" (in DeMallie 29). However rarely we associate such attitudes with intercultural relations today, this sincerity and loving faith in the potential for a book to convey the voice and knowledge of the other is a vital precondition for polyphony.

Consideration of the complicated biographical and religious background to this exchange provides further evidence of the depth of this faith and the formidable obstacles it seems to have overcome. When Black Elk and Neihardt came together in 1931, the Indian recounted his origins and life as a healer and warrior up to the time of Wounded Knee. But Black Elk had abandoned his weapons and his shamanistic practices long before the interview and devoted himself publicly and successfully to lay ministry in support of Jesuit missions among the Sioux. Neihardt, meanwhile, was puzzled by Black Elk's involvement with the church and much more invested in the religious mission of his own poetry and of Black Elk's vision experience than in conventional faith communities or doctrine. At Neihardt's instigation, then, Black Elk described and took up again an identity as traditional Lakota religious leader that he had set aside decades earlier.

In this epitome, one can begin to appreciate the irreducible element of cross-cultural stimulus and polyphonic response that Bakhtin labels "outsideness":

> In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more). A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without *one's own* questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (but, of course, the questions must be serious and sincere). Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched. (*Speech Genres* 7)

In an ethics of polyphony, this concept of outsideness plays a crucial role, although Bakhtin's idealist formulations require some more sober recognitions of historical reality. Clearly, as a *description* of intercultural exchange, this passage entirely fails to account for the possibility that anything other than mutual enrichment and unmerged coexistence ever happens when foreign cultures meet. It includes no mention of silencing or conquest or damage. An unmodified Bakhtinian sense of outsideness and polyphony should not be embraced insofar as it might tempt one to ignore or forget the grim historical record of cultural imperialisms that have violated and in many cases destroyed the "open totality" of other cultures. However, as an ethical *prescription* of what we might strive for in a multicultural vision of culture and history, and of how we might begin to liberate violent episodes of repression from their seeming finality, outsideness as an element in polyphonic conceptions of culture can take us very far indeed.

Black Elk Speaks provides a concrete and compelling illumination of this principle. Raymond DeMallie, the scholar who has studied and reconstructed the complete original stenographic transcripts

of the Neihardt interviews with Black Elk, depicts the Indian's participation in the following terms:

> It was as if something long bound up inside the old man had broken free at last, an impulse to save that entire system of knowledge that his vision represented and that for more than twenty-five years he had denied. Since becoming a Catholic[,] Black Elk had strictly put away the old ceremonies and his healing rituals. He had accepted the white man's religion and the white man's ways, and this would not change. But the vision, and his failure to live up to it, must have been a heavy burden. This burden he could at long last transfer to another man—someone who could record the old Lakota ways as testament and memorial to a way of life now gone forever. (28)

The questions that Neihardt brought regarding his own projects triggered what DeMallie calls the "impulse to save that entire system" in Black Elk. When the Lakota "system of knowledge" gained a voice through the interaction with Neihardt, new questions about the relation of Christianity and Lakota religion could be posed, questions we are still only beginning to address today. When Black Elk saw an entirely new potential audience, a group much larger than his own tribe, he could contemplate and offer up the meaning of his vision in new ways. Considered in this light, Black Elk's way of sharing his personal burden may suggest a polyphonic ethics of testimony: not an escapist vision of truth in idealized, ahistorical encounters but a practice of witnessing that can reveal new possibilities of dialogue after dialogue has apparently been silenced through violence. *After* surviving bloody battlefields and cultural decline and tremendous personal guilt and failure, Black Elk was able to regain a feeling of faithfulness to the truth of his vision. In the outsideness of his relation to Neihardt and the western literary tradition, Black Elk could transform the burden of an unfulfilled past into testament and memorial.

The labor and improvised community necessary for this unfolding of polyphony and "new semantic depths" is evinced in DeMallie's detailed picture of the scene of Black Elk's storytelling, a scene involving many more participants and voices than just Neihardt's and Black Elk's:

> [T]he work began very slowly. [Neihardt's daughters] perceived it as real drudgery. Black Elk would make a statement

> in Lakota, which his son Ben then translated into English. Ben spoke the idiomatic "Indian English" typical of the time—a dialect that had arisen out of the need for Indian students in off-reservation boarding schools, coming from many tribes and speaking many different languages, to communicate with one another in English. . . . What was written down was not, strictly speaking, a verbatim record of Black Elk's words, but a rephrasing in comprehensible English. While this could sometimes be one or two steps removed from the old man's actual words, in the long run it was likely to generate fewer misunderstandings and to be more faithful to the intended meaning than a strictly verbatim recording. In a sense, Neihardt was already "writing" Black Elk's story by rephrasing his words in English. (32)

To study this scene of narration is to see the many differences that were traversed and preserved. Viewed in terms of conception and

The Neihardt/Black Elk interviews involved several participants, including the men's children. From left to right, Enid Neihardt, Black Elk, Ben Black Elk, Standing Bear, and John Neihardt.

John G. Neihardt Papers, c. 1858–1974. Reprinted with permission from Hilda Neihardt with the assistance of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection–Columbia, University of Missouri/State Historical Society of Missouri.

execution, friendship and kinship, race and culture, orality and literacy, language and dialect, dictation and translation, religion and art, *Black Elk Speaks* is hybridized and dialogical—the polyphonic product of outsideness, arduous communication, and collaboration across boundaries. The circumstance of both Neihardt and Black Elk involving their children in dictation and translation and stenography appears to embody—already in the very act of writing itself—Bakhtin's great time idea of a work changing through generations. And although the work is at one level fixed in the form of a book, the open totality of its multicultural, multitemporal witness invites the reader to participate in the process of cross-cultural dialogue which generated it.

Polyphony in Prophecy: Sending and Receiving Voices

Through its unique existence on the plane of great time, literature can provide a special, even exemplary, form of I-other contact, a kind of ethical relation in which we as readers feel a claim made on us by what we read. Having explored direct forms of contact between Neihardt and Black Elk in the scene of narration, let us shift the focus to the narrative itself and the more mediated contact between contemporary readers and the figures and voices in Black Elk's Great Vision. When a people, in a retrospective account of a prophetic dream, sends voices, uttering a call or prayer, who exactly can hear it and respond? Can we?

In fact, Black Elk's own experience of the Great Vision was one of nearly total incomprehension. In 1872 it came to him as a nine-year-old boy while he lay unconscious for twelve days in a high fever. Amid tremendous, whirling images of clouds, horses, spirit-beings, and all the forces of nature, the boy was allowed to see the coming persecutions and sufferings of his tribe, but the Six Grandfathers (ultimate deities of the Lakota world, symbolizing the four directions, sky, and earth) also granted him gifts of power and the promise of becoming a great warrior and healer, the savior of his people. Initially —plagued by uncertainty and fear and voices he could not understand—the nine-year-old hid his vision from everyone, his family and his tribe. In 1881, at age eighteen, tormented with a sense he had to tell someone, he partially disclosed it. Even that partial revelation impressed the tribe's spiritual elders as a radical, exceptionally powerful vision, and so, on the authority of the dream, the young Black Elk began his work as a healer. However, he remained unsure about how or whether to harness the full measure of destructive war

U.S. cavalryman amid the dead at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, January 1, 1891, three days following the massacre.
Courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

powers he had been given in his dream, and he never did—even as his people were hunted and killed by the armies of the whites. He had never shared the full story of his Great Vision with anyone until Neihardt came to interview him in 1930, almost sixty years after the dream. Clearly, in the context of tribal massacre, cultural decline, and a personal sense of doubt and failure in the dreamer himself, it is no simple matter to decide how prophetic spirit voices can be understood and answered in history. It may be that they acquire meaning only over centuries, at the level of great time.

I will emphasize two aspects of this vision, two ways that it contributes to the polyphonic relation of senders and receivers made possible by the literary text, *Black Elk Speaks*.[1] First, the multileveled sense of temporality that emerges in the dream time of Black Elk's prophetic utterance creates an inherently open-ended, unfinished set of images. And second, Black Elk's narration sets the magnificent images of the dream world within a personal and tribal history constantly out of sync with those images—generating a sense of deep, abiding ambiguity, a question for the reader about how to grasp the truth of the Great Vision, since one is forced to wonder about whether and how it can ever be fulfilled. Because the vision itself

contains many voices, many reversals and contradictions, many processes of growth and decline and renewal, it does not so much foretell specific events as offer figures of change and transition. The claim issuing from the prophetic text is therefore inherently dynamic and open to new receptions.

A line from Black Elk's Great Vision offers a moving, beautiful image of the source of this claim:

> A voice I am sending as I walk.
> A voice I am sending as I walk. (see DeMallie 125)

Sending voices is a Lakota image of prayer which occurs frequently in *Black Elk Speaks*. Reflection on this ritual and prophetic phrase reveals some of the polyphonic complexity of Black Elk's vision and its unfolding in literature and over time, its manner of reaching and claiming the reader. In the sequence of events in the Great Vision narrative, the sending of voices accompanies the beginning of a people's journey, the walking of the good road to prosperity and peace, the process of regeneration of a people that has already suffered acutely. Even as they begin to walk the good road, however, the people are destined to suffer again: Black Elk's vision encompasses multiple crises and restorations of life.

The vision's conjoined and frequently repeated images of setting forth (breaking camp), walking, and sending voices incorporate a complex symbolism of levels in time and links between generations. Setting forth signifies that new strength for the journey has been gained, strength emerging out of and fulfilling the past—"Now the people shall walk with their power, the power they have received" (in DeMallie 124). Walking signifies present movement through both time and space, the nomadic constitution of order and identity in mobility—"They were in order, the younger generations and then the older generations following. They are marching" (in DeMallie 125). Sending voices out of this ordered motion, however, broadens and extends the temporal sweep of tribal (re)constitution, for the sending goes on from the back forward, from the southern grandfather spirit behind, through the ranks of ancestors, toward the women and men of the current generation, and toward future generations—"When they got to the end, the men and women began sending voices for the children and again they stopped" (in DeMallie 126).

Such moments and movements in Black Elk's Great Vision reveal a deeply layered, relational sense of temporality: beginning and ending, motion and stasis, act and repetition, past and future are

never absolute or isolatable reference points in experience; the beginning of the journey already signifies a culmination, and the ending is crossed by the forward reach of the call to the future. The infusion of power, the order of generation, the manner of walking, and the sending of voices all reiterate and reinforce the pervading spirit of kinship and interconnectedness of worlds and times. The constant sense of beginning again within the Great Vision opens multiple possibilities of relating visionary time and the time of history, senders and receivers. Visionary images of ever renewed motion and prayer suggest that tribal identity must be taken up, reworked, and re-created dynamically over time. This emphasis on ongoing processes of strengthening and reconstitution vivifies the claims exercised on the present by the past, deepening polyphonic interaction, drawing receivers into responsive relations with senders.

In articulating an ethics of polyphony in the wake of massacre, we must honor the primal and primary reality of testimony—by listening for the voices sent, by holding open, or rather reopening, the possibility of a certain mode of relation in transcendence. By the currently unpopular word *transcendence* I mean to express the hope that the call of the voices narrated in Black Elk's Great Vision might reach across the many divides dramatized in his act of narrating them: from spirit and vision world to waking world; from distant childhood past through Black Elk's memory to literature; from Lakota tribal symbols to American academic culture; from a nomadic people hunted, militarily defeated, and forced into reservations to their descendants and to the descendants of their persecutors; from strife, illness, and death to new life. I have little doubt that a faith in this sort of transcendence animated both the testimony of Black Elk as well as the creative response of John Neihardt.

At the end of their first meeting, Black Elk presented Neihardt with a gift expressing this faith, a gift Neihardt described in a letter:

> Before I left, Black Elk presented to me a beautiful old sacred ornament that he had used a long while in the sun dances in which he has officiated as priest. This ornament consists of a painted rawhide morning star to which are attached by thongs an eagle feather and a strip of buffalo hair. He told me the meaning of this. He said that the morning star signified the desire for and the certainty of more light to those who desire, that the eagle feather signified high thinking and feeling, as the eagle feather flies high, and that the buffalo hair

> signified plenty of that which is needed by men in this world. And as he gave me the sacred ornament, he said that he wished me all these things. (in DeMallie 28)

With this gesture, Black Elk manifested his willingness to share his vision. The gift, like the vision whose narration it prefigured, embodied circles of senders and receivers: it served as a relic of the personal and tribal past, a symbol linking friendship and truth, and an anticipation of stories to be exchanged in the future. The gift's meaning promised meaning ("the desire for and the certainty of more light to those who desire") and its objects signified self-transcendent motions of spirit (shining, soaring, abundance). The gift expressed in a circular way the primacy of giving and generosity. This expansive creation of trust and connection deepened when, in the course of narrating his vision, Black Elk went on to perform Lakota ritual adoption and naming ceremonies not only for Neihardt but for Neihardt's daughters. The daughters' rituals concluded with the striking phrase, "[W]e know that when in the future there may be only one Indian left alive, she [the daughter] will be a friend to him" (in DeMallie 36). An ethics of polyphony drawing on this example, then, is a form of faith in the transcendent life of meaning, the power of human relation and communication to overcome even the most lethal threats to those relations.

What Lakota ritual and symbol express as friendship, kinship, and gift, one of Bakhtin's published fragments expresses as an artistic act, the generous creation in polyphonic discourse of an unfinalized "other consciousness." He says polyphony involves

> a completely new structure for the image of a human being—a full-blooded and fully signifying other consciousness which is not inserted into the *finalizing* frame of reality, which is not finalized by anything (not even death), for its meaning cannot be resolved or abolished by reality (to kill does not mean to refute). (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 284)

What Bakhtin's dense language strains to express here is the paradox of an open-ended form or whole, an image that embodies not the finite, material life of individual bodies but the relational and hence infinite life of interactive consciousnesses. But while Bakhtin's own formulations are terrifically abstract, the example of *Black Elk Speaks*—its unfinished life story, prophetic vision, and witness to massacre—presents a compelling justification for Bakhtin's audacious claim that

"to kill does not mean to refute," that, in effect, the voice of the other and its meanings can transcend not only cultural differences but even violence and death.

One can trace this surprising proximity between the Russian literary critic and the illiterate Lakota shaman still further by comparing Bakhtin's account of the "fully signifying other consciousness" with Black Elk's recorded comments to Neihardt on the subject of artistic or visionary inspiration:

> You are what they call a man thinker. As you sit there, in your mind there is a kind of a power that has been sent you by the spirits; and while you are doing this work in describing this land, probably there is a kind of power that did the work for you, although you think you are doing it yourself. Just like my vision; a man goes without food twelve days he'll probably die, and during this time probably they were feeding me. But all this while I was in a form of the vision. It seems that I was transformed into another world. (in DeMallie 41–42)

In interpreting these images of spirits and other worlds, it is essential to stress that for both Bakhtin and Black Elk these worlds exist not as comfortable or secure escapes from responsibilities and choices and suffering, but as the zones in which the most crucial responsibilities are brought into tension with what we take to be reality. These regions of other voices and consciousnesses enliven our *sense* of difference and complexity without absolving us of the burden of *making sense* of them. *Black Elk Speaks* is structured at its deepest levels by the painful and unresolved gap between the Great Vision and the life that Black Elk actually led. The compelling drama of the text lies, above all, in the way its narration of a failed promise of power—the vision of a restored people that had had no corresponding reality in Lakota defeats or in the anomie of reservation life—turns the promise of power into an open question for the reader. Does the promise still have meaning? The restoration of the Lakota tribe does not happen within the confines of the story, and this implies that new life and power can only come in response beyond the world of the text: the reader's response. Black Elk was profoundly stirred by the thought that by giving his vision and power away, by speaking it and letting it be translated, he could at last advance the possibility of the transformation promised in his vision.

Black Elk's voice, together with the spirit voices sent out by the multitudes in his dream world, bring the reader into contact with the historical problems of the Great Vision. The vision's haunting depiction of a black road of destruction crossed by a red road of healing, its vivid mixtures of terrible suffering and hope restored, point to the ultimate questions that we still face in the legacies of western conquest: Can some of the diverse cultures of American Indian nations survive? Can reservation life be reclaimed from decades of social trauma and disintegration? Can the sacred hoops of Indian religions be recentered and related in new ways to traditions that have tended to misapprehend and suppress them? Is a mutually enriching relation of outsideness still possible between white and Indian?

In short, the reader must question, as Neihardt shows Black Elk himself continually questioning, how to relate the Great Vision to history. The Great Vision demands to be interpreted and acted on—it never ceases to provoke and haunt Black Elk, and he keeps circling back to it. However, in a way that emerges subtly but powerfully through the narrative of *Black Elk Speaks*, one also feels that Black Elk has learned to live with the inability to fix its meaning. Rather than mapping out his destiny or his tribe's definite future, the vision seems to have taught Black Elk to live in a state of perpetual thoughtfulness and vigilance, looking for signs of danger and new opportunities for renewal.

Hearing spirit voices throughout his youth often gives Black Elk the frightening feeling that "something is going to happen." This often-repeated, indefinite phrase regularly presages (and does not always avert) threats of killing and destruction in Black Elk's story; it conveys a sense more of dark foreboding than of clear foresight or guidance. Is a spirit vision, however great, sufficient to counter the destructive force of the text's own images of fear and disintegration, or is Black Elk narrating in the space of his story the very impossibility of any universal vision? The overarching patterns in the Great Vision involve repeated illness and affliction followed by healing and new power, the recurring ravages of warfare and destruction succeeded by gifts of supernatural aid—and yet Black Elk never conceals or softens the fact that in his own life and in his people's history and (especially) in the actions of the whites, warfare predominates. These intense, unfinalized, disturbing problems constitute a paradoxical testimony to Black Elk's power and his undying hope. They manifest a kind of courage shown in the face of formidable contradictions, an ability to sustain, remember, and recite a vision of abiding

mystery and elusive truth. The tone differs profoundly from Bakhtin's joyful celebrations of polyphony and interpretive enrichment, and yet Black Elk seems to rely on a faith in the unfinalized, meaning-bearing provocations of unresolved ultimate questions that is not so far from Bakhtin's most fundamental convictions. Faced with these unsettling testimonies of faith, the challenge, of course, is for us to learn how we can read and respond to them.

Beginning with a Vision and Ending with a Massacre: Polyphony in the Structure of *Black Elk Speaks*

The test of sending voices in polyphony and great time—of reciting prayers and stories of witness whose original contexts have been destroyed and whose receivers may even be part of the culture that did the destroying—should be answered by a corresponding effort by readers to test the limits of their ideas of reading and literature itself. In order to begin this process and to conclude this essay, I would like to focus more directly on the distinctive features of the written version of *Black Elk Speaks*—the literary text, in other words, which John Neihardt shaped as a way of making Black Elk's scattered anecdotes and images more accessible for a reading audience. It is crucial to reiterate and to recognize the profound implications of the act of translating Black Elk's testimony into literary form. After their interviews in 1931, Neihardt wrote that Black Elk was "utterly unaware of the existence of literature" (in DeMallie 37). The text thus exists on the very boundary of literature, in the zone of imagination shared by religion and art. The narration emerged out of Black Elk's deep familiarity with oral religious culture and with the Lakota translation of the Christian Bible, but he offered it without a conceptual grasp of how or to whom his oral testimony could communicate.

In this concluding section, I want to explore more closely Neihardt's shaping of this oral testimony. Had he been a postmodern writer, he might have published the stenographic record of Black Elk's interviews with little emendation. But while this approach would have produced more of the gaps and multiple voices favored in contemporary readings of literature, it would have produced a less moving and powerful and, interestingly, a less deeply polyphonic work. I will argue that some of the text's most suggestive and compelling levels of meaning are opened by Neihardt's stylistic choices, by his active response to Black Elk's incalculable gift of story and vision. More specifically, I will focus on three key effects of his editing: obsessive circling around the dream vision of center and whole-

ness, pointing toward the terrible end represented by Wounded Knee, and building up Black Elk as a tragic and exemplary figure. Polyphony does not emerge from the mere juxtaposition of voices and perspectives, but from a structure which creates unresolved tensions, embodying ultimate questions in a way that makes it possible to take up those questions in great time, where they constantly stimulate new dialogues.

In translating the Indian's testimony, Neihardt created a whole, imposing on Black Elk's speech a beginning, middle, and end. Although he was dealing with a welter of unfamiliar oral material, John Neihardt crafted this narrative trajectory in ways that not only sharpen the clarity and impact of Black Elk's story but also transcend Neihardt's own attempts at epic plotting. In place of Neihardt's heavy-handed lamentations and paeans on the theme of courageous, eloquent sufferers of white and red races—his mountain men, cavalry soldiers, and Sioux warriors—*Black Elk Speaks* displays a visionary grandeur, a compassionate but unflinching look at suffering, and a complex, enigmatic psychology in the protagonist vastly beyond anything in his other works. He altered neither his project nor his conception of history, but, encouraged by Black Elk's trust and inspired by Black Elk's dream images, the poet brought his earlier preoccupations together with another voice in ways that deepened meaning in both men's visions.

Let us trace the workings of this polyphonic effect in two passages—the first paragraphs of the book and an altered section in the Great Vision about the sacred hoop of the world—that Neihardt composed or heavily reworked "in the spirit" of Black Elk as part of Neihardt's effort at framing and making the Lakota Indian's testimony more intelligible. In these sections Neihardt maintains his distinctive voice, without that voice exercising a dominating or finalizing influence on Black Elk's speech. Instead, I think his voice can be shown to vivify and deepen the other.

The fictionalized beginning of *Black Elk Speaks* has Black Elk locate the origin of the story in the poet's desire for a story and in their friendly relation and address to one another:

> My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy

> snow? So many other men have lived and shall live that story, to be grass upon the hills.
>
> It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit. (2)

Although none of the sentiments implied here are forced or untrue, Black Elk never said this exactly. As DeMallie's transcripts reveal, Black Elk actually began his testimony in a traditional Lakota manner by recounting his parentage and the origin of his name. Though Neihardt has Black Elk begin by announcing "I am going to tell *you*," the "you" pronoun appears rarely in *Black Elk Speaks*. Through almost the entire book, Neihardt the interviewer remains invisible; he avoids drawing attention to his role as listener or addressee. Thus the special narrative function of the "you" here provides a start, a start that is at once a romantic image of poetic origin and an orderly, classical introduction to what follows: an older person telling the story of his life to a friend. Neihardt has thus fully transposed a traditional Lakota rehearsal of naming and ancestral kinship into a western literary myth of poetic filiation and narrative autonomy—the story emerges from the desire for a story. But does this transposition constitute an imperialistic, self-aggrandizing gesture? It might be read that way, but that would surely violate much of what this beginning seems to reflect: Black Elk's generosity, genuine friendship, the accurate account of Neihardt's having sought out Black Elk to ask for a story, the intercultural act of bridging, and the desire that has probably brought not only Neihardt but the reader to pick up and begin this story from an unfamiliar voice about a different kind of life.

The rest of the passage continues in this manner. Neihardt frames and inflects the upcoming stories in ways that reflect some of his own deepest preoccupations and motifs. He stresses the august tone of elderly insight and wisdom, the sense of impending death, the retrospective narration of an action that is final and complete, the absorption of the individual in destiny and of humanity in nature, and the humility and grandeur of a spiritually enlightened figure. And yet, again, for all of this fairly transparent appropriation, Neihardt manages to strike chords that resonate throughout the more literal renditions of Black Elk's words. Although Neihardt's prose does admittedly lapse into ponderousness in some passages where Black Elk's voice was lighter and more humorous, on balance,

neither wisdom nor death nor absorption of the individual in cosmic unity is inconsistent with the major themes of Black Elk's stories. By beginning with such topics, Neihardt highlights subtle dimensions of Black Elk's tone throughout, which moves between harsh indignation at atrocities, stoic resignation, and flaring, poignant moments of brightening and renewed hope. The opening pages of *Black Elk Speaks* capture nicely such shifts in tone:

> This, then, is not the tale of a great hunter or of a great warrior, or of a great traveler, although I have made much meat in my time and fought for my people both as boy and man, and have gone far and seen strange lands and men. So also have many others done, and better than I. These things I shall remember by the way, and often they may seem to be the very tale itself, as when I was living them in happiness and sorrow. But now that I can see it all as from a lonely hilltop, I know it was the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it; of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people's heart with flowers and singing birds, and now is withered; and of a people's dream that died in bloody snow.
>
> But if the vision was true and mighty, as I know, it is true and mighty yet; for such things are of the spirit, and it is in the darkness of their eyes that men get lost.
>
> So I know that it is a good thing I am going to do; and because no good thing can be done by any man alone, I will first make an offering and send a voice to the Spirit of the World, that it may help me to be true. (2–3)

These paragraphs are not free of Neihardt's predilection for a destiny that is stark and final and narrated with the sweeping omniscience of the keen-eyed backward view. This predilection was plainly visible in Neihardt's 1924 comments about the great American epic period of history, with its race-mood of courage and its precise, utterly determinate beginning and ending points. This love of closure and tragic necessity traps the epic cycles of Neihardt's poetry in relatively narrow ideological circuits that hold little interest today. Yet in conjunction with the uncontainable imagistic force of Black Elk's vision, this very drive for closure and clarity creates a vital tension and a potentially redemptive historical ambiguity: What possibility is there that the truth of Lakota and other Indian insights might actually survive what appears to be their obliteration, the end of their dreaming? Can the narration of catastrophe transform apocalypse into an unfinalized

provocation to new understanding, new responses and responsibilities? What spiritual resources do the remembrance and narration of the past offer us for overcoming the finality of the past itself?

The "lonely hilltop" metaphor constitutes one of Neihardt's most subtle and multivalent images of memory and transformation. There is a chain of hilltops through *Black Elk Speaks*, a chain only present in Neihardt's version of the narrative, each hilltop with a somewhat different form of knowledge and mystery attached to it. In the passage just quoted, the hilltop view seems at first to offer knowledge of personal failure, social death, and bloody ending. But that view is immediately qualified by the countervailing "knowledge" that the vision is "mighty yet." In the "Author's Postscript" to *Black Elk Speaks*, a hilltop, or "point of rock," is the scene of Black Elk's desperate and uncertain prayer for a long delayed fulfillment of his vision:

> "[W]ith running tears I must say now that the tree has never bloomed. . . . Again, and maybe the last time on this earth, I recall the great vision you sent me. It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives. Nourish it then, that it may leaf and bloom and fill with singing birds." (273–74)

In contrast to these accents of disappointment and still unfulfilled expectation, in the Great Vision the hilltop becomes a mountaintop that offers the entire sacred hoop of the world and history to a simultaneous and triumphant vision of harmony. Thus, the hilltop offers a series of contradictory views: failed life, enduring truth, expectation, and peace. What does Black Elk really know? What can he see? Can any of it be communicated, and is any of it true or powerful? Neihardt's succession of hilltop views makes all of these questions intensely present and palpably, irreducibly open.

Such complex shifts in perspective and address and levels of time can best be understood as multitemporal and polyphonic. Bakhtin distinguishes between the word addressed to agents making decisions in the immediacy of a historical moment and the unresolved clash of ultimate questions that must be taken up by succeeding generations in great time. Neihardt defines an analogous split between the dark and finalized world of politico-military history ("a people's dream . . . died in bloody snow") and the deeper, unresolved visions and questions underlying history ("it is true and mighty yet"). At this level of unfinalized questions the complicated problem emerges of how to relate Christian ideas of God with Lakotan notions of *Wakan Tanka*, or Great Incomprehensibility, and this difficulty continues to pro-

Black Elk, 1947.
Courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

voke new attempts at synthesis and differentiation, at ethical and historical redefinition. At this level, environmentalists and ecologists return to *Black Elk Speaks* and other Indian myths to envisage new possibilities of relation between society and nature. At this level, younger generations of Indians can seek—in a white poet's rendition of Lakota storytelling—new beginnings in their own attempts to overcome the crushing fate of dead ends. Likewise, at this level, it becomes possible to confront questions of historical responsibility and griefwork.

In my final example from *Black Elk Speaks*, we can see that Neihardt's version of the climactic moment in the Great Vision provides an image of just this kind of confrontation, an image showing both diversity and connectedness, a vision seeing both luminous presence and unfinished hope for the future:

> Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy. (43)

Although Black Elk's vision contains universal themes of destruction and regeneration, sickness and health, war and peace, this moving passage—which was largely invented by Neihardt—has the effect of widening the purview and scope of Black Elk's spiritual insight and moral authority. One might, along with several prominent commentators, fault Neihardt for imposing vocabularies of Platonism and Christianity on Black Elk, but a more promising course, in my view, lies in linking up this view of many hoops in a world circle with Bakhtin's vision of complex unity:

> The mutual understanding of centuries and millennia, of peoples, nations, and cultures, provides a complex unity of all humanity, all human cultures (a complex unity of human culture), and a complex unity of human literature. All this is revealed only on the level of great time. Each image must be

> understood and evaluated on the level of great time. Analysis usually fusses about in the narrow space of small time, that is, in the space of the present day and the recent past and the imaginable—desired or frightening—future. (*Speech Genres* 167)

This passage from Bakhtin, together with the intense *axis mundi* religiosity of Neihardt and Black Elk, constitutes a great promise and challenge to contemporary criticism. In our attempts to affirm diversity, we have tended to become trapped in the "narrow space of small time" and to critique, dismiss, or condemn broad visions of humanity for being tainted with an oppressive essentialism. In doing so we risk overlooking the vital possibilities of a complex unity, a nonreductive universalistic human spirit with the potential to further the underlying aims of community and toleration that drive many of our inquiries into culture and literature. Our critical institutions have been caught up in a pendulum swing, from the extreme of a myth criticism insensitive to cultural differences to the extreme of a political criticism focused on cultural differences so acute they fracture our sense of human connectedness. My reading of Bakhtinian theory and *Black Elk Speaks* has attempted to articulate an ethics of polyphony that would honor both a historical reckoning with domination and a listening for voices that can transcend it; an ethical criticism that would seek resources in both dominant and subaltern cultures for overcoming the effects of violence; a form of critical attention that does not discount from the start the positive energies of love, friendship, and enriching intercultural exchanges; a polyphonic sense of temporality that sees in multiple levels of time an abundant and (currently) neglected source of resistance and hope; and finally a renewed concept of agency, authorship, and responsibility that can discern in the projects of artistic shaping and critical understanding the creative potential for new vision and more inclusive circles of humanity.

NOTE

1. Although the points I am making here are equally relevant to *Black Elk Speaks* in its published form, I have cited in this section the interview transcripts given in DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather*. They contain a fuller version of the Great Vision, and some of the details in that rougher text allow me to make some important points more economically and clearly than Neihardt's smoother, more polished rendition.

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