"AFTER ALL THIS BECOMES LIT": "BECOMING" AND PERFORMATIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY NATIVE POETRY

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"It's already turned loose.

It's already coming.

It can't be called back."

—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

In contemporary struggles for Indigenous sovereignty, language use is a consistent point of contention. The technology of writing is currently being used as a weapon to erase Indigenous peoples from dominant narratives and out of existence, following in the steps of a long history of linguistic colonialism. As Muscogee writer Joy Harjo states in the introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*, "To write is often still suspect in our tribal communities, and understandably so. It is through writing in the colonizers' languages that our lands have been stolen, children taken away."[1] How, then, do Indigenous writers negotiate the complex implications of writing in the words and grammar of the settlers? What does it mean to "reinvent the enemy's language," to twist the tongues of an oppressor for one's own creative and political purposes?

In connection with insights given by Harjo and her co-author, Spokane writer Gloria Bird, on the topic of these questions, Dian Million (Athabascan) describes her thoughts about the theorization of Indigenous lives as trying "to work with an attention to language—to listen for the way that people make meanings from the various meanings that are 'always already'

[1] Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird., eds, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writing of North America*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 20.

available and the way they reach to move beyond these meanings."[2] She terms this process "languaging," a neologism formulated "in order to accent the active process that we engage to reconceptualize."[3] Throughout this essay, I aim to keep in mind Million's insistence on the dynamism of languages as they are actually utilized and mobilized in the lives of Indigenous peoples, making sure to try and be attuned to the ways in which various poems are languaging, constantly refurbishing the linguistic landscape that they, however reluctantly, inhabit.

Though the focus of the present project will be on poetry written by Native poets from North America who work primarily in English, I want to acknowledge the artificiality of some of the delimitations that this particular focus implies. Firstly, the designation of certain chosen literary works as "poetry"—or even more specifically as "lyric poetry" or "resistant writing"—is a product of western impositions of genre onto Indigenous works, which may or may not map well onto the same generic framework. This is not to say that Native poets lack knowledge of the conventions of contemporary western poetry; if anything, the paradox of writing in English is only made more unwieldy and confusing by many Native poets' deep understanding of the inner workings of English and the damage that its usage continues to perpetuate.[4] Similarly, the geographical specificity of "North America" is yet another construction rooted in colonial violence,[5] so Native poets and critics will be identified by their tribal affiliations whenever possible.

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[2] Dian Million, "There Is a River in Me" in *Theorizing Native Studies*, eds. Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 41, footnote 4

[3] Ibid.

[4] Harjo and Bird, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language,* 24.

[5] Ibid., 26.

Because they are difficult questions and not particularly relevant for the purposes of my project, I will not attempt to provide an answer for what poetry is or what it does. Instead, I want to focus on what poetry *can* do and how it *makes* do, despite all of the ideological and practical pitfalls that it presents for Native poets writing in English. What conditions of possibility does Native poetry open up? What does it allow and disallow? In attempting to deal with these questions, I want to move away from thinking about poetry as an effect of structural realities, and instead consider how it might in fact lay the groundwork for political action by materializing a space in which these engagements can occur. This is not a distinction about relative importance, but one about possibility. Language does not only reflect what circulates around it—it also manufactures that which it seems to make visible.

As such, this project is in large part an argument for the ability of poetry to constitute lived worlds, a rejection of the notion that poems reside only in the realm of the aesthetic, the formal, the self-contained and intangible. This ability can and has been used both to oppress and to liberate. Through an analysis of three very different poems, I will demonstrate ways in which poetry makes possible a connection between word and world, and in turn opens up the opportunity to interrupt colonial realities, whose operations are in no small part textual. Moreover, I argue that reading poetic texts as "becoming" rather than "existing" motions to the prospect of things and relations in the world existing in other, less harmful configurations. For each of the three chosen poems, I highlight one type of text that is complicit in colonial practice—namely, the anthology, the history book, and the dictionary—and consider the ways in which the corresponding poem can be read as a "counter-text" that takes up and repurposes its conventions.

In the midst of this somewhat optimistic endeavor, I want to recognize the limits of interpreting cultural production in terms of its ability to effect material change. I do not and will not argue that poetry is equivalent to activism. The pen is mightier than the sword only when it writes along the grain, and when it doesn't, it runs the risk of writing in invisible ink. But at the same time, this does not make poetry unimportant. As a critic, I'm aware that I can't compete with the power of the sword, only try to make the grooves on the page legible, to partially decipher a set of gestures that the pen once made. I know this is not enough, but from it, I hope we can work to imagine otherwise.

In *Wasa'se: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Taiaiake Alfred contemplates what it means to be Onkwehonwe ("original people"[6]), and turns immediately to the matter of language. He recounts how Leroy Little Bear described the difference between European languages and Onkwehonwe languages—while the former "centre on nouns and are concerned with naming things, ascribing traits and making judgments," the latter are "structured on verbs; they communicate through descriptions of movements and activity."[7] Alfred then ties this observation to contemporary Indigenous struggles, commenting that "[w]e [Onkwehonwe] have mistaken the mere renaming of our situation for actual reconnection with lands and cultures."[8] This point echoes Dian Million's insistence on using the verb "languaging" over the noun "language," and points to a need for thinking of language as constantly adaptive, rather than already fully formed.

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[6] Taiaiake Alfred, "First Words" in *Wasa'se:* In *Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005), 2.

[7] Ibid., 15.

[8] Ibid., 16.

From this account of Native languages and the political significance that can be derived from them, we can begin to conceive of a particular relation between language and reality. If, as Alfred asserts, the naming or describing of oppression is insufficient for the purposes of "actual reconnection," it stands to reason that language for Alfred must play a more active role in this healing. Here I begin to consider the ways in which language can be constitutive of reality, and turn to the concept of performativity as it was originally theorized by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*.

Austin defines performative utterances as phrases for which "to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it."[9] The classic example of these speech acts is when "I do" is said in the course of a wedding[10]; the phrase literally initiates the marriage between the people who speak it instead of describing its occurrence at an earlier point in time. While performative utterances and their variations appear in some of the poems that I will examine later in this essay, they are not my primary concern. I will address them when they come up, but I wish to use performativity primarily as a conceptual framework to demonstrate the world-making capabilities of language and also to explain why texts can be sites of such fierce contestation.[11]

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[9] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 6.

[10] Some critics have examined the ideological significance of the choice of the wedding as the primary example of performativity; see Sedgwick 2003, 70-2, and Fletcher 2008, 113-4.

[11] The effects that laws have on Native peoples are probably the most intuitive examples of the significance of performative utterances in the context of Indigenous struggles. In fact, Austin himself notes the similarity between

In the introduction to *Visit Teepee Town: Native Writings After the Detours*, Diane Glancy (Cherokee) and Mark Nowak write in regard to the works included in the anthology:

> Often in reading, words are intentionally misread and misplaced in order to fuzz, to blur, to unboundary. *Asyndetoning* the line of traffic. *Submarining* to get to what is beneath. Often these poems and poetic statements also formulate a reality that comes into being as the words are spoken; an atavism to the old belief that what was spoken actually came into being. These poems attempt to per(FORM), in their own way, a *ghost dance* in which the power of language to (FORM)ulate/re(FORM)ulate a lost or endangered world returns.[12]

In this passage, languaging is already in action. The "verbing" of nouns is a fitting demonstration of Alfred's comments about the relation of nouns and verbs in Onkwehonwe languages, and moves the reader to consider how poetry can both reside concretely on the page and still be in a process of becoming. This tension is where my inquiry begins.

Counter-Anthology[13]

On its surface, Anishinabe writer Gordon D. Henry's poem "Simple Four Part Directions for Making Indian Lit"[14] appears to fall under a small but significant literary subgenre, which, for

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the performative and the "operative" as it is used in legal discourse (7). See Robert Cover's "Violence and the Word" for further insights on the matter.

[12] Diane Glancy and Mark Nowak, "*Cruizing* the Iceberg" in *Visit Teepee Town: Native Writings After the Detours* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1999), iv.

[13] Thanks to Annie Dwyer for suggesting this subheading!

[14] Gordon D. Henry, "Simple Four Part Directions for Making Indian Lit" in *Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas*, ed. Allison Adelle Hedge Coke (Tucson: U of Arizona, 2011), 281. See appendix for full poem.

lack of a better term I'll call the "faux-instruction." These second-person works take the form of a how-to manual, ostensibly providing the reader with general directions for accomplishing a task while in actuality detailing the speaker's experiences, which may be only slightly relevant to the task at hand.[15] What is particularly interesting about the faux-instruction genre for the purposes of this essay is the performative nature of instructions, which can be thought of as gentler versions of commands. Austin writes that "a command is in order only when the subject of the verb is 'a commander' or 'an authority,'"[16] alluding to the statement he made earlier in the book that a performative utterance only does the thing it claims to do when it is said in the "appropriate circumstances."

The matter of whether or not a circumstance is appropriate for a phrase to be effectively performative is closely related to what kinds of power structures the speaker participates in and where they are located within those structures. When Henry, as a Native writer, claims authority on what a literary work *should* be like through the form of an instructional poem, he directly challenge the process by which western aesthetic norms are established and codified. Henry's poem does not simply articulate a new set of norms or try to assert an alternative authority—it takes dominant evaluations of Native literature to task by mimicking and lampooning the very logics of their operation, and, moreover, does so in the language of those who usually have the last say on the quality of a Native work.

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[15] Some notable examples include Lorrie Moore's landmark short story collection, *Self-Help* (which includes stories with titles like "How to Be an Other Woman" and "The Kid's Guide to Divorce") and Spokane writer Sherman Alexie's poem "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel," which, like Henry's piece, is a bitterly ironic indictment of the way that Native writings have been pigeonholed by the western literary public.

[16] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 12.

The poem's inclusion in an anthology of poems by Native writers is also significant. The function of an anthology is to showcase a collection of pieces that have each been deemed properly demonstrative of a specific kind of cultural work being done. The issue of how an anthology is curated is of course ideological—what is included, what is excluded, and how these inclusions and exclusions are framed all depend on what qualities of the collection the editor(s) want to emphasize. All too often, Native poets and their works are either relegated to a few "special interests" pages of an anthology or are left entirely unconsidered.[17] By proclaiming itself as a set of guidelines that could be used to define and evaluate "Indian Lit," Henry's poem makes an implicit critique of the anthologizing tradition, not necessarily targeting the anthology that it is a part of, but rather the broader perceptions of what kinds of Native poetry are legible as anthology material.

While it speaks to the pain of subjection to an oppressive gaze, of the things lost in translation that remain unfound, the poem is also full of humor and indefatigable snark. Nearly a quarter of the piece is devoted to a delightful litany of made-up names (e.g. "Ice Cream Turtle") that, according to a series of convoluted rules ("(you may) include prepositions,/except: forego, between, beyond, under/over, into, across, beside, beneath;/avoid abstractions, slang, economic terms,/hip phrases, or contemporary/situations or signs."[18]), should not be used to name

[17] Take, for example, Maidu writer Janice Gould's critique of Carolyn Forché's introduction to the anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* in which Forché writes that "as North Americans, we have been fortunate: wars for us (provided we are not combatants) are fought elsewhere, in other countries. The cities bombed are other people's cities. The houses destroyed are other people's houses." Gould notes that "[m]any Indians and other 'minority' people would not be able to read these words without a sense of irony" (798) since Forché's assertion implies that their experiences were not fit to be considered and anthologized.

[18] The last two lines are clear references to the constant relegation of Native voices to the past.

characters while "Making Indian Lit." The stanza of oddly specific rules points to the unspoken system of assumptions that govern dominant evaluations of Native literary works while the catalog of off-limits names constitute a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* attack on the privileging of western epistemologies. This list of names then comes to a close with the speaker deadpanning, "So, maybe take a break/offer prayers to the polytheistic/Indo European Spirits/of syntax," a parodic inversion that mimes academic discourse on Indigenous cultures.

This is a performative poem that is at odds with itself. On the one hand, the very fact of its presence is implicitly instructive for "Making Indian Lit," and its inclusion in an anthology with the subtitle "*Poetry from the Indigenous Americas*" corroborates this reading. On the other hand, the speaker continually doles out patently ridiculous advice about what actually counts as "Indian Lit," which then, both despite and by virtue of the poem's parodic refusal of them, ends up being included in the category of Native literature. For example, the list of rules about character names mentioned above paradoxically *includes* five lines of words that must be *excluded*. The performative function of the command (i.e. the injunction against using certain words as names) coupled with its necessary failure to become true (because of the words' inclusion in the poem) undermines the authority of the western literary establishment that the speaker ventriloquizes. Moreover, it points to the status of Indigenous peoples and texts in dominant aesthetic and political realms as *included exclusions*, existing only as exceptions against which other peoples and texts become legible.[19] Thus, an anthology of Native works must continually resist becoming a collection of silences.

[19] For the political significance of this kind of membership, see Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*.

The title of this project comes from a line near the end of the poem, after the speaker advises the reader to compile a series of paper documents—"newspapers, magazines, museum brochures"—that are then to be rubbed "with beargrease and lard,/Or last night's ground beef leavings" before being lit on fire. The poem continues: "After all this becomes lit/Be careful about who you/Read to." The double meaning of "lit" as it is used in this poem—as literature and as flame—suggests a violence that is inevitably present in the constitution of a privileged aesthetic category like "literature." In addition to establishing the poem as a how-to guide for producing Native literature, the title is now able to offer an additional meaning: the "Simple Four Part Directions" can be for "Making Indian [adjective] Lit[erature]" or for "Making Indian [noun] Lit [i.e. ignited]."[20] It's not often that a bit of wordplay can have a significant emotional impact, but which, given the overall tone of the poem, is an appropriate affective strategy.

The two phrases "Ignite all of the above" and "After all this becomes lit" are separated by a stanza break that also serves as an indication of a new "step" required for "Making Indian Lit." While the first of these phrases is a direct command—what Austin categorizes as an "inexplicit performative"[21]—the latter is a more complex iteration of performativity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* that "periperformatives," or statements about a performative utterance, constitute a significant subcategory of the performative because of their ability to mediate between the speaker, the listener, and the "witnesses" of the speech act. Sedgwick gives the example of a dare, which, when stated in the form "I dare you to ___" is an explicit performative; however, "[t]o have my dare greeted with a

[20] This second interpretation is ungrammatical, but considering the poem's overall attempt to disrupt the conventions of English grammar and spelling, it seems like a plausible and productive reading of the title.

[21] Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 32.

periperformative witnesses' chorus of 'Don't accept the dare on our account' would radically alter the social, the political, the interlocutory (I-you-they) space of our encounter."[22]

Looking at the line in this way, "After all this becomes lit" implies that it is already "after the fact," that the line has already become "lit," thus sidestepping any possible intervention on the part of the reader or any "witnesses" who might object to the ignition. The category of the periperformative utterance calls attention to the whole legitimating structure that must be in place in order for a performative to be successfully deployed, implicating the witnesses in the actions that they reject or condone. In this case, the reader is made helpless and possibly indignant by the poem's jump from the relative lightheartedness of a line about ground beef to the devastating two-facedness of "lit."[23] This "cutscene" forces non-Native readers to confront their position in relation to Native struggles and examine the ways in which they may be giving permission for ongoing oppression.

Given the lack of punctuation in that line and the poem's general inclination towards punning, we could easily read the same phrase as if there were an implied comma after "all"—"After all[,] this becomes lit." In this, case, "this becomes lit" can be isolated as an explicit performative, and the question turns to what "this" is. Consider the possibilities if we take "this" to refer to the poem itself: a command is given ("Ignite all of the above") and suddenly, there is a stanza break; an assertion is made, and at the same time, becomes real—"this [line, this poem] becomes lit." Through this reading, the speaker is awarded a certain degree of agency in the

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[22] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwikc, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 70.

[23] This abrupt shift is in some ways reminiscent of the near-instantaneousness of law's effect on Native peoples, the speed with which the written (lit) can become material and violent (lit).

constitution of “literature,” and the poem poses a performative challenge to the legitimating powers of anthologies.

Counter-History

In contrast to the bitter irony of Henry’s poem, there is a delightfully conversational quality about Sherman Alexie’s poetry, a breezy informality that is reminiscent of the affective immediacy of the New York School. “Lean Cuisine” details the experience of a speaker who discovers while vacationing in Spain that the restaurant he was dining at had once been visited by Sitting Bull. While it may not initially seem like it could do the serious work of decolonization, this poem and the accompanying sense of being in the moment with the speaker are in fact actively creating languaging possibilities. For one, the cheeky, campy tone denies any attempt to locate Native poetry in the past, but it forecloses this possibility without letting the poem as a whole lose sight of the decisive hold that the past has on the present, the way in which the present is coming into existence at each moment of its articulation.

A note about history: it is often said that history is written by the victors, but rarely is this statement analyzed beyond its surface meanings. However, even the identification of “the victors” and the victors’ version of history suggest that another account of the same events, if only it had been written, would be just as understandable and acceptable as the dominant narrative. This assumption obscures the differential accesses to legibility that various groups of people have, and fails to acknowledge the need to historicize the way in which we understand what it means to historicize. Not only do the contents of an accepted history book produce the past, they also produce the means through which history can be told. Thus, for a history book to proclaim its own contingency is not enough if it does not also reflect upon why it will inevitably

fail to capture the whole truth of the past. As unlikely as it may seem, “Lean Cuisine” produces precisely this kind of self-reflexive history, scribbling in the contested spaces of “American History” and emerging not as the permanent victor, but as a temporary narrator through which history is told for now.

Imagine, for example, if we were to compare “Lean Cuisine” with the New York School poet Frank O’Hara’s iconic poem, “Having a Coke with you.” Both detail an “American” encounter with European history and culture[24], but while O’Hara’s poem makes a clean break between the stuff of the past and the stuff of the now, clearly favoring the latter, Alexie’s poem maintains an ambivalent relationship with the past as well as the present. O’Hara’s speaker opines about his lover: “it is hard to believe when I’m with you that there can be anything as still/as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it/in the warm New York 4 o’clock light we are drifting back and forth/between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles.”[25] In this statement, the speaker clearly differentiates between the specificity and vivacity of the present moment represented by the lover and the “warm New York 4 o’clock light” with the stillness and stale permanence of statuary. By contrast, Alexie’s speaker proclaims, “Forget Neil-goddamn Armstrong!/Every Indian has been the only Indian somewhere./Every Indian has been the First Man on the Moon.”[26] In affirming the possibilities of a new relation to “American History” and a new conception of oneself in the flow of time, the poem produces a radically

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[24] See Mackay 2012 on depictions of Europe in Native poetry.

[25] Frank O’Hara, "Having a Coke with You" in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1971.), 360.

[26] Sherman Alexie, “Lean Cuisine” in *What I’ve Stolen, What I’ve Earned* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 2014), 138-9. See appendix for full poem.

different vision of the history of Native peoples. The speaker rewrites the story of the moon landing, and ironically asserts the ubiquity of having been "the only Indian somewhere."

This triumphalism is then complicated by the speaker's realization that Sitting Bull had beaten him to the punch, having eaten at the same restaurant at some point in his life. Subsequently, the speaker revises his position: "Suddenly, I was Buzz/Aldrin, Second Man/On the Moon. Suddenly/Every Indian was potentially/The Second Man On the Moon." While these lines start out by mimicking the earlier sentiment with a deliberately overwrought sense of shock and disappointment, the tone quickly turns to one of reverence as the speaker acknowledges, "Every Indian was potentially/The Second Man On the Moon." The near-anaphoric setup of this line in combination with "Every Indian has been the First Man On the Moon" highlights the significance of being "second"; in the same moment or series of moments that the speaker "suddenly" becomes aware of his relation to the past, the reader at the same time becomes aware of the same possibility.

As the speaker goes on to explain, "there might be six degrees of/Separation among all white folks,/But between Indians, there's only two,/Even on the Spanish Mediterranean coast." The practice of measuring degrees of separation provides an exceptionally clear look into some of the mechanisms of history-making—not only does it make evident who is included and who is excluded in a particular "genealogical" chain, it also reveals the nature of each of these connections. For Alexie's narrator, what prompts the creation of this two-person connective chain is simply the fact of being Native, a commonality he shares with Sitting Bull, one of the few Native historical figures known to "American History." Thus, being second is not a near-victory disappointment, but a trans-historical honor. The forging of this solidarity between himself and Sitting Bull in the present moment through an almost stream-of-consciousness style

has the effect of reconstituting the static image of Sitting Bull while at the same time lending the speaker a large historical horizon. This moment is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's claim in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that "[t]o articulate the past historically…means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[27] The danger here is the threat of erasure, of even the speaker misremembering or presuming the past vacated of Native actors. Sitting Bull emerges as the sudden flash of memory, a historical anchor that grounds the speaker without drowning him.

The linkage between the speaker and Sitting Bull can be described as what Dean Rader terms "epicizing the lyric."[28] For Rader, American Indian poetry that might otherwise be characterized as "lyric"—that is, personal, emotionally-driven, and centered on the "I"—often "function as more than a mere lyric; they carry the weight, the history, and do the cultural work of an epic."[29] While I don't necessarily agree with Rader's implication with the word "mere" that the lyric is an inherently ahistorical genre, such quibbles depend on a nontrivial concern with western generic conventions, something which Rader rejects early on in his piece and which I will likewise avoid.[30] Significantly for the task of reading "Lean Cuisine" as a poem that makes and becomes, Rader argues that because the epic lyric is often a "wildly public, communal text…frequently the author of the poem is merely a vehicle for a kind of expression that does not

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[27] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 255.

[28] Dean Rader, "The Epic Lyric: Genre and Contemporary American Indian Poetry" in *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*, eds. Janice Gould and Dean Rader (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 123-142.

[29] Ibid., 127-8.

[30] Ibid., 125.

simply seek a connection between author and audience *but literally creates it*" (emphasis mine).[31] It is important to note that this connection Rader writes about does not reside within a poem, but is instead constituted by it. Fundamentally, Rader's argument is that there is a difference between western and Native treatments of the past, and within that difference, there is a potential for Native poetry to be mobilized for creative purposes.

One way in which the poem creates a connection between the speaker and the reader in the moment of its interpretation is by foregrounding the process of its own production. The speaker begins the poem by writing in a fairly familiar storytelling register ("The best meal I ever ate…") in order to describe a particularly memorable meal that he once had in Spain. After briefly considering whether he was the first Native American ever to have dined in that particular place, culminating in the "Forget Neil-goddamn-Armstrong!" stanza, the speaker writes, "But I digress. So let me repeat:" and proceeds to reproduce the first two stanzas of the poem word for word. Not only does this structure call attention to the construction of the poem as a poem, it does so while maintaining the flow of a story being casually related by a close friend. Thus, the illusion of a story in motion, changing and developing in the moment, remains, even as the artifice of the typed page is uncovered.

The self-interrupting, self-reflexive turns in the poem are not unprecedented in and of themselves. In fact, they can easily be categorized under what poet Corey Marks calls the "descriptive-meditative structure," which consisting of three parts: description, meditation, re-description.[32] However, what *is* extraordinary about Alexie's particular deployment of this

[31] Ibid., 130.

[32] Corey Marks, "The Descriptive-Meditative Structure," in *Structure & Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*, eds. Michael Theune (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2007), 123.

structure is the way in which it refuses to privilege the individual as the site of sudden, epiphanic change, even though the speaker is ostensibly telling a story from his own experiences. Marks characterizes the descriptive-meditative structure as having originated in the Romantic lyric tradition and being essentially about "dramatiz[ing] a moment of realization, of changing thought."[33] By contrast, rather than documenting a moment of renewed perception brought upon by a period of intense self-scrutiny, the turns in Alexie's poem comically deflate the idea of an autonomous Great Man ("First Man on the Moon") and choose instead to emphasize the relational nature of the speaker's identity. In other words, each time that a reader encounters "Lean Cuisine", the visible lyric "I" in the poem is undercut by the implicit epic "we" that resides somewhere in a trans-historical web being stitched between the speaker, the reader, and Sitting Bull.

Counter-Dictionary

With a title as provocative as "The Devil's Language," Cree poet Marilyn Dumont's triptych poem—part memory, part story, part polemic—makes explicit its concern with the issue of language usage for Native writers. Like "Lean Cuisine," this piece appears initially to take the form of a standard lyric poem, beginning with an "I" and the speaker's contemplation of "the Great White way of writing English,"[34] but quickly turns into something more complex and multifaceted. Here, the language of the settlers is engaged in a critique of itself, though this critique does not simply issue forth from the writer or her speaker counterpart, but through an entire storytelling apparatus that engages the entire space of literary production and reception.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Marilyn Dumont, "The Devil's Language," in *A Really Good Brown Girl* (London: Brick Books, 1996), 54. See appendix for full poem.

This is in some ways similar to the "we" invoked by Alexie's poem, but in the case of "The Devil's Language," the focus is less on a dominant account of national history and more on the linguistic and ideological restrictions involved in the narration of a personal history. After all, despite the attention that it calls to its own form, Alexie's poem is perfectly grammatical, falls well within western conventions of poetry, and does not speak directly about its use of English. Dumont's poem, however, obsesses over language, calling its uses and norms into question over and over again throughout. The speaker can barely utter half a line before the very foundation of those words' ability to produce meaning, to make sense(s), is dissected and rendered conditional by their entanglement in colonial histories and presents.

One of the main ways in which sense is made and order imposed onto language is through the dictionary. So often we defer to the dictionary's authority not for grammatical or "practical" inquiries but for ethical and political ones. We ask questions about what "love" or "justice" or "indigeneity" is and proceed to look for the answer in the established definitions of those words. It's easy to understand this impulse. We talk endlessly about miscommunication, all of the pitfalls we would be able to avoid if we could all just start from the same definitions of the same words. But of course, as Taiaiake Alfred reminds us, to name a thing is not necessarily to understand it. Moreover, the English dictionary's stranglehold on definition comes from the same colonial authority that writes the laws and anthologies and history books that, in turn, become lived realities for Native peoples.

The speaker in Dumont's poem warns early on: "the Great White way could silence us all/if we let it," then goes on to explain: "its had its hand over my mouth since my first day of school/since Dick and Jane, ABC's and fingernail checks." During my first few passes through the poem, I kept misreading those two lines as "Dick and Jane have had their hands over my

mouth since my first day of school," which while comically surreal is also an oddly fitting image for the way in which pedagogical regimes have been complicit in the silencing of Native voices and languages, with the dictionary as the ultimate pedagogical weapon. The power to define is also the power to delineate, to create, to verify, to deny—in short, to secure the shape of the world. Here, Dian Million's attention to languaging becomes especially relevant. Dumont writes about the harm that compulsory English education has had on her and her Native community, yet she does so in that very language. Rather than read this as an unfortunate but necessary paradox, it might instead be productive to consider the ways in which the poem confronts the established authority of the English dictionary and language with deliberate combativeness rather than reluctant hesitation in order to do the work of reinvention.[35]

At various points throughout the poem, the speaker seems to be extending a pointing finger out of the page, directing questions and statements straight at the reader, who has no choice but to be brought into the poem's rhetorical orbit. She writes: "my father doesn't read or write/the King's English says he's/dumb but he speaks Cree/how many of you speak Cree?/correct Cree not correct English/grammatically correct Cree/is there one?" Here, the speaker speaks directly to the readers, daring them to defend grammatical correctness as an indicator of intelligence, but paradoxically, the use of English points back at itself while at the same time creating a dialog with the reader, whose internal response to the speaker's questions contributes to the language-making and meaning-making process that engages the poem as a site of becoming.

[35] For another example of the dictionary's authority being subverted through poetic form, see Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary.*

Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez notes that instead of being aggressively polemical in its approach to the question of the settlers' language, Dumont's poem incorporates autobiographical moments from the poet's childhood as a way of connecting with the readers while at the same time unsettling their assumptions. Dumont tells "her own literary story and [invites] readers to *listen* to that story and, thereby, become part of that story, too."[36] This heteroglossic, interactive construction confounds the poem's categorization as "resistance writing," a generic imposition that the speaker addresses early on in the poem, characterizing it as the label given to Native writers who dare to speak out about their own oppression ("resistance writing/a mad Indian/unpredictable/on the war path/native ethnic protest"). Nevertheless, the speaker maintains a charged sense of opposition to the logic of the dictionary, pointing out its glorified image in lines like, "as if violating God the Father and standard English/is like talking back(wards)//as if speaking the devil's language is/talking back/back(words)." Indeed, the poem proudly talks back to the dictionary, and though it does so in English, it returns the words all jumbled and mixed up, having recognized the arbitrariness of its rules.

In contrast with the sharp, direct focus of the first two stanzas, the last stanza of the poem is written as a dreamlike second-person recollection. The persistent use of "you" and "your" seemingly demand that the reader recall something for which they most likely have no memory. The lines describe a mother—*your* mother—"[feeding] you bannock and tea/and syllables/that

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[36] Susan Brill de Ramírez, "The Power and Presence of Native Oral Storytelling Traditions in the Poetry of Marilou Awiakta, Kimberly Blaeser, and Marilyn Dumont," in *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*, eds. Janice Gould and Dean Rader (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 87. Emphasis in original.

echo in your mind now, now/that you can't make the sound/of that voice that rocks you and sings you to sleep/in the devil's language." The compounding of the two "now"s in the same line seem to firmly ground a collective memory in the present moment, making it accessible to everyone reading/listening, while also evoking a common phrase used to soothe crying infants. At the same time, the second "now" links up to the next line to complete the phrase "now that," which in the context of these lines alludes to the loss of a past event that nonetheless continues to echo on in the present. The simple word "now" serves two purposes within the span of one line, moving purposefully from one meaning to another while appearing to be merely redundant. In this small way, the speaker takes existing meanings in the English language and utilizes them for her own expressive purposes, having been weaned on syllables spoken by her mother.

Additionally, the phrase from which the poem takes its title appears in the very last line, and the image associated with it is rather curious. The speaker describes a lullaby being sung to "you" in "the devil's language," a song which successfully lulls "you" to sleep. Depending on how we choose to read the last stanza, the sinister overtone of the title is either greatly enhanced or somewhat nullified. On the one hand, we could choose to understand it as describing the way in which English and the associated violence of its imposition onto Native peoples has so thoroughly permeated Native culture that it has even tainted a ritual as intimate and private as the lullaby. On the other hand, we could choose instead to consider how this deployment of "the devil's language" unsettles notions of linguistic hegemony and opens up possibilities for English to work for Native writers and storytellers. Indeed, it is not even entirely clear that the title necessarily refers to English. As Brill de Ramírez notes, the identity and nature of "the devil's language" shifts throughout the poem such that it refers at one point to the "Anglo-Canadian discounting and vilification of the indigenous Cree language" and at another point to the

"linguistic colonization by the King's English."[37] Through this second interpretive option, we are able to recognize the slipperiness of language, the ways in which its promiscuous wanderings and becomings can lead it away from the fixity of the dictionary and into radical new realms of meaning production.

Conclusion

The three poems that I have discussed make up only a small sample of contemporary Native writings and represent only a few strategies and points of resistance to ongoing colonial influences. There does not exist one great decolonizing refusal, but the range of possibilities afforded by "becoming poems" is such that they are at times able to point the "enemy's language" back at the enemy, to attack from within while being without. I will conclude the present discussion with a look back at the epigraph, which is taken from Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko's acclaimed work, *Ceremony.*[38] The reason I am ending with this piece is not to add one last literary example of performative resistance into the mix, but rather to look to *Ceremony*'s structure as a way of situating and theorizing the stakes of the hermeneutic practices that this essay has been engaged in thus far.

The epigraph comes from a poem that occurs midway through *Ceremony*. This poem starts with the lines "Long time ago/in the beginning/there were no white people in this world/there was nothing European,"[39] and is said to be the story invented by a witch who through the telling of the story brings white people into the world. Prior to the appearance of this poem in the book,

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[37] Susan Brill de Ramírez, "The Power and Presence of Native Oral Storytelling Traditions," 87.

[38] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

[39] Ibid., 122.

a character explains, "That is the trickery of the witchcraft…They want us to believe all evil resides with white people…But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates…it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place."[40] The narrative presented by the poem resides within the larger story of the novel, which itself is framed by the opening lines of the book—"Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman,/is siting in her room/and whatever she thinks about/appears/…/She is sitting in her room/thinking of a story now/I'm telling you the story/she is thinking."[41] The three lines in the epigraph—the last lines in the poem—do the performative work of creating white people within the context of a much larger system of interlocking narratives, a system which can be read as the titular ceremony through which the protagonist, Tayo, is healed, and the reader encounters and experiences the book. As such, this utterance is not as ominous as it may seem; at the same time that it makes possible a colonial future, it also enables the various channels through which resistance to this future can occur.

By locating agency in Native storytelling and asserting that words alone can set important events in motion, the lines quoted in the epigraph decenter European figures from narratives of colonialism and give performative power over to Native storytellers. Moreover, all of this is possible not *despite* the fact that *Ceremony* is a story written in a non-Native language and presented as a physical book, but precisely *because* of the subversive power that the contradictions in form and content lend to the work. Similarly, to read English-language poems written by Native poets as becoming—as directly contesting the textual supports of colonial realities—is to affirm the ability of these storytellers to spin a new yarn from old wool, to retool, reinvent, re-language the letters that the settlers had thought would spell the end for Native

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 1.

peoples and lifeworlds. What exactly these poems are constantly becoming remains unclear, but whatever it is:

"It's already turned loose.

It's already coming.

It can't be called back."

Appendix

Simple Four Part Directions for Making Indian Lit
Gordon D. Henry

Ah-Beshig for the money:

Take something Indin
and take something
non
Indin
Make the indin
Indigenous or native
or skin

Make the
non
indin
non
indigenous or
non
native
or non
skin
or white

Ah-Two for the shonyaa:

Make the indin non indin
And the non indin indin
Or the white indin

Ah-T(h)ree:

Make a character out of paper
Write a name with fire
or sky, or a combination of
color and the names of birds
or the absence of an article
with the present tense verb
from a limited number of infinitives

(you may) include prepositions,
except: forego, between, beyond, under

over, into, across, beside, beneath;
avoid abstractions, slang, economic terms,
hip phrases, or contemporary
situations or signs.

(You cannot use, for example, the names

foregoes hawk
under crow
into deer
Values Dog
Or Love Crane
Or Dances Similar
Or In the Middle of Night
red thunder banging
or
Across wolf
Eating Horse
Bling Eagle
or Has in Trust
or Many Shoes
or Sun Dude
or Chick Lit
or Donut Shop
Yard Sale Man
Beneath the Ground
Upside the Head
Do not Cross
or Out of Position
or Big Credit
or Bear Pimp
or Stone Suitcase
or Ice Cream Turtle
or Calls the Taxi
or Waits for Bus
or Bums a Smoke
or Speaks the Bible
Running Mascara
or Saint Muskrat
or Graffiti Cloudsor Air Flute
or Telescope Woman
or Medicine Cheese
or Karma Bull
or Missus Layups
or Nice One
or Red Exit

or Off Limits
Or even
Working Man)

So, maybe take a break
offer prayers to the polytheistic
Indo European Spirits
of syntax

inscribe a smoke or a ceremony

Add laughter to fighting
Tears to anything
sounding like history
Reinscribe Indian
Non Indian
White

Repeat

Imperialism
    conquest
Imperialism disease medicine
    conquest alcohol
Imperialism guns bow
    conquest
Imperialism

Make crossing tongues
As simple as pow wow for profit
And dying chevy hey yaw
As complex as Aristotle remains ethical
And remains remain catalogued
Use newspapers, magazines, museum brochures,
Skatagon, flint and match
Roll characters, names words, onto paper
Paper into rolls
Rub with beargrease and lard
Or last night's ground beef leavings
(this will not work with
Olive or sunflower oil)
Say four hail marys, a couple of
Aho's or ah ah kaweekin
Ignite all of the above

Ah-Forza:

After all this becomes lit
Be careful about who you
Read to

They may be hearing
Indin in everything
Non Indin

(As what remains from fire is not spirit)

Lean Cuisine

Sherman Alexie

The best meal that I ever ate
Was in an ancient fishing village
On the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

Fresh tomato on still-warm bread slathered with garlic,
And baby fish, bones and all, caught that morning.

As I ate, I kept thinking, “I might be the only
Native American who has ever eaten baby fish,
Bones and all, in an ancient fishing village
On the Spanish Mediterranean coast.”

Forget Neil-goddamn-Armstrong!
Every Indian has been the only Indian somewhere.
Every Indian has been the First Man on the Moon.

But I digress. So let me repeat:

The best meal that I ever ate
Was in an ancient fishing village
On the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

Fresh tomato on still-warm bread slathered with garlic,
And baby fish, bones and all, caught that morning.

To confess, I ate dozens of baby fish, bones
And all, and enough bread to make two loaves.

Gluttony, thy name is Sherman, bones and all.

After the meal, I drank coffee
As strong and bitter as colonialism.

And I, through my translator friend, asked
The restaurant owner/chef if
A Native American, A Red Indian, had
Ever eaten there, and he said, in Spanish

“Of course, of course, my great-grandfather
Was honored to serve Sitting Bull.:

Holy shit, I thought.

Sitting Bull!
Sitting Bull!
Sitting Bull, bones and all!
Santa mierda, I thought.
Suddenly, I was Buzz
Aldrin, Second Man
On the Moon. Suddenly,
Every Indian was potentially
The Second Man on the Moon.

O, I swooned. Who knew?

There might be six degrees of
Separation among all white folks,
But between Indians, there's only two,
Even on the Spanish Mediterranean coast.

Who knew? Did you?

O, sing an honor song,
Sing an honor song
For baby fish, bones and all!

But, damn, it wasn't fair,
For I was too fat to sing,
So I eased my belt,
And leaned back in my chair,
My belly warm and full
With the same meal
That had pleased Sitting Bull.

The Devil's Language

Marilyn Dumont

1.
I have since reconsidered Eliot
and the Great White way of writing English
standard that is
the great white way
has measured, judged and assessed me all my life
by its
lily white words
its picket fence sentences
and manicured paragraphs
one wrong sound and you're shelved in the Native Literature section
resistance writing
a mad Indian
unpredictable
on the war path
native ethnic protest
the Great White way could silence us all
if we let it
its had its hand over my mouth since my first day of school
since Dick and Jane, ABC's and fingernail checks
syntactic laws: use the wrong order or
register and you're a dumb Indian
dumb, drunk or violent
my father doesn't read or write
the King's English says he's
dumb but he speaks Cree
how many of you speak Cree?
correct Cree not correct English
grammatically correct Cree
is there one?

2.
is there a Received Pronunciation of Cree, is there
a Modern Cree Usage?
the Chief's Cree not the King's English

as if violating God the Father and standard English
is like talking back(wards)

as if speaking the devil's language is
talking back
back(words)
back to your mother's sound, your mother's tongue, your mother's language

back to that clearing in the bush
in the tall black spruce

3.
near the sound of horses and wind
where you sat on her knee in a canvas tent
and she fed you bannock and tea
and syllables
that echo in your mind now, now
that you can’t make the sound
of that voice that rocks you and sings you to sleep
in the devil’s language.

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