

Learning to be Satisfied: Navajo Poetics, a Chattering Chipmunk, and Ethnopoetics¹

Anthony K. Webster

In memory of Barre Toelken

“This is so, isn’t it?” —F. R. Leavis (1972:62)

“Hane’ doo t’óó saad t’éí át’é jinóózjǫ́’ át’ée da, t’áá bí be’iina’ haleeh.” —Rex Lee Jim (cited in Casaus 1996:10)
Rough translation: “Stories (poems) are not just words to be thought about, they are to become life.”

“[Poetry] avoids the last illusion of prose, which so gently sometimes and at others so passionately pretends that things are thus and thus. In poetry they are also thus and thus, but because the arrangement of the lines, the pattern within the whole, will have it so. . . . Exquisitely leaning toward an implied untruth, prose persuades us that we can trust our natures to know things as they are; ostentatiously faithful to its own nature, poetry assures us that we cannot—we know only as we can.” —Charles Williams (1933:9-10)

Prologue

I am sitting in my office at my home in rural southern Illinois. Outside I can hear the chattering of a chipmunk who lives near the steps that lead up to the front door of the house. The chipmunk spends much time on the landing of the stairs, oftentimes chattering away. Other times

¹ This essay could not have been written without the generosity of Blackhorse Mitchell. I thank him again. Our conversations about Coyote stories and the Navajo language have much influenced my thinking. Thanks as well to Rex Lee Jim and Laura Tohe who have taught me much about Navajo poetics. A conversation with Sherwin Bitsui brought many of the issues in this essay into focus for me. I thank him. Thanks to the other Navajos who have taken the time to talk with me about languages, poetry, and the moral imagination. Research on the Navajo Nation was done with a permit from the Navajo Historic Preservation Office. I thank them. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Michigan Department of Anthropology Linguistic Lab (February, 2019); I thank all in attendance for a lively conversation. I thank especially Judy Irvine and Barb Meek for a number of insightful comments. Another version of this paper was presented at the Linguistic Anthropology Lab at the University of Texas at Austin (September, 2019), and I thank those in attendance as well for their comments. A slightly different version of this essay was presented at the University of Helsinki (September, 2019) as well. I thank Laura Siragusa for the invitation. I thank as well the audience members for a number of useful comments. I thank Aimee Hosemann for comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Finally, I thank the three reviewers for *Oral Tradition* for generous and kind comments.

silent. Whenever, though, I exit the house in the spring, summer, or fall, it bolts away and hides in the bushes near the window that looks out at our bird feeder and the front yard. This eventing is so common that it might easily become background, something that I am dimly aware of. It retains its salience, its compellingness, for at least two reasons. First, because I attend to the chipmunk by taking the occasional notes on its habits and my reactions to those habits (in the tradition of Aldo Leopold (1986)), then coupling this with quotes that I write in my leather-bound commonplace book (in the tradition of W. H. Auden (1970)). Secondly, because it contrasts so starkly with where I live in Austin, Texas. There I find no chipmunks. Their absence, especially for someone who grew up in the Midwest (Indiana), who grew up among the woods of the Midwest, seems always startling to me. The chipmunk at my home in southern Illinois is a reminder of their continuing presence in my life, a continuing reminder of something about myself as well. The chipmunk reminds me, to put it simply, of home, of my home in Indiana when I was young. Chipmunks, whatever else they may be, are reminders for me of home—both in Indiana and in Illinois now.

Introduction

Chipmunks are present on the Navajo Nation, in the American Southwest; they were certainly present—both physically and discursively—when I have been doing ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork there. Here is a passage on chipmunks by John Watchman in my commonplace book (I'll discuss the formatting below):

'Áadi 'inda hazéists'ósii,
 "Nishá'?"
 'Ákóq náádilgheed!
 T'áadaats'í 'aani.
 Daaztsá," ho'doon'iid, jini.
 'Áádóó 'ákóq náájilghod.
 Nít'ée', "t'áá'aaníl ma'iyyéq daaztsá!á!"
 Yikáá' haasghodii' dahnahacha'.
 "ts'os, ts'os,
 ts'os, ts'os," nóo dahnahacha'.

Here is the translation of this passage that Blackhorse Mitchell and I did together several years ago now (Webster and Mitchell 2012:165-66):

And only then Chipmunk,
 "What about you?
 You also run over there!
 It may really be true.
 He is dead," It was said to him, they say.
 And then he also ran over there.

Then, “It is true that Ma’ii is indeed dead!”
 He got on top of his body and skipped around.
 “ts’os, ts’os,
 ts’os, ts’os,” he said as he skipped around.

The passage by Watchman is from a much longer narrative—often known in English as “Coyote and the Prairie Dogs” or “Coyote and Skunk”—that he and Edward Sapir recorded and translated together in the late 1920s (Sapir and Hoijer 1942; see also Dinwoodie 1999; Webster and Mitchell 2012). The major players in the narrative are Coyote, Skunk (sometimes Lady Skunk or Wildcat), and the Prairie Dogs. Chipmunk is not mentioned in most of the versions of this narrative that I have encountered (see for example the versions told by Yellowman, Curly Tó Aheedliinii, Laterro, The Late Little Smith’s Son, Timothy Benally Sr., and Rex Lee Jim).² Though, while many of the versions do not involve Chipmunk, it is the case that the place where Watchman told Sapir this narrative—Crystal, New Mexico (nestled as it is near the Chuska Mountains)—does have chipmunks. In my own visits there, I have seen chipmunks.

Among the most famous versions is the one told by Yellowman to Barre Toelken and then later analyzed by Toelken (1969) and then again by Toelken and Tacheeni Scott (1981). This incident is absent in that version. Indeed, Chipmunk is not explicitly named in the narrative. One goal of this paper is not to try and explain why Watchman included Chipmunk and Yellowman did not. For me, anyway, that seems beside the point. The point is rather: what is the moral work of this episode in the Watchman version? I do this as a way to honor the artistry of John Watchman. To honor as well the work of Barre Toelken.³

Recognizing the verbal artistry of individual narrators has certainly been a hallmark of the ethnopoetic tradition—a tradition, of course, that Toelken was deeply involved with (see D. Hymes 1981 and 2003; Tedlock 1983; Toelken and Scott 1981). I make this point because narratives documented by prior generations of anthropological linguists are still presented as if they were the singular accomplishment of those anthropological linguists—the narrators have been erased. This is, perhaps, the most radical kind of “discursive discrimination” (Kroskrity 2015), where the human beings who told these narratives become, merely, the language. Notwithstanding D. Hymes’ (1987) insightful discussion of the artistry of John Rush Buffalo (see also D. Hymes 2003), a recent and valuable updating (Wier 2019) of Hoijer’s *Tonkawa Texts* (1972) praises Hoijer’s work while utterly erasing the contributions made by John Rush Buffalo. This, to borrow Bernard Perley’s (2012) term, is *zombie linguistics*—languages without speakers.

² See Parsons 1923; Hill and Hill 1945; Morgan et al. 1949; Haile 1984; Benally 1994; and Jim 2004 for the texts.

³ When I first began publishing articles on Navajo verbal art, Toelken was sometimes a reviewer of those pieces—he often let me know that he had reviewed the piece. His reviews were always generous—even if he didn’t agree with what I was saying—and always in the spirit of making my work better. This essay acknowledges that kindness. Toelken was, of course, not an anthropologist, but a folklorist. As a brief personal aside, I first became aware of Toelken when I took Sandy Ives’ Folklore class at the University of Maine in the early 1990s—the textbook we used was Toelken’s *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1979). My own interest in linguistic anthropology developed, in part, out of this early encounter with folklore and with Toelken’s work.

Toelken, to be sure, would have had none of this—for him these narratives were, most decidedly and ethically, the stories told by Yellowman.

Watchman told this narrative in a particular context—knew it was being artifactual—and as Nevins (2015) and Carr and Meek (2015) have suggested, that entails not just an awareness of the interactional moment (Webster 1999), but some vision of the future (see also Kroskrity 2009; Bruchac 2018). Watchman told this to Sapir, but he also told it to an imagined future audience (Webster 2017). We do well to remember that. We know as well that Watchman told this narrative in the summer, outside, that is, its traditional time in the winter. We do well to remember that too. We do well, that is, to remember that this was an interaction in a real time and space between human beings.⁴

Other Navajos have published versions of this story. In 1949, William Morgan included a Navajo and English bilingual version in a collection of Coyote Stories published by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Timothy Benally Sr. (*To'dich'inií Binalí Biye'*) published a version in Brian Swann's edited volume *Coming to Light* (1994:606-13). Rex Lee Jim (2004:320-23) published a version in a later volume also edited by Brian Swann (see also Webster 2004). In that piece, I should add, Jim reports on what Coyote tells him (2004:318):

“And Rex,” he chides. “Don’t forget about technology. The times are changing, and you must learn to embrace the changing. Change with the times. Change the way you tell my stories. Take the camcorder, the cameras, the tape recorders, and the digital cameras out of your closet and teach your nephews and nieces how to use them. Hey, they’re just collecting dust now,” he teases.

In what follows, I want to think about this passage by Watchman—think about it in relation to the larger narrative told by Watchman, think about it in relation to the other versions of this narrative told by others, think about it in terms of a particular Navajo-informed interpretative framework, and think about it in terms of ethnopoetics. Towards the end of this essay I’ll waver a bit, become less sure of things, and ultimately abandon the theme—this too will be a part of that particular Navajo-informed interpretative framework: Don’t say too much. And yet, as you’ll see, I’m going to take the long way around the barn to say this infinitely little. My excuse for taking this long way around the barn is that I hope it is aesthetically a relatively pleasing way—a shortcut, not in terms of saving time or distance, but in going that other way, of meandering. If there is a point to this meandering, it is to give substance to Geertz’s claim about poetry: “Like sailing, gardening, politics, and poetry, law and ethnography are crafts of place: they work by the light of local knowledge” (1983:167). One way, then, to get at that light of local knowledge about poetry is through *ethnopoetics*. While ethnopoetics has often been conceived as the study of the poetries or literature of a people, here, I’d like to refigure ethnopoetics as the understanding of poetic practices (literature more broadly) through ethnography, the *ethno-* of ethnopoetics reminding us, as Barbra Meek (2019) has noted, of the ethnography needed for

⁴ Watchman was not, of course, unique in this regard concerning the Navajo Field School run by Sapir in 1929. Dinwoodie makes this point as well about another consultant, Bernie Bitsili: “In any case, evidence from Sapir’s *Navaho Texts* shows that informants did not always restrict their activities to ‘informing.’ Bitsili took the interview as an opportunity to attempt much more: to attempt to reframe his culture in a new world-order” (1999:188). Watchman, too, was attempting to say something about that “new world-order.”

understanding the poetic practices of any constellation of people. I would certainly place Toelken's work in this tradition. In what follows, I hope to make clear the value of such an approach. I hope to suggest, as well, that such a refiguring of ethnopoetics makes clear the kinds of ethical issues to which anthropologists should be attentive.

John Watchman's Chattering Chipmunk

A number of years ago, Dell Hymes (1981, 1998, and 2003) suggested that Native American narratives that were dictated to a previous generation of linguists and anthropologists are better represented as a series of lines than as block prose. Other work in ethnopoetics added nuance and subtlety to Hymes' original formulation, often highlighting the difference between the kinds of narratives analyzed by Hymes (recorded by hand by earlier researchers) and those recorded by contemporary audio-recording technology, and also seeking a rapprochement between the two perspectives (Tedlock 1983; McLendon 1982; Bright 1979; V. Hymes 1987; V. Hymes and Suppah 1992; Kinkade 1987; Kimball 1993a; Kroskirty 1985; Wiget 1987; Woodbury 1985 and 1987). Adding to this was, as well, attention to both the meanings of such verbal art and the evaluative and aesthetic criteria by which such forms of verbal art were understood (Bahr 1986; Bahr, Paul, and Joseph 1997; Kroskirty 1985 and 2012; Kimball 1993a and 2010; Palmer 2003; Molina and Evers 1998; Epps, Webster, and Woodbury 2017). Questions as well of translation—not just of lexical items, but of poetic devices that might reveal subtle shifts in rhetorical force, in the kinds of expectations that listeners might have had towards such shifts—have been an important concern in ethnopoetic research (D. Hymes 1981; Tedlock 1983; Berman 1992; Kimball 1993b; Woodbury 1998; Bunte 2002; Kroskirty 2010; Mitchell and Webster 2011). The divining of lines is only one component of ethnopoetics. Ethnography is a crucial component as well.

Toelken and Scott (1981) applied an ethnopoetic perspective to Navajo narratives—and in particular, a version of “Coyote and Skunk” as told by Yellowman. Among the many important points raised by Toelken and Scott (1981) is the value of collaboration in the translation process—Toelken's revised translation with the help of Scott is a much better translation, more attentive to the subtleties in the Navajo version. My own translation work has benefited immensely from the guidance of Blackhorse Mitchell. Mitchell and I worked together to produce the full translation of Watchman's narrative, which we published together (Webster and Mitchell 2012). Elsewhere, Mitchell and I have worked together to translate the poetry of Rex Lee Jim (see Mitchell and Webster 2011).

In the full published version (Webster and Mitchell 2012), I have followed D. Hymes' lead and segmented this narrative into lines, verses, stanzas, and scenes. In doing this, I hope to have highlighted something of Watchman's underlying poetic structuring. Ethnopoetics attempts to reveal something of individual voice and style. I hope as well to have said something about the subtlety of meaning that ethnopoetic analysis might discern. In what follows, I want to explain briefly the ethnopoetic principles that informed that presentation and then say something about the plot and highlight certain key moments in the narrative before turning again to the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay.

In that published version, lines have been segmented based on the use of the quotative *jini* (“they say”), parallelism (thus if two utterances are identical, I take that as an indication that each is a line), the use of initial particles (*nit’ée’* (“then”), *’áádóó* (“and then”), *’áadi* (“and”), and others), as well as form and content alignment. Larger narrative units are principally determined by form and content alignment. Scenes were indicated by Roman numerals (there are four scenes). Stanzas are indicated by a space between lines. Verses are indicated by indentation. In addition to the full publication in Webster and Mitchell 2012, the interested reader is encouraged to see also Sapir and Hoijer 1942:20-25.

There is a great deal of repetition and parallelism in the narrative. Such parallelism seems to create meaningful pairs of action and response. The providential world of the opening scene is one example (see below).⁵ Here is an example of the use of parallelism by Watchman that ties in to the scene concerning Chipmunk:

’Ákóq jilwod.

 Nit’ée’, “t’áá’aaníílá!” jinio njilwod.

’Áádóó Gahtso dahnáázhdilghod Ma’yéę bich’i’.

 Nit’ée’, “t’áá’aaníílá!” jinio nnáájilghod.

’Áádóó Tqzhii ’ákóq náájilghod.

 Nit’ée’, “t’áá’aaníílá!” nóo nnáánálwod.

He went there.

 Then, “It is indeed true!” he said as he came running back.

And then Jack Rabbit also started running towards that Coyote.

 Then, “It is indeed true!” he said as he also came running back.

And then Turkey also ran there.

 Then, “It is indeed true!” he said as he also came running back.

Watchman uses the initial particle *’áádóó* (“and then”) to introduce both Jack Rabbit (*Gahtso*) and Turkey (*Tqzhii*) and alternates that use with *nit’ée’* (“then”) when they return having been convinced (as indicated by the emphatic enclitic *-lá*) that Coyote is dead. Watchman also uses the semeliterative prefix *náá-* (“again, also,” a prefix that indicates repetition) with *-wod*, *-ghod* (“to run”) for both Jack Rabbit and Turkey, but not with *-wod* (“to run”) for Deer.

Watchman uses a number of Navajo ethnopoetic devices in this narrative (poetic devices particular to the Navajo language). For example, Watchman opens the narrative with the formulaic opening, *’alk’idáq’ Ma’ii jooldlosh, jini* (“long ago Coyote was trotting along, they say”). This formulaic opening clearly indicates that what is to follow is one of Coyote’s numerous adventures. *’Alk’idáq’* (“long ago”) suggests that the world Coyote inhabits will be

⁵ By “providential world,” I mean that a narrator creates a world that sustains or provides for the needs of a character. Here Coyote desires water and water is provided for him. Such providential worlds can be found in other Native American narrative traditions as well (see D. Hymes 2003:203-27).

slightly different from the current world.⁶ The word is, as one Navajo told me, a “necessary” part of the story. It also places this narrative squarely within the voice of tradition. Navajos sometimes call this genre of narratives *Mq’ii joldloshí hane’* (“stories of the trotting Coyote”). This opening connects with the genre name. Watchman also closes the narrative with the formulaic closing *t’áá’ákódi* (“that’s all”). In such ways, Watchman places his narrative within the received expectations of Navajo narrative genres.

So much for the basics of poetic structuring. The essential details of the plot are as follows: Coyote and Skunk come up with a plan to deceive the other animals (sometimes just Prairie Dogs, sometimes all the animals that *-dlosh* (“trot”)). The plan revolves around Coyote pretending to be dead. Once the other animals are convinced of the truthfulness of Coyote’s death, Skunk, whose name in Navajo is *gólízhii* or “the one who urinates,” urinates in the eyes of the other animals, and Coyote jumps up and clubs all (or almost all) the animals to death. After they have done this, Coyote convinces Skunk to participate in a race. The winner gets the dead animals and the loser gets nothing. Skunk, knowing he is slower than Coyote, hides and lets Coyote run past him. Afterwards, Skunk eats all the dead animals that have been roasting in a pit. Coyote returns and pleads with Skunk for food and Skunk gives Coyote scraps (bones).

Most of the versions of “Coyote and Skunk” begin with Coyote alone. This opening scene represents a “lyrical” moment (D. Hymes 1998:ix) or a “providential world” (D. Hymes 2003:226). Such lyrical moments are common in other Native American traditions. Here the lyrical moment concerns a world of wish fulfillment. All seems right with the world. Coyote wishes aloud for a gentle rain and a gentle rain begins to fall. Watchman develops this scene with tight parallelism (or repetition with variation) and pairing.

“My toes, I wish that water would come bubbling between!”

Just so, between his toes, it came bubbling up, they say.

“My belly, I wish water would come to that level!”

Just so, it reached the level of his belly.

“My back, I wish I could trot along with it at that level!” he said, they say.

Just so, his back, it reached that level, they say.

“My ears, I wish only that they stuck out!” he said, they say.

Just so, his ears, only they stuck out, they say.

Each line begins here with Coyote mentioning a body part and then his desire. The Navajo version presents the parallelism even better. The parallel lines are chant-like (Navajo chants exhibit such parallel structures and the upward direction of such parallelism; see Reichard 1944; McAllester 1980; Field and Blackhorse 2002).

“Shikégizhdéé’ tó hada’nxoshle’!”

T’áá’áko bik’egizhdéé’, hada’nxosh, jini.

“Shibid bíghahgo tó neel’áale’!”

⁶ I have heard older Navajos use this form—especially elongating the final long vowel even more—as a way to introduce stories about their youth—suggesting, in a humorous way, that they are so old that their youth occurred during such mythic times.

T'áá'áko bibid tó bineel'á, siljí'.
 “Shiigháán t'ééidasitáago yishdloshle'!” ní, jini.
 T'áá'áko bíghaáán t'éidasitá, jini.
 “Shijaa' t'éeyá háát'i'le'!” ní, jini.
 T'áá'áko bijaa' t'éeyá háát'i', jini.

Not only is there the repetition of the initial possessed body part (in Navajo body parts need a possessive pronoun, here *shi-* (“my”) in the first line and then *bi-* (“their, his, her”) in the parallel line), but each pair is resolved through the use of *t'áá'áko*, which I translate as “just so.” There is more. Watchman also ends each of Coyote’s “wishes” with the optative enclitic *-le'* (“wish”; enclitics are semi-bound morphemes that occur in word-final position; optative means that the enclitic indicates a wish). Verb forms are repeated in each parallel line (the sound-iconic *hada'nxoshle'* (“bubbling up, between”) in the first line, for example, is repeated in the second line, but without the optative enclitic *-le'*). This is a form of grammatical parallelism, and it lends an internal coherence to this section as well. Finally, Watchman ends five of the lines with the quotative *jini* (“they say”). This device is used at the end or near the end of thirty-eight lines (there are eighty-eight total lines). It is one of the primary poetic structuring devices in this narrative. It occurs nineteen times in the first twenty-four lines, and then occurs only nineteen more times in the next sixty-four lines. Its use at the beginning of a narrative indicates that the narrative is outside the personal firsthand knowledge of the narrator and places the narrative in the voice of tradition (this is what others have said).

Jini, I should add, is one of the features that Toelken missed in his 1969 translation of Yellowman’s narrative (Toelken and Scott 1981:92). Indeed, Toelken had taken Sapir and Hoijer—and by extension Watchman—to task for the “apologetic device” used in their text collection (Toelken and Scott 1981:112). It should be obvious, as it became obvious to Toelken, that *jini* is not superfluous to these narratives, but essential. It is, in that respect, a quintessential example of what Sherzer called the “poeticization of grammar” (1998:18). Here, to add to that, I quote Navajo poet Laura Tohe (2005:11):

Jini, they say. We accept *jini* as part of our stories on simple faith. It’s not important who said it, but that it was said. The stories become part of our collective memory. Our stories begin and end with *jini*. At Ya’dziilzihi is the place named after the contest where young men shot flocks of arrows toward the clouds to see who could shoot farthest, *jini*. At Séi Delehí, lover’s trysts took place on the wide sandy bed near the tamarisks. *Jini*.

The use of *jini* in contemporary Navajo poetry can be found in poets as diverse as Luci

Tapahonso, Rex Lee Jim, and Esther Belin (Webster 2009:34).⁷ It continues to be a salient aspect of Navajo verbal artistic tradition.

With Coyote’s arrival at the Prairie Dog Town, the lyrical moment ends. Coyote now deceives in order to get what he wants (namely, food). Watchman spends very little time on the actual mechanics behind the deception that Coyote and Skunk engage in, rather he moves to the “running and returning” motif. Here the various animals each run to see if Coyote is in fact dead, and seeing him “dead” they return exclaiming *t’áá’aaníilá!* (“it is indeed true!”). This is repeated verbatim five times (twice by Deer). To make sure that the listeners understand the veracity of this statement, Watchman adds *-lá* (“indeed”). Chipmunk is the last such animal to go. He (possibly she) has been goaded to go by Skunk—Coyote’s partner in the deception (though the two, as I noted earlier, will have a falling out over the eating of the corpses of the Prairie Dogs). Mitchell translated the pronoun referring to Chipmunk as “he,” but that’s not in the Navajo form (Navajo does not code for gender in its pronominals)—as a translation, then, it says too much, it’s exuberant (on the exuberance of translations see Becker 1995). It’s also the case that in Navajo English, of which Mitchell is an accomplished speaker, “he” and “she” do not code for gender and can be used interchangeably. Here is the relevant excerpt again; this time I have added emphasis on an important recurrent sonic form:

’Áadi ’inda hazéists’ósi,
 “Nishq’?
 ’Ákóq náádílghed!
 T’áadaats’í ’aaní.
 Daaztsá,” ho’doon’iid, jini.
 ’Áádóó ’ákóq náájilghod.
 Nt’ée’, “t’áá’aaníl ma’iiyęę daaztsálá!”
 Yikáá’ haasghodii’ dahnahacha’.
 “ts’os, ts’os,
 ts’os, ts’os,” nóo dahnahacha’.

The sonic forms that resonate here are *hazéists’ósi* (“chipmunk, little chatterbox”) and the ideophone *ts’os*, which simulates a chattering sound. Note that the *-ts’ósi* here is most likely the form for “slender, little” and not the ideophone *ts’os* (likely related to the ideophone *ts’oqs* (compare with Webster 2006 and 2018)); but—and I think this a key to Watchman’s craft here—it is potentially heard in *hazéists’ósi*. This is a kind of *sound texture*—two forms interanimate each other, suggesting possibilities (what Jakobson (1960) would call intensification of form).

⁷ Let me say something about the example from Rex Lee Jim that circles nicely back to a point made by Toelken and Scott. Here is the use of *jini* in a poem by Jim: *Áko ląq háádóó ma’ii haaldloozh jini* (1998:69). Here’s how Jim translates it in that volume: “Ahuh, where did coyote start trotting, they say, my grandfather?” (1998:69). Here’s how I translated it: “And so, surely, from where does coyote start trotting, it is said” (Webster 2004:73). And here is how Jim translates it in a more recent collection: “Aq’, so where did coyote start trotting from, they say?” (2019:11). Here Jim uses the very affirmation form that Toelken and Scott (1981:84) discuss as an example of the ironic sound texture evoked by Yellowman in his telling of a Coyote story (I discuss this example shortly). No doubt here a coincidence, but a delightful coincidence nonetheless, which also reminds us of the salience of the affirmation form.

Such sound textures work by way of phonological iconicity—where the sounds of and in words are felt to resemble each other (see Webster 2018; Samuels 2001). Navajos that I know call this practice *saad aheelt'éeego diits'a'* (“words that resemble each other by way of sound”; see Webster 2018). This kind of sound texture, then, is not unique to Watchman, but his placing it in this story does seem to be unique when compared to the other versions of this narrative. One of Toelken and Scott’s (1981:84) key insights is Yellowman’s use of *qq* at key moments in his narrative to create an ironic tension—in everyday discourse *qq* is used to assent, but here the device is used to call into question the truth of what is being described in the narrative—one hears an affirmation when one should know better (compare this use of sonic texture with that described by Mitchell and Webster 2011).

Navajos that I know, that I have worked with, do like to contemplate the relations between words by way of sound—drawing connections between such sonic forms (much of Jim’s poetry is predicated on this (Webster 2018)). Punning, then, is an aspect of a broader Navajo acoustemology (Webster 2018; see also Feld 2015). It is not mere happenstance, for example, that *leetso* (“yellow dirt, uranium”) sounds like—can pun with—*Yé'íitsoh* (“monster(s),” of the kind killed by Monster Slayer—though it is important to recall that not all monsters were slain); there’s a deeply moral overtone here (see Yazzie-Lewis and Zion 2006). Part of this has to do with a Navajo language ideology that the Navajo language was “put down” by the Holy People for Navajos to use (see Peterson and Webster 2013:99)—and being so placed, it is important to attend to connections based on sounds; language, that is, *saad*, as Jim told me in October of 2000, being “sound that communicates.”⁸ Here is a poem by Jim that plays with the ideophone *ts'qqs* (1995:37):

na'asts'qqsí
ts'qqs, ts'qqs
yiits'a'go
íits'qqs

And while there are a number of ways to translate this poem, since much of it is ambiguous, here is one translation (see Webster 2018 for other translations):⁹

mouse
suck, suck
sounding
kiss

Jim’s poem calls attention to the way that the ideophone *ts'qqs* is also a verb stem and can be found in the nominalized term for mouse—morphologically analyzable as “the one that goes

⁸ I hasten to add that this practice of punning is not restricted to Navajo internal puns—rather, interlingual puns are also quite common and can do similar moral work (see Webster 2009, 2010, and 2018).

⁹ For example, *na'astsqqsí* can be heard as *náá'ásts'qqs* (“to perform a sucking ceremony again”; see Webster 2018:32).

about sucking”—and the verb for “kissing” or “sucking.” Now *ts’òqs* simulates something like the sound of kissing or sucking—perhaps of a mouse, or a baby, or a ritual specialist, or lovers. Mice, as Jim long ago explained to me, can be omens of death, of evil—this point particularly salient given the deadly Hantavirus outbreaks on the Navajo Nation. The book *saad* was published two years after the 1993 outbreak—the poem, partly, comes out of that moment (Webster 2006). All of this, of course, can be convoked by the interplay of sounds in the poem. It can be many poems simultaneously.

The interplay of sounds in Watchman’s version looks somewhat different than the example described by Toelken and Scott. It looks, instead, more like the example from Jim’s poem. Paul Zolbrod discusses something of the place of *hazéists’ósi* in Navajo mythic narratives and provides some suggestive commentary by Pearl Sunrise and Wesley Thomas. Sunrise translated *hazéists’ósi* as “little chatterbox” (contrasting with *hazéétsoh* (“big chatterbox, squirrel”)) and called attention to the “chattering sound” that it makes. She also noted that *hazéists’ósi* chatter when they feel safe. Their sound can communicate something—a sense of safety (Zolbrod 2004:687; see also Webster 2018). Zolbrod also provides the following discussion (2004:686-87):

According to Navajo anthropologist Wesley Thomas . . . the root for both words is *-zei-* which designates sound, preceded by the prefix *ha*, which designates movement. It is traditional, he added in a conversation during the spring of 2000, that squirrels are perceived as messengers, either by the sounds they make or the way they shake their tails.

Both squirrels and chipmunks, for those that might listen, are messengers by way of sound. Note that the irony in the passage by Watchman is that *hazéists’ósi*—by producing a sound found in its name—is sending a message that it is safe while it dances on Coyote who is only feigning to be dead. *Hazéists’ósi* is not safe. In conversations with Mitchell, while we were translating this passage, he found this scene rather compelling. So too did other Navajos I discussed it with. Some of that, I think, has to do with the ways that the sounds resonate across this passage (see also Toelken and Scott 1981). But only some of it—because I think there is something else at play as well.

Now, as I suggested earlier, this passage does not occur in the other versions of this narrative that I am familiar with. It does, however, resonate quite clearly with a passage found elsewhere in Navajo narrative tradition—that is to say, Watchman’s use is an intertextual reference. The link is to mythic narratives that depict *Naayee neizghani* (Monster Slayer) killing *Déélghééd* (Burrowing Monster, also known as Horned Monster; see Reichard 1950; Matthews 1994; Zolbrod 1984). Here’s how Gladys Reichard describes it (1950:419):

It was customary for him [Chipmunk] to crawl out to the very end of Burrowing Monster’s horn and, when Monster Slayer had supposedly killed him, Chipmunk ran out to be sure he was dead, and reported by his usual sound, *ts’óós ts’óós ts’óós ts’óós*. As a reward he was allowed to streak his face and stripe his body with Burrowing Monster’s blood.

This scene is also included in Matthews’ *Navaho Legends* and in Paul Zolbrod’s *Diné bahane*.

Matthews calls the animal a “ground squirrel” and gives the form as *Hazaí* (1994:118)—the Franciscan Fathers complicate the matter by giving the form for “chipmunk” as *hazaí* (Franciscan Fathers 1910:141) in one place and as *hazéists’ósií* (1910:178) in another and translating *hazéists’ósií* as “ground squirrel” as well (1910:141); Zolbrod (1984:229) calls the animal “squirrel” (see also Zolbrod 2004) and provides the Navajo form *Hazéétsoh*—which is conventionally translated into English as “squirrel.”

Such questions of translation, especially of non-present animals, can be tricky. Here is an example from the work of Elsie Clews Parsons concerning “turtle” and “horned toad.” Parsons (1923) provides a narrative involving Coyote swallowing Turtle. Sapir and Hoijer (1942:474) even point out in the notes to the Watchman version that Parsons’ narrator (Laterro) uses Turtle instead of Horned Toad. We are fortunate that Parsons included a rendering of the Navajo form. Parsons gives this form as *nashonditiji* (1923:368). This is not the form for “turtle” that I am familiar with; that form is *tsisteel*. In fact, the form that Parsons gives is most likely *na’ashó’ii dich’izii* (“rough lizard”), or, as it is normally glossed, “horned toad.” Thus, this narrative has the same two main characters, Horned Toad and Coyote. There is no difference, then, between the main characters in the Watchman version and the Laterro version. One can imagine how this miscommunication could have occurred. Parsons’ translator Lewis might have glossed the form as, perhaps, a “hard” or “rough” “reptile” or “lizard,” and that certainly could have been understood by Parsons as “turtle” (see Webster 2008:462).

Ground squirrels and chipmunks do look similar, and both can have streaks on their faces.¹⁰ My goal here is not to resolve the question of whether or not it was a ground squirrel, a chipmunk, or a squirrel that climbed out onto Burrowing Monster’s horn and made its customary sound to indicate safety—it seems entirely likely that it depended on a narrator’s views on the matter. Some question of translation practices is probably involved as well. Some sense, as well, of the pleasure some Navajos take in synonymy and polysemy, of diversity of form (Peterson and Webster 2013). The crucial point is to note the resonance between this scene and the scene described by Watchman. The fundamental contrast here is that in one case Chipmunk, as Zolbrod writes, “signals to *Naayee neizghani* that *Deelgeed* is dead, and the world is now safe from a fearful predator” (2004:687), and in the other case Chipmunk is wrong—Coyote is not dead, Chipmunk’s signaling of safety is misguided, and Chipmunk and the other animals pay for that mistake with their lives. Appearances can be deceiving. Many Navajo listeners would have recognized the intertextual reference and the irony here. The world is not safe and the old assurances have failed. It is this contrast, coupled with the end of a providential world, that seems most suggestive, suggestive of the possible moral work of this narrative. Perhaps this was commentary to Sapir, perhaps to that imagined future audience.

Let me, as a way of concluding this section, circle back to the work of Toelken. Toelken and Scott (1981) highlight some of the moral overtones of the version of this narrative told by Yellowman: a critique of greed, of wanting more than is needed—of a lack of moral control on the part of Coyote. They discuss as well the moral work of laughter in response to these stories—that laughter indicates a recognition of the breaking of moral precepts. In a later piece, Toelken

¹⁰ Here it might be useful to note that “chipmunk” is, according to Silver and Miller, a borrowing into English of the Ojibwa word *atchitamo*, which they gloss as “squirrel” (1997:257).

(1987) would highlight the multiple—fourfold—interpretative framework that Coyote stories are a part of—from entertainment to the articulation of a moral order to ritual to witchcraft. Specifically, Toelken writes (1987:391),

The story which I translated in the Yellowman articles, where Coyote wishes for rain so that he can use the flood to kill and eat prairie dogs, appears by brief allusion in the Rainmaking segments of several rituals. The power of the allusion is enhanced by the prairie dog imagery, for prairie dogs are thought to embody the same forces underground as those which are represented above ground. Prairie dogs are said to “cry for rain.”

And still finally, at a later date, Toelken has this to say about Coyote tales more broadly and, again, about this particular story (1996:14):

One of the reasons the stories are so eloquent, it seems to me now, is that—far from needing analysis and explication—they are in and of themselves dramatic analyses and enactments of the weaknesses and arrogances that cause trouble for all humans. Yellowman knew I was using these stories to better understand Navajo worldview, but was he employing the stories for a broader purpose in telling them to me? Is there a reason why his most often-told story, at least in my presence, is that one about Coyote making rain in order to drown the prairie dogs that are insulting him?

Anthropology on an Intimate Scale

As a way of moving towards a conclusion, after having not offered much in the way of a definitive interpretation of either the narrative told by Watchman or the single scene I’ve been discussing, I’d like to draw some more obvious connections between Toelken’s work and what I have been saying—all of which leads me as well to saying something more about a particular Navajo interpretative framework and about the place of ethnopoetics in a concern with human affairs.

In some sense, I have deformed Watchman’s verbal artistry—I have focused on a brief section of a much larger narrative. In another sense, I hope to have honored Watchman’s artistry as well by highlighting his brief intertextual allusion to another narrative. Here let me quote Alton Becker on the value of such an approach (1995:393-94):

Of all the different mistakes a philologist must make in attuning to a new lingual world, the most difficult to overcome are mistakes of prior text. Prior text (or lingual memory) builds over a lifetime, giving resonance to things people say or hear. The hardest thing for an outsider to know is what is new and what is common—when people are speaking the past, when they are speaking the present.

The allusion, its quickness (Calvino 1988; Webster 2006), works because it taps into those prior texts—giving, that is, a particular resonance here, but giving it without saying too much. While

in some cases, explicit describing of what is really happening is the preferred option in narratives, more often than not, the preference I have encountered—in Navajo narratives and poetry (both forms of *hane'* (“story, narrative”))—is the more elusive route, the less explicit route, so that the person can “come to it” themselves. Such coming to it oneself makes the moral message more relevant, more compelling, because you have made that connection. So too that way of doing things—of elusiveness, of non-bossiness—is also a moral way of speaking. As an example of such a view, here’s a quote by Jim about his poetry (2001):

One of the good thing about poetry is that you can disguise it in many ways . . . and sometimes that approach is sorta sneaky but it’s a preferred approach in many ways and it’s a much more forceful approach in many ways because the person end up talking about it and discovering for him or herself rather than say it directly, I mean I could say it to you so I really just give it to you straight, and you could say, “Well, you’re not supposed to say that, and well it won’t be the last and too bad.” Whereas the other way it begins as way of self-exploration, and that process again the reader begin to say, “Hey wait a minute,” and becomes more convincing . . . more meaningful, because of the experience that that person, the reader goes through, the hearer, the listener.

As I have discussed at length elsewhere, many of Jim’s poems are predicated on punning, and Navajos I have discussed this with have found the puns to be particularly strong ways of expressing moral ideas (see Webster 2018). Puns are, for many Navajos, invitations to imaginative acts—they do not force a singular interpretation, they are multiple things simultaneously, not to be resolved, but to be contemplated—and thereby to be lived (to recall Jim’s point from the epigraph to this essay). Toelken, as well, makes this point about simultaneity concerning Coyote stories and the ways they prompt contemplation (1996:9):

Lévi-Strauss notwithstanding, this is not a simple binary system in which something is either A or not-A; this is a complex analog system in which most things are A and not-A at one and the same time.

Here we do well to recall what a Navajo consultant told W. W. Hill about the work of Coyote stories (Hill and Hill 1945:317):

The old men used to tell these stories when we were young so that we would think. They told us these stories to make us think, just as Rabbit figured how to get rid of his enemy, Coyote.

As Mitchell told me one evening as we were working on the translation of one of Watchman’s Coyote stories, “these stories are true, people are still like that.” One Navajo friend told me that the best Coyote stories, the strongest Coyote stories, the ones that really made you think, were not the full tales told on winter nights, but the quick allusion to a Coyote story in conversation—when the story had a particular relevance for the moment, had a particular moral relevance for the moment. The task then was for the listener to figure that out on their own. Toelken too takes up the allusions to Coyote stories—he focuses on their use in ceremony (1996:8-9):

Either in these conversational breaks or in the myth recitations themselves, participants will hear and make allusions to Coyote's various and well-known adventures.

My friend's comment, I should add, resonates quite directly with a point Ronald Scollon made for Athabaskan narratives (2009:261):

Within the Athabaskan storytelling tradition one doesn't waste words or insult one's listener by telling somebody something he or she already knows. A truly knowledgeable person really only requires an allusion to the story.

One is, as well, reminded of Basso's discussion of Western Apache aesthetics (1996:85):¹¹

An effective narrator, people from Cibecue report, never speaks too much; an effective narrator takes steps to "open up thinking," thereby encouraging his or her listeners to "travel in their minds."

And a bit later on (Basso 1996:103):

Over the period of years, I have become convinced that one of the distinctive characteristics of Western Apache discourse is a predilection for performing a maximum of socially relevant actions with a minimum of linguistic means. Accordingly, I have been drawn to investigate instances of talk . . . in which a few spoken words are made to accomplish large amounts of communicative work. For it is on just such occasions, I believe, that elements of Apache culture and society fuse most completely with elements of grammar and the situated aims of individuals, such that very short utterances, like polished crystals refracting light, can be seen to contain them all. On these occasions, the Western Apache language is exploited to something near its full expressive potential.

After having spent nearly 20 years thinking, writing, and talking with Navajos about Navajo verbal art, I would suggest that much the same could be said for the poetry of Rex Lee Jim (1995)—especially those poems he considers to be "masterpieces"—because they were messages from *nilch'i 'áłts'íísí* ("Little Wind") and not his own creation (Webster 2018 and 2019); such poems are quotations of Little Wind. So too, I think, for the quickness displayed by Watchman in his use of the scene concerning Chipmunk. They are such poetic crystallizations, or at least momentarily so.

Toelken's work, to borrow a distinction from D. Hymes (1996:60), was—or became more over time—mediative, less extractive in its emphasis (see also Kroskrity 2015; Davis 2017; Bruchac 2018)—not placing narrative traditions in some homogenizing perspective, collecting for the sake of collecting, extracting ethnographic tidbits, or reducing narratives to mere literalism. Not making them, that is, tell our story. We need to steer away from a Frederick

¹¹ Navajo and Western Apache, like the languages to which Scollon refers, are Athabaskan languages, and the people share—to varying degrees—certain aesthetic sensibilities (see Peterson and Webster 2013; see also Rushforth and Chisholm 1991).

Clegg-like vision of anthropology. Here is the ongoing relevance of an ethnopoetic approach. A theory of storywork (McCarty et al. 2018), for example, entails a commitment to understanding locally relevant interpretative frameworks—to some sense of the diversity of narrative traditions, of the diversity of the ways of making sense of narrative traditions (see Sherzer 1987 and 1998; Epps, Webster, and Woodbury 2017). Ethnopoetics should engage in a principled dialogue with local theories of meaning and moral responsibility, local interpretative frameworks. This is a view of ethnopoetics that recognizes narrators as coeval, fully intersubjective in the doing of things with words, in telling stories to fellow human beings—not as some abstracted “Navajo myth,” but as something far more important, the attempt at creating a shared sense of the world (Fabian 1983; see also Palmer 2003; Dobrin 2012; Moore 2015). Or as Blackhorse Mitchell told me, in talking about his own poetry, the attempt at reminding people that he is a human being.

When ethnopoetics, as it has done at times, reduces narratives to merely the discerning of lines, when it forgets the human beings, the verbal artists, involved in the fashioning of narratives, forgets the very languages being spoken, forgets the situatedness of such intersubjective moments, then it too reproduces the denial of coevalness—becomes, that is, extractive in its emphasis.¹² In the mediative approach, the approach exemplified, for example, in Lise Dobrin’s (2012) ethnopoetic work—which shows how ethnopoetics can call attention to that

¹² Among the more egregious examples of an extractive model concerning Indigenous narrative traditions is work that hews closely to “literary Darwinism” and “evolutionary psychology.” Gottschall (2008) and Stewart-Williams (2018) are recent examples of this extractive orientation. Their work, as well, is not based on an implicit denial of coevalness, but rather is explicitly predicated on a denial of coevalness—it values narrative traditions only in relation to the distance such traditions (and narrators) can be removed from our time and our place, removed from any sense of contemporaneity. Extraction and the denial of coevalness seem intertwined in their approaches. To get some sense of this extractive approach, Gottschall (2008) engages in a kind of mass inspection, looking for keywords concerning beauty and romantic love in English language translations of putative “oral traditions” (scant attention is given to questions of translation). There is no acknowledgment of the humanity of the narrators, no attempt to place them within a particular sociohistorical, interactional, or personal context—they simply become the voice of a culture (contrast this approach with Haviland and Hart 1998). The narratives are chosen because, among other reasons, “most of the 90 collections in our sample date to within a few decades of the year 1900, before many of the represented cultures were saturated by Western influence and—more specifically—by images of attractiveness conveyed by Western mass media” (Gottschall 2008:134). In the chapter on “romantic love,” Gottschall (2008:168-169) credulously cites W. Ramsay Smith on his methods of documenting and editing Australian Aboriginal verbal art. Gottschall ignores that Smith plagiarized roughly 90% of his book from the work of Australian Aboriginal author and inventor David Unaipon (Unaipon 2001). Unaipon is denied coevalness by Gottschall. He is erased. Steve Stewart-Williams, in his *The Ape that Understood the Universe*, describes the research of Gottschall and his co-author Marcus Nordlund as follows (2018:144):

Jonathan Gottschall and Marcus Nordlund analyzed thousands of traditional folk stories from cultures around the world, again looking for telltale signs of romantic love. They restricted their survey to stories that predated contact with the West—stories, in other words, that couldn’t have been “tainted” by Western individualism or Shakespearean sonnets.

David Unaipon, who had a variety of literary influences—John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian sermons, European fairytales, and so on (Muecke and Shoemaker 2001:xi)—is, again, completely erased as a coeval human being, someone who existed in the same time, who was a contemporary in all that implies, with W. Ramsay Smith. Margaret Bruchac (2018:18), in her compelling *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists*, which investigates the lives of the Indigenous peoples who interacted with anthropologists—even as some anthropologists erased their co-presence—makes a particularly salient point, which should echo with the fetishizing of 1900 as some magical Rubicon of “contact”: “Here, it is important to note that, by 1900, few Indigenous communities in North America were as socially isolated or ‘primitive’ as collectors might imagine” (or, I would add, as some evolutionary psychologists and literary Darwinists would still like to imagine (see also the earlier work of Radin 1966:126 and Wolf 1982 on this point)).

coeval moment between narrator and audience (in this case Dobrin)—we see the ultimate value in an ethnopoetic approach, in attending to the how and what people may be trying to say through the stories they tell, to paraphrase D. Hymes (1996), as voices worth listening to on their own terms—not as abstractions, but as interactions (see also the chapters in Kroskrity and Webster 2015). This is ethnopoetics, this is anthropology on an intimate scale.¹³

It is this mediative perspective that influenced Toelken's eventual returning of the Yellowman tapes to the family so that they could be destroyed. Part of this had to do with the concern of some Navajos with having “the voice of a dead man” on tape (Toelken 1998:383). There was also a concern with playing the tapes with Coyote stories at the wrong time of the year (in the summer, for example; Toelken 1998:383). And then there was the view that Toelken's own questions about Coyote stories had suggested an interest on his part in witchcraft, and were implicated in the illnesses of the family of Yellowman (Toelken 1998). Ultimately, it was Yellowman's sister who requested the tapes be returned so that they could be destroyed. Toelken's article on returning the Yellowman tapes came out while I was preparing to do fieldwork and, as such, it became something I was concerned about in my own fieldwork. It prompted conversations with Navajos about my own recordings.

In my experience interviewing Navajos, most have not been concerned with being recorded (either in Navajo or English or some combination of the two)—indeed some have wanted me to record them, to make a record of important things. Some Navajos did not want me to record them (for a variety of reasons). One Navajo did let me record them, but they also wanted me to destroy the recording after they died. They also told me though, after I asked, that it was appropriate to keep the transcripts after they died. When I asked a Navajo friend about this, he told me that the person was probably concerned with the sound of their voice—the danger was with the hearing of the sound of the voice; the transcript didn't have the same issue. My friend didn't seem particularly keen to go into details and so we moved on to other more enjoyable topics. Perhaps there is a change afoot concerning the way language is understood—a change, perhaps, in language ideology, so that the recording of voices is seen as less dangerous. But then this might be a change in a semiotic ideology—older Navajos that I know sometimes lament that their parents and grandparents were reluctant to have pictures of themselves taken, that they would have liked to see such photos of family members (see also Faris 1996; Peterson 2013; Denetdale 2007). Perhaps, echoing Jim, such things are changing with the times. Perhaps there have always been multiple competing language and semiotic ideologies at play among Navajos (Peterson and Webster 2013; Field 2009). In any case, what I learned from such conversations was not to presume that I knew what Navajos were going to tell me. What I learned was to listen (Webster 2015; compare with Basso 1996; Cruikshank 1997; Meek 2007; Nevins 2004).

I am reminded, finally, of Auden's “The Joker in the Pack” (1989), an insightful reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* that turns, at the end, to a contemplation of Iago's relation to a particularly pernicious vision of science—a vision that asks not whether or not we should do something, but rather, merely and more dangerously, can we do something. Auden raises the

¹³ This is merely to restate Fabian's (1983) point about the intersubjective foundation of ethnographic fieldwork, and to echo as well Paul Friedrich's point that “ethnopoetics tends to relativize knowledge, to recognize its subtlety”—“more hesitantly and generously” (2006:228).

possibility of reframing our understanding of knowledge in the following manner (1989:271-72):

To apply a categorical imperative to knowledge, so that, instead of asking, “What can I know?” we ask, “What, at this moment, am I meant to know?”—to entertain the possibility that the only knowledge which can be true for us is the knowledge we can live up to—that seems to all of us crazy and almost immoral.

Seeing this question as immoral or craziness is, in fact, entangled in a particular set of assumptions about the nature of science, of knowledge, of the responsibilities towards the acquisition of knowledge (see Debenport 2015; Isaac 2007). For Navajos that I have talked with about such things, this is precisely the moral way to approach knowledge—to ask, that is, “What, at this moment, am I meant to know?” To do otherwise, as Toelken (1987 and 1996) has discussed, is to indicate an impatience with the proper ways of coming to know things. To do otherwise suggests, then, a lack of moral responsibility.

Learning to be Satisfied

What I’ve been getting at here, and what Toelken got at in his own way, is a view of the work of anthropologists as attending to the limits of our knowledge, the limits of what we should and should not say, what we should and should not know. A view that we have ethical, that is to say moral, obligations to respect such limits—to not be too bossy in our interpretative practices, to respect the imaginative capacity of others, to know when to stop (see Webster 2019).

We go a long way as anthropologists, as fellow human beings, by not trying to impose an overarching order on Navajo frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility—by trying, that is, *not* to solve Navajo philosophy (see Aberle 1961; Farella 1993; Faris 1990; see also Denetdale 2007; Lee 2014).¹⁴ This was a realization that Reichard (1945) made concerning Navajo recognition and respect for diversity (linguistic and otherwise), her mammoth *Navaho Religion* (1950) being more encyclopedia than grand overarching theory of something called “Navajo Religion.” One of the critiques that I have heard from Navajos of the work of Matthews (1995), Zolbrod (1984), and Witherspoon (1977) is that they posit an overarching unity where there is, in fact, diversity—diversity informed by contexts (see also Faris 1990 and 1994). There is simply no such thing, nor can there be, as “the Navajo Nightway” or “the Navajo origin narrative”—there are only, as Navajos have told me, particular instantiations in particular contexts (see

¹⁴ I borrow the phrase “frameworks of meaning and moral responsibility” from Rushforth and Chisholm (1991:4).

Wasson and Toelken 1998 on this point as well).¹⁵ This was, I should add, Farella's (1993) implicit critique of his earlier book *The Main Stalk* (1984).¹⁶

We do not, that is to say, translate cultures any more than we translate languages. What we do, hesitatingly and generously, if ever so incompletely, is to translate particular instantiations of cultures, of languages, of people—and those particularities allow us to say something not so particular. That is, they allow us to say something human, or, I would venture, something humane. Which is another way of saying something that Rex Lee Jim told me in October of 2000, standing outside in the cool evening, at the overlook at Tsegi at Canyon de Chelly National Monument on the Navajo Nation (I've presented the transcript based on pause structuring to highlight something of the cadence; see also Webster 2018):

The more and more genuinely Navajo I become
 People like my work more
 Even though they're not Navajos
 And I've come to the realization
 That in doing that
 I become more and more human

The question that lingers is not what makes us human, but rather, and more urgently, how do we become more human.

It is my view—informed by Toelken and Navajos that I have worked with over the years—that the task of the anthropologist, the task of ethnopoetics, is not to explain Navajo verbal art, to pin it down, but rather—as I have tried to do here and elsewhere—to place it within a particular Navajo interpretative framework, to respect that framework of meaning and moral responsibility as well; to not, that is, say too much (Webster 2018 and 2019). Here I cannot help but recall the caution found in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* about Saint John's inability to not say too much (1968:97):¹⁷

It was that, I think, that old Saint John had in mind when he said, "In the beginning was the Word. . . ." But he went on. He went on to lay a scheme about the Word. He could find no satisfaction in the simple fact that the Word *was*; he had to account for it, not in terms of that sudden and profound insight, which must have devastated him at once, but in terms of the moment afterward, which was irrelevant and remote; not in terms of his imagination, but only in terms of his prejudice.

¹⁵ Zolbrod (1984:19) is certainly aware of this limitation as well.

¹⁶ As an interesting aside, I have often heard anthropologists recommend Farella's *The Main Stalk* to those interested in Navajo philosophy; I have not heard them recommend Farella's later *The Wind in the Jar*, which calls into question the very foundation of his earlier book. *The Main Stalk* fits a particular anthropological expectation, less so *The Wind in the Jar*.

¹⁷ Momaday's novel makes use of Navajo verbal art. The title is an intertextual reference to Navajo verbal artistic traditions and to the translation work of Washington Matthews (1994:269-75).

We must be careful with our prejudices. Careful, that is, in learning to be satisfied. That's a lesson, I think, Watchman might well have understood.

Epilogue

Returning now to my commonplace book, let me give the last word, not to Watchman or Toelken—though I should—but rather to Italo Calvino and his concern with the fundamental quality of *quickness* in literature—of which, I think, Watchman has taught us something (1988:54):

A writer's work has to take account of many rhythms: Vulcan's and Mercury's, a message of urgency obtained by dint of patient and meticulous adjustments and an intuition so instantaneous that, when formulated, it acquires the finality of something that could never have been otherwise. But it is also the rhythm of time that passes with no other aim than to let feelings and thoughts settle down, mature, and shed all impatience or ephemeral contingency.

We know only as we can.

The University of Texas at Austin

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