Black Elk Speaks (and so does John Neihardt) An Intercultural Relationship

Jennifer Folkers
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses

Part of the Communication Commons

Recommended Citation
Folkers, Jennifer, "Black Elk Speaks (and so does John Neihardt) An Intercultural Relationship" (1994).
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses/476

Available by permission of the author. Reproduction or retransmission of this material in any form is prohibited without expressed written permission of the author.
Black Elk Speaks
(and so does John Neihardt)

An Intercultural Relationship

by
Jennifer Morrison Folkers
Project Title:

Black Elk Speaks (and so does John Neihardt)
An Intercultural Relationship

Approved by:

Catherine Hall-Palczewski:
Associate Professor of Communication

Jeanmarie Cook:
Associate Professor of Communication

Jill Farry:
Director, Liberal Studies

Jill Farry:
Director, Liberal Studies

Margaret Cook:
Director, Honors Thesis Program

Mark Thamert:
Director, Honors Program
Black Elk Speaks
(and so does John Neihardt)

An Intercultural Relationship

A THESIS
The Honors Program
College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment
of
the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"
and the Degree Bachelor of Arts
in Liberal Studies

by
Jennifer Morrison Folkers
May 1994
# Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND ................................................. 1
CULTURAL DISCONTINUITIES AND FRAGMENTATION ..................... 10
ROMANTIC UNITY ............................................................... 20
CONCLUSION ................................................................. 31
BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................... 35
And so it was all over.

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.

*Black Elk Speaks*, John G. Neihardt

*Black Elk Speaks* was published in 1932 by John G. Neihardt after he had conducted a series of interviews with Nicolas Black Elk the previous year. As the title suggests, the text originated from Black Elk's oral storytelling about his visions and memories as an Oglala Lakota Medicine Man. Neihardt transcribed the interview material relatively accurately but made some alterations.

Despite Neihardt's attempts at cultural accuracy, the most quoted parts of the book are passages Neihardt created or altered. The above citation is perhaps the most quoted part of *Black Elk Speaks* (Gravely 8) and it is one Neihardt wrote himself. "It was all over," the citation claims. Little hope remains for regaining Native American cultural unity, for "the sacred tree is dead." While the passage represents the poetic quality of Neihardt's writing, which is respected by both Euro-Americans and Native Americans because of its artistic beauty and its universality, it also forms the cornerstone for the debate about the cultural integrity of *Black Elk Speaks*. This
section of the text, as well as others, creates a sense of a terminal ending for Black Elk's people.

Black Elk's words were more circular in meaning. About the sacred tree, Black Elk said:

In setting me at the center of the earth and showing me all the good things that were to be my people's and now my people are in despair and I will thus send a voice again. You have set me here and made me behold all things, and at this very place, the center of the earth, you have promised to set the tree that was to bloom. But I have fallen away thus causing the tree never to bloom again; but there may be a root that is still alive, and give this root strength and moisture of your good things that you have given to us people and through all the powers of the four quarters, the mother earth and the four-leggeds of the earth and the wings of the air through whom we should send up our sighs and voices. May you behold them and also behold me and trust me and hear me, O Great Spirit, my Grandfather. (DeMallie 295-297)¹

By including the live root in his recollection, we see that Black Elk created a picture different from Neihardt's dead sacred tree. Black Elk's sacred tree is still partially alive. Hope remains.

The passage cited above was not the only alteration to Black Elk's story. In the book, The Sixth Grandfather, historian Raymond J. DeMallie compares Black Elk Speaks and the original interview notes. This comparison reveals material omitted and material added to the Black Elk interviews.

Excluded from the text were many specific details that "failed to advance the

¹Raymond DeMallie is a historian who wrote the book The Sixth Grandfather which uses the original steno-notes to create a more accurate rendition of Black Elk's story. By using letters and other historographical proof, he intensively explores Black Elk's life, Neihardt's reasons for using Black Elk's story, and the relationship between the two men.
narrative," like Black Elk's Christianity and specific details from some of the rituals (DeMallie 77). Passages added to the book include:

... information of Crazy Horse (Black Elk Speaks, pp. 84-87), the Reynolds fight (p. 91), the sun dance on the Rosebud (96-98), Gall at the Custer Battle (110), and details concerning the winter of 1876-77 and the death of Crazy Horse (136-47). In addition, the book's three introductory paragraphs (pp. 1-2) and the three concluding paragraphs (276) were composed by Neihardt as expressions of Black Elk's thoughts. (DeMallie 77)

Ironically, of the 270 pages in the text, these 50 pages (not representative of Black Elk's direct words) are among the most frequently quoted from Black Elk Speaks (DeMallie 77). This brings to question the possibly changed cultural meaning of the text.

Although the written transcripts of the oral stories can be seen as a preservation of Native traditions, the transcription of those stories also has a limiting effect on the tradition of storytelling and on the stories themselves. Black Elk Speaks, for example, tells the story of a Oglala Lakota medicine man's life, focusing around his vision to create a spiritual center for his tribe. Neihardt wrote the story in the first person so that it seems that Black Elk wrote the book himself. Because of the autobiographical tone of the book, it is important that readers have a clear understanding of the bicultural nature of the book--especially given the manifestations of cultural differences in regard to the concept of time.

\[2\text{Indeed, part of the popularity of Black Elk Speaks within the dominant discourse has been the perceived preservation of the Lakota religious culture for future generations.}\]
Undeniably, the relationship between the writer and speaker of *Black Elk Speaks* is a complicated one. In 1930, Neihardt, a "poet laureate of Nebraska" (DeMallie 26), traveled to the Pine Ridge reservation to do preliminary writing of the last volume of *Cycle of the West*, an epic poem about Native American life. Traveling with his interpreter, Emil Afraid of Hawk, Neihardt hoped to talk to Black Elk about the ghost dance religion. Neihardt knew no Lakota and Black Elk knew no English.⁴

In *Black Elk*, Neihardt discovered more than a story about the ghost dance religion; he discovered a religious man with whom he felt a deep spiritual connection. So he wrote to his publisher and requested time and money to interview Black Elk for a more detailed story of his life. To write *Black Elk Speaks*, Neihardt listened to Nicholas Black Elk tell the stories of his life as Black Elk's son Benjamin interpreted. The communication system was something like this: Nicholas Black Elk told the stories, Benjamin Black Elk translated, Neihardt's daughter Enid took stenographer's notes of the translated stories, and Neihardt later wrote from and edited those notes to create *Black Elk Speaks*. In an interview in 1971, Neihardt reflected on this process:

*Black Elk Speaks is a work of art with two collaborators, the chief one being Black Elk...* At times considerable editing was necessary, but it was always worth the editing. The beginning and ending are mine; they are what he would have said if he had been able. At times I changed a word, a sentence, sometimes

⁴Although Black Elk learned some English when he traveled with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, he had forgotten it by the time Neihardt came to talk to him 41 years later.
created a paragraph. And the translation—or rather the transformation—of what was given me was expressed so that it could be understood by the white world. (Iverson 107)

From the statement above, we can see that Neihardt made some assumptions about Black Elk and made changes in the storyline according to those assumptions and according to the goal to "be understood by the white world."

When an author makes changes in the original text as Neihardt does with Black Elk Speaks, the relationship between writer and speaker becomes especially complicated because of cultural differences. From one perspective the liberties that Neihardt took with Black Elk's story were both linguistically and culturally inappropriate. Native American literature scholar and author Paula Gunn Allen reasons that difficulty arises in translation not only because of the difference of words, but also because of the differences between cultures in perceptual and contextual meaning (86). Translation, being perceptual as well as contextual, causes the meaning of the text to be changed in translation.

In Black Elk Speaks, a major and problematic cultural difference is the cultural concept of time. When Neihardt transformed the text "so that it could be understood by the white world," he may have radically altered its spoken meaning. In Black Elk Speaks, the text allows the Euro-American reader to remain in the traditional linear conception of time because it linearly ends the Native American culture at Wounded Knee in 1891. A Native American concept of time, being more circular, would not have created such a clear
ending of the culture. In Black Elk's words, even if the Native American way of
life had been radically altered by the Wounded Knee massacre, the root of the
sacred tree remained. In this perspective, even a radical cultural change in a
Native American culture does not kill it.

Randall A. Lake, in his article "Between Myth and History: Enacting
Time in Native American Protest Rhetoric," argues that the application of Euro-
American linear time to represent Native American cyclical time consigns
Native Americans to the past. "And in consigning Native Americans to the
past," Lake contends, "it sentenced them to a metaphoric and literal death"
(127). Lake supports his claim with a statement written by Vine Deloria Jr. in
his book God is Red: Most Americans believe the problems of native tribes to
be "facts of American history, not problems of the present" (Quoted in Lake
128). This problem is symptomatic of a juxtaposition of linear time onto
circular time. Because of the Native American concept of cyclical time, many
Native Americans expect continuation while the dominant culture searches for
definite endings and deaths.

By temporally manipulating the text, Neihardt creates a romantic fatalism
that sentences the Native American tradition to death at Wounded Knee.
Although the title of the book would lead us to believe that Neihardt's intention
with Black Elk Speaks was to represent Black Elk's story with literal and
cultural accuracy, his additions to the beginning and ending of the book affix a
Euro-American temporal dimension to the story.
By concluding that the Native American cultural unity, the sacred hoop, was destroyed by the Battle at Wounded Knee, Neihardt relegates Native American culture to the past. He gives the story of Black Elk and the Native American tradition the same sense of finality that Euro-American dominant culture imposes on Native Americans (Lake, 1991). David Murray, ethnolinguist and author of *Forked Tongues*, describes how the dominant culture imagines Native American peoples in the media. It transforms the Native American image from the original image of "independent, alien and, therefore, profoundly threatening figures during the nineteenth century to defeated, anachronistic survivors" (70). The new picture of defeated Native Americans provided "material for the exercise of suitable white emotions, whether the frisson of horror or idealized nostalgia or pity" (70). Neihardt, then, apparently does not challenge the dominant culture's stereotyped conception that Native American people only existed in the past.

Even today, popular culture maintains the romanticized image of a once great, now dead Native American people. *Dances With Wolves* is one powerful example of this treatment of Native Americans in the United States media. The popular 1991 movie ends with a proclamation similar to Neihardt's:

Thirteen years later, their homes destroyed, their buffalo gone, the last band of Sioux submitted to white authority at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. The great horse culture of the plains was gone and the American frontier was soon to pass into history.

Interestingly enough, the tribe about which this quotation speaks is the same
tribe from which Black Elk comes.

Perhaps the still-popular idea that the Native American culture is extinct survives because it seems convincing to Western logic. It temporally separates the Native American people from those in the dominant culture by putting them "back then, when the buffalo roamed" while the dominant culture exists in the "modern-day." In the dominant culture's conception, the idea that Native American people are part of a history that has "passed away" places them dangerously close to extinction.

But Black Elk Speaks is more than a text written by a Euro-American for the dominant culture. Black Elk Speaks is an intercultural document because of the 250 pages that are in the translated words of Nicolas Black Elk. Also, despite its cultural transgressions, both Euro-Americans and Native Americans consider it to be an appropriate use of Black Elk's story. Also, Black Elk Speaks in many ways is an extension of autobiography—especially because it is written in first person. Drawing on the work of Arnold Krupat's article "For Those Who Come After: a Study of Native American Autobiography," Murray argues that "'Indian autobiography' should apply specifically to those texts which exhibit 'bicentral composite composition'" (68).

In this sense, a Native American text that is bicentral in composition should be viewed as something that is different in form rather than "corrupted or inferior" (Murray 68). The text is an autobiographic, or first person representation, of the relationship between the writer and the speaker. It can
be seen as an accurate representation of the cultural limitations and possibilities inherent whenever two different cultures meet (Murray 68).

Black Elk Speaks is representative of the literary trend in which a Euro-American editor and a Native American storyteller create an "autobiography" accepted and understood by popular culture. Although as Murray claims, most Native American autobiographies have been a "response to a white initiative" (68) and are often written with the writer's intentions in mind rather than the speaker's, the story maintains much of its Native American cultural significance. The validity of the Black Elk Speaks as a purely Native American text is limited because of the cultural biases of the author. Instead, Black Elk Speaks is about both Oglala medicine man Nicholas Black Elk and the writer John G. Neihardt.

The validity of such "autobiographical" texts is questionable, and Black Elk Speaks is constrained by the complication of ethnic representation and accuracy. The questions surrounding the validity of the book are exemplified by the modernist/postmodernist paradigms which have typically been polarized (Murray 1989). Murray describes the development of the dominant cultural paradigm from the "Enlightenment universalist assumptions about a common origin for [hu]mankind" that eventually gave way to "emphasis on racial differences" (15). According to Murray, the seemingly polar positions that have developed in this debate echo those of modernism and postmodernism,
respectively the romantic idea of the unity of all people vs. the explicit pragmatism of cultural discontinuities and fragmentation.

This thesis reviews each of these two positions explicitly, using the example of Black Elk Speaks. I begin with the most recent paradigm: the exploration of cultural discontinuities as an ideal in the interpretation of Neihardt's editing of Black Elk's story. Then examine the interpretation of the text as an extension of the romantic ideal of human unity. Neither of the interpretations stands on its own, however. The dichotomy between attempting to restore lost unities and attempting to exploit cultural discontinuities must be abandoned in order to become a more polycentric community.4

CULTURAL DISCONTINUITIES AND FRAGMENTATION

The ideal of cultural purity and distinct ethnic division is not new to members of my generation. Respect of cultural differences being the underlying goal, our academic world has been filled with rallying cries for cultural pluralism and multicultural education. In this environment, Black Elk Speaks can be viewed as representative of the dialogue between the dominant Euro-American culture and non-dominant cultures in the United States. In this conversation, accurate cultural representation is believed to be one of the most important factors in the creation of cultural survival. Representation of culture

4Polycentrism, or many centeredness, is an acceptance of many different cultural styles within one community, is the underlying goal of a movement to gain cultural acceptance and understand across cultural boundaries. Ideally, a polycentric community would consist of different cultural centers ("sacred trees"), eliminating the possibility of one culture having dominance over others.
ideally becomes a process of self discovery for the speaker, or a process of empowerment for a non-dominant cultural group. Spokespeople such as Neihardt who are not a part of the culture take the risk of misinterpretation. Murray warns of the complexity in representing a culture other than one's own. One possible danger of representing another culture is to "... deal with the other as a creation of [Euro-American dominant] culture" (3). The problem of ethnocentrism becomes multifaceted when a member of the dominant culture tries to represent another culture because the dominant culture constantly pressures the co-culture to function within it and often-times a person from the dominant culture will not recognize his or her perceptions as culturally limited.

Murray explains that the colonization of the United States formed the relationship of dominance and subordinance between the dominant culture and the Native American cultures. The translation between the two cultures has typically followed the same pattern:

In a situation of mutual agreement and equality of power, adaptation and translation can be a two-way process. In a situation of dominance, the cultural translation is all one-way, and the penalty to the subordinate group for not adapting to the demands of the dominant group is to cease to exist. (Murray 6)

Murray asserts that the balance between cultural survival and assimilation is fragile in a system of dominance.

Because it controls imagery, the dominant culture receives an image of Native Americans fitted to its tastes. *Black Elk Speaks* manages to represent
the Native American people in a palatable way by creating a romantic image of Native American history and ignoring present and future implications, but at what cost? Because Neihardt's role in the creation of the book was made inconsequential, the dominant Euro-American culture is given the impression that all of the text is in Black Elk's own words. Murray explains this phenomenon by saying: "Knowledge of the process of this translation [from a non-dominant culture by the dominant culture], though, must be repressed by the dominant side, in favour of a reassuring image of mutual intelligibility which does not register as significant who has had to 'translate'"(6). In the worst case scenario, the reader may become convinced that there has been no translation.

Within that conception of the limitations of cultural understanding, a writer becomes inextricably tied to her or his work, and the cultural limitation of context must always be recognized. Neihardt, in attempting to present himself as the perfect medium through which Black Elk's story can be told, brings his own instrumental intentionality and cultural background into Black Elk's story. In other words, Neihardt had a specific audience-oriented goal, and he used communicative strategy to reach that goal. One of the ways Neihardt makes Black Elk Speaks convincing was the use of the first person to tell Black Elk's story. This way, the reader is convinced that it is Black Elk speaking, not Neihardt interpreting.
Iverson states that "... so skillful is Neihardt's writing that few readers remember that it is Neihardt recounting what he has been told" (107). Black Elk Speaks is written as though it was from the perspective of a Native American man. One of the lines of the text, for example, is "I was ten years old that winter, and that was the first time I ever saw a Wasichu [a white man]" (62). This line, and many others, make it seem as though the text is told in a perspective other than that of the dominant culture.

Iverson reminds us that however convincing Neihardt has been, "Neihardt was more than a translator or recording secretary" (107). By adding the first and last few paragraphs to the original interview notes, Neihardt took a more active authorship role. He placed his own cultural reality into Black Elk Speaks, claiming that the Native American culture is dead ("There is no center any longer, the sacred tree is dead.") even though Black Elk did not make that claim. By adding his own temporal reality, Neihardt created a text dynamically aimed towards his own dominant culture that shared his conception of time.

Black Elk Speaks is but one example of the popular misunderstanding of the bicultural content of texts which causes Native American storytellers to be subjected to a system of dominance. In the book Native American Women Telling Their Lives, the authors describe the possible loss of power that Native American people may experience when their stories are translated or analyzed by a different and dominant culture:

There is obvious biculturation today, but it is a biculturation that is not new, a dilemma that has existed from the moment of first
contact. When the first Indian women began allowing the stories of their lives to be committed to paper, to be edited and analyzed by those from another culture who did not understand the taboos, the rituals, or the roles, the differences in culture became apparent. (133)

The biculturation of Native American texts to which the above citation refers is a form of acculturation. It is a cultural compromise by the writer of the text to create a text more understandable by the dominant audience at the cost of minimizing the Native American cultures’ distinctiveness. The tension created by a literary tradition that must cater to a more universal audience pulls Native American texts into a precarious position. By taking the stories of these women and putting them into a different context, Euro-American editors and critics may sap away the cultural strength, uniqueness and embeddedness of their stories. By targeting the dominant culture, editors strip Native texts of the relevance for Native American cultures themselves.

The perceived division along ethnic lines (especially between the dominant culture and non-dominant groups) sometimes causes readers’ mistrust of bicultural texts such as Black Elk Speaks. David Brumble, author of many books investigating the concept of Native American autobiography, represents one of the most extreme examples of this mistrust. He believes that Neihardt exploited Black Elk by taking his story to gain personal fame. In Brattle’s perspectives and ones like his, the appropriation of another’s story is always suspect, especially when the writer is a member of the dominant culture. Stories interpreted and edited by members of the dominant culture are
especially suspect because the dominant culture often does not have an understanding of the acculturation process. Members of the dominant culture have never had to confront acculturation because their culture is the most visible. Because a member of the dominant culture interpreted and edited the story of marginalized person, the difficulties magnify.

If not given the proper tools to identify intercultural distinctions, readers from the editor's own culture often will not be able to divide her or his own culture from that of the storyteller. This is because we are all tied to our cultural understandings. One of the ways this is manifested is in language. According to one anti-universalist theory about language, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language plays a large role in the "totality of culture" (Hoijer 194) and can not be isolated and understood across cultural boundaries. Murray also emphasizes that we are products of our own cultural understandings and language. He refers to cultural "frisson," which conveys the complexity of relating to a cultural voice outside of our own. Frisson occurs when we realize that we are trapped in a language and cultural knowledge and then realize another person is beyond our capacity to understand (Murray 10).

It seems, however, that Neihardt did not experience frisson. Instead of being acutely aware of cultural differences between Oglala culture and Euro-American culture, Neihardt's work was very much focused on the elimination of the cultural boundaries between Native Americans and the dominant culture. One of the ways that Neihardt aspired to cross cultural boundaries was to
develop a basic human element in the work in order to create a greater empathy among Euro-Americans towards Native Americans. He attempted this by including human and personable descriptions in the text. The text begins: "My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life..." (1). This style was consistent with Neihardt's work. Raymond J. DeMallie, author of "Lakota Legacy," claims that Neihardt's other works as well as Black Elk Speaks, carry the theme of the unity of the human spirit, trying to overcome "the petty differences that separate Indians from whites" (126, emphasis added).

Neihardt tried to transcend cultural distinction rather than confront it. In doing this, he may have neglected awareness of his own cultural limitations, or he may have minimized real and important cultural differences between him and Black Elk.

Once the empathetic relationship is established, Neihardt told the story in a way that challenged the dominant culture's limited perception of history. He attempted to do this by using the voice of Black Elk to evaluate the historic relationship between the dominant culture and the Oglala Sioux. By including "Black Elk's" accounts of famous battles like Custer's Last Stand (chapter 9), and by relaying Native American humanness through Black Elk's stories of everyday life and religious rituals throughout the book, he challenged the previously limited popular conception of the historical relationship between the Euro-Americans in the U.S.

\footnote{Actually the section in the book about Custer's Last Stand and some other famous battles were additions from Neihardt's other research.}
One of the ways Neihardt created an image of Native American humanness was by relating Black Elk’s story about his family. In the book, Black Elk describes the way he got his name from his father and grandfather. He gave his parents and grandparents names, which personalizes them: "My mother’s name was White Cow Sees; her father was called Refuse-to-Go, and her mother, Plenty Eagle Feathers" (7). He also went beyond just naming by personalizing his father:

"... I was three years old when my father’s right leg was broken in the Battle of the Hundred Slain [known among the dominant culture as the Fetterman Fight]. From that wound he limped until the day he died, which was about the time when Big Foot’s band was butchered on Wounded Knee (1890). He is buried here in these hills. (7-8)

In the above citation, Neihardt used a part of Black Elk’s story that parallels the dominant culture’s vision of history because the dates are accurate. He also personalized Black Elk’s father and hinted of an intimate relationship between the two with Black Elk’s nostalgia about his death. ("He is buried here in these hills.")

Taking advantage of the empathy evoked through the Native American perspective, Neihardt ended the book with a recounting of Wounded Knee, where thousands of (now made human) people were killed by members of the dominant culture. According to Carl J. Starkoff, author of "Renewing the Sacred Hoop," Neihardt was a "tragedian describing for white Americans the death of their own innocence as noble seekers for truth and freedom" (159). According to Starkoff’s theory, Neihardt’s storytelling strategy presents the
death of Euro-America's innocence, not only because the colonial process harmed the Native American people, but more potently because of its effects on the dominant culture.

Thus, as a member of the dominant culture, Neihardt's own agenda, "expressed in a way that could be understood by the white world," reveals his reasons to end Black Elk Speaks formally with the Wounded Knee tragedy (Holler in Gravely 8). The tragedy connects white action to the "fall" of the Native American traditional life; it also presents the Native American people in sympathy-evoking terms. The fatalism attached by Neihardt in the last paragraph is instrumental in his representation of Native American experience because it eloquently achieves Neihardt's goals to tell the history of Native American people in the U.S. in a way which the dominant culture could understand.

Neihardt stepped beyond his role as editor or translator when he submitted Black Elk's story to his own instrumental intentionality. In "Nicolaus [sic.] Black Elk: Holy Man in History," Roger Dunsmore speculates that Black Elk's own intentionality would have been more consummatory\(^6\) in nature:

> The knowledge of the circle informs the act of giving away. So when Black Elk gives his vision away, he gives it back to the grandfather and the great men of his tribe. In the preface of the book we read: "What is good in this book is given back to the

---

\(^6\)Consummatory rhetoric occurs when the act of speaking is more important to the rhetor than an audience-oriented result. Ritual speech falls into this category because it is done in a formal sense to connect with a spiritual presence. For further discussion of consummatory rhetoric in contrast to instrumental rhetoric, see "Enacting Red Power: The Consummatory Function in Native American Protest Rhetoric" by Randall A. Lake.
grandfathers and to the great men of my people." Black Elk pays his debt in gratitude to the natural world and to the wise men of his tribe by giving the vision away, transmitting it in the only way left to him. The logic is simple, impeccable, and rooted in the deepest tradition of his own culture. Nicolaus Black Elk's life story and the wisdom of the traditional ways of the Oglala Sioux are not merely a romantic longing for a way of life that is gone. They are, above all, the story of a duty of all those who have received a great vision. (158)

Neihardt assigned his own instrumental intentions to the text and revised the story so that it would not only "share a great vision," but also create a specific, romanticized image of the relationship between the dominant society and Native American peoples. The ending effectively romanticizes Native Americans by making them figures of the past. In doing this, Neihardt simplifies the culture of Black Elk by appropriating it into his own reality.

Neihardt also contributes to his nearly "primitivist and romantic" (Starkloff 160) treatment of Black Elk's story when he neglects the issue of Black Elk's Christianity. There is room for mention of Black Elk's Christianity in the author's preface (xvi) when Neihardt remembers being warned that Black Elk may not speak to him. Neihardt never mentions that part of the reason Black Elk may not have spoken to him was because of his membership in the St. Joseph Society, which required that he give up Native ritual. Gravely posits that Black Elk's Christianity was an example of the adaptive nature of Native American tradition and acknowledges the possibilities for cultural survival through adaptation. The added dimension of cultural adaptability, Starkloff reminds us, would serve to break Neihardt's carefully constructed tone.
because it would give contemporality to Black Elk and the Native American tradition (160).

Perhaps a more accurate representation of Black Elk’s story would not have appealed so strongly to the dominant culture. In the view of cultural purism, however, loss of an extensive Euro-American audience would be an acceptable exchange for an accurate, living image of the Native American people. To uphold the fantasy that Neihardt was little more than a representative medium (as, according to Gravely, many popular readings of *Black Elk Speaks* do) is to inappropriately fuse Black Elk and Neihardt together. Gravely suggests that the introduction of texts such as *The Sixth Grandfather* and other variations of the Neihardt stenographer notes—as well as emerging scholarly investigation—make the fusion tendency of bicultural text something that can "only live at the level of artistic appreciation" (7).

**ROMANTIC UNITY**

The arguments that reject the authenticity of *Black Elk Speaks* as a Native American text are convincing. That is why I was surprised to find that many Native Americans of different tribal backgrounds are fully supportive of *Black Elk Speaks* and consider it a text representative of Native American life. In fact, one of the most famous Native American activists, Vine Deloria, Jr., wrote the introduction to the most recent edition of the book. In the introduction he writes that for young Native American people who are actively
searching for their roots, *Black Elk Speaks* "has become a North American bible for all tribes" (xiii). Native American support, however, relies on a distinctive reading of the text. While the dominant culture sees *Black Elk Speaks* as a vision of hopelessness and inducer of their guilt, Native American peoples use the book as a document of empowerment.

Indeed, the most important purpose of the book may have been this empowerment of Native Americans. Deloria describes the importance of *Black Elk Speaks* as follows:

> The most important aspect of the book, however, is not its effect on the non-Indian populace who wished to learn something of the belief of the Plains Indians but upon the contemporary generation of young Indians who have been aggressively searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality. To them, the book has become the bible of all tribes. They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life. . .(xiii)

So despite the cultural usurpation of the story by Neihardt, the book continues to provide a source of energy and religious guidance to many Native American people. It seems that John Neihardt's ending was premature. The book itself is the living root to the sacred tree.

Even Native American activists who aim towards the recognition of their own specific culture also use *Black Elk Speaks*. In some Native American communities the text is used to represent the relationship between the dominant culture and Native American cultures. According to Getchen M. Bataille, *Black Elk Speaks* was used by Native American activists during the
civil rights protests of the 1960s to help them explain their cultural position in the United States (136). Because of its focus on the relationship between the dominant culture and Native Americans, it helped the activists in "distinguishing themselves and their issues from the protests and issues of other racial minorities and was an easy reference to use when attempting to describe the life which Indians had lost because of government manipulation" (136). In this sense, Black Elk Speaks provided Native American activists with an important link between Native American people and the dominant culture.

According to many scholars and readers, Black Elk Speaks is a valuable text on two different levels. First, it represents the possibility of spiritual transcendence of cultural boundaries. Second, ironically, people who care about maintaining the specificity of Native American cultural traditions--including storytelling, use the bicultural text as a key to understanding Native American culture. Both of these views depend on the assumption that the survival of Native American culture relies on the transcendence of cultural boundaries.

Admirers of Neihardt's work, including Deloria and contemporary Native American author N. Scott Momaday, praise the spiritual connection between Black Elk and Neihardt that allowed them to transcend cultural differences in the production of the book. DeMallie reasons that Neihardt’s ability to recreate Black Elk’s story resulted from their intense personal interaction. He claims that the book’s success “is surely due in large part to Neihardt’s empathetic
appreciation of Black Elk's 'other worldliness'—a spiritual quality that set him apart. The mystic in Neihardt and the mystic Black Elk were kindred souls" (124). In his introduction to Black Elk Speaks, Deloria also speculates that the magical quality of the book manifests itself in the relationship between the two men:

Present debates center on the question of Neihardt's literary intrusions into Black Elk's system of beliefs and some scholars have said that the book reflects more of Neihardt than it does of Black Elk. It is, admittedly, difficult to discover if we are talking with Black Elk or John Neihardt, whether the vision is to be interpreted differently, and whether or not the positive emphasis which the book projects is not the optimism of two poets lost in the modern world and transforming drabness into an idealized world. (xiv)

Deloria goes on to explain that the relationship between Black Elk and Neihardt as two culturally different people is not important. Rather, the intensity of the relationship between Black Elk and Neihardt embodies the purpose of religious texts—to include all people. The possibility of intense interpersonal connection across cultural boundaries is reason by itself to create an important place for Black Elk Speaks as a transcultural text.

Because of the spiritual connection between Neihardt and Black Elk, Black Elk Speaks is a transcultural text while attempting to be as accurate as possible to the original story of Black Elk. As Gravely claims, "Black Elk Speaks may also be seen as a document of spiritual connection and of transcultural philosophy" (17). In one part of the book, Black Elk tells of a vision when he realizes that the vision itself became truth, transcending
particular reality:

I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here. (169)

In the light of this vision, the particular reality of cultural distinctiveness is trivial because no culture is closer to the light of the "real." All cultures, according to this part of Black Elk's spiritual awareness, are equally limited. In this sense, true reality is beyond our limited sense of it.

The spiritual theme and tone of Black Elk Speaks create a literary piece that is valuable because it transcends culture and concentrates on universal humanness. Deloria names Black Elk Speaks "a religious classic, perhaps the only religious classic of this century, [which] is a testimony indeed to the continuing strength of our species" (xi). He believes that the unity of theme allows the book to be popular even outside of the Northern Plains, or the Lakota tribe. It serves in humanity's search for "larger, more cosmic truths."

Deloria believes that the text aligns the Native American tradition with the great religions of our century. The tragic ending of the book, in this light, is incidental to the religious message which is applicable to all people. About the cultural disparities, Deloria writes:

Can it matter? The very nature of great religious teachings is that they encompass everyone who understands them and personalities become indistinguishable from the transcendent truth that is expressed. So let it be with Black Elk Speaks. That it speaks to us with simple and compelling language about an aspect of human experience and encourages us to emphasize the
best that dwells within us is sufficient. Black Elk and John Neihardt would probably nod affirmatively to that statement and continue their conversation. It is good. It is enough. (xiv)

The religiousness of Black Elk Speaks, in this case, is almost dependent on its simplistic representation of the Native American experience. It is almost tied to Neihardt’s attempts at making the text clear and emotionally pertinent to the dominant culture.

The simplicity of Black Elk Speaks relies on the conversational style of Black Elk who talks directly and concretely about his experiences. Even his religious visions are told in terms of strong colorful imagery that ties the religious to the material world. Part of Black Elk’s first vision (which occurred when he was nine) told of hard times for people if they were not to make the sacred tree bloom:

Now the earth was bright again as we rode. I could see the hills and valleys and the creeks and rivers passing under. We came above a place where three streams made a big one—a source of mighty waters—and something terrible was there. Flames were rising from the waters and in the flames a blue man lived. The dust was floating all about him in the air, the grass was short and withered, the trees were wilting, two-legged and four-legged beings lay there thin and panting, and wings too weak to fly. (32)

Black Elk’s use of the preterit verb tense and colorful words created a simple and compelling picture of his vision, and Neihardt’s translation effectively captured his imagery.

Neihardt was loyal to this spiritual connection and the general spirit of the text. Because of the spiritual connection between the two men, Momaday argues that Neihardt achieves the preservation of the essential spirit of Black
Elk's story. Neihardt preserved the story in a way which "brought extraordinary care, sympathy and dedication to his task of faithfully reproducing the essence of the speech" (Momaday 37). Preservation of the sounds and feeling of the oral tradition through rhythmic mimicry and pacing created "a masterpiece of transformation of the oral tradition from one language and culture into another without the loss of the essential spirit of the original narration" (Momaday 37). Momaday refers specifically to Neihardt's use of "lyrical names, the precise ordering of detail, the evocation of the great warrior ideal" which aid in bridging the "poem and the sing, between literature and legend, between the written tradition and the oral tradition" (37). The following paragraph is an example of his verse:

We stayed at the Soldiers' Town this time until the grass was good in the Moon When the Ponies Shed (May). Then my father told me we were going back to Crazy Horse and that we were going to have to fight from then on, because there was no other way to keep our country. He said that Red Cloud was a cheap man and wanted to sell the Black Hills to the Wasichus; that Spotted Tail and other chiefs were cheap men too, and that the Hang-Around-the-Fort people were all cheap and would stand up for the Wasichus. My aunt, who was living at the Soldiers' Town, must have felt the way we did, because when we were breaking camp she gave me a six-shooter like the soldiers had, and told me I was a man now. I was thirteen years old and not very big for my age, but I thought I should have to be a man anyway. We boys had practiced endurance, and we were all good riders, and I could shoot straight with either a bow or a gun. (92)

Within this paragraph, we can see the use of heroism and an ordered pattern of detail. This paragraph is one of many such rhythmic paragraphs in Black Elk Speaks.
The spiritual transcendence of *Black Elk Speaks* also makes it succeed as literature. To Momaday, for example, the importance of the text is its intrinsic human qualities. Although he does not say that *Black Elk Speaks* represents the Oglala people accurately, he claims *Black Elk Speaks* has value because it tells us of the intrinsic qualities of humankind. Within the text, he claims, we human beings are better able to see ourselves (32).

In Black Elk's "great vision," for example, we are forced to approach human existence and the existence of all life in interconnectedness:

> I looked ahead and saw the mountains there with rocks and forests on them, and from the mountains flashed all colors upward to the heavens. Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center from one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw it was holy. (42-43)

In comparison to this part of the text, Neihardt's limited cultural perspective is marginal to the text's importance. Momaday goes further to add that the importance of human reaction to the text is more meaningful than its cultural accuracy. To frame the book's "tragic turn" as the whole depiction of the book misses more important elements:

> ...the whole assumption of a profound and permanent dignity, an irreducible impression of the records of human history. We need not concern ourselves with labels here, any more than we need concern ourselves with the question of authorship or the quality of
translation or transcription. It is sufficient that *Black Elk Speaks* is an extraordinarily human document—and beyond that the record of a profoundly spiritual journey, the pilgrimage of a people towards their historical fulfillment and culmination, towards the accomplishment of a worthy destiny. (31)

Momaday's praise of the text revolves around its success in "bridging times, places, and cultures" (31). In a literary context, then, Neihardt's use of tragedy creates a literary masterpiece, and the quality of *Black Elk Speaks* is not eliminated because of his cultural insertions; rather, it is increased. Even DeMallie, who found the full interview conversation important enough to republish in a less edited version, still believes that *Black Elk Speaks* is an important literary text. About Neihardt he asserts, "His works are true literature, transcending the particular without destroying it" (110).

To better understand the cultural sanction of *Black Elk Speaks*, it is also necessary to look at the Native American storytelling tradition itself. Intrinsic to the tradition of Native American oral storytelling is the need for adaptability to keep the story relevant and alive to the community at all times. Adaptability is made possible because of a ritual and spiritual view of storytelling; for the essence of Native American storytelling allows for cultural transcendence in the spiritual sense if there is spiritual understanding and connection.

Momaday contends that the story of Black Elk was able to transcend the cultural barriers between him and Neihardt because Native American storytelling facilitates the meeting of the mind and spirit. In this sense, Momaday claims, "the oral tradition bridges the gulf between cultures and
establishes itself in its rightful [spiritual] place" (38). This spiritual place is beyond cultural definition. As Momaday says, "in the ultimate achievement of the storyteller's purpose, he [or she] projects his [or her] spirit into language and therefore beyond the limits of [her or] his time and place" (34). The story, then, is beyond even the storyteller's existence.

Also intrinsic to Native American storytelling is the need to pass the story on. According to Dunsmore, Black Elk's decision to share his story with a Euro-American editor did not marginalize the story; rather, it embodied his cultural vision. Dunsmore claims that Black Elk fulfills the power of his vision because he gives it to Neihardt:

As long as Black Elk held his vision close in the death-grip of his own cultural tradition its power mocked him just as it mocked him when he held it locked in his own private personality and made him think he was crazy. By letting it go its own way into the world Black Elk acknowledges that the vision has a life of its own. (156)

Black Elk's vision and his story must be transferred to another storyteller in order to maintain its life. As Dunsmore reminds us, Black Elk transmitted the story "in the only way left to him" (158), by giving it to someone with the capacity to write it down. In this sense, we can almost say that Black Elk used Neihardt to ease his burden as much as Neihardt used him to gain a story.

DeMallie recognizes the Native American tradition of adaptability of story when he writes, "For Black Elk, relating his vision to Neihardt was not merely a sharing, but an actual transfer" (119). Because the story was given to
Neihardt, the story becomes his. He had the right then (and perhaps even an obligation) to include part of himself in the story when he retold it. Momaday supports this idea when he says that Black Elk performed his function in the speaking—the telling of the story in the spiritual tradition of his culture. In this interaction, Neihardt becomes the keeper of the story and the next storyteller. What happens after the story is told is reflective of the story’s new owner and not of Black Elk. Neihardt’s ending to the text that claims the death of the sacred tree is reflective of Neihardt’s vision of Native Americans or even his vision of humanity’s loss of centeredness.

Deloria speculates that “Black Elk shared his visions with John Neihardt because he wished to pass along to future generations some of the reality of Oglala life and, one suspects, to share the burden of visions that remained unfulfilled with a compatible spirit” (xiii). The story was relayed to Neihardt because Black Elk trusted that the spiritual connection was strong enough for understanding. With the story, Neihardt was given the responsibility of fulfilling the vision in his own terms.

Many Native Americans seem to accept Neihardt’s appropriation of the story. Some Native Americans not only accept the book, but also use it as an example of the relationships between the dominant culture and a spiritual guide. To Native American people, Black Elk Speaks appears to be, in Deloria’s words, “good enough.”
CONCLUSION

Seemingly, *Black Elk Speaks* is torn between two polar positions. One position values cultural integrity and the other values human commonality. The difficulty in balancing the two is complicated in a situation of cultural dominance. It would seem that Neihardt’s editing causes *Black Elk Speaks* to become part of a larger tradition of the dominant cultures’ appropriation of Native American traditions for their own means. But, instead, with copyrights in 1932, 1959, 1961, 1972, and 1979, it continues to return to the surface of dominant discourse to describe the relationship between the dominant culture in the U.S. and Native American peoples. *Black Elk Speaks* has also become something spiritual. It represents a spirituality found in the careful creation of a story given to a new storyteller.

However, as a distinctly Native American text, *Black Elk Speaks* is limited. The primary problem is that Neihardt does not seem to confront, or even admit to having, his own cultural biases. Because Neihardt attempts to minimize his role in the production of the storyline, the reader is left with the belief that one of the great Native American religious men believes that the "sacred tree" of his Native American people "is dead" even though Black Elk (who apparently believes in a more cyclical temporal reality) makes no such claim. The notion that the sacred tree is dead only reinforces the dominant culture’s placement of Native Americans in the past and the dominant culture’s assumption that Native American traditions are dead.
As academics and students of the United States attempt to come to terms with a polycentric world instead of a monocentric, or uni-centered one, we will be confronted with the limitations of our own cultural understandings. We need to admit to those cultural limitations. Member of the branch of the United Nations set up to confront issues of culture and the head of the Office of Cultural Enrichment at St. John's University and the College of St. Benedict, Jose Bourget recommends that "We must start by seeing the self as a culture."

Recognizing that we must be aware of our own culture, we are able to read Black Elk Speaks as a bicultural text. As a bicultural text rather than as a Native American text, Black Elk Speaks is an example of the potential for intercultural communication and understanding. Despite, and perhaps because of, the juxtaposition of linear temporality onto Black Elk's story, the book has the capacity to teach a great deal about the relationship between the Euro-American dominant culture in the United States and the Native American culture. Indeed, it was the book I was given by my January term professors Jim Loftus and Jim Green in 1991 to understand the relationship between the dominant culture and the Lakota people of South Dakota.

Once we get beyond reducing the Native American experience to movies like Dances With Wolves and to books like Black Elk Speaks, members of the dominant culture stop leaving Native Americans behind in a sense of romantic nostalgia. Only outside of our own linear temporality (or in recognition of it) can we experience the sense of spiritual connection Neihardt
experienced in 1930.

Fortunately, Native American storytelling has become increasingly accessible to non-Native Americans, and the form of Native American storytelling has also become more varied. Leslie Marmon Silko is one of the most well known Native American authors who deals directly with the genre of oral storytelling transcribed into written texts. Her books *Ceremony* and, more directly, *Storytelling* add an interesting dimension to the dialogue about the validity of writing down other people’s stories. Other more well known authors such as Paula Ann Gunn, Louise Erdrich, and J. Scott Momaday are also part of the Native American voice. Because of the diversity of contemporary Native American texts, *Black Elk Speaks* becomes "the fragment of a much larger whole" (Momaday 34).

*Black Elk Speaks* does not need to remain torn between specific cultural integrity and human commonality. Instead, with recognition of its limitations, the book can become part of our understanding of intercultural relationship, and, for the dominant culture, part of our understanding of ourselves. After all, Black Elk himself saw the power of the relationship between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. For a better comprehension of the way Black Elk saw the interconnectedness of all life, perhaps we should turn again to a direct translation of his words:

And here at the center of the earth I am now [at] the same place that you have taken me and showed me all the good things of the earth that were to be my people’s. The four-leggeds and the wings of the air, through them, relative-like we should be, and
through them we should send up our voices to you, O Great Spirit! In setting me at the center of the earth and showing me all the good things that were to be my people's and now my people are in despair and I will thus send a voice again. You have set me here and made me behold all things, the good things, and at this very place, the center of the earth, you have promised to set the tree that was to bloom. But I have fallen away, thus creating the tree never to bloom again; but there may be a root that is still alive, and give this root strength and moisture of your good things that you have given to us people and through all the powers of the four quarters, the mother earth, and the four-leggeds of the earth and the wings of the air through whom we should send up our sighs and voices. May you behold them and also behold me and trust me and hear me, O Great Spirit, my Grandfather.
(DeMallie 295-296)
Bibliography


---- "The Rhetor as Dialectition in 'Last Chance for Survival.'" Communication Monographs. 53 (September, 1986) 201-220.


