Abstract

Why do some Navajo poets write poetry that describes “ugliness” on the Navajo Nation and what do they believe they are doing by writing that poetry? I examine those questions by focusing on Blackhorse Mitchell’s poem “Beauty of Navajoland.” I first discuss a performance of this poem to a Navajo and non-Navajo audience at Swarthmore College. I turn to discussions I had with Mitchell about his poetry and this poem. Contrary to an injunction on the Navajo Nation to dooajinida “don’t talk about it,” Mitchell and other Navajo poets argue that it is only by talking about it that the “ugliness” can be restored to “beauty.” We need to understand these terms as bivalent terms — the iconicity of linguistic forms across languages — that reside in two linguistic systems.

Keywords: Navajo; Navajo English; poetry; bivalency; language ideologies; ecological Indian stereotype

1. Introduction

Periodically, anthropologists (among others) become overly concerned with “spurious” debates (Nadasdy 2005: 321). One such debate has concerned the so-called validity of the “ecological Indian” stereotype and Native American relationships with the world or environment (see Krech 1999; Hunn et al. 2003; Harkin and Lewis 2007; Clemmer 2009; see also Harkin 2000, 2004; Thornton 2008; Cruikshank 1998, 2005; Basso 1996; Conklin and Graham...
Richard Clemmer (2009), for example, challenges Shepard Krech’s (1999) views of Native American conservation practices, arguing that Western Shoshone’s did engage in certain kinds of practices that could be understood as “conservation.” Clemmer also calls attention to the complexity of any term like “conservation.” Here Clemmer echoes Paul Nadasdy (2005), who has argued that judging Native Americans by Western standards and conceptions of “conservation,” “ecology” or “environmentalism,” can only be misleading. What Nadasdy (2005) is concerned with are local beliefs and values. Following Julie Cruikshank (2005), we can understand these local beliefs and values as “local knowledge.” In two influential works, Cruikshank (1998, 2005) investigates such local knowledge through the voices, the stories, of Indigenous women. While not explicitly linking her work with Joel Sherzer (1987, 1994) and Greg Urban’s (1991) discourse-centered approach to language and culture, Cruikshank’s work, by foregrounding the words of her consultants, clearly aligns with that perspective. More explicitly, it also aligns with the work of Dell Hymes (1981) and Dennis Tedlock (1983), both precursors to a discourse-centered approach (see Sherzer 1987).

In this paper, I take a discourse-centered approach to a performance by Blackhorse Mitchell of his poem “Beauty of Navajoland” at Swarthmore College in November of 2004. I try to understand the social work that Mitchell is doing through his performance (see Hymes 1981; Bauman 1986; Kroskrity 2009a, 2009b). I then connect his performance with discussions that I have had with Mitchell over the years about this poem. Here I suggest the ways that Mitchell is challenging certain stereotypes both of Navajos and of Navajoland. I also suggest the ways that Mitchell’s performance can be understood in light of more recent socially and politically conscious poetry and art performances by a group of Navajo poets and artists in the Shiprock, NM region. These artists and poets meant to bring awareness to the issues behind the movement Dooda Desert Rock. To that end, I also describe something of social and environmental milieu of the Shiprock region on the Navajo Nation. Rather than concern ourselves with the ways Westerners may imagine Native Americans as “ecological Indians” or not, my concern is with the ways Mitchell and other poets must engage certain stereotypes about Navajos and the Navajo homeland. This, I argue, fits a larger trend of Navajo poets engaging in social and political activism. Ultimately, I want to understand something of the work of Mitchell’s poem, based on local theories of poetry and language ideologies, in changing the current state of the Navajo Nation.

Following David Delgado Shorter’s (2009) recent book on performing Yaqui history, I will intersperse excerpts from three transcripts of conversations I had with Blackhorse Mitchell in the summer of 2008. I do this because, like Shorter (2009: 4), I hope to “write social science that emphasizes the intersubjective and social dynamic between me and community members” (see also
Tedlock and Mannheim 1995; Evers and Molina 1998; Denetdale 2007). In these excerpts, Mitchell explains, among other things, what his poem is about and what the motivation was for writing it. Mitchell also teases me about eating too much salad and for paying for translations (on anthropologists being the target of Navajo poets” teasing see Webster 2010a). These are not the only transcripts I have of my conversations with Mitchell about this poem, but these transcripts reveal some of the tensions in our conversations and in the ways that Mitchell repeatedly embeds the poem or parts of the poem in our discussions.

2. The stubborn particulars of voice

In my view, Nadasdy (2005) has provided one of the most useful critiques of many of the assumptions undergirding the literature on the stereotype of the “ecological Indian.” Nadasdy (2005: 293) argues that, “the stereotype denies the realities of native people’s lives, reducing the rich diversity of their beliefs, values, social relations, and practices to a one-dimensional caricature.” As Nadasdy (2005: 321) usefully notes, “notably lacking from such a standard explanation, however, is the perspective of First Nation people themselves.” Or what Julie Cruikshank (2005: 3) calls, “the stubborn particulars of voice.” Indeed, as Nadasdy (2005) notes, there is something about the whole “ecological Indian” debate that seems entirely unanthropological. Native Americans are to be judged by Western criteria, and when Native peoples do not match that criteria, it is, once again, their fault for failing to live up to our categories.

For Nadasdy,

Conservationists and mainstream environmentalists, then, tend to view the ecologically noble Indian as the original conservationist or as a natural anti-litter activist, while environmentalists with more radical goals see in the ecologically noble Indian a subversive figure, one who holds the philosophical keys to environmental revolution . . . they legitimize their own political positions by associating themselves with this mythic ecological figure — and all its associated symbolic capital. (Nadasdy 2005: 299–300)

Michael Harkin (2000, 2004) adds to this by noting the role of tourist expectations towards Native peoples. As Harkin notes (2000: 56), “The ecotourist discourse emphasizes the sanctity of natural areas . . . to the ecotourist, the presence of aboriginals signifies a link with romantic ideas of the past, of authentic traditional cultures existing in harmony with the landscape. This gaze is sympathetic, as long as the aboriginals conform to expectations.” In discussing the Ahousaht Trail, a trail created for ecotourists by the Ahousaht First Nation, Harkin notes,
The trail had not been well maintained . . . trash had been allowed to accumulate, especially in the section near the village . . . The essence of place making is dwelling in and knowing a place. Dwelling in includes disposing of trash and has for thousands of years. Middens of village sites in coastal British Columbia are often many meters deep. While it offends the aesthetics and environmental sensibilities of the hikers, it is integral to the human habitation of this environment. (Harkin 2004: 398–399)

Important in all of this is also a consideration of the kinds of languages that Native peoples employ to talk about the world. Nadasdy (2005: 303) argues that, “many Euro-North Americans also interpret First Nation people’s talk of “respect” to mean they have feelings of love and reverence for an environment that they regard as sacred and that the beliefs in turn keep them from exploiting and/or destroying it. But terms like sacred and reverence, like respect, are English terms used to approximate aboriginal concepts.” Harkin (2004: 397) makes a similar point about aboriginal activists’ uses of the term “sacred.” Nadasdy (2005: 303) then concludes, “it is dangerous to judge First Nation people’s behavior against the meanings of these English terms as generally accepted by Euro-Americans.” However, this position seems to take for granted that “sacred” and “respect,” are merely mainstream English terms. “Euro-Canadian Yukoners completely misunderstand what Yukon First Nation people mean by ‘respect’” (Nadasdy 2005: 302), I would argue, because they assume they are all speaking some normative mainstream English.

Cruikshank’s (2005) concern with local knowledge should also alert us to recognizing local languages. Local languages lack “mobility,” they do not travel well because they are constantly being evaluated by external assumptions (Blommaert 2005). Let me presage a later argument here. While there is much to commend in both Nadasdy (2005) and Harkin’s (2000, 2004) work, they both seem to assume there is only one English language. I would argue, instead, that terms like “respect” and “sacred” are at minimum bivalent (Woolard 1998). As Kathryn Woolard (1998: 7) states, “by bivalency, I mean the use by a bilingual of words or segments that could ‘belong’ equally, descriptively and even prescriptively, to both codes.” Here Woolard (1998: 5) follows the “Bakhtinian skepticism” concerning some “unitary language” as “bounded, discrete languages, or ‘codes’” (see also Webster 2010c). Bivalency reminds us that languages are permeable. “Sacred” and “respect” have been misrecognized — due to phonological iconicity (Samuels 2001; Webster 2009) — as coming from the same linguistic system, where mainstream English is that default language, and hence having near identical semantic meanings and histories. However, they reside in both Kluane English (a local language), for example, and mainstream English and have different historical trajectories (see Leap 1993 on American Indian Englishes). This is the risk of the iconicity across languages, that forms from one linguistic system can be misrecognized.
as coming from a different linguistic system. Sometimes this bivalency can be used in interlingual puns that challenge the stability of languages (Woolard 1998; Samuels 2004; Webster 2010c). Sometimes such bivalency is certainly strategic and meant to tap into mainstream stereotypes about aboriginals (Woolard 1998; Graham 2002; see also Gill 1987). However, and here I do echo Nadasdy (2005), it seems a mistake to reduce what Native peoples are doing and saying to only such an externally calculated view (see also Cruikshank 1998). Rather, we should also attempt to understand what Native peoples may mean when they make claims about, for example, “beauty” and “Mother Earth.”

Finally, Nadasdy (2005) and Harkin (2000) also appear to be relatively unconcerned in their discussions with local theories about language and what language use can do in and to the world. While Harkin (2000, 2004) cites Keith Basso’s work on Western Apache uses of place-names and narratives, he does not engage with Basso’s (1996: 82) concern with understanding Western Apache language ideologies. As Basso (1996: 82) argues, we, as anthropologists, need to “explore the culturally based assumptions and beliefs . . . the “linguistic ideology” with which persons . . . rationalize for themselves and explain to others what spoken words are capable of doing when used in certain ways” (see also Rumsey 1990). Here too I follow Paul Kroskrity (2004: 498) and understand language ideologies, as “beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social world” (for discussions of Navajo language ideologies see Field 2009; Webster 2009, 2010a; see also Peterson 2006). If some Western Apaches or some Navajos believe that certain kinds of talk can change the world — that there is a felt iconicity between form and affect — we should take account of that.

We are confronted by several questions then. First, how do outsiders — the state, environmentalists, tourists — understand indigenous claims about the world? Second, what are the ways Natives actively understand and talk about the world? Here there is ample literature (see Rushforth 1992, 1994; Conklin and Graham 1995; Conklin 1997; Cruikshank 1998; Povinelli 1995, 2002; Graham 2002; Denetdale 2007; Thornton 2008; Kroskrity 2009a among others). A related question, then, is what do Native people believe they are doing when they talk about the world in certain ways? To investigate that question, we must take Cruikshank’s (2005) concern with “the stubborn particulars of voice” seriously (see also Hymes 1996). Here I follow Hymes (1996) and Jan Blommaert (2005: 68) and understand voice as “the capacity to accomplish desired functions through language” (see also Kroskrity 2009b; for another view on voice see Hill 1995). I would add that voice is also about the felt iconicity between expressive forms and the expressive utterance as intertwined with the intimacies — the personal histories — of the linguistic individual (see Johnstone 1996; Samuels 2004; Webster 2010a, 2010c). And it is only in
recognizing local theories — language ideologies — of what people are doing with languages and stories that we can begin to recognize voice (Basso 1996; Hymes 1996; Blommaert 2005; Kroskrity 2009b).

3. Beauty of Navajoland

The scene is November 17, 2004, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. Blackhorse Mitchell stands before a packed audience of students and faculty from Swarthmore College. Ted Fernald, a linguistics professor who has been active with the Navajo Language Academy (see Fernald and Platero 2000), has invited Mitchell to perform at Swarthmore. It is night time. Mitchell is dressed in black pants, a black vest, and a white and black shirt. He has performed a number of songs for the audience. At the beginning of the performance that night, Mitchell is introduced by a young Navajo woman who is a student at Swarthmore College. Throughout the night Mitchell will address the young lady about the Navajo language and about the Reservation. Mitchell has traveled from his home on the Navajo Nation near the community of Shiprock, New Mexico. He has performed on and around the Navajo Nation a number of times. I video-taped him numerous times while I was doing fieldwork on the Navajo Nation in 2000–2001. Mitchell and Fernald have both invited me down from Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, where I am a postdoctoral fellow.

Blackhorse Mitchell is, perhaps, most famous for his book *Miracle Hill*; originally published in 1967 and reissued by the University of Arizona Press in 2004 (see also Zolbrod 2004; Webster 2010b). On the cover of both the 1967 edition and the reissued edition is an image (not the same image) of “Shiprock” Tsé Bit’á’i (winged rock), a rock formation that can be seen from miles away. Shiprock is not “Miracle Hill.” Mitchell’s book is well-known among Navajo artists and writers. At a poetry reading in Window Rock, Arizona, in July 2001, Navajo poet Luci Tapahonso singled out Mitchell’s book as being an early inspiration for her to become a writer. I have heard other poets make similar comments. In 2000–2001, the book was virtually impossible to locate on the Navajo Nation outside of the libraries at Window Rock and Tsaile, Arizona (where the main campus of Diné College is located). After the reissuing, the book was available during the summers of 2007 and 2008 at “ahwééh/gohwééh, a coffee shop in Shiprock, New Mexico run by Gloria Emerson that sold a number of books of poetry by Navajo authors and also sponsored poetry readings, when it was open. It has since closed. During the summers of 2007, 2008, and 2009 the reissued copy was also available for purchase at Cool Runnings, a music store in Window Rock, Arizona that also has produced two CDs of Mitchell’s music. Mitchell is also well-known on the Navajo Nation for his
“sheepherder songs” (songs that he has composed while watching his sheep). When I did my initial fieldwork on the Navajo Nation on the emergence of contemporary Navajo poetry, he had also begun to read his poetry again (he had published a number of poems in the late 1960s and early 1970s).

Mitchell has just finished singing his song “American Bar,” about a young Navajo man who is in love with a Navajo woman who runs off to the big city. When she comes back to the Southwest she tells the young man to meet her at the Greyhound station in Gallup, New Mexico. The young man finds her instead coming out of a local bar (the American Bar of the title) with two “cowboys” on her arms. The young man then drives back to the Navajo Nation alone. Mitchell has put down his drum and picked up a large black binder from the podium that contains much of his writings. This is not the first poem that Mitchell has read from the binder.

The transcript attempts to capture some of Mitchell’s performance features. Lines have been organized based on pause structure (Tedlock 1983). Quoted material, including the poem, have been indented. Caps indicate an increase in loudness. Other information concerning the performance is included in brackets.

[Before this comes “American Bar”]

BM: I’ll read to you
When people come to the Navajoland
They always say,
“My goodness [said in higher pitch]
your country is beautiful
the rocks
the mountains
man, you have a country.”
When I hear that
I always look on my own road
And what I see
I’m the opposite
So I wrote

Beauty of Navajoland
Plastic bags blowing in the wind
aluminum
beer cans shining in the country [nervous laughter from audience]
flies enjoying waste on huggies disposal
AND
an empty bottle of Zima ornaments the roadside

The beauty of Navajoland
little big trashes drifting in the gale of wind
run over dogs and coyotes
vultures feasting on deteriorating smell of meat
and the crows flying away with the eyes of the kill

“The beauty of Navajoland,”
you say
those polluted dark clouds are not the real clouds
the rivers and streams contaminated
by redneck piss and dungs
and uranium in the flowing innocent river

The beauty of Navajoland
bra strap
hanging on the roadside guide post
crucifix with plastic bouquet of flowers
standing and reminding in humiliations
and
coal stripping of Mother Earth
and flood of acid rain

is not the beauty of Navajoland
[applause]

that’s how I view Navajo Nation
there is no beauty

UNLESS they clean up [5 second pause]  
power plants and all the ugly filth
then I’ll be proud
but I’m not proud

I see all of this
I see my Navajo Nation people lecturing
they wear all these jewelry
turquoise
saying “Mother Earth”
And I would be laughing
I kinda look at myself
I’m not gonna come out here
Wearing all these

Except this watch [shows silver watch from under sleeve]
but I’m not gonna come over here
play a wild medicine man [makes motion up and down his chest of regalia]
with a lot of [leans forward as if weighed down by regalia]
walking around [hunched over] [audience laughter]
no, that’s not my style
I’d rather come over here
and be myself
[stands back up]
SO that’s what I’ve been working on
writing
[closes binder and takes it to podium]
the book title
[moves back towards audience]
doesn’t talk about beauty
just talks about the country
the land as it was
back in the
I would say
kinda like the late 40s
that’s what I grew out of
and that’s the what the book is about
[This is followed by Mitchell’s song “Brand new vehicle.”]

The title and recurrent refrain of Mitchell’s poem is clearly ironic. It is a form of “echoic mention” — here echoing and reversing the words of a tourist (Sperber and Wilson 1981; Hymes 1987). When Blackhorse Mitchell wrote this poem, he tells me, he intentionally centered it on the page so as to break from a practice he was taught at boarding school. Blackhorse Mitchell began writing poetry while he was in boarding school in the 1960s. Blackhorse Mitchell has written poetry in both Navajo and Navajo English (Webster 2010b; see also Bartelt 2001). Most Navajo poets write in English or Navajo English. Many Navajo poets do code-switch from English into Navajo in their poetry (Webster 2009). Some Navajo poets — Rex Lee Jim, Nia Francisco, Laura Tohe, and Blackhorse Mitchell — do write poetry entirely in Navajo. However, literacy in Navajo is still relatively uncommon among Navajos (see McLaughlin 1992). Poetry in English and Navajo English reaches both a wider audience of non-Navajos, but also a wider audience of Navajos as well. Few Navajo poets are full-time poets. Most have other jobs. Blackhorse Mitchell, for example, teaches high school.

The plural marking on dungs is an example of Navajo English, a local language. While some reviewers of Mitchell’s work have understood the use of a plural marking on dungs or sheeps or an alternation in tense markings as a “confused” use of some putative “standard” English (see Webster 2010b), Mitchell has explicitly stated, for example, that he prefers sheeps over sheep. Local languages like Navajo English are often stigmatized and devalued and then read as iconic of the “confused” nature of their speakers as well (see Webster 2010b; Blommaert 2005). Mitchell is quite aware of outside evaluations of his English as deficient, but for him sheeps simply makes more sense. In the transcripts we find that Mitchell consistently uses dungs, both in the performance in 2004 and in the conversations I had with him in 2008. It is also how
he has written it in the versions he has given me, first in 2004 and then again in 2008 and 2009.

In lines 2–14, Mitchell sets up the motivation for writing this poem. He explains, through the use of quoted speech, that, “when people come to the Navajoland” they often marvel at the “beauty” of the country. Mitchell’s poem is a challenge to the tourist view of the Navajoland. Instead, Mitchell describes the realities of the Navajo Nation as he “sees” them looking at the land around him. After line 17, there is a smattering of nervous laughter from the audience. Mitchell has told jokes that night and invited a faculty member (Ted Fernald) and a visiting linguistic anthropologist, as well as two ladies from the audience to dance, much to the amusement of the audience. The audience seems unsure of how to take this poem. Mitchell continues. After the applause at the end of the poem, he goes on to say in lines 41–42, “that’s how I view Navajo Nation, there is no beauty.” Mitchell then loudly announces, through his use of “unless” in line 43, that this could change. The change would come about if, and here Mitchell pauses mid-clause for five seconds between “clean up” and what it is he wants cleaned up. It is an uncomfortable pause because in line 44, Mitchell closes the clause by adding, “power plants and all the ugly filth.” He must make his point explicitly. In line 45, he notes that if such things are done, then he’ll be “proud.” In line 47, Mitchell switches to a discussion of certain “Navajo people lecturing” about “Mother Earth” (line 51). These Navajo people are what some Navajos see as stereotypical Navajos, Navajos covered in turquoise jewelry. Mitchell contrasts himself with those Navajos by pointing out that he is not covered in jewelry (save for his watch). Indeed, he adds a nice comic element in lines 58–60 where he gestures to his chest being covered with imaginary jewelry, so much jewelry that he stoops over as he speaks in lines 59–60. The audience laughs. Instead, Mitchell says as he stands back up, he will be himself (line 64). Certainly Mitchell’s use of “Mother Earth” can be seen as tapping into a set of expectations which he believes the audience may hold (Gill 1987), but it is simultaneously a critique of the use of “Mother Earth” by certain Navajos. Like Mitchell’s challenge of a tourist view of Navajoland, this too is a challenge to the expectations that the audience may have about Navajos and Navajoland.

In line 65 Mitchell puts an emphasis on “so,” usually a good indicator in my experiences watching Mitchell perform, that he is summarizing his previous comments and is about to change topics. Indeed, Mitchell notes that he has been writing (line 66). However, throughout the night Mitchell has also discussed his book _Miracle Hill_ (reissued that year by the University of Arizona Press). It is that book he then refers to in line 67. During line 66 he had taken the black binder with his poetry in it back to the podium and put it down. During line 67, he then moves back toward the audience. In lines 68–75, Mitchell wants to clarify that _Miracle Hill_ is not a book about “beauty.” His book is not
like the people who visit the Navajo Nation who are always talking about the “beauty of Navajoland.” Rather, his book “talks about the country/the land as it was” (lines 69–70). It does not create an idealized view of Navajoland. After line 75, Mitchell walks back to the podium to retrieve his drum. He will conclude the performance with his song “Brand new vehicle.” That song concerns how after you buy a new vehicle, you will have people wanting to be around you (see Mitchell 2006).

4. Navajo poetry as Hane’

One local theory of poetry, as expressed by Navajo poets like Rex Lee Jim and Blackhorse Mitchell, is that poetry functions to make you think, to reflect and that such reflection then should motivate one to proper behavior (see Webster 2006, 2009). Related to this is the view by some Navajos that proper language use can change the world (see Reichard 1944; Witherspoon 1977; McAllester 1980; Field and Blackhorse 2002). This is the creative power of language use (Reichard 1944; Witherspoon 1977). This is one of many language ideologies found on the Navajo Nation today (see Field 2009; Webster 2009).

Many Navajo poets have described contemporary poetry as a form of hane’ “story, narrative.” Indeed, many Navajo poets link their poetry through formal poetic devices with traditional Navajo narratives (see Webster 2004, 2009). There is a sense to hane’ that it must be publicly shared (see also Peterson 2006). Many Navajo poets mentioned as one central feature of contemporary Navajo poetry that it was meant to be shared (see Webster 2009). Among Navajos, narratives — from Mq’ii Jooldloshi Hane’ “stories of the trotting Coyote” to contemporary poetry — can be used as “indirect” forms of critique (see Toelken and Scott 1981).1 Indeed, there is also a subset genre of contemporary Navajo poetry that is based on Navajo Coyote stories (Webster 2004). One purpose of telling Coyote stories is to get people to think. W. W. Hill and Dorothy Hill (1945: 317) quote a Navajo consultant as explaining why Coyote stories were told as, “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.” As Barre Toelken (1987) has ably demonstrated, for many Navajos, Coyote stories are not merely for entertainment, but are about changing the world. In fact, Toelken and Scott (1981) and Toelken (1987) challenged the received view that Navajo Coyote stories were directed primarily toward children and served merely as entertainment. Toelken (1987) points out that such a view misses the importance that aesthetic practices have in bringing about change in the world (see also Reichard 1944; McAllester 1954, 1980; Field and Blackhorse 2002). Likewise, the use of stories to get people to “think” also resonates with a general Navajo ethos that I have heard, t’áá bi bee bôholníih or, in English, “it’s
up to her/him to decide” (see also Lamphere 1977). People should be allowed to make their own decisions and their own interpretations (see also Webster 2009).

5. Excerpt 1

July 9, 2008. This fragment of conversation occurs about mid-way through the recording. It is mid-afternoon and we have been talking about what poetry does and as is typical in our discussions about poetry, Mitchell focused in on a specific poem. In this case, that poem was “Beauty of Navajoland.” In the following transcripts, lines are organized based on pausing and marked with /. I do this not to argue that Mitchell speaks in poetry, but instead to suggest something of the cadence and rhythm of the conversation. Conversations take time. Caps again indicate loudness. : = lengthening. @ = laughter. Brackets again indicate relevant features of the conversation.

AU: you once said to give an imagination to someone/ an that’s/ so that’s

BM: I WANT people to really see it /like the beauty of Navajoland

AU: mmhmm

BM: you can go on the road/ an saw saw those things then/ I I want / I want somebody to laugh an say / “god damn it this guy’s r:ight”

AU: mmhmm

BM: not / just to say o:h:/ the WAY it’s written is awesome

AU: right

BM: that’s not / that’s /that’s not / THAT’s no good / I want uh people actually/ o:h look out there an say / “look at that dirty sky / oh Jesus I read that somewhere I think Blackhorse wrote it about it”/ OR AT LEAST somebody was standin out there an says / “I’m glad it’s raining” / an then they start scratchin

AU: hh

BM: and then they say “what’s wrong” and they might / maybe the doctor says /“you you should stay outta the rain because it had a lot a acid”

AU: hh hh

BM: I DON’T WANT my/ my poem to/ to be/ jus: /said / I want it proven sayin / it is true/ I want somebody ta go down tuh / San Juan River take their shoes off an / just swarm their feet around an then all of a sudden uh shit crosses the feet [2 sec pause]/ an say, “what is this/ there’s a lot a salad in it / I think it’s a white man’s”

AU: @@@ /a lot of salad in it

BM: y:eah
Blackhorse Mitchell’s Beauty of Navajoland

Excerpt 1 begins with my repetition of a turn-of-phrase that Mitchell and other Navajo poets have used, about “giving an imagination” through hane’. Mitchell stresses that in his poetry he wants people to “really see it.” Likewise, his poems are “true” and can be “proven” by observation. The conditions he describes in “Beauty of Navajoland” are a reality and if one can see these things — that is, imagine them — then “people should begin to think about” it. Following Scott Rushforth (1992, 1994) concerning Northern Athabaskan ways of knowing, Mitchell wants secondary epistemic knowledge — his poem — to be validated by primary epistemic knowledge — personal experience. Rather than treating the writing as merely “awesome,” Mitchell wants people to be motivated by his poetry to “see” and to “think.” That is, to recognize what is really going on around them. In fact, in another discussion about another poem, Mitchell chastises a former teacher for being overly impressed with grammatical structures and not in what he was trying to say (see Webster 2010b).
Mitchell contrasts himself both with slam poets and with another Native poet who is not a Navajo. This poet, according to Mitchell, has a confrontational style. Mitchell raises his voice when speaking like this poet. Note that Mitchell does not disagree with what that poet is saying about colonialism, but rather is concerned with what he perceives as that poet’s confrontational style. More than one Navajo poet has suggested that an overtly confrontational style is not the “Navajo way” (see also Lamphere 1977; Field 1998, 2001). Some Navajos that I have spoken with have evaluated certain poets negatively for what they see as an overtly confrontational style. Mitchell’s view on slam poetry is complicated because he often speaks with great appreciation for the slam poetry style of Navajo poet Zoey Benally (on Benally’s poetry see Wheeler 2008). Mitchell, for his part, prefers a less showy style.

6. Thinking, seeing, and listening

Navajos, like other Athabaskans (see Cruikshank 1998; Nevins 2004; Meek 2007), put a premium on proper “listening.” As Cruikshank (1998: 144) notes, “Indigenous storytelling assumes a relationship between speaker and listener. A listener becomes knowledgeable by hearing successive tellings of stories and may mull over, reinterpret, and absorb different meanings with each hearing.” When I asked Blackhorse Mitchell who was the audience for this poem, his response was, “anyone who could pick it up and listen.”

In an insightful discussion about Western Apache language ideologies, that is their views on the uses of language, Keith Basso (1996: 84) notes that, “Western Apache conceptions of language and thought are cast in pervasively visual terms. Every occasion of “speaking” (yałti”) provides tangible evidence of “thinking” (natsikeęs), and thinking occurs in the form of “pictures” (be’elzaahi) that persons “see” (yo’įį). Prompted by a desire to “display thinking” (nil’ί natsikeęs), speaking involves the use of language to “depict” (’e’ele’) and “convey” (yo’ááł) these images to members of an audience, such that they, on “hearing” (yínel’ί’i’) and “holding” (yotá’) the speaker’s words, can “view” (yínel’ί’) the images in their own mind.” Basso’s work, with the linguistically and culturally related Western Apache, echoes with the descriptions that Mitchell makes of what he is trying to do through his poetry. Many of my discussions with Mitchell are in “visual terms” (“look” and “see” recur throughout the transcripts).

Mitchell’s comments also resonate with the work of Gary Witherspoon (1977). As Witherspoon (1977: 32–33) points out, in a chapter on “Creating the World Through Language,” for some Navajos, “knowledge [ééhózin] is the inner form of thought [ntsáhákees], language [saad] is the inner form of speech [yáti’], . . . thought is the inner form of speech, [and] . . . knowledge is also the
inner form of language” (see also House 2002). For some Navajo poets, proper
or beautiful language use, that is poetry, can “stimulate thought,” as Rex Lee
Jim described it to me (Webster 2006: 44), or as Blackhorse Mitchell explained
to me in an interview I did with him February 17, 2001, “poetry should have
a rhythm, it should tell a story, it should make your reader really think, see
clearly what’s happening.” Jim, for example, suggested that his poem Tó Hááli
“Spring” (Jim 1998: 12–13), which concerns vulgar English graffiti and litter-
ing at an important place for Navajos, was an attempt to get Navajos to “think”
about what they were doing (see also Webster 2009). When Mitchell critiques
a former Anglo teacher of his, he describes her inability to understand one of
his early poems as her failure “to see what I was trying to say” (see Webster
2010b). When Mitchell explains what he wants his poetry to do he frames it
as getting people to “think” about what he is saying, so that they can “really
see” it.

In “seeing” things clearly, one can then be motivated to act or, as John
Farella (1984: 35) points out, in discussing Navajo philosophy, “if the mind
can be changed, the world changes.” Or as David McAllester (1954: 72) long
ago noted about Navajo aesthetics, “beauty is that which does something”; that
is, heal, protect, and sustain (see also Field and Blackhorse 2002).

7. Excerpt 2

July 9, 2008, it is evening, and Blackhorse Mitchell and I are sitting in his
home outside Shiprock, New Mexico. We are again talking about his poetry.
We have spoken on and off all day about his poetry. I am asking him what he
is trying to accomplish with his poetry. He begins to respond, I turn my digital
recorder on. Here is a fragment of that conversation.

BM: so it’s just like / the way I would write / the this is just one good
example/ an/ the only way I would write my poem is in the middle uh/ a chaos
AU: mm hmm
BM: meaning / I would find / uh people/ WHOLE LOT A people, not just
one
AU: mm hmm
BM: that’s/ the only way/ if I get bored/ if I get distract/ maybe at a
conference
AU: ah ha
BM: maybe at a gathering an: / it’s what people say/ it just so happened
that [clears throat]/ this [clears throat]/ lady was/ called in:/ to attend a writer’s
conference
AU: mm hmm
BM: [Community Name]
AU: okay
BM: an/she comes in/ an she stands there/ an she reads/ a couple of paper
I forgot the name a the lady/ she said / [2 sec pause] / “MY GOD/YOU NAVAJOS/ when I was coming in from/ Tuba City /OH MAN/ HOW beautiful your Navajoland is/ you got all that nice open country”/ and what was I thinkin/ I’m just sittin there I say/ “oh: my God/ what is she saying/ haven’t she looked around/ hasn’t she seen/ what’s/ along side of the highways/ oh Jesus/ what was she looking at/ WHERE WAS SHE LOOKIN”/and SO/my poem/ I went an put/ BEAUTY/of NAVAJOLAND/plastic bags/ blowing in the wind/ aluminium/ beer cans/ shining in the country/ flies: es enjoying WASTE on /Huggies disposals/ AND/an empty bottle of Zima ornaments/the road side/the BEAUTY a Navajoland /little a big trashes drifting in the gale of wind/run over dogs and coyotes: vultures: feasting on deteriorating smell a meat/AND/the crows /flying away with the eyes of the kill [2 sec pause] /“the beauty of NAVAJOland,”/ you: say:/ THOSE polluted dark clouds are not the real clouds/the rivers/ an streams contaminated/ by redneck piss and dungs/AND/uranium in the flowing innocent r:iver/the BEAUTY of Navajoland /bra: strap/hanging/on the road-side guide post /crucifix with plastic bouquet of FLOWERS/ STANDING an remi:nding in humiliations/AN /coal stripping of M:other Earth/an/ flood of acid rain/is not the beauty of /Navajoland
AU: ah
BM: that’s/ what I wrote
AU: can I have a copy of that?
BM: it’ll cost you
AU: that’s fine
BM: @@
AU: @@
BM: ANYWAY /THAT’s /what I WROTE/an that’s what I mean/if you/ look at this/ it’s something I see/that/people don’t see/so:/whoever said/the word beauty/ I go, “by golly if /there’s beauty on Navajoland/how come you/ you have this/we HAVE this”/is what I’m saying
AU: mm hmm
BM: an I was just hoping that/whoever: read this/an it’s true/I I:/I got real/ real:/I got to the grip/like/bra strap hangin on the roadside guide post would be:/I see that/eh ya you know guidepost and somebody thinks that’s/that’s something great to hang/somebody:/maybe they throw the poor/they use the old lady or:/screw for half of the night an then throw her bra strap up there/ Navajo/uh either the new Navajo is thinking ah that’s/that’s cool/to me that’s not cool/an then/[clears throat]/crucifix with plastic bouquet of flowers/ whenever somebody died along the roadside they put all a this/this decoration of plastic bouquets/and I don’t like that
AU: right
BM: I don’t like lookin at it/that’s not nice/they should put it/in a cemetery where it belongs
AU: mm hmm
BM: but/people don’t/why/why do we get in/into this band wagon/so:/ALL ALL a this /and then[@ /we/you find/council men/you find great people/they always stand there says/ “MOTHER EARTH”/ what did they know a Mo:ther Earth/you know/so:a lot a things that happen/a no nobody pays atten-tion ta /what Mother Earth wants/THAT’S/that’s why I wrote it like that I was/ mad/at that point

In Excerpt 2, Blackhorse Mitchell performs his poem “Beauty of Navajoland” for me during our interview. In many discussions, with many Navajo poets, they perform their poetry for me during our interviews (see Webster 2009, 2010b). Indeed, here Mitchell echoes some of the discussion he gave about the poem at Swarthmore College. Mitchell elaborates on the Anglo woman coming onto the Reservation and commenting on how “beautiful your Navajo land is.” His poem is then a response to this woman’s inability to “see” the realities of the Navajo Nation. As he explains, the realities are things the he sees, but that other “people don’t see.”

But if Mitchell is critiquing the Anglo woman for not really seeing Navajoland and rednecks for pissing in the San Juan River, he is also critiquing Navajos for doing “ugly” things. In the above excerpt he singles out Navajos for putting bra straps on guideposts, for leaving empty cans and bottles of beer after they have partied, and for putting up crucifixes with plastic flowers to commemorate an individual’s death. In another conversation, Mitchell describes all of these things as “ugly.” Mitchell also echoes his discussion from Swarthmore when he singles out various “great” people who talk about “Mother Earth” without really understanding what “Mother Earth wants.” He is aware of the strategic use of various bivalent terms like “Mother Earth” that will resonate with Anglo American outsiders and tourists.

8. From “Mother Earth” to Shitrock

Let me now add that some Navajos that I know, certainly not all, sometimes do talk of “Mother Earth.” As we see in the above transcript, Mitchell uses the term outside of the performance setting. Some Navajos that I have worked with have glossed the term Nahasdzáán as “Mother Earth.” They note that embedded within this term is asdzáán “woman.” Some Navajos refer to the “earth” as nihimá “our mother” or shimá “my mother.” Gary Witherspoon (1977: 91–94) documented such usage in the 1970s. Gladys Reichard (1950: 19) noted that,
“essential parts, as well as the earth itself, are called ‘our mother.’” As Witherspoon (1977: 92) describes, “a mother is one who gives and sustains life . . . and by both definitions the earth is a mother to the earth surface people [human beings].” Witherspoon (1977) challenges a view that sees the use of -má “mother” as a metaphorical extension when applied to the earth, sheep, cornfields, and mountains. Rather he argues that all share in the quality of “sustenance.” Here too, then, “mother” is bivalent in both mainstream English and Navajo English (in fact, the use of “mother” by Navajos can sometimes be confusing to those who expect it to map onto mainstream English uses of “mother”).

In the same interview, some Navajo poets will mock Navajo politicians’ uses of “Mother Earth” as a cynical ploy to tap into Euro-American stereotypes or that politicians use the phrase without an adequate understanding of what “Mother Earth” actually entails, and then point out, that, of course, “Navajos do believe in Mother Earth, we call the earth shimá or nihimá, you know. Nahasdzáán means Mother Earth.” For some Navajos, “Mother Earth” is a salient concept in Navajo English and linked to the Navajo language. In Rex Lee Jim’s poem “Tó Háálį́,” he translates the line Nahasdzáán shimá ha’níigo as “Earth, my mother” (Jim 1998: 12–13). I have heard Jim read this poem in Navajo to audiences primarily composed of Navajos (see Webster 2009).

Driving north from Window Rock, Arizona (the capital of the Navajo Nation) to Tsaile, Arizona, (site of the main campus of Diné College) one finds a number of homemade signs along the road imploring people to “keep the Navajo Nation beautiful.” These signs become less common the closer one gets to Shiprock, New Mexico (also the location of a satellite campus of Diné College). Mary Lawlor (2006: 58) notes the sign outside Window Rock that says, “Welcome to the Navajo Nation: Explore Scenic Parks.” The Navajo Nation does market itself as a tourist destination. On the Webpage for the Navajo Tourism Department (http://www.discovernavajo.com/) a film, Welcome to the Navajo Nation, describes the importance of “Mother Nature” to Navajos and highlights the scenic beauty of the Navajo Nation (last accessed 1/15/2010). Such an image is certainly crafted to entice non-Navajos to visit the Navajo Nation, but that is not the whole story. Regional Southwest magazines like Arizona Highways and New Mexico Magazine certainly play up the Navajo Nation as an enticing tourist attraction as well. Leah Dilworth (1996) has explored some of the history of the ways the Southwest and Navajos have been imagined. She notes the role of the Fred Harvey Company in constructing an aesthetic view of Navajos (see also Bsumek 2008; Mithlo 2008).

When I speak with tourists on the Navajo Nation, they tend to highlight a view of the Navajo Nation as “scenery.” Some lament the poverty. Letters to the editor in the Navajo Times occasionally include letters from tourists chas-
tising Navajos for not keeping the Reservation clean or not taking care of their
dogs. Sarah Krakoff (2008: 30) states that, “many non-Indian visitors to this
stark, high desert region are overwhelmed by the signs of third world poverty,
including roving stray dogs, roadside trash, alcoholic (and recently, metham-
ephedrine added) hitchhikers, and a landscape pocked marked by mining and
other forms of resource extraction.” Following Harkin (2000, 2004) and Na-
dasdy (2005), one can sense in Krakoff’s tone and in the letters that crop up in
the *Navajo Times* the disappointment with Navajos for not matching a roman-
tic ideal. Lawlor (2006: 60) describes herself as an “educated tourist” when she
visited the Navajo Nation for research on the public face of the Navajo Nation.
She views Shiprock, the “town,” not the “dramatic rock formation,” as “easily
mistaken for any border town, or, perhaps more accurately, for any middle-
American strip zone” (Lawlor 2006: 88, 89). One wonders what she was ex-
pecting. Again, Navajos — not the landscape — fail to live up to romantic
ideals. Lawlor (2006: 89) also notes that, “Navajo people use both names [Tsé
Bit’a’í and Shiprock] today, at least in public discourse.”

*Tsé Bit’a’í* “winged rock” is the name for the rock formation. I have not nor-
mally heard the community of Shiprock referred to as *Tsé Bit’a’í*. In my experi-
ences, from 2000 through 2009, some Navajos refer to the Shiprock commu-
nity in Navajo as *Naat’áanii Nééz* “tall leader” or *Toohdi* “at the water/
river.” In English, Navajos from both Shiprock and other places on the Reservation,
sometimes call Shiprock “Shitrock.” Navajos also recognize the poverty and
desolation in Shiprock, but seldom have I heard them misrecognize Shiprock
as a “middle-American strip zone.” Some Navajos do lament the fast food
restaurants in Shiprock. Some Navajos, though, are quick to point out that the
KFC serves mutton stew. One Navajo poet I interviewed in 2000 insisted that
I interview her at the KFC. She was quick to call my attention to the mutton
stew on the menu. Other Navajos that I know generally avoid the restaurants in
Shiprock and prefer to eat in Cortez, Colorado (about a forty-five minutes
north of Shiprock) or Farmington, New Mexico (about a half-hour east of
Shiprock) when they can eat out. But Farmington is a problematic place in its
own right.

Just outside Shiprock, at the exit to one of the major power plants in the Four
Corners region, is a sign that reads, “Wake Up You Bunch of Nuts, We All Live
Downstream” (see figure 1). Below that sign is another sign with the image of
four Navajos urinating into the San Juan River and the question in large red
print, “Showing Our Concern for the Environment?” In the bottom corner of
that sign, in smaller print, is the question, “The truth hurts doesn’t it?” If you
are driving to Farmington the sign is on your right. When you drive back
to Shiprock the sign is on your left. At the intersection with the exit, there
are traffic lights. The signs are conspicuous. One Navajo poet I talked with
in the summer of 2008 said that she was surprised that the sign was still up.
According to that consultant, the sign had been up for a couple of years. She had assumed the power plant would have had it removed by now. As that poet noted, every time a Navajo leaves work they will be confronted by that sign and have to “think” about what they are doing. One afternoon, Gloria Emerson asks me to go down to the San Juan River with her and take pictures of the river and the garbage that lines the river. Emerson is careful to direct me to take photos of all the garbage along the river. She is working on a project about the importance of water and about the condition of the river that she will present to an audience in Shiprock. Unfortunately, the event is poorly attended.

9. *Dooajinida* “don’t talk about it”

Sitting in Tsaile, Arizona in a dorm on the campus of Diné College, on a cold March evening in 2001, a young Navajo college student, who also wrote poetry, laments to me that contemporary Navajo poets are not talking about the important issues on the Navajo Nation. He tells me that Navajo poets are good at criticizing “white people,” but that they are less inclined to criticize all the myriad issues that are confronting Navajos on the Reservation. Issues, he says,
like poverty and pollution. I respond by noting the poetry of Nia Francisco (1994), with its gimlet eye on the myriad of social issues confronting Navajos. He has not heard of Francisco’s book. I might have also mentioned the early work by Gloria Emerson (1971) which critiqued the social and political ills on and around the Navajo Reservation. When Rutherford Ashley’s (2001) book of poetry is published in 2001, one Navajo praises the book and tells me that Ashley is one of the only Navajo poets talking about social and economic issues on the Reservation. On the other hand, in 2000 I also heard one aspiring Navajo poet state that the poetry of Esther Belin was too political.

Years later, July of 2008, I bring up the conversation I had with the young Navajo college student with Navajo/Hopi poet Venaya Yazzie. Yazzie, along with Gloria Emerson, Esther Belin, and Tina Deschenie, has been active in Dooda Desert Rock (“dooda” “no”), an attempt to block the construction of a new power plant on the Navajo Nation in the Four Corners Region and spearheaded by Elouise Brown, a Navajo who lives in the area where the Desert Rock power plant would be located (Horoshko 2008: 16). These activities for Yazzie have included an exhibit at the Center for Southwest Studies at Ft. Lewis College, Durango, Colorado, in 2008, titled “Connections: Earth + Artist = A Tribute Art Show to Resistance to Desert Rock” and a poetry and art session in March 2009 titled “Connections: Earth + Artist II” at the Navajo Studies Conference in Shiprock. During that event, which is lightly attended, Yazzie describes some of the opposition she encountered from Navajos about the art exhibit in Durango. In an interview I did with Yazzie in July of 2008, she pointed out that one of the issues that Navajo poets face is a concern with dooajinida “don’t talk about it.” She has had people tell her that some of her politically engaged poetry is best left unsaid. Dooajinida, as another Navajo consultant explains to me, is often associated with ‘aseezí “gossip.” As Yazzie explained to me, the phrase dooajinida encapsulates the idea that, “you don’t talk about these things cuz that’s what happens, when no one’s around and you don’t want other people to know that’s what happens.” Using dooajinida in this context suggests, like the cultural intimacy described by Michael Herzfeld (1997), that you should not write about social, political and environmental issues on the Navajo Nation because outsiders, primarily Anglos, might overhear it, and it will confirm various negative stereotypes that Anglos have about Navajos.

Navajo poets that I know are quite aware of these outside negative stereotypes about Navajos, that, for example, all Navajos are alcoholics (on some of the stereotypes about Native Americans see Meek 2006; Hill 2008; see here also Deyhle 2009). Indeed, a number of Navajo poets have pointed out the tension involved in simply ordering a beer at a border town bar or restaurant. The moment you order that beer, they tell me, you can be seen as confirming Anglo stereotypes. This is especially true in a border town like Farmington, NM.
Many Navajos have told me that Farmington was once known as the Selma (Alabama) of New Mexico. Farmington is often described by Navajos as a “racist” or “redneck” town. I have heard astonishingly racist comments about Navajos in Farmington. Some Navajos refuse to do business in Farmington because of the racism they see. Some Navajos that I know, who speak Navajo freely on the Navajo Nation, are sometimes reluctant to speak Navajo in Farmington. Navajo poet Zoey Benally has told me about how she did not want her slam poetry team associated with coming from Farmington. She and the other poets preferred to be from the “Four Corners Region.” However, some Navajo poets are quick to add various caveats. For example, many Navajo poets speak highly of the bookstore and cafe Andrea Kristina’s, which has hosted art exhibits and poetry readings by Navajos. But, in general, many Navajos consider Farmington a “dangerous” place. And by “dangerous,” Navajos often mean a potentially violent place.

Adding to all of this is Desert Rock. Desert Rock is a power plant project that is officially supported by the government of the Navajo Nation and by many Navajos. Some Navajos have explained to me that Desert Rock will create jobs and spur “economic development” on the Navajo Nation. Other Navajos — including poets — counter these arguments by suggesting that there will be few jobs actually created and that these jobs will be menial labor jobs (janitors and security guards). They note that most Navajos lack either the education or the educational opportunities to get high paying employment at a “high tech” power plant. Finally, these Navajos note that the power from this power plant will not go to Navajos, but rather to Texas or California. Indeed, in the letters page of the Navajo Times, there has been a spirited debate about Desert Rock. This, I might add, includes a letter written by Venaya Yazzie and published in February 2008. Navajo critics sometimes label those involved with Dooda Desert Rock as “trouble-makers.”

In a poem for Connections: Earth + Artist = A Tribute Art Show to Resistance to Desert Rock, Tina Deschenie addresses some of these issues in the chorus to her poem. She writes, “Those people protesting, they’re just trouble makers, Protesters, trying to be like AIM” (AIM is the American Indian Movement which was an politically active American Indian group in the 1970s whose activities included a number of high profile protests and occupations [Fixico 2004: 388]). As Yazzie noted in an interview I did with her, “a lot of Navajo people are very apathetic to anything that goes on that’s political, they just don’t wanna get involved.” This apathy is a repeated concern expressed by other Navajo poets as well.

When I spoke with Mitchell about dooajinida he also equated it with a prohibition against gossip, but he also noted that, “you have got to talk about” issues like the environment. Instead, he said that the injunction dooajinida should be used, for example, when someone tells someone “to go to hell.” As
he said, “you don’t say wrong things like that, don’t tell your neighbors to go to hell.” Here Mitchell’s description of *dooajinida* is reminiscent of a familiar point in much of the literature about Navajos. Toelken (2003: 111) describes it this way, “For Navajos, actually uttering words creates the reality of their world . . . hence people avoid speaking of things they don’t want to see appear in the world around them.” The injunction *dooajinida* is about not saying things that are not already in existence. Yazzie and Mitchell, on the other hand, both agree that there are some issues that must be discussed, most likely because they already exist. The state of the Navajo Nation is one such issue. Here, then, both seem to agree that the injunction *dooajinida* is being misapplied, or as Mitchell said, “distorted,” when it is used for poets discussing issues like power plants on the Reservation or treating “Mother Earth” cavalierly.

Some Navajo poets have suggested that being an overtly politically active Navajo poet would likely decrease the chances for one to get published. As Deschenie noted in an interview I did with her in July 2008 about venues for Navajo poets, “there’s just so few publishers.” Many Navajo poets have expressed to me a feeling that there are stereotypes among publishers of what a Navajo poet should write about. More than one Navajo poet has told me about a poetry manuscript that was rejected for “not being Navajo enough.” Navajo poets, like other Navajo artists as well, know that tourists and non-Navajos often have expectations about what Navajo poets or artists should write about or paint (see Dilworth 1996; Denetdale 2007; Bsumek 2008; on the political economy of such expectations see M’Closkey 2002; on a more general survey of stereotypes of Native peoples see Deloria 2004; Troutman 2009). One Navajo poet/artist explained that she does art work both to satisfy tourists’ expectations and art work that she feels is important but is unlikely to sell. This is the double bind of the Indigenous art market (see Marcus and Myers 1995; Myers 2001, 2002; Povinelli 2002; Bunten 2008; Mithlo 2008). One Navajo poet described the Navajo Nation as a “zoo,” a place where tourists could come and gawk at Navajos. Such comments show the deep ambivalence that some Navajos have with marketing the Navajo Nation and themselves as a tourist destination or attractions. That ambivalence can also be heard in Mitchell’s poem as well.

Navajo poets are aware of these multiple tensions; tensions from outside non-Navajo expectations and tensions from other Navajos as well. To write poetry that is critical of tourists or that call attention to the economic, environmental and social issues on the Reservation is still a risky undertaking. In my experience, there certainly now are more Navajo poets actively engaged in issues concerning environmental and other social and political issues than there were in 2001. Gloria Emerson has recently described the Shiprock region to me as the “hub of Navajo poetry.” In the summer of 2008, Navajo poets like
Zoey Benally, Clifford Jack, Venaya Yazzie, Gloria Emerson, Esther Belin, Tina Deschenie, and Blackhorse Mitchell all lived in the Shiprock region. All of these poets write politically engaged poetry. Whether it is Clifford Jack’s poetry challenging stereotypes about Navajos or Tina Deschenie’s, Esther Belin’s and Venaya Yazzie’s poetry in support of Dooda Desert Rock, Shiprock is not just a hub for Navajo poetry, but it is also a center of Navajo activist poetry.

10. Excerpt 3

July 20, 2008. This interview begins after Blackhorse Mitchell has shown me the way he has centered some of his new poetry to challenge the way he was taught to write poetry at the boarding school. Mitchell and I are sitting in his living room.

AU: So I just want to start with/something you just said/that the Beauty of Navajoland /the reason you centered it
BM: mmhmm
AU: because you a:/wanted to make it different
BM: mmhmm
AU: than the way they taught you at boarding school
BM: Yes
AU: Could you say something about that [light laughter]
BM: Well the [light laughter]/My thinking/have TOTALLY changed/from the boarding school life/looking at the Beauty of Navajoland/is like/looking at all the things that have changed/SO/way down at the end/when I said like/ [4 second pause]/the beauty of Navajoland/would be like um/“bra strap hanging on the roadside/guidepost/crucifix with plastic bouquet of flowers/standing and reminding in humiliation/AND/coal stripping of Mother Earth/ and flood of acid rain/is not”/ACTUALLY I don’t call it the beauty of Navajoland/maybe it is thought of as Christmas/if you pick up all these materials/like bra strap, huggies/AND/@@
AU: @@ I see
BM: And you put all of these/throw-a-way beer cans/and if you put it on a Christmas tree/maybe it would make a good decorations/but it wasn’t meant to be/it seems like [clears throat]/the first line/where it says/“the plastic bag blowing in the wind”/that’s what you would find in the street/even in Farmington/the clean town/you would find that/like, “aluminum beer cans shining in the country”/that means in the open country/people party and they just throw stuff/ and then it says, “fly enjoying waste on the huggies disposal”/it seems like that’s another thing/people just throw huggies
AU: mmhmm
BM: away/either alongside of the road/and you find flies/and it’s jus, jus all these things/how should they be dealt with
AU: mm
BM: and that’s just a question/like um/ALL the things that I’m looking at/like/“little big trashes drifting in the gale/that’s run over dogs an coyotes”/and you find vultures/as well as the crow/“feasting on/deteriorating smell of meat”/that’s what you find here on the highway/you find all of these ugly smells/and you wonder/so I put it/ah in a POEM form/that people never really look at these things/and then hunh/I put like, “‘the beauty of Navajoland’/YOU SAY”/this is anybody/tourists are coming into Navajoland/and saying, “oh how beauty/high pitch on quoted line here]/your land is/and the country”/they might look at Shiprock/without looking down/and they look down/or/look across the sky/they might find, “the polluted dark clouds/which are not the real clouds”/and not knowing the rivers and streams/are contaminated by redneck piss/and dungs/SO it’s not only Farmington/but wherever the river flows/and there’s/Aztec/and Durango/and Silverton/and up the way/I’m sure these people/they just/SOMEWHERE they take care of it/but along the river/they do wild things
AU: hmm
BM: and who knows/people go to the river and piss in it/and/and it just flows/that’s what I’m talking about/we NEVER know/what goes on up the river
AU: mmhmm
BM: as well as/from here/from Shiprock/down the river/and as I was saying/that/people dumping trash in the gullies/and when flood rain/washes them away/washes them into the San Juan River/we’re just as bad/and it goes down to Page/and I’m sure/there’s a lot of things/under/the big lake Page/I’m just thinking/about/how many/junk/is under there/and/on the surface/people are boating/and enjoying/just boat riding and fishing [done in a sing-song voice]/but what’s/way down there/at the bottom
AU: right
BM: is what I’m saying/we’re not really/looking at the environment/like or/taking care of the environment/like we’re supposed to/SO/all all of this/that’s/what I was talking about
AU: mhm
BM: and I feel/it does cover/like the coal stripping/and then the power plants/because/like all the things that go on/around Navajo country/and people are not really:/looking at it/or what they saying/and I thought/I’d write it/to that point/that this is the new era/this is today
AU: mhm
BM: that I’m talking of/2000
In excerpt 3, Mitchell again walks me through the poem. I have been, by this time, on the Navajo Nation for a little over two weeks. I have talked with many of the poets involved with Dooda Desert Rock and I have talked with Mitchell about these issues most nights. When I ask him to talk about his centering this poem as a challenge to the regimes of the boarding school, Mitchell takes it as an opportunity to discuss the ways his views have changed over time. Mitchell no longer writes like he did in Miracle Hill. This is so, not just in the centering of the poem on the page, but in that his “thinking has totally changed” since boarding school. Mitchell has an interesting comic touch about using the trash on the Navajo Nation as Christmas tree decorations, suggesting that one can find “beauty” in the trash if used correctly. Mitchell’s concern with the negative consequences of uranium mining is a topic many Navajos — poet and non-poet alike — have been concerned with (see Brugge et al. 2007). Here Mitchell is clearly tapping into a pervasive concern on the Navajo Nation about the consequences of uranium mining. Indeed Yazzie’s (2008) letter to the Navajo Times about Desert Rock also invokes the ramifications of uranium mining and embeds it within Navajo narrative traditions of the slaying of monsters (see Zolbrod 1984).

We also hear echoes of the performance from Swarthmore here as well. Again, Mitchell notes that it is “tourists” who make these claims about the “beauty of Navajoland.” Tourists may look at the “dramatic rock formation” of Shiprock, but they might not “look down” at the people living there. They might not “see” what is going on. Again, Mitchell wants people to “see” through his poetry.

In this conversation, Mitchell follows the San Juan River. He points out that upriver, even in the deeply ironic “clean town” of Farmington, rednecks — Mitchell’s term for racists who live in Farmington — will defile the river through dung and piss. Mitchell’s comment about the plastic bags in Farmington is particularly interesting because Farmington — unlike Shiprock or most communities on the Navajo Nation — has regular garbage collection services. Mitchell goes on to follow the course of the river, pointing out that, “it’s not only Farmington but wherever the river flows and there’s Aztec [New Mexico] and Durango [Colorado] and Silverton [Colorado].” As Mitchell states, “we never know what goes on up the river.” Mitchell again does not give Navajos a pass here. Rather than only blame “rednecks,” Mitchell also notes that Navajos dump “trash in the gullies.” This is a conversation Mitchell and I have had many times. In one such conversation, Mitchell noted that this is an “ugly thing” to do. According to Mitchell, Navajos “are just as bad” when it comes to “contaminating” the river. Mitchell continues to follow the river, we move from the gullies around Shiprock, back to the San Juan River and then finally to Page, Arizona. Here Mitchell imagines all the “junk” in Lake Powell (a major tourist destination in the Southwest) as people, “just boat riding and fish-
ing.” Mitchell says this in a sing-song voice that draws into relief the contrast between their ignorance about what is going on above water and what is “way down there at the bottom.”

11. On beauty and ugliness

When Blackhorse Mitchell uses the term “beauty,” it should not be confused with the mainstream English term “beauty.” Instead, it should be understood as a lexical item in Navajo English (a local language), much like the plural marking that Mitchell uses on dungs. Here it resonates not so much with Western notions of “beauty,” but with Navajo views on hózhó. The same is true of Mitchell’s use of “ugly.” We confuse the matter by assuming that mainstream English and Navajo English are isomorphic (an assumption wholly licensed by the inequality between linguistic systems and the speakers of those languages [Hymes 1996; Blommaert 2005; Webster 2010c]). They are not. We need to understand Navajo English terms like “beauty,” “ugly,” and “Mother Earth” as bivalent with mainstream English terms. Here I follow Kathryn Woolard (1998: 6) and understand bivalency as, “a simultaneous membership of an element in more than one linguistic system.” Such forms are based on a phonological iconicity across linguistic systems. In this case, the two linguistic systems are Navajo English and mainstream English. “Beauty” and “ugly,” to adapt a term from linguistics, are “false friends.” Phonologically iconic forms — bivalent forms (if not polyvalent) — are often misrecognized as having near identical semantics or meaning. They appear to have the same meaning because of superficial similarity of form, but, rather, they have distinct historical trajectories and semantics. I am not claiming, however, that “beauty,” for example, is equivalent with hózhó. Hózhó is formed from the very productive and interwoven verb stem -zhó “beauty, harmony, peaceful, orderly,” the Navajo English term “beauty” is neither as productive nor is it as interwoven into a host of Navajo expressive forms (see Woodbury 1998 on “interwoven”; see Witherspoon 1977 on the productivity of -zhó).

What I am arguing is that for some Navajos, including Blackhorse Mitchell, “beauty” is a Navajo English approximation of the Navajo term hózhó “beauty, harmony” (see Witherspoon 1977; Lamphere 1969). It is not an approximation into some normative “English,” but rather into a distinctive local way of speaking and writing. Likewise, for Blackhorse Mitchell, “ugly” is a Navajo English approximation of hóchxó “ugly, disorderly” (see Lamphere 1969; Witherspoon 1977; Farella 1984). Over the years, Mitchell has made a number of comments about the “ugliness” of various things on and around the Navajo Nation. At first, I took this to be a strange aesthetic judgment. However, over time, I have come to realize such comments are about the disorderly
and out of control qualities of these things. As Witherspoon (1977: 186) notes, héóchxó is used to describe “things and beings out of control.” Lamphere (1969: 281) glosses hózhó as “pleasant conditions” and héóchxó as “ugly conditions” (see also Haile 1947). Various things, like bra straps on guideposts and redneck piss in rivers, are ugly, because they are out of control and disorderly. As has been repeatedly noted about Navajo ritual, one of the primary goals of much ritual is to restore order or beauty or hózhó (see Witherspoon 1977; Farella 1984; Toelken 2003). Mitchell’s poem, through its attempt to get listeners to think and see, is also an attempt to restore order, to restore “beauty.”

I would argue that one can also understand why Rex Lee Jim reads his poem Tó Háálį, with its code-switching into English vulgarity, to Navajo audiences composed of both adults and children (see Webster 2009). Jim is trying to get Navajos of all ages to see the ugliness and to “think” about that ugliness. This is why Jim has described his poetry as “thought poems” (Webster 2006). Indeed, in an interview with Tina Deschenie in 2008, she recalled a poetry performance by Jim in 2001 where he read a number of his critical poems in Navajo — including Tó Háálį — to a Navajo audience. As she noted, many Navajos in attendance, “gasped.” Deschenie, who was involved in the first Connections: Earth + Artists, saw Jim’s performance as important. Jim, I would argue, was trying to get Navajos to “see” and “think” about the current state of the Navajo Nation. Like Mitchell, he was attempting to restore order and “beauty.”

12. Conclusions

Why do some Navajo poets write about contemporary environmental and social issues? Based on the discussions with Mitchell, I think we can now sketch out something of what Mitchell is attempting to accomplish with his poem, “Beauty of Navajoland.” When Mitchell describes the various “ugly things” in this poem, he is inviting his audience to listen to what he is saying. In listening, Mitchell wants his audience to see, that is to visually imagine, what he is describing and to recognize the truth in his descriptions; this is a felt iconicity between the world as it is and the world as he describes it in his poetry (see Samuels 2004). Based then on these visual images, he is then inviting people to think about what is going on on the Navajo Nation. If his listeners engage in such thinking, Mitchell hopes things on the Reservation can change. He is not telling Navajos (or non-Navajos) what to do, that would be presumptuous (see Lamphere 1977; Field 2001). He is, instead, helping Navajos to make their own decisions. In the performance at Swarthmore, Mitchell must make some of this explicit in his discussion with non-Navajos. Mitchell repeatedly makes
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some of his argument explicit in the conversations he and I have had about this poem. But, as with his verbal trip down the San Juan River, he has also invited me to imagine these issues as well. Like the Coyote stories described by Toelken and Scott (1981: 104), Mitchell’s poem “suggest[s] a set of ethics for humans.” And like Coyote stories, these ethics are not normally explicitly explained. Rather, the expectation is that the listener/reader will — through reflection, that is, thinking — infer such ethics (Toelken and Scott 1981: 110). And like Cruikshank (1998) and Basso (1996) have argued, such reflection comes from repeated engagement with stories.

Mitchell’s poem, then, has at least two audiences, both nicely encapsulated at the Swarthmore College performance in November 2004. This is a dialogue both with outsiders and with Navajos. On the one hand, this poem is directed at non-Navajos or potential tourists to the Navajo Nation. Mitchell is prompting potential tourists to really “see” Navajo country. This means not engaging in a superficial appraisal of the reservation as mere “scenery,” as banally “beautiful.” Moreover, Mitchell wants potential tourists to listen to what he is actually saying and to see beyond stereotypes, both positive and negative of Navajos. It also means, as Mitchell reminded me after reading an initial draft of this paper, that he wants to “reach out” and remind outsiders — who he sees as having an inordinate power differential vis-à-vis Navajos — that he is a “human being” with “feelings.” Mitchell’s poem is iconic of his humanness. On the other hand, the poem is also aimed at Navajos. And here it is important to remember that throughout the performance at Swarthmore, Mitchell repeatedly addressed the young Navajo woman who had introduced him. What Mitchell was doing through the performance of this poem was, I believe, to get both potential tourists and Navajos to listen, to think, to see, and then to act in a proper manner toward rectifying the “ugliness” he was describing. His poetry performance, an aesthetically pleasing use of language, was, to paraphrase McAllester (1954), doing something. For Mitchell, and for some other poets, describing what is happening on the Navajo Nation is the first step in getting people to see and think about that truth. It is not gossip, nor is it trouble-making. It is an accurate description of the current situation. Mitchell’s poem is an attempt to restore order, harmony, or, as he says in his local language Navajo English, “beauty” to Navajoland. Mitchell is trying to change people’s minds, and in so doing, to change the world (Farella 1984). The problem, as some Navajo poets understand it, is to get more Navajos to “listen” and “see clearly what’s happening.”

The ecological Indian stereotype is woefully distracting because it turns our focus away from what Native Americans are actually doing and saying. Today there are a growing number of Navajo poets writing about environmental and social justice issues. Such poetry is not just focused on external forms of colonialism or racism — criticizing “white people” as the young Navajo college
student noted back in 2001 — but rather it takes a critical stance towards events on the Navajo Nation like the attempt to build the Desert Rock power plant. Many Navajos, not just poets, who live around the Shiprock region are quite aware of the economic, social, and environmental issues that confront them on a daily basis. Actions like the sign at the exit to the power plant suggest that some Navajos are attempting to change those realities. This can also be seen in some Navajos refusing to eat at the fast food restaurants that populate the Shiprock community. One also can see teams of Navajo high school students picking up litter on the sides of the road. Navajos engage in such activities not to fulfill some ecological Indian stereotype, but to fundamentally improve the conditions of their lives. That is also why poets write poetry about environmental and social justice issues. Taking the “stubborn particulars of voice” (Cruikshank 2005: 3) seriously, can allow us to understand something of what it means when some Navajo poets say their poetry is *hane*. It also means recognizing local languages like Navajo English and attending to the bivalency across linguistic systems, to not assume phonological iconicity means semantic isomorphism. It can also allow us to begin to appreciate what some Navajo poets consider to be the purpose, the work, behind their poetry that calls attention to the “ugliness” — the disorder — on the Reservation and why it is important to accurately describe that “ugliness.”

Notes

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2. I assume, following Paul Hopper (1987), that grammar is a by-product of use; a certain sedimenting of recurrent patterns through repeated use. Rather than see language use as informed by some putative “universal grammar,” we should instead see languages as “emergent grammars” (Hopper 1987), locatable, as Bakhtin (1986) would remind us, in the concrete utter-
ances of socially located speakers (see also Johnstone 1996). Languages are, then, relatively and never completely shared patterned ways of speaking and sometimes writing.

3. I am not claiming that all Navajo poets understand their poetry in this way, but I hope to have suggested that some do.

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