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POWERFUL FEELINGS RECOLLECTED IN TRANQUILITY

LITERARY CRITICISM AND LAKOTA SOCIAL SONG POETRY

R. D. THEISZ

The anthropologist and ethnomusicologist William K. Powers, in his *Beyond the Vision: Essays on American Indian Culture*, laments that the discipline of ethnomusicology—and music pedagogy—with its emphasis on the vocal and instrumental “art music” traditions of musically literate peoples has been lax in accepting anthropological theory. Thus, Powers points out that ethnomusicology, where it is concerned with the music of oral, indigenous cultures, adheres to outdated theories on “primitive” music and displays a telling absence of ethnographic abilities.¹ Reflecting

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Powers’ judgment, it seems to me that the conceptual seams between anthropology, ethnomusicology, and musicology are rather formidable.

At the same time, from the endogenous point of view of the indigenous traditional song composers, performers, and audiences, the theories and methods of all three of these disciplines must necessarily too often appear naïvely uninformed, pejorative, arrogant, exploitative, and even bizarre.

The aim in the analysis below is to bridge yet another obstructive conceptual seam that has insulated two disciplines or subject areas from each other, that of western literary criticism and Native American oral song poetry.

Dearie, each time I come to this place,
I cry to myself in secret,
day and night.

—Lakota song poem

The late Michael Dorris in his 1987 essay “Indians on the Shelf” stated that “learning about Native American culture and history is different from acquiring knowledge in other fields, for it requires an initial, abrupt, and

wrenching demythologizing."² In his meaning, it seems clear that the elimination of pervasive falsehoods, of omissions and distortions, must precede any new knowledge in the area of Native American studies. Like other disciplines, such as women's studies, African-American studies, and Latino/a studies, American Indian studies in general is a revisionist undertaking. Moreover, this arduous "demythologizing" is nowhere more necessary in the area of interdisciplinary American Indian studies than in the academic stance on and treatment of traditional Native American song poetry. The myths that have precluded appropriate study of Native American song texts as literature result from several biases and failings.

Examining this array of biases and failings of American Indian studies in great detail would digress from the thesis of this analysis. Nevertheless, a quick glance at the mistreatment of traditional song poetry in the pertinent enterprises such as literary interpretation and the study of Native American artistic expression will ground the direction of the later exploration. The terms "song poetry" and "song poems" are used to refer to the two central dimensions of the genre—the performance and literary dimensions.

Oral texts of the Native American literary tradition have historically been the domain of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and folklore. The first and perhaps major rationale for relegating oral texts outside the literary canon appears to be the very nature of oral literary expression. The relationship of orality to literacy "problematizes" the traditional Western conceptualization of literature, which has most typically stressed the "close connection with 'literate' forms and 'literate' cultures."³ Yet, if orality were the only challenge, Native American oral narratives, life stories, and other oral narrative forms would also linger in critical limbo. This is not the case.

Even when oral texts received greater literary attention in the works of Dell Hymes, Jerald Ramsey, Karl Kroeber, Richard Bauman, Andrew Wiget, and others in the 1960s and 1970s,

oral narrative has held a favored position in the emerging field of oral Native American literature. Most scholars seem to display a greater affinity for oral narrative forms, so that, by comparison, Native American oral song poetry has aroused little interest. Song poetry appears to present special difficulties for literary study.

Compared to the study of oral narrative forms, the study of Native American oral song poetry as *literature* has been undertaken by only a select few. So, in spite of admonitions such as Ruoff's to study the oral literatures of Native Americans as a "vibrant force that tribal peoples continue to create and perform," and her view that songs "are central to all aspects of ceremonial and nonceremonial life," the literary study of Indian oral song poetry has not kept pace with the study of narratives, oratory, and ritual drama which have enjoyed considerable and energetic attention.⁴

The issue must be raised whether song poetry in its use of language, in its incorporation of melody and musical instruments, or even in its connection to dance and its performance mode of representing human experience is viewed as subliterate. Perhaps literature scholars find such performance elements beyond their interest or even competence. The focus of the following spotlight on Native American oral song poetry would therefore highlight what Richard Macksey calls the "ontological question" in literary criticism, by which he means questioning the nature and mode of existence of a literary work and "the philosophy of language and mimetic representation."⁵ So far, the literary study of oral song poetry appears to have generally avoided the question or declined to engage song poetry as a fitting subject.

Two examples can serve to illustrate this reluctance. The 1994 *Dictionary of Native American Literature* includes the following introductory explanation by its editor, Andrew Wiget:

On the other hand, some topics that would have been especially interesting in conjunc-

tion with the study of oral narratives were not included. While it would seem logical to have a general article on "Songs," for instance, it was clear from the beginning that Native American songs from over 350 different tribes did not have as a subject the same kind of formal coherence that oral narratives did. . . . To have included articles on song . . . would have been to invite their authors to create the most speculative kind of typology with which to frame a brief and spotty discussion of an enormous topic.⁶

Wiget certainly appears to understand the significance of song but then abandons any effort to advance the study of song because it would be too "spotty," "fragmented," "complex," and interdisciplinary.⁷

Another specific dimension of the ontological dilemma in this regard—one of the myths, in Dorris's terms—is the very divergent conceptualization of the broader field of Native American oral literature. Even though some, like Ruoff, recognize the cultural centrality of songs as the "largest part of American Indian oral literatures,"⁸ others have limited their notion of Native American oral literature to that of narrative. Thus Julian Rice, who has contributed significant work on oral narrative and Indian autobiography to the field, in his contribution to the *Dictionary of Native American Literature* entitled "Oral Literature of the Plains Indians"—perhaps due to Wiget's editorial decision above—summarizes only the tradition of narrative without a single mention of song poetry. This perspective is not untypical of the field. It seems clear to me, in view of the above, that oral song poetry is the victim of a general pronarrative bias, or, inversely, an anti-song poem bias.

In response to such disappointing views on the nature and desirability of studying oral song poetry, this analysis intends to examine a particular tribal subgenre, that of Lakota social song poetry, the most marginalized subgenre of oral song poetry, to illustrate the potential for illumination of this form through

the prism of literary theory, literary history, and literary criticism.

Extant ethnomusicological and literary studies of oral song poetry have featured ceremonial songs and songs associated with the warrior tradition. The "vanishing red man" myth at the close of the nineteenth century caused a rush to preserve documentation of the disappearing authentic life of the noble but doomed aborigine, and so the songs of the hunt, of the warrior, of the communication with the world of the spirits, represented the sought-out forms of oral song. Social dance songs, which feature romantic contexts as well as romantic subjects, were considered to address baser and more trivial matters and were thus not really of interest. The prolific collector and recorder of indigenous music, Frances Densmore in her 1918 classic *Teton Sioux Music*, provides a good example of this tendency. Perhaps the romantic focus of social song poems was also perceived as evidence of acculturation and thus tainted by Western notions of courtship.

Applying the principles of modern literary theory and criticism to the doubly neglected form of Lakota oral social dance songs can contribute to a more appropriate understanding of this particular subgenre and its place in the canon. The strategy to follow will blend the exogenous or etic perspective of the non-Lakota academic with the more endogenous or emic perspective of a practicing singer who has been immersed in Lakota music and literature for over thirty years, the last twenty-five years as a member of Porcupine Singers, a widely traveled and respected traditional Lakota singing group from the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota.

The collection and study of Lakota song poetry begins with the early works of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists such as Natalie Curtis and Frances Densmore. The more recent contributions of William K. Powers; Ben Black Bear and R. D. Theisz; and Albert White Hat and John Around Him have provided recordings and interpretations of a

variety of Lakota songs.⁹ Yet, their work has not emanated from the point of view of literary theory and criticism that is undertaken here, nor has it benefited from it.

In the 1960s and '70s, scholars such as Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hymes, and Jerome Rothenberg, as well as others, sought to revise academic notions of Native American oral performance by emphasizing that beyond the early ethnographic transcriptions lie the "pretexts," the original performances, in their verbal and even nonverbal art. Robert M. Nelson summarizes the pioneering of this literary criticism, which became known as "ethnopoetics":

They taught that an oral tradition is a species of literature. Like any other body of literature (including any print-text literature), Native American oral traditions have both culturally specific content or subject matter and culture-specific aesthetic criteria; these aesthetic norms regulate the composition of performances and these same criteria can be used to evaluate such performances.¹⁰

Regrettably, the pursuit of these distinctive literary principles has not reached English departments nor most literary critics, never mind many anthropologists nor linguistic anthropologists.

The nature of literature has been debated since the time of Plato and Aristotle. Efforts at defining literature and its function in the Western heritage have been attempted endlessly, with many notable benchmarks such as Aristotle's well-worn concepts in his *Poetics*; Horace's formulation of literature as *dulce et utile*, or "sweet and useful" in the sense of enjoyment and usefulness; Wordsworth's shift to portraying the common man and woman in common diction and his famous definition of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquility"; and Matthew Arnold's concept, reminiscent of Horace's, about the essence of literature being "sweetness and light," to cite but a few before the twentieth century.

In the 1920s Owen Barfield, in exploring the nature of poetry, proposed that the poetic experience can be defined as a "felt change of consciousness" as our aesthetic imagination responds to a text.¹¹ In the 1940s Rene Wellek and Austin Warren proposed that of three definitions of literature which could be summarized, that is, "everything in print," "the great works," and "imaginative literature," the last of the three would represent their preferred designation.¹² More recent examinations of the concept of literature have become increasingly less confident about the nature of literature. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer cite Irving Howe's statement that "literature is difficult to organize" as they explore the difficulty of fixing the meaning of literature.¹³ Terry Eagleton, after reviewing the various historical efforts at defining literature ontologically, settles on the functional approach: "Perhaps 'literature' means something like . . . any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly."¹⁴ His caution in beginning with "perhaps" indicates the circumspection of his conclusion. He continues by asserting that "Literature, in the sense of a set works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist."¹⁵ Eagleton continues his reasoning by proposing that the canon, "the unquestioned 'great tradition' of the 'national literature' has to be recognized as a *construct*, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time."¹⁶ Davis and Schleifer join Eagleton in cautiously concluding that literary value is thus a transitive and provisional idea shaped by ideology.¹⁷ Charles E. Bressler echoes the notion of literature's functional and cultural relativity: "[I]f people value a written work, for whatever reason, they frequently decree it to be literature whether or not it contains the prescribed or so-called essential elements of a text."¹⁸

The review of these diverse though selective explorations of the nature of literature at such length, including some of its most recent insights, supports my contention that Lakota song poetry is valued as a referential imagina-

tive act within Lakota culture which does not have the tradition of distinguishing between literary and nonliterary, or fine art and popular art, as the Western academy has been wont to do. Lee Patterson also sees the recent conceptualizing of literature as determined not by some ontological essence but by its "cultural functioning" and, reminiscent of Barfield above, how its audience—to broaden the concept of "the reader" to that of "audience" for the performance of oral song poetry—regards it.¹⁹ Thus, it seems to me, our evaluation of oral song poetry, rather than being guided by traditional literary biases, should be approached cautiously as an example of our likely cross-cultural fallibility, as Dorris advised.²⁰ Robert M. Nelson concurs regarding the study of Native American literatures: "One thing Western-trained critics like myself are learning is that we have a lot to *un-learn* about *how* literature means, or can mean."²¹ Rather than song poetry being seen as subliterate or as of less importance than oral narrative, it should be the subject of rigorous study. If quantity and centrality in Native American cultural life, as cited by Ruoff above, may be seen as measures of cultural regard, song poetry clearly deserves a more pivotal role in the study of oral literatures.

In this vein, in order to avoid the exclusionary application of the term "literature," song poetry should be considered as artistic verbal (and musical) expression in the sense of the German "Wortkunst," or verbal art. If Lakota people themselves have cherished song poems as examples of the aesthetic imagination, if they have experienced song poems in Barfield's terms in a "felt change of consciousness," the well-worn literary assumptions and antipathies of literary studies should acquiesce and accord them literary attention.

At this point, we would do well to heed Dorris's declaration to demythologize by raising the question of whether considerations of aesthetic experience are too often based on ideologically narrow, contemporary Western definitions of art. Thus the ensuing discussion of literary critical methods being applied to

Lakota song poems might wrongly—and reflecting past colonial practice—apply a Western set of critical principles to a non-Western, indigenous culture and thus reductively assume validity that cannot be assumed. Steven Leuthold in his study of indigenous aesthetics proposes three counter-responses to the danger of thus cavalierly universalizing aesthetic principles and definitions. He suggests we have the option not to attempt to define them at all, or we can define them variably for each culture or period or even individual, and, thirdly, we can "compare ideas about art found in different cultures or periods and be aware of commonalties that may emerge."²² In his discussion, he then supports the third of the three possible approaches "because it acknowledges cultural differences in attitudes about art, but also allows for commonalties that may emerge."²³ As Leuthold continues his ethno-aesthetic study, he determines distinctive elements of indigenous aesthetics as they compare and contrast with the Euroamerican tradition, but yet he also reminds us of the intercultural nature of much indigenous American experience and that art is unique in its expression of universal concerns that ultimately "touch a common chord."²⁴

Andrew Wiget agrees that concerns about ethnocentrism precluding "proper understanding" do not prevent effective study of Native American oral literature. He seeks instead "to promote a dialogic consideration of Native American oral literature and the nature of Euroamerican literature as phenomena" because this undertaking would stimulate consideration of concepts "problematic even in Western critical discourse."²⁵ Thus, rather than a casual acceptance and application of definitive Western conceptualizations, we are encouraged to engage in an open exploration of unsettled ideas.

In this effort to legitimize Lakota song poems in terms of Western critical theory and practice, then, it is important to be aware of the relatively different aesthetic contexts of the Lakota and Euroamerican critical practice while recognizing that sufficient commonal-

ties exist to illuminate this special genre of American Great Plains literature and culture.

The Western conceptualizations of literature have coursed through time, from the earliest Greek formulations to the most recent articulations, oscillating and undulating between various coordinates of mimesis, symbolism, realism, verisimilitude, authorial intent, and the like. The time-honored attempts at determining and affirming the nature and functions of literature have yielded to our postmodern tendency not to assert unequivocally or prescriptively but rather accept the principle of indeterminacy. In somewhat the same way, literary criticism has increasingly preoccupied itself with self-definition and bringing its own functioning to mind. Distinguishing between "practical criticism" and "theoretical criticism," as Bressler has undertaken, or between "criticism" and "critique," as Davis and Schleifer have done, have become representative concerns. By the former term "criticism" Davis and Schleifer mean the study of "what texts say and how they say it," and by "critique" they refer to the study of "the often unnoticed assumptions within criticism."²⁶ This very sketchy example is mentioned to exemplify how the recent inclination has been to become more and more theoretically self-conscious, to recognize that all reading is based on some theory, whether well articulated or not, whether ideologically committed or eclectic. In this way, the study of literature has yielded to the study of theory, with literature serving the theory. Ultimately, the contemporary state of the art of critical theory and criticism encourages us to abandon blithe assumptions of disinterestedness or objectivity in our critical reading of texts and instead to carefully review our own interests and our practices of reading. In reflecting this trend, Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson advocate that the function of literary theory is "to explain and generalize both literary discourse and critical practice, making strange what has become naturalized and taken for granted."²⁷

Making the process of reading transparent can further the purpose of advocating the study of Lakota song poems. Heeding Donald Keeseey and Guerin et al. as they remind us that not all approaches are equally suitable to a particular genre as well as a particular work, this inquiry will rely primarily on the historical/historicist approach, on genre criticism, and on the reader response approach in order to demonstrate how literary criticism, and maintaining intercultural vigilance, can enrich the interpretation of Lakota song poems.²⁸

The concept of the historical approach in Western literary criticism relies fundamentally on the belief that a work can be better read if we know the life of the author as well as the values and assumptions of his age, the life and times approach. Since the majority of Lakota song poetry, today more so than in past generations, has become anonymous even in the Lakota community, the biographical individuality of the author is a thankless avenue of pursuit. Contrary to the common academic perception that song poetry is anonymous, however, it must be emphasized that the community in which the song poem originated itself often recalls the composer-author into the third generation. Moreover, even when the author is recalled, the Lakota audience does not expect that the author's biographical or personal experience is necessarily reflected in the text, and it is understood that the situation portrayed is a fictional convention akin to the conventions of the medieval European courtly love and its complaint. Hence, the audience would make no effort to pursue the reflection of the song text in the composer's life.

What will prove more helpful in pursuing the historical critical approach, then, is to see the work in light of how it reflects the life and times of the characters in the work along with the sociocultural or historicist background during its genesis. In this sense, we must recall that the historical sense of courtship among the Lakota is quite different from Western notions. As in so many other non-Western cultures, being or falling in love is a sign of

youthful exuberance and immaturity, when one is behaving foolishly and potentially tarnishing family honor and threatening the social fabric. Julian Rice explores the theme of sexuality and how, in their self-centered indulgence and lack of restraint, lovers violated traditional Lakota expectations.²⁹ As William K. Powers describes it, courtship among the Lakota was historically rather ritualized and performed in a structured public way, usually with strict chaperoning.³⁰ Thus, limited instances of close physical contact in courtship were strictly controlled. As Severt Young Bear Sr. recalls:

In our Lakota tradition we didn't have social courtship kinds of dances like white people had. The only dance even close was the night dance, where under strict chaperoning by relatives, young men and women under the watchful eye of elder relatives who were in attendance exchanged gifts and danced together in public. There was no other dance where courtship was involved.³¹

Frances Densmore also briefly mentions the night dance, as does Ben Black Bear Sr. more recently, who believes it to have begun in the 1860s and last saw it performed in 1936.³² As we place these night dance songs in historical perspective, they appear as somewhat of an anomaly, as the Lakota had no extensive love song or dance tradition.

With the early 1880s, assimilation efforts intensified. The Carlisle Indian Boarding School heralded the initiative to deculturate Indian children on the one hand and assimilate them on the other. With the "Peace Policy" came the magnified influence of Christian churches. President Chester Arthur authorized the Secretary of the Interior to forbid traditional rites and dances. The Court of Indian Offenses was established in 1883, which identified the sun dance, the central sacred tradition of the Lakota, as one of its punishable offenses. In practical terms, James McLaughlin, the agent at Devil's Lake in North Dakota from 1876 to 1881, describes putting

a stop to the Sun Dance there before coming to the Standing Rock Reservation in September 1881.³³ Similarly, Valentine McGillicuddy, the agent at the Pine Ridge Reservation, in the summer of 1882 warned the Lakota leaders, including Red Cloud, that this was to be their last Sun Dance.³⁴ When we also consider the notorious actions surrounding the Ghost Dance Movement, especially the events surrounding the Wounded Knee Massacre, we can begin to fathom some of the tragic consequences of cultural suppression.

Ironically, Francis E. Leupp, the commissioner of Indian Affairs, in 1905 lamented regarding the dominant attitude toward tribal music: "Eminent musicians in all parts of the world express astonishment that our people should have left so noble a field almost unexplored."³⁵ Although I grant that this statement regarded primarily the music dimension of oral song poems and not their literary aspects, it flies directly in the face of all other policy evidence designed to eradicate traditional ceremonies, music and dance, language, family, and values. Withholding of treaty rations and imprisonment were common strategies. These destructive, culturally disruptive policies did not end until John Collier, commissioner of Indian Affairs issued his Circular 2970 on Indian Religious Freedom in January of 1934. Moreover, residual negative attitudes of government, education, and church continued well into the 1960s. Curiously, while their institutional policies denigrated and sought to eradicate tribal cultural practices, and Indian people suffered accordingly under these policies, research on Native American music and culture was maintained by the fields of ethnomusicology, anthropology, folklore, history, and linguistics, but not by literary criticism.³⁶

At the same time, Lakota people observed the courting practices at military forts and settlements with curiosity and bemusement. Square dances and officers' ballroom dances did not go unnoticed. Not surprisingly, this mix of exposure to alien dance and music forms—including song texts—and the oppres-

sive cultural policies created a historical milieu conducive to new forms and content. Severt Young Bear Sr. provides an enlightening version of the Lakota response to these influences in the chapter of his life story entitled "Dancing Behind Drawn Curtains: Social Dance Songs":

From the early 1880s, when the U.S. government started to forbid our sacred ceremonies, to the 1920s, when they still tried to force us to become good modern white citizens no matter what we wanted, we reacted in different ways. Our public Sun Dances sort of went underground and were held way back in the grass-roots communities someplace. Our warrior society parades and ceremonies were adapted to fit white patriotic holidays . . . so the agent would allow us to dance. But the new result of these assimilation policies was the social dances that developed just around and after the first World War.³⁷

Since public ceremonial and warrior dances were broken up by the Indian agent's police, Lakota people began to hold dances in private homes "behind drawn curtains." During this time, then, social dances became a popular innovation.

I will demonstrate how applying the time-honored historical approach, together with the more recent critical historicist emphasis on issues of power imbalances, can illuminate our experience of the text.

Lakota social dance song poems may be defined "cognitively"—to use Powers's "cognitive" versus "conative" distinctions—that is, by function, as songs that accompany primarily round and rabbit dances in which men and women dance together in a circle and as couples, respectively. By comparison, the "conative" category refers to categorization according to the manner in which the audience responds to the songs, a feeling dimension that groups songs not by their function but by the affective reaction of the audience, a perspec-

tive which we have called "reader response" approach in literary criticism.³⁸

The basic premise of Western reader response theory is that the text does not exist without a reader, thus focusing critical attention on the reader and the interaction between the reader and the text.³⁹ In the early part of our century, I. A. Richards proposed that we value literature because it satisfies our "appetencies," our "seeking after," and therefore meets our deepest need and desire for some sort of meaning and view of our world and our human condition.⁴⁰ This taking stock of the reader's response is termed "transactional theory" by Louise Rosenblatt although she feels the experience is more one of negotiating meaning between the text and the reader.⁴¹

For this inquiry, the reader corresponds to the Lakota audience responding to the social dance song poem performance, from which the text cannot be isolated. Its performers and observers—whether active dancers or onlookers—share a common reaction regarding these social dance song poems, which I will explore below. Examining the categorizing perspective of the audience is in keeping with the interests of reader response critics and will also illuminate the conative classification of this song poem category that Powers has posited. In addition, however, this perspective also leads us to another area of Western literary criticism, that of genre criticism.

Northrop Frye emphasizes that the basis of the term "genre" is "determined by the conditions established between the poet and his public."⁴² This formulation continues to be very useful for purposes of this paper, as social dance song poems establish a particular conventional relationship between the texts and their performance and the members of the Lakota audience. In the focus on rabbit dance songs, a particularly widespread subgenre of social dance songs, the convention is that the text shares the words of a woman regarding matters of love, primarily unrequited, unfulfilled, unrealized, and embittered love. The Lakota audience in its awareness of the conventions of this subgenre expects to hear such

feelings shared at a somewhat trivial level. As Powers points out, the audience enjoys these song poems in a humorous vein for several reasons. First, men are performing in Lakota women's female speech, and the humor is therefore generated by the incongruity of narrated female perspective and male performance. Secondly, courtship in Lakota culture is considered a period of irrational thoughts and ill-considered behaviors in which particularly women lose their proper perspective on modesty, reticence, and family honor. Thirdly, the humor results from the understanding by the audience that private and even intimate thoughts have been made public exposing the woman's foolishness.⁴³

Frye's discussion of literary genre theory continues with his idea that "[p]resentation" of the acted, spoken, and written word distinguishes the genres, and that the lyric poem specifically presents the "concealment of the poet's audience from the poet, . . . [is] preeminently the utterance that is overheard," and that "the lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or someone else."⁴⁴ This observation continues to be applicable here as well. Lakota Rabbit Dance song poems in the early stages of this subgenre generally began with the word "Scepansi," which in Lakota is a form of address for an older sister or female cousin as a confidante of the female speaker. A 1921 Rabbit Dance song poem text exemplifies this feature:

Scepansi, kici wayaci ki he tuwe so?
Takeciyapi na tokiyatanhan hi so?
Okiyakaye imacuka ca kici wowaglaka
wacin ye.

Sister/cousin, the one you're dancing with,
what is his name and where is he from?
Tell him he captures my heart [or: excites me so]. I really want to talk to him.⁴⁵

The audience is thus privy to a privately shared confidentiality between two females, which reveals the vulnerability of the infatuated young girl or the naïve young female in love.

Frye continues his conceptualization of the lyric by stating that "a rhythm which is poetic but not necessarily metrical tends to predominate."⁴⁶ From reading the texts of the song poems recorded in this essay, the reader gains little sense of its rhythmic quality. It should be remembered in this regard that though these song texts appear to be rather prosaic, in the sense of prose discourse, the drum accompaniment provides a clear duple beat—or actually a triple beat with the second beat silent—the louder beat of which is analogous to the stress of syllables in English. The texts are thus provided cadence and are sung rhythmically according to this accented beat.

As Frye continues in discussing the relationship of poetry to music since the Greeks: "We should remember, however, that when the poem is sung, . . . its organization has been taken over by music."⁴⁷ Though our representative Lakota song poem texts when printed appear to be rather simple prosaic statements, the nature of actual performance conventions allows them to provide more of the effect we generally expect of Western poetry. In considering Edgar A. Poe's *Poetic Principle*, where the latter maintains that poetry is "essentially oracular and discontinuous," Frye supplies us with these two qualities which are contained in the song poem performances by the public male musical performance of purported female intimacies.⁴⁸ Though line and stanza forms are not evident from the written and translated texts, the common "bi-partite, incomplete repetition" of Lakota/Plains song structure, which have been described elsewhere⁴⁹ adds the sense of regularity and shape that is associated with much traditional Western poetry. In applying some fundamental features of genre criticism (see some others below under poetic language), I would submit that Lakota song poetry meets the general expectations of a valid poetic form.

To return to the historicist criticism mode of analysis for a moment, some sense of the longitudinal understanding of Rabbit Dance song texts can be enlightening. The above sample exemplifies the conventional term of address in the early days of these song poems.

The young female speaker was confiding a romantic thought to another female relative. In the 1930s and 1940s the term "scepansi" (female cousin) was replaced in most songs by "Dearie." The female speaker is now addressing the male directly, indicating the change from the modest young Lakota woman who talked with a female relative *about* a young man she is attracted to, to the more modern, westernized woman who talks directly to the male.

Dearie, wicoiye ota ye, wicoiye ota ye,
itokasni ye. Wancala wiconiye toksa
iyecetu kte.

Dearie, there's a lot of talk about us, there's
a lot of talk about us, but don't worry
about it. There is only one lifetime and
everything will work out for us.⁵⁰

In subsequent decades, the changing lifestyles and behaviors of Lakota people are reflected in the female speaker's increasingly assertive tone. An example of such a song poem was composed during the so-called New Deal period of the 1930s:

Wicasala wan ecas kici waun wesa waunci
canna iyopemayaye. Toksa New Deal kta
ca cante sicin kte.

That man that I will stay with forever,
whenever we dance together, he gets mad
at me. [or: Although it's true he's the
man I live with, whenever we dance to-
gether, he ridicules me] Later, when the
New Deal comes, he will be broken
hearted.⁵¹

The implication is that the new order of the New Deal will result in greater empowerment for the female speaker. The occasional intrusion of English words may also be noticed as adding a note of humorous novelty to the audience's response. Another example of the increasingly aggressive and even confrontational attitude of the female speaker, to the point of destroying marriages, goes as follows:

Dearie, tawicu yatun na nicinca ota yesa
wastecilaka waun we. Wacin kin tiwahe
najujuciyein kte.

Dearie, [even though] you are married and
have a lot of children [I'm loving you], If
I want to, I can break up your home and
be with you.⁵²

Having witnessed several public performances of this particular song poem in the last few years, I have been able to observe the laughter that this egocentric and exaggerated self-assertion generates among the Lakota audience.

The latest stage of development for these social dance song poems has been the substitution of texts completely in English for the original Lakota words. As a result, the conventional Lakota female speech and the original female point of view thus loses some of its impact. I first heard and recorded this song poem in the middle 1970s:

Dearie, every time I see you, I can still re-
member the time I was with you. I don't
care what they say about us, honey, I
still love you.

Another of these all-English song poems was composed by the late Severt Young Bear Sr. also in the 1970s:

Dearie, take me home, take me back to Por-
cupine. If you don't take me home, I will
tell Mama on you.⁵³

By the 1970s, one of the original purposes of these song poems—for husbands and wives and lovers not to be jealous of each other—has also faded along with the popularity of social dance song poems. The early custom was for husbands and wives not to dance with each other and for women to choose their dance partners. Some Lakota people blame jealousy and overpossessiveness for the decline of these song poems.⁵⁴

From the perspective of applying selected Western critical literary strategies to the in-

terpretation and evaluation of Lakota social song poems, however, their decline in our time may also be interpreted slightly differently. The value and appeal of these song poems has been that they presented a satire of how young women under the dangerous influence of love succumb to immodesty, infatuation, as well as forgetfulness of proper behavior and thought. Today, these social dance song poems no longer serve the functions that originally generated them. If we recall, originally these texts presented a form of underground resistance to cultural oppression by United States Indian policy. In addition, they reflected a new kind of behavior and language regarding courtship that departed from the norms of traditional courtship mores, much as the courtly lyric and *carpe diem* poetry of the Western poetry tradition did in their respective eras. The performance of these song poems, which exposed such immoderate behavior to public satire, thus confirmed the "more enlightened" traditional Lakota perspective on love and courtship held by the audience at the time. Similar examples that warn men and women of the dangers of heedless love and sex abound in the Lakota oral narrative tradition. The well-known Iktomi trickster stories, the Double Woman stories, and the narratives featuring deer and elk spirits reinforced appropriate courtship behavior. After the middle of the twentieth century, however, these dynamics are no longer at work, and social dance song poems, at least, begin to lose their historical cultural function.

Finally, these song poems during their greatest popularity exemplified another concept of Western literary criticism. In seeking to define what literature actually is, theorists have proposed that one fruitful avenue of definition is to look at how literature uses language in a special way. Terry Eagleton reviews these efforts of defining literature in terms of its using language in a peculiar way: "Literature transforms and intensifies language. . . . Under the pressure of literary devices, ordinary language was intensified, condensed, twisted,

telescoped, drawn out, turned on its head . . . 'made strange.'"⁵⁵ If all literary language is somehow language that attracts attention to itself, poetry specifically uses language in a way that causes the reader to recognize it as such. In his central theoretical statement of the Russian formalist school, Viktor Shklovsky defined poetry as "attenuated, tortuous speech. Poetic speech is formed speech. Prose is ordinary speech."⁵⁶ In this view, which is not shared by Coleridge and selected other poets and poetry, poetry's selective language use is one of its distinguishing qualities. Lakota social song poem texts may not give evidence of all the various descriptions of poetic language, such as the "condensed, elevated, sublime, emotive, fine, self-referential" kinds of formulations, but they do utilize language that is understood by Lakota audiences to be different from ordinary, everyday speech, thus achieving a felt change of consciousness. In this regard of using nonordinary speech, also, Lakota social song poetry can be interpreted from this principle of literary criticism.

How is the language of these texts "made strange" in Eagleton's meaning? First, the performance dimension calls attention to the special use of the language. Melody supplied by groups of male singers and the rhythmic accompaniment of their drum tells us this is a special language occurrence. Then, there is the choice of female speech, clearly discernible in the female grammar of the original Lakota texts, but which is sung by men and which thus estranges the language performed. As indicated above, the musical performance adds rhythmic structure and form to the language. In addition, the awareness by the audience that the dialogic intimacy of the words—whether between two female relatives in the earlier texts or, in the later form, between two lovers—contradicts their public performance and thus clearly makes their language nonordinary. The feelings of the woman speaker in the texts may also very well give evidence of being influenced by popular mainstream music, thus making the audience ready

for any deviance from Lakota discourse in language or content. Yet again, the occasional insertion of an English word, such as the use of "Dearie" or "New Deal" in the song poem above and in the following song poem, is seen as drawing attention to the special use of language.

Dearie, iyotancila k'un
Wana yagni kte
Tehan yagnin kte
Ehake kiss wanji mak'u we.

Dearie, I loved you most
And now you're going home
Home, so far away
So kiss me just once more.⁵⁷

Texts completely in English, such as the two presented earlier, also draw attention to themselves in this respect, as their performance otherwise follows Lakota contextual conventions. Among these performance conventions is a five-syllable cadence of Lakota vocables (weyaha, weyaha, yo) peculiar to social dance song poetry at the end of each text portion of a song rendition, providing a sense of closure recognized as specifically signifying social song poems. Hence the placement of vocables, both within texts and in terminal locations, must also be seen as a poeticizing element.

In all cases, the language of the texts of these song poems has been viewed and enjoyed by its Lakota audiences in the heyday of social dance song poetry as innovative, very modern, fashionable, and even a bit risqué.

This analysis has deliberately selected a Native American oral literature form that is generally ignored and disregarded as serious literature, even by scholars who work in the Native American oral and written literary field, in order to demonstrate how, if viewed as worthy of literary attention, such a category of oral literature can yield illuminating results. Since such song poems have been prized by nearly seven decades of Lakota audiences, they merit thoughtful attention. By applying

three strategies widely used in Western literary theory and criticism, this exploration has sought to illustrate that these song poems do meet literary criteria. It has not considered evaluative issues as to whether these texts rank among the "best that has been thought and spoken" (or sung in this case), ranking them among the great works of the human imagination, but rather has adhered to the principle cited by Maynard Mack et al. in their *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* that works worthy of literary consideration should have "recognized authority in their own languages and cultures but also in the judgment of a larger world."⁵⁸ The considerations above have sought to present an adequate picture of the place of these song poems relative to Lakota cultural history, Lakota genre classification, and Lakota audience response. That the "larger world" will grant them a place in its literary spectrum can only be hoped for as we seek to renovate our ideologies. For now, in spite of some concerns about reductionist aesthetic failings or about succumbing to ongoing intellectual colonialism in applying Western critical theory and practice to a Native American form of oral literature, it should be clear that if insights such as these from historical criticism, genre theory, and reader response theory are applied in an open manner, these song poems satisfy not only Western literary criteria but, more broadly, meet cross-cultural literary expectations as well.

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