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Surviving the War by Singing the Blues: The Contemporary Ethos of American Indian Political Poetry

REBECCA TSOSIE

INTRODUCTION

On December 29, 1986, exactly 96 years after the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, I sat in a dark nightclub on L.A.'s Sunset Strip and heard a performance by the Grafitti Band that made me realize just how well Indian people had survived. My mind kept returning to Wounded Knee, the photos of the murdered Sioux people, frozen in contorted agony. Black Elk had described that bitter day for John Neihardt, the butchered corpses of women and children "heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch."[1] According to Neihardt, Black Elk felt that "Something else died there in the bloody mud . . . A people's dream . . . It was a beautiful dream." Nineteenth century Indian resistance to the destructive waves of white settlers had manifested itself in the philosophical core of the "Ghost Dance" vision. But that vision met with more than symbolic death at Wounded Knee, and from the depths of disease, starvation and death, many Indian people agreed with Black Elk that the "nation's hoop" had been "broken and scattered." Black Elk's recollections through Neihardt ended on a final, bitter note: "There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."[2]

Yet the two American Indian men who had formed the Grafitti Band proved the opposite to Black Elk's fatal vision. In the smoke and wine smell of the nightclub, beneath hazy, purple-red disco

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lights, John Trudell, a Sioux poet, and Jesse Ed Davis, a Kiowa-Comanche guitarist, played a series of songs that were living testament to a People's dream that will not die, to a cultural endurance, powerful and lasting. That dream is the spiritual resistance of Indian people to the genocidal wars—both physical and ideological—of more than four centuries of continuous conflict with European peoples. Cultural pride and resistance have changed to meet the times, as have the Indian people themselves; however, in its purpose and effect, the "Dream" remains integral, whole and alive.

Ward Churchill, Creek-Cherokee scholar, notes a central continuity between the 19th century Ghost Dance vision and the contemporary politically-motivated poetry of many American Indians. He summarizes: "struggle is vacuous without a vision of the future . . . to remain in accordance with the spirit of the ghost dance, the future must consciously retain the continuity of values and tradition which allows for cultural survival and regeneration."[3]

Contemporary Indian people are well aware of their role as the direct descendants of tenacious survivors. Their ancestors rose from the living hell of the 19th century "Indian Wars" and left a legacy of strength and endurance. This legacy is the basis of the 20th century "Dream," and as Acoma poet Simon Ortiz affirms: "It's almost inexplicable that Black Elk would say the dream ended . . . we [now] know it did not and will not end."[4] Contemporary Indian poets such as Ortiz utilize the strength of their traditional past to address the critical issues of present and future. Significantly, the contemporary "Dream" encompasses the survival of the Earth and all people who unite in opposition to the continuous Western history of exploitation and destruction. What Black Elk witnessed at Wounded Knee is only one example of a series of wars that have not ended.

This paper was first inspired by the poetry of John Trudell. In his many song-poems lies perhaps the most compelling interpretation of the "Dream" for human and cultural survival. Trudell's poetry speaks directly from a "Native" ethos and world view which questions Euroamerican technology and "progress" with sharp, albeit lyrical, criticism. Trudell's spoken message finds an able and expressive partner in the guitar solos of Jesse Ed Davis. His vivid blues riffs and biting rock'n'roll licks bring an emotional edge to Trudell's words, which in many ways parallels the raw

emotion and power of the Delta bluesmen who rose from the pain and oppression of the American South. Together, the two men unify a body of culture and thought which speaks to the experience of many "Native" people. I use the terms of a Shawnee poet, Barney Bush, to define "Native": "A native person is anyone who is from this earth and does not seek power over the lives of others."[5] As the Grafitti Band played that December night, I saw black, white, Indian and Asian people respond to the compelling rhythms of the music and to Trudell's message that survival can be achieved only if we admit our common bond as living beings. Once we transcend society's artificial barriers of "race" and "class," we will realize that the "enemy" which victimizes both human being and Earth does not have a "race," only a mind-set which is willing to destroy the natural environment or anything obstructing its "manifest destiny."

As with other contemporary Indian musicians, such as Buffy Saint-Marie, Floyd Westerman, and the rock group XIT, the music of John Trudell and Jesse Ed Davis may seem a far departure from more "traditional" modes of Indian music—high-pitched Plains singers around a Northern drum, or even-toned Southwest chants. But the emotion and message in the music are no less "Indian," and they speak to the other side of contemporary Indian life: to the pain of seeing "brothers" incarcerated and shot, of seeing "sisters" destitute and drunk on skid row streets. Trudell's poetry clearly springs from the spiritual core of his Sioux people, but he chooses to focus on the harsh realism of the modern world: the exploitation and destruction of land and people, the daily wars fought in ghetto alleys and Wall Street offices. His poetry answers the request of Paiute writer Adrian C. Louis for "INDIN poets who use their tool of words for political gain and cultural survival . . . [since] . . . too many skin bards are writing about coyotes and turtles when they should be writing about the children born of relocation, about urban skins and res poverty, about the continual termination policies of this government . . . about our strengths as members of specific and autonomous nations."[6]

But, of course, the story of Indian survival *is* a Coyote story, with a trickster-figure singing the blues, laughing and crying (often simultaneously) and beating incredible odds. For coyotes, of all creatures, know the art of indirect attack and judicious retreat. And they almost always survive.

In this paper I hope to explore the ethos of "survival" through song, language and cultural resistance. The first section will focus on world view, both Western and "Indian," and its relation to historical as well as contemporary political and social conflict. I will explore how art becomes the agent of criticism and the exponent of change. Next, I will discuss major themes in contemporary Indian poetry that comprise the Native ethos of cultural resistance and survival. In keeping with the broad artistic fusion of the Grafitti Band's music, I will correlate certain themes in Indian poetry to the spirituals and blues of the black American people. Because I concentrate on a specific form of cultural resistance, artistically expressed primarily through the themes which comprise "the blues," I have structured the poetic selections accordingly. While numerous Indian poets such as Wendy Rose, Paula Gunn Allen, Leslie Silko, Philip Minthorn and Maurice Kenny are currently writing strongly political poems, I have focused on certain poets whose work seems to spring from the same philosophical source as that of the old blues singers—John Trudell, Simon Ortiz, Barney Bush, James Welch, Roberta Whiteman and Joy Harjo. In the end, I hope the content of this paper will be human and alive, not merely another treatise on what is purely "Indian" or "is not"—a subject best left to anthropologists.

I hear an urgent message for survival in the poetry and music of John Trudell and Jesse Ed Davis, and in the words of countless Indian writers and spokespersons. Perhaps these initial sparks will ignite a unified, spiritual flame. But, poetics aside, this paper is for anyone who has felt the pain of contemporary social and political wars, and reached that place (borrowed from an old blues song) where you "Got the blues, and too dam' mean to cry."[7] I'm talking about small town jails and big city cops, downtown bus stations and uptown "drug busts." I'm talking about surviving, with a good song, a strong vision—and a smile.

I

At the basis of all art is the need for creative expression. However, the artist's specific response to reality stems from his own culturally-conditioned world view. Because of this, American Indian artists often perceive and express reality differently from

their European counterparts. Contemporary Indian artists have a rich, integrated set of beliefs to build on—the legacy of traditional tribal world views. Most Native American world views stem from a concept of the universe as holistic, complex, interrelated, with all forms of life equally dependent upon one another.[8] Black Elk's image of the Sioux nation as a "Sacred Hoop" encompasses all life. This world view is realized through an ethos of respect and responsibility toward the natural world. Thus, in many ways, the Native American ethos is the direct antithesis of the Western ethos, which stresses the need for technology and "progress," and condones the upset of intricate natural balances, relegating environmental protection and human rights to a secondary position.

The Western world view observes a strict dichotomy in its perception of the natural world: the mind is separate from the body, man is above nature, God is removed from the earthly sphere, and "fact" prevails over possible affect.[9] This mind-set is commonly referred to as "rational," although one must question the "reasoning" which permits the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources and the wholesale destruction of life, considering both "acceptable sacrifices."[10] The European quest for "progress" places gain above all else. As Lakota activist Russell Means explains in "The Same Old Song," the European culture consciously "despiritualizes" the universe, placing God, morals and truth into a sphere separate from the worldly quest for accumulation and progress. In this way, there is no guilt over the destruction of life and beauty, because "it's very difficult . . . to convince a person there's something wrong with the process of gaining when they lack the spiritual wisdom to feel a loss for what is being destroyed along the way."[11] The European people are taught that spiritual "salvation" exists only in a remote, ethereal "heaven," with an often wrathful "God" who is readily pacified with weekly monetary contributions and nightly recitations of "prayer." They are not taught to perceive the universe and life holistically, as interdependent equals; rather, for the Euroamerican, man is above animals and earth, and both are expendable before "progress."

As Robert Berkhofer documents in *The White Man's Indian*, the burgeoning Western "rationalization" ordered the universe into a linear equation of superior and inferior components. "Civilized" Western man was thought to be at the apex of the natural

human order, while Native American, African and Asian peoples were placed in more subordinate positions.[12] Despite contemporary movements for "equal rights," this line of thinking persists, because as Ward Churchill states, "Given production [and] industrialization as the measure[s] by which all human advancement may be calculated, then only Europe can lay claim to ultimate leadership in terms of human progress and development."[13] The axiom of "industrial superiority" led to the 18th and 19th century European colonization of distant lands—Africa, Asia and America—and the forcible attempt to mold Native people into roles that would serve European needs and desires, from military "alliance" to military "conquest," from black slavery to Indian removal policy. European policies were cloaked in the dress of "Christian salvation" to give a much-needed moral sanction to the most immoral of practices. Simon Ortiz comments sarcastically on the Puritan search for "Truth" and "obedience to God's will" which promoted their fervent attempts to "civilize the Wasteland:"

> Cotton Mather was no fool . . .
> The axiom
> would be the glory of America
> at last,
> no wastelands,
> no forgiveness.
> The child would be sublime.[14]

The Biblical axioms of honor, right and wrong, duty and salvation became corrupted in Puritan ideology to provide divine sanction for the conquest, displacement and genocide of Native American people, all for the "advancement" of the European race and culture. This Puritan ideology is the philosophical grandfather of the 19th century focus on "manifest destiny." Even today, the ideology of "manifest destiny" remains strong. Barney Bush comments on the present "space race": "Your manifest destiny is / not complete until each / planet bears your flag."[15] And Marxist Phil Heiple reveals former Interior Secretary Watt's belief that he was on a colonial mission sanctioned by God. Heiple quotes Watt: "My responsibility is to follow the scriptures, which call upon us to occupy the land until Jesus returns."[16] Watt's "mission" holds special import for Native Americans, since Indian land holds 60% of all domestic energy

reserves,[17] and *any* land, White or Indian-owned, is subject to Governmental appropriation through the power of "eminent domain."

Ironically, the 20th century fixation on industrial development dealt a swift death to the 19th century ideal of the "yeoman farmer," self-sufficient on his own plot of land, cultivating the earth's resources for his family and community. Today, the only farmers that are successful are enterprising corporate interests who are paid by the Government to destroy any "surplus" in order to keep prices competitive. The small farmer has keeled under to the affluent businessman, and sadly, as Simon Ortiz notes, in small midwestern farm towns today, "there are more bars than churches or foodstores." The 19th century pioneer ideal has met a final, fatal blow, and now,

> Dreams
> thinned
> and split
> can only produce
> these bones
>   The last outpost
> known,
> the rusted plowshare.[18]

John Trudell also notices the ironic twist that history has taken. That December night, he told his audience, " 'Indian' is the name they gave us . . . But I look around now, I see the farmers, the homeless people and I wonder just who the 'Indians' are today." Trudell's words cast a different light on the meaning of "Indian." The "Indian" people have always considered themselves specific groups and cultures: "Lakota," "Ojibwa," "Dine." The Europeans massed these divergent cultures into one generic term, "Indian," and approved of their sacrifice before technology and "progress." Today, all "victims" of this inhuman mindset—white, black or brown—are "Indians" to the industrial world. Trudell sees contemporary society as being in the throes of a "rich man's war," with "governmental nuclear views" and "industrial allies," "cutting the world as though they cannot see blood flow."[19] Instead of comprehending the struggles of American Indians apart from those of black Americans, Middle Easterners or Central Americans, he realizes that "Central America [is] bleeding wounds same as Palestine / Harlem / Three

Mile Island and El Salvador / Pine Ridge and Belfast." Trudell includes all human beings, the earth and the future of life itself on the list of "victims." He senses the profound alienation between spirit and self in the Euroamerican perception which promotes this destruction, and comments wryly: "With Isolation for Ancestors / there's only the present / bought by the credit material uses / forging chains binding you to destruction / compliments of your deities—the Industrial Priests."[20]

Trudell and other contemporary Indians have intimate experience with the "Industrial Priests." Nineteenth century Federal Indian policies of removal and outright genocide have been subtly reinstated for 20th century needs: termination, relocation and mineral exploitation of Indian land are no less deleterious than their 19th century forebears. Harold Littlebird, a Laguna/ Santo-Domingo poet, remembers the way Laguna looked before Jackpile Uranium moved in, the "peach trees and rows of corn, melon patches and fields of grain." Now, he says, these are gone, and in their place lies the "ugly scar" of the Jackpile Uranium open-pit mine, with "the mill tailings . . . left uncovered / blown about by the winds / with no provisions for removal."[21]

Environmental desecration by huge corporations remains commonplace on many reservations, including Pine Ridge, Navajo and Laguna. The mining companies exploit the land and then leave the people to suffer the consequences. Winona LaDuke, an Anishinabe woman and a founder of WARN (Women of All Red Nations), cites truly alarming statistics: On the Pine Ridge reservation, radioactive contamination of the water is nine to twelve times the Federal "maximum acceptable radiation dosage" of two picocuries per liter of water. In December of 1979, 38% of all pregnancies on the reservation resulted in miscarriage or hemorrhaging, and the birth defect rate among the surviving children significantly exceeded the national average.[22] Although many uranium mines have closed, they leave behind an enduring and deadly legacy of radioactive contamination. As LaDuke observes, at Laguna many buildings have been constructed with radioactive materials from the mine, and throughout the Grants Mineral Belt (Southwest mining region), the groundwater is seriously contaminated. The EPA has installed filters for the benefit of tourists at highway drinking fountains, but the residents are left to use the contaminated water.[23]

Winona LaDuke concludes that scholarly analysis of "Third

World" peoples might be more fruitfuly concerned with the stark realities of global life: the social, economic and political exploitation of native people. As LaDuke explains, "To native peoples, there is no such thing as the first, second and third world; there is only an exploiting world . . . and a host world."[24] The indigenous peoples of the continents, who trace their world views directly to the land of their origin, are the "host world" to Western colonizers who continuously exploit both native land and native people for their own material gain. The "race" of the colonizers is not at issue. White, black, Indian and Asian peoples all have adherents to the Western mind-set. Neither is the race of those who oppose the Western ethos significant. Contemporary Indian people feel that all races should unite in opposition; after all, the dangers of radioactive contamination, depletion of water and soil, and increased birth defect and cancer rates concern *everyone*.

Although they interpret life as interrelated, Native American world views do not necessarily subscribe to the European concept of "universal brotherhood." Rather, many Indian groups believe that all cultures have individual integrity and value, and none should seek to "assimilate" or "convert" another. The key to harmony between diverse cultures is mutual respect. As Vine Deloria points out, "It is not necessary that crows should be eagles,"[25] but we *should* recognize our common bond of life and our mutual duty to preserve that life for future generations.

The American Indian protest movements, which took active shape in the 1960s, are directly related to the Native ethos of "survival"—the preservation of all life. However, because of enduring stereotypes, the goals of Indian activists have frequently been misunderstood. In the late 1960s the American Indian Movement was formed, and its members became involved in protests that took "non-traditional" forms—"occupation," group demonstration, and outright verbal assault on specific government policies. The stereotype of the "stoic," "noble" Indian, passively lamenting the destruction of his aboriginal world (remember the "tear" of Iron Eyes Cody?) was nearly annihilated. White scholars who "understood" Indians blamed "urbanization" and "culture attrition," and indicated that Indian youths had been negatively influenced by black militants and even "Commie" instigators.

In fact, for better or worse, as former Rosebud Sioux tribal

chairman Robert Burnette pointed out, "AIM was a uniquely Indian organization."[26] Much of the in-fighting that plagued AIM was directly related to philosophical and practical differences in the members' diverse tribal backgrounds. What bound these different cultures together was a common struggle for survival and recognition of basic human rights, which outweighed their respective differences. American Indian activists wanted to call attention to many critical problems which had been "pushed under the rug" by the U.S. government. Native people are aware that most aspects of their struggle for political autonomy, socioeconomic justice, and protection of their land and resources never reach the American public. For example, the Churchrock nuclear waste spill contaminated Navajo water so badly that many sheep were killed immediately, though the incident never received media attention.[27] By contrast, the Three Mile Island "accident," which occurred four months prior to the Churchrock spill, was widely publicized. The Navajo people felt especially disadvantaged when a U.S. district court barred claimants from prosecuting the United Nuclear Company for damages in their own tribal court. Although the company held leases with the Navajo Tribe and the spill had seriously affected the Navajo people and their livestock, the court determined that the tribe did not have sufficient interest to claim legal jurisdiction.[28]

Government suppression of the unappetizing aspects of its policies and programs may be more commonplace than many Americans care to admit. The periodic "scandals" uncovered by the press are probably more the rule than the exception. Therefore, the critical value of the press and, in fact, all forms of literary and aesthetic expression which address government policy, cannot be overestimated. John Trudell explained in a recent interview for the *Los Angeles Times*, "When one lives in a society where people can no longer rely on the institutions to tell them the truth, the truth must come from culture and art . . . Every culture has art and probably the first form of art is the spoken word, making pictures with words and communicating it."[29]

However, because Western cultures still observe a dichotomy of belief in which art is divorced from the "more serious" parts of culture and society, such as business, government and science, artists who seek to combine the aesthetic with the realistic are often criticized or ignored by the artistic "mainstream" of society. For example, Japanese-American poet Garrett Kaoru Hongo

describes his own poetry, which addresses racism and the experience of Asians in U.S. concentration camps during World War II, as unpopular among academics because "You can't quantify the lines. In order to teach it, you have to talk about El Salvador, the difficult lives of the poor, the emotional distress many people live in."[30] The poetry of "ethnic" writers often contains accurate social and political criticism, but is rejected by the literary mainstream which eagerly embraces further research on the fine points of Shakespeare and Chaucer, but cannot appreciate the strong value and integrity of another culture's artistic expression—particularly when that expression challenges Western ethics. As Hongo asserts, Western academics and literary critics often observe an "apartheid world of art," separating art from the outer society and attempting to "exclude the spiritual from the political [when] the spiritual and the political are the same."

Many ethnic writers speak from a dual appreciation of culture, encompassing both the native culture and the outer, Western culture, which allows greater perception into each. Luci Tapahonso, Navajo writer, speaks of the "value of language" which is held by bicultural people: "[Their] use of language encompasses the history and evolution of a people and stands for important and unique aspects of [that] culture."[31] That "history and evolution" did not take place in a cultural vacuum; rather, it comprises changing social and political realities, together with linguistic and aesthetic adaptations. As a result, contemporary Indian artists may adopt apparently "non-Indian" modes of expression—acrylic painting, rock music and English "slang"—and still create "Indian art"; the work itself has come from the specific cultural orientation of the artist. In its response to the contemporary realities of Western society, ethnic art may be more inclusive than art which evolves solely from the Western world view.

As Bob Sipe notes, "Within art . . . is the power of negation, the power to suggest images which transcend social reality."[32] He quotes Marxist scholar Herbert Marcuse, who warned that art can lose its critical integrity if incorporated into the "mass culture." In a modern context, Sipe claims that American entertainment and advertising industries may promote "one-dimensional acculturation," using "art" to inspire a "norm" that must be sold to America: The "Miami Vice" look, the Madonna image, etc. Even the political commentary of artists such as Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen *may* lose its intended effect

if played mindlessly on American pop-music stations and packaged for slick "money appeal" by record company executives. Similarly, music and literature which seem too "controversial" to sell on the American mass market may be dismissed by record companies and publishing houses.

Interestingly, many American people of all races have always opposed "one-dimensional acculturation" in favor of individual integrity. This resistance has inspired the work of white musicians such as Bob Dylan and Elvis Presley, black American singers and poets such as B. B. King and Richard Wright, and American Indian musicians and writers such as John Trudell, Jesse Ed Davis, Simon Ortiz, Barney Bush and James Welch.

II

> There are places I have never felt at ease,
> where something taps against the glass,
> the blackjack of a cop and bitter lives.
> Who the hunter? Who the hunted? Who survives?
> —Roberta Whiteman (Oneida), *Star Quilt*

Language and song share a common function in all societies. As Simon Ortiz explains, the core of a song is "Language as expression and perception."[33] The thought and the sound unite for *meanign*—the substance of the song or poem which touches the listener. The listeners share the "essence" that surrounds the song with the artist in what Ortiz calls a mutual "relationship." The song becomes real and meaningful as artist and listener share a common experience or interpretation of the world. This "relationship" becomes fundamental in assessing the importance of the blues and of American Indian poetry in the wider realm of American cultural experience. The poets and blues singers have created meaningful artistic expressions of their respective "ethnic" experiences, ranging from historical remembrance to modern interpretations of spiritual, social and political conflicts and realities. Both groups share a common ideology: resistance to the Euroamerican ethos which has promoted interracial inequality and conflict, and the "one-dimensional acculturation" of all people to the Western industrial mind-set. Although the two artistic expressions stem from dramatically different cultures and social ex-

periences, there are startling overlaps. Perhaps these overlaps originate from the commonalities of black American and American Indian experience. Each people has suffered from oppression, dislocation, poverty and despair. And the artists of both "worlds" share a bond with Charlie Parker, a black musician who once stated simply: "Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn."[34]

In his appraisal of black American music, *The Spirituals and The Blues,* James Cone describes the origin of the blues from the "sorrow songs" of the black slaves, or "spirituals" as they are often called. While the spirituals emphasized patience in earthly struggles and oppression, and the need to wait for divine justice, the blues were a secular response, a gut reaction to the everyday violence and suffering the black people endured. The spirituals used prayer to resist white oppression and affirm African values and world views—the "spirit" of the people which might be tempered, but would not be broken. The blues, on the other hand, were (and are), as Ralph Ellison has written, "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."[35]

Ellison may seem contradictory when he describes the blues as "near-tragic, near-comic," but such polarity and its artistic resolution is the most accurate assessment of both black American and Native American ideology. On a human level, the need for both humor and sorrow is critical in the struggle for survival.

The very experience of being an "ethnic" person retaining one's own culture and ethos within the larger Western culture of America, is polarized and contradictory. The blues were the attempt of black Americans to reach the "truth" of those disparate identities and give meaning to black American experience. Cone explains that "the blues are true" because they respond to the "chaos of life" by pulling together that which is disparate in the Western world, "art and life, poetry and experience, the symbolic and the real."[36] An important aspect of this effort was finding the humor in the otherwise pitiful inconsistencies of white thought and black experience (for example, how does the Protestant "work ethic" apply to a people who are discriminated against in the job market?).

Both contradiction and humor become important in the blues. These elements are best imaged by animal "trickster" figures, common to both black and Native American cultures, who embody the power and endurance of the people themselves. These figures invariably possess the ability to laugh while enduring pain and opposition. Consider the dark "trickster" humor of this early blues song:

> Boll Weevil say to the doctor,
> "You can throw out all your pills;
> When I get through with the farmer,
> He won't pay no doctor bills."[37]

The boll weevil, a nearly indestructible pest to Southern farmers, seemed an applicable symbol of the "small defeating the rich and mighty." Boll Weevil rivals the sheer persistence and audacity of Coyote, a trickster figure for many Indian tribes, particularly those of the Southwest. Diane Burns, an Anishinabe/Chemehuevi poet, uses Coyote as a metaphor for downtown Indian "drunks" who defy societal norms in their own contradictory struggle to "survive." She sees these Indian men in their "greasy ol' ribbon shirts," and notices that "Sometimes those crazy drunks on the corner scream / like they're being sliced up or something, / except when they're really sliced up they / never scream."[38] She associates this gut determination to outlive the pain with animal trickster counterparts: "Inside the ribbon shirts / coyote laughs / wolf waits / The village cryers hang out on the corner."[39]

Most American Indian tribes have traditionally believed that humor is essential in the otherwise critical and grim struggles of life. Without humor, many Indian people believe, the search for truth and balance is futile. Humor therefore becomes not only desirable, but a sacred necessity, and is often embodied in the ritual personage of sacred clowns. Black Elk tells of the Lakota "Heyoka," a sacred clown who makes the people "feel jolly and happy first" in the heyoka rituals, "so that it may be easier for the power to come to them."[40] He explains further: "The truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face, laughing or weeping."[41] People clearly need humor when life is grim and despair invites surrender. However, the reverse can also be true: When the people feel *too* good, too sure of their safety, they tend to

place themselves in arrogant and vulnerable positions. At this time, *pain* is necessary, and the need to face reality, ugly as it is, becomes the key to survival.

Just as humor and sorrow are opposites whose synthesis becomes the only way to achieve truth and balance, all of life's polarities are, in the end, essential for knowledge and survival. In the same vein of thought as both the Lakota traditionals and the blues singers, John Trudell speaks to the importance of "opposites":

> It took the times we didn't care
> about living, to learn [survival]
>
> It took the pain, the grief and
> the dying to remember what gets forgotten
> in the living
>
> It took the lessons of a thousand
> generations to get through the time
> of yesterday
>
> It took the joyful songs of laughter
> to last beyond today into tomorrow.[42]

In the same poem, Trudell echoes Black Elk's admonition for the people to experience both joy and sorrow on the long road back to truth and spiritual balance: "Weeping is another way of laughing / and resisting / and outlasting / the Enemy."

As Trudell speaks of "outlasting" the enemy, he refutes the popular American (mis)conception of the Indian as a "vanishing American." James Welch, Blackfoot/Gros Ventre poet and novelist, also speaks to this stereotype, tongue-in-cheek: "Look away and we are gone. / Look back. Tracks are there, a little faint, / our song strong enough for headstrong hunters / who look ahead to one more kill."[43] Kenneth Lincoln has described Welch's position as a "spirit of reaffirmation and comic rebirth in the warrior's serious play with the odds against his people,"[44] and the analogy of "warrior" is perhaps the most accurate metaphor for many contemporary Indian poets. Barney Bush speaks of modern awakenings which seek to turn the tide of industrial destruction as "songs that bond to life . . . songs that will turn . . . power around." He says that those who "seek the power that is / dormant unconscious" walk "a warrior's road."[45]

The "warrior's road" is one of resistance. Although the power

of resistance may be understated and hidden—much like the power of Boll Weevil and Coyote—it may be even more powerful because of this quality. John Trudell thus explains the power of resistance in "September 19th," a poem from his 1982 collection, *Living In Reality*. He describes being arrested at an antinuclear rally, being shoved about by his captors, who were "addicted to their chain of command," and finally pushed aside,

> thinking
> I was just another protester
> they were finished with
> Never understanding
> I am not finished with them
> For I am the resistance
> and
> as always I will return.[46]

Trudell likens his own experience to the resistance of 19th century Sioux nationalist Crazy Horse, who was willing to die for his beliefs and his people. The human "death" is inconsequential before the eternal life of a people's culture and ethos. Trudell realizes that the Euroamerican insensitivity to other cultures and peoples will facilitate the demise of their present power structure. He explains,

> They told me
> squat over there by the trash
> they left a soldier to guard me . . .
> little did they understand
> Squatting down in the Earth
> they placed me with my Power
> . . . my Power to laugh
> laugh at their righteous wrong.[47]

Kenneth Lincoln's analogy of "comic rebirth" applies equally to the "warrior spirit," the Earth, and the animal tricksters who fall on hard times, may even "die," but always return to life once again. This unquenchable spirit of survival is the core of American Indian and black American resistance, and takes its strength from the ability of the people to appreciate the inconsistencies of life, see the humor, and continue the struggle to find the truth and a vision that will save the people.

At the heart of this ongoing quest for survival lies a long-standing belief in "change." Traditional Indian rituals, blues songs and contemporary Indian poetry all share a common faith in the inevitability of change. In many traditional Indian cultures, the primary component of the world view was the concept of motion and change as the very essence of life. Gary Witherspoon describes the Navajo concept of *Hózhó* as the ultimate, natural condition of the human being: living in balance, happiness, health and harmony—in a "Good Way."[48] The closest term for "Hózhó" in the English language might be "beauty"; but for the Navajo, beauty, like the natural aging process of life, is never static or fixed; rather it is dynamic, flowing and changing. Trudell speaks of change for Indian people as evidence of strength and continuing endurance. He notes that while Westerners have referred to Native people as "red indians," "we have been the colors / of a chameleon's back / Changing with time / Altering the larger pattern / Surviving genocide / because we have to."[49]

Since motion and change are culturally sanctioned for many Indian tribes, contemporary Indians often do not see any disparity in synthesizing aspects of other cultures with their own on a limited and voluntary basis. Consequently, while integral parts of the aboriginal cultures and world views survive, the Indian people have also drawn from the other cultures and races of America, blending traditional tribal ways with elements of the white, black and Asian cultures. Gary Witherspoon emphasizes the Navajo creative response to the non-Navajo world, which has enabled the Navajos to adopt elements of other cultures without disrupting their own. Today, the Navajo remain a prime example of cultural and physical survival in the face of tremendous opposition. Witherspoon suggests that the resilience of the people may take root in Navajo mythic tradition, where travel and motion are sanctified by the experiences of their wandering culture-heroes who learn from encounters with strange beings and new forms of power.[50]

Interestingly, contemporary Indian poets often emulate the travels of the ancient culture-heroes. For example, much of Simon Ortiz's work comes directly from his experiences traveling across the country, looking for evidence of the native people who live, or once lived, on every portion of the American continent. He writes in the prologue to *Going For The Rain* that a man "makes his prayers, he sings his songs," he journeys, "always

looking . . . sometimes he finds meaning and sometimes he is destitute. But he continues; he must." Ortiz believes that a man's "travelling is a prayer as well," a necessary step in the ultimate homecoming which is his "return to himself."[51] After these critical travels, the man returns to the strength that "his selfhood is, his home, people, his language, the knowledge of who he is." He returns to *Hózhó*, as the Navajo rituals instruct, and "life has beauty and meaning, and it will continue because life has no end."[52]

Simon Ortiz travels from the "blinding city / the lights, / the cars, / the deadened glares that / tear my heart / and close my mind,"[53] to the sacred Navajo land "near Tsegi, / . . . red and brown land / that is like a strong / and a healthy woman / ready to give birth."[54] Ortiz connects his own physical journey with the energy and motion of language, which comes from the "heart," or center of life, in "the deep well / where all points meet / and intercross again / and countless times / again."[55] He admits the common purpose of his physical journey and his spiritual poetry: "to recognize the relationships I share with everything."[56]

There is an earthy side to Ortiz's poetry which corresponds closely to the Blues. In one poem, he chuckles over his journey to California, which was, admittedly, "too far":

> Once I been to California
> Got lost in L.A., got laid
> in Fresno, got jailed in Oakland
> got fired in Barstow,
> and came home.[57]

This realistic portrayal of travel echoes the old blues songs, with their emphasis on buses, railways and trains, which symbolized both "motion" and the possibility of "changing the present reality of suffering."[58] In the old spirituals, the train was often the metaphor for death—the ultimate, most frightening "escape." But in the blues, the train became a realistic symbol of escape: "Gonna go up No'th / Gonna ease mah pain, / Yessuh, Lord, gonna catch dat train."[59]

But in order to change reality, or even to escape from it, one must *feel* reality. This is a central message of both Indian poets and blues singers. Poetry and music become the vehicles by which to transcend the "mute zone" that society has placed us in through fear and oppression.

John Trudell sees the role of the "Grafitti Man" as such a vehicle, and has, in fact, named his band and initial tape release with Jesse Ed Davis after this contemporary "counter-culture hero," who remains the bane of middle-class society and "white-washed walls." In the title song of the release, Trudell describes the contemporary street scene: "Rag man / Rag woman / paper bags full. / Street age alerts in tenant child's eyes / sidewalk playgrounds got to beware / Junkman's in the shadow / dealing his junk." Trudell sees the middle-class attempt to isolate themselves from this grim reality as futile and foolish. The middle-class reality may *seem* disparate from the street scene: "Middle-class man / Middle-class land / clean enough to be a family affair . . . / controlled climate / temperate zones / Neat little shops all laid out / everything for sale by cash or plastic."[60] But in fact such "insulation" is illusory. Trudell sees middle-class Americans as virtual automatons, blinded to the corruption of politicians and big-businessmen, whose "suits" are not "stained by sweat or blood," and whose "sophistication smiles hide stain and decay." *Everyone* is victimized by the greed and corruption of big business (the industrial priests) and Trudell reveals the common philosophy of both the industrial priests and the dope dealers: " 'Spoils of war are spoils of war,' says Junkman, owner of the Junk."

The by-products of both the industrial priests and the dope dealers are the same—toxic waste and the waste of human lives—and both adhere to the same "disposable," "live-for-the-moment" ethos. Kenneth Lincoln speaks of James Welch's work as an attempt to "[sift] the debris of two cultures in conflict. Indian ruins scatter amid the wreckage of Western materialism: junked cars, tarpaper shacks, blown tires, rusting radiators, discarded bathtubs, shattered glass . . . and the memories of traditions past."[61] And indeed, the conflict between the "throwaway" culture of Western societies and the traditional Indian cultural emphasis on preservation and respect is a key issue in the work of many contemporary Indian poets.

What Lincoln describes as the "wreckage of Western materialism" Trudell sees as evidence of "material delirium." In "Lavender's Blues," Trudell describes an Indian who "wakes up about noon these days" and whose day "doesn't even start until dark." He "vaguely" remembers "ancient oral sunrises," recalling the traditional admonition to rise at dawn with a prayer, but

the modern rhythms and realities of life put him "in limbos between dimensions / living too many days like the lyric with no song." Although at times confused as to what "reality" actually *is,* Trudell rearranges society's values honestly and without hesitation. He assesses the human "wreckage of Western materialism" as "No more than neon flash / trying / hiding in neon mask."[62] The insubstantial components of Western materialism cannot match the older ethos of preservation for Indian people. Trudell asserts, "Have to face who we really are / at some point we have no choice." And Simon Ortiz affirms Trudell's decision to face reality with balance, strength and dignity—in the warrior's way—as he writes, "You can't help but be American, not a citizen or a shadow but a patriot and warrior for land and people even when insignificant and lost."[63]

What Ortiz sees as a "citizen or a shadow" is the automatonal middle-class personality which pervades American society. This personality rejects independent thought or emotion in favor of "directives"—from policymakers or the company boss. Bob Sipe elaborates on this "national social character," drawing on the work of Erich Fromm. He claims that society inculcates the ideal of the "organization man, a man without conscience or conviction, but one who is proud of being a cog, even if it is only a small one, in a big and imposing organization. He is not to ask questions, not to think critically, not to have any passionate interests, for this would impede the smooth functioning of the organization."[64] The "organization man" mentality rejects emotion in favor of "factual" data—most often for monetary gain. This mind-set is clearly in operation today in the many large industries that are involved in the nuclear weapons build-up of the superpowers. The best salaries in America often go to employees of large corporations who carry out "defense contracts" for the United States government. Although technically these employees are accomplices in a potential episode of mass death and destruction, they are taught to feel no guilt or remorse. Their "complicity" is rationalized by the scope of the material rewards, and by the fact that the "enemy" (Russia, Iran, etc . . .) is not perceived on the same human level as another American. "They" are "sneaky" and "dangerous." It is "our moral duty" to build a bomb as a "deterrent." Today, this rationale operates to condone an official military policy that speaks of "limited nuclear war" as viable.

The Western mind-set, which disassociates the physical from the spiritual, is largely responsible for dangerous inconsistencies in the modern perception of humanity. Sexuality and emotion are suppressed and degraded to a "material" level: "Love" becomes yet another commodity, a ploy to sell books and movies. Simon Ortiz comments, "Scholasticism and intellectualism have been barriers to emotion. No wonder there is such fear of women, children, blood and anger: control them."[65] The fear of women, which this society manifests in its rampant gender-directed oppression and high incidence of rape, can be directly related to the need of patriarchal Western males to control natural processes and corresponding emotion: sex, birth, love. Women are taught to feel shame for engaging in sex, or giving birth to anything but a "legitimate," "planned" child. The birth process and the experience of conception are deeply tied to female emotion; yet Western men continually seek to manipulate the emotional response of the woman to fit their own social and political "norms." James Cone stresses the physical and emotional nature of the blues as an important antithesis to the Euroamerican suppression of sexuality, emotion and human needs. Cone comments on Western "values": "People who destroy physical bodies with guns, whips and napalm cannot know the power of physical love."[66]

The numb denial of Western man to admit his common humanity with all life has been responsible for the human tragedies at Wounded Knee and My Lai, and for the disgraceful episode of American slavery. Simon Ortiz writes of the mental "evolution" which permitted Western people to separate human and spiritual concerns from material drives: "They should have seen / the thieves stealing / their most precious treasure: / their compassion, their anger."[67] Tranquilized by the sterile, emotionless ethos of technology and "progress," the Western world suffers a dangerous alienation from the core meaning of life.

In contrast to the Native beliefs of life as motion, change and breath, Western technology seems to have taken a death route, where further "progress" only invites further destruction, and the Western world view substantiates this path as inevitable and expected, leading to mass, mute acceptance. Joy Harjo, a Creek poet, offers this insight: "We are horses knocked out with tranquilizers / sucked into a deep deep sleeping for the comfort / and anesthesia death. We are caught between / clouds and wet earth

/ and there is no motion / either way / no life / to speak of."[68] "Anesthesia death" is a singularly appropriate metaphor for our current condition. Science continues to promise new "advancements"; religious leaders continue to plug divine "salvation" (for a price); and dope dealers continue to push new opiates to alleviate the pain and worry. The global populace remains confused and impotent, while the small, powerful group of political "elite" controls *everyone's* choices of life, death and even eventual annihilation. Simon Ortiz cautions,

> There should be
> moments of true terror
> that would make men think
> and that would cause women
> to grab hold of children
> loving them, and saving them
> for the generations
> who would enjoy the rain.[69]

John Trudell sees some hope for emotional awakening in rock-'n'roll music (which, interestingly, has been largely inspired by the blues). He contrasts the sensual music of Elvis with the bland songs of Pat Boone, fully approved by Middle America—"white bucks" on their feet and double standards in their minds. Trudell explains, "Someone's Mom and Dad waltzed us around / Everygirl wasn't supposed to enjoy 'it' / If she did, she was 'bad' / And Everyboy? / Well, 'boys will be boys' / 'Take what you can. Marry a decent girl when the fun stops.' "[70] Trudell refers to Elvis as a "General" for the rebellion of young Americans against the contradictory values of the older generation. Pat Boone, on the other hand, was the "General" of the middle class, guarding old "values" no matter how superficial. Trudell compares the two: "I mean, you take 'Don't Be Cruel' . . . and 'Jailhouse Rock,' or you take Pat in his white bucks, singing 'Love Letters In The Sand'—Hell man, what's real here? . . . I mean / wanting and needing and imprisonment / we all been to those places / but what did White Bucks understand, other than more straight-line dancing / you know what I mean?"[71]

Trudell sees the raw-edged music of Elvis, Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley as a catharsis that ejected Americans from the post-World War Big Sleep. In his elegy to John Lennon, "God Help and Breed You All," Trudell warns against the passive accep-

tance of the violent assassinations of John Lennon and Martin Luther King. He sees such socially sanctioned passivity as a corollary to the "Warmaker's Behavior Modification Master Plan: killing men of peace." He also urges Americans to heed the message of these murdered men of peace, to oppose the mind-set which numbly accepts death and destruction as "fate." Trudell concludes his tribute to Elvis, "Men like you woke us up / and now they're trying to put us back to sleep / so we'll see how it goes / Anyway, look at the record, man / Rock'n'roll is based on revolution going way past 33⅓."[72]

John Trudell envisions a society where men and women can come together, sister to brother, and embrace all the hope that life has to offer. He honestly admits, "Sometimes it's lonely / being a man / The programming has its effect / Isolation is such a cruel thing."[73] Trudell's vision transcends the restrictive "nuclear family" of Western society, which means, as John Fire Lame Deer explained, "Pa, Ma, kids, and to hell with everybody else."[74] Trudell speaks from a belief that is firmly ingrained in most American Indian tribal world views, that of male and female as complementary halves of the same sacred hoop, each forming a vital and necessary counterpart to the other. Trudell advises,

> Sister, Sister
> we are all the family of Earth
> they have taken us away
> in their new clear war
> taught us to compete
> and abuse
> and blame each other
> while we're all being used . . .
>
> Sister, Sister
> I am your brother
> Everytime
> I've ever hurt you
> I've always
> hurt myself.[75]

John Trudell perceives a spiritual universe, where the heart and spirit form the sacred core of human existence, and the family as a holistic unit becomes the outer expression of this spiritual "center." He pleads, "Sister, Sister / hear my heart / it's time

/ to bring the family / back together . . . / We must remember what / life is all about." Trudell concludes, "it's all up to us / we have a choice." In assuming responsibility for the future, Trudell breaks the "victim" mentality of passive acceptance that society has inculcated. He seems to assert, as did the old blues singers, that in the end there is no "scapegoat" but the self. We cannot continue to blame one another and an amorphous societal "enemy" for our failures and conflicts. Rather, we must find the truths of our struggle, critically examining the past and present, and find our place within that struggle, not as victims but as *victors* with an undying ethos of survival. Along the way, we can sing the pain as the old-time blues singers did, and take strength from our native land, which is still the most profound example of regeneration and resilient beauty. As Simon Ortiz writes, "Neon is weak. / Concrete will soon return / to desert . . . / Sing a bit, be patient. / Wait."[76]

On a more somber note, although most Euroamericans worry more about social "revolution" than natural retribution, even the most "rational" human being must worry about the present massive contamination of earth, water and sky with radioactive and toxic chemical waste. This environmental contamination constitutes a dangerous "time bomb" for the entire world. At the conclusion of *Living In Reality*, John Trudell attempts to counter the modern tendency to equate environmental protection with "political activism"; he claims that although "We have many varying political social perspectives which at times keep us divided . . . Water for life is not a political thought, nor is it an organization. Water for life is survival."[77] Trudell has realized that the rapid destruction of the natural environment can have only one conclusion for the earth's population: death. Many Indian people agree that the wisest course to follow for the future would be to unite "Earth power" with "human power" as allies, not adversaries. There is a place for technology which benefits living beings; but the time has come to find alternatives to those aspects of technology which are detrimental and potentially disastrous, such as nuclear power plants and atomic weapons. Simon Ortiz agrees with John Trudell that through positive human interaction we can turn the tide of industrial destruction, and one day, "The bones of this nation will mend."[78]

Clearly we must appreciate the criticisms and contributions of all cultures in this new consciousness. No longer can we hide the

truth behind vacuous academic pondering, analyzing the obvious and skirting the controversial, critical aspects of human existence. More simply, it is time to wake up.

> There is an honest and healthy anger which
> will raze these walls, and it is the rising of
> our blood and breath which will
> free our muscles, minds and spirits.[79]
>
> These seeds take root in the hush
> of dusk. Songs, a thin echo, heal the salted marsh,
> and yield visions untrembling in our grip . . .
> Once more eagles will restore our prayers.
> —Roberta Whiteman, *Star Quilt*

III

Contemporary Indian poets write from the "heart"; they attempt to track past hurts and wrongs, then transcend the pain through "song," prayer and unity, much as the black people have done through the spirituals and the blues. The American Indian people have always believed in the vital interaction of song and prayer. In the old, traditional chants, singers often repeated sacred words to evoke renewal, regeneration and restoration.[80] Today, John Trudell recites "Shaman's gonna make a chant / a chant / a chant. / Healing in his song / his song / his song," redirecting the ancient healing energy and catharsis of song-prayers to modern needs.

The connection of spiritual balance to the physical world cannot be underestimated. As the Navajo believe, "In order for people to produce hózhó in their world, they must be able first to create hózhó in their minds."[81] With this understanding, we can see the unbroken connection between the visions and prayers of old-time prophets and medicine people such as Black Elk and the modern song-poems of John Trudell and Jesse Ed Davis, Simon Ortiz, and James Welch, among others. Contemporary Indian poets have reinvented the "Dream" for survival and cultural integrity, and have expanded it to include the other races and cultures of this world. As John Trudell says, "We [all] come from the Beginning / a world with no end / LIFE."[82]

If we can begin to consider the entire global world as the

"sacred hoop," then we can find our way back to the center, which Black Elk called the sacred "Tree of Life." In this way, we can all nourish the "Dream" and ultimately find our place within its power and protection. Eventually we will all realize, as John Trudell has, that:

> We have to understand what hearts are for
> before we can get back
> to heaven or paradise
> or the power in our minds.[83]

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