

CHAPTER 4

DISCOURSE BEYOND LANGUAGE

CULTURAL RHETORIC, REVELATORY INSIGHT, AND NATURE

Donal Carbaugh and David Boromisza-Habashi



ON A BEAUTIFUL FALL DAY in Cody, Wyoming, Scott Frazier, a member of the Native American Crow Nation, was discussing water and wind. As an educator, he had been invited to speak on these matters at a conference on Native Land and the People of the Great Plains. Mr. Frazier spoke energetically to his mostly Native audience about the importance traditional people place on watching and observing one's surroundings. He summarized his point through a slowly paced, highly reflective, measured tone, in these words:

Listen to the wind or water
If we quit listening
The spirits quit talking
Then we stop
We don't want to stop

Indeed! As Mr. Frazier directed us, if we listen to wind and water, we can open our eyes and ears to the world around us. So opened, our minds can sense in the world its spirited nature, and learn from it. This deep process is identified by Mr. Frazier as "listening," and through it, we are offered a way, not of stopping, but of keeping things going, becoming better educated, equipped with a proper knowledge that is more attuned to the world that surrounds us.

We have placed Mr. Frazier's words above in a particular format in an effort to capture some of their spoken qualities. Each line was spoken as an

integral unit, with each being punctuated at the end with a slight pause; the first is a directive to his audience to “Listen”; the second identifies a suboptimal condition when the directive is not heeded, “if we quit listening”; the third and fourth elaborate the consequences of this suboptimal condition, “the spirits quit talking, then we stop”; the last makes the premise of the stanza explicit, “we don’t want to stop.”

This kind of speaking is worth our attention for a variety of reasons. Note the complexity of it. First, Mr. Frazier’s words illustrate a way of speaking that is common among some traditional Native Americans. Second, words, like those used here, when properly understood, refer interlocutors to a kind of communication that is, in the first instance, a non-linguistic form of engagement. As he mentions, this form involves various nonverbal agents of expression, such as the wind and water. Third, and further, this way of speaking, and the events being referenced by it, are quite necessary for survival, for they bring into view powerful sources of rightful living. Words as these are deep rhetorical resources for, at once, they illustrate a way of speaking, direct us to “listen” in a proper way, thus referring to non-linguistic forms of engaging the world, while valorizing these as powerful, necessary practices.

Some listeners, or readers of this chapter, perhaps like us, upon hearing this way of speaking for the first time, might puzzle over or even challenge it, saying, as one person did: “It is preposterous to listen to the wind or water. People determine what is said, not these forces of nature!” Others might wonder: How could I possibly listen in this way? What is it that I listen to? What is it that is getting said? The uninitiated are challenged to wrestle with the premise that there are agents in communication with humans that are other-than-human. If able to entertain this possibility, they are eventually then led to the same questions. This chapter explores this way of speaking in some detail, through these questions, examining its cultural shapes and meanings for those who use it. What is this cultural form? What rhetorical force does it have as it draws people into its ways of being and dwelling in places? Through this form, what are the possible agents of expression, and its potential as a social and cultural practice?

As we explore a Blackfeet practice of non-linguistic communication, we position at least some of our readers in a place to reflect upon conceptions of communication that may be partly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The typical presumption is that communication is, par excellence, a linguistically based action, and this has had (and continues to have) a profound role in shaping Judeo-Christian cosmology. This view might be broadly summarized as parsing up the world into three (or, for those who reject the existence of the supernatural, two) realms: (a) the human world (where we can interact with other humans and we can also experience them physically); (b) the non-

human natural world (the realm of non-agents with which we cannot interact but that we can experience physically); and (c) the supernatural world (the realm inhabited by agents with whom we can interact but that we cannot experience physically). A Blackfeet form of “listening,” however, questions this Judeo-Christian conception of communication as linguistically based interaction because it problematizes the second one of the above three points. It suggests that humans, in some communicative moments, do not stand in opposition to a non-human natural world, but in fact belong to it as one among other members. It also suggests that communication is *not* the sole possession of the human and the supernatural realms, only, but infuses the natural universe as a whole. As a consequence, Blackfeet “listening” can largely embrace Judeo-Christian (Western) understandings of communication, yet in so doing, extends this entire cosmology into other realms, as well. How does it do this?

We can illustrate the point, initially, with four lines of text (7–10) taken from Rising Wolf’s characterization of Blackfeet listening, which is discussed in more detail below. In these lines, he introduces the cultural phrase, “actually listening,” which he contrasts with another “which is pretty common today.” This latter mode of listening to the natural world consists of two moves: “listen,” then “make up your own mind of what you heard.” In this latter mode, one gathers sensory data from nature and then proceeds to make sense of it in the privacy of one’s “own mind.” Rising Wolf, however, states that it is a mistake to deny the possibility of a direct communicative interaction with nature’s objects or processes. Why? Because one then misses the wisdom that is available through listening to those objects and processes directly; this can make the sources of this wisdom inaccessible, or at best secondary, especially when communication is confined to other humans only, or when “listening” is simply focused in the processes of one’s “own mind.”

AN EXERCISE IN IRONY

It has been our experience, when discussing this kind of study, that some have been distracted initially by an ironic dimension within it. So, to begin, let us admit that the examination of this way of speaking, through this printed medium, is to some degree an exercise in irony. The irony is apparent as we acknowledge that the way of speaking under investigation here is referring, in part, to a communication practice that is not itself speech, in its normal sense, nor is it linguistic, again, in the formal, technical sense of being linguistic. Note, then, that the way of speaking and communicating being examined here includes non-speaking, with this non-speaking being a way of communicating for some traditional Blackfeet people. The irony grows deeper. Our composi-

tion, here, is a way of writing; the subject in this writing is a Blackfeet way of speaking; with this way of speaking, itself, being about a nonverbal, communication practice. In short, this research report places words upon words about non-words. In yet other words, the writing and the speaking are using words to say something about a process that is, in its first instance, according to those who live this way, a non-linguistic communication practice. This printed medium, then, is twice removed from its central subject matter. A worded world strives to capture a non-worded practice. And so we stand, ironically, poised to do the best we can, our language aimed at a non-linguistic action. More on this later.

A PERSPECTIVE ON RHETORIC AS CULTURAL DISCOURSE

The perspective at work in this chapter treats communication generally, and the oral practices of people specifically, as partly constitutive of social and cultural life. Just as there is a political and economic ordering to social life, so there is a communicative one, a system of “sayables,” which serves as an expressive touchstone about social reality in scenes and settings of communal life. As we shall see, communication is what people make of it, with those coproductions being a formative part of who they are, how they act, how they relate to one another, how they feel about things, and how they dwell in nature (Carbaugh 2005; Katriel 2004; Philipsen 2002). This general program of ethnographic work traces some of its roots to the ethnography of communication (e.g., Hymes 1972), which is wide in scope (e.g., Carbaugh 1995; Philipsen 1997) and deep in its demonstrations of sociocultural lives (e.g., Bailey 2000; Basso 1996; Covarrubias 2005; Philipsen 1992, 2000).

Of special concern in this report are a set of “cultural sayables” that are being used principally among Blackfeet people of the Northern Plains in Montana. These identify deeply important communication practices with nature. Such sayings bring into view local means of verbal and nonverbal practice, and the deep meanings active in those practices. Through prior studies of communication and ethno-rhetoric, a theoretical framework for such study has been formulated, based upon a comparative study of such phenomena (Carbaugh 1989, 2005). This has been used to investigate such sayables in several different languages and speech communities, including Israeli Arabic and Hebrew (e.g., Bloch 2003; Katriel 2004), US American English and Russian (Carbaugh 2005), Japanese (Hall/Noguchi 1995), and Finnish (Carbaugh 2006; Wilkins 2005), among others. The special focus draws attention to terms, like “listening,” above, that identify deeply coded cultural practices, treating them as rhetorical devices that shape practical action, mold cultural beliefs about com-

munication itself, and, in the process, become inextricably tied to premises of personhood, social life, and dwelling in nature.

The following analyses will introduce several utterances made in the first author's presence over the past twenty years by Blackfeet colleagues and consultants. Each is presented with attention to the context of the utterance, followed by observations about such an utterance, focused upon the specific theme of "listening to nature." After examining several such utterances, we will explore an excerpt from a critically acclaimed novel by a Blackfeet author, in which this way of speaking is inscribed. The analyses of this and the prior utterances are summarized, then, as a "Blackfeet discourse." This discourse will be treated a bit more abstractly, as an instance of a general discursive form that cultivates revelation and mystery. Summary comments present a cautionary tale for the treatment of all cultural discourses.

TWO BEARS SPEAKS ABOUT "WRITING ON STONE"

At the same meeting in Wyoming where Mr. Frazier spoke, Two Bears, a former director of cultural affairs for the Blackfeet Nation, was discussing a form of communication that is widely known among traditional Blackfeet people. This form was inscribed in the title of his talk, "Writing on Stone." There is a place near the Sweet Grass Hills in northern Montana where such writing is evident and centuries old. Some of the writing there appears where it seems impossible for normal human beings to reach, way up high on cliff walls. The writing includes symbols and images difficult to see, let alone interpret or understand. The place thus assumes an aura of considerable mystery in the placement, design, and rendering of the writings. As Two Bears explains, "writing on stone tells stories to us in mysterious ways."

Part of the mystery is the presumed source of the writing itself. While apparently etched by specific human authors, the enduring meaning is beyond normal people. When properly understood, this medium is spirited and material, with the source of the messages—if not the animator, in Erving Goffman's terms—being the Great Spirit who makes mysterious things happen. When appropriately reflected upon, these things, the rocks along with the wind and water, can reveal deep insights for living, omens of bad luck, or of good fortune. One doesn't know exactly what will come in such places, through such various media, but to be sure, it can be powerful and enduring, if mysterious.

Just as these "writings on stone" are considered material instruments of the Great Spirit's communication, so too is "the world," its objects, and creatures. As Two Bears put it:

We live by paying attention to the things around us

Coyotes teach us to take a second look

Ants teach us cooperation

If we don't pay attention

Bad things happen

We lose wisdom

One must keep one's eyes and ears open, "paying attention" to the coyotes, ants, the wind, water, and trees, just as to the etchings in the stone. While many people may see the Great Plains as places of vast, empty space—one book refers to this region of the United States as "the empty quarter" (Garreau 1981)—to Blackfeet, as Two Bears said on this occasion, "there are no such things as empty spaces." All spaces are part of the created world, are to be understood as part of the creation, for all were made by the Great Spirit: the world thus includes, in its various and particular parts, agents of the Creator's messages. Attending to "the world" in this way offers sacred and powerful, if mysterious, teachings. Not paying attention to this results in "bad things" happening, and ultimately, to a "loss of wisdom."¹

RISING WOLF ON "COMMUNICATION" AND "LISTENING"

Let's listen to another Native American speak about "listening" and the features it involves. These words come from Mr. Rising Wolf, who was raised in a traditional Blackfeet family, deeply knowledgeable about the ways of his ancestors. A highly respected tribal member, he was kindly taking some of his time to help me understand various practices that, to him, characterized proper Blackfeet living. One of these had, at this point in his life, become a challenge. He described it in this way:

- 1) It's the hardest thing to concentrate on
- 2) what you really believe in
- 3) It's the hardest thing
- 4) to listen
- 5) It's one of the hardest things I think human beings have
- 6) is to listen
- 7) And actually listen and hear what they listen to
- 8) not listen and then make up their own mind

- 9) of what they heard
- 10) which is pretty common today
- 11) But to actually listen.
- 12) and you start hearing the spirits talking
- 13) and they communicate with people like bigfoot, the eagle,
elk, deer, the rocks, water
- 14) When these spirits come in
- 15) you can feel, or
- 16) you can hear those spirits and
- 17) you can feel them doing things to you.
- 18) Say if an eagle came in
- 19) you could feel the breeze of that wing as he flies by
- 20) you can feel it when he comes and puts his head by you
- 21) Same with an animal that has hair
- 22) you can feel the hair
- 23) you can feel the difference in hair too
- 24) if you're born in the mountains
- 25) been around mountains
- 26) been around animals
- 27) you've always touched the animals, so
- 28) you can tell the difference
- 29) you can close your eyes and
- 30) you can almost say
- 31) this is a dog
- 32) this is a deer
- 33) this is an elk
- 34) So you can tell that
- 35) in the ceremonies.
- 36) By going through those there
- 37) it rejuvenates your spiritual, spirituality
- 38) and your rebirth of your confidence in who you are

- 39) and that it's still alive and strong
 40) and no matter how far back East in some city you might be
 41) you know that nature and the communication
 42) between the animals and man is still there.
 43) it makes you feel spiritually strong
 44) to the point that you just want
 45) to jump with cheer and joy.
- 46) And you go back to your city life with that energy.

This brief oral text is rich in many ways. For our purposes here, notice, according to Mr. Rising Wolf, that listening is difficult (lines 1–6); one reason it is difficult for many is that they “make up” things they have heard “in their own mind” (lines 7–10), rather than really listening to what is in the world, and thus “hearing the spirits talking” (lines 11–13). Mr. Rising Wolf elaborates how “bigfoot, the eagle, elk, deer, the rocks, water” can “come in” and “communicate with people” (line 13). When this happens you can “feel” or “hear those spirits ... doing things to you” (lines 14–17). Mr. Rising Wolf gives several details of how the closeness of contacts between an eagle, animals, mountains, and people can help us not only “hear” but “feel.” Results of this process are a rejuvenation of spirituality (line 37), renewed confidence (line 38), spiritual strength (line 43), even exhilaration (line 45). And further, the value of this communication practice itself has been renewed, making it all possible (lines 41–42).

Note the careful wording by Rising Wolf in the second stanza (lines 7–13). There is a shift in consciousness here from one's own self, and mind, to the world of which one is a part. The former can easily obscure the latter, imposing self onto the world where it does not really belong. The “really” here expresses the Blackfeet premise that spiritual reality is adamantly real, around us for scrutiny, and we should not let our own minds get in the way of that. The domain of concern, then, in this type of listening is erected upon an accessible reality of which all can partake, and from which all can gain insight and renewal.

COMMUNICATING WITH RAVEN, AMONG OTHERS

In his celebrated novel, Blackfeet author James Welch composed a conversation between a key character, White Man's Dog, and a Raven (chap. 6, 56–57).

The drama carries forth as White Man's Dog (WMD) was searching for his way in the world. He was awakened one morning by a raven, and after eating, followed it. As he moved along following the raven, he realized he was going to a far-away place where he was being asked to perform a needed task. He approached a wooded area where the raven had landed in a tree, and while resting, he was startled when the Raven spoke:

- 1) Raven: You do not need your weapon young man. There is nothing here to harm you.
- 2) WMD: [His eyes widen; his heart races.]
- 3) Raven: It surprises you that I speak the language of the two-leggeds. It is easy for I have lived among you many times in my travels. I speak many languages. I converse with the black-horns and the real-bears and the wood-biters. Bigmouth and I discuss many things. ... I myself am very wise. That is why mik-api [an elder] treats me to a smoke now and then.
- 4) WMD: [Drops his weapon and falls to his knees.] Oh, pity me raven. I am a nothing-man who trembles before your power. I do not wish to harm my brothers. I was afraid of this place and what I might find.
- 5) Raven: It is proper that you humble yourself before me, White Man's Dog, for in truth I am one of great power. [Raven allows himself a wistful smile.] But my power is not that of strength. Here you see your brother skunk-bear [a wolverine] is caught in the white man's trap and I have not the strength to open it. In all of us there is a weakness.
- 6) Raven and WMD move to the trapped Skunk Bear.
- 7) Raven: So you see how it is. He has been trapped for four days, and now he is too weak to cry out. You may release him.
- 8) WMD: He will not bite?
- 9) Raven: [laughing, *caw! caw!* echoing around] You are his enemy for sure, but even Skunk Bear has a little common sense.
- 10) WMD: [carefully releases Skunk Bear while noticing he is very weak and tried to chew off his leg]
- 11) Raven: Throw him some of your real-meat, for it has strength in it to fix up this beast. ... You see, this animal has a weakness too—he is a glutton and cannot live long without food.
- 12) WMD: [Gives Skunk Bear meat.]
- 13) Raven: And now you must get down the mountain.

14) WMD: [Thanks the raven and glances at the wolverine as he turns to leave.]

15) Raven: By the way, when you enter your close-to-the-ground house tonight, lie on your left side away from the entrance. Dream of all that has happened here today. Of all the two-leggeds, you alone will possess the magic of Skunk bear. You will fear nothing and you will have many horses and wives. But you must not abuse this power, and you must listen to Mik-api, for I speak through him, that good many-faces man who shares his smoke.

This story exhibits many of the qualities we have noticed so far. We will use it to demonstrate a system of nine Blackfeet premises about this type of communication event. Each is formulated from the traditional Blackfeet view, as a belief and/or virtue that is presumed for this kind of event to be intelligible and efficacious. Together, the system captures some of the distinctiveness and power in so acting, and being.

- 1) In Blackfeet reality, there are multiple human and non-human agents that are active together; in this excerpt, that includes White Man's Dog (a man), and the raven (a bird). In earlier utterances this has included the wind, water, writing on stone, coyotes, ants, bigfoot (caribou), the eagle, elk, deer, the rocks, water (again). Human beings are sometimes startled into this realization, as White Man's Dog has been here (in the first and second stanza). This startling realization can open one's senses to insights otherwise left hidden (see premise 6 below).
- 2) Each agent, as the man and the raven on this occasion, has status as a communicant, can express things, and should be considered as such. This is demonstrated in the 15 stanzas of dialogue, above. All such agents have this status, and hold the potential to be communicants, along with people.
- 3) Agents such as man, raven, black-horns (buffalo), real-bears (grizzly and black bears), wood-biters (beaver), and bigfoot (caribou) can also converse with each other (in stanza 3). This can occur in "many languages," such as the Raven's caws, the wind's sounds, the ants' movements, and so on. Each is a source of wisdom.
- 4) Wise people, like mik-api [the elder], have learned to listen to various agents in the world, to be humble in their presence, to respect what each has to teach, and to learn from them (stanzas 3, 4, 5). In this sense, one can listen, hear, and feel through the various languages of these agents, including the assembly of all beings, from raven to rocks, wind, and water.
- 5) The most wise, like the raven and mik-api [the elder] can, at times, through this process, gain access to what some Natives have called, "the language of

the universe” (stanzas 1, 3, 4, 15, and throughout). This is a grand conversation among all the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, and all that the great Creator has made.

6) Expressions from other agents can occur in surprising and mysterious ways, such as a raven speaking “the language of the two-leggeds.” The elements of surprise and mystery can create awe, and insight, in the presence of such mysterious powers. Powers of these kinds, of the various agents, are deeply potent, varied, and unpredictable. These powers are benevolent and to be respected (stanzas 2–5).

7) Recognizing the inherent power of agents in the universe, like those of the raven and the skunk bear, can, in turn, cause us to reflect upon the weaknesses in ourselves (e.g., stanza 4). This is virtuous, for all beings should exercise proper modesty and humility in the presence of the creation.

8) Understanding our weaknesses can, in turn, reveal our strengths (stanzas 11, 12, 15). These help us get through our lives, and should also be used in service of others. This is the process through which White Man’s Dog understood the weakness (of gluttony) in the typically fearless Skunk Bear. The process also exhibits White Man’s Dog’s weakness, his fear of the unknown (e.g., the Raven talking), but also his strength as he helped skunk bear, and eventually others, through physical and spiritual aid.

9) The lessons presumed and taught here rely on listening to the agents in the world who speak, through various languages, as the raven, the Skunk Bear, and others have done.

A SUMMARY OF SOME OF THE QUALITIES IN THESE INSTANCES OF BLACKFEET DISCOURSE

The segments of Blackfeet and Crow discourse included above create a particular cultural stance for dwelling in nature, for becoming attuned to its spirited qualities, all the while listening to what it has to say. This discursive stance is filled with anticipation as various agents may speak at unexpected times, in unexpected ways. This type of event is not a function simply of one’s will, but involves a shift in the locus of attention from one’s self-will, to the elemental energies in the world that are in all things. When focused on the spirited energy in things, a traditional Blackfeet practice becomes active, a way of communicating with the real world (not with some fanciful disembodied spirits). Knowing in this way involves the primary nonverbal acts of watching, hearing, feeling, or listening to all of one’s surroundings. Through these acts, multiple

senses are activated as portals into reality: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. Through these multisensory acts of attentiveness, the world becomes known through its own ways of expressing itself, through its various means. When engaged in the world through this stance, one can become better attuned to it, resonant with it, and know things about oneself and the world that otherwise remain hidden. This largely non-linguistic communication process equips one with knowledge, and thus positions one in a place better to speak, verbally, using language. Yet one should never mistake the linguistic reports about this stance, and these events, for the non-linguistic events, themselves, for the linguistic report is always a faulty and secondary version of the primary stance at work in these non-linguistic events.

**DANGERS IN NOT LISTENING:
PERCY BULLCHILD'S *THE SUN CAME DOWN***

Just as one is directed to listen properly by Scott Frazier, Two Bears, James Welch, and the Raven, so the pitfalls of not listening are discussed as a kind of counter-discourse. The following four excerpts from the teachings of the late Blackfeet elder, Percy Bullchild (1985), serve to demonstrate the point.

- 1) For many eons of time the snakes flourished, increasing by manyfold. In fact, they had filled this mud ball and they were still coming. There were certain commands given them by Creator Sun to follow. As time went on, the snakes forgot all about the commands of their Maker. *They weren't listening*, they took everything in their own way. (6f., emphasis added)
- 2) At this time the Snake family still abounded on this land, the body of Mother Earth. These snakes were still trying their best to rule their own ways while Mother Earth was suckling them. From their wickedness, these snakes had become many—they were in many forms because of their crossbreeding with one another. Some were beginning to have legs, but they still looked like a snake. And because of no discipline or *not wanting to listen*, many of them became overgrown. Big, big in their form. Tall and long. The life of reptiles, dinosaurs. Again these reptiles reproduced many, manyfold. In fact, too many again roamed this land. So many of them again, *they wouldn't listen* to their Creator Sun's rules, but would rather have their own way. (36, emphasis added)
- 3) Napi [the disciple of Creator Sun] was alone again and started back towards his camp. But along the way towards the camp, he would stop and climb a limb to play the eye game of happiness [as played by the little birds, the chickadees]. He played the game in excess, leading to his blindness. Napi

was just one of those people that *listens, but never uses what he hears*. Too often, he climbed on a limb to play. (157, emphasis added)

4) Through with his meal, Napi folded his leggings up neatly and was soon ready to leave. Before he went out of the tipi, a strange man motioned to Napi to wait, and then he spoke: “I am the Sun, Creator of all things. Creator of this Earth you are one of the many forms of life here. Any place here on this Mother Earth is my tipi, which you were trying to run away from. You were only running inside of my tipi all the time you were running, that’s why you always woke up in that bed you slept on. [Napi was then instructed on the proper wearing of the leggings.] *Napi was listening, but the words of this strange man were going right through Napi’s ears. He didn’t hardly hear a word of the words that were spoken by this strange man.* All Napi had in his mind was to get a-going so he could try those red-winged woodpecker feather fringed leggings on, they looked so neat the way they were made. (195, emphasis added)

Based upon these teachings, we can formulate a set of lessons related to proper listening: Not listening implies breaking rules. Not listening is a fault, or a breach. The fault is a failure in resonance, of becoming attuned with the deep wisdom in the world. This deep wisdom is available to all who watch and listen appropriately. These rules are the rules of a spiritual power (Creator Sun in instances 1, 2, and 4) or the rules of a game played by agents with spiritual energies (chickadees in instance 3).

Not listening leads to the agent’s destruction. The snakes don’t listen and are destroyed by Creator Sun (in instances 1 and 2). Not acting upon what he heard gets Napi into trouble (he loses his sight after instance 3, and embarrasses himself after instance 4). This contributes to his final fall from Creator Sun’s favor. Not listening is detrimental to well-being; it can result in various kinds of symbolic and/or physical death.

As Rising Wolf points out above, not listening properly involves “having things one’s own way,” or following one’s own desires against the ever-present power of the spiritual world. There are typical qualities of not listening properly. These involve the privileging of self, and one’s own mind, over place, and others; or, being preoccupied with one’s immediate concerns over enduring or ancient wisdom.

As a result, the lessons teach: When listening properly one has access to traditional and enduring knowledge; this is revealed as one becomes attuned to the spiritual reality in the world; and when one acts in accordance with that reality. To listen properly is to be vigilantly attentive to the spirit-natured world in which one acts. All beings have access to this, should listen to it, and learn from its deep wisdom.

COMMUNICATION WITH NATURE AND REVELATORY MOMENTS: COMPARATIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSES

Michelle Scollo Sawyer (2004) has presented a comparative study about “nonverbal ways of communicating with nature.” It is a “cross-case” analysis, focused on five different practices through which people use nonverbal communication in order to connect with, or listen to the natural world. Through her analyses, she identifies the following qualities as active across these social practices: Each, according to participants, linked the sacred to material being, connecting spiritual and physical life; each practice, when done, was believed to improve the quality of life; each practice, while nonverbal, was identified linguistically, and in most cases, could be taught to others; each included agents in communication that were human and non-human (e.g., as the wind, ocean waves, lions); each involved a multisensory way both of knowing and being within the natural world; through each, nature “spoke” in revelatory ways about “the sacredness within and the connections between all living things.”

The findings of these cases, combined with the analyses above, suggest that there is, in many expressive systems, a general form of practice through which humans learn from the non-human world, and enhance their senses of that world of which they are a part. Across the cases, we realize there is non-trivial convergence, and cross-cultural evidence that communication practices of this kind exist, are valorized, and used to improve practical ways of dwelling in the world. But further, these are difficult means of communication to inscribe, especially in expressive systems that privilege print, writing, self-consciousness, and linguistically bounded knowledge.

REFLECTIONS ON REVELATORY DISCOURSE AS AN UN-BINDING FORM OF EXPRESSION

In a second comparative study, Michael Sells (1994) explored “mystical languages of unsaying.” He explored qualities of discourse that seeks to express transcendent knowledge, yet acknowledges the limits in its ability to do so. For our purposes, we can notice a set of common qualities among Scollo’s, Sells’s, and the present study. These identify a general discursive form through which revelatory insight is gained by listening to nature.

A first quality is an expressive coexistence with nature, albeit one of an unnamable kind. The experience fills one, like White Man’s Dog above, with awe and inspiration. In the case of traditional Blackfeet, this involves, when occurring properly, in the first instance, listening to nature, hearing animals, the wind, water, and so on speaking. This experience is, according to Blackfeet, adamantly real, if in some ways ineffable and transcendent.

A second quality is the desire to name the experience, thus making it known to others. This effort to communicate seeks to identify, through language, a phenomenological world of being-in-nature. For Blackfeet, this can involve snippets of discourse as those inscribed above. For others, this can involve, as Scollo (2005) and Sells (1994) describe in detail, verbal descriptions of activities like “sauntering” and “getting out into nature” (Scollo 2005), or metaphors of emanation and overflowing (Sells 1994: 6f.).

A third quality exists in the play between the expressive coexistence (quality one) and the verbally expressive (quality two). The desire to verbally express the transcendent and ineffable experience creates a dilemma that cannot be entirely resolved, verbally. How does one name the unnamable, or discuss what is beyond words? Yet strive to do so, we do. The dynamic consists in the play on the validity of both qualities: One knows the coexistence cannot be captured adequately in words; yet one should seek to put one’s important experiences into words. From a Blackfeet view, this involves speaking about these experiences, yet doing so in a way that knowingly does not capture, adequately, the reality of those experiences. Both dimensions of the practice—the nonverbal coexistence and the verbal expression—are accepted as valid, with a play between them being acknowledged. In the process, one finds oneself using a discursive form that grants through verbal expression, yet at the same time takes away, the reality of the nonverbally, transcendent coexistence.

This discourse, as it seeks to name the unnamable, can exhibit an irresolvable dilemma and a regressive quality. The irresolvable dilemma involves vain efforts to express verbally what is beyond verbal expression; it is regressive as one hears validity in such expression, yet also fault with it, thus needing correction; the effort to verbally correct the expression is inevitably flawed; this discursive dynamic is unstoppable. This point is frequently acknowledged among those wise in traditional Blackfeet ways. When asked, what does the crow say, or what is the wind saying, or what does the rock say, one is sometimes met with the wry response: “The listener decides.” In short, the wise sage says: Something has been said, we know that, can say some things about that, and this is as far as we can go, together, linguistically, for now. And we also know that what was said, non-linguistically, is more than what we have, for now, said, linguistically, about it.

This kind of discourse, as such, when understood, has a deliberate and open quality about it, constantly seeking improvement and self-correction. It is unbounded by its own current terms, and seeks outwardly beyond itself. In this sense, the discourse presents, yet at the same time solves, a dilemma: We cannot, or should not, act as if we have had a final say in the matter. The virtues of modesty, vigilance, open-minded access to the world’s expressions, and all that this has to say, are kept in view. These words lead explicitly beyond themselves, into a realm of deeply non-linguistic practice.

Of course, efforts at identifying this discourse places one squarely in the dilemma discussed above. How does one name such a discourse that cannot be adequately named? How does one name the un-nameable? We have come to think of this as an “M?”-discourse. Following Sells (1994), traditional Blackfeet, and building with Scollo (2005), we can dub the discourse as in some sense saying something important about the mystical and mysterious (M), while still immediately knowing that that saying is inadequate and must be questioned (?). Through the discourse, we draw to our attention a feature of the world that we somehow know, for it has made itself expressively available to us, yet knowingly we cannot address this adequately with our words. For Blackfeet, this involves speaking about agents who both speak and, in another sense, do not. Yet speak they do. It is the simultaneous granting of mystery, naming it, yet searching beyond it, that keeps the discourse explicitly unbound by its own terms, seeking beyond itself, transcending the very linguistic form used to express it.

Five qualities of this M?-discourse can be summarized here in the abstract: an ineffable yet expressive coexistence, linguistic expressions about it, a spiraling form (the dialectical play between the coexistence and the linguistic expressions), its irresolvable and regressive qualities (in efforts to express what cannot be adequately expressed), and its necessity to be unbound by language. And thus we return to where we began, to an ironic place, writing about a way of speaking that identifies a non-linguistic practice that cannot adequately be expressed, through words.

M?-DISCOURSE AND IRONY: WITH A HINT OF THE COMIC

To begin, we introduced our investigation as one using language to target a non-linguistic practice, using language about a Blackfeet way of speaking about a non-linguistic practice. We have found it necessary also to consider this ironic dynamic in reverse, starting with the originating practice of “listening,” moving to ways of speaking about listening, of which we then write. When we trace the ironic quality in this latter direction, prioritizing the nonverbal expression over its verbal expression, we can capture the following Blackfeet premise: Based upon nonverbal expression and practice, we know we can “listen” to “the wind”; as a result, we struggle to speak in the light of this experience; about which we write. The nonverbal expression of spiritual reality is given priority over its verbal expression.

This general discursive process can, of course, be understood recursively, as a doubly constituting relationship between so listening (to the world express itself) and what is said about it (expressively through language), each having a

hand in creating the other. We want to argue, however, that the cultural ontology—to use Richard Shweder’s (1991) phrase—that is in place for the practice draws a more causal link: listening necessarily precedes what is said about it. And not only that, but “listening” must go beyond the speech about it for it to be indeed what it is. This, we have seen, is necessary for several reasons if one is to live a kind of “realism” insisted upon in these Blackfeet practices. This, also, does not prohibit a recursive quality in the process. With this line of thinking, then, we can conclude by asking, first: How does one listen in this way? What possibilities exist when we listen in this way? Then, after so listening, what indeed can we say about it? What can be written about the process?

And so we end, for now, teetering on the brink of the absurd, as we write about ways of speaking about things that cannot be said through language; speaking about listening, writing about the wind and animals speaking, and the like, through a language not their own. The ironic dynamic seeps through every line of this chapter, as it wrestles variously with linguistic characterizations of non-linguistic entities, verbal modes of nonverbal communication, channels of communication that can be given a linguistic voice but which are largely outside “the prison-house” of that language. How does one render such a non-linguistic practice linguistically without defying the very practice of concern?

When we further couple this irony with a cultural premise that, at times, privileges the nonverbal channel of communication over the verbal, and envisions that channel as a primary mode for communication, we have magnified the dynamic, and the dilemma, thus accentuating the very ironic exigency that M?-discourse addresses, and creates. In terms of a reflective Native American discourse: It is not just that the literal wind is not a word, but that the wind without the word has much more to say to us, beyond these words we speak about it. Indeed, what can we say about that?

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Notes

1. Historical bases of this way of speaking, and living, are discussed in Harrod 2000; McClintock 1992: 167, 335–51; and in a different way in Todorov 1984.