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“TOO LITTLE CARE”: LANGUAGE,
POLITICS, AND EMBODIMENT IN THE
LIFE-WORLD

Kurt Spellmeyer

When I think about the politics of speech and writing, I return over and over to the final scene in Kurosawa's film *Ran*, or *Chaos*, which contemplates, among many other things, the fragmentation of social life in postmodernity. Kurosawa shows us a man in the fading light, bent forward on his staff at the edge of an enormous cliff. This man, really a boy, cannot see that the sun is going down because he can no longer see anything, having lost his eyes in a dynastic struggle that left most of his family dead. Nor can he know that his sister, whose arrival he expects momentarily, lies beside her severed head in the valley, another victim of another civil war. Along the path from his hut the boy has carried a scroll that evidently holds some importance for him, but as he reaches the edge of the precipice and his staff swings through the empty air, he drops the scroll to the stones below, where it falls open beneath the camera's gaze. For just a second Kurosawa shows the image on it, of a man standing upright in a circle of light, at ease with the world—a world, we might say, where politics would be unnecessary. And then we see once again the younger man, an awkward silhouette beneath the sky. We are all, Kurosawa means to tell us, that man: among us now, everything will be fiercely contested, the nature of identity no less than the limits of the state.

My concern here is not with Kurosawa or his film, but with the contestation itself, which I propose to examine by asking why fierce disagreement has overtaken even those of us whose modest task is teaching students how to read and write. In the process, I hope to suggest that if politics matters to any field, it should matter to composition: not politics in the conventional sense, as the

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"blinding" of him and the "beheading" of her, but politics in its deeper aspect as what happens after a person has dropped the scroll—the assurance of stability—and the problem of chaos ensues.

While the violence that *Ran* displays to excess has a place in every social order, Kurosawa's "chaos" arises from a contestation among rival versions of order, each claiming for itself the status of truth, and each plunging its opponents into ceaseless unease. Violence can be used by anyone toward almost any end; chaos is the product of a disarray on the level of the "life-world," which Edmund Husserl was the first to define as the "horizon," socially constituted and intersubjective, that each of us takes for granted as we move through our everyday lives. In the life-world, my experience repeatedly affirms the "naturalness" of whatever I see or think or do, and at those moments when events arrest this "natural" flow, I will renew its coherence as completely as I can, if not by transforming my actual circumstances, then by learning to perceive them in a more encompassing way (Husserl 142–47; also Merleau-Ponty 84–97, Schutz 3–15). Yet it is just this renewal that chaos threatens, for the collision of worlds, as Kurosawa demonstrates, may at last call into doubt the possibility of an order not created and sustained by violence alone.

KNOWLEDGE AND EMBODIMENT

That the crisis of postmodernity *has* overtaken us in composition surely no one can doubt. Given the proliferation of academic disciplines, each with its restrictive dialect, and given our growing awareness that behind these dialects lie vastly different modes of seeing and acting, the days are gone when we could simply announce, as Henry Seidel Canby did in 1912, that "Good form in writing" is the same as "good form in dress. It is bad form to wear a flannel shirt with a dress coat, or a white lawn tie with a sack suit. It is quite as bad form to . . . make mistakes in grammar" (xiv). The days are gone as well, or I hope they are, when most teachers of writing would accept at face value the conclusions of researchers like Carl Bereiter, who argued two decades ago that poor blacks in Urbana, Illinois, were a people without any language worth the name: without a language, or a culture, or the power to reason (112–113). Rejecting such opinions, more careful researchers, among them William Labov and Mina Shaughnessy, Shirley Brice Heath and Mike Rose, have helped us to see that the peoples supposedly without a language preserve their own "ways with words," ways as logical, complex, and elaborated as those familiar to the speakers of "standard English"—the language, that is, of the white middle class, from whose ranks have come most college-level teachers in our field. Although these teachers, the "we" of the following essay, once taught something simply known as "good English," we now

teach a dialect among many dialects, and the distinction signals a major shift in our values and practices.

Still, rehearsing these details does not help, I think, to explain why the politics of language and instruction has become so much a matter of controversy. No one who understands that language and the university are themselves historical constructs can ignore the fact that each has been constructed in the interests of some groups at the expense of others, and to the detriment of some values for the sake of others. Even E. D. Hirsch adopts this position when he equates literacy with culture. But we have yet to recognize what culture *is*: neither a stock of fundamental facts and terms nor a repertoire of conventions, neither a Lévi-Straussian *bricolage* of structures nor a Geertzian “ensemble of texts,” but something closer to tales that must be told, retold, and revised until they seem real to the teller (Lévi-Strauss 16–22, 75–108; Geertz, *Interpretation* 452). By forgetting both the teller and this process of revision, we have failed to acknowledge our complicity in the persistence of an ethnocentrism all the more profound because it masquerades as tolerance.

For some indication of just how profound the ethnocentrism is, I would like to consider an essay, “The Man Made of Words,” by N. Scott Momaday, a writer of Kiowa ancestry who speaks about language and social life from the interface between his “horizon” and ours. There Momaday observes, “It seems to me that in a certain sense we are . . . made of words; that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of a verbal dimension” (Hobson 162). To illustrate the nature of this dimension and to argue its distinctly moral quality—to argue, that is, a link between our language and our lives in the world—Momaday recalls his final hours at work on *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, a narrative that weaves together Kiowa history and myth with his private impressions while retracing the journey of his ancestors from the Yellowstone country to Oklahoma where they met, fought, and lost to successive waves of white settlers. As our historians used to assure us, the destiny of the white settlers was providentially manifest, but the Kiowa were forced to play out a hidden and ironic destiny, for *their* journey of collective self-fashioning was interrupted by their near-annihilation, and it may have been the sense of something prematurely terminated, something yet to be written, that left Momaday unsure of what he should say in his epilogue.

When he began to write again, however, this time about the end of his ancestors’ migrations, Momaday remembered an old woman, Ko-sahn, from whom he had heard stories one summer—and abruptly he saw that these stories held the key not only to Kiowa history, but also to his project. Ko-sahn, he realized then, was the embodiment of everything that remained unsaid, the

uncompleted narrative of his people. Or rather, she made it possible for Momaday himself to embody the past, transposing it into his own life:

For some time I sat looking down at these words on the page, trying to deal with the emptiness that had come about inside of me. The words did not seem real. I could scarcely believe that they made sense, that they had anything whatsoever to do with meaning. In desperation almost, I went back over the final paragraphs, backwards and forwards, hurriedly. My eyes fell upon the name Ko-sahn. And all at once everything seemed suddenly to refer to that name. The name seemed to humanize the whole complexity of language.

What happened next to Momaday happened, as he might put it, at the boundary between the lived world and the “verbal dimension”:

Then it was that that ancient, one-eyed woman Ko-sahn stepped out of the language and stood before me on the page. I was amazed. Yet it seemed entirely appropriate that this should happen.

“I was just now writing about you,” I [said]. . . . “But all of this, this imagining,” I protested, “this has taken place—is taking place in my mind. You are not actually here. . . .”

“Be careful of your pronouncements, grandson,” she answered. . . . “If I am not here in this room . . . then surely neither are you.” (Hobson 164)

Words, Momaday reminds us, come from the past unembodied, and they cannot be embodied—cannot have a *meaning*, as opposed to an abstract definition—until they take on the power to explain the reader’s circumstances to himself, just as Ko-sahn does for Momaday. And yet once words have assumed this explanatory power, they no longer operate as “text” at all, a verbal artifact distinct from the flow of experience. To the extent that words become real and meaningful, they also change how the reader thinks and sees and feels. As meaning, a text is embodied in the reader, and this embodiment effects a “deep” transformation of both the reader’s universe of language and sense of self, reconciling them within the contours of a single reality. But the “depth” of this change, as Momaday represents it, is neither a quality of the text nor an attribute of the reader; rather, it emerges as a consequence of their shared capacity to disclose a world.

Of course *we* who are not of Kiowa descent might prefer to dismiss Ko-sahn’s appearance as a “literary device”—as, in my terms, “not deep.” But Momaday intends to question our longstanding common-sense distinction between words and things: the belief that we can see Ko-sahn without the agency of language, and conversely, that we can speak her name in a meaningful fashion without also bearing witness to her presence. If Momaday suggests that words mean nothing outside the context of particular events, he also argues that the way events reveal themselves depends on the language we use. Because words have the potential to conceal as well as disclose, any struggle over language at the same time entails a

struggle over worlds fought on the deepest levels of the self—that part of the self most intimately connected with other selves and with history. To silence any person, to prohibit his speech or discredit his manner of speaking, is therefore to silence much more than the person, not only everyone from whom the speaker learned his words, but also everything these words have made real: the Sun Dance of Momaday's ancestors; the sacred Sun Dance Doll Tai-me; the prophetic falling of the stars in 1833, which signaled the end of the Kiowas' sovereignty. We should not forget that Momaday writes as someone who has seen the devastation of a world, and now struggles to resurrect it by recovering its names, images, and narratives. While he addresses us in our language, and on terms we can readily appreciate, he also writes as a person who has viewed this language from an outsider's perspective—has known firsthand its ability to silence those who give things other names. As much as his essay reaffirms our life-world and our language, it also takes aim against them. By reconstructing the traditions of his forebears in words partly ours and partly his, Momaday resists, and then presses back, the limitations of a culture which has endangered his own legacy.

Momaday's predicament—and increasingly ours as well at a time when there are more and more Momadays around—arises from his uneasy situation between worlds often violently opposed. The writer Simon J. Ortiz, from the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, describes this same predicament in the short story "Woman Singing" through the impressions of his narrator Clyde, a migrant farm worker in Idaho. One afternoon when Clyde hears a woman singing in the shack across from his, he remembers the songs of his people, the Navajo, on their reservation far to the south. Later Clyde and another Indian worker, Willie, go into town to watch a movie about a very different kind of singer:

Hank Williams was the singer's name. Clyde knew who he was, used to be on the Grand Ole Opry on radio, he remembered, sang songs he remembered too. Clyde thought about the singers back home. The singers of the land, the people, the rain, the good things of his home. His uncle on his mother's side was a medicine man, and he used to listen to him sing. . . . Sing with me, his uncle would say, and Clyde would sing. . . .

Willie laughed at the funny incidents in the movie, and he laughed about the drunk Hank Williams. That made him wish he had a drink again. (Hobson 260)

Through the one word "singer" two distinct worlds compete for embodiment in Clyde: the world of Hank Williams, where singers drink and fight and raise hell with other men's wives, and the world of the people, the Navajo, who sing to invoke the rain and many other "good things." Caught between these conflicting worlds, Clyde at first feels anger and then despair, since the conflict is far from equal. Although Momaday successfully appropriates white culture, Clyde and the other migrant workers have been so thoroughly appropriated that the reservation and its way of life survive as little more than memory:

And then he thought of what all the white men in the world thought about all the Indians. . . . For a long time Clyde stood behind the door of his and Willie's shack. Listening and thinking quiet angry thoughts. He thought of Willie . . . the Elkhorn Bar, Hank Williams . . . and he asked himself what he was listening for. He knew that he was not listening for the song, because he had decided that the woman singing was something a long time ago and would not happen anymore. If it did, he would not believe it. He would not listen. Finally, he moved away from the door and began to search through Willie's things for a bottle. But there was no bottle of anything except the kerosene and for a moment he thought of drinking kerosene. (Hobson 263–64)

In Clyde's despair, Ortiz shows us what is *really* at stake when we speak about the politics of language—a dialectic of loss and recovery, concealment and awareness, powerlessness and power on a scale so intimate and ordinary that our “politicized” profession characteristically overlooks it. Behind the politics of language, or rather, far beneath it, there waits another, long-neglected politics, long-neglected and poorly theorized—a deep politics of experience, “deep” because it unfolds at the boundary between life-worlds in dialogue or contestation.

But why, with contestation everywhere around us, have we neglected the reality of experience to such a degree? Why has experience remained, if not an object of derision, then an empty trope, even among its defenders? This neglect, I am convinced, is an outcome of our privileged situation as the “winners” of colonial history, who like winners everywhere justify the status quo by appealing to the notion that things are the way they are necessarily. For the last hundred years, after all, nearly everything we have learned about culture and language—from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown to Geertz, and from Saussure to Barthes, and Derrida—has presupposed the existence of determining laws or codes that operate “behind the backs” of those subject to them (Durkheim 415–47; Geertz, *Local* 62–64; Saussure 7–17; Barthes, esp. 35–40; Derrida xv, 3–4, 340–41; Giddens 2–3). Yet it is exactly this perspective Momaday repudiates when he insists, writing from the standpoint of the “defeated,” that nothing is real beyond the world people consciously make in the effort to declare “possession of themselves” (Hobson 169). By idealizing language and culture as the true actors on history's stage, the descendants of Durkheim and Saussure leave resistance as well as domination unexplained: why is it that people work so hard to impose their codes and systems on others? And why do those others work so hard, in turn, to fight against the imposition?

The answer, I am persuaded, lies with the codes themselves; or rather, with their poverty before the plenitude of experience, which R. D. Laing once defined as “man's invisibility to man”—that portion of everyday life, in other words, which always exceeds the codes (18). And from the excess, from the predicament of no longer seeing in the present a satisfying likeness to the past, domination *and* the act of resistance arise—the first as a denial, the second as a reaffirmation—of

everything the codes leave out. But if Laing took experience seriously, domination and resistance remain incidental for those who hold, with Lévi-Strauss—a successor to both Durkheim and Saussure—that language exhibits a reason “which has its [own] reasons . . . of which man knows nothing” (*Savage Mind* 252). What disappears from the “behind-their-backs” tradition is any sense of how human subjects struggle to preserve their life-worlds against the imposition of alien values. This struggle, arguably the central issue of education, is nothing less than the central issue of postmodernity itself.

When the African novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o writes about the education of children under the British colonial regime in Kenya, he restores to the discussion of language and culture much that remains concealed by postcolonial high theory. Like the Kiowa and Navajo, Ngugi’s people, the Gikuyu, one day found themselves strangers in their native land. Under the tutelage of British supervisors, the development of young Gikuyu “was now determined,” Ngugi recalls, “by the dominant language” of English and the dominant culture of northern Europe. In primary school, the children of Ngugi’s generation, whose parents had grown up with the tales of Hare and Leopard and Lion, read Dickens and Stevenson and H. Rider Haggard (12). Not only did the pedagogy of the colonists intentionally divide the school from the home, but it colonized what Ngugi calls the “mental universe” of its subjects. For these children, thinking transpired in a language far removed from the world they knew firsthand, and this world, their world, they learned to see through the eyes of those who despised them. Ngugi himself remembers reading Hume’s famous dictum that “the negro is naturally inferior to the whites,” and Hegel’s altogether characteristic opinion, in *The Philosophy of History*, that “there was nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in the African character” (16–18). No matter how the colonizers imagined their undertaking, to Ngugi it meant the loss of a “harmony” between the self, the world, and language (28).

The experience of colonial subjects like Ngugi, Momaday, and Ortiz differs greatly from the experience of middle-class whites. But on the level of deep politics the colonization of the student’s “mental universe,” the discrediting of his or her everyday language and common-sense world, is a phenomenon that reaches far beyond any single class or nationality and beyond ideologies of left and right. Well before Europeans colonized sub-Saharan Africa, they had already colonized themselves, smashing down their small-scale societies and overturning their local knowledge—not once but so often and so thoroughly that the most “advanced” societies are also those to which the state of “homelessness” has become most tenaciously endemic (Hobsbawm 44–73). Almost everyone can claim, as Ngugi does, that formal education in some sense concealed the events it supposedly explained and that the language of the classroom could “never, as spoken or written, properly reflect . . . the real life” of the student’s own “com-

munity" (16). While not everyone benefits equally from the prevailing balance of terrors and powers, the logic of colonization applies to everyone alike. On the top as on the bottom, we are all colonized, and the fact of our mutual oppression explains why colonization continues—as a deep cultural logic—long after the troops have gone home.

The troops, so to speak, are now within us. Even a person like Joan Didion, born to relative privilege, describes her education in the essay "Why I Write" much as Ngugi does:

During the years when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley I tried, with a kind of hopeless late-adolescent energy, to buy some temporary visa into the world of ideas, to forge for myself a mind that could deal with the abstract.

In short I tried to think. I failed. My attention veered inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible, to what was generally considered . . . the peripheral.

(Smart 257–58)

The "peripheral" was Didion's life, and although she represents her frustrations as uniquely hers, it is the familiar, almost universal character of her observations here that might lead us to look for a larger, and social, cause. Like many of our students, Didion understood formal knowledge as removed from, even antithetical to, her actual circumstances, and for Didion, within the academy at least, this division became insurmountable. "During those years," she recalls in her essay, "I was traveling on what I knew to be a very shaky passport, forged papers: I knew that I was no legitimate resident in any world of ideas. I knew I couldn't think" (Smart 258). The deep political consequence of Didion's estrangement from the "world of ideas" was still another division: between herself and others, between her private life and a public world always vaguely imagined as "out there." Convinced she "couldn't think," Didion became a "writer" by default: someone committed to a redefining of words on the basis of her lived experience.

To the extent that speech and writing permit—in fact, demand—such redefinitions, words are perpetually political. And to the extent that institutions, English departments among them, can enable or prevent the embodiment of ideas and the destruction or renewal of life-worlds, their function is political as well. But if politics confronts us as an inescapable fact, which *specific* form of politics will we foster? By expanding the canon and revising undergraduate curricula in the spirit of multiculturalism, we may still overlook what matters most—not knowledge but the uses of knowledge. Even with all the curricular changes now in place at schools like Berkeley, Syracuse, and Minnesota, nothing will really have changed in English unless we are willing to promote the use of knowledge by our students as a means of renewing and enlarging their specific historical loyalties. Adding Malcolm X to a reading list is not the same as reconstructing the university to make room for Black Muslims and their way of life. And "making room" should mean more than reducing this way of life to a

subject for analysis at the hands of an instructor whose pose of professional dispassion and rigor may conceal (but not prevent) efforts at converting Black Muslim students to a rival faith or allegiance.

By ignoring the political distinction between adding texts to a list and bringing “otherness” into our professional arenas, we may preserve the appearance of uncoercive inquiry when we are really on the road to Kurosawa’s earthly hell of mutual incomprehension—which is, I should point out for those who missed the film, a version of King Lear’s. And Lear’s kingdom falls into chaos not because he has grown too careless of order, but because in his obsession with it he neglects the preservation of intersubjective understanding, the understanding that comes with the willingness to see through the eyes of those least like oneself. “I have,” he says, “ta’en/ Too little care of this” (*Lear* 3.4.82–83). If Momaday, Ortiz, and Ngugi can add anything to Lear’s insight on the moor, it is precisely that the less we care about what knowledge does to people, the farther we will stray from the future achievement of any truly common knowledge.

DISEMBODIMENT AND THE DYNAMICS OF COLONIZATION

But how, exactly, do we go about pursuing such a knowledge, the kind that Momaday constructs when he ushers Ko-sahn into our world? For many of us, the most obvious answer, possibly the only one, must be a return to reason. The crisis fostered by our current multiplicity of worlds would seem to bestow upon reason something like the unqualified reverence in which Socrates held it at another crucial moment of conflicting values—reason as the “pilot” that guides the “soul” from “a plurality of perceptions to a unity” (*Phaedrus* 247c, 249b–c). A return to Reason with the capital “R” might enable us to see the prevailing chaos of different values from a new and reassuring perspective, not as a collision of rival truths but as a contest among rival claimants to the Truth, each positioned somewhere definite between stark ignorance and perfected knowledge.

For me, however, and I suspect for many others, the single most powerful defense of reason is to be found in Boethius’s treatise, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Although *The Consolation* offered nothing really new as an account of reason, it laid out its simple argument with such overwhelming emotional force that it created almost singlehandedly what might be called the *romance* of reason. A former consul of the Roman Senate and a defender of its fading authority, Boethius was condemned to death by Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, who had conquered the Western Empire in 489. In the months preceding the execution, with the political survival of the empire less and less certain and with the Church increasingly threatened by Theodoric’s Arian heresy, Boethius wrote in praise of a Christianized goddess of Wisdom whom he renamed Philosophy. To the vagaries of Fortune, which has betrayed him in the long run, he contrasts the

unshakable insight provided by reason. “For who,” Philosophy asks him, can impose “any [unjust] law upon man, except upon his body, or upon his fortune, which is less than his body? You can never impose upon a free spirit, nor can you deprive a rationally self-possessed mind of its equanimity” (35).

Whatever reason might become in the centuries that followed, it would seem to have its origins in the phenomenon of oppression, just as Nietzsche understood. Through reason, the victim fabricates a compensatory inner self and a second, “rational” world beyond the reach of the oppressor, a world in which the silent can speak and the defeated can achieve an unachievable redress. Yet the mind’s liberation carries with it a hidden price, and that price is the asceticism of disembodiment, for when reason no longer serves the body by enlarging the sphere of its concrete interactions, it becomes a surreptitious ally of the oppressor. Such, Nietzsche alleges, was the case with Socrates, who responded to the chaos in Athens not by pursuing new modes of experience but by claiming to have glimpsed a realm of “truth” that experience could do nothing to change. In Nietzsche’s view, the result was an unparalleled disaster: armed with reason, Socrates’s young admirers—the West’s first missionaries—waged a war on the life-world of their stammering, defenseless fellow citizens (Nietzsche 478).

Man, as Kenneth Burke is rumored to have said, does not live by the *idea* of bread alone. And because reason all too often and too easily prefers ideas over bread itself, its romance conceals a destructiveness that philosophers sometimes prefer to ignore while historians cannot—if they look closely. Those of us taught to hold reason in an unreflecting esteem would do well to recollect that the West’s colonial adventure was at the same time a history of reason’s relentless, and subversive, invocation. Here, for example, is what an early nineteenth-century Protestant missionary, William Swan, had to say about the Buryat Mongols of Siberia, when they persistently rebuffed his efforts to convert them from their native amalgam of spirit-worship and Lamaism:

During our stay many came to us, received books, and conversed about the Gospel. . . . When we had exposed the futility of their arguments for a multitude of gods, etc., they would say, “This is too much for our minds,” (meaning such subjects were beyond their reach.) In fact, they are in general very ignorant, even of the tenets of their own superstition [Buddhism], nor is it requisite, according to their ideas, that they should know them, their duty consisting merely in reading prayers in an unknown tongue [Tibetan], and performing other bodily exercises; so that they are saved completely *the trouble of thinking*; on this account their religion is more suited to the indolence of their minds, as well as the depravity of their nature, than one which addresses the [intellect]. (Bawden 235)

Anyone who reads the narratives of the preeminent European missionaries—Matteo Ricci in China or David Livingstone in East Africa—will be impressed by the consistency with which these men linked cultural difference to unreason. And conversely, we can hardly fail to appreciate the confidence with which they

presupposed that the triumph of their way of life would follow on the triumph of reason. As Swan wrote in a proposal for the future education of the Buryat,

Means should be taken to excite in them a spirit of enquiry. The people should be taught *to think*, and to consider this as their undoubted privilege. When they learn that freedom of thought and action in religious matters is their inalienable right, their eyes will then begin to open upon the deceitful maxims of their own priesthood. They will then be led to examine the foundations of their belief, and the true nature of their religious observances. . . . Every Christian Mission established in such a country has the direct tendency thus to excite and keep up enquiry, and much may be done in sapping the foundations of an erroneous system before any outward change is apparent. (Bawden 252)

Swan does not neglect to add that an unsparingly reasoned assault on Lamaism must go hand in hand with "the inculcation of Christian principles," while back home, in the Britain of Robert Owen, Jeremy Bentham, and James Mill (the father of John Stuart), these same principles were growing less and less secure. Among the "savages," perhaps, Swan the rationalist may have unconsciously hoped to regain a paradise of certainty lost to him forever in his native land.

Though a student of the Buryats' Mongolian dialect and a worker in Siberia's "mission fields" for the better part of two decades, Swan never seems to have appreciated the most basic features of the religion he labored so long and so hard to exterminate. On some level he knew that the lamas he derided as unreasoning (comparing them to "Papists," among many other things) were heirs to an ancient and highly sophisticated tradition of dialectics, and that the most eminent among them had undergone scholarly training in the Buddhist canon and in the literary legacy of India and Tibet, a training more extensive than the infrequent education Swan himself had received (Bawden 84–86; 156–168). For Swan, nonetheless, the Buryat were always to remain a people without knowledge, a people who had never learned "to think." In this same spirit Swan's contemporary, the explorer-missionary Dr. Livingstone, made a point of openly violating the religious conventions of the tribes whose hospitality he enjoyed, just as Ricci, two centuries earlier, had set out to master Chinese culture, even going so far as to adopt the clothing of a Buddhist priest, in order to cast down the whole edifice more completely (Oliver 80; Spence 114–15, 250–55).

Assessing the ultimate failure of the Siberian mission, the historian C. R. Bawden observes that the Buryat had nothing to gain from conversion to "what . . . looked like a fly-by-night novelty." For the individual Buryat, there could be no conceivable "reason . . . to apostasize, to give all this up, to cut himself off from his fellow Buryats and earn their scorn" (232). William Swan, the defender of reason, might have had faith in a universal truth, one superior to differences of every kind, but no degree of rigor or eloquence made his version of that truth credible to the Buryat themselves. Their beliefs, as much as ours—

and as much, I should add, as our students'—went hand in hand with an entire way of life, which the change Swan hoped to incite would have placed at needless risk. To suppose, as Swan did, that some amount of strenuous argument might touch off a mass conversion was to invert the real relationship between ideas and life-worlds. If the Buryat turned their backs on the Protestant mission, they did so not because they found its logic unconvincing; they found its logic unconvincing because they wanted, and they needed, to continue being Buryat. Like all of us, they believed what already made sense, in terms of their accustomed assumptions and their proven social arrangements. For them, as for us, such assumptions and arrangements defined the farthest boundary of thinking, which any welcome change must enlarge rather than erase.

Although Swan's mission to Siberia failed, the progress of "reason" is by and large a chronicle of uninterrupted conquests. Yet it has drawn its strength, generation after generation, from a commitment to the unreason it supposedly renounces—a commitment to the irrational refusal of any genuine dialogue, which would entail an admission that the other party must be right from some particular perspective. While the disclosure of this perspective lies beyond the power of reason alone, it never lies beyond power of words, as the means of embodied involvement with the world. Consider the nature of the world disclosed to the reader through the words that follow, spoken at the turn of the century by the Paiute Jack Wilson (Wovoka) in conversations with James Mooney, a Smithsonian-sponsored anthropologist. On a winter's day in 1889, the sun, according to Wilson, "died," and so did Wilson himself, who then rose up into heaven. There

he saw God, with all the people [deceased] long ago engaged in their oldtime sports and occupations, all happy and forever young. It was a pleasant land and full of game. After showing him all, God told him he must go back and tell his people they must be good and love one another, have no quarreling, and live in peace with the whites; that they must work, and not lie or steal; that they must put away the old practices that savored of war; that if they faithfully obeyed his instructions they would at last be reunited with their friends in this other world, where there would be no more death or sickness or old age. He was then given the dance which he was commanded to bring back to his people. By performing this dance at intervals, for five consecutive days each time, they would secure this happiness to themselves and hasten the event. Finally, God gave him control over the elements so that he could make it rain or snow. (Mooney 14)

True or false? Warranted or unwarranted? To ask these questions at the outset is in my view worse than absurd; by doing so we renew a long history of violence aimed not only at others, but also at those aspects of our own experience we have never understood or acknowledged. Far from requiring the kind of detachment that Plato recommends in the *Phaedrus*, the detachment of the thinker who has learned to transcend the specificity of his circumstances, Wilson's words seek out an embodiment in us, a change in our manner of perceiving the world.

A change of just this kind overtook James Mooney, the ethnographer who interviewed Jack Wilson. By 1890, when reports of an Indian messiah first reached federal agents in Washington, Indians from many tribes had begun to welcome Wilson as nothing less than a "divine messenger" whose "revelation" would restore their shattered lives. More eager to pass judgment than to understand, the press treated him with the same glib condescension that magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* have made routine today. Years later, Mooney would recount how Wilson had "been denounced as an impostor, ridiculed as a lunatic, and laughed at as a pretended Christ." But Mooney's purpose, succinctly stated in the first chapter of his ethnography *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, was to retell Wilson's story toward a different end: "Notwithstanding all that had been said and written by newspaper correspondents about the messiah, not one of them had undertaken to find the man himself and to learn from his . . . lips what he really taught." Not one, in Mooney's words, had "understood" the real "meaning" of the Ghost Dance (7). To understand its meaning, Mooney sat for hours on the floor of Wilson's lodge, and he took part in the Ghost Dance while living among the Arapaho and Cheyenne. All told, he spent twenty-two months and traveled 32,000 miles to interview Wilson's followers in twenty tribes, intermittently returning to Washington to conduct ancillary research. For Mooney, and very nearly Mooney alone, "understanding" meant surveying the subject from every possible point of view (xi-xiii).

Throughout his years among the Buryat, William Swan had achieved a state of vigilance celebrated by his colleagues as "single-mindedness" (Bawden 12). In Mooney, though, we see another kind of vigilance, a determined desire not to stay the same at any cost but to go beyond the limits of both his knowledge and his sense of self—and this disparity between the two modes of knowing is reflected in the smallest details of their responses to the unfamiliar. Here, for example, is an account of a Lamaist ceremony recorded by Edward Stallybrass, an associate of Swan's in the Siberian venture:

The chief Lama told us, that the Lamas would now perform [their] service, upon which the latter went to collect their instruments, laughing as they went. These consisted of cymbals, kettles [drums], and two long trumpets, which made a most dismal noise. The Lamas said their prayers with a muttering voice, and with their eyes shut. At intervals they were accompanied by the instruments, which sounded without any regular tune. The chief Lama stood by, muttering his prayers with apparent devotion. The whole was a scene of the greatest nonsense and confusion. (Bawden 141)

And now here is James Mooney at a Plains Indian ritual:

[The] whole company, men, women, and children, went through the same ceremony . . . beginning with Wilson and myself, and ending with members of the [host] family. The ceremony occupied a considerable time, and was at once beautiful and impressive. Not a word was said . . . excepting as someone in excess of

devotion would utter prayerful exclamations aloud like the undertone of a litany. Every face wore a look of reverent solemnity, from the old men and women down to little children of 6 and 8 years. Several of them, the women especially, trembled while praying. (162)

Stallybrass's conception of rationality obliged him to look with the greatest skepticism and "distance" at those aspects of the lamas' ceremony most directly opposed to his severe Congregationalist sense of order—especially, I imagine, the lamas' laughter in a grave and sacred venue. By belittling their ritual as "the greatest nonsense and confusion," he summarily denied it any place in his life-world—or rather, he *tried* to deny it, since it was already there irreversibly. And because it was already there, this denial of the other would henceforth require an inner policing, a relentless suppression of the "other" inside. I have no doubt, however, that suppression had become second nature to Stallybrass long before his encounter with the Buryat, in whom he recognized the sense of playfulness he had once learned to despise as shameful in himself.

Mooney's research on Wilson and the Ghost Dance religion was rational in a different and far less destructive sense—less destructive to his own life as well as to the lives of others. Perhaps because he saw in the Paiutes' misery the outlines of his private distress, he identified with Wilson and his followers as few other white observers did. The "son of dirt-poor and despised Irish immigrants," Mooney expressed, in the words of Alice Beck Kehoe, "a strong feeling of fellowship with other groups conquered and oppressed by English-speaking governments" (30). By reconstructing the Ghost Dance phenomenon in terms of his personal history, Mooney was able to look beyond the unfamiliar content of Wilson's teaching to discover its broader human value—the way it sustained its believers within their local *Gestalt*. Swan and Stallybrass saw Lamaism as a rival dogma and nothing else, but Mooney realized that disparities on the level of explicit belief, the level philosophers mean when they talk about truth or falsity, can obscure more consequential similarities on the level of pragmatic social practice, the "deep" level of life-world politics. Different beliefs in different contexts could serve the very same purpose, and in the context of Native American life during the 1880s, Wilson's prophecies abundantly justified Mooney's comparisons to the "great world faiths." Everywhere he looked the missionary William Swan saw unbridgeable divisions, but the ethnographer James Mooney saw everywhere a common human ground—common not in the details of what people thought, but in the dilemmas that made thought necessary. This ground, often ignored but never altogether out of sight, Mooney uncovers more expansively by asking his readers to consider "how natural" it is for a "race" that "lies crushed and groaning beneath an alien yoke" to "dream of a redeemer, an Arthur, who shall return from exile or awake from some long sleep to drive out the usurper and win back for his people [everything] they lost" (Mooney 1). Since

history has spared no one fully, we have all, as Mooney knew, lived through something like this loss, and we have all felt something like this need.

THE POLITICS OF EMBODIMENT

If our experience is destroyed, our behavior will be destructive.

R. D. Laing (28)

Mooney's writings offer us a deep-political alternative to the reductive heuristics of "argument," a way of knowing not irrational but deeper than "reason." In their concern for the renewal of knowledge through its embodiment within a life-world, these writings oblige us to rethink how we teach at least as carefully as what we teach. They oblige us to distinguish between a pseudo-emancipatory pedagogy of contempt or conversion and those heuristics more conducive to dialogue broadly imagined as an experiential pluralism: not the liberal pluralism that perpetuates estrangement by ignoring or suppressing difference, but one that values difference as a common resource for the enlargement of life-worlds through an endless, uncoercive exchange. If this exchange today operates nowhere in a fully realized form—in no institution or locale, no discourse or discipline—people have always managed to keep it going nevertheless even under the worst circumstances, or so the fate of societies like the Kiowa suggests.

After a century of intensely repressive educational practice, when everything that could be done was done with a vengeance to humiliate Native Americans and erase their historical memory (see Jensen), writers such as Momaday and Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, and Louise Erdrich have attracted millions of white readers. And many whites, supposedly heirs to the triumph of the West, have since the time of the first colonial encounters quietly withdrawn their allegiance (Axtell 168–206). Just as Momaday's theories of language owe something to his graduate training under Yvor Winters at Stanford, so Americans of European ancestry may discover that Ko-sahn speaks more powerfully to them than Conrad's Marlowe or Melville's Ishmael. By looking where their predecessors turned away, these readers may find sources of renewal described by the historian James Axtell as "community, abundant love, and uncommon integrity" (206). Then again, they may choose to look elsewhere—in which case "higher pluralism" has a distinct advantage over chaos, cynicism, or plain bad faith.

To illustrate what happens on the grand scale when this higher pluralism disappears, I want to conclude with one author's account of a society that ours may increasingly come to resemble, both in its diversity and in its unwillingness to acknowledge diversity's uses. The society is Sri Lanka, and the author is Stanley Tambiah, a contemporary anthropologist of Southeast Asian societies. According to Tambiah, the growing political conflict between a largely Buddhist Sinhalese majority—the "missionaries" in his narrative—and a largely Hindu

Tamil minority has produced a war of interpretations, a struggle to control the “text” of the island’s ancient culture. Haunted by fears of disloyalty and collapse, fears made worse by the island’s economic decline, the Sinhalese majority has attempted to assimilate the Tamils through such measures as a “Sinhala only” language policy, and these measures have inspired a determined and sometimes murderous Tamil resistance (74–75). What seems most enigmatic to Tambiah is the suddenness of the rupture between two groups that enjoyed eight hundred years of coexistence, including three centuries of occupation by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British.

Although no single account can do justice to so complex a phenomenon, Tambiah notes the disappearance of shared rituals and icons that sustained enduring peace through a *de facto* hermeneutic openness. One exemplary shared icon, possibly the most important one of all, was the god Kataragama, whose yearly festival has brought together millions of Sinhalese and Tamils since the 1500s. While Hindu priests presided at the shrine proper, each group paid its respects to the god in a different manner and each left the festival with a different sense of what had transpired there. And yet precisely because the festival afforded opportunities for difference, it sustained a commonality as well—a commonality-in-difference now endangered. For the first time on record, Buddhist priests have replaced their Hindu counterparts, and Sinhalese zealots more and more monopolize the previously ecumenical cult, with the worst possible results (Tambiah 59, Obeyesekere 460–61). “However much,” Tambiah insists, the loss of pluralism “served in the short run to liberate collective energies,” the ideology of “communal identity”—the ideology of mandatory sameness—has in the long run “functioned as . . . an engine of domination” (141). But Tambiah leaves relatively unexplored the “existential” sources of the ideology, which may owe less to Sinhalese traditions than to the deep politics of embodiment, the same struggle that now drives our fierce debates over canons and curricula.

On the basis of our history since the Industrial Revolution, we might speculate that the ideology of mandatory sameness marks the advent in Sri Lanka of the modern nation-state, governed by professional politicians, administered by unelected functionaries, financed by corporations, and culturally normalized by the schools. But this ideology of sameness, for the Sri Lankans as for us, may have a deeper source in a profound self-hatred. What the Sinhalese fear most about the Tamils is the truth about themselves, to which the Tamils, merely by their presence, bear an inadvertent witness. With rising popular expectations and a declining economy, many Sinhalese now doubt their capacity to face the crisis, and instead of attempting to resolve it by transforming their way of life, they have set off on a search for disembodied and idealized compensations, a collective denial of their most recent and most pressing experience of failure. By fabricating a tradition that belies the complexity of the past, they can forget who they are

today, and by imposing a single normative interpretation on cultural fixtures like the Kataragama festival, they can compel the Tamils to join them, in both their predicament and their world-denying asceticism.

We scarcely need the example of Sri Lanka, however, to see Tambiah's "engine of domination" grinding on. As often as universities have encouraged the embodiment of knowledge, they have played the very opposite role by enforcing some version of what Arthur Schlesinger calls our "national identity" (21). Given the academy's conflicted heritage—of popular empowerment as well as normalization—our most deeply political act as teachers of English may be to reconsider "politics" itself, which has typically justified a regimen of "explaining" knowledge to our students or of deconstructing it for them, as if our worlds and theirs were already the same. Convinced that truth lies beyond change and difference, our predecessors strained to overlook those moments of experience that seemed most menacing, unruly, and alien. And now we, while attempting to reclaim those moments, still regard truth as something to be fashioned on behalf of others, when in fact we cannot predict—though we should certainly try to learn—how the meaning of our knowledge changes once it enters the life-worlds of people unlike ourselves.

Far more deeply political than "politics" today is a practice far more difficult for teachers as well as students: Mooney's practice of pursuing through difference a transformation of the self; of straining, as Momaday strains, to hear in the unfamiliar words of others the voices from his own past. The translation of such a practice into scholarship and pedagogy falls beyond the purview of this essay, but every text we teach is a Kataragama, whose openness to multiple interpretations we can deny or accept but never contain. Indebted as they are to a tradition of denial—a tradition devised to contain this openness in the name of an order "always already" manifest—politics and pedagogy in their usual forms continue the missionaries' task. But like William Swan among the Buryat, we may find that the gospel carried to the wilderness is neither welcome nor useful there. Any knowledge which might be useful must give people something "deeper" than one gospel or another; it must assist them in their particular struggles to decide who they have been and what they will become. Without claiming to provide for the salvation of our students, teachers of writing have a part to play in these struggles; and considering that more than words are at stake, perhaps we actually will.

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