“Fragmentary Holiness”: Spirituality and Environmental Justice in the Poetry of Elizabeth Woody and Melissa Kwasny

“Poetry is not purely a personal concern or event; its spiritual evolution comes from one’s responsiveness to a community,” writes Elizabeth Woody to introduce the poems in her 1994 book *Luminaries of the Humble* (xiv). Her community includes the Yakama, Warm Springs, Wasco, and Navajo peoples of the Columbia Basin region in Oregon and Washington. Through poetry she seeks to share indigenous knowledge of this ecosystem with other Northwesterners so that they might value the inherent sacredness of their surroundings. Fellow Northwest poet Melissa Kwasny writes with a similar conviction that poetry can inspire audiences to recognize themselves as part of an interconnected, transcultural community. In her 2013 book of essays *Earth Recitals* she ponders how poetry might “teach us to turn to, not from, an earth we are perilously close to ruining for ourselves as well as for the nonhuman” (Introduction 3). Although she is not Native American, Kwasny looks to her Cree neighbors in western Montana as models of how people can learn to live sustainably in the places they call home by seeing the nonhuman as alive and imbued with spirit. It is a well-worn criticism that contemporary lyric poetry and American spirituality are private concerns with limited social relevance. Woody and Kwasny reject this stigma of solipsism and show how poetry can extend beyond the personal when it is tied to particular places and
communities. Writing poetry is, for them, a practice of negotiating the poet’s relationship with an ever-evolving community, including its history, traditions, and present-day realities.

This article argues that Woody and Kwasny mobilize environmental justice by writing poetry as a transcultural spiritual practice, a literary device that puts Native and non-Native religion, literature, and history into dialog through representing Northwest lands as sacred places. From a Native point of view, environmental justice activism seeks not only to redress the economic and social inequalities caused by environmental racism but also to illustrate the spiritual meanings of lands which structure tribal communities’ worldviews. Jace Weaver (Cherokee) writes that “When Natives are removed from their traditional lands, they are robbed of more than territory; they are deprived of numinous landscapes that are central to their faith and their identity, lands populated by their blood relations, ancestors, animals, and beings both physical and mythological” (43). Sustainable living in this context entails what environmental activist Winona LaDuke (Ojibwe) describes as a “reaffirmation of the relationship of humans to the Creation” in a spirit of gratitude and through rituals that reinforce “the relationship of people to their sacred lands, to relatives with fins or hooves, to the plants and animal foods that anchor a way of life” (12). To write and create stories is essential in maintaining the kinship ties between the people and their land. Writing on Cree poetics, Neal McLeod argues that contemporary Cree poets and storytellers “link human beings to the rest of the world through the process of mamâhtâwisîwin, the process of tapping into the Great Mystery, which in turn is mediated by historicity and wâhkîtowin (kinship)” (89).

Like many Native writers, Woody and Kwasny write with the belief that poetry can lead to transformation, renewing the interrelationships that exist in particular places. Their poetry is a transcultural spiritual practice that compels readers to imagine themselves anew in relation to other humans and the nonhuman world. The poems engage religious rituals and symbols from European and Native American cultural traditions to suggest that spirituality can positively influence a secular society through its appeals to justice and solidarity. They are transcultural spiritual practices through the ways in which the poems engage with ideas, forms, and languages outside the poets’ personal experiences.1 Beginning with Woody, I examine each poet separately to show how they represent their specific landscapes and religious and cultural heritages. Both poets are aware that romanticized appropriations of Native American spirituality and poetry often parallel the devastation of tribal lands, and they work to correct problematic modes of thought which justify environmental and cultural subjugation. By
bringing these poets into conversation with one another I show how a dialogic method of comparative literary scholarship can draw out the similarities between texts from different cultural backgrounds while still respecting their distinctions. Moreover, I insist that such methods are necessary for scholars who seek to tell a more holistic and heterogeneous history of American poetry.

Woody’s poetry describes the history of the American government’s devastation of tribal lands along the Columbia River. Under the 1855 “Treaty with the Tribes of Middle Oregon,” the Warm Springs, Yakama, Umatilla, and Nez Perce tribes ceded 10 million acres of land. They retained 578,000 acres south of the Columbia as well as the rights to fish, hunt, and gather traditional foods in their usual areas within and beyond reservation boundaries (Oregon History Project). As Woody explains, Wyam (Celilo Falls) remained, as it had for millennia, a center of trade and fishing. On March 10, 1957, however, the US Army Corps of Engineers completed construction of the Dalles Dam, submerging Wyam and destroying an important place of work, subsistence, and community for the tribes. The Dalles was one of a series of dams that redirected salmon runs in the Columbia and its tributaries and threatened to deprive the Warm Springs people of the primary source of protein in their diets. It also threatened their spiritual livelihood. As the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission explains, “The tribal cultures in the Columbia River Basin could rightly be called Wy-Kan-Ush-Pum or ‘Salmon People’ for how completely these sacred fish shaped their culture, diets, societies, and religions” (“We are all Salmon People”).

For the Warm Springs people, a material reliance on salmon translated into a spiritual and empathetic relationship with them. In Woody’s words, they expressed a “mentality of abundance,” meaning “there is plenty on earth for everyone, which is brought about by good thought and a response from the divine. Flourishing occurs by the active power of individual and communal thought in prayer” (“Voice of the Land” 167). For indigenous communities, sustainable living includes spiritual practices that arise from their experiences of living in particular places. The Warm Springs people live by the idea that t\-cha-meengsh-mee sin-wit na-me ad-wa-ta-man-wit, or “At the time of creation the Creator placed us in this land and gave us the voice of this land, and that is our law” (166). Their actual use of the environment and their spiritual practices are informed by their experiences of living along the Columbia River. The “First Salmon” ceremony, commonly practiced by the various tribes along the north Pacific coast to honor the return of the salmon each year, symbolized the mentality of
abundance and modeled other “giveaway” ceremonies. Woody writes in another essay:

... Salmon were the first to teach us of wealth. In the Longhouse the host family offers gifts in honor of loved ones in birth, naming, achievement, and, finally, in death. It is called a Giveaway.

The salmon honor future generations by their last Giveaway at spawning. Their die-off generated the most biologically diverse forest on earth. For millions of years salmon came and left this way. For eons, this monumental Giveaway brought us health and renewal. (“Simple”)

The humble recognition of the interdependence of the human and non-human prevented depletion of the salmon (Taylor 13–38). Historian William Lang explains that “Each year the first fish caught in the spring is treated with special care, cooked and eaten in ceremony, and its bones deposited in the earth. From the ritual killing of this first fish and the collection of its blood to its mid-river burial, the ceremony communicates the people’s respect for salmon and counts as insurance that a strong run would ensue and repeat itself in future years” (163). Woody writes to teach both Natives and non-Natives living in the Columbia River Basin how to live with an awareness of this interdependence in their ordinary lives.

In her 1994 poetry collections Seven Hands, Seven Hearts and Luminaries of the Humble Woody enacts this interdependence through the image of weaving root baskets with her female relatives—a practice of sustainability that connects her with the history of her environment and culture. Like the first salmon ceremony, weaving is a spiritual practice as well as a practical one for the Warm Springs people. The spring arrival of these edible roots marked the end of the “lean season,” which lasted from November through March when there were few fresh foods available in the region (Boyd 55–59). Gathering the roots was considered Áut-ni kutkút, or “sacred work,” that the women ceremonially performed each season (Aguilar 65). Woody’s poem “Weaving,” from Seven Hands, calls the roots “little sisters” and names them “Khoush, Sowitk, Piaxi, Wakamu,” suggesting that they have personhood and are giving of themselves for the community. The women weave the roots together until “Spirals hold all this design/air-tight and pure.” The speaker prayerfully continues: “This is our house, over and over” and “We will be together in this basket./We will be together in this life” (46). It is a prayer of gratitude offered through the women’s act of making “houses” for the roots. The roots in turn
provide the community with baskets and physical nourishment (Intro to Seven 15–16).

Weaving also provides spiritual nourishment for the women who share stories with one another and make present a centuries-old tradition of gathering roots and weaving. Woody describes this in “Plateau Women,” from Luminaries:

The body is already absorbed into the story, by blood, with the part that is internally one self and many selves. She [a Great-Aunt] says, “When you bring out from the heart a wonderful being, it is all from the Earth, goes to the Earth. The Spirit blooms and we have this Light feeding the root. We have to remember our source of nourishment, or we will starve.” (52)

Storytelling spiritually binds the women together with the larger community, including the nonhuman beings that live alongside them. Importantly, their relationships are not bound by linear time. By weaving the baskets, the women “remember [their] source of nourishment”—their ancestors and ancestral lands (52). These memories are humbling reminders of the individual’s responsibility to her community. Woody continues:

Imbued with luminosity, the eyes cast over this land, come back as vibrant small spots of flowers, so tiny and humble in honesty.

As a Great-Grandmother, whose foot could have fit into your palm, is so tiny and is bigger in recollection than white-capped mountains. (52–53)

Humility here does not deny the significance of the individual. In the intimacy of the great-grandmother’s foot in the palm of a hand, the grandmother is presented as a living person, not a distant memory. The individual and the community, the living and the dead, the human and the nonhuman are interconnected and made present in the weaving of the baskets. Storytelling, like weaving and writing poems, is shown to be an act of sustaining the community and the individual’s connection within it. As Woody writes elsewhere, “We have died. It is evidence of faith to create” (“Spider Woman’s Coyote Bones,” Seven 90). She expresses this faith through weaving and through poetry.

Woody’s faith does not ignore the devastating effects of colonization on indigenous peoples, languages, and lands. As a transcultural spiritual practice, her poetry thematically evokes the challenges of
reconciling Native and non-Native worldviews. She did not learn her tribal language, which fact obscured a complete understanding of her community’s history and connection to the nonhuman world. “The Queen’s language,” the poem says, “is lonely, singular, bereft of the relationships to Blood-kin, medicine, or tradition.” The separation of the Warm Springs peoples from their ancestral languages is mirrored in their relationship to the land. The poem continues, “The last Salmon is divided,” and “a Great River is fragmentary holiness.” This division is literal—hydroelectric dams have rerouted the Columbia, impeding salmon spawning patterns. It also symbolizes how both the Warm Springs people and non-Natives living nearby lack a thorough knowledge of the Columbia Basin ecosystem. Consequently, the giveaway tradition is incomplete. The poem nevertheless continues, “Placing the Salmon head facing upriver/will demonstrate we have not absolutely conformed” (“The English in the Daughter of a Wasco/Sahaptin Woman, Spoken in the Absence of Her Mother’s True Language,” Luminaries 107). Native ways of knowing and interacting with this land can still be put into practice. By calling the river a “fragmentary holiness,” Woody highlights the lack of sustainable connections between Northwesterners and the Columbia. Further, in its echo of “wholeness,” the phrase suggests that the river can be made whole again if the people recognize and respond to its sacredness.

Poetry is one sort of response. Literary scholar Janice Gould argues that Indian women use poetry as prayer in which “words are powerful” and “contain magic, potency, the ability to effect change in credible, meaningful ways” (806). Woody suggests the transformative power of words in “She-Who-Watches, the Names are Prayer.” The poem is dedicated to David Sohappy, a “spiritual leader of the Yakima people” who was imprisoned in 1981 for allegedly selling salmon caught on the Columbia with a ceremonial use permit (Harjo 95–96). Woody explains that “She-Who-Watches is a petroglyph on the Columbia River. She was originally a woman chief, the last, before Coyote changed her into rock to watch over her people and the male chiefs who followed her” (notes to poems in Seven 123). In keeping with the notion that Woody speaks with “the voice of the land,” the speaker of the poem is the petroglyph. She-Who-Watches tells of Celilo, “dispossessed, the village of neglect/and bad structure” (“She-Who-Watches” 76). Like the river’s fragmentary holiness, the submerged Celilo Falls is emblematic of Euro-American conquest and dispossession of Indian lands that hosted sacred ceremonies as well as the “secular” acts of fishing and trade. A village that was once an important meeting place for the Yakama, Warm Springs, Nez Perce, and Umatilla peoples now exists only in memory. Unlike Woody’s poems
about weaving, these memories seem absent from the community as a whole, remaining in the past along with indigenous knowledge.

She-Who-Watches mourns her people who have died with broken spirits. “There are drownings in the Dalles,/hanging in jails and off-reservation suicide-towns,” she says, “My children,/with names handed down and unused” (76). They have been separated from their sacred lands, languages, and ways of knowing. These experiences are both intensely local and national. She connects the destruction of Celilo Falls to the “dusty battles of the Indian Wars” and the “Long Walks” of “the Nez Perce, the Navajo, the Cheyenne” (77, 76). In making such connections, Woody reminds readers that non-Native Americans’ notions of progress (as symbolized in the poem by the railroad and the Dalles) have been destructive. Indeed, Woody argues that sustainable living takes into account the spiritual and physical needs and experiences of all beings.

Woody metaphorically reenacts this interdependence by describing the land in corporeal terms: “‘Human Beings,’/the words are tremors in the rib cage/of hills” (77). The landscape is not simply a symbol of human suffering, nor is Woody romantically projecting her own emotions onto it. Although the poem’s tone is mournful, as a whole, it is more than an elegy or memorial for a dying culture. It actually reverberates with life. Woody uses verbs such as “beat,” “clang,” “rail,” “wail,” “rush,” “grope,” “clamor,” “click,” and “whip.” These active verbs contrast with calmer images such as “The falls are faint rocks enrippled/in the placid lake of back waters” and “Celilo Falls sank unwillingly in the new trading/and everyone dissolved in the fall” (76, 77). The juxtaposition of dissolution/placidity and clanging/wailing is a transformative tension, as Woody’s act of prayer calls forth the spirits within the landscape to heal the larger community.

To understand the poem not only as a form of personal prayer, but also as a community-oriented spiritual practice, it helps to look at another poem, such as “Shaker Church Prayer,” in which Woody uses similar language to describe her grandmother’s actions as she prays:

Her feet raise dust.
Shaker songs

stomp, stomp,

.. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. ..
They rise for calls of prayer.
Throw the evil away.
Bring the light in.

.. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. .. ..
The church trembles,
then we rest. (82-83)

Woody’s prayer does not involve contemplation so much as action. In the Shaker Church, as in the land, prayer involves the movement of bodies, voices, and spirits. It arises from the people’s history of living at Wyam. This history includes complex encounters between Native spiritual practices and non-Native ones. As a religious movement distinct from Ann Lee’s Shakers, or “Shaking Quakers,” Indian Shakerism developed in the late nineteenth century as an indigenous appropriation of Christianity by Coast Salish tribal cultures in British Columbia and the Puget Sound region. Converts spread it to the Yakama, Warm Springs, and Umatilla peoples around 1906–08. Historian Susan Neylan argues that Indian Shakerism can be interpreted as “a counter-colonial performance” that “reinscribes native American cultural traditions within, yet also against, a colonial world” (190). Indian Shakers believe that they can access spiritual power through their interaction with nonhuman beings. Through ceremonies, songs, and dances they “renew the relationship between humans and nonhumans/more-than-humans” and “heal sickness caused by exposure to spiritual power and/or nonhuman elements” (195–6). For Indian Shakers, “the songs themselves literally contain God’s presence” and “were used for prayer and worship, to bring the shake to new devotees, to heal, and to console people in mourning” (200). Thus, by suggesting that Celilo Falls has life—and even personhood—beneath its serene surface, “She-Who-Watches” performs a spiritual act that aims to heal the communities in the Columbia River Basin by reintegrating the people with their lands, languages, and cultural traditions.

Woody’s poetry—and Kwasny’s, as we will see—goes beyond simply seeing nature as sacred, or reinventing the human/nonhuman relationship. She invokes the history of US colonization against indigenous peoples and languages as well as their lands. In contrast to how non-Natives sometimes imagine Native spiritual practices, Woody’s poems avoid nostalgically idealizing the nonhuman. Instead, she accepts the landscape with its history and fragmentation, and she seeks to heal it and her transcultural community through her writings and activism. In an essay on the Warm Springs tribes she notes that “the tribe took action and did not spend much time in despair” after the submersion of Celilo Falls, and they looked for ways to use the reservation’s resources for the economic benefit of everyone. They invested in “hydroelectric power, forest products, and tourism” and are now one of the largest employers in Oregon (“Confederated” 202–03). In addition, through agencies such as the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission,
they have integrated traditional knowledge and current scientific research to establish better regulations to prevent overfishing in fisheries run by Natives and non-Natives, and to ensure the fish are able to complete their spawning cycles. Also, in 2001 several Roman Catholic bishops in British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington responded to the problems of overfishing, the destruction of tribal lands, and the need for job security for those living in poverty in the Columbia River region by signing a pastoral letter urging people to “work together to develop and implement an integrated spiritual, social and ecological vision for our watershed home, a vision that promotes justice for people and stewardship of creation” (“The Columbia River Watershed”). Woody suggests that poetry can play a role in establishing such a vision insofar as it arises from the histories and cultures of a particular community and re-presents them to contemporary readers in ways that might urge them to act.

Woody thus illustrates the tangible ways that the Columbia River has become a meeting place of multiple cultures. Although the poems may be less explicit in this respect than the essays, they metaphorically become meeting places through Woody’s use of English terms such as Celilo Falls (for Wyam) and She-Who-Watches (for Tsagiglálal) as well as in her use of the conventions of Euro-American lyric poetry. These characteristics exist alongside specific representations of Warm Springs religious practices and symbols such as the Indian Shaker Church ritual and the sacred number seven in her book *Seven Hands, Seven Hearts*.9 Whereas many tribal groups prefer to not share their religious traditions with outsiders, Woody suggests it is necessary, at least to a certain extent, in order for people to live more sustainably.10 They can do this by altering their habits of thought and behavior in acknowledgement of their daily interactions with the nonhuman. Woody’s poetry is a significant response to environmentalist critics who argue that poetry can lead to sustainable living by creating “more responsible metaphors to live by” (Gilcrest 147).11 For instance, in understanding themselves as “Salmon People,” the tribal cultures in the Columbia River Basin work to ensure the material and spiritual subsistence of all beings in their surroundings.

Woody also fits within a larger pattern of Northwestern literature.12 In *On Sacred Ground: the Spirit of Place in Pacific Northwest Literature*, Nicholas O’Connell maintains that:

[Northwestern writers] consider the split between the human and the nonhuman as a dangerous illusion, which encourages the destruction of the environment and the spiritual impoverishment of human beings.
They seek to repair this split by emphasizing the animate and spiritual nature of the land. (179)

Other scholars have drawn from literary examples to argue that the religious identity of the region is characterized by the “belief that nature is sacred, rituals that connect people to place, and movements seeking to protect the environment” (Shibley 142). Each scholar notes that Northwesterners often express these spiritual sensibilities with reference to Native Americans. As with many such representations, however, they have simplified Native cultures to satisfy distinctly Euro-American tastes (Jenkins 136). As we have seen, Woody’s poetry insists on an environmentalism that links the Columbia River ecosystem in spiritual and material ways and which facilitates the mutual flourishing of humans and nonhumans. Moreover, her poetry has a political meaning that is often missing in other Northwestern writers. She condemns the devastation of Native American lands and cultures while at the same time asserting the sovereignty of the Warm Springs people. As she writes in “Translation of Blood Quantum”:

We are watched over
by the mountains, not Man, not Monarchy,
or any other manifestations
of intimidation by misguided delusions of supremacy
over the Land or beings animate or inanimate. (Luminaries 104)

Inasmuch as Woody writes for the renewal of her Warm Springs community, she also expresses hope that her non-Native readers can learn to respect these rights and alter their behavior accordingly.

Unlike the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Cree people in Montana do not live on their ancestral lands. For economic, social, and political reasons the Montana Cree were among a number of Plains Indian groups to migrate southward from Canada in the late nineteenth century. Although the US government moved many of them to reservations, such as the Rocky Boy Reservation in 1916, many Cree living in Montana today are “landless,” meaning they reside off reservations or are not enrolled with a particular tribal community (Dusenberry; Sperry). The Cree people that Melissa Kwasny encounters near her home in Jefferson City are part of this landless population. Like them, she has had to adapt to an environment that has changed over time due to mining operations and urban development in the area. Jefferson City is an old mining town in western Montana, about 700 miles northeast of the Warm Springs Reservation, on the edge of the Columbia River Basin. The town was formed in the 1880s after white settlers discovered gold alongside Golconda Gulch and
Prickly Pear Creek (Lindsay 18). Today, wastewater discharge from Helena and mining disasters that spilled arsenic and cyanide pollute these waterways (Kuglin; Wood).

Kwasny invokes these environmental effects in her 2009 collection of poems, Reading Novalis in Montana, with such descriptions as: “green bleeding down into the industrial parks, strewn with the remnants of teenage luck: used condoms, contraband, beer.” Like Woody, she also links environmental degradation with spiritual disenchantment:

The miners swarm like ants, dirty, hungry, having left their homes and families in the east. It is not food or shelter they are after—you’ve heard they feed dead cattle and poultry bedding to their cows—but the commodities, the art and furniture, the peccadilloes: lava lamps, infinity pools, pink flamingos.

There is a certain emptiness between the ancient years of roaming and the end of roaming, the old song and dance gone, the gods waiting for their complements. How huge this country is and how we’ve filled it. The woman in the desert subdivision leads workshops in correct listening, although it would be a different place here, blue dragonfly, dry species, without the Roman columns, without the irrigation.

Whether or not we are part of this, should we still feed their angels, we who love our quick summers of breath? (“The Waterfall,” 41)

“Their angels” are commodities, and she is not sure she wants to be part of such a culture, though she knows she cannot completely escape it. She seeks instead an authentic, spiritual connection with the land and through poetry apart from these artificial concerns of contemporary life. Kwasny’s poetry connects humans and the organic spiritual world by representing animals and plants not simply as metaphors for the inner life or symbols of emotion, but as external realities, like the salmon and She-Who-Watches, that are “rich with knowledge of what it means to live on this earth” (“Learning to Speak with Them,” Earth 15). In doing so, she looks to Cree spiritual and poetic traditions as a resource for how she might live more sustainably. Kwasny is never certain that she can actually know the Montana landscape as the Cree do, but she writes poetry as a transcultural spiritual practice that brings Cree knowledge into dialog with her own cultural knowledge based on, for example, Christian and Greco-Roman myths.

Her twelve-part poem “The Waterfall” presents a spiritual journey along a presumably real path from the speaker’s house to an unnamed
waterfall. Along the way, Kwasny alludes to Euro-American and Cree traditions and histories to challenge readers to recognize how particular myths and symbols structure our interactions with our environments. Kwasny’s opening description of the waterfall is imagistic: “The rags fade in their frame of overbent willow, prayer/flags laid in a web of leaf-silver.” In this liquid metaphor where rags become prayer flags, the speaker hears the voices “of the old ones . . . who quicken to their language spoken/a language that is stricken and is floral” (27). Throughout her poems, she uses “the old ones” to refer to the dead and to suggest that their spirits are alive in the immediate world. The Cree term is kēhtéayak, and as Cree scholar Neal McLeod explains, Cree poetics serve as a way to connect to “old voice echoes,” or “the stories and embodied experiences of the ancestors.” He continues: “Through our dialogue with these older stories (âniskwàpitamâcimowin), pathways of understanding are re-travelled and indeed expanded. These poetic pathways are embodied and emerge from a concrete, tactile engagement with the world” (101). Rather than claim to be connecting with Cree ancestors, as many non-Natives have done in appropriating Native cultural traditions, Kwasny’s poems echo her own literary and personal ancestors. She calls these ancestral voices “floral,” implying that they can be heard in the nonhuman world. She longs to communicate with the old ones and the nonhuman, and as with the Cree, she does so through a “concrete, tactile engagement with the world.”

The way to this communion, she says, “is always through water,” and the journey will be inundated by distraction: “At the ninth level there are star-flowers, arrow-leaf sown across the field of closed vision.” Even flowers can be distractors when their surface beauty hinders individuals from acting responsibly in their environments. Kwasny’s reference to “the ninth level” echoes the nine circles of hell in Dante’s Inferno as well as the myth of Demeter. Both stories require an individual to descend into the earth to emerge with a new understanding of themselves in relation to the spiritual and secular worlds. This new consciousness is ecological in that it includes all human and nonhuman beings and their complex histories. As Kwasny’s speaker embarks on her journey, she offers the old ones “canned salmon, berries, a smoke” because she has heard that “the old ones respond to the old ways and are drawn back.” In keeping with the poem’s mythical allusions, the speaker also gives them an incantation, but the incantation itself reflects reality more than myth: “I sing of disappearing things. Too bad—/the dusky sparrow, snow geese wings/tattooed with stripes” and “the native tribes in Deer Lodge jailed/for writing checks that bounce, our failed/intentions . . .” (28). Kwasny’s use of “our” here and her allusion to European myths implicates the poet and her
readers as participants in the devastation of human and nonhuman beings in the western US. She also suggests that this actual devastation is linked to the myths and metaphors employed to describe the nonhuman and the spirit world. She must acknowledge these facts to begin her journey.

Kwasny is not the first American to condemn US colonialism of lands and peoples on the continent, of course, nor is she alone in seeking to adopt Native American worldviews for her own. In his 1969 essay “Poetry and the Primitive,” Gary Snyder infamously encouraged American poets to become “shaman-poets” who would write unencumbered by the capitalist values and practices of modern societies (438). Such values, he claimed, spiritually and psychically separated people from their natural instincts, leading them to treat the land as a commodity. Although Snyder’s environmental arguments may be apt, his appropriation of Indian myths and practices in his early work prevented his poetry from becoming a meeting place of multiple cultural perspectives. Native American writers roundly criticized Snyder and other proponents of “white shamanism.” Leslie Marmon Silko argued that Snyder’s 1974 book *Turtle Island* appropriated tribal myths to avoid confronting his own history. She wrote:

> Ironically, as white poets attempt to cast-off their Anglo-American values, their Anglo-American origins, they violate a fundamental belief held by the tribal people they desire to emulate: they deny the truth; they deny their history, their very origins. The writing of imitation “Indian” poems then, is pathetic evidence that in more than two hundred years, Anglo-Americans have failed to create a satisfactory identity for themselves. (Silko 213)

Three decades later, poets such as Kwasny have acknowledged these criticisms and tried to portray Indians in ways that acknowledge their specific histories and geographies. Moreover, Kwasny represents the Cree in Montana only after interrogating her Euro-American heritage, thus avoiding Silko’s charge about white poets denying their history.

As a transcultural spiritual practice, Kwasny’s poetry illustrates her desire to respectfully learn to see the world from the perspective of the Cree people she knows. “Brook Trout,” an earlier poem in the book, describes the speaker teaching a Cree girl the names of the brook trout and the black-oil sunflower. The girl points to “Grizzly Gulch,” seeking to pan for gold there, and the speaker explains this is “her own Golconda,” referring to Golconda Gulch in Jefferson City. She says the girl’s grandfather once told her the story of “Wa-sak-a-chak,/first man,
like Adam, so he got to name things.” The girl asks, “Who came first, the fish or the stars? The stars, I tell her, though by now I am a bit confused. Are we talking of her tradition or of mine?” (10). The speaker’s confusion of traditions is productive, showing that the speaker and the girl have knowledge to share with one another. They each know an origin story, and while the details are specific to each tradition, the speaker recognizes that the stories influence how each person understands herself in relation to her environment and history. McLeod explains the Cree narrative as it is understood by his community in Canada:

\[ \text{â-mâmâhtâwisit wisâhkêcâhk is a common expression within Cree stories. It means that kîstêsinâw, our elder brother, “has the ability to tap into the Great Mystery.” Because of this ability, kîstêsinâw was the first ceremonialist, trying to link living beings in this dimension to the force of life beyond our conscious reality. In the process wisâhkêcâhk transformed the world, made it safe for humans, and gave names and shapes to Creation.} \] (92–93)

The Genesis account of the creation of the world which Kwasny alludes to is certainly distinct from the Cree tradition, yet Kwasny detects in each story a way of understanding the spiritual dimensions that link humans with the nonhuman world. Furthermore, she values this transcultural sharing of knowledge because she believes that it can lead to environmental justice.

Not sharing ecological knowledge—and the spiritual dimensions of such knowledge—leads to confused metaphors in which nonhuman objects lose their vitality. “We have tried to name without knowledge of the Native names for willow, initiates, confused/without an order or invitation,” the speaker says in section six of “The Waterfall” (35). This confusion makes people settle for clothes “in shades of eggplant” instead of planting or eating the real things (34). It is why they wonder if “the juniper berries we stumble/ across might be poison;” it is why they get “lost in the deep woods.” Unlike indigenous peoples, who for generations passed down knowledge of the environment through stories and rituals, non-Natives often look to field guides that objectively describe the environment but do not consider it as a living entity. Kwasny continues, “We live as if in a foreign land, the soil consecrated/to spirits we don’t know, who do not know us” (33). Non-Natives are the foreigners on these lands, she says; they are the ones who must be acculturated.
In such statements, Kwasny’s poem runs the risk of romanticizing Indians’ relationship with the nonhuman world. Being landless, the Cree people Kwasny encounters may not be any more native than she is to the Montana land she explores. Nevertheless, she complicates the romantic impulse by acknowledging what she does not, and indeed cannot, fully understand. What she shares with her Cree neighbors is a spiritually engaged sense of the landscape—one that has the potential to build a transcultural community that allows for the flourishing of all beings. She writes:

I know what you will say, what has been said
before you: white people who want to play Indian.
Yet when the old Cree man prayed in front of me,
I kept my palms flat on the earth.
I had never heard a person pray with such reluctance.
He was afraid of what he prayed to. (32)

She does not pretend to know, nor does she ask, to what he prayed. She is moved by the experience, but with her “palms flat on the earth,” she respects the meaning of prayer in his tradition without assuming she can appropriate the prayer as her own. She recognizes, too, that the spiritual meaning of the waterfall for the Cree people is based on historical events. She writes:

Not quite a hundred years ago, in the hills
outside a western town named Helena, a band of Cree
were camped. While the men prayed and fasted
over the ridge, the women waited with their children
by the water. The cavalry came and massacred them.
But there is a part of the story I have only recently
learned, that when the women saw the soldiers coming,
their spirits fled into these rocks.
Today, potatoes and squash break the horizon of our soil.
Who believes enough to have a vision now? (30)

Knowledge of the landscape must account for the land’s history and continued presence for its indigenous residents. In this case, Kwasny recalls white Montanans’ attempts to gather Cree, Chippewa, and Metis peoples onto reservations in the early part of the twentieth century. Settlers feared Indians living off reservations, describing them as “wandering Indian gypsies” and “vagabonds” who put financial strain on their communities which actually benefited from their seasonal labor (qtd. in Sperry 86). Kwasny is aware that this history can debilitate the spirit. It may be easier to believe what is visible—the potatoes and squash growing in the garden—rather than an invisible, spirit-filled world. She recognizes that this is as true for younger Cree generations
as it is for her. In a later section she writes, for example, that the Cree boy finds “nothing interesting on this path” because “he has never learned the language his great-grandfather speaks” (39). Kwasny’s poetry insists on such visions to build more ethical, transcultural relationships between humans and nonhumans.

Kwasny intertwines religion and history, nature and culture, on a formal level. Section 6 is written in *terza rima*. As *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines it, the form traditionally symbolized the Holy Trinity and suggested “tireless quest and . . . the interconnectedness of things.” After Dante, it “became the preferred meter for allegorical and didactic poems” written in Italian (1271). In using this form, Kwasny highlights the spiritual significance of the poem, but her conception of the interconnectedness of things is messy and includes technology as well as living beings:

> The rains begin, signaling a return to an interior we straddle between the office and the forest. We celebrate, mourn the fact that, as the critics say, contemporary life is urban life. We dress in shades of eggplant, Asian pears, and corn, though often we pick up radio signals in our dreams at night. Our children merge with their heroes from video games. They fling the furniture, wield the knife. But who will we go to to exorcise them? (34)

Technology confuses one’s relationship to other humans and to nonhumans. Internally, we live between the office and the forest, unable to fully live in either place. Wearing the colors of nature and playing video games are but simulacra of actual relationships. The use of *terza rima* is itself a technology in the sense that it has been constructed and imposed on the poem, rather than organically emerging from the poem in the act of its composition. Kwasny employs it in a ritualized way, further showing how her poetry is a spiritual practice.

Because of its association with Dante, the form advertises itself as sacred to those who are aware of its history. Even to readers unaware of the form, the regular rhymes and meter imply a deeper meaning. Kwasny notes a similar pattern in how people interact with the landscape. She continues, “What is the allure/for us in the rush of wind and water, that we always/think we hear more?” She answers, “It doesn’t contain the finger of Saint Peter, //a bit of the Tree Cross, or the red scab torn from the days/of Saint Francis” (34). Objects are not holy because a saint touched them, she suggests, but the nonhuman is holy in and of itself, and we have failed to recognize it. Rather than criticize the idea
of the sacred, she condemns the constructedness and inflexibility of religious symbols and saintly relics.

Cree ceremonies and symbols, on the other hand, resonate with Kwasny’s spiritual sensibilities because they seem to be more malleable to present realities. In a section titled “The giveaway dance,” she evokes Cree giveaway ceremonies. The dance is traditionally conducted in the fall or early winter and is dedicated to the spirit *pa-kak’-kas*, or “Bony Specter,” “a tall skinny spirit who is a man but nothing but bones” (qtd. in Dusenberry 136). It comprises four days of gift giving, and the Cree believe that generous giving brings more blessings, whereas stinginess or deceitful giving brings misfortune (Mandelbaum 206). Kwasny’s poem reenacts a giveaway dance beginning with a litany of blessings: “May your nephew from Fort Peck be healed from the leukemia”; “Here is a jar of wild chokecherry jam” (37). As the poem continues, the litany becomes one of loss, and the syntax breaks down:

Here what the young ones have left for the cities

May those watching us may the old men not forget to name them

May the tree people the rock people the kingfisher the eagle

May the dead who are just one threshold between us may their fugitive voices

find us. (37–38)

Kwasny’s representation of the giveaway dance finally becomes a calling back in an attempt to bring the community together. It is a healing ceremony that echoes the transcultural impulses of Woody’s poems. For Kwasny as well as for Woody, the larger community’s health depends on the relationships between humans and nonhumans, the living and the dead. It also necessitates that Natives and non-Natives learn their respective histories to find places of empathetic connection. Once they have done so, it maybe possible for them to create new transcultural narratives that allow for the flourishing of all beings.

Woody and Kwasny write poetry as a transcultural spiritual practice, exemplifying the possibilities for a cross-cultural approach to environmental justice, one in which non-Natives learn from indigenous people without appropriating from or intruding on their cultures. As literary scholar Elizabeth Ammons argues in her interpretation of Simon Ortiz’s fiction:

… hope and healing have the possibility of coming from bonds between all people exploited by the system
of late capitalism and indigenous people oppressed by Western economic practices for centuries, if the non-Natives are able to approach such affiliation in a spirit of respect and thus learn from indigenous people how to see and live life differently. (138)

To “live life differently” means living with an awareness of how humans and nonhumans are interconnected on multiple spiritual and material levels. Woody and Kwasny suggest that this awareness can be cultivated through poetry, that images and myths can appeal to our inner lives and lead to transformation. Woody writes to maintain the integrity of her Warm Springs community, including humans, nonhumans, the land, and the stories that make the community whole. Kwasny explores what that integration might mean for her own multi-ethnic community. Her poems suggest that integration not only requires an awareness of nature’s sacredness, but also a shift in how we use language and myth to talk about nature. For both writers, poetry is a spiritual practice that mobilizes environmental justice through creating and maintaining this interconnectedness.

Bringing these poets into conversation with one another shows not only how poetry can be transformative, but also, following Ammons, how literary scholars can participate in the environmental justice activism of the writers we study. Ammons argues that multiethnic literature of a “liberal activist tradition” can “play a profound role in the fight for human justice and planetary healing” because “words on the page reach more than our minds. They call up our feelings. They call out our spirits. They can move us to act” (172). Transforming the imagination is a necessary first step in redressing the effects of environmental racism on tribal communities. As literary scholars and teachers we can follow the lead of the writers we study to work for environmental justice. My analysis of Woody and Kwasny suggests the value of studying poetry dialogically, for their poetry offers a space in which the stories and metaphors attached to the nonhuman are renewed and made meaningful to transcultural communities.

NOTES

1. For an overview of different definitions of transcultural literary studies, see Arianna Dagnino, “Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s),” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2013. Dagnino defines transcultural literature vis-à-vis world literature as works “whose authors have—in one way or another, consciously or unconsciously, physically or virtually—made the voyage out of and from their national,
linguistic, ethnic, or cultural boundaries” and consequently, “negotiate but also inspire new border crossing imaginaries ....”

2. For a historical account of Celilo Village before and after the construction of the Dalles see George W. Aguilar (2005); Katrine Barber (2005); Robert Boyd (1996).

3. Throughout this article, I rely primarily on Woody’s descriptions of the Warm Springs culture and customs because Woody has been authorized by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs to speak on their behalf. I include anthropological and historical sources when they provide additional context that is useful for understanding the poems.

4. This is not to say that Northwest Indians maintained a romantic relationship with the salmon. As Taylor points out, their fishing practices developed over time and changed in light of fluctuating numbers of salmon in the rivers each season.

5. On the community-oriented ethos of Native American literature see, for instance, Gerald Vizenor (1999); Jace Weaver (2001).

6. Molly McGlennen makes a similar observations about the complex ways in which Woody uses metaphor and personification. In interpreting the poem “The Ebb of Foolish Endeavors,” she writes, “... though Woody attributes human characteristics to the landscape ... it is beyond mere allegory. In fact, the final lines of the poem completely subvert the idea of poetry working as metaphor, but instead expression becoming the very characterization it creates; therefore, the words take on a gravity and a sacredness that pulls the reader into an occurrence, not a rendering ...” (McGlennen 123–4).

7. The Indian Shaker Church of the Canada and US Northwest established between 1882 and 1910 should not be confused with the Shakers, or the United Society of Believers, founded by Ann Lee in the 1770s. Indian Shakers were known as such because of their ability to heal through “the shake.” Their practices combined elements of spirit dancing, shamanism, and Christianity.

8. Woody’s activism goes beyond poetry. She is currently the Director of the Indigenous Leadership program for Ecotrust, an organization based in Portland, OR that seeks to “inspire fresh thinking that creates economic opportunity, social equity, and environmental well-being.” http://www.ecotrust.org.

9. The book’s title comes from her poems “Longhouse I” and “Longhouse II.” For more information on the Longhouse religion see Aguilar. Sahaptin refers to one of three tribal groups that make up the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. The other two are those who speak Chinookan and those who speak Paiute (Woody, “Confederated,” 194).

10. For an opposing argument regarding literary representations of tribal religions see Paula Gunn Allen (1990).

11. Also see, Lawrence Buell (2005).

12. Woody also participates in a larger Native American poetry tradition. Linda Hogan and Joy Harjo, for example, write from similar ecological and
spiritual perspectives. Woody adds to this tradition a Warm Springs perspective that seeks to bridge Indian and Euro-American worldviews and cultures.


14. “Terza Rima [consists] of interlinked tercets, in which the second line of each tercet rhymes with the first and third lines of the one following, \( \text{aba bcb cdc, etc} \ldots \) Terza rima has a powerful forward momentum, while the concatenated rhymes provide a reassuring structure of continuity ... in all its realizations ... [it] suggests processes without beginning or end, a \textit{perpetuum mobile} in which linkage and continuation are seamlessly articulated.”

15. For a comparison of the different ways Natives and non-Natives understand religion and its relation to place see Vine Deloria (1973).

\textbf{Works Cited}


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