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Excavating the Archaic: Ethnopoetics and Strategic Primitivism

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EXCAVATING THE ARCHAIC: ETHNOPOETICS AND STRATEGIC
PRIMITIVISM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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This dissertation reconsiders the work of three American poets associated with Ethnopoetics in order to resituate their poetry and Ethnopoetics itself. Analyzing the poetry, prose, and translations of Jerome Rothenberg, Clayton Eshleman, and Armand Schwerner, it shows how Ethnopoetics as a movement entails a self-reflexive approach to the primitive which calls Western values and thinking into question by proposing that the “primitive means complex” (Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred* xxv). In addition to exemplifying the complexity of the primitive, these three poet-translators illustrate the pedagogical usefulness in altering worldviews and creating new poetics through what this study defines as strategic primitivism.

Ethnopoetics deserves renewed critical attention because contemporary academic discourse tends to view the employment of the primitive as non-reflective cultural appropriation. This dissertation illustrates the continued critical relevance of Ethnopoetics for contemporary literary criticism through the reformulation of the idea of the primitive. This in turn, challenges dominant ideas about literature and broadens the influence that subaltern cultures can contribute to the composition, interpretation, and teaching of poetry. Ethnopoets are avant-garde artists concerned with repositioning the primitive and creating art that challenges the notion of what art is and can be, but they

advocate a pluralistic approach to thinking about poetry and poetics. Ethnopoets collapse the division between oral poems and literate poems.

First, this dissertation addresses the problematic lineage of the “primitive” and distinguishes Ethnopoetics’ approach from cultural appropriation. The following three chapters look, in turn, at Jerome Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred* and “Khurbn,” Clayton Eshleman’s *Juniper Fuse*, and Armand Schwerner’s *The Tablets* in order to illustrate their employment of what is defined as strategic primitivism. The dissertation concludes with a turn towards teaching practices and the importance of an Ethnopoetic pedagogy.

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CHAPTER ONE

REDEFINING THE PRIMITIVE: A PLURALISTIC APPROACH TO POETRY

the PRIMITIVE ...

Where is it?

What can it mean?

Does it belong to Those over there?

(over where?

OR

over here?) To everyone that wants it?

Is it an idea?

A way to classify, define, subjugate?

Again, for/on those Others over there?

(over where?

OR

over here?) Is it something that can be refashioned or reconceptualized?

if so . . .

Why?¹

¹ An original poem by Jay W. Sarver inspired by the composition of this chapter.

Section One: Ethnopoetics, Ethnopoets, and Strategic Primitivism

This dissertation reconsiders the work of three American poets associated with Ethnopoetics in order to resituate their poetry and Ethnopoetics itself. Analyzing the poetry, prose, and translations of Jerome Rothenberg, Clayton Eshleman, and Armand Schwerner, this dissertation shows how Ethnopoetics, as a movement, entails a self-reflective approach to the primitive which calls Western values and thinking into question by proposing that “primitive means complex” (Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred* xxv). In addition to exemplifying the complexity of the primitive, Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner illustrate the usefulness of the primitive in altering worldviews and creating new poetics through what this study defines as strategic primitivism.

Ethnopoets collapse the division between oral poems and literate poems. Sometimes, they remind us that if we were to look deeply enough into our own archaic, poetic history, we would find oral and performance art that is infused with as much meaning as any literate poem could aspire to. Ethnopoets are also avant-garde artists concerned with creating art that challenges the notion of what art is and can be, but they advocate a pluralistic approach to thinking about poetry and poetics.

The focus of this dissertation is on how I read the implications of Rothenberg’s, Eshleman’s, and Schwerner’s poetries as attempts to correct the misuse of the term primitive. I do this by illustrating the complexity and usefulness of the concept in terms of how a reevaluation of the idea creates a new worldview, and with it, a new poetics. Ethnopoets employ the primitive through various means, and this dissertation will discuss

how Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner use translation and transcription as means to ethically transcribe the primitive and, in turn, the other into American poetics.

This dissertation will provide in-depth analysis of the poetry of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner, reading their individual works and reading ethnopoetry as a whole. As each ethnopoet is discussed singularly and in connection to the other ethnopoets, this dissertation will deal with the following questions: How does Ethnopoetics call for a reevaluation of the primitive? How can Ethnopoetics change/challenge our thinking concerning the acts of reading and interpreting poetry? How can Ethnopoetics help us understand the value of strategic primitivism?

This chapter serves as a general introduction to this dissertation. In this introduction, I concentrate on how Ethnopoetics is an attempt to restore the vitality and meaning of the primitive into contemporary culture. In addition, what follows will introduce the main ethnopoetic concerns of this dissertation, which will include: the acceptance of oral and performative works as poetry and the importance of reconnecting and interacting with the primitive in order to discover new models for thinking about poetry.

Primitivism has a problematic past in Western culture. Frequently, people and artifacts are given the designation of primitive so that they can be abused for imperial purposes. Primitivism usually involves casting peoples and cultures as simple and inferior to Western cultural developments. Because primitivism is used to degrade people and their cultures, it leads to the production of an other that is not seen as an equal to the culture that is categorizing the now other into a primitive. Other times, primitivism

invokes the idea that these so-called simple cultures were the basis for the now superior cultures of the Western world. This ideological construct serves the purpose of allowing the self-designated superior culture to extract from the now primitive or child-like culture at will. An essential feature of this downgrading of a culture to a primitive culture is the decontextualization of the history of the culture because if the culture is simple, then there is no layered meaning to the things that the culture produces or to the thoughts and ideas of those people. The negative features that accompany this non-strategic primitivism even extend to early ethnographers and anthologists that wanted to grant primitive poetries respect from Western audiences.

An example of an attempt to engage with the primitive that leads to a reproduction of the same kind of negative and imperialistic connotations of the primitive is Mary Austin's introduction to George W. Cronyn's *Native American Poetry*. Austin states that poetry as a "mode" is "the most responsive to natural environment" (xiii). She opens her discussion of Native American poetry by connecting poetry to nature because that is what primitive poetry is supposed to be about, according to non-strategic primitivisms. In addition, Austin uses words like "simple savage" to describe the state of mind of the Native American poet and she suggests that primitive poetries are only valuable to the individual poet-performer, which downgrades the sophistication of primitive poetries in comparison to literate, Western poems that can speak to a larger audience beyond the poet (xvi). Finally, in her discussion of a Zuni story, she reaffirms that not only are the poets that produce primitive poetries but also the very poetries in and of themselves are "simple" (xviii). These are comments from someone that wants readers to appreciate primitive poetries and realize that context is important when reading

primitive poetries, and yet, Austin continues to reproduce discourse about primitive poetries that is bound up within non-strategic primitivism.

The idea of the primitive that Ethnopoetics engages with is a primitivism that is not bound up with teleology; Ethnopoetics does not employ the primitive in order to show how much progress has been made in human cultural history from an archaic moment in time to the present. While Ethnopoetics does not understand the primitive as being a childlike culture that contemporary culture grew out of, it also does not assume that primitive poetries are the same as contemporary Western poetry. Ethnopoetics does not normalize primitive poetries, like some early American ethnographers did, in order to suggest that primitive poetries are the same as Western poetries only outside of Western culture. Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg, in the Preface to *Symposium of the Whole*, in addressing the “plunder[ing]” of “‘new’ and ‘old’ worlds” by “the industrial West,” say of the concept of the primitive that Ethnopoetics engages with, “Cultures described as ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’—a stage below ‘barbarian’—were simultaneously the models for political and social experiments, religious and visionary revivals, and forms of art and poetry so different from European norms as to seem revolutionary from a later Western perspective” (xi). Ethnopoetics, in its dialogue with primitive poetries, recognizes the breadth and diversity of primitive poetries that Rothenberg and Rothenberg allude to as it relates contemporary poetries to the primitive.

The primitive that Ethnopoetics engages with also extends from Robert Duncan’s idea of “a symposium of the whole” from “Rites of Participation.” Duncan suggests that “a symposium of the whole” would be built out of a community of those that have

historically been kept at the margins of Western culture. Duncan says, “The female, the proletariat, the foreign; the animal and vegetative; the unconscious and the unknown; the criminal and failure—all that has been outcast and vagabond must return to be admitted in the creation of what we consider we are” (328). Thus, for Ethnopoetics, the primitive is made up all of those cultures and peoples, internal and external, that Western imperialism has abused or ignored in some form or another throughout modern history.

Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner all work with different ideas of the primitive in their respective poetics, but they are all invested in thinking about the primitive as being complex. Rothenberg, in *Technicians of the Sacred*, is primarily interested in showing the range of oral, performative, and image based poetics that have been generated throughout human cultural history. Eshleman is invested in recovering primitive archetypes to illustrate the primacy and potency of those archetypes for early human artists and contemporary artists, which is a central idea behind *Juniper Fuse*. Schwerner, in *The Tablets*, works with primitive forms in his work to contemplate how primitive forms and structures continue to be useful for contemporary poets.

Because ethnopoets, as they compose new poetry, acknowledge the sophistication of primitive works of art and consider primitive artists to be on the same intellectual and creative ground as contemporary, Western poets, ethnopoets avoid some of the pitfalls of previous attempts to incorporate or unreflectively appropriate the primitive into the contemporary. In addition, Ethnopoetics proposes that there is no such thing as the Romantic “ideal/simple savage,” as espoused by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) and in the aforementioned Cronyn’s *Native American Poetry*

(2006)², nor the unethical Modernist appropriation of the primitive, such as Ezra Pound's unreflective use of Chinese poetry in "Ts'ai Chi'h" (1913, 1916) or T.S. Eliot's use of Buddha's Fire Sermon in "The Waste Land" (1922). As Rothenberg and Rothenberg say in the Preface to *Symposium of the Whole*, "Nor is our interest directed backward toward a past viewed with feelings of decontextualized nostalgia" (xii). What Rothenberg and Rothenberg point to is that Ethnopoetics engages with the past in a way that reflects on primitive poetics in an ethical way that recognizes historical contexts and difference.

Ethnopoetics works with the primitive in creating new poetry; whereas, previous poets that were interested in the primitive appropriated and categorized primitive art as they incorporated it into their work. Also, ethnopoets, in working with primitive poetics, do more than just appreciate primitive poetics because they understand primitive artists and contemporary artists as participating in the same artistic endeavors. This is why the ideas of dialoguing and negotiating with the primitive are such key aspects of how Ethnopoetics rethinks the primitive. Ethnopoets understand the primitive traditions that they dialogue with as living traditions that are in the same state of constant process that literate traditions exist in. Ethnopoetics works with primitive poetics to illustrate that "taken as a whole, then, the human species presents an extraordinary richness of verbal means—both of languages and poetics—closed to us until now by an unwillingness to think beyond the conventions and boundaries of Western literature" (Rothenberg and

² Cronyn's anthology was originally published in 1918 as *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America*.

Rothenberg xiii). Ethnopoetics recognizes that human art, from the archaic past to the contemporary present and all the different cultures that exist along that timeline, shares a similar desire to express life and the world in a verbal way and once poets, academics, and readers are willing to accept that, then an entire range of poetries becomes visible. This visibility or understanding of global poetry as a range of poetries is emphasized because the first step in dialoguing with another poetic tradition is the recognition that there exist other traditions that can be dialogued with. If the only poetry that is thought to be worthwhile is the known literate traditions of Western culture, then an active dialogue with other traditions is impossible. This acceptance of a range of poetries brings with it the desire of Ethnopoetics to work towards recovering oral poetries to show that oral poetry is just as powerful of a language phenomenon as written poetry is.

Ideas like the primitive can lend themselves to universal or essentialist claims about human cultures and history because trying to link to a shared primitive past can come off as an attempt to rid cultures and peoples of their distinctiveness. In addition, the idea of pursuing the primitive in contemporary discourse brings with it the negative associations of looking down upon the primitive as being inferior and submissive to the contemporary. This kind of dualistic thinking treats primitive cultures as raw material that can be non-critically used and abused by poets and scholars because the contemporary poet or scholar ignores the primitive, classifying it as sub-human—in other words, an other.

However, Ethnopoetics gives credit to the influences of other cultural traditions in making contemporary poetry. Also, the idea of the primitive can be misinterpreted in

Ethnopoetics as calling for some kind of return to nature or state of innocence much like a Romantic poet would have asserted in the nineteenth century, but, as this dissertation will show, that is not the case. This dissertation will show that Ethnopoetics gives voice to the complex, experienced, and varied ethos and discourses of other communities. Ethnopoetics strives to fulfill this ideal through thinking about cultures in dialogue with each other as opposed to one culture absorbing another culture for poetic or scholarly purposes.

Finally, problems with the primitive extend from concerns over colonialism in terms of the modern Western man controlling and stealing from primitive peoples, but again, this idea runs counter to the ethics of Ethnopoetics. Ethnopoetics does not seek to control other cultures. Instead, as suggested above, Ethnopoetics seeks to create an open dialogue that allows for various cultural traditions to interact with each other on an equal playing field. While Ethnopoetics pursues an active, reflective dialogue with the primitive, there are other “primitivisms” that this dissertation acknowledges but does not discuss. Gina M. Rossetti, in *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Literature*, says of Modern American writers, like T.S. Eliot and Ernest Hemingway, “For selected American modernist writers, the primitive becomes the means by which they artistically escape from the modern era’s deadening culture” (25). Rossetti also calls attention to the racial implications of early twentieth-century primitivisms when she suggests that there was an “emerging fascination with racial primitivism” that included Gertrude Stein’s use of “assumptions about black sexuality” (25). Ethnopoetics negotiates the primitive in order to make sense of and inform the present rather than using the primitive to escape the present. Ethnopoetics makes no assumptions about other

cultures and the primitive but rather engages with the primitive to question the ways in which Western culture categorizes other poetries and cultures.

Another kind of primitivism that emerged out of the twentieth-century was the French Surrealist Negritude movement. This movement was led by “young French-speaking black poets . . . [such as Aimé Césaire] who launched the movement in the 1930s tied all [of their criticisms of European culture] to [ideas of]—‘Africa,’ then colonized—from which they themselves had been estranged” (Rothenberg and Rothenberg 52). While Negritude illustrates the ethnopoetic idea that the subaltern can in fact speak, it was a movement that focused on ideas of Africa and the racial problems that accompany Western colonial expansion. Ethnopoetics dialogues with an entire range of primitive poetries and poetics rather than focusing on one region, such as Africa.

Furthermore, ideas of embracing the primitive can be extended to the Black Arts movement. Margo Natalie Crawford, in “Natural Black Beauty and Black Drag,” discusses how the idea of “Black is Beautiful” was informed by ideas of “the ‘black primitive’ in the African American imagination” (166). She uses the poetry of Amiri Baraka as an example of how the movement “celebrates” and “reclaims the very word ‘primitive’” (166). Again, while the poetry of the Black Arts movement reclaimed the term primitive, the poets that did so focused on one line of the primitive as opposed to generating a space for all primitive poetries to dialogue with each other like Ethnopoetics does. On the other hand, the example of the Black Arts movement and Baraka’s poetry illustrates that there is a difference in how the primitive can be negotiated based on the motivating factors behind the engagement with the primitive. Baraka attempts to reclaim

the word primitive as an empowering, social-political act within African-American culture; Ethnopoetics rethinks the primitive in order to destabilize the ways that poetic traditions are thought about and constructed in Western culture. Both acts are political in nature, but the pursuits are markedly different. In addition, and as will be discussed in relation to Eshleman's use of goddess archetypes in chapter three, certain Feminist poetries of the twentieth-century engaged with a repositioning and reimagining of the goddess as an "ecological" figure (Rothenberg and Rothenberg 56).

The concept of the primitive, when used in relation to Ethnopoetics and particular ethnopoets, is defined by Jerome Rothenberg in his Pre-Face (1967) to *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe & Oceania* (1968, 1985). Rothenberg begins his Preface with the heading: "Primitive Means Complex" (xxv). Rothenberg continues to add to his redefinition of the primitive with: "There are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages. Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity" (xxv). Understanding the primitive as complex, as Rothenberg does, is an important aspect of Ethnopoetics.

Rothenberg goes on to suggest that the traditional use of the primitive carries a negative and inferior connotation due to the value systems espoused in Western cultures. He says, "Measure everything by the Titan rocket & the transistor radio, & the world is full of primitive peoples. But once change the unit of value to the poem or the dance-event or the dream (all clearly artifactual situations) & it becomes apparent what all those people have been doing all those years with all that time on their hands" (xxv). While discussing Rothenberg's *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North*

Americas, an anthology, and *Ethnopoetics*, Paul Christensen, in *Minding the Underworld: Clayton Eshleman & Late PostModernism*, writes “it is Rothenberg’s task to show that the ‘they’ of his equation is not strange or antithetical, but a neglected portion of the Westerner’s own soul—the dark Other degraded as witchcraft, cannibalism, unevolved or retrograde mental states” (42). What Rothenberg does, when he redefines primitive to mean complex and meaningful, is call into question the dominance of Western thinking and values in evaluating poetry and other cultures.

In its recontextualization of the primitive, *Ethnopoetics* challenges Western thinking because it does not perceive cultures in essentialist terms, regardless of whether the essential aspects of a culture are assumed and imposed by another culture or a political construct created within the culture—referred to by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as “strategic exclusions,” which is based on “strategic” essentialism (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 147, 282). *Ethnopoetics* does not engage in “strategic” essentialism; rather, *Ethnopoetics* offers a frame in which to consider the various ways that cultural traditions intersect and diverge from one another while asking how those intersections and diversions can lead to creating different kinds of poetry.

Ethnopoetics’ non-essentialist worldview is due to the strategic employment of the primitive, which brings with it a non-hierarchical acknowledgement of the other. This reevaluation of the concept of the primitive facilitates a view of poetry for poets and scholars that encourage an acceptance of oral traditions as producing profound pieces of poetry, as well as implying the damaging effect that privileging one form of poetry over another creates for thinking about poetry as an important mode of cultural expression.

Victor Turner's "A Review of 'Ethnopoetics'" discusses how Ethnopoetics attempts to remind poets and society of the disregarded aspects of the human condition, such as the importance of unconscious thinking and the body. Turner suggests that the intention of ethnopoets is to call attention to the meaningfulness of reflexivity and the importance of seeing "the other" as the "we." Both points are attempts at critiquing traditional Western thinking that dates back to Plato's ideas concerning the importance of the mind over the body and the binary opposition of the civilized versus the primitive (338). In this way, ethnopoets engage in a kind of poetics that attempts to include the other as part of a world tradition of poetry without altering the other.

Employing the primitive as complex in culture and everyday life calls for an understanding of art as meaningful and transformative, which I term strategic primitivism. In addition to the recognition that the primitive is complex, strategic primitivism also involves the collapsing of the primitive with the contemporary in a way that injects and reframes the primitive in contemporary poetry. This collapsing of the primitive and the contemporary begins with the recognition that no culture or era is superior to another, and the merging of the primitive and the contemporary occurs when ethnopoets and ethnoscholars strive to produce work that illustrates how the primitive is a part of the contemporary and how the contemporary informs our ideas of the primitive. Ethnopoetics strategically engages with primitivism because to continue to think of the primitive as being inferior to the contemporary is to deny a breadth of poetic traditions and poets taking part in the global phenomenon that is poetry. Ethnopoetics is strategic because it recognizes the problematic history of the primitive in Western culture, and as Ethnopoetics dialogues with primitive traditions, it works towards an increased

understanding and awareness of the damage that has been done to primitive poetic traditions while calling attention to the relevance of the primitive for contemporary poetries. These ideas of strategic primitivism bring with them the idea that Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner recognize the problematic nature of the primitive in terms of Western cultural history and actively embrace the idea of the primitive in order to further call attention to how the primitive has been abused by the West but, more importantly, to show the relevance of the primitive to the contemporary.

Because Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner pursue a dialogue with the primitive that understands the primitive as being on the same level as the contemporary, they avoid a number of the pitfalls that can accompany working with primitive traditions. The problems that can be associated with engaging with the primitive, for example, include the poet/translator/scholar thinking that they fully know and understand the primitive culture because primitive traditions are simple, thoughtless, and more directly connected to nature. These ideas about the primitive lend themselves to a cultural imperialism that Ethnopoetics avoids because ethnopoets pursue a negotiation with the primitive. This can be seen in the way that Rothenberg puts together *Technicians of the Sacred* because his idea of representing a range of poetries implies that the representatives of different geographical areas are a sampling rather than a complete gallery of everything that the region being presented has to offer in terms of poetry. Eshleman illustrates the idea of not assuming knowledge over the primitive in his recognition throughout *Juniper Fuse* that there is a scholarly history about the Upper Paleolithic imagination that offers a variety of ways of thinking about the cave images that inspire Eshleman and that he contributes to. Finally, Schwerner's *The Tablets*

contends with the idea that Ethnopoetics does not assume to know the primitive through his creation of a fictional scholar-translator that does the kind of authoritative scholarly work that Ethnopoetics avoids.

Rothenberg recognizes the risk of active engagement with the primitive, which is why he is so invested in recovering oral poeties in ways that illustrate the complexity of oral poeties while also providing extensive context for those oral poems. By doing these things, Rothenberg reacts against common associations that primitive poetic traditions are simple, lack a sophisticated history, and are innocent forms of language expression that can be appreciated but are too different to be important to contemporary poetic traditions. One of his primary means of doing this is through “total translation” which will be discussed at length in the next chapter. Rothenberg’s sense of the primitive is that it is a part of every culture and should be a part of everyday life. Eshleman understands the risks of negotiating the primitive in contemporary poetry, which is why he strives to recast Upper Paleolithic peoples as artists, researchers, and thinkers throughout his discussion of the poetic implications of cave imagery, which puts primitive peoples on the same level as literate, Western peoples. Essentially, Eshleman claims that the primitive people of the Upper Paleolithic era had the same intellectual capacities and interests as people living today. Schwerner recognizes the problematic nature of the primitive through his use of humor and irony in his work because he calls attention to the way that overzealous scholarship and the desire for knowledge can lead to a troubling view of the primitive as simple and easy to understand.

Poetry that employs strategic primitivism enacts a transformed sense of how one relates to poetry. Strategic primitivism invokes a concept of poetry that calls for a continuous, triangular self-reflexivity between poet-performer, the poem, and the audience/reader. This use of strategic primitivism illustrates the difference between how Ethnopoetics evaluates and incorporates the primitive into poetics and poetry, and how the Romantic and Modernist poets thought of and incorporated the primitive. I argue that strategic primitivism is a direct result of the ideals and ethics of Ethnopoetics. Strategic primitivism produces works that are anti-essentialist; opens dialogue with other cultures, dignifying them and representing their distinctiveness; and questions the western privilege of mind over body. So, what is Ethnopoetics?

While the term “Ethnopoetics” might seem to define a poetry “emphasizing ethnic particularit[ies]” as *Postmodern American Poetry* (222) deceptively puts it, I illustrate throughout this dissertation that Ethnopoetics actually synthesizes differences through its attention to Robert Duncan’s idea of the “symposium of the whole” as a community of inclusion, in opposition to “the Symposium of Plato,” which was a community built on exclusion (“Rites of Participation” 328). Ethnopoets reconsider how they respond to other cultures and the archaic due to the leveling effect that can occur when poets think of cultures in dialogue with one another as opposed to existing within hierarchical categories that emphasize difference for the sake of separation, which creates more disconnect between cultures. This, in turn, challenges dominant ideas about literature and broadens the influence and impact that dominant and subaltern cultures can contribute to the composition of poetry. Turner says, “Ethnopoetics may be said to provide one counterstroke to [‘monoculture’] by making visible and audible the multiple poetic and

deeply human expressions of the *ethnoi* [the others that are we], by showing cultures as a complex flowering” (341). Thus, Ethnopoetics employs a strategic primitivism that is based upon self-reflexivity. This self-reflexivity is built upon a willingness to understand and exchange with multiple poetic traditions across “a symposium of the whole,” which brings with it an openness in considering what poetry is and can be.

The remainder of this chapter is divided into six sections. The next section is a literature review that discusses the critical attention that Ethnopoetics has received and how I am adding to that scholarly discussion. Section Three calls attention to the importance of orality for Ethnopoetics, along with considerations of performance due to the re-evaluation of oral traditions. The critical attention that Ethnopoetics gives to oral traditions is a result of the intentions of ethnopoets and ethnoscholars to avoid privileging one kind of poetry over another. The acceptance of diverse oral traditions as poetry lends itself to the discussion of pluralism that can be found in Section Four. The idea of pluralism is a key concept in understanding the aims of Ethnopoetics because ethnopoets and ethnoscholars attempt to create a dialogue between poetic traditions and the primitive and the contemporary. Section Five carries on the discussion of pluralism by showing that ethnopoets and ethnoscholars translate differently in order to maintain the dialogue and negotiation that is a part of how Ethnopoetics works with other poetic traditions. In Section Six, I discuss the implications of renewed attention to orality, pluralism, and translation on how Ethnopoetics calls for a sense of literary traditions that remain in flux and that are based on maintaining a dialogue between the past and the present and a range of poetic traditions. The final section of this chapter forecasts the main ideas of the remaining chapters of this dissertation.

Section Two: Literature Review

Sherman Paul's *In Search of the Primitive* is a useful earlier text to start thinking about how Ethnopoetics challenges the Western canon through reevaluating the primitive; this reevaluation illustrates why the primitive is important for contemporary poetry. In addition, Victor Turner's "A Review of 'Ethnopoetics'" further clarifies the political nature of Ethnopoetics and how it challenges the primacy of the Western tradition through its attention to the other as part of a symposium of the whole where the Western tradition is not privileged over other traditions; instead, the Western tradition is put into a dialogue with other traditions.

Four dissertations that also address how Ethnopoetics challenges a more Eurocentric approach to poetry are: Rosa Alcalá's *Identities in Relation: Transcribers, Translators, and Performers in Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004); Kenneth Sherwood's *The Audible Word: Sounding the Range of Twentieth-Century American Poetics* (2000); Molly Weigel's *Interactive Poetics: Native-American/European-American Encounter as a Model for Poetic Practice* (1996); and Sharon H. Nelson's *Jerome Rothenberg: Technician of the Sacred* (1980). Alcalá echoes the concerns and ideas of Ethnopoetics in her dissertation, which discusses Rothenberg, when she says,

transcription, translation, and performance, rather than merely derivative of or subordinate to original texts or dependent upon written sources, are foundational and foremost in the development of innovative poetics.

Moreover, these innovations are the direct result of each poet's engagement with tradition as an evolving dialogue dependent upon social

relations. In order to understand the ways in which poetry emerges from and is the result of translation, transcription, and performance, conventional ideas regarding authorship and originality are challenged. (7-8)

Alcalá's work illustrates the importance of Ethnopoetic ideas and how those ideas challenge dominant hegemonic ideas and apparatuses. Her dissertation adds to the ways that Ethnopoetics challenges typical Western ideas about poetry through calling attention to ideas of "authorship" and "originality." I think Ethnopoetics challenges the importance of individual authorship as a concept by understanding poetry as coming from and representing a poetic tradition informed by a community rather than being a unique work of individual talent. Also, Ethnopoetics calls into question the importance of being "original" through its attention to negotiation and conversation with other traditions. What is important for Ethnopoetics is the continual renewal of poetry through participating in an active pluralism rather than glorifying the individual poet.

Alcalá's research further adds to this because she refers to Charles Bernstein's critique of literary and cultural traditions. Bernstein says, in "Optimism and Critical Excess (Process)," in reference to a letter from Benjamin Friedlander concerning Charles Olson and literary traditions, "The point is not to retrace the steps but to respond to the process of discovery. The idea that you've got to read what I read, or what he or she reads or read: awful nightmare of sameness" (175). Alcalá's and Bernstein's ideas help illustrate why Ethnopoetics has remained "subterranean"; Ethnopoetics calls for a

tradition of traditions or a canon of possibilities as opposed to the kinds of traditions and canons that are generally depended upon and used throughout the academy.

Sherwood, in *The Audible Word: Sounding the Range of Twentieth-Century American Poetics*, alludes to this idea when he says of Ethnopoetics:

Ethnopoetics produced a heightened awareness of: the artfulness of oral poetry, the importance of theorizing transcription and translation, the existence and substantiality of oral traditions (often counter to the Western canon), and the ways in which peoples' verbal arts illuminate their cultures.... As a literary project, Ethnopoetics begins with an acknowledgment of the limitations of a western model of literature and the particular texts celebrated in the terms of that model. It revalues rich, traditional poetries in formal, philosophical and spiritual terms—thereby enhancing the domain of poetry. (100)

Sherwood discusses the breadth of Ethnopoetics as a project that is greatly invested in showing the variety and importance of oral poetries, along with elaborating on the role that transcription and translation play in the re-evaluation of poetry beyond a limited Western canonical view. He further points out that Ethnopoetics enlarges the possibilities of poetry through its active questioning of the Western canon.

Weigel's *Interactive Poetics: Native-American/European-American Encounter as a Model for Poetic Practice* connects to the ideas and concerns of Sherwood, as her work interprets the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Susan Howe, and

Jerome Rothenberg. She discusses how each poet employs cultural encounter as a means for creating their poetry. She examines how Rothenberg's use and understanding of translation encourages cultural interaction between texts and people. Weigel concludes that due to the inherent openness that is present in each poet's work, each poet addresses the principal ethical and aesthetic issues concerning the self and other.

Nelson's dissertation also accounts for the challenging nature of Ethnopoetics. Nelson's work provides commentary on Rothenberg's earlier poetry leading up to his development and involvement with Ethnopoetics. Nelson's view of Ethnopoetics is that it is a break from Modernism and a return to Romanticism. She writes, in *Jerome Rothenberg: Technician of the Sacred*, "The basis of Ethnopoetics is the belief that poetry is a significant event at the centre of and centered in a vision of the universe which admits of the possibility of sacrality of everything; and this point of view is believed to be shared with or parallel to that world-view common to 'archaic' cultures or those which still retain tribal roots and rituals" (70-1). She says further of Ethnopoetics, "[It is] a movement away from 'conventional poetics' and the implications of conventional poetics and towards 'a poetry of utterance' which is transnational, transcultural, and transtemporal, and in which the 'irrational' and the 'sacred' are no longer ignored" (89). Alcalá, Sherwood, Weigel and Nelson's ideas work well together and support my dissertation because they allude to the importance of cultural encounter that informs Ethnopoetics. They also agree that Ethnopoetics challenges accepted norms and ideas concerning poetry.

There are also some relevant articles that address Rothenberg in particular, which also indicate the value of Ethnopoetics in how it reevaluates the primitive. One such article is Peter Middleton's "The Transitive Poetics of Rothenberg's Transnational Anthologies." Middleton discusses the important role that anthologies play in introducing new authors to the public and creating a canon to be discussed in the academy. He states that "modern poetry has depended on anthologies both for its definition and circulation now for more than a century" (90). Middleton says of poets and anthologies, along with Rothenberg as a poet-anthologist, "Poets themselves have therefore probably given more thought to the construction and aims of anthologies than anyone else, and no one more than the Jewish poet Jerome Rothenberg, who has been producing anthologies for more than thirty-five years—anthologies which have consistently worked through cultural and aesthetic difference" (90). Middleton calls attention to the importance of Rothenberg's work as an anthologist of poetry because Rothenberg attempts to make anthologies that exhibit a plurality of views on poetry. Rothenberg's attempt to recuperate the variety that poetry is capable of sustaining is evident throughout *Technicians of the Sacred*.

Another article that addresses the complexity of Rothenberg's intentions within *Technicians of the Sacred* is Jed Rasula's "On Rothenberg's Revised 'Technicians of the Sacred.'" This article was published in 1986 and is a response to Rothenberg's revision of *Technicians of the Sacred* published in 1985. Rasula's reading of *Technicians of the Sacred* is a positive review of the text that emphasizes it as an important anthology for contemporary poetry. He calls particular attention to "The Commentaries" section of *Technicians of the Sacred* as helping readers to see how Rothenberg's attempt to reconceptualize the sacred in contemporary poetry clearly mirrors similar attempts to re-

envision the sacred in other cultures across time. In addition, Rasula traces how Rothenberg actively incorporates the work of previous translators and anthologies in *Technicians of the Sacred*. Overall, Rasula distinguishes *Technicians of the Sacred* from previous anthologies through its careful attention to context of the primitive poems and the impact such primitive poems can have on contemporary poetry (136-38).

Marjorie Perloff, like Rasula, also discussed the importance of *Technicians of the Sacred* upon the publication of the second edition in her article, “Soundings: *Zaum*, Seriality, and the Recovery of the ‘sacred.’” Perloff describes *Technicians* as, “[Rothenberg’s] fascinating anthology of alternate poetries” (37). She says further of Rothenberg and *Technicians*, “Like all of Rothenberg’s extraordinary anthologies, *Technicians of the Sacred* must be understood less as a gathering of poems by others—in this case, a gathering of ‘primitive’ poems from around the world—than as a long and complex poetic text by Rothenberg himself” (41). Perloff calls particular attention to how it is through the combination of the poems and the corresponding commentaries that readers can have a sense of how *Technicians* functions as a “collage composition.” For Perloff it is through this “collage composition” that Rothenberg successfully works out what it means to be “a technician of the sacred” (42). Furthermore, Perloff also calls attention to how *Technicians* is meant to provide examples of alternate kinds of poetry for contemporary poets (42-43). Finally, she points out how Rothenberg revised “The Commentaries” in order to make the anthology less a product of 1960s poetry and more a book for contemporary poets of the 1980s and beyond (43-44).

John Zalenski, in “Rothenberg’s Continuing Revolution of the Word,” discusses Rothenberg’s poetic project in connection with Dada through a close reading of Rothenberg’s *That Dada Strain* (1983). Zalenski says, “[Dada] represents a challenge to narrow assumptions about the nature of human being, and a return to the most primitive basis of language—all as a way of urging towards inclusivity, of increasing the meaning and the breadth of social life and language acts” (202). According to Zalenski, Dada encouraged thinking of common aspects of human creative endeavors in order to re-think the role of art in contemporary society. Zalenski says, of Rothenberg’s connection to Dada, “This, of course, is no new departure for Rothenberg. Rather it is an extension and development of his earlier work and an added dimension to the project of recovery which constitutes the discourse of ethnopoetics” (202). Zalenski also connects Robert Duncan’s idea of “a symposium of the whole” to Rothenberg and ethnopoetics (202). This article discusses the literary traditions that Ethnopoetics grew out of and acknowledges the primary goal of Ethnopoetics, which is to facilitate a poetics of dialogue and negotiation between cultural traditions through a reconsideration of the range of poetry from the primitive to the contemporary.

A more recent discussion of Rothenberg’s work as poet, translator, anthologist, and editor is Geoffrey O’Brien’s “Runes with a View: Jerome Rothenberg’s Wide, Wide World,” a review of Rothenberg’s *Gematria*, a book of poetry. While the focus of O’Brien’s review is on how Rothenberg is not appreciated enough as a poet because of the wide range of his work in creating anthologies and his emphasis on performing poetry, O’Brien does call attention to Rothenberg’s intentions of working within the widest possible frame in order to be inclusive.

While the aforementioned dissertations and articles represent a strong interest in Ethnopoetics and ethnopoetic concerns, this dissertation will further explain how Ethnopoetics challenges Eurocentric views of poetry through the active pursuit of dialoguing with other cultures in order to generate a “symposium” of poetry. In addition, this dissertation explicitly contends, through the idea of strategic primitivism, that a key feature in understanding the works of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner is to understand how their individual works re-evaluate the primitive and the contemporary together, rather than separating them, in order to further broaden the scope of poetry. I will illustrate the importance of Ethnopoetics and the three ethnopoets in question in terms of how redefining the primitive is a major poetical and political move. This dissertation claims that it is important to recover and reconsider Ethnopoetics and ethnopoets because Ethnopoetics is a different kind of American poetry with the attention it pays to primitive texts, orality/literacy and performance.

There has been some significant critical and scholarly work done concerning the poets and issues that I will discuss, even though the previous scholarship is somewhat limited in scope. These critical pieces discuss the significance of Rothenberg’s contributions to American poetry as an anthologist and poet. Also, critical attention has been given to how Rothenberg and Schwerner can be associated with other contemporary poets, such as Robert Pinsky and Seamus Heaney. The aforementioned *In Search of the Primitive*, by Paul, illustrates the critical attention that ethnopoets received at one time. Many critical works have attempted to establish the importance of Ethnopoetics as a major turning or shift in contemporary American poetry. However, there has been a diminishing amount of scholarly attention in recent years given to Ethnopoetics due in

part to the influences of postmodernism on literary studies and a critical focus on cultural identities.

Dan Featherston points to the problems that Ethnopoetics has faced with the rise of postmodernism in his essay, "On Visionary Poetics, Robert Kelly, and Clayton Eshleman." Featherston discusses Duncan's idea of a "symposium of the whole" as a visionary ideal. He also discusses the postmodern criticism of visionary ideals. He writes, "Postmodern theory dictates that all ideologies are provisional, culturally constructed, and involve complex power relations. The popularization of such a perspective may help keep in check totalitarian visions, but it has also led to extreme skepticism toward the visionary mode in general" (409). Thus, one of the reasons why there has been lack of interest in Ethnopoetics is due to the skepticism of one of the founding principles of the movement, which is that positive, inclusive vision of culture is possible. Featherston says of Duncan's idea, "Duncan's 'symposium of the whole' is one model of vision as the critique of culture, stressing plurality, compassion and coherence by cooperative design against the exclusive, alienating visions of fascism and orthodox religion that made the twentieth century the bloodiest in human history" (409). According to Featherston, Ethnopoetics not only provides an alternative vision for culture and society, but it also critiques the very same authoritative cultural mechanisms that postmodernism calls into question. In this way, Ethnopoetics functions as a framework in which to critique and challenge the dominance of Western thinking.

Due to the postmodern, critical interest in the stability, or instability, of cultural identity and the push to recognize marginalized voices, some ethnopoets, such as

Rothenberg and Schwerner, are now considered to be ethnic poets rather than ethnopoets. Or, as in the case of Eshleman, they are barely considered at all. This shift in critical studies of literature and culture has caused Rothenberg to be read as an interesting open form Jewish poet and Schwerner as a post-modern Jewish poet. For example, Rothenberg has received critical attention for his works that explore his Jewish heritage, such as “Poland/1931” (1974) and “Khurbn.” There is nothing wrong with reading Rothenberg in this way, but readings of his work that focus only on what he brings to a tradition of contemporary Jewish poets will miss out on other important aspects of his poetry. I am not interested in dismantling the work that has been done in terms of reading Rothenberg as an important contemporary Jewish poet; instead, I am interested in showing that when Rothenberg writes poetry or compiles an anthology, he always works within an ethnopoetic framework that understands the primitive in relation to the contemporary. Rothenberg composes poetry that allows him to reflect on his relationship to his Jewish heritage, but he always does so as an ethnopoet that is interested in dialoguing with other traditions.

In addition, this dissertation also claims that Ethnopoetics has been misinterpreted. Scholars, such as Tara Browner, suggest that Ethnopoetics was a movement of white, avant-garde poets that stole from and/or distorted art from Native Americans and other people of non-European descent. Browner’s “‘They Could Have an Indian Soul’: *Crow Two* and the Processes of Cultural Appropriation” argues that Ethnopoetics was a movement of cultural appropriation that ignored “real” native peoples and their customs. Browner’s essay deals explicitly with Pauline Oliveros’ *Crow Two: A Ceremonial Opera*, which appeared in the Ethnopoetics journal *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics*

and how Oliveros ignored “real” native peoples and their thoughts. Browner argues that Oliveros composed a piece “analogous to those of a cluster of primitivistic American writers and poets during the late 1960s” (243). In doing so, according to Browner, Oliveros committed an act of cultural appropriation.

I include this essay because Browner, in an attempt to demonize the work of Oliveros, generalizes Ethnopoetics to the point that any ethnopoet or ethnoscholar is a cultural thief, which is a gross misrepresentation of the work of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner. In particular, Browner’s argument dismisses the work of ethnopoets like Rothenberg, who composed poetic pieces in collaboration with Native Americans such as the Seneca. In a sense, Browner oversimplifies Ethnopoetics and ignores the many positive aspects of the movement. While I will discuss how critics, like Browner, oversimplify what ethnopoets were attempting to do, I will primarily focus on those earlier critical works that attempted to carve out a thoughtful critical space for Ethnopoetics to inhabit as well as those more recent pieces of scholarship that cast Rothenberg and Schwerner as Jewish poets. Regardless, the primary focus of this dissertation is on how Ethnopoetics attempts to move towards a “symposium of the whole” and to re-evaluate the primitive with the contemporary in poetry in order to open spaces for active dialogue between cultures.

Section Three: An Investment in Orality and Performativity

Typically, in contemporary Western culture, it is assumed that poetry is a print based text sometimes performed by the poet and that poetry is high-cultural—an art form that has little connection to mainstream or mass culture. It should be noted, however, that

slam poetry and hip hop retain oral elements, but I think those two forms of poetic expression are not often considered to be poetry in the academy. Because poetry in the academy is often thought of as existing in print for a select group of readers, it can be difficult to think of poetry as existing in a greater variety of forms, such as poems from an oral tradition. However, that is what Ethnopoetics asks poets and scholars to consider. Dennis Tedlock, in his definition article, “Ethnopoetics,” says Ethnopoetics is the “study of the verbal arts in a worldwide range of languages and cultures. Primary attention is given to the vocal-auditory channel of communication in which speaking, chanting, or singing voices give shape to proverbs, riddles, curses, laments, praises, prayers, prophecies, public announcements, and narratives” (80). According to Tedlock, Ethnopoetics attempts to work with as many diverse and expansive texts as possible. Ethnopoetics understands the use of language to include a greater range of possible incarnations than more typical Western approaches to the primitive. I also think that this reconsideration of orality in Ethnopoetics is a key way that it avoids naïve-primitivism; this attention to orality works towards understanding oral traditions as complex and diverse in a way that was typically ignored in prior Western discourse on the primitive. In doing so, Ethnopoetics makes an argument that verbal art can include a wide range of oral poetics from the sacred to the profane.

In addition, Tedlock says, “The aim is not only to analyze and interpret oral performances but also to make them directly accessible through transcriptions and translations that display their qualities as works of art” (80). This adds another aspect to the project of Ethnopoetics, which is to work towards making oral art accessible through creative and original methods of translation and transcription so that contemporary

people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds can see the range of what verbal art is across cultures and eras. Tedlock says further:

Practitioners of ethnopoetics treat the relationship between PERFORMANCE and text as a field of experimentation. Texts that were taken down in the era of handwritten dictation and published as prose are reformatted and retranslated in order to reveal their poetic features In the case of a sound recording, transcripts and translations serve not only as listening guides but also as scores for new performances. (82)

I think Tedlock suggests that when oral poetics and stories are given critical attention, the idea of performance also needs to be considered. Furthermore, transcribers and translators enact performances as they remake earlier transcriptions and translations in order to show the complexity of oral poetics. Tedlock says, of how ethnopoetic scores need to be understood, “Whatever a score may encompass, the notion of a definitive text has no place in ethnopoetics Ethnopoetics remains open to the creative side of performance, valuing features that may be rare or even unique to a particular artist or occasion” (84-85). Again, Tedlock points out an important aspect of the ethics of Ethnopoetics because while Ethnopoetics explores the range of verbal art, it also does not attempt to solidify that range into one particular kind of verbal art. The tendency of ethnopoets and ethnoscholars to recognize variations as important is a key component of strategic primitivism and further separates the work of ethnopoets and ethnoscholars from a more naïve, stereotypical view of a poet or scholar who does not see the variations as important. Ethnopoetics is always willing to engage with variations and versions even

when its practitioners seek to point out commonalities among the various cultures and traditions that exist across the spectrum.

While the ideological underpinnings of Ethnopoetics call for recognizing a wider range of poetries, an additional issue that Ethnopoetics has to overcome is that poetry is something that is read individually by a select few readers. Because contemporary print poetry has a limited audience, it can be difficult to think of poetry as being a dominant form of cultural expression that speaks the ideas and concerns of a culture at large. Ethnopoetics rethinks ideas of poetry beyond typical conceptions of poetry by reflecting on and working through the limitations of the canon and the ethnocentrism that sometimes follows canon construction. Ethnopoetics accomplishes this reflective work through a willingness to accept oral and performance art as poetry and by thinking of poetry as a global art. In this way, Ethnopoetics can be linked to the complementary theoretical framework that Performance Studies³ provides and, in particular, Richard Schechner's *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*.

Schechner's *The Future of Ritual* discusses the history of the avant-garde over the last 100 years and incorporates Performance Studies into that history. Schechner critically examines ritual as an important cultural act, along with the idea of play. Schechner

³ I use Richard Schechner's definition of Performance Studies from his book, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Schechner says, "Performance studies came into existence within, and as a response to, the radically changing intellectual and artistic circumstances of the last third of the twentieth century. . . . people are increasingly finding the world not a book to be read but a performance to participate in. Performance studies is an academic discipline designed to answer the need to deal with the changing circumstances of the 'glocal'—the powerful combination of the local and the global" (26).

suggests that ritual has become a much more flexible concept. He says, “understanding of ritual, as process applying to a great range of human activities rather than as something tethered to religion, is a very important development” (20). Schechner’s insistence on calling attention to ritual and performance helps to contextualize the various aims of ethnopoets engaged with the oral and performative qualities of the primitive. Also, Schechner’s revised notion of performance includes the acts of composing and translating as performative acts, which the poets discussed in this dissertation reflect on.

Another work that theorizes performance and helps frame the kinds of performance that ethnopoets are invested in is Richard Bauman’s *Verbal Art as Performance*. His basic assumption and argument is that “performance counts” (vii). Bauman elaborates on the importance of performance through his insistence that performance embodies a particular kind of “speaking” (3). He also discusses performance as framing certain cultural ideas (5). Bauman says, of performance as a mode of cultural speaking, “performance becomes *constitutive* of the domain of verbal art as spoken communication” (11). He is calling attention to the centrality of performance in being able to interpret oral texts.

The importance that Bauman places on performance as a mode of cultural communication is further elaborated through his discussion of how various cultures use different modes of performance ranging from ceremonial oratory to professional storytelling (12-13). Bauman says of this range of verbal art, “the point to be emphasized here is that just as speaking itself as a cultural system (or as part of cultural systems defined in other terms) will vary from speech community to speech community, so too

will the nature and extent of the realm of performance” (13). Through this recognition, Bauman reconsiders the very notion of performance. This then leads him to a discussion of the concept of an “emergent performance,” which is a performance that is always shifting or in flux (37). The emergent quality of performance is of particular importance to Ethnopoetics; if performance as verbal art has a built-in flexibility, then the consequences for ethnopoets would be that they can create poetry that is performance based and reflects the range of poetics that ethnopoets work with across a “symposium of the whole.” The consequences of thinking of poetry as an “emergent” art form also impacts readers, teachers, and critics because as Ethnopoetics pushes poetry off of the page, it encourages readers and scholars to think of poetry in a similar flexible manner. Furthermore, part of the ethnopoetic project is an attempt to reflect on the variety of poetic practices that exist across cultures and history. This primitive poetics that collapses the archaic with the contemporary attempts to broaden the scope and importance of American poetry. The result of this rethinking about American poetry through dialogue and negotiation with other cultures is the creation of an opportunity for silenced cultural traditions to be able to speak to the range of poetics that Ethnopoetics facilitates. This is the case because every known linguistic group produces some kind of poetry but may not produce other genres of literature that exist in the West, such as film. Thus, what Ethnopoetics tries to accomplish is a self-reflective understanding of other cultures and history that reframes poetry in a transnational and transhistorical sense.

It is possible that the opening up of American poetry to reflect the variety that exists across cultures and time could be read as a further extension of Western cultural imperialism and appropriation. I think that what makes the ethnopoetics of Rothenberg,

Eshleman, and Schwerner different from other forms of cultural appropriation is that they are not trying to mimic the archaic or oral traditions; instead, they are interested in negotiating a poetic space that allows for their poetry to take part in the range of poetics that comes into view when an ethnopoetic lens is used for thinking about poetry. Because the recognition and negotiation of the “symposium” of poetry is a significant aspect of Ethnopoetics and the various works of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner, the idea of pluralism also comes into play in terms of understanding the ideological implications of Ethnopoetics and strategic primitivism.

Section Four: A Different Kind of Pluralism

The revised notion of the primitive that Ethnopoetics invokes also enacts a pluralistic approach to poetics and the composition of poetry. Pluralism is often associated with multiculturalism, e.g., Kwame Anthony Appiah’s discussion of “hard pluralism” in *The Ethics of Identity*.⁴ In addition, Diana L. Eck, in “What is Pluralism?,” says, “First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*. . . . Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. . . . Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*. Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*” (sic) (n.p.). Eck’s definition of pluralism is helpful in making sense of the ethics of Ethnopoetics because Ethnopoetics is invested in recognizing and engaging with diversity. Furthermore, the works of

⁴ Appiah says of “hard pluralism,” “[That it is a swift movement] from the equal standing of individuals to the equal standing of identity groups, and, indeed, a homology between identity groups and persons is a staple of certain forms of multiculturalism” (73).

Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner seek to understand differences across various traditions in order to have a dialogue with those traditions which creates a different framework for contemporary poetry.

Also, it makes sense to associate Ethnopoetics with theories of pluralism because those theories emphasize a different way of viewing how cultures interact and inform each other than a typical multicultural approach to the discussion of diversity. Notions of racial identity that have been created by widespread multiculturalism are called into question in the theoretical work of Appiah and Walter Benn Michaels.⁵ They suggest that the essentialist identification with and celebration of race is in itself another form of racism and as such, needs to be critiqued. Ethnopoetics also challenges the notion of the essentialism of racial identities by asking us, through the active dialogue that ethnopoets have between various poetic traditions, to critically consider how other cultural traditions can inform our own. This line of thinking lends itself to reevaluating the idea of the primitive because ethnopoets seek to establish a dialogue between the primitive and the contemporary. It is also important to reevaluate the ideas and works of Ethnopoetics in light of contemporary discourse concerning essentialist notions of race and culture because these essentialist notions have caused ethnopoetic works, which favor the

⁵ Michaels writes in "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," "The commitment to difference itself represents a theoretical intensification of racism, an intensification that had nothing to do with feelings of tolerance or intolerance toward other races and everything to do with the conceptual apparatus of pluralist racism" (45).

pluralistic “symposium of the whole,” to be brushed aside in favor of literary works that illustrate and celebrate cultural differences.

In keeping with how Ethnopoetics challenges essentialist notions of race and culture, this dissertation builds on the work of Michael Castro in his book *Interpreting the Indian: Twentieth-Century Poets and the American Indian*. Castro says of his book, “This book is about America, Americans, and Native Americans. Particularly it is about twentieth-century poets who have sought to bring their notions of the three together to create something new—new poetry, new consciousness, a New World” (xi). Castro discusses various American poets from the twentieth-century, including William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Jerome Rothenberg, and Gary Snyder. Castro discusses these poets in-depth in order to illustrate how the idea of representing the Indian in American poetry has shifted over time. He begins his discussion with early ethnologists, translators and anthologies of Native American poetry in order to trace how Indian poetry and the amount of attention given to it developed over time. Castro says of Mary Hunter Austin, a key American poet and anthologist of Indian poetry, and others like her during the first quarter of the twentieth century:

we must identify what Austin and others recognized as the central characteristic of [Indian] poetry and the cultures that produced it: what I term *holistic awareness*. . . . By *holistic awareness* I mean the Indian’s sense of oneness with the earth and with the creatures on it; the term suggests also the oneness, within each person, of body, mind, and spirit and the sense of overall oneness of material and spiritual reality. (5)

Castro further says, of the “holistic awareness” that Austin called attention to, that it “has become an important resource, model, and theme for American poets” (7). This idea of “holistic awareness” is an example of how Ethnopoetics has different goals in mind when working with other cultural traditions. Castro explains how prior American poets’ imagination of the Indian “holistic awareness” simplified all Indian poetry under one category and, in doing so, made it easier for American poets to think about what Indian poetry has to offer, while at the same time, ignoring the differences in those various traditions. Ethnopoetics does not attempt to simplify poetries from other traditions; instead, it attempts to maintain a dialogue that is open to a variety of poetries.

Ethnopoetics represents poetry as enacting a performative and oral quality, but, in doing so, does not strip away the differences between traditions or lump various traditions under one convenient heading. Furthermore, Ethnopoetics strives to show the complexity that exists when poets and readers consider poetry as constituting a range of traditions, which is indicative of the strategic primitivism that Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner enact. Finally, this “symposium” that Ethnopoetics creates for thinking about global poetic traditions brings with it a negotiation of the sacred as an aspect of poetry, found in the work of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner. The idea of the sacred, as discussed in subsequent chapters, is an important aspect of the range of poetries that ethnopoets dialogue with in composing poetry, and it should be noted that the sacred, when used by ethnopoets, is quite different from the idea of “holistic awareness.” This is the case because the idea of the sacred is different for each poet discussed in this dissertation as well as for the various cultures that are discussed in later chapters. An aspect of the sacred in Ethnopoetics that can be seen across the works of the poets under

discussion is that the composition of poetry and the act of translating are significant cultural language acts and that the processes of making poetry and translations are acts of creation in themselves, which is mirrored in the opening section of Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*—"Origins & Namings."

While Castro expresses concerns about "holistic awareness," which simplifies other poetic/cultural traditions, he does affirm that Rothenberg's work complicates the ways in which American poets think about and interact with other poetic traditions. In broad terms, Rothenberg's poetic project is two-fold: he wants to call attention to and celebrate Native American and other "primitive" poetic works, and he wants to build a new poetics out of those forms. Castro points to the intricateness of Rothenberg's project when he says:

Rothenberg's concept of total translation draws on the inclination toward performance poetry in twentieth-century European and American avant-garde literary movements, including [Olson's] projective verse. It uses American Indian poetries as the basis for developing new, postmodern performance forms intended to extend America's sense of what a poem is and can be. Rothenberg explored further than any of his predecessors the formalistic implications of using Native American poetry as a model.

(117)

Castro helps situate the basic framework of this dissertation by calling attention to Rothenberg's intentions and establishing Rothenberg as continuing the project of those that came before him, such as Charles Olson.

Castro suggests that Rothenberg is different from a majority of his predecessors in interpreting Native American poetic traditions because he is interested in providing translations of oral and performative works that retain at least some of the original qualities of those works. Castro's emphasis on how Rothenberg's poetry creates new poetic forms from working with Native American poetry illustrates how Rothenberg deals with other traditions in a non-appropriative sense. This is the case because Rothenberg engages with other forms, which requires him to negotiate between Western traditions and other traditions of poetry. This active engagement further illustrates Eck's definition of the value of pluralism because Rothenberg creates a dialogue in *Technicians of the Sacred* that allows for cross-cultural communication without one cultural tradition trumping or absorbing another. In this way, Rothenberg exhibits Eck's idea of "the new paradigm of pluralism." Eck says, "The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another" (n.p.). Rothenberg is successful in this negotiation because he practices other forms through his work as a translator-anthologist-poet who does not privilege one tradition over another. At the same time, Rothenberg builds a new kind of American poetry out of what could be termed "primitive" models. The idea of building a new poetics out of the primitive and archaic is mirrored in the work of Eshleman and Schwerner as well.

This idea of a pluralistic approach to poetry that I pursue in this dissertation as a key way of understanding Ethnopoetics and strategic primitivism comes from my reading of the aforementioned theorists. In addition, the pursuit of conversation that is a

significant feature of pluralism speaks to the Ethnopoetic idea of a “symposium” of poetry, as well as an opening up to or discussion with other academic disciplines. Eshleman calls attention to the importance of thinking about poetry in terms of plurality, but not pluralism, in *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld* (2003). While my reading of pluralism comes from a consideration of scholars, such as Eck, and I see a connection between what those scholars say about pluralism and Eshleman’s sense of plurality, it should be noted that pluralism and the pursuit of plurality or interdisciplinary thinking are words that are similar in idea but are not the same. Eshleman does not take the time to fully explain his sense of plurality, which is why this dissertation will more fully illustrate how Ethnopoetics is built upon the idea of a pluralism that pursues a plurality or range of poetries and how that idea affects the kinds of poetry that Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner compose.

What Eshleman does say of his sense of plurality is as follows: “I sought to be open to what I thought about and fantasized while in the caves or while meditating on their image environments—to create my own truth as to what they mean, respecting imagination as one of a plurality of conflicting powers. I also sought to be a careful observer, and to reflect on what others have written, photographed, and drawn” (xv). Plurality in Eshleman’s sense means to draw from a wide variety of perspectives and then employ those perspectives in his poetics and composition process. This is how Eshleman pursues a conversation with the archaic in his poetry. He later states that he has drawn from “a range of thinkers outside of archeology proper” (xv), which includes the work of

C.G. Jung and Charles Olson.⁶ This kind of approach would more typically be considered a mixing of genres of thinking and writing or interdisciplinary creative scholarship.

In order to clearly articulate the features of Ethnopoetics that I mention above, I will carefully examine two of Rothenberg's works: his anthology *Technicians of the Sacred* and "Khurbn," a long poem, in order to show how he engages with the archaic and then infuses that dialogue into his own work. I have chosen *Technicians of the Sacred* because it clearly shows Rothenberg's investment in the idea of a range of world poetry traditions, which is an extension of Duncan's concept of a "symposium of the whole."⁷ "Khurbn" is used to illustrate how Rothenberg incorporates his ideas as an anthologist into his own poetry and to link Rothenberg's work to Eshleman's *Juniper Fuse*. Finally, I will discuss Schwerner's *The Tablets*. Schwerner is also interested in finding poetic possibility through an interaction with the past. But, his attempt is markedly different from Rothenberg's and Eshleman's because Schwerner creates his

⁶ Of particular importance in thinking about how Ethnopoetics builds on a frame established by Olson are Olson's "Human Universe" and "the hinges of civilization to be put back on the door," which can be found in Rothenberg and Rothenberg's *Symposium of the Whole*. In "Human Universe," Olson challenges the history of Western thought since the Greeks through a discussion of non-Western cultures, in particular the Maya (62-70). Olson further elaborates on the changes that need to be made in Western culture through a contemplation of history and diverse cultures in "the hinges of civilization to be put back on the door" (444-46). Rothenberg says of Olson, "Charles Olson was one of the major figures between Ezra Pound and the present in opening up American poetry to a range of ancient and contemporary/Western and non-Western cultures" (444).

⁷ Castro says, "*Technicians of the Sacred* represents a great effort of synthesis. It attempts to present tribal poetry within a modernist perspective and to suggest basic affinities, convergences, and analogies between primitive and modern poetry systems and patterns of thought" (119).

own ancient text, the tablets, in order to re-evaluate the role of the primitive in contemporary poetry.

Section Five: On Translation

The above mentioned ethnopoets' works can be grouped together through their common interest in the merging of the primitive and the contemporary that occurs through poetry that encourages negotiation between poetic traditions. Christensen says of ethnopoets, in particular Eshleman, "To treat the themes and strategies of Eshleman is, in a way, to deal with all the other figures⁸ of his circle as well; despite their individual differences in style, taste, approach, the poetry of these writers follows a program of psychological analysis and of mythopoetic critiques of contemporary life" (10). Inherent in the work of Eshleman and "his circle" is a mix of anthropology and archaeology for the active dialogue that these poets engage in to compose their poetry stretches across cultures and time. While this dissertation will focus on the works of Rothenberg, Eshleman and Schwerner, there are other ethnopoets, as suggested by Christensen, who could be discussed in similar ways, including Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman, and David Antin.

This dissertation focuses on Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner over Snyder, Waldman, and Antin due to the importance that translation and transcription play in each

⁸ Christensen is referring to poets that he recognizes as deep imagists, which include: Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Kelly, Diane Wakoski, Armand Schwerner, and David Antin.

of their works. It is their shared interest in translation and transcription for poetic inspiration that links these three poets together in how they each look for ways to put various cultural traditions in conversation with each other, as well as thinking about ways that the archaic reflects the contemporary and the contemporary reflects the archaic. They each engage with the archaic in order to reexamine past poetic traditions so that they can compose new kinds of poetry. All three share a common interest in reexamining the archaic through translation and transcription; however, they each go about it in their own way. For these reasons, Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner best represent the issues that this dissertation addresses. I did not set out to write exclusively about the work of male poets; however, the female ethnopoets that I could have included would not have worked as well for my argument of strategic primitivism. For example, Waldman was mentioned above, and I could have discussed her interest in the chants of María Sabina and how Waldman uses the structures of Sabina's oral chants to create her own contemporary poetry that reflects a belief in the power of language. While that is the case, Waldman does not fit in with Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner in terms of thinking about the primitive as a concept that needs to be rethought and an interest in translation as a way to negotiate primitive poetics. In addition, from a historical perspective, Ethnopoetics was a concentrated movement in the late 1960s and 1970s when many academic disciplines were male-dominated as can be seen in the tables of contents of the ethnopoetic journal, *Alcheringa*.

Rothenberg employs a translation method called "total translation," which he says, in his Preface (1971) to *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1986, 1991), is "a term I use for translation (of oral poetry in particular) that takes into account any or all elements of the

original beyond the words” (xxi). His method of “total translation” is a way to more actively engage with the qualities of oral poetics through an attempt to reproduce aspects of how the poetics are performed. This is how Rothenberg breaks away from the New Critical tradition of only examining and considering poetry through close reading, which his work was, in part, a reaction to.

Rothenberg says further of this kind of translation, “For the translator—if he’s to match the interest of the original—must extend its meaning into his own language” (xxi). Translation for Rothenberg is a way to have an active dialogue between the culture he translates from to the culture he translates for, which allows him a broader method for interpreting other cultures’ poetics and performances. Rothenberg’s idea of translation directly connects back to Eck’s assertion that “the new paradigm of pluralism” allows for a multitude of voices to be heard without having to silence one voice for another. Rothenberg engages with Eck’s definition of pluralism through his translations in two ways. His idea that a translation must carry its meaning into the translated language illustrates Eck’s ideas of “*the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*” and Rothenberg’s translations are “*based on dialogue*” (sic) (n.p.) with the source text. In this way, Rothenberg employs a pluralistic approach to translation because he is interested in maintaining the integrity of the source culture of the translated piece and creating a culturally relevant piece for the culture it is being translated into. When Rothenberg translates a piece, he does so by moving back and forth between cultures.

Eshleman pursues a pluralistic approach to translation that emphasizes interpretation as well. This is indicated in his essay, “At the Locks of the Void: Cotranslating Aimé Césaire.” Eshleman says,

I see the poet-translator in the service of the original, not attempting to improve on it or to outwit it. He must, alone or with a coworker, research all archaic, rare, and technical words, and translate them (in contrast to guessing at them or explaining them). As I see it, the basic challenge is to do two incompatible things at once: an accurate translation *and* one that is up to the performance of the original. (143)

What Eshleman suggests here is that translation is an art, and it is an art that is process based—much like the composition of poetry. Also, Eshleman’s understanding of the work of the translator illustrates a shared ideological point with Rothenberg in the sense that translation is an active negotiation between poet-translator and the poem that is being translated. This idea of translation further illustrates a key point of Eck’s theorizing of pluralism. Eck says, “The new paradigm of pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another” (n.p.). Eshleman’s method of translation, like Rothenberg’s, is ethical because as Eshleman points out, the idea behind a translation is to make it function as fluidly in the translated language as it does in the original language. The goal of translation is to produce the same effect in the second language as in the original. Eshleman’s and Rothenberg’s ethical treatment of the other when translating is important to keep in mind because it informs the Ethnopoetic goal of

embracing and knowing the other but not subjugating the other. This also marks Ethnopoetics as offering a different or alternative discourse on post-colonial thinking because ethnopoets and ethnoscholars suggest that the subaltern can speak.

While Eshleman and Rothenberg can be linked due to their ideas about how translation can support a negotiation between cultures, the dialogue between various cultural traditions is most clearly evident in Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*. In that anthology, Rothenberg exhibits world poetry in how different cultural traditions overlap with each other through the opening thematic sections, such as "Origins & Namings." Geographical based sections, such as "The Americas," follows the thematic sections in order to show the variety of poetics that exist within a particular area of the globe.

In many ways, Rothenberg's *Technicians* is set up to constantly remind the reader of the negotiation that is essential in coming to terms with the range of poetics that exists within cultures and across cultures. I discuss further features of how *Technicians* is set up in the next chapter; but, it is important to note that in *Technicians*, Rothenberg attempts to make the case for the continuity between oral traditions and contemporary poetics. Eshleman participates in a similar kind of negotiation in terms of how the archaic, which for Eshleman is the Upper Paleolithic imagination, reflects the contemporary world. Ideas about translation are also an integral aspect of Schwerner's *The Tablets*. In addition, Schwerner's work as a translator can be directly linked to Rothenberg's work as a translator and anthologist because some of Schwerner's translations are included in *Technicians*, such as "The Machi Exorcises the Spirit Huecuve" and "The Woman Who

Married a Caterpillar.” Also, Schwerner shows his interest in questioning the limits of translation throughout *The Tablets* in his use of the Scholar/Translator character and the fact that Schwerner creates his own archaic tablets in order to investigate what translation has to offer to poetics. An emphasis on translation is an important component of how Ethnopoetics pursues pluralism in poetry and scholarship. Translation offers a means for ethnopoets and ethnoscholars to directly engage in a conversation with another culture in a way that treats the source text and culture as an equal participant in the process of conveying meaning from one culture to the next.

Section Six: Reconsidering Literary Traditions

Beyond translation, Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner are associated through how they each challenge Western based canonical traditions of poetry that continue to dominant the discussion of contemporary American poetry today. Because American poetry continues to be canon specific, supported by New Critical readings of fixed texts, the work of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner, and other ethnopoets, is kept at the periphery of American poetry. Ethnopoetics challenges the history of American poetry and criticism in the twentieth-century and beyond by thinking about American poetry as a part of a wider tradition of global poetries, and Ethnopoetics calls for an approach to poetry that recognizes and negotiates the differences between those traditions. This is a significant pursuit because it calls into question the very notions of canon making in an attempt to leave the door open for continued conversations between cultures and texts. In doing so, Ethnopoetics attempts to level the playing field for cross-cultural interaction in a way that creates opportunities for different cultures to speak.

Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner each challenge the canon in their own way. However, a common theme that can be seen throughout each poet's work is in each poet's reevaluation and reflection on how the primitive informs the contemporary. This frame for thinking about Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner is a partial revision of the work of literary critic Paul, particularly his text *In Search of the Primitive*. In that text, Paul discusses the work of David Antin, Rothenberg, and Gary Synder. This dissertation revises some of Paul's ideas in the sense that I call attention to several ideas of the primitive that Paul points out, such as how the past informs the present. Also, Paul suggests that to merge the primitive with the contemporary is a challenge to the status quo of New Critical based canonicity (viii).

Through revisiting Paul's attention to the primitive and the challenge to canonicity that Ethnopoetics invites, I will provide a more detailed analysis of Rothenberg's work and bring the work of Eshleman and Schwerner, who Paul mentions but only in passing, into the discussion. It is important to revisit the work of Paul whose text is an early attempt to provide a rationale for why thinking about the primitive is an important aspect of contemporary poetry. His reading of poets that are invested in the primitive relies on universal ideas about human history and nature that are decidedly non-critical by today's standards, however. In addition, Paul's text consists of his personal musings and reflections concerning the ethnopoets he discusses; this dissertation will provide a more systematic and detailed analysis of the work of ethnopoets.

Due to how each poet collapses the primitive with the contemporary, Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner are not content to work within the English language poetic

tradition; instead, their work is a questioning of the established canon in terms of how they ignore typical boundaries that tend to create canons and separate different cultures from speaking to each other across national and linguistic lines. These criticisms lend themselves to a further questioning of the continual effect of New Criticism's reading of poetry, which is still an undercurrent in the classroom. One issue with New Criticism and its reverence for close reading of poetry is that it casts out oral and performance poetics because oral poetics are texts that change over time, passed down from performer to performer and generation to generation. In addition, oral poetics are less compressed (using repetition and vocables), which makes it difficult to read and interpret using the formal conventions that New Criticism identifies as being essential for good poetry. Finally, oral poetics illustrate important aspects of the original culture, which makes the poetry culturally specific rather than universal in theme.

All three of the above mentioned differences between oral poetry and formal written poetry disrupt the ability of the critic to complete a conventional close reading since a New Critic needs to have a stable text to read and work from. An overemphasis on text-based close reading excludes different kinds of poetics and creates a partitioned literary tradition that cannot admit the range of global poetics that Ethnopoetics brings to the table. This questioning of a literate, Western canon is not a rejection of the Western tradition of poetry; instead, it is a call for a negotiation of Western poetry with a variety of different kinds of poetry. This reevaluation of what makes for poetic traditions brings with it residual effects concerning how we think about American poetry and poetics as well as how we think about the importance of poetry in general. This is the case because, as stated above, poetry is produced even in cultures that do not produce other distinctive

genres of literature, such as film, drama, and novels; therefore, the tendencies of Western canon making create restrictions on what poetry is and what makes for good poetry, which in turn, silences other cultures. However, Ethnopoetics attempts to create opportunities for those silenced cultures to speak to the rest of the “symposium.”

The positives to thinking about poetry beyond the established Western tradition are clearly discussed in John Miles Foley’s *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Foley writes about different modes of composing and reading poetry, suggesting the value of exposure:

to different ways of composing and “reading” poetry. We seek to become a better audience by broadening the range of possibilities, diversifying the menu of verbal art, and rethinking some of our most basic assumptions about poetic communication. Part of this rethinking will involve nothing less than reshuffling our cognitive categories, a process that can be both exhilarating and unsettling. (11)

Foley is pointing out that in order to begin to understand oral poems as poetry we first must break away from any of the pre-established notions we have about what poetry is. In this sense, Foley’s work directly challenges the Western philosophical imperative of literacy that was essential to former schools of critical thought, such as New Criticism, and the West’s appropriation of the primitive.

Furthermore, Foley’s work on oral poetries links back to the active pluralism that Ethnopoetics pursues and that is a fundamental aspect of strategic primitivism as

discussed earlier in this chapter. Foley further supports the idea of moving towards a pluralism of poeties when he says, “[This book] calls for a healthy pluralism in approaching oral poetry, and that means genuine open-mindedness” (11). I think that Foley’s call for a “healthy pluralism” applies to poetry, in general, and Ethnopoetics because, as discussed earlier, Ethnopoetics actively dialogues with various poetic traditions across the spectrum of world poetry. It is Ethnopoetics’ acceptance and propagation of “a healthy pluralism” that makes Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner’s poetry important artistic, but more importantly, socially relevant works as each text accepts and reflects a multifaceted view of reality.

Turner, in “A Review of Ethnopoetics,” adds to how Ethnopoetics calls for an active negotiation between cultures when he says, “The more we are aware of the multiplicity of Others, the more we become aware of the multiple ‘selves’ we contain” (340). Ethnopoets provide poets and readers with a contemplation or negotiation of other cultures and realities in relation to their own, such as thinking about creation myths (as presented in the “Origins and Namings” section of *Technicians*), dealing with loss and death (as shown in the “Death & Defeat” section of *Technicians*), and considering what constitutes other major life or cultural events (as illustrated in “The Book of Events” sections of *Technicians*). Thus, their work points out the problems with accepting a limited worldview in terms of literature, art, and culture, and further illustrates how the work of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner move towards Duncan’s “symposium of the whole.”

The aforementioned theorists and works build a case for why it is important for ethnopoets to redefine and reclaim the words and ideas associated with the primitive. It is important to reevaluate the concept of the primitive because in redefining it, Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner are able to show how the primitive is not disconnected from the contemporary but is part of the contemporary. This idea is built on a reflective negotiation that runs across various traditions, which then informs the contemporary poetry of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner. Finally, the redefined primitive challenges ideas about the canon because ethnopoets, through their active dialogue across various traditions, question the relevance of a limited Western canon for thinking about contemporary poetry.

Due to Ethnopoetics' call for an active engagement with a range of poetic traditions and the redefinition of the primitive, it is important to call renewed attention to Ethnopoetics and its concerns through scholarship. Rothenberg alludes to the idea that there has been a lack of critical attention concerning Ethnopoetics in *Technicians of the Sacred*. Rothenberg states in his revised Preface (1984), "but the work, by the same token, has hardly begun, & the changed paradigm of where we see ourselves in time & space has received little recognition. In that sense it remains (like much that is good among us) partly, maybe largely, subterranean" (xix). Rothenberg's recognition and acceptance of Ethnopoetics as being at least somewhat "subterranean" calls for scholarly attention to be given to the movement and its poets. Two reasons why Ethnopoetics has remained "subterranean" is made evident by Turner in "A Review of 'Ethnopoetics'" when Turner explains the uneasiness with which Western culture attempts to interact with

other cultures and the democratizing of culture that Ethnopoetics attempts to create through reflexivity.

Turner says of the emergence of Ethnopoetics that it:

comes at a time when knowledge is being increased of other cultures, other worldviews, other life styles, when Westerners, endeavoring to trap non-Western philosophies and poetics in the corrals of their own cognitive constructions, find that they have caught sublime monsters, eastern dragons, lords of fructile chaos, whose wisdom makes our knowledge look somehow shrunken and inadequate. (338)

This uneasiness of interacting with the other on equal terms has caused Ethnopoetics to be cast aside in anthologies and from critical discussions in favor of poetry and poets that conform to the already established standards of what makes for a good poem. Rothenberg states that “the political intention of *Technicians* was in fact to call ... European hegemonies into question” (xxi). That being said, Rothenberg trusts that his anthologies and translations make it clear how Ethnopoetics creates opportunities for different poetic traditions to dialogue with each other; however, because he doesn’t ever clearly explain how Ethnopoetics challenges a more Eurocentric approach to poetry, some scholars and critics have missed the important contribution that Ethnopoetics makes to contemporary poetry. This dissertation will explicitly explain how Ethnopoetics challenges Eurocentric notions through a discussion of how Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner employ strategic primitivism.

Section Seven: Subsequent Chapters

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter Two: Surveying the Range and Employing the Sacred: How the Primitive Shapes Jerome Rothenberg's Poetics will focus on how Rothenberg employs strategic primitivism through his attempt to broaden the meaning of the primitive and to illustrate how the primitive informs the contemporary. Emphasis in this chapter will be on how to read *Technicians of the Sacred* as a whole. After moving from a discussion of the anthology as a whole, I will focus on three sections: "Origins & Namings," which will illustrate how the anthology is an example of the active negotiation between cultures that Ethnopoetics fosters; "America," which will be discussed in terms of how Rothenberg represents Native American work through his use of "total translation"; and "Europe & the Ancient Near East," which will illustrate how Rothenberg incorporates various primitive/alternate Western texts into this new poetic whole that *Technicians* forges. A key idea in this chapter will be to show how Rothenberg also adds to the idea of the sacred through his redefinition of the primitive.

After discussing *Technicians*, I will move to Rothenberg's "Khurbn," which deals explicitly with the idea of how the primitive and the contemporary can be collapsed in contemporary poetry. In "Khurbn," Rothenberg attempts to find closure in understanding the events of the Holocaust and how the Holocaust continues to have an effect on today. This closure is accomplished through his understanding of a variety of poetic traditions rather than being just an expression of his Jewish identity.

Chapter Three: Searching for Meaning in the Dark: Re-imagining the Abyss in Clayton Eshleman's *Juniper Fuse* will focus on how Eshleman's use of strategic

primitivism is a reflection on how the primitive informs the contemporary. This is different from Rothenberg's approach because Eshleman explores the implications of beginning poetry with the Upper Paleolithic imagination and moving back and forth across a spectrum of poetic traditions. He accomplishes this exploration through his transcriptions and theories concerning cave art in southwestern France. There is also an inherent concern with rethinking poetic traditions and poetics in Eshleman's text as he creates a "pluralistic approach" to understanding Upper Paleolithic art through a careful reading of the complex sign systems that constitute it and then applies that reading to his own poetry.

Chapter Four: Fabricating the Primitive: Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets* as Imagined Archaic will show how Schwerner also negotiates the primitive and the contemporary. He utilizes archaic forms in new ways while probing the limits of scholarship in relation to understanding the primitive and poetry. In doing so, he enacts an intellectual trickster poetics. The focus of this chapter will be on how Schwerner employs his own kind of strategic primitivism in *The Tablets* through an active engagement with the concept of translating poetically. Schwerner created a culture and artifacts of that culture to then translate and interpret for his readers. He further complicates the idea of translating poetically through his creation of a fictional "scholar-translator" that barges in and out of the text to provide commentary on the tablets. This text most fully exhibits the negotiation that is inherent in Ethnopoetics in terms of engaging with other traditions and disciplines. Through this active engagement, Schwerner intentionally challenges the limits of what it means to create translations and poetry. I will briefly discuss *The Tablets* as a whole and then focus on "TABLET I,"

“TABLET III,” “TABLET XII,” and “TABLET XXVI” to show how Schwerner uses concepts of translation in his poetry to create new forms of poetic expression in contemporary poetry.

Chapter Five: Shaking a Rattle and Beating a Drum: The Significance of Ethnopoetics and the Importance of an Ethnopoetic Pedagogy contemplates reasons why ethnopoetic texts should be taught as well as provides some commentary on why teaching Ethnopoetics calls for a reframing of how poetics and poetry are taught in the classroom. It is not simply that we need to make the reading list longer by adding some ethnopoetic texts; rather, when we read and think about poetry through an Ethnopoetics lens, it becomes evident that Ethnopoetics calls for a major pedagogical shift. Because of this, consideration will be given to how students can attempt to create and enact their own forms of strategic primitivism in the classroom. To take up Ethnopoetics in the classroom is to take the ideals of Ethnopoetics into the classroom. It calls for an undaunted embracing of a “symposium of the whole,” which does not necessarily mean the need for an all encompassing syllabus on how to teach everything within the whole. However, it does mean that when poetry is taught, it is taught with the recognition that there are multiple interacting traditions of poetry, and that studying poetry should entail a variety of performative practices.

CHAPTER TWO

SURVEYING THE RANGE AND EMPLOYING THE SACRED: HOW THE PRIMITIVE SHAPES JEROME ROTHENBERG'S POETICS

i remember trying to make it rain
with an empty coke can
that rattled with its own tab
my vain attempt to make magic happen
with crossed legs
and mimicking trance
but nothing happened
was it a lack of belief that voided the sacred?
or
was the happening, the act the sacred?⁹

Section One: Jerome Rothenberg's "Primitive" Poetics

In this chapter, I will discuss Jerome Rothenberg's attempt to broaden the meaning of the concept of the "primitive." According to Rothenberg, "'primitive' means complex" (*Technicians of the Sacred* xxv). Rothenberg conceptualizes the primitive as

⁹ An original poem by Jay W. Sarver: inspired by a dry summer day and a reading of Jerome Rothenberg.

“complex” because he wants to illustrate the relevance and importance of composing poetry that is infused with primitive texts and ideas to offer new directions and thoughts for contemporary poetics. A major focus of this chapter will be on Rothenberg’s anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe & Oceania*, as a whole while being attuned to how particular sections reinforce Rothenberg’s complex reading and presentation of “primitive” poetries. After moving from a general discussion of this anthology, I will focus on three sections: “Origins & Namings,” which will illustrate the role that Ethnopoetics has played and can play in creating a new framework for contemporary poetry; “America,” which I discuss in terms of how Rothenberg represents Native American work; and “Europe & the Ancient Near East,” which will illustrate how Rothenberg attempts to incorporate various “primitive”/alternative Western texts into the new poetic whole that *Technicians* attempts to forge.

A key idea in this chapter is how Rothenberg wants poets to reconsider and reconceptualize the ways in which poetic traditions can dialogue with each other and to consider ways in which the past informs the present and how our understanding of the past is informed by the present. The epistemological act of weaving the past with the present does not universalize the past to make it convenient for the present; rather, the past and present mutually inform each other. The cultural space that Rothenberg calls attention to envisions the contemporary poet as having an increased awareness of global poetic traditions that help guide a poet to work with a poetics that takes them in different or new directions. This reclaiming of an important cultural space through a broader understanding of poetry connects to the idea of how Ethnopoetics is questioning the role

of the poet and the idea of the “primitive,” along with reflecting on the role of the sacred in poetry. This poetics move places the poet in a unique and important cultural space. I argue throughout this chapter that poets that reconsider the primitive and the sacred are able to collapse the past with the present.

Poetry that emerges out of Rothenberg’s particular strand of ethnopoeitics values “a range of poetries,” as suggested by the subtitle of *Technicians of the Sacred*. Through this value of the “range” in world poetries, Rothenberg, in his later poetry—“Khurbn,” for example—illustrates how his concern with the sacred and reconsideration of the relationship between the past and present is still relevant in his poetry. These concerns of Rothenberg’s contemporary poetry stem from his work as an anthologist in *Technicians of the Sacred*. It is through Rothenberg’s claims, concerning the “primitive” and the sacred that he developed through thinking of the “primitive as complex,” that he employs strategic primitivism in two ways. First, as an anthologist, in the valuing of non-western and marginalized texts in *Technicians of the Sacred*. And second, as poet in his continued questioning of a contemporary poet’s ability to learn from various technicians of the sacred in creating new poetry, which I discuss through an examination of Rothenberg’s “Khurbn.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, strategic primitivism invokes a concept of art that calls for a continuous, triangular self-reflexivity between artist/performer, the artistic work, and the audience/reader.

Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred* is one of his major works as an anthologist; other important anthologies include *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americans* (1986; 1992), *America, a Prophecy: A New*

Reading of American Poetry from pre-Columbian Times to the Present (1974), and two more recent anthologies of 20th-century poetry. *Technicians of the Sacred* is an anthology of over six hundred pages and is made up of a wide variety of texts from around the world and various time periods. It is divided up into five opening thematic sections: “Origins & Namings,” “Visions & Spels” (sic), “Death & Defeat,” “The Book of Events (I),” and “The Book of Events (II).” These five opening sections collect poetries from different cultures and time periods. The opening thematic sections are followed by geographical sections: “Africa,” “America,” “Asia,” “Europe & The Ancient Near East,” and “Oceania.” Throughout the thematic and geographical sections, *Technicians* contains a variety of poetry that includes prose poems, free verse, epic poetry, praise poems, sound poems, illustrated poems, and fragments of poems. The geographical sections are followed by two more sections: “Statements” and “The Commentaries,” which are extensive in themselves at almost two hundred pages. Rothenberg, in *Technicians of the Sacred*, draws from a wide variety of translators and prior translations, along with including his own translations.

Geoffrey O’Brien, in “Runes with a View: Jerome Rothenberg’s Wide, Wide World,” mentions *Technicians of the Sacred* and says of Rothenberg:

As anthologist . . . he has aspired toward maximum inclusiveness, seeking to extend the areas he focused on, to reveal multiple voices and secret correspondences already hidden in them. By equating archaic and experimental, primitive and complex, he offered contemporary poets an

opportunity to conceive of their roots as deeper and wider than any narrowly defined academic lineage. (28)

O'Brien calls attention to the intentions of Rothenberg in creating anthologies like *Technicians*, which are concerned with revising conceptions of poetry as widely as possible. O'Brien also makes the point that Rothenberg makes anthologies, like *Technicians*, in order to argue that poets need to think of their work as being part of a range of traditions and eras rather than as being part of a limited, linear tradition of poetry.

Due to Rothenberg's intention of creating a different kind of poetry anthology in order to facilitate a new kind of poetics, he, in *Technicians of the Sacred*, asks us to reconsider and reflect on what poetry is, as well as the very origins of poetry. Rothenberg says in his Preface (1984) of *Technicians*, concerning the key ideas behind the creation of his anthology, "It was my hope to make a fresh start, to begin at the beginning That meant not so much a simple rubbing out of history as its possible expansion; & it meant, against our inherited notions of the past, a questioning of such notions at their roots" (xvii). Rothenberg conceptualized *Technicians* as a book that would help him and others gain a different perspective on global poetry that would take nothing for granted, but probe the very foundations of Western thinking concerning the value of "primitive" art. I think that Rothenberg does this most clearly in the opening thematic sections of *Technicians*; those sections juxtapose various cultures in how each culture responds to or demonstrates the theme of the section. For example, "Visions & Spels" (sic) opens with a Tibetan piece, "The Annunciation," has a Serbian piece in the middle, "Spell Against

Jaundice,” and ends with a Navajo Indian piece, “From *The Night Chant*.” Thus, each thematic section illustrates a range of poetries in a micro sense, which is then followed by a range of poetries organized by geographic range that illustrate the variety across the globe.

Jed Rasula, in “On Rothenberg’s Revised ‘Technicians of the Sacred,’” says of *Technicians*, “*Technicians of the Sacred* is unique among all compilations of world poetry because of its insistence on the primacy of the poetics of its own—rather than its source—language” (135). Rasula attributes this uniqueness due to the breadth of “The Commentaries” section (135). In addition, I think that the way Rothenberg sets up “The Commentaries,” by having them at the end of the anthology, and by balancing between ethnographic data and contemporary poetry,¹⁰ asks readers to reconsider what it means to do scholarly work because “The Commentaries” alludes to the importance of combining research with creativity. Thinking about how research informs poetry and how poetry informs research is a major aspect of Rothenberg’s ethnopoeitics and his use of strategic primitivism.

Rothenberg’s taking on of the foundations of Western thinking is also discussed in an earlier dialogue between William Spanos and Rothenberg:

Speaking for myself, then, I would like to desanctify & demystify the
written word, because I think the danger of frozen thought, of

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, in “Soundings: *Zaum*, Seriality, and the Recovery of the ‘Sacred,’” says of Rothenberg’s editing for the second edition, “As in the case of the ‘Bantu Combinations,’ Rothenberg’s versions of primitive ‘Events’ are purposely presented so as to illuminate their contemporary counterparts” (44). I think this move illustrates how Rothenberg has become more strategic in his workings with “primitive” texts.

authoritarian thought, has been closely tied in with it. I don't have any use for 'the sacred' in that sense—for the idea of book or text as the authoritative, coercive version of some absolute truth, changeless because written down & visible. (510-11)

While this is a broad and general claim concerning the ethos behind the composition of *Technicians*, Rothenberg goes on to say of his and the anthology's focus in Preface (1984): "The area I set out to explore was poetry: an idea of poetry—of *language & reality* both—that had haunted me since my own first beginnings as a poet. The inherited view—no longer bearable—was that one such idea of poetry, as developed in the West, was sufficient for the total telling" (xvii). Already Rothenberg has begun to etch out what poetry means to him in his Preface (1984), in which he reconsiders the very notions of poetry as broadly as possible to include performance pieces and oral poetry into his new "range of poetries." John Miles Foley makes a claim similar to that of Rotheberg's in his book, *How to Read an Oral Poem*, when Foley says, "It's simply impossible to overstate the importance of oral poetry across the disciplinary spectrum, primarily because on available evidence it appears to be a universal human enterprise. Because oral poetry dwarfs written literature in size and variety, it should be everyone's concern" (xii). The pervasiveness of oral poetry and oral traditions becomes evident as one reads through *Technicians*. By including such range and variety of non-canonical works, the anthology makes an implicit argument for the expansion of the scope of poetry; its attempt to provide a "range of poetries" illustrates what is lacking in many other anthologies and in certain, dominant views of a poetic canon.

It is no accident that Rothenberg's sub-title for the anthology is "a range of poetries," which is a key concept for Rothenberg. The idea of providing a "range" comes from Rothenberg's appreciation of Robert Duncan's idea of a "symposium of the whole." As he explains in his dialogue with William Spanos: "Overall, however, I would want to expand the context of recovery: not to isolate it but to see it as part of a greater enterprise: a greater scheme or strategy described by Duncan out of Whitman as the composition of 'a symposium of the whole'" (516). In *Technicians*, Rothenberg attempts to provide a sense of the vast magnitude of what poetry can be if poets are willing to take into consideration the scope of world poetry to include "primitive" and/or sacred texts. Rothenberg's attempt to be as inclusive as possible in *Technicians* when thinking about the limits of poetry is a key concept of both Ethnopoetics and Rothenberg's work as an anthologist. Because Rothenberg makes his anthologies from the perspective of inclusion, he is able to anthologize texts that would have before been thought of as religious texts, such as shaman poems. I think shaman poems are frequently found throughout *Technicians* because for many of the "primitive" cultures that are included in *Technicians*, oral traditions are built out of shamanistic performances.

Despite an emphasis on the sacred, *Technicians* is not solely an anthology of religious poems, although some poems are religion based, e.g. "The Round Dance of Jesus" (336-40); instead, Rothenberg asks readers to consider the term "sacred" in a broader sense. As indicated above in his dialogue with Spanos, "the sacred" in Rothenberg's work is not an attempt to create something authoritative and to remove it from the common, everyday world. Charles Bernstein, in his Foreword to Rothenberg's *Writing Through: Translations and Variations*, says, "Rothenberg's work, resolutely

situated in the zone of the secular, in contradistinction to the hieratic, offers scant comfort to the new spiritualisms that constantly reinvent themselves in and as American poetry. For Rothenberg, ritual without innovation and disruption, like spirituality in the service of fixed religious doctrine, is a barrier to the sacred” (xii). In Rothenberg’s case, and in the scope of this discussion, “sacred” means thinking about using language as a means for creation. Sometimes this “sacred” understanding and use of language means communicating with or acting as a conduit for the various gods and goddesses that one comes across in a reading of *Technicians*. Other times, it means understanding poetry as an important, communal act that is initiated and carried out by a shaman-poet.

Rothenberg says further, of a deep appreciation for the “primitive,” in his Preface (1984), “[The poems revealed] the realization that poetry, like language itself, existed everywhere: as powerful, even complex, in its presumed beginnings as in many of its later works. . . . Poetry appeared not as a luxury but as a true necessity: not a small corner of the world for those who lived it but equal to the world itself” (xvii). Poetry is more than just an interesting linguistic phenomenon; poetry is a necessary part of expressing lived experiences across history and the globe. Hank Lazer, in “Jerome Rothenberg, An Introduction,” points to the importance of Rothenberg taking such a stance when he says, “Rothenberg stands as an inspiring example of resistance to provincial (mis)understandings of poetry as merely a specialized craft. For more than forty years, he has been in the habit of taking readers to points of generative intersection. His career can be seen as an active engagement with two great forces in poetry—the voice and the book” (49-50). Rothenberg’s insistence and push for a worldwide perspective on poetry created a shift in contemporary poetry that requires readers to see beyond themselves and

their culture to an understanding of how language unfolds in similar and different manners throughout the world. Lazer also points out two important ways of considering Rothenberg's work as poet and anthologist by emphasizing Rothenberg's mutual interest in giving "voice" or performative qualities to poetry and his deep investment in book making. Both of Rothenberg's aims remind readers of the complexities of poetry, and in turn, language.

Language is a powerful force in *Technicians*. It is through language and the creation of poetry that Rothenberg asks us to consider all those things that "primitive" poetry, grounded in oral traditions and performance, encapsulates to pose the idea that the "primitive" poetries contained within the anthology have something to offer contemporary poets and readers. Rothenberg's *Technicians* also asks readers to approach archaic materials in an "open-minded" way when he proposes that "primitive" poetries are important vehicles for expression. Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg, as co-editors, say in their Preface to *Symposium of the Whole*, "To summarize rapidly what we elsewhere present in extended form, the oral recovery involves a poetics deeply rooted in the powers of song and speech, breath and body, as brought forward across time by the living presence of poet-performers, with or without the existence of a visible/literal text" (xiii). Rothenberg and Rothenberg argue that the oral and performative aspects of poetry are fundamental to thinking about poetry. Thus, one of the goals of Rothenberg, in *Technicians*, is to illustrate how the primacy of oral traditions runs across various cultural traditions over time, each in their shared and particular ways, and how thinking about the "primitive" as fundamental, in terms of poetics, allows for contemporary poets to take poetry in different directions.

Rothenberg shows the “primitive” is complex throughout *Technicians* in terms of how he organizes the anthology and the selections that he chooses to include. He makes these choices to re-position the “primitive” as important for contemporary poetry and calls for a conscious and reflective shift in poetics and the composition of poetry. Rothenberg showcases this complexity through the variety of poetry that he offers in *Technicians*, which in turn illustrates how Rothenberg uses strategic primitivism in two key ways: through his use of “total translation” and with his insistence of the idea that poetry can be sacred, e.g. shamans can be thought of as poets. Thus, throughout *Technicians of the Sacred*, readers are encouraged to appreciate shamanistic rites and performances from various cultures as poetry. Sherman Paul, in *In Search of the Primitive*, calls attention to Rothenberg’s appreciation of the shaman when he says, “In fact, modern poetry enabled [Rothenberg] to appreciate the shaman, whose role of visioning and healing (making whole) he in turn appropriates for modern poets. In the crisis of consciousness that marks our time, the poet has again taken on the necessary work of *turning the mind upside down*” (99). I agree that one of Rothenberg’s purposes, in *Technicians*, is to think of the primitive shaman and his practices as complex and poetic in nature. This repositioning of the shaman allows poetry to be taken in different directions because Rothenberg calls for a poetics that emphasizes being visionary and inclusive. However, I disagree with Paul in the sense that Paul reads Rothenberg as wanting to be a shaman, which suggests a non-strategic primitivism. I think Rothenberg has learned from the poetic traditions that shamans function within and has allowed those influences to become a part of his poetics. Thus, the prevalence of shamanism in *Technicians of the Sacred*, and implied by the very title, serves as an example of the

inclusiveness of Rothenberg's poetics and practices as an anthologist. The inclusion of shamans illustrates how divergent traditions, forms, and images can help build a different kind of contemporary poetics, which is what *Technicians* provides for its readers.

Poets and readers are asked to actively read *Technicians* to reflectively consider the range of poetry, rather than one particular tradition, and to then immerse themselves within that range. Through immersion in a range, poets can strategically consider the primitive and the sacred as creating a different kind of poetry than one that is based solely on a Western, literate tradition. Paul discusses how Rothenberg, in *Technicians*, attempts to provide a different kind of poetics. Paul says, "This is the first of the anthologies by which he would change our minds—or, better, open possibilities. It is remarkable not only for how much it gathers from the remote past and for its extensive commentary, . . . , but for the pre-face in which he schematically presents what he demonstrates throughout, the 'intersections & analogies' of the oldest and newest poetries" (98). I think that Rothenberg, through contemplating the intersections of the primitive and the contemporary, makes an argument for both general readers and poets in terms of what poetry can be.

Bernstein provides a more recent evaluation of Rothenberg's work with anthologies like *Technicians*. Bernstein says, "Rothenberg's anthologies present a multicultural America of many voices in a way that explicitly rejects Eurosupremacism from *within* a European perspective; that is, dispensing with the demagogic rejection of Europe as such in favor of idealized 'America'" (xii). I think that Bernstein is pointing to how Rothenberg's work as an anthologist is strategic in nature because Rothenberg is

deliberately rejecting traditional conceptions of what poetry is. For readers of *Technicians*, Rothenberg offers a wide range of different poetic texts from various cultures throughout various eras.

Bernstein provides a rationale for why Rothenberg creates anthologies in the particular way that he does. Bernstein says:

Translation is always a form of collaboration: between two (or more) poets and also between two (or more) languages. For Rothenberg, the total translation creates not a secondary representation of that which lives primarily elsewhere but rather a poem engaged in—and of—its “own” “new” language. This is the underlying logic of including, side by side, poems from alphabetic cultures and poems from the post-alphabetic European modernists and contemporaries. The alphabetic provides a technical means to realize the postalphabetic (Rothenberg’s “new-old”), just as the postalphabetic opens avenues to traffic in the sight/sound/mind of cultures long ago superseded by the inevitable (and inevitably destructive) course of history. (xiii-xiv)

Thus, the general reader can come away from *Technicians* with an altered view on how thinking about the primitive as complex illustrates certain commonalities or foundations of poetic traditions across the range of cultures that Rothenberg includes in his anthology. I think, for poets, Rothenberg’s argument that re-examining the primitive as complex allows contemporary poets the opportunity to try out different forms and to think about the composition of poetry as engaging in a sacred act. Rothenberg attests to this idea in

his Preface to *Writing Through* while discussing the various translations he has worked on throughout his career. He says, “With all of these translations the effort was both to bring the works across (the literal meaning of ‘translation’) and to have them serve a manifesto function—a call to consider, by example, new or alternative ways of making poetry” (xvii). In these ways, Rothenberg invests in remaking the poetic landscape that poets work within. This is why Rothenberg begins the anthology with the section “Origins and Namings,” and in particular to begin with “Genesis I,” as Rothenberg asks readers to give up their preconceptions about poetry and begin anew with a sense of poetic creation that is grounded in the “primitive.”

Rothenberg says of “Genesis I” in “The Commentaries,” “What’s of interest here isn’t the matter of the myth but the power of repetition & naming (monotony, too) to establish the presence of a situation in its entirety. This involves the acceptance (by poet & hearers) of an indefinite extension of narrative time, & belief that language (i.e., poetry) can make-things-present by naming them” (441). Paul adds, about the opening section of *Technicians*, “What is notable in the initial section ‘Origins & Namings’ . . . is the concern with light, with cosmogonical genesis” (100). Thus, Rothenberg wants readers to be attuned to the possibilities that language can allow for poetry from the very start of *Technicians*. The main idea behind the anthology is clearly voiced in Kanto Indian “Genesis I” because the poem calls forth the idea of creating poetry as a sacred language act. This sacred language act also affects the reader when “Genesis I” ends with “It was very dark” (7). I think Rothenberg positions his readers in the “dark” in order to suggest that what is to follow is newly created for the reader to experience and ponder.

Paul echoes a similar claim when discussing an earlier Rothenberg book, *White Sun Black Sun* (1960): “From the start, Rothenberg is concerned with the revolution of the word as a revolutionary word that will deliver us from darkness” (74). Beginning in darkness creates a metaphorical and epistemological space for readers to begin to revise their conceptions of poetry as they continue to read through *Technicians*. This is why Rothenberg has “The Commentaries” for each piece appearing at the end of the anthology rather than after each piece; readers will feel free to work out their own meanings and interpretations for the poetry that they encounter. In essence, this creates the situation for a reader to have a dialogue with the text as they read as there are multiple voices to be found throughout the anthology. The reader gets to choose who to listen to and when to listen—if they want to listen beyond the poem at all. I think that the level of choice that readers are provided with in *Technicians* creates a dialogue between pieces that would be less likely to be noticed if the commentaries followed each piece rather than being collected in their own section at the end of the anthology. This dialogue is particularly the case in the opening thematic sections of *Technicians*. For example, in “Origins & Namings,” there are five different “Genesis” poems. These include “Genesis” poems from various cultures and places: Kato Indian; Arnhem Land, Australia; Maori, New Zealand; Hebrew; and Uitoto Indian, Colombia. While the commentary on “Genesis I” is helpful in creating a particular understanding of the poem and how it is different from “Genesis II,” the commentary itself is not the important part of reading *Technicians*. Rothenberg is not only interested in teaching us about world poetry and oral traditions, but, more importantly, he is interested in allowing readers an opportunity to experience the range of world poetry rather than accept a limited conception of the scope of poetry.

Rothenberg discusses his intentions in creating anthologies like *Technicians of the Sacred* in *Writing Through*. He says, “My project . . . was to join with others in an attempt to open and enlarge the field of poetry, by tactics of our own devising or by an exploration of actual poetic worlds, wherever and whenever found” (73). I think that Rothenberg presents a range of poetry for readers to discover the inherent possibilities that are created for poetry if there is a willingness to not compartmentalize cultures and separate the primitive from the contemporary. Rothenberg speaks of this idea in *Writing Through*. He says:

And I thought of poetry as in some sense self-corrective—both of language and of itself as a special form of language—a vehicle for what Wittgenstein, speaking of philosophy, had called “a struggle with the fascination that forms of language have upon us.” That was how I saw our plunge into ethnopoeitics—a freeing up of poetry and a challenge to the unnecessarily closed system (both cultural and formal) that was the state of poetry when we came to it. (73)

I think that Rothenberg reinforces the inclusiveness of his career project when he mentions freeing up poetry from “cultural and formal” conventions. In *Technicians of the Sacred*, Rothenberg accomplishes his push to allow poetry to be free through the dialogue that exists between pieces in the anthology, as well as between the reader and the text.

Readers of *Technicians* are asked to begin their poetic journey with the beginnings of creation from a non-Christian point of view to an enactment of the word itself, and, in doing so, play with Christian mythology through a reading of Kato

“Genesis I.” Rothenberg further insists that readers begin to rethink the idea of the sacred through another non-Christian creation poem, “Genesis II,” which emphasizes the physicality of creation. “Genesis II [Song 159]” begins “Go take that hot stone, and heat it near her clitoris: / For the severed part is a sacred *djuda rangga*. Covering up the clitoris within the mat, within its tranverse fibre, within its mouth, its inner peak . . . / Go, the people are dancing there like *djuda* roots, like spray, moving their bodies, shaking their hair” (9). By including “Genesis II” in the opening section of *Technicians*, Rothenberg makes a statement about how the sacred as a poetic concept can be rethought through the explicit description of the sacred emerging from sexual acts. By suggesting, through inclusion, that there can be a connection between the sacred and sexuality, I think Rothenberg suggests that not only should the sacred be re-interpreted as poetic, but that the sacred itself needs to be re-interpreted in order for it to be poetic. Rothenberg says in “The Commentaries” about “Genesis II,” “A heavy ripeness, the swelling & bursting of a teeming life-source, colors Australian views of the creation. The body of the sacred sister, heat around the clitoris, the budding tree roots, spray & blood, a swarming sense of life emerging—not two-by-two, in pairs, but *swarming*—was turned-from in the West, reduced to images of evil” (447). “Genesis II” gives voice to the act of how human beings procreate, and that the physical act of procreation is a sacred one.

This multifaceted view of the sacred is further evident in the lines “Go digging within, causing the blood to flow, sacred blood from the red vagina, that no one may see! / Very sacred stands the *rangga* penis!” (“Song 160” 10). Rothenberg offers this sacred poem to poets and readers as an opportunity to reexamine the sacred as a more flexible concept. For example, if we take a traditional American Christian understanding of the

sacred, the idea of origins and genesis comes from an all powerful God that creates the world asexually. The Holy Bible opens with the following account of creation:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. (Gen. 1. 1-5)

I interpret the opening lines of the Bible to be authoritative because it is a singular God that creates everything due to the power of His voice. Whatever God says manifests itself at his command. Furthermore, this act of sacred creation is done without any kind of sexual quality because God creates the light and the world through his Spirit, which I interpret as the intellect of God. Also, God acts as an authoritative figure in the above selection because he pronounces judgment on what is good, which in this case is the light.

Rothenberg, in *Technicians*, challenges an authoritative, non-sexual concept of the sacred through the various "Genesis" poems that he includes. In fact, even when Rothenberg chooses a text from a foundational Western culture, e.g. the Hebrew "Genesis IV," he still pulls from the margins of those cultures. For example, "Genesis IV" comes from "The Secrets of Enoch," in *The Lost Books of the Bible and the*

Forgotten Books of Eden. “Genesis IV” provides a very different idea of how God created light.

“Genesis IV” opens with:

And I commanded in the very lowest parts that visible things should come from invisible, & Adoil came down very great, & I beheld, & look! It was a belly of great light.

And I said: “Spread apart, & let the visible come out of thee.”

And it spread apart, & a great light came out. And I was in the center of the light, & as light is born from light, an age came out, a great age, & it showed me all the creation I had thought to make.

And I saw that it was good. (19)

There is still an authoritative divine being that is creating light and the world in “Genesis IV”; however, God in this sense creates light and the world out of enacting a sexual performance that causes a cosmic pregnancy which leads to the birth of light and time. Rothenberg, in “The Commentaries,” says, “God’s sexuality—lonely, hermaphroditic—is another very natural way of imaging the creation” (460). I think that Rothenberg includes “Genesis IV” in order to show how traditional Judeo-Christian creation stories have variations that, when considered, can widen notions of the sacred. This is the case because “Genesis IV” deals not only with the act of cosmic creation, but also the physical act of procreation that exists in everyday life. Thus, while “Genesis IV” contains similar aspects to the book of Genesis from the Holy Bible, it shows how a traditional religious

story from within Christianity can be reconsidered so that there does not need to be a division between the sacred and sexuality.

Throughout the opening section of *Technicians*, Rothenberg is attempting to formulate his own framework for the origins of poetry and how those origins can be re-utilitized and re-contextualized into the contemporary landscape of American avant-garde poetry. “Genesis I,” “Genesis II,” and “Genesis IV” allows Rothenberg and his readers the opportunity to reflect on the differences between a complicated “primitive” conception of sacred creation that unites the spiritual with the physical, in contrast to a limited Puritanical/Christian view of sacred creation that separates the spiritual and the physical. This re-interpreted “primitive” sacred adds to Rothenberg’s attempt to broaden the scope of poetry through a revised understanding of the relationship between the spiritual and the physical. Rothenberg then employs strategic primitivism with his insistence in understanding archaic oral and performative texts as providing an alternative beginning for poetry and, through that recognition, offering contemporary poets a different poetic tradition and platform to reflect on and create within.

Rothenberg’s insistence on casting a different kind of poetic tradition is further evident as a reader moves from “Origins and Namings” and begins to consider the various geographic groupings of poems; the idea of how each section of *Technicians* functions independently and in unison illustrates Rothenberg’s visionary mode of book making. He has assembled an anthology through putting together poetic pieces that emphasize the inherent oral and performative qualities of the “primitive,” and in doing so, he shows how each poem functions as a different, yet similar, example of poetic

expression. This is particularly the case with “The Tenth Horse Song of Frank Mitchell” from the “America” section. Rothenberg employs “total translation” with Mitchell’s “Horse Songs.” Rothenberg discusses his use of “total translation” in the commentary for the poem. Rothenberg says that in this particular form of translation, he means “total in the sense that I was accounting not only for meaning but for word distortions, meaningless syllables, music, style of performance, etc. The idea never was to set English words to Navajo music but to let a whole work—words & music—emerge newly in the process of considering what kinds of statement were there to begin with” (549-50). “Total translation” for Rothenberg is an attempt to provide the best possible reading experience for a reader that cannot see the poem performed by Mitchell. This method of translation is in itself poetic because Rothenberg has to make various decisions in translating onto paper so that more than just a reading of “Horse Song” can take shape. Sherwood, in “Sound Written and Sound Breathing,” says of “total translation,” “Taking a cue from Charles Olson’s ‘projective verse,’ total translations aimed to produce texts particular enough to be used as scores for spoken performance. Suddenly, phrasing, intonation, and the delivery of the poem had significance The spoken could no longer be swept under the carpet when the artistry that composed these poems was revealed” (77). “Total translation” makes reading an oral, performative poem more possible in an anthology because it encourages a reader to perform the poem, and provides the reader with the necessary linguistic tools to do so.

“The Tenth Horse Song” begins with: “*Key*: wnn Ngahn n NNN” (224). Thus, from the very beginning of the poem, an attempt is made to equip the reader with a sense of how to sound out the piece, which might, at first glance, be considered nonsense

syllables that can be skimmed or skipped over altogether. The “Horse Song” begins, “Go to her my son N wnn & go to her my N wnn N wnnn N nnnn N gahn / Go to her my son N wnn & go to her my son N wnn N wnnn N nnnn N gahn” (224). These first two lines of the poem illustrate Rothenberg’s intentions in *Technicians*; “The Tenth Horse Song” provides a different kind of poetry for readers and poets to consider through Rothenberg’s showcasing of the poem’s oral and performative qualities with his use of “total translation.”

The oral and performative qualities of this poem are evident in the repetitious lines. The repetition that exists in the first two lines shows the complexity of oral poems because there is a steady build of words and sound that begins to form into an intricate poetic web. The poem moves from the initial framing of the poem through the first two lines to a transitional line: “Because I was thnboyngnng raised ing the dawn NwnnN go to her my son N wnn N wnn N nnnn N gahn” (224). This transitional line is connected to the previous repeated lines through “go to her my son N wnn N wnn N nnnn N gahn,” but it also adds a description of the narrator of the story “Because I was thnboyngnng” After having introduced the narrator/character of the story, the poem moves to a list of actions and things that continue to rely on sound patterns and repetition to keep the oral poem going: “& leafing from thuhuhu house the bluestone home N gahn N wnn N go to her my son N wnn N wnn N nnnn N gahn / & leafing from the (rurur) house the shining home NwnnnN go to her my son N wnn N wnn N nnnn N gahn” (224). These lines show how the poem continues to build upon lines that have come before while adding new information or another piece of the story as the poem progresses.

After an additional 20 lines of progressive build, the poem begins to close with, “(a)cause I am thm boy who blisses/blesses to be old N gahn N nnnn N go to her my son N wnn N wnn N nnnn N gahn” (225). This line provides some final information about the narrator/character of the story, and then the poem ends with a repetition of the first two lines of the poem, “Go to her my son N wnn & go to her my N wnn N wnnn N nnnn N gahn / Go to her my son N wnn & go to her my son N wnn N wnnn N nnnn N gahn” (225). In a sense, an oral poem like Mitchell’s illustrates composition in process because what the reader sees on a page is not the final product; rather, it is just the score for the reader to work within. The real poetic piece emerges out of a performative reading of the poem itself. Thus, no oral poem is ever complete until it is given breath by a reader who is willing to engage with the structure of the poem and sound it out. Bernstein, in his “Foreward” to Rothenberg’s *Writing Through*, says:

Many of Rothenberg’s translations question the idea of accuracy, insisting on a ‘total’ translation that necessarily brings over from its source the full verbo-vocal-visual spectrum. Rothenberg’s *17 Horse Songs of Frank Mitchell* his greatest realization of total translation, emphasizes the transcriptive dynamic of much of his translation from oral sources, since it is more a score for performance than a poem to be silently read on the page. (xiii)

Bernstein calls attention to the performance elements of oral poems that Rothenberg’s method of “total translation” allows Rothenberg to show in his translations. I think that what Bernstein suggests is that Rothenberg’s “total translations” allow for a greater

creativity in how poems are translated and interpreted. The translator leaves his mark on the translation, since the translator is determining which elements of the poem to call a reader's attention to. In terms of the reader, "total translation" allows for a greater sense of how dynamic oral poems can be, even when they are read silently.

The range of poetics and methods that Rothenberg offers in his translations is also a major component of his poetics. For Rothenberg, poetry should emphasize all the qualities of language rather than just what is written on a page. He even goes so far as to say, "I wanted to avoid 'writing' the poem in English, since this seemed irrelevant to a poetry that reached a high development outside of any written system" (550). His thoughts about translating Navajo poetry echo his sentiments in the Preface (1967) that opens *Technicians*, "That there are no primitive languages is an axiom of contemporary linguistics where it turns its attention to the remote languages of the world. There are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages. Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity" (xxv). This idea further illustrates how Rothenberg employs strategic primitivism because he understands that oral language systems can be just as complex as literate based systems, and he attempts to showcase that idea in Mitchell's "The Tenth Horse Song."

Rothenberg utilizes "total translation" throughout his anthology to provide his reader with the ability to reflect on what happens to language and poetry when translations are presented as experiments that attempt to get at key performative qualities of poems from oral traditions. He says, in "Total Translation" the Appendix in *Writing Through*, "I also realized (with the Navajo especially) that there were more than simple

refrains involved: that we, as translators & poets, had been taking a rich *oral* poetry & translating it to be read primarily for meaning, thus denuding it to say the least” (202). I think Rothenberg’s explanation behind the idea that “total translation” is an attempt to correct misconceptions about primitive poetics by showing primitive poems in a dynamic way that one would not be aware of based on previous translations of the same poems.

The ethics behind “total translation” are an important feature of Rothenberg’s strategic primitivism. He says further of the ethics of “total translation,” “I translate, then, as a way of reporting what I’ve sensed or seen of an other’s situation: true as far as possible to ‘my’ image of the life & thought of the source” (203). Rothenberg suggests that he translates with the people and the culture that the text came from to aid him as a translator in helping readers see the poem in a similar manner that a person from the original culture of the text would have seen it. Thus, Rothenberg’s translations allow for the culture of the text to remain a part of the text through his ability to use “total translation” to render those aspects of the culture that have an effect on the text.

The other part of Rothenberg’s poetic project asks poets to rethink the concept of the sacred as a viable means to create different kinds of poetry—whether in suggesting the sacredness of language or the importance of a kind of poetic-shamanism. “Odin’s Shaman Song: ‘The Runes,’” from “Europe and the Ancient Near East” section of *Technicians*, further builds the case for the inherent power and flexibility of language as the poem employs various magical qualities that move the narrative along as well as establish the creation of poetry as a sacred act.

The opening lines of “Odin’s Shaman Song” describe the pain and suffering that Odin had to endure in order to acquire the knowledge of the runes so that he can create poetry. Odin is “hung” from a magical tree, “gashed with a stake,” and is given no “comfort” in order to prove that he is willing to sacrifice himself to acquire the power of language (353). While Odin suffers in order to acquire the knowledge of the runes, his sacrifice grants him immediate reward. Odin says:

I got nine mighty songs from the famous song
of Bolthron, Bestla's father,
and I got a drink of precious mead
sprinkled as from the heart.

Then I began to thrive and bear wisdom (353)

Odin suffers for knowledge that he uncovers through song. Knowledge and language are linked in this story poem, and this poetic knowledge is powerful. The songs that Odin is granted through his physical suffering also provide him with nourishment for both body and mind. It is the songs that restore him, and in restoring him, make him greater than he was before. Equating physical suffering with linguistic and metaphysical reward offers a different understanding of the world through a poetic vision that can come only through an widened notion of the sacred. It is through Odin's sacrifice that he is able to negotiate the sacred in order to create meaning and poetry in the world. In doing so, Odin enacts the role of a kind of shaman-poet or as Rothenberg says in the commentary, an "ur-poet" (596).

“Odin’s Shaman Song” continues to show the effects that a re-conceptualized sacred and shamanistic poetry can have on altering one’s perception of the world with:

I grew and prospered;

Each word drew another word from me.

each deed drew another deed from me.

Runes you will find, fateful signs

that the kind of singers coloured

and the great gods have made,

good strong staves good stout staves

carved by a god-ruling spirit. (353)

Odin grows through his understanding and singing of the songs that he has acquired.

Also, he becomes possessed by the songs with “each word drew another word from me / each deed drew another deed from me.” It is through his shamanistic possession that he is able to read the “Runes” and is then able to decipher the “fateful signs” that he finds in the “Runes.” Through his ability to know the “Runes,” he can contemplate the past for his present, and, in doing so, he enacts the aspect of shamanism that connects the present with the traditional past.

“Odin’s Shaman Song” moves towards its conclusion by directly questioning the listener’s ability to do what Odin himself has done.

Know how to cut know how
to read them?

Know how to tint know how
to test them?

Know how to plead know how
to proffer?

Know how to send know how
to surrender? (354)

This part of the poem directly addresses the listener of Odin's Song in order to illustrate the level of achievement that Odin has attained. Only Odin "know[s] how" to read and create the runes. His ability to understand and make songs is the power of creation itself in this story poem. It is Odin's ability to make songs, to create poetic language that allows him to be the god-king that he has become. While Odin is a god-king of great power, he is still subservient to the power of song for even he had to "to plead [and] surrender" to the power of the runes. "Odin's Shaman Song" ends with a reiteration of the power of sacrifice and surrender to the powers of language and creation (354).

I think Rothenberg includes "Odin's Shaman Song" to show that there are mythical roots for thinking of poetry as being a powerful use of language created by technicians or shamans, and thinking of poetry in this sense allows for different or alternative ways for contemporary poets to compose their own poetry. Rothenberg says

further in the commentary of “Odin’s Shaman Song,” “The magic/mysticism of letters and alphabets is otherwise a fact of poetry through large parts of the world” (596). As editor, he includes “Odin’s Shaman Song” in order to illustrate the archaic understanding of language as being the root of creation and to illustrate that it is through a passionate, all-consuming interaction with language that enables a poet to create powerful pieces of poetry. Rothenberg says in the commentary, “Behind the present excerpt is the account of Odin’s theft of the elixir-(mead)-of-poetry—*odrerir*—& with it his own transformation into a virtual god-of-language. As one grasps it here, that language is both voiced & written in the form of runes, a magical alphabet in which each letter (rune) stands for a charm, an incantation, towards specific ends” (596). Rothenberg also includes “Odin’s Shaman Song” as an example of the complexity of an archaic language system, the runes, due to the inherent necessity that the language places on oral and written aspects of language.

Archaic language systems, like the one reflected on in the runes of “Odin’s Shaman Song,” are complex because they demand a balance between orality and literacy in order for meaning to be transmitted. In a way, the rune system calls for a dialogue between different kinds of language use to create a specialized form of language that can only be mediated by a technician of the language, in this case Odin, in order for meaning to be created. The runes only have power if they are spoken, but they can only be known and passed down because they are written. In a sense, this summarizes my understanding of Rothenberg as a poet-anthologist in *Technicians of the Sacred*. Rothenberg asks the question throughout his anthology: what happens if we stop thinking about orality and

literacy in separate terms, and instead think about the ways they can complement each other to create new kinds of poetry? I think, in a way, Rothenberg calls for a rune poetics.

“Odin’s Shaman Song,” through its magical use of language, connects back to the “Origins and Namings” section of *Technicians*, as discussed above, because “Odin’s Shaman Song” combines the sacredness of language with the ability to create poetry, which is an important concept that can be found throughout *Technicians*. Thus, “Odin’s Shaman Song” allows Rothenberg the opportunity to further illustrate how the “primitive is complex.” This complex understanding of the primitive brings with it a multifaceted understanding of language, which can help guide a poet to the creation of meaningful poetry. Paul says of Rothenberg, “He does not wish merely to acquire the techniques of the oldest poetries, he himself wishes to be a technician of the sacred” (122). Paul is right to point out that Rothenberg engages with the primitive and the sacred in order to contemplate different poetic modes and concepts; however, Rothenberg is more strategic than Paul suggests. I think Rothenberg does not mean to become a technician of the sacred; instead, he wants to discover and explore what he refers to as “channels” to follow poetry through. Rothenberg says, in his Preface to *Writing Through*:

. . . from 1960 on, I began to use translation as a way to channel material into publications of my own.

Where that channeling turns up most clearly is in the acts of translation that are an underpinning for the anthologies . . . that I began assembling in the later 1960s. . . .

With all of these translations the effort was both to bring the works across . . . and to have them serve a manifesto function—a call to consider, by example, new or alternative ways of making poetry.

All of that remains central to me—the translation, I mean, and those other suppositions and legitimate acts of “othering” that underlie my entire project.

(xvi-xvii)

I think Rothenberg creates the anthologies he does to reach out across the range of poetries that exist within his anthologies and to try to be influenced as a poet to continually re-conceptualize poetry as he channels various traditions in his work as a poet-translator. Rothenberg does not want us to just read and consider poetry. Instead, he wants us to recognize that poetry has foundations in the primitive and the sacred. He asks us to collapse the primitive with the contemporary and the sacred with the profane and the mundane. I think that if we are willing to travel across the various avenues that Rothenberg creates in his anthologies, poetry and poetics are altered in profound ways that call for inclusion in a way that also alters a reader’s sensibilities and understanding of poetry. In this way, Rothenberg reworks the primitive to discover the contemporary.

Section Two: Jerome Rothenberg’s “Khurbn” as Sacred Closure

Rothenberg works within the channels that he discovered in making anthologies, like *Technicians*, in his long poem, “Khurbn.” In “Khurbn,” Rothenberg deals with the issue of looking for poetic inspiration from the past in order to newly see his present. He accomplishes this by enacting a poetic mode that is based off of shamanistic or visionary

poetries. “Khurbn” is an example of how Rothenberg utilizes strategic primitivism in his own poetry that is primarily concerned with coming to terms with aspects of his Jewish heritage and the history that accompanies that heritage. Thus, this section provides an opportunity to illustrate how Rothenberg’s strategic primitivism continues beyond his work in *Technicians*.

Rothenberg says, in “‘KHURBN’ and Holocaust: Poetry *after* Auschwitz”:

In 1968 America was deep into Viet Nam and I was finishing a first assemblage to tribal poetries from around the world, *Technicians of the Sacred*. The war drove me to a further, deeper alienation from America, and *Technicians* led me to explore ancestral sources of my own—”in a world” (I wrote) “of Jewish mystics, thieves, and madmen.” (283)

This reflection adds credibility to the idea that an exploration of the archaic can lead to a fruitful discovery of both the individual and the culture that one is from in order to compose poetry that is of the present moment, along with being an expression or meditation of the past.

Rothenberg’s “Khurbn” illustrates how Ethnopoetics can be understood in terms of seeing the poem as a visionary plane on which language and textual spaces allow for a variety of interpretations of history and the present. This poetic journey is deeply psychological and is experienced through the physical spaces that Rothenberg immerses himself in. Christine A. Meilicke in, *Jerome Rothenberg’s Experimental Poetry and Jewish Tradition*, reads “Khurbn” as Rothenberg’s attempt to provide a vehicle for the

dead victims of the Holocaust to speak.¹¹ However, I think that what Rothenberg does in “Khurbn” is attempt to find some way of poetically working through the genocide of the Holocaust in order to find some kind of closure or to make sense of those events. Thus, Rothenberg can be understood as enacting a kind of sacred poetics in “Khurbn” because he attempts to work through the past in order to create a new perspective on the present through his poetry.

While “Khurbn” is Rothenberg’s attempt to work with the silenced voices of the past, the poem cannot speak for the dead. Instead, the poem functions as a means for Rothenberg to contemplate the events of the Holocaust and to try to make sense out of the void that those events created. Hence, Rothenberg’s poetry moves towards a kind of knowledge that is not easily discernible, let alone scientific. The visionary poet must contemplate his visions that the void reveals and follow those visions to wherever they may lead. This allows Rothenberg to dwell in a method of knowledge production that calls for an interaction with the linguistic logic of shamanism in order to discover important and lasting impressions that can then be translated into powerful poems.

Rothenberg illustrates his understanding of the usefulness of archaic, abyssal images/spaces when he says in his introductory words to “Khurbn”:

The poems that I first began to hear at Treblinka are the clearest message
I have ever gotten about why I write poetry. They are an answer also to the
proposition . . . that poetry cannot or should not be written after

¹¹ Meilicke says, “The central motif of *Khurbn* is therefore the notion of the poet as a medium for the dead” (235).

Auschwitz. Our search since then has been for the origins of poetry, not only as a willful desire to wipe the slate clean but as recognition of those other voices & the scraps of poems they left behind them in the mud.
(153-54)

These introductory words provide the reader of “Khurbn” with a sense of what they are about to read, but more importantly, they establish a clear theoretical ground in which to consider the poems that are to follow. Rothenberg calls attention to and places an emphasis on the importance of contemplating geo-specific spaces in poetry. Thus, Rothenberg relies upon a metaphorical and physical journey that he undergoes in order to experience the poetics of each space that he encounters, and then he attempts to relay that information to readers. Throughout each step, Rothenberg enacts a kind of shamanistic mode that establishes a link between Poland, his cultural heritage, his poetics, and his readers. However, it should be noted that Rothenberg is not acting as some kind of Jewish mystic.

Rothenberg’s understanding of the sacred, as discussed above, is much more elaborate than just acting as some kind of priest of his cultural religion. The depth of Rothenberg’s understanding of the sacred was suggested above by Bernstein when Bernstein said that for Rothenberg, “ritual without innovation or disruption . . . is a barrier to the sacred” (xii). Thus, Rothenberg does not attempt to enact the sacred in his poetry in order to reinforce a particular kind of sacredness that is related to certain religions, in this case Judaism; rather, Rothenberg enacts the sacred in his poetry in order to dwell in poetic spaces that would have been off limits for secular purposes.

Rothenberg alludes to the shamanistic-visionary like mode of employing the sacred in “Khurbn” when he discusses the poem as “allowing my uncle’s khurbn to speak through me” (153).¹² Rothenberg understands “Khurbn” as allowing him the opportunity to reflect on his uncle’s tragic story. The idea of Rothenberg acting in a metaphorical sense as a conduit for a spirit to speak through him further builds the association between his work and shamanism. While Rothenberg suggests, in his discussion of the poem, that he is allowing his uncle’s story an opportunity to be reflected on in the present, it does not mean that Rothenberg is somehow channeling his uncle’s spirit in some kind of poetic séance. Instead, Rothenberg uses his uncle’s story to merge the distance between the events of the Holocaust and Rothenberg’s contemporary life. Concentrating on his uncle’s story allows Rothenberg the ability to pick a point or place from which to build his poetic contemplation when reflecting on the Holocaust and its impact on Rothenberg’s contemporary self and world.

It is through Rothenberg’s workings with shamanistic poetics from oral traditions that allow him the ability to see poetry as a way to reflect on horrific events of the past in a contemporary way, which is one way of reading “Khurbn” as enacting Rothenberg’s strategic primitivism. Meilicke says, “The poems of *Khurbn* are written under the influence of the voices of the past, which overwhelm the poet when he approaches the geographic location of the Holocaust—places such as Treblinka” (233). Thus, being in a place that has powerful spiritual resonance allows Rothenberg the opportunity to

¹² The idea of “khurbn” in this case can be thought of as the left behind traces and experiences of Rothenberg’s uncle.

contemplate his conceptions of what connections he can make with the past in order to inform his present.

Rothenberg speaks further of the rationale behind “Khurbn” when he says in “‘KHURBN’ and Holocaust: Poetry *after* Auschwitz,” “Holocaust is a Christian word that bears the image of a sacrifice by fire. A totality of fire: that is, in human terms, a genocide. The fire I believe is true; the sacrifice a euphemism for the terror” (282). Rothenberg believes in the “fire” of what happened during the Holocaust because it speaks to the destructive nature of the events that made up the Holocaust. He further speaks of why Holocaust is a misnomer when he says, “*Khurbn* was the word I knew for it: disaster pure and simple, with no false ennoblement. Nothing left to say beyond the word. No sacrifice to ponder. And no meaning” (282). Meilicke says, “By employing the Yiddish word *khurbn* and giving Yiddish titles to his poems . . . , Rothenberg memorializes and ‘cradles’ the language of millions of murdered Eastern European Jews. . . . Like the Hebrew and Yiddish writers of Holocaust literature, he writes ‘for a lost community,’ and, as a poet, he speaks for the voiceless” (232). I think Meilicke misinterprets the intentions of Rothenberg in the sense that she tries to tie him too neatly to his Jewish heritage and, in the process, make him into the kind of Jewish mystic that I argue he is not enacting.

Rothenberg reflects on his Jewish heritage in “Khurbn,” but he does not do it in order to take his place in a tradition of Hebrew and Yiddish writers; he is not speaking for Judaism at large. To take Meilicke’s understanding of Rothenberg’s work in “Khurbn” at face value undermines Rothenberg’s work as an ethnopoet and his attempt, as such, to be

as inclusive as possible. Rothenberg writes “Khurbn” in the way that he does because of the very alternate channels that he discovered through his work as an ethnopoet-translator-editor. He writes this poetry to help himself come to terms with what his uncle’s Holocaust story means for Rothenberg’s contemporary life. I think because Rothenberg attempts to find some way of dealing with the wrongs of the past in the present, he must negotiate between what he knows about his uncle’s story, the Holocaust, and his own contemporary present.

Rothenberg begins to negotiate and become attuned to the pieces of the past that he is able to reflect on through a contemplation of the word khurbn. As with *Technicians*, “Khurbn” also begins in darkness, which leads Rothenberg to discovery and poetic contemplation. “Khurbn” begins with “In the Dark Word, Khurbn”:

all their lights went out

their words were silences,

memories

drifting along the horse roads

onto malkiner street

a disaster in the mother’s tongue

her words emptied

by speaking

returning to a single word

the child word

spoken, redeyed on

the frozen pond

was how they spoke it,

how I would take it from your voice

& cradle it

that ancient and dark word

those who spoke it in the old days

now held their tongues (155)

I think Rothenberg begins his poem in darkness with “all their lights out” because it reinforces his idea that there is no redeeming value to be gained from the historical events of the Holocaust. For Rothenberg, his poem must begin in the dark because he, as poet, is in the dark about what to make of the events of the Holocaust. While there is no redeeming value to be found in the Holocaust, there is a value in reflecting on the past in order to make some sense of the present. That is what Rothenberg is trying to do in “Khurbn”; he is trying to come to terms with what happened. In some ways, “Khurbn” functions as a “Genesis” poem because it is a reflection on how things happened in the past and how they can be related to in the present; however, it is not strictly a “Genesis” poem because there is no creation in the darkness of “Khurbn” except for the poems that Rothenberg composes. Rothenberg must make do with darkness because there is nothing else for him to start with. The Holocaust created a void through the extinguishing of so many human lives or “lights.”

In the second stanza of “In the Dark Word, Khurbn,” Rothenberg begins to enact his shaman-like mode through speaking, “their words were silences, / memories / drifting along the horse roads.” Rothenberg begins to cue the reader into how his poetic journey is going to occur through his ability to acknowledge the void created by the silenced voices of his past ancestors. He uses the poetic knowledge that he obtained through his work as anthologist and translator to act as a kind of shaman-poet because he is willing to find some way of relating the silence of those that have been extinguished to his poetry.

This opening poem also establishes a common ground with *Technicians* through the invocation of the importance of the spoken word. There is evidence of this in the

remaining stanzas of the poem. As in each stanza, there is a reference to spoken language, voice, and/or words. Thus, Rothenberg channels the ability to make connections with silenced voices of the past and redirect that silence into a new, poetic vision. In essence, Rothenberg builds his poems out of a contemplation of the silence that pervades the places he visits and the visions that he sees.

Out of the darkness that is established in “In the Dark Word, Khurbn,” Rothenberg discovers an emptiness that has been left behind in the second poem of “Khurbn,” “Dos Oysleydikn (The Emptying).” Rothenberg begins “Dos Oysleydikn (The Emptying)” by asking, “at honey street in ostrova / where did the honey people go?” (156). A subtle difference between the beginning of this poem and “In the Dark Word, Khurbn” is that “Dos Oysleydikn (The Emptying)” begins with a rhetorical question. In one sense, “Where did the honey people go?” can be answered by both Rothenberg and the reader because both are aware of the historical events that surround the area that the poet is encountering. However, in asking a question, Rothenberg illustrates that while he works within the dark and the silence, he still does not have answers for why things happened. This reinforces the fact that Rothenberg’s intent in “Khurbn” is not to make sense of what happened but to reflect on what happened and the ways in which the present can be merged with the past.

The poem continues: “empty empty / miodowa empty/ empty bakery & empty road to warsaw” (156). The poet suggests his lack of answers for the questions that he considers by his focus on “emptiness” as a concept; for him, “emptiness” is all that remains of his ancestors in this place. Furthermore, Rothenberg establishes that

something is missing from the street and that the road the poet begins to embark upon leads to “warsaw,” which is described in the poem as containing “yellow wooden houses & houses plastered up with stucco / the shadow of an empty name still on their doors” (156). Thus, the former ghetto of the Jews has retained a tattered image and is still shrouded in darkness, as the evil of the place continues to permeate its surroundings. It is this very darkness that Rothenberg attempts to work with and through to come to some kind of understanding about what happened to his ancestors and what that means for him. Through allowing himself to be possessed by the bits and tatters of the past that surround him on his journey, Rothenberg illustrates the complexities of collapsing the past with the present, which is an aspect of his strategic primitivism. Also, in terms of strategic primitivism, I think the poetic project that “Khurbn” embodies is only possible through an understanding of poetry in the kind of inclusive terms that Rothenberg suggests in *Technicians of the Sacred*. Rothenberg writes “Khurbn” in the way that he does because his sense of poetics, drawn from a range of traditions, allows him the ability to use poetry to contemplate the kinds of horror and loss that the Holocaust created.

This emptying out of geo-specific places is done in order to allow for a taking on of the horror and loss of the Holocaust. It also continues to resonate throughout “Dos Oysleydikn (The Emptying)” as everything contains emptiness for the poet. For example: “old farmers riding empty carts down empty roads / who don’t dispel but make an emptiness / a taste of empty honey” (156). This layering of emptiness that hovers over the poet’s perception of Poland brings him to a contemplation of the countryside that leads to an even darker road than the one to Warsaw: “the road led brightly to treblinka.” Thus,

Rothenberg's journey in the poem begins with contemplation, then to the ghettos of Warsaw, and finally on the road to extermination at Treblinka.

Upon this contemplative journey to Treblinka, Rothenberg described the countryside and what he perceives there, which finishes out the poem, "Dos Oysleydikn (The Emptying)":

Past which their ghosts walk

Their ghosts refuse to walk

Tomorrow in empty fields of Poland

Still cold against their feet

An empty pump black water drips from

Will form a hill of ice

The porters will dissolve with burning sticks

They will find a babe's face at the bottom

Invisible & frozen imprinted in the rock (157)

The final lines of this poem provide further rationale on Rothenberg's part as to why the poem "Khurbn" must be completed. Rothenberg describes perceiving ghosts that are trapped in a "cold," "black" place, where they are "invisible & frozen imprinted in the rock." The "invisible & frozen" voices of the past cannot be brought forward by a contemporary poet, or anyone else for that matter, because they are stuck in the past.

Rothenberg recognizes that the voices of the past have been silenced, and he attempts to come to terms with that silence through his poetry. He can come to terms with the “invisible & frozen” voices of the past because his sense of poetics has been revised so that he can use poetry as a means to create closure concerning his inability to easily connect with the past.

Rothenberg’s incomplete ability to contend with the past through a kind of shamanistic-visionary model that is an inherent part of *Technicians* is further evident in Rothenberg’s “Dos Geshray (The Scream)”:

there is no holocaust

for these but khurbn only

the word still spoken by the dead

. . .

it is the only word that the poem allows

because it is their own

the word as prelude to the scream

it enters

through the asshole

circles along the gut

into the throat

& breaks out

in a cry a scream

it is his scream that shakes me

weeping in oshvientsim

& that allows the poem to come (162-63)

While Rothenberg is unable to provide some kind of adequate explanation for what happened during the Holocaust, he is greatly affected by the residual impressions that still inhabit the spaces that he enters in “Khurbn.” I think it is Rothenberg’s attempt to work through the Holocaust in this poem that causes him to be “shake[n]” because he knows that he will never be able to fully represent the horror and suffering of the Holocaust; yet, he still finds himself surrounded and overtaken by the lingering silence that affects him so deeply on an emotional and a physical level. James McCorkle, in his article “Contemporary Poetics and History: Pinsky, Klepfisz, and Rothenberg,” says of the above poem, “Rothenberg’s ‘Khurbn’ has a dense, almost brutal physicality. The dialectic of created language and the tortured body is fully evident in ‘Dos Geshray (The Scream)’” (183). When McCorkle’s ideas are considered, “Dos Geshray” involves the poet physically and metaphorically engaging with his uncle’s tragic past through a meditation between the physical anguish that his uncle suffered and the poet’s own attempts to experience that anguish. Rothenberg then projects that anguish into poetic language; however, the key to Rothenberg’s use of poetic language is that it is grounded in an understanding of the utility and power of archaic traditions, such as shamanism, to

produce knowledge and an understanding about the past and the ways in which the past can interact with the present.

McCorkle further builds on the idea of possession and shamanistic tendencies in the poem with, “Rothenberg’s poem is a haunted poem; it has explicitly sought to find the sources of suffering in the human body and then to make them knowable or shared” (184). The poem is a “haunted” poem because it exhibits Rothenberg’s attempt to engage with the silenced past in the physical world. Meilicke also suggests that Rothenberg enacts a shamanistic mode in “Khurbn” when she says of the Hebrew and Native American influences on Rothenberg’s poetics, “Some shamans are possessed by ancestral spirits and become their instrument. Rothenberg draws on this idea when he views himself as a kind of shaman, that is, a medium for the voices of the dead” (235). Meilicke insinuates that Rothenberg is in fact a shaman; however, I think that Rothenberg’s approach to encountering the past in “Khurbn” is shaman-like. I think it is too easy to just call him a shaman. As I suggested above, I think Rothenberg has learned how to contend with the past in the present through his workings with primitive and archaic poetries, but that does not make him a shaman. Rothenberg is not interested in saving the silenced voices; instead, he attempts to merge the past with the present in order to create a context for understanding what happened. It is through Rothenberg’s employment of thinking about poetry from the perspective of shamans and other technicians of the sacred that Rothenberg uses strategic primitivism in this poem.

Rothenberg further enacts his form of strategic primitivism, i.e. what he has learned from archaic technicians of the sacred in being able to come to terms with horror and tragedy, in “The Other Secret in the Trail of Money.” The poet says:

& all true all true the poet’s vision
proven in the scraps. Bank notes & zlotys strewn
over the field. Papers buried. Testaments
to death & to the acquisitive nature of the guards
its passage from hand to hand, to make a picnic
in the Jewish State. Imagine.

That he is again in the field leading to the showers & that the field is
strewn with money. Those who are dead have left it, & the living bend to
pick it up. (167)

His form of strategic primitivism allows him to further expose the truth of what happened during the Holocaust through a contemplation of a specific place based on the pieces of physical and spiritual evidence that Rothenberg encounters and contemplates. With this poem, the reader is reminded of the power of a poet’s perception and that what comes from the “poet’s vision” is the truth, i.e., the visionary perceptions of shaman poet. These visions come from being attuned to the mundane reality that surrounds the poet at Treblinka through the bits and pieces “strewn” about. I think it is important to note that Rothenberg only has bits and pieces to consider in his attempt to work through the past in the present. These bits and pieces are an important aspect of what Rothenberg sees as a part of the tragedy of the Holocaust. The Holocaust created a chasm of pain and despair in human history. Because of this irreconcilable gap in human history, the best

Rothenberg can offer readers about the silenced voices can only be partial and incomplete. It is from the reality of the mundane and the forgotten that the poet is able to begin to construct his archaic vision of the past in the present. He sees through his imagination and experiences, which the reader is able to see through the poet; thus, the poet acts as a multiple channel for his visions of the past. This then positions the poet, in Rothenberg's poem, as a means for contemporary readers to come to terms or contend with the oppressive nature of the horror that surrounds us when we try to make sense of the Holocaust. While Rothenberg attempts to provide a means for readers to contend with the silenced voices of the Holocaust, I think that his poetic acts do not smooth out the differences between the past and the present, but instead, helps the present come to an understanding of the past.¹³

The void from which Rothenberg speaks his poetic truths is a dark and ugly place, but Rothenberg is determined to mediate the space in order to illustrate the evil that created that space and how the evil of the past continues to resonate today. This is seen in the third stanza of "Der Gilgul (The Possessed)":

3

earth, growing fat with

the slime of corpses green and pink

¹³ See McCorkle for a discussion of how Rothenberg attempts to convert a personal concern into part of the public consciousness in "Khurbn" (184).

that ooze like treacle, turn

into a kind of tallow

that are black

at evening that absorb

all light (169)

This poem illustrates how Rothenberg's invocation of the unseemliness of the past has affected his entire perception of the place. This unseemliness is most evident with the use of the line "the slime of corpses green and pink" and that the decaying bodies "ooze"; the earth has been forced to feed on this vileness that has robbed his people of any "light" or hope when they look upon the past. He forces the reader to confront this ugliness in order to remind the reader of the evil that has occurred on the ground that he currently stands on. This illustrates the definition of *khurbn* that Rothenberg has invoked in order to criticize the use of the word "Holocaust" as the utilization of his uncle's *khurbn* allows Rothenberg to remind readers of the utter destructive nature of what is commonly termed the Holocaust.¹⁴ Thus, Rothenberg summons the repulsiveness of the area in this poem illustrating the evil that humanity is capable of so that the silent voices of the past may have an impact on the present.

¹⁴ McCorkle suggests that the implication of Rothenberg's poem is to move readers towards an understanding of the Holocaust through engaging with "difficult truths" because not everything about the horrors of Treblinka will ever be completely known or understood (187-88). Meilicke, while discussing "The Domain of the Total Closes around Them," suggests that the imagery found in the poem "aims to reach the reader" and force "unwilling" readers to think deeply about the ugly events of the Holocaust (245).

Rothenberg closes “Khurbn” with “Peroration for a Lost Town.” He says,

what will I tell you sweet town?

that the sickness is still in you

that the dead continue to die

there is no end to the dying?

for this the departed would have had an answer:

a wedding in a graveyard

for you sweet town (189)

Rothenberg begins to close “Khurbn” with no kind words for those that are alive to bear witness to his shamanistic uncovering of the past. He offers the town of Ostrów-Mazowiecka only the ghastly truth of death and sorrow. This reinforces the aim of Rothenberg’s project, which was not to provide catharsis about the events of the Holocaust but to speak the brutal and tragic truth behind the events that have been dubbed the Holocaust. Rothenberg finds no redemptive grace in this dark place to console those that must now bear the weight of death that hangs over the town.

What Rothenberg does offer is revealed in the following lines that close out the first part of this final poem:

o faces o dimming images lost smiles o girls embracing girls

in deathless photographs o life receding

into images of life you beautiful & pure sweet town

I summon & I summon thee to answer (190)

One way to read these lines of the poem is to think of Rothenberg only offering the town condemnation and judgment as he ends his visionary journey through the past. I think the poem could be read as Rothenberg wishing that the town was still full of the living voices of those that were silenced, but he, and the readers at this point as well, knows that this is impossible.

The answers that Rothenberg finds in the second part of “Peroration for a Lost Town,” are those of willful forgetfulness and indiscernible history:

“What was a Jew like? they asked. . . . No one is certain still if they exist. . . . They spoke & paused. Spoke & paused again. If there was a history they couldn’t find it—or a map. The cemetery they knew was gone, the dead dispersed. . . . And the shops? we asked. The stalls? The honey people? Vanished, vanished in the earth, they said.” (191)

According to this part of the poem, it would be impossible for there to be any kind of redemption from the fires of the Holocaust because all that exists is a grim acceptance that something happened to the Jews, but there exists no account amongst the villagers about what happened to them. “Peroration for a Lost Town” ends with: “an apparition / set apart / out of the furnace” (192). There is nothing left to be claimed here. Rothenberg has spoken the truth as best he could, but, again, all that is left to contemplate is silence and intangibility.

Jerome Rothenberg is a poet-translator-anthologist. He is an ethnopoeist who deeply explores his connections and disconnections to Western culture and his Jewish heritage. In fact, all four of those facets work together in the assembling of anthologies, like *Technicians of the Sacred*, and in his poetry, like “Khurbn.” His ideas of poetry and book making go hand in hand, as does his criticism and investigation of world poetry. There are at least two particularly useful ways to read his work: to focus on how he uses “total translation” in order to provide readers with an opportunity to be more fully aware of the oral and performative aspects of primitive poetries, and with it an emphasize on the various nuances of sound; and to consider how contemporary poets can learn from archaic technicians of the sacred in order to reconsider the limits of poetry. Both of these ways illustrate Rothenberg’s essential tenet that the “primitive is complex.” “Total translation” poems show the vitality and variety of oral poetry; the idea of learning from a variety of different kinds of poetries from the past is evidence of the visionary capabilities of a “primitive” mindset. In these key ways, Rothenberg employs his own kind of strategic primitivism that is an important aspect of the ethnopoeists under review in this dissertation.

Rothenberg’s use of strategic primitivism allows him to build an understanding of the primitive that helps create an alternative context for the creation of contemporary poetry through the inclusive nature of the range of poetries that Rothenberg works with and offers to poets and readers alike. Working with the primitive helped Rothenberg develop his sense of poetics as being broad enough to allow him to pursue topics and ideas in poetry that lead to a contemplation and reconsideration of how the past informs and affects the present, as illustrated in “Khurbn.” Only a poet who is well-versed in the

range of poetries of the sacred could create a poem that contains such a profound contemplation of silence without attempting to provide answers for what happened. The idea of an ethnopoet being deeply grounded in the archaic and discovering a visionary mode of his own through the repositioning of the “primitive” will be further discussed in the next chapter on Clayton Eshleman’s *Juniper Fuse*.

CHAPTER THREE

SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN THE DARK: RE-IMAGINING THE ABYSS

IN CLAYTON ESHLEMAN'S *JUNIPER FUSE*

my FEAR of the dark light YOU cast

IS

part of YOUR work

but (as if a whisper

also)

partly my own

FUZZY and silent YOU scuttle across my mind

Leading me further and further

downward OR is it around?

into what is BEYOND

What i find is mine and YOURS and mine again¹⁵

Section One: Clayton Eshleman's Poetics of Pluralism

Clayton Eshleman, through transcribing cave art, provides readers with a different method of discovering poetic inspiration in his book, *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld*. I will discuss Eshleman's *Juniper Fuse* as a text that actively repositions the importance of primitive art. My reading of *Juniper Fuse* illustrates how Eshleman employs strategic primitivism throughout the text. I argue that strategic primitivism is different from previous uses of primitivism in poetry because it has, at its root, a reflective quality through which the ethnopoet is very much aware of how he employs the primitive and why he employs it. I believe ethnopoets enact

¹⁵ Original poem by Jay W. Sarver inspired by a reading of *Juniper Fuse*.

strategic primitivism in order to illustrate Rothenberg's claim from Preface (1967) in *Technicians of the Sacred*: "Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity" (xxv). In the previous chapter, I discussed how strategic primitivism provides an opportunity to study and reflect on archaic texts from within Western culture and around the world, which helps move the tradition of world poetry towards a "symposium of the whole." This chapter will illustrate how Eshleman employs strategic primitivism in order to rethink the history of the human imagination, and in turn, human cultural history.

Eshleman's work is unique because he engages with actual archaic sources (the cave images) and these sources inform his contemporary poetry through Eshleman's understanding of how all human creative endeavors exist on a "continuum" that began in the Upper Paleolithic moment and has continued on into the contemporary. In addition, Eshleman's work offers a different viewpoint on how to interpret cave images because his poetry informs his understanding of the cave images. Thus, with Eshleman's poetry there is a constant cycle of poetry inspiring investigation and investigation inspiring poetry.

Before discussing Eshleman's *Juniper Fuse*, it is best to start with an understanding of Eshleman as a poet. Eshleman is principally interested in composing poetry that reflects his personal experiences in a visionary way, calling attention to particular geographical spaces and philosophical and social dilemmas, such as issues of gender. Jerome and Diane Rothenberg, in *Symposium of the Whole*, say of Eshleman's poetry that "the vision of the 'paleolithic imagination' and what he calls 'the construction of the underworld' marks his distinctive contribution to an expanded ethnopoetics" (446).

Eshleman has lead a long and multifaceted career as a poet, translator, and editor, which has lead him to write and compile various books of poetry, translations of poets, and essays. His travels and translations of other poets have greatly impacted his poetry (Rothenberg and Rothenberg 446). He has been the editor of literary magazines: *Caterpillar* (1967-1973) and *Sulfur* (1981-2000). *Caterpillar* contained various foundational ethnopoetic texts (Rothenberg and Rothenberg 446). Before the publication of *Juniper Fuse*, he published over twelve books of poetry, including *Coils* (1973), *What She Means* (1978), *Hades in Manganese* (1981), *Fracture* (1983), and *From Scratch* (1998). He is most celebrated for his translations of César Vallejo, in particular Vallejo's *Complete Posthumous Poetry*, which was published in 1978 and won Eshleman a National Book Award.

Eshleman, through translating Vallejo, came to see poetry as an “imaginative expression of the inability to resolve the contradictions of man as an animal, divorced from nature as well as from any sustaining faith and caught up in the trivia of socialized life” (“A Translation Memoir” 27). Due to Vallejo's influence, Eshleman states that he discovered his right to do whatever he wanted with his poetry; Vallejo's poetry helped Eshleman understand poetry as an open form that encouraged experimentation with structure and content, in order to create “an authentic alternative world” (27). His work in *Juniper Fuse* is a continuation of a quest to find and reaffirm the importance of alternative traditions and worldviews. In this sense, Eshleman fully embodies what it means to be an ethnopoet.

He further discusses the effect of translating Vallejo on his poetic perception in “Before Paradise: An Interview with Dale Smith” by saying, “So, mainly through

Vallejo, I came to see the writing of a poem as penetrating a labyrinth whose off-shoots and dead-ends were to be experienced as a way of thinking into, against, and through” (297). I believe that, for Eshleman, poetry is never something that one experiences passively; instead, poetry enacts multiple worldviews and, with it, a questioning of culture. Also, the idea of a poem enacting a labyrinth of language and the mind can be seen throughout *Juniper Fuse* as Eshleman actively and critically interprets and translates the cave images that he encounters.

Poetry invites the kind of experimentation and interpretation that Eshleman engages in. It allows poets an opportunity to engage with the nuances of language more than other forms of literature. Due to my understanding of poetry, I argue that Eshleman is invested in using the allowances and conventions of the genre to illustrate the profound impact that the Upper Paleolithic imagination has had on his poetry. Furthermore, I think that Eshleman uses poetry to make a case that it is an important mode of contemporary literary expression. While I will argue that Eshleman is at times trying to link his ideas of the Upper Paleolithic imagination to human issues beyond poetry, he is most intent on using *Juniper Fuse* to explain how the cave images have affected his understanding and composition of poetry to inspire other poets to seek out their own projects and inspirations.

Juniper Fuse functions as a multi-genre text that illustrates Eshleman’s concern with poetic plurality. I find his musings about the physical qualities and metaphorical/archetypal possibilities of the caves of southwestern France and his poetry provide further evidence of his concern with poetic plurality. He goes about creating a “pluralistic approach” to reading the Upper Paleolithic imagination specifically, and

poetry, in general. At work throughout *Juniper Fuse* is the play between the idea of the literal journeys Eshleman has taken inside the caves and the metaphorical/intellectual/imaginative journeys that have come out of exploring and considering the physical qualities of the caves. Eshleman's reading of Upper Paleolithic cave art is the basis of his use of strategic primitivism. In order to interpret Eshleman's employment of strategic primitivism, I consider his reevaluation of archaic cave art. These reevaluations are discussed and utilized throughout *Juniper Fuse* and move history and human culture towards "a symposium of the whole" because Eshleman understands the Upper Paleolithic Imagination as the very beginnings of human culture.

At the nexus of Eshleman's reading of the Upper Paleolithic Imagination is a shared, human experience that is similar to Robert Duncan's concept of a "symposium of the whole." Like with Rothenberg, Eshleman's poetic project is an attempt to illustrate that high levels of creativity can come out of what is thought of as primitive art. The difference between Rothenberg and Eshleman is that Rothenberg is most intent on illustrating the complexity of oral poetry and Eshleman is most intent on showing the significance of archaic cave art. There is also an inherent concern with knowledge production in Eshleman's text, as Eshleman comes to an understanding of Upper Paleolithic art through a careful reading of the complex sign systems that constitute it. In this way, *Juniper Fuse* illustrates Eshleman's idea that critical scholarship can and should inform poetry.¹⁶ Finally, the text of *Juniper Fuse* also merges poetry and prose; the book moves seamlessly between prose poems and poetic prose, which illustrates how Eshleman mixes genres in order to utilize the conventions of poetry and prose to help him

¹⁶ Eshleman discusses this idea in reference to Wallace Stevens in "Eight Fire Sources" (37).

unify his cave inspired poetry and his poetry inspired thinking about the caves into a single text.

In previous works of criticism on Eshleman's poetry, Eshleman has been read as an example of a poet whose work dealt deeply with the concerns and issues of postmodernism and as a contemporary, visionary poet. Paul Christensen's book, *Minding the Underworld: Clayton Eshleman & Late PostModernism*, which is the only in-depth study of Eshleman's poetry, was published twelve years before *Juniper Fuse*. In *Minding the Underworld*, Christensen makes a case for why Eshleman is an important postmodern poet. Dan Featherston, in his essay, "On Visionary Poetics, Robert Kelly, and Clayton Eshleman," discusses the development of visionary poetry in contemporary American poetry and discusses Eshleman as a visionary poet. The critical work of Christensen and Featherston constitute the only significant criticism that has been generated about Eshleman's poetics, which is one of the reasons why I call attention to his poetry as being significant in order to add to the critical conversation about Eshleman.

To fully understand Eshleman's pluralism and strategic primitivism, it is best to begin with the *Introduction* of *Juniper Fuse*. Eshleman discusses how the caves in Lascaux were discovered in 1940 (xi). He then begins to provide a rationale for the title of his book: "wicks made of a quarter-inch juniper branches were used in many of the 130 hand lamps found in [the caves]" (xi). Eshleman later mentions the importance of the wick lamps with the idea that the undergrowth of juniper that covered up the entrance to the caves was the wick of the cave, which points to how Eshleman understands the physical attributes of the caves in a metaphorical sense because he sees his entrance to the caves as providing a new way or light of understanding for his poetry that is ignited

each time he enters a cave for further exploration (xi). This information is provided to justify the title of the book, *Juniper Fuse*, as the text functions as Eshleman's attempt to illuminate the connection he sees between nature and art in that the "fuses" are fashioned from natural materials which happened to grow or were planted on site, but are made into the tools that allow for exploration of the caves and the conditions for making art within them. Furthermore, the juniper functions as an actual wick that helps illuminate aspects of the interior of the caves. In this sense, the caves become visible in a way which allows Eshleman to explore and builds his poetics. The caves, which Eshleman journeys through physically and imaginatively, provide inspiration and an alternative understanding of art and culture. His description of the juniper wicks casts his book as a guiding light through the various corridors of the caves and of his mind. For Eshleman, the cave images unfold for the journeyman poet who is willing to enter freely and leave altered. This metaphor of illumination and contemplation can be traced throughout *Juniper Fuse* and is a key concept for understanding the significance of Eshleman's work.

Eshleman continues to build the argument of his book:

This book envisions and examines some of the origins and developments of imagination recorded in cave wall imagery (for the most part in southwestern France) during the last European Ice Age, roughly between 40,000 and 10,000 years ago. . . . To follow poetry back to Cro-Magnon metaphors not only hits real bedrock—a genuine back wall—but gains a connection to the continuum during which imagination first flourished. My growing awareness of the caves led to the recognition that, as an artist,

I belong to a pretradition that includes the earliest nights and days of soul-making. (xi)

Eshleman suggests that his book illustrates Upper Paleolithic image making as a significant artistic moment and that his realization of the importance of cave art has had a great impact on he understands poetic traditions. Eshleman understands himself as part of a long-standing continuum of artistic creation, which is reflected in his poetry. I think that Eshleman's claim also has implications for thinking about Western poetic traditions. I argue that Eshleman's idea of connecting to the "continuum" distinguishes his understanding of poetic traditions from other conceptions of poetic tradition, such as T.S. Eliot's ideas, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," about how literary traditions "slightly, alter" themselves to accommodate new works (99). Eshleman's work suggests that poetics began in prehistory and that those Upper Paleolithic ideas continue to play out across the poetic continuum. This continuum approach allows poets the ability to move back and forth in time in terms of who they see as poetically important and relevant for contemporary poetry. I think for Eshleman, traditions are generated by poets and a dialogue with other poetic traditions. Furthermore, Eshleman makes a powerful claim about the importance of investigating the primitive as an ethnopoet when he muses on how the caves function as a "back wall" and help him to pinpoint a "pretradition" to which he can respond.

He later reiterates the importance of studying the Upper Paleolithic imagination when he says, "I believe that what we call image-making and, consequently, art, was the result of the crisis of the separation of the hominid from the animal to the distinct but related classifications of the human and the animal" (29). This quote details another

major critical idea behind Eshleman's project, which is that the cave images are a result of humanity's angst about being torn from nature. Eshleman understands his work as calling attention to humanity's angst by reconciling that angst with an earlier moment in human cultural history, which positions him as a visionary poet because he attempts to bridge the gap between early humans and contemporary humans.

Eshleman adds that *Juniper Fuse* is an attempt to answer a question that Alexander Marshack, a science writer, asked him in 1974: "What is a *poet* doing in the caves?" (xi). I interpret Eshleman's answer to be that a poet is in the caves to reevaluate and transcribe primitive cave art as an important and strategically critical act because the Upper Paleolithic moment illuminates a shared primitive history of human art. I believe Eshleman illustrates the idea of the versatility of the Upper Paleolithic imagination through his willingness to let the caves inform his poetry and allow his poetry to inform his scholarly understanding of the cave images, which further shows that critical scholarship can and should be a part of contemporary poetry. This is why Eshleman's poetics can be thought of as engaging with the caves in a pluralistic sense.

Because Eshleman finds contemplative and significant art in the darkness of the caves through his employment of strategic primitivism, he is able to avoid the kind of binaries that he is critical of because effective uses of strategic primitivism invoke a contemplation of how the archaic informs the contemporary and how understanding the archaic depends upon the contemporary. Eshleman expresses this idea through his understanding of a "continuum" that begins with the Upper Paleolithic and will continue into the future beyond Eshleman. In this sense, the darkness can be just as illuminating for the ethnopoet who employs strategic primitivism as any art cast in the brightest of

lights. I argue that Eshleman discovers and then infuses his poetry with an alternative tradition to work off of, which allows him to meander through his poetry in a pluralistic way. It is through this reevaluation and transcription that Eshleman comes to see the error in Western civilization's reliance on binaries, such as primitive versus civilized.

I believe that a key aspect of Eshleman's poetics is an active negotiation between himself and the archaic images that he encounters in the caves. In the caves, he discovers a treasure trove of metaphors in the caves to ignite his own imagination, which in turn, infuses his poetry with an alternative tradition to work off of and allows him to meander through his poetry in a pluralistic way. Eshleman creates the kind of poetry that he does due to his willingness to engage with poetry in a pluralistic sense that allows the archaic and the contemporary to exist simultaneously.

This strategic move of his generates more ideas for his poetry while at the same time avoiding the epistemological traps of binary oppositions that turn the archaic and the contemporary into dueling ideological stances. Christensen, in *Minding the Underworld*, says of Eshleman and his pluralistic sense of poetics, "Eshleman's poetic vision is of the one *becoming* the many through a kind of penitential lyricism [of which] the suspenseful treks he makes through the caves of southwestern France [are a part of]" (29). I consider what Eshleman discovers in this "pretradition" that has been revealed to him through his various mental and physical journeys through the caves is an avenue of artistic freedom that illustrates the influence of the various traditions and poetics that he has engaged with throughout his career as a poet. The effect of this "pretradition" on Eshleman's poetry is clearly shown in *Juniper Fuse*. He articulates the various facets of his discovered

“pretradition” throughout the text in order to clearly show how the primitive or the archaic can have a profound effect on contemporary American poetry.¹⁷

When Eshleman’s poetry creates a discussion between the primitive and the contemporary that enables him to move back and forth upon the poetic “continuum,” he does not do so without a sense of the value that poetic traditions may have for others. I contend Eshleman shows his ethnopoeitic sensibilities and how strategic primitivism is different from cultural appropriation when he says, “I don’t want to engage the caves in an ahistorical void or to strip-mine them for ‘poetic’ materials. Among other things, I want to incorporate their imagery into poetry as a primary antecedent dimension, in effect opening a trap door in poetry’s floor onto these unbounded but evocative gestures” (xii). Eshleman calls attention to his process of utilizing the archaic, primitive, or other because he actively negotiates between traditions or “pre-traditions” in order to further complicate his own poetics and to illustrate the various ways that cultures interconnect throughout time. This is non-appropriative because Eshleman understands his poetry as being of equal standing with other pieces of art and poetries that exist along the “continuum” that he draws from in the caves. Furthermore, I think Eshleman’s insistence to allow the archaic and the contemporary to overlap in his poetry shows his idea that the archaic is always a present part of the contemporary mind but poets do not realize this until they immerse themselves in the cave images.

¹⁷ Eshleman’s participation in a “pretradition” associates him with other visionary poets, such as William Blake and Charles Olson. Blake and Olson both attempted to expand the domain of poetry through the archaic. Blake attempted to construct or reconstruct Christian mythos in his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in order to illustrate the problems of binary thinking, i.e. Blake’s discussion with the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel (*Symposium of the Whole* 8-9). In Olson’s *Mayan Letters*, he engaged with the archaic through his poetic reconstruction of the Mayan in order to take American cultural history back to an earlier and non-European origin..

It is Eshleman's conscious choice to saturate his poetics with "pre-traditions" in art that further associates his work with that of Duncan. Duncan's idea of a "symposium of the whole" is shown to be a guiding force in Eshleman's writing when Eshleman writes, in "A Translation Memoir," "I had developed an affinity for a poetry that went for the whole, a poetry that attempted to become responsible for all the poet knows about himself and his world. . . . [This kind of poetry] inducted and ordered materials from the subconscious as well as from those untoward regions of human experience that defy rational explanation" (23). Featherston, in "On Visionary Poetics, Robert Kelly, and Clayton Eshleman," says of *Juniper Fuse*, "It is precisely the establishment or *re*-establishment, of the present by way of a serviceable past that makes these poems and prose visionary—'far-seeing'" (422). Eshleman's interest in creating and translating poetry that attempts the daunting but open task of speaking to the whole illustrates Eshleman's employment of strategic primitivism in his transcription and translation of cave art. I contend this further shows how deeply affected Eshleman's poetics has been by his sense of belonging to a poetic "continuum."

Eshleman further builds on the importance of the idea of a shared "continuum" in understanding his poetic intentions when he says, "It seems that over the centuries our 'big holeness' has increased in proportion to our domination of the earth. Today it is as if species are disappearing into and through an 'us' that lacks a communal will to arrest their vanishing" (*Juniper Fuse* xiv). Eshleman asserts the need for a community of the whole, and he is suggesting that one avenue to reestablish our wholeness with ourselves and the earth is through the Upper Paleolithic imagination.

Eshleman further says, “I found that cave imagery is an inseparable mix of psychic constructs and perceptive observations. That is, there are ‘fantastic’ animals as well as realistic ones” (xv). In suggesting that the cave images contain both the real and the fantastic, Eshleman implies that cave art is more sophisticated and experimental than we might think at first glance, which allows him to connect his contemporary poetics to the primitive cave images. I think, for Eshleman, the Upper Paleolithic imagination serves as bedrock for the beginnings of human experimentation. An important aspect of Eshleman’s strategic primitivism is his understanding that early humans were artists, inventors, and researchers as opposed to simple primitives. Eshleman’s insistence that early humans were just as intellectually complex as contemporary humans further illustrates his reflective investment in the archaic because for Eshleman the archaic past informs and is a part of the present.

Eshleman discusses the poetics behind *Juniper Fuse* when he says, “I sought to be open to what I thought and fantasized . . . to create my own truth . . . Sometimes a section is all poetry, sometimes all prose—at other times it is a shifting combination like a Calder mobile, with poetry turning into prose, prose turning into poetry” (xv). In this sense, Eshleman enacts a poetics based on vision¹⁸ as opposed to knowledge. His visionary standpoint is due to his strategic primitivism that values the primitive as important, which allows him the poetic ability seek out and rediscover the physical and metaphorical abyss that the caves represent. His poetic reflections on the cave images propel him through his journeys in the caves. I think this continued contemplation of the archaic imagination

¹⁸ See Featherston for further discussion of Eshleman as a “visionary poet” (409-16).

allows Eshleman to construct and reconstruct his poetics every time he encounters something intriguing about the caves.

A key component to Eshleman's reading of the cave images becomes apparent when he discusses how he understands the cave images as Upper Paleolithic people divorcing themselves from the animal world around them (*Juniper Fuse* xvi). The variety that exists within the cave imagery, such as a bison-headed man (*Juniper Fuse* 33) or a bird-headed shaman (*Juniper Fuse* 183), is the driving idea behind *Juniper Fuse*, and illustrates "that the liberation of what might be called autonomous imagination came from within as a projective response on the part of those struggling to differentiate themselves from, while being deeply bonded to, the animal" (*Juniper Fuse* xvi). It is the confrontation of the multiple within the metaphorical abyss the caves represent that provides Eshleman with the creative license to theorize why the imagery exists.

The imagery that Eshleman encounters has a pluralistic effect on his poetics because he does not attach a particular meaning to each cave image that he ponders. Instead, Eshleman attempts to read the cave images in as many ways as possible, which then helps him construct a poetics that values re-interpretation. This is the case because he wants to maintain a dialogue between the archaic and the contemporary which means he has to keep working with and through the images he encounters. He does not want to know the Upper Paleolithic imagination in any kind of quantifiable sense because deciding on what an image stands for means ending the conversation, and he desires to know of the Upper Paleolithic imagination so that he can maintain the conversation.

Eshleman's reading of the cave images illustrates that he understands the images as important pieces of art in their own right as well as offering a particular kind of archaic

inspiration for contemporary poetry. This understanding is evidenced through his commenting on the effect of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* on his own poetics. Eshleman says, "While one of the primary drives in writing poetry is toward originality, it is also gratifying to discover that one's own efforts to clear new ground have some antecedent support—that another thinker has established a background against which one's own efforts can be viewed and possibly confirmed" ("Eight Fire Sources" 44). Eshleman is particularly influenced by Bakhtin's idea of the "grotesque," which Bakhtin defines as, "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness" (303). What is important to keep in mind with this definition is that Bakhtin cautions against reading the "grotesque" in a purely negative manner. Instead, Bakhtin encourages scholars to see "both the positive and the negative poles" of the "grotesque" (304-08). This is an idea that is clearly seen throughout *Juniper Fuse*, as Eshleman argues that the "grotesque" cave images provide an idea of how Cro-Magnon people thought about and conceived their world. Eshleman pursues the multifaceted nature of the "grotesque" in his poetry to further consider how the past informs the present and how the present mirrors the past.

Along with Eshleman's reading of the cave images as embodying the "grotesque," he also sees them as embodying Bakhtin's idea of "the grotesque body" as "a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (317). Eshleman says of the influence of Bakhtin's "becoming body"¹⁹ on his reading of the cave images, "If Rabelais's world represented an infringement on borders and stability, the Cro-Magnon world, I discovered, displayed itself in that abyss between no image and an image, or before there were any borders to

¹⁹ See Christensen for more on how Eshleman's poetry illustrates the idea of becoming.

be infringed” (45). I understand this idea of a body continually branching out and creating new bodies is one way to think about Eshleman’s poetics; Eshleman’s poetic framework is always in flux depending on how he responds to and incorporates the ideas, concepts, and images that he encounters in the caves.

Eshleman’s creative license allows him to continually unfold implications concerning why cave imagery exists and how it can inform contemporary creative processes. Eshleman claims that early shamanism or, as he terms it, “proto-shamanism,” begins to be evident in human culture in the cave images. He says, “Shamanism, or what might be more accurately termed proto-shamanism, may have come into being as a reactive swerve from this separation continuum, to rebind human being to the fantasy of that paradise that did not exist until the separation was sensed” (xvi). Eshleman suggests that this is the case due to how animal images and human images share the same canvas spaces throughout the caves (xvi). In this way, the cave art created by Upper Paleolithic people attempted to address the problem of intellectual and emotional separation from nature through creative expression. I see Eshleman’s interpretation of the caves as exhibiting a major turning point in the human psyche and the proto-shamanistic attempt to reestablish the lost close association between the animal and the human as a further elaboration of how the caves provide an ethnopoet with the ability to reflect on and reevaluate the significance of the primitive for contemporary poetics. This is the case because Eshleman is arguing that people have continued to face the problem first articulated by our primitive ancestors—traumatic separation from nature—which is why Eshleman feels it is necessary to reevaluate the Upper Paleolithic imagination as complex and incorporate it into his own contemporary poetry.

Eshleman's interpretation of the cave imagery as constituting proto-shamanism leads him to theorize that "all the figures [are] open to magical interpretation. Deep caves especially would be ideal locations for the experiencing of symbolic death and regenerative vision" (xvii). Therefore, I understand Eshleman's reading of the cave walls as exhibiting human separation angst and an attempt at shamanistic healing. This leads Eshleman to the idea of the caves as being of the abyss because the caves serve as a dark, physical, and symbolic space that attempts to reconcile humanity with its lost animal self. While the caves are dark and powerful spaces, they provided human beings with the opportunity to develop a vocabulary on an open canvas in order to address their various intellectual and emotional anxieties. The caves, then, for Eshleman, become spaces of critical artistic expression. Describing the caves in this manner is a positive description that presents the caves as a significant space that allowed artists an opportunity to reflect on the world and how they related to the world.

I contend that Eshleman's positive reading of the caves enacts a visionary mode through his willingness to be overtaken or possessed by the images he encounters. His visionary path sees, understands, and embraces the dark rather than fearing it; in doing so, he casts the dark as embodying all of the "grotesque" things that readers may be uncomfortable with. I believe that, for Eshleman, the underworld is a contemplative site where humans may express their angst and find ways to represent it and consider ways to overcome it.²⁰ Thus, the darkness that surrounds the cave images is an empowering site for human creativity. I think for Eshleman the caves represented an open space for early

²⁰ Christensen also argues that Eshleman is working within an underworld trend that dates back to the nineteenth century (178).

humans to wrestle with or work through the psychological issues of their time in an imaginative way. The benefit for the contemporary poet is that the poet, in traveling through and reflecting on the caves, can absorb or interpret what he sees into a contemporary representation of the archaic struggles of the past that continue to be a part of the struggles of the present.

Eshleman proposes an interpretation of the caves as being a metaphorical and transformative site in which those that enter into the caves enter into a metaphorical abyss, which constitutes a poetic womb due to the range of possibilities for creation of poetry that embraces the “pretradition” that exists within the abyss. In *Juniper Fuse*, I see the feminine as having mythic power. Eshleman imagines the caves as representing a psychically charged geo-space where Upper Paleolithic and contemporary people struggled through a dark dreamscape and found spiritual rebirth. Eshleman says of this idea, “Implicit here is the idea that the birth from one’s mother is not a complete or real birth, and that the real or second birth involves something more than merely continuing to exist” (xxi). Christensen also attests to the metaphor of poetic rebirth in Eshleman’s poetry (19). In agreement with Christensen, I argue that a re-birth²¹ through a metaphorical abyss leads to a transformative moment from which the poet emerges with new visions that greatly inform his poetics. It is the ability to emerge from the caves in a transformed psychological state that empowers the feminine.

In terms of Eshleman’s ideas of the caves as the origin of image-making, Christensen says, “[Eshleman] could ground the whole of his poetry and give it the

²¹ Christensen argues that Eshleman has been an active participant in what Christensen terms “the rebirth paradigm” (142-43).

mythopoeic center needed to draw its various themes of exploration, maturity, and struggle into a coherent argument” (194). The themes of “exploration, maturity, and struggle” that Christensen points out are articulated in Eshleman’s understanding of the “continuum” that his work in *Juniper Fuse* acts within and reacts to. In fact, I posit that *Juniper Fuse* moves beyond Christensen’s themes by showing the relevance of the primitive for contemporary American poetry. The caves offer ethnopoeists the chance to re-encounter the earth as a mythic mother, and once saturated within the walls of the mythic and mystical, to explore and re-explore the various avenues that exist within and during that archetypal moment. This further shows how Eshleman offers a different space for ethnopoeists to work within because he recognizes the cave images as being the beginnings of poetry.

While Eshleman sees the images within the caves as a primordial site of regenerative poetics, he does so very carefully. He alludes to this idea in an interview with Dale Smith entitled, “Before Paradise,” when he says, “every claim that I make on Cro-Magnon imagination, I must realize is a combination of what is there on a cave wall and my projection. All image-making, from the start I intuit, is charged with projection” (277). Eshleman’s qualifications of how he is reading the images in the caves illustrate a key idea of Ethnopoetics: self-reflexivity. Eshleman’s self-reflexivity is built on maintaining a dialogue between the archaic moment of Upper Paleolithic image making with the present moment of composing contemporary poetry. I think that Eshleman’s interest in the archaic lies in his recognition that the archaic informs the contemporary and the contemporary informs the archaic. Furthermore, I argue that Eshleman’s understanding of the cave images and the Upper Paleolithic imagination is one based on

him as an individual poet who searches for archaic images in order to connect with them on an epistemological level that will inform his poetry. In my mind, this is what marks Eshleman's work as being non-appropriative as Eshleman does not subvert the archaic images to his contemporary poetry; rather, his interest lies in showing how one is an inherent part of the other.

I think Eshleman illustrates that the role of poetry is to enact critical thought about the art that we experience and the world that we live in. He employs strategic primitivism, which is deliberately reading, participating with, reconstructing, and imagining archaic sources, in order to create a unique kind of contemporary poetry. Eshleman's strategic primitivism also continues to illustrate the pluralistic approach that is a key aspect of his work, as he always looks for and acknowledges other ideas within the images and poetry that he encounters. In my reading, at every turn in *Juniper Fuse*, Eshleman actively avoids an external or distanced viewpoint and reading of the Upper Paleolithic imagination to avoid falling into a non-self-reflective mode, such as one might think of a stereotypical curator or anthropologist enacting, because Eshleman does not compose an authoritative prose text on the subject. I contend that Eshleman's non-appropriative work with the cave images is further marked by the fact that his goal is to create a poetry that enacts an imaginative poetic engagement with the world in which we live, and in doing so, he employs strategic primitivism, which is deliberately utilizing archaic sources in order to create a unique kind of contemporary poetry. Eshleman does this in order to illustrate that "primitive means complex."

Section Two: The Poems of *Juniper Fuse*

Having established major components of Eshleman's poetics and his interest in strategically employing Upper Paleolithic cave-images, I will look more particularly at individual poems from *Juniper Fuse*. I contend that the early poem, "Hades in Manganese,"²² gives a sense for how Eshleman begins the journey through the deep recesses of the mind. Eshleman says in the commentary section of *Juniper Fuse*, of "Hades in Manganese,"

The burden of this poem is to assimilate a range of personal and transpersonal twentieth-century "hells," which may be thought of as rubble packed against the gate to the Upper Paleolithic My notation was that only after this material cleared (imagined) could I give myself to the deep past. This kind of clearing away is a never-ending process and crops up at many points in this book. (sic) (247)

"Hades in Manganese" initiates the long, arduous process of clearing away the contemporary in order to begin an engagement with the archetypes and proto-shamanistic aspects of the caves that Eshleman understands as serving as the beginning of poetic expression. Such contemplations of Upper Paleolithic "opening" continue throughout *Juniper Fuse*.

Eshleman begins his journey through the Upper Paleolithic imagination in "Hades in Manganese" with a self-reflective note:

Today I'd like to climb the difference

²² This poem was originally published in *Hades in Manganese* (1981), which is why there are comments on this poem from Christensen.

between what I think I have written and
what I *have* written, to clime being,
to conceive it as a weather
generate and degenerate,
a snake turning in digestion with the low. (9-14)

The poem opens with the thoughts of Eshleman²³ as a poet announcing his presence in the text and what he would like to accomplish through the spinning²⁴ of this poem. I read this opening as Eshleman thinking over his poetic work and contemplating that which he has done already, and that which he can still do. This creates a contemplative tone for the poem, which I believe is the state of mind that a reader of Eshleman's should be in. To read Eshleman's poetry, one must be willing to engage with the web of possibilities that Eshleman continually weaves throughout his work in order to understand how his work attempts to collapse the archaic with the contemporary, and, in doing so, create a different kind of poetry.

When Eshleman says, "generate and degenerate, / a snake turning in digestion with the low" (9). I believe he alludes to and uses the archetype of the self-consuming snake in order to describe his own work as creating and destroying itself.²⁵ His poetry is

²³ I read the speaker of the poems of *Juniper Fuse* as Eshleman because he suggests in an interview with Keith Tuma that his poetry is "autobiographical as well as transpersonal" (*Companion Spider* 312).

²⁴ I choose to describe Eshleman's poetic process in terms of weaving and webs due to his insistence that the spider is his avatar (*Companion Spider* 311).

²⁵ In the interview with Tuma, Eshleman continues to connect himself to his poetic avatar, the spider, when he says, "I not only give my heart to my poetry, but I eat my poetry as well Since my confirmation figure is lethal as well as constructive, it supports negation as well as affirmation, releasing me from the kind of idealism that permeates so much poetry" (*Companion Spider* 310).

constantly engaged in a metaphorical life cycle of creation, death, and recreation. The poem then moves to a contemplation of the dysfunctional relationship between humankind and the animal world. “Hades in Manganese” continues:

But what you hear
are the seams I speak, animal,
the white of our noise
meringues into peaks
neither of us mount—or if we do,
as taxidermists, filling what is over
because we love to see *as if* alive. (9)

I think in this stanza, Eshleman illustrates the influence of his understanding of the Cro-Magnon moment in human cultural history as when humankind separated itself from the animal, and in doing so, brought about the denial of our own primitive/animal selves. He speaks as an “animal” and criticizes the human drive to be further away from the abyss, as if in doing so we can overcome nature and our severed association with it. I believe a key idea to take from this particular poem and *Juniper Fuse*, as mentioned above, is that Eshleman wants to remind humanity of its severed animal self through a contemplation of the abyss.

Eshleman came to understand the abyss or the underworld through the work of archetypal psychologist, James Hillman. In “Interface I: ‘The Separation Continuum’” of *Juniper Fuse*, Eshleman says of James Hillman’s work:

Before returning to the Dordogne in 1978, I read an essay, later published as a book, by the archetypal psychologist James Hillman, called “The

Dream and the Underworld.” Hillman was not concerned with prehistory in this work, but what he had to say about dreams and the way we have used them suggested a way for me to begin to think about cave imagery.

(4)

Eshleman admits that Hillman’s theories had an effect on his work,²⁶ but even so, he distinguishes his ideas from Hillman’s because Eshleman explores the underworld in terms of the Upper Paleolithic imagination rather than the archetypes of Ancient Greece that Hillman uses. When discussing Eshleman’s earlier book, *Hades in Manganese*, of which poems are reprinted in *Juniper Fuse*, Christensen says, “Eshleman wants us to believe that this descent into Hades is a healing journey, the very one mapped out by Hillman’s books” (204). Christensen suggests that this journey through the underworld is to help bring life and death together rather than cast them as being in opposition (204). Eshleman came to understand this idea through his reading of Hillman and his experiences in the caves.

While Eshleman’s thinking about the underworld stems from his association with Hillman, his theorizing of the underworld does depart from Hillman’s because Eshleman takes concepts of the underworld back to prehistoric archetypes. This is something that Hillman would not agree with. Hillman says of the underworld, “I am assuming that its general geography is already somewhat familiar from myths, religions, painting, and

²⁶ Christensen confirms Eshleman’s statement when he says of Hillman’s work and Eshleman’s poetics, “In 1978 Eshleman came upon another crucial text for his thesis, James Hillman’s *The Dream and the Underworld*, in which literary references to the underworld are closely compared to processes and structures of mind, thus arguing a connection between sets of metaphoric description points back to lived experience” (64).

literature, where the horrors of hell and the sufferings of the deep, the waters one crosses to get there, the guardians at the gates, the figures who reside there, have been relayed to us through centuries of common lore” (17). This is an example of how Eshleman is in agreement with Hillman and also how Eshleman breaks away from Hillman. Hillman understands the underworld in the sense that there is an established tradition of the underworld that has been passed down through the generations of Western culture; however, Hillman does not want to go back further than the ancient Greeks. Eshleman participates in this tradition of envisioning the underworld, but he wants to go back to the Upper Paleolithic era.

Hillman later adds, about aspects of Hades, “The spiritual quality of the underworld stands forth most clearly in descriptions of Tartaros . . . was imagined to be at the very bottom of Hades, its farthest chasm. . . . [Tartaros] was personified as the son of ether and earth, that is, a realm of dust, a composite of the most material and immaterial” (38). Hillman describes this aspect of Hades in ways that can be associated with the caves that Eshleman explores, such as a “chasm” that is made up of “earth” and “dust,” even though it is described as masculine. I think that Eshleman sees the caves as a kind of Tartaros that allows him to re-imagine the abyss in his own way. Eshleman says:

Several people, including James Hillman, had warned me: You must be very careful when you are trying to induct prehistoric archetypes; Hillman, in particular, had explained that unlike Greek archetypes, which we can examine today as the discrete and complementary structures of Greek myths, prehistoric archetypes seem to us far less differentiated. (46)

This further shows how Eshleman's poetry departs from Hillman's psychology as Hillman will only take his theories back so far, but Eshleman wants to take theories of the underworld all the way back to the "bedrock" of human imaginative thinking.²⁷ In this way, as Christensen points out, and I agree, Eshleman works with a variety of different underworld ideas and traditions to reflect on how such concepts can inform contemporary poetry. Thus, while Eshleman was influenced by Hillman's work and agrees with some of Hillman's ideas, Eshleman also creates his own sense of the underworld in *Juniper Fuse*.

This engagement with the abyss leads Eshleman to challenge the dominance of man over nature. This is shown in the following lines of "Hades in Manganese":

Perseus holds the written head out to the sun.
His sword from his hip projects what is on his mind,
a center torn from a center, Medusa
wrenched from her jellyfish stronghold,
her severed pipes, the caterwauling serpents,
his treasure from the underworld. (11-12)

According to Christensen, "This is the male archetype again, the Western ego pitting all his consciousness against the terrors of the deep, the horrified underworld" (205).

However, I think that while Christensen is right in pointing out Eshleman's invocation of Greek archetypes in this poem, I think he does that to put the archetypes of ancient

²⁷ Eshleman also breaks from Hillman because Hillman wants to only work with ancient archetypes and exclude Christianity in his understanding of Hades. Hillman speaks of "Christianism" as a barrier to re-establishing the underworld as an important realm (85-94). Christensen suggests that Eshleman, due to the influences of the Catholic writers that he translated, does not exclude Christian ideas of Hell from his poetry (207), which further shows how Eshleman breaks from some of Hillman's theories.

Greece into dialogue with his reading of the cave images. That is to say, Eshleman works with already established and recognizable archetypes in order to build up his own pattern of archetypes in the caves. In addition, I think he incorporates Perseus as a way to pay homage to the ideas of Hillman since Hillman's work relied on the careful study of Greek archetypes. The poem continues with:

The hero will not be
transfixed into himself, he will lift
reflected terror from reflected depth,
he will thrust his hand down
into the sodden tampax mass where earth bleeds. (12)

Christensen says, "The passage is a skillful manipulation of [Eshleman's] basic themes, the male ego in conflict with the female soul, the shaft turned uterus, a bleeding orifice of the lower body from which this Medusa head has been pulled" (205). I think what is important to take from Christensen's reading is that Eshleman is interested in flipping things upside down, or invoking inversion, as he proceeds to journey deeper into the underworld. This illustrates Eshleman's employment of the "grotesque"²⁸ which radiates through the imagery of the "sodden tampax mass where earth bleeds."

The "grotesque" image also illustrates his commitment to creating a mythic femininity that is based on understanding contemporary feminine associations through an archaic lens. Furthermore, I contend that Eshleman's use of mythic femininity, in this instance, focuses on the reality of the female reproductive cycle—menstruation.

Eshleman's focus on images of female reproduction is consistent with other archaic

²⁸ Featherston adds, "Eshleman's poems seem demonstrative of the grotesque archetype" (426).

traditions that can be found throughout Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*.²⁹ "Hades in Manganese" explores Eshleman's sense that women have been demonized and marginalized by Western culture,³⁰ and he counteracts that demonization of women through recovering the mythic power of women³¹ with his assertion of the abyss as embodying a transformative womb. In this sense, I think Eshleman is connecting with an Ethnopoetic concern of "return[ing] [poetry] to the goddess," which is to say an image of the sacred female that ranges from Robert Graves' "The White Goddess"³² (the poetic Muse) to visions of the goddess as a "geocentric/Gaiacentric" figure (*Symposium of the Whole* 56).

"Hades in Manganese" continues by transitioning from an allusion to Greek mythology, to Eshleman's life, to Greek mythology:

My father, for thirty years timing blacks
slaughtering steers, folds into men
beating the animal in other men,
extracting Pan-pipes, jugular flutes of morning (12)

²⁹ In *Technicians*, see "Genesis II" (9-10) as discussed in the preceding chapter, "What Fell Down? Vulva!," (168), or "The Vulva Song of Inana" (322-23).

³⁰ During an interview with Dale Smith, Eshleman says, "Because women get pregnant and give birth, and because they are traditionally (for significant reasons) associated with the hearth, and with gathering (in contrast to hunting), they are also thought of being more primary, more akin to nature, than men. This is probably true, but its truth is misused to consequently degrade women as less spiritual and more animal-like than men" (*Archaic Design* 284).

³¹ For further information on how the idea of recognizing the mythic feminine as being subversive in Western culture, see Elaine Pagels' "God the Father/God the Mother" (*Symposium of the Whole* 217-224).

³² Graves suggests that "the test of a poet's vision" depends upon his willingness to be subservient to the White Goddess/Muse. He discusses the sacredness of this visionary mode of composing poetry, "a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lush—the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death" (56-57).

I argue that the movement back and forth between myth and Eshleman's own life shows how Eshleman understands poetry as a place in which to contemplate personal and transpersonal histories. Christensen says of these lines, "The horizon line between two realities is now redrawn and Eshleman pulls his whole argument together when he notes [the following lines]" (205):

Surface is reality as is ascension
as is depth. Medusa hangs down through
fathoms of archaic familiarity,
the pylons men have made of female psyche,
women beat into gates through which to draw
the ore of heroic energy, to appease
a masculine weather for manipulation and torture. (12)

Eshleman continues to illustrate his strategic primitivism through articulating the power of the mythic feminine, Medusa, and the creation of the dominant male over the submissive female in this poem. I understand the argument in these lines as the mythic feminine being rejected; however, while it has been rejected, Eshleman thinks it can be recovered and engaged with in order to create new kinds of poetry.

This repositioning of the mythic feminine, in this case Medusa, is further complicated by Eshleman placing her in the underworld as "Medusa hangs down / through fathoms of archaic familiarity." I think these lines show how Eshleman calls attention to his idea that women are forced to psychically dwell in the underworld, but the underworld for Eshleman is a positive place where the poetic imagination can continue to manifest itself. Also, with the inclusion of a "hang[ing] down" Medusa, Eshleman

reaffirms his belief in the continuum of human artistic creation. This is the case with Medusa because she is a mythic figure that Eshleman has placed in direct relation to the source of the continuum: the caves.

While I argue that the above lines illustrate the continuum that the caves provide through Eshleman's positioning of Medusa in the underworld, Christensen says of the above lines, "Ascension brings us back to Christ, who conquers the underworld and death and thus obviates the soul's own ground. Its image-base is replaced by the abstractness of heaven. . . . One birth is enough, one 'gate' out of the feminine underworld and a destiny linked with the sky" (206). Christensen reaffirms what he understands to be Eshleman's poetic concerns and ideas through reading these lines of the poem as Eshleman reflecting personally through the inclusion of his father and reflecting transcendently or universally through a contemplation of the values of Western Civilization. This reading is helpful because it shows how Eshleman is interested in challenging humanity's claim to supremacy over nature and the primacy of masculinity. However, I assert that the ascension of Christ can be alluded to but does not necessarily have to be the only reading—Eshleman never directly names Christ in the poem. Instead of a direct critique of Christianity, I argue that the poem seems to incorporate recognizable archetypes to help Eshleman re-work the underworld in his own way.

Eshleman's re-patterning of the underworld through his contemplation of established Western archetypes in dialogue with his own sense of the Upper Paleolithic imagination is an aspect of his use of strategic primitivism throughout his poetry, and "Hades in Manganese" in particular. I contend that Eshleman employs strategic primitivism to offer an avenue towards reestablishing our sense of and association with

the archaic. Furthermore, Eshleman's desire to create new archetypal patterns in his cave underworld illustrates his interest in transforming the underworld from the Greek standpoint, as espoused by Hillman, to an idea of the underworld that is a mythical and artistic space that goes back to the earliest examples of the human imagination. Christensen discusses Eshleman's description of the underworld as an attempt to establish the underworld as a mythic site of spiritual renewal through recognizing that we are not complete (204). Christensen's idea casts Eshleman's Hades as a positive "geo-mythical site." I think this can clearly be seen in the following lines:

Hades receives meandering Hermes
mazing of my thoughts into the La Pieta
softness of the target-maker's arms—
there what I change is ended, my despair
is nursed cryptically, for Hades' breasts,
like cob-webbed mangers, are miracle proof.
There a sucking goes on, below the obstructed
passage way, all senses of the word, stilled
in its being, take place. I am playing
with what is left of my animal, a marble
it rolls into neuter, a cat's eye, rolls back,
I crack its pupil between word-infant lips . . . (14)

The conceptualization of Hades as female, through Eshleman being "nursed cryptically, for Hades' breasts," illustrates Christensen's idea that Eshleman's underworld is a site of renewal. Also, I read this stanza as indicative of how Eshleman has recast the underworld

as feminine, and there exists within the mythic femininity real regenerative power. This further shows how Eshleman's understanding of the underworld deviates from Hillman and ancient Greek conceptions of Hades, as Hades in Hillman's work, which utilizes the archetypes of ancient Greece, talks about Hades as a male God. For example, Hades' rape of Persephone, which Hillman explains as an important aspect of the Hades archetype.³³ This serves as a further example of how Eshleman is influenced by Hillman's work but refuses to work exclusively within one set of archetypes. Eshleman's feminization of the underworld also connects his work to other archaic traditions, such as a Chinese tradition that is presented in Rothenberg's *Technicians* entitled "Correspondences." In that poem, heaven is male and the earth is female. The second stanza of the poem says, "The Receptive is the earth, the mother. It is cloth, a kettle, frugality, it is level, it is a cow with a calf, a large wagon, form, the multitude, a shaft. Among the various kinds of soil, it is black" (17). I think that "Correspondences" can be linked to Eshleman's idea of the mythic feminine because "the mother" is described as the earth and a womb because she is "the Receptive." Also, "the mother" is described as a "shaft" that is part of "soil." This speaks, to me, of the caves that Eshleman endows with so much significance and power.

The underworld as the regenerative, mythic feminine is a concept that can be found throughout *Juniper Fuse*. A further example of this is a prose-poem section called "The Black Goddess." I argue that this prose-poem illustrates how Eshleman utilizes and reflects on the archetype of the Goddess. At the same time, Eshleman takes the archetype in a different direction than Graves' Muse or even more contemporary manifestations of

³³ Hillman says, "Rape moves the Persephone soul from the being of Demeter's daughter to the being of Hades' wife, from the natural being of generation, what is given to a daughter by mothering life, to the psychic being of marriage with what is alien, different, and is not given" (48).

the Goddess, such as the non-aggressive and non-Christian European wolf goddess of Diane Di Prima's "The Birth of Loba," as Eshleman's Goddess is a *dark* Goddess.

On the surface, the Goddess is black because it is a stone "daubed with manganese" in a cave (210). That is to say, Eshleman's goddess of rebirth is of the earth. I think his earth goddess shows how he transforms the already poetically powerful archetypes of the White Goddess/Muse into a Black Goddess in order to further suggest that while the caves are a dark place, the images that the caves contain can still function as a muse for poets interested in taking their poetry to the underworld and re-emerging with an alternative sense of poetics.

"The Black Goddess" begins with a prose explanation of the stone tree that is in the Le Combrel cave. Eshleman claims about this stone, "Possibly as early as 25,000 B.P., Cro-Magnon people identified and marked this proto-World Tree" (210). He continues his description of the "proto-World Tree":

Her broad, short trunk has a vertical cleft, widening near the base into a triangular hole. At the top of the trunk, out of the chamber ceiling, pod-shaped stalactites proliferate. Under two of these pods, along the cleft, a stalactitic mass seems to liquefy and descend, icicling across the triangular hold and fusing with the molten stone which appears to be emerging from the hole.

Cro-Magnons daubed manganese on a dozen or so of the pods, turning them into blackened breasts, the trunk into a torso, the fissured torso into monstrous trunk-legs, and the triangular hole into a seeping vulva. (210)

I think Eshleman's inclusion of "The Black Goddess" further casts the underworld not only as feminine but also as grotesque. This goddess of the underworld invokes the grotesque through its inversion, as it emerges from the top of the cave and moves towards the bottom, and also through Eshleman's description as breasts which are "blackened," her legs are "monstrous," and her vulva is "seeping." I believe that within "The Black Goddess," Eshleman clearly articulates the influence of Bakhtin's idea of the "grotesque" on his work, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Eshleman says of Bakhtin in "Eight Fire Sources,"

Bakhtin's vision of "grotesque realism," . . . not only back up my own grotesque fascination with the body that helped me gain a perspective on Ice Age imagery that following year after Caryl and I visited the painted and engraved caves in southwestern France. Bakhtin's book . . . became a hinge for me between the deep past, the medieval past, and the present: . . . it grounded the 'grotesque' in the grotto, or cave, itself, helping me to make some sense out of the undifferentiated, hybrid figures to be found in Lascaux and Les Trois Frères. ("Eight Fire Sources" 44)

The above quote illustrates how Eshleman understands his theorizing of the "continuum" of human imagination that stretches back to the Upper Paleolithic imagination through his inclusion of Bakhtin's theorizing of the "grotesque." I argue that regardless of whether Eshleman is drawing off of Blake, Olson, or Bakhtin's theories of the medieval grotesque, the source of Eshleman's inspirations always return back to the Upper Paleolithic imagination.

I understand the prose description of the Black Goddess as further illustration of the role that feminine images play throughout *Juniper Fuse* through the attention given to the vulva and how the female images are in the process of releasing fluids from their bodies. I believe that this description of the Black Goddess comes from Eshleman's understanding of Bakhtin's "grotesque." Eshleman says, in "Eight Fire Sources," "Bakhtin's unfinished, ever-creating body—linking fecundation and death, degradation and praise—thus connects with the Upper Paleolithic vision of the human as indeterminate and initially unclosed. . ." (45). It is through Bakhtin's line in the continuum that Eshleman has come to understand the "grotesque" image that he discovers in the Black Goddess, to value that image, and to make a poem about it. I argue that "The Black Goddess" allows Eshleman to exemplify his understanding of how the caves enable poets the opportunity to journey in physical and metaphysical spaces.

The poet's journey through the feminine underworld continues in "The Black Goddess" when Eshleman moves from his own prose description of a cave image into a poem. The poem begins: "So this Black Goddess stone tree may be / a vision of an image-life-giving Mother / inside a quester's hollowed out mother body . . ." (212). I think that these opening lines combine many of the key concepts that Eshleman explores throughout *Juniper Fuse*. The opening line calls attention to a specific image within the caves, which then opens up a critical-poetic space within the mind of Eshleman as to what the image could mean. This thought process leads to the image as a vision of the regenerative, mythic Mother of all, i.e., the earth. The invocation of the earth leads back to the idea of Eshleman as a journeyman through the poetic labyrinth that the caves

represent. In this way, he invokes the mythic feminine in order to join with it and create a sacred, poetic moment.

Through this union, Eshleman does not seek to subjugate the Goddess; but rather, to become one with the Goddess and form a balanced union. Attempting to re-empower the feminine, “Eshleman makes atonement as a member of the persecuting majority. His redemption comes by joining the other side, by a fusion of self with the otherness long stifled by Western ideals” (Christensen 166). Christensen states of Eshleman’s poetry after *What She Means* (1978), “The sexual act is sacramental in the poems, a mythical reenactment of a return to the womb and underworld by the male, and a repossession of lost male powers by the female” (165). While he is on target with his discussion of how “the sexual act is sacramental,” I believe Christensen over-simplifies Eshleman’s reason for wanting to re-empower the Goddess. Christensen’s reasoning is one based on negativity and guilt. Eshleman invokes the sacred feminine to call attention to the positive aspects of the archetype. Eshleman’s engagement with the sacred feminine does not wipe out the white male that is part of who he is; instead, the Goddess adds to the person that he is.

I argue that the difference between Eshleman’s union with the Goddess and Robert Graves’ discussion of the need for true poets to be subjugated to the Goddess is that Eshleman understands the union in a positive sense, as he offers himself as a bridegroom for the Goddess.³⁴ Eshleman becomes more than just Clayton Eshleman

³⁴ Positive sacred unions between the Goddess and God exist within the Christian Gnostic tradition (see Pagels’ “God the Father/God the Mother” 217-224) and the Jewish Kabbalah tradition (see Gershom Scholem “Kabbalistic Ritual and the Bride of God” 303-10).

through his union with the Goddess, and the Goddess becomes more than a stone idol.³⁵ I see Eshleman's relationship with the Goddess as vastly different from Graves' assertions concerning the Goddess due to Eshleman's understanding of poetry as a craft that is learned through a self-guided apprenticeship based on a poet submitting himself to a Goddess/Muse. This idea of poetic apprenticeship shows how Eshleman does not essentialize the mythic feminine in his poetry. He tries to show the positives of re-invoking the Goddess in terms of his submission to the feminine rather than subjugating it. I believe this is indicative of his ideas about the misplacement of women in western culture. He most clearly discusses his ideas about poetry as apprenticeship in "Novices: A Study of Poetic Apprenticeship."³⁶ I contend that Eshleman's apprenticeship or willful submission to the Goddess/Muse illustrates a powerful dynamic, which serves as a useful example in thinking about how Eshleman submits to the primitive rather than subjugates it.

Furthermore, Eshleman's repositioning of the Goddess archetype and his relationship to the Goddess echoes the work of other contemporary poets, such as the aforementioned poet, Prima. In "The Birth of Loba," Prima offers insight on how she re-conceptualized the idea of the Goddess/Muse as a gentle, yet driving force behind her

³⁵ Edmund Carpenter in "The Death of Sedna" discusses how the goddess has become diminished through his discussion of Sedna, an Eskimo mermaid goddess who "[the Eskimos] gave . . . the power of life & death over man" has become "debased into a paperweight," i.e. the goddess has been so greatly marginalized that she has been transformed from a being of great power over life to an insignificant, pretty object that is available for sale (480-81). The myth of Sedna appears in Eshleman's poem "The Dive," which precedes "The Black Goddess" (207-09).

³⁶ In "Novices" Eshleman offers a series of thoughts and considerations on the long process and journey of becoming a poet through submitting oneself to the craft of poetry through the Muse, embodied as Psyche (17-18), and a process of "experience, research, self-regulation, and experiment" (38-43) that, when followed, will lead to a transformation and "regeneration" of the poet (70).

poetic vision that is developed in her poem “Dream: The Loba Reveals Herself,” which is included in the aforementioned essay. Prima’s Goddess/Muse is a wolf. In confronting the non-aggressive “European wolf goddess,” Prima is able to find comfort in a non-Christian mythos that reconnects her with pre-Christian European traditions, which then allows her to express her dreams in a more visionary and creative way (442-43). Prima’s poem describes the Goddess as a “protectress,” “great mystic beast,” “green warrior woman,” “Mother & sister,” and “Myself” (443).³⁷

Prima’s use of a wolf goddess in order to contemplate a personal muse further illustrates how Eshleman participates in a contemporary embracement of the Goddess archetype, and through that embrace, he is able to create a visionary mode that allows him to explore the various crevices of his stone Goddess while at the same time not dominating Her. Prima’s poem also illustrates the key difference between Graves’s theorizing of the White Goddess and Eshleman’s invocation of the Goddess, as Prima’s dream self and the wolf goddess do not attempt to subjugate one to the other; rather, they seek a union, and Prima’s dream self sees herself reflected in the Goddess.³⁸

³⁷ The lines of the poem that I am quoting from are as follows:

Protectress.
great mystic beast of European forest.
green warrior woman, towering.
kind watch dog I could
leave the children with.
Mother & sister.
Myself. (443)

³⁸ For a further range of Goddess representations in Ethnopoetics, see Donald Philippi’s “First Person Voice in Ainu Epic” for a description of the Ainu wolf goddess as “a goddess of very beautiful appearance who wears white robes” (156) and the aforementioned wolf goddess in Prima’s “The Birth of Loba.” Gary Synder also discusses the importance of the Goddess archetype in his essay, “Poetry and the Primitive: Notes on Poetry as an Ecological Survival Technique” (95).

The interaction between a human and the divine is a key element in understanding Eshleman's relationship with the Black Goddess; the divine and sacred in *Juniper Fuse* can be encountered because they exist on earth in a physical sense. Thus, the "Black Goddess" concerns a bridging of the gap between spiritual and physical interactions with the sacred with the intent of participating in an act of "continual creation."

The ideas of the power of the mythic feminine; the caves as invoking a visionary, critical space; and the idea of the poet's journey through an internal labyrinth are shown throughout the rest of "The Black Goddess." For example:

In Cro-Magnon imagination might
all marked caves have been
the root tunnels of a Mother Tree
synchronized with shamans who bound the emerging
strands of the soul's story into image lore?

.....

Birth from the dream world = the making of images

The triadic shamanic initiation (generation death regeneration) can thus be expressed another way:

mother

Mother

image (212)

These lines illustrate how Eshleman begins with a cave image and then moves³⁹ to the issues that are always a concern for him. The lines cited above illustrate that once the contemplative space begins to unfold, it leads to a wider discussion and questioning concerning the development of human image making from the pretradition that Eshleman has established as existing within the caves. The fact that Eshleman ponders through a mode of questioning rather than assertions is a significant aspect of his poetic process that further casts him as a self-reflective poet rather than an authoritative expert on the Upper Paleolithic imagination. I think this reflexivity, then, leads Eshleman to suggest that reemergence or rebirth from the world of the abyss helps create meaningful poetry.

This contemplation of the rebirth that occurs through the abyss leads back to a reflection on the poet as journeyman as “The Black Goddess” continues: “In Gargas a quester writhed through, or ate mushrooms, or / fell asleep, we will never know, / he turned himself into a uterine double,” (212). Eshleman goes on to discuss the journey of the questing poet:

he located the sole gate of access to paradise,
he dived to the bottom of the sea,
followed a bear into a grotto, had the sense to listen to
a hedgehog, we turn forever know
the beautiful U-turn of his journey, for the pot, the cauldron,
the pouch, all in structure
trace a descent, dissolution at bottom, a swerve, an ascent.

³⁹ Featherston notes, in reference to Eshleman’s own thoughts about his work in *Hades in Manganese* (1981), that this idea of the past informing the present is what makes Eshleman’s poetry visionary (422).

He entered his dream, wandered his emptied mother (213)

This passage of the poem illustrates that Eshleman understands the poet's journey through the underworld as having very specific rites to it, which is indicative of his understanding of the role that a poet plays in the "continuum" that was initiated by the Upper Paleolithic imagination. First, the poet must find the site of entry into the underworld; in this case, it is the Black Goddess' vulva, and then he must dive in and find his way in whatever direction is offered. He must be guided by animals that are at home in the underworld, a bear and a hedgehog. The poet must be willing to be turned around and discover new paths, as well as rediscovering paths already trodden upon. Through this process, he maps out a descent for himself that through inversion becomes an ascension into dream, and in dream he can begin to construct his visions. I argue that, for Eshleman, this process that manifests itself in the poem enables a poet to construct their own sense of the continuum and what the poet wants to create out of their own established continuum.

This literal and metaphorical journey through the caves allows the poet to become attuned to the things around him and to perceive images of the abyss as further explained in "The Black Goddess":

Now I see the snow-swept Mesolithic headland,
bodies curled in ice, a bison frozen giving birth,
blizzard-buried mammoths, hunters with birch-bark containers,
axes, their blackthorn pips—
did these presevered ones, once revealed in the melt,
evoke the first "intimations of immortality"?

Or was it the fog beyond the Mesolithic headland,
a fog bank of infinite horizontal depth condensing over
world-end space—
did this fog, a mask worn by the void, backdrop this world-end
headland? (213)

While the poet has willingly entered and traversed the underworld, it does not mean that he will have clarity about the visions that the underworld unfolds for him. Instead, the abyss unveils itself only to offer further questions about the nature of visions and images. I think the poet alludes to the uncertainty of abyssal visions when he says, “Now I see the snow-swept Mesolithic headland,” and then he adds, “Or was it the fog beyond the Mesolithic headland.” I see these two lines as being in conflict with each other because at one point, the poet can clearly articulate his vision, but then a “U-turn” occurs, and the poet must question if he sees snow or fog. Either way, the poet is never granted a clear vision of what he sees and can only transcribe the images of his vision as best he can. This vision emanating from the abyss does not provide the poet with a sense of knowing, and with it, a sense of metaphysical or epistemological security; instead, the abyss offers images of what can be and leaves it up to the poet to decide what to make of the images that are unfolding. Thus, the poet is left with a critical perspective on his vision that requires further contemplation as opposed to readily accessible knowledge.

The poetic contemplation of “The Black Goddess” ends with an exit from the Goddess after further “fracture[ed]” views and visions:

Then as if gulped by fog the archipelago disappeared,
the Black Goddess tree reappeared, trailing a webwork of roots,

blackened breasts over red disks
reverberating the ocean's beginnings
Blasts of molten rock and soot,
Premonitions of Kali-Ma and Set
Potential's chaos,
Realization's curtailing cone. (214)

These concluding lines of the poem temporarily end the poet's journey through this particular portal of the underworld, the Black Goddess's vulva, and lead the poet back outside of the Black Goddess. The poet envisions this rebirth through the Goddess' vulva as an eruption that harkens back to the formation of the primordial world and those ancient gods of the abyss, and with this eruption, the poet emerges back into the mundane reality of the contemporary world with an understanding of an alternative world of possibilities and new perspectives.

I argue that this rebirth through the underworld shows how Eshleman works within an underworld trend that dates back to the nineteenth century (Christensen 178). While Eshleman works within an already established trend, he embarks on a different path where the poet sees, understands, and embraces the underworld rather than fearing it, and, in doing so, casting it as a powerful site of mythic feminine regeneration for poets who willingly commune with the underworld, which, in the case of this poem, is embodied by the Black Goddess.

Eshleman says of his repositioning of the underworld, "Implicit here is the idea that the birth from one's mother is not a complete or real birth, and that the real or second birth involves something more than merely continuing to exist" (xxi). Christensen also

attests to the metaphor of poetic rebirth in Eshleman's poetry (19). Thus, a re-birth through a metaphorical abyss leads to a transformative moment from which the poet emerges with new visions that greatly inform his poetics.

Furthermore, Christensen argues that Eshleman has been an active participant in what Christensen terms "the rebirth paradigm," which he argues had a mass effect on art beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, and that this paradigm argued "that one's true character lay in the recesses of a youthful prototype, a figure trapped beneath the structures of consciousness" (142-43). I think it is through emerging from the caves in a transformed psychological state that empowers the feminine. The difference between biological birth and spiritual rebirth is that the spiritual rebirth demands a high level of agency because the person must choose to enter the earthen womb that the cave represents, struggle to find meaning once inside, and then reemerge psychologically embodying the various physical and mental pathways that the cave had offered.

For Eshleman, the underworld is a contemplative site where humans may express their angst and find ways to represent it and overcome it through engaging with "the rebirth paradigm." Thus, the darkness that surrounds the cave images is an empowering site for human creativity. I contend that Eshleman discovers poetic knowledge through what he describes as a dark and "grotesque" image. Finally, in "The Black Goddess," Eshleman's invocation of Kali-Ma (a Hindu goddess) and Set (an Egyptian god), deities commonly associated with destruction and the underworld, shows that his method of poetic illumination is not bound to a purely Western tradition, which further illustrates how Eshleman's work within the "continuum" of human art and culture is an essential aspect of his strategic primitivism.

I read Eshleman's idea of rebirth through the underworld as a continued point of interest for him in *Juniper Fuse* that can be further seen in a later section of the text: "The Abyss." "The Abyss" functions as a prose-poem that continues to reflect on what the Upper Paleolithic imagination has to offer to poets that are willing to dwell in the poetic space of perpetual darkness. Eshleman opens this section with some discussion of what the abyss means through examining Upper Paleolithic images. He says, "The Upper Paleolithic is retrieved spar by spar. . . . To be drawn into these beveled resonances is to confront the abyss of potential form-to-be, a free-wheeling non-systematic Abyss Board where moves subtract as they add—where I play against the Abyss . . .—what can I garner, gain, pick up, before I lose?" (215). Eshleman indicates two important points about how he perceives his metaphor of the abyss. First, the abyss, like his vision from within the Black Goddess, only provides him with glimpses or pieces of the knowledge that it contains, and this piecemeal collection of knowledge and understanding is the only way to go about unfolding the meanings of the cave images. Second, embracing the abyss as a way towards poetic inspiration is to play a game with the abyss—a game which offers only fractured perceptions, but never a clear vision—because the abyss will only unveil itself and its world to a degree. There is no mastering of knowledge for Eshleman when he engages with the abyss. There is only the opportunity to receive a vision or a new perspective on the underworld and the images that it contains.

Eshleman's reimagining of the abyss leads him to discuss a private correspondence between himself and Adrienne Rich. Rich writes to Eshleman, "The abyss surely = woman even when she's absent or unnamed" (*Juniper Fuse* 215).

Eshleman uses this quote to, yet again, move from theorizing in prose about the underworld to creating a poem from those musings. “The Abyss” continues:

The abyss is polluted by the male equation
 woman = death,
from this it follows that the vulva is a toothed sewer,
a mouth drinking male marrow,
a mouth whose tongue is Eve—
 under which:
man’s fear of non-existence,
death conceived as punishment rather than recycling. (215)

I argue that this poem shows how Eshleman brings to light and critiques the demonization of women. Eshleman suggests that the dominance of women by men has tarnished an understanding of the abyss as a positive space. This occurred out of a fear of women and seeing death in a negative light. I think Eshleman’s reinterpretation of the abyss casts the reproductive cycle of women and death in a positive and multifaceted light because both are part of the natural order of things. This, then, leads Eshleman to ponder whether some men, out of inadequacy, “allowed the vagina to take on terrifying size, associating pits, chasms, and hells, with female physiology?” (215). Eshleman suggests that the creation of an evil abyss may be due to sexual frustrations on the part of men.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I use the word “may” deliberately because much of Eshleman’s thoughts are musings that he is considering rather than concrete explanations to explain the history and development of the metaphorical abyss.

Eshleman continues to theorize the abyss with, “We continue to be in multiphasic Expulsion from a paradise we unconsciously rejected when we separated ourselves from animals” (217). The concept of continual fall from a primordial grace is inherent throughout Eshleman’s conception of the abyss. Again, he alludes to the idea that humanity is caught up in a perpetual severance from our animal selves and the rest of the animal world. He further says of the current conception of the abyss, “It took thousands and thousands of years but we did create the abyss out of a seemingly infinitely elastic crisis: therio-expulsion—and we have lived in a state of ‘animal withdrawal’ ever since” (217). Hence, the abyss became a negative place because people dumped all of their frustrations and angst into the depthless space that the abyss embodies.

These musings on the abyss lead Eshleman to construct another poem based on the question, “If dreaming is the reflex of deep sleep, is the underworld the reflex of the abyss?” (218). He begins the poem that follows his musings within “The Abyss,” “A labyrinth is a folded (or crumpled) abyss” (218). This line illustrates how Eshleman understands the abyss as offering a labyrinth-like metaphor for a poetics based on the archaic. Opening this poetic investigation of the abyss with reference to a labyrinth further shows that Eshleman initiates another journey into the underworld where the poet will have to weave his way through in order to come into contact with the necessary visions to create new and interesting poetry.

Eshleman further builds on the importance of re-seeing or re-contextualizing the abyss when he discusses occult and proto-shamanistic practices.⁴¹ He says in “The

⁴¹ Eshleman’s discussion is based on the scholarly work of Kenneth Grant. Eshleman’s discussion includes *Outside the Circles of Time* (1980) and *Cults of the Shadow* (1975).

Abyss,” “If regeneration in occult terms requires the perilous crossing of an abyss for a reunion of human divine consciousness, for shamanism the reunion requires an ecstatic journey to the realm of the ur-shaman. In both cases, there is an abyss, or barrier, between phenomenal separateness and noumenal exchange” (220). With this theorizing moment, Eshleman further revises notions of the abyss through discussing the spiritual aspects that the abyss can provide. This is in contrast to his discussion of the abyss and “The Black Goddess” because in that instance, Eshleman was more focused on illustrating the association between the physical, “grotesque” body and the abyss. His reason for doing so is to further illustrate the fallacy of understanding the abyss in a narrow and specific way. I think reading “The Black Goddess” with “The Abyss” illustrates Eshleman’s need to think about the underworld in multiple ways throughout his work.

Eshleman’s desire to understand the Upper Paleolithic in a variety of ways leads him to further suggest in “The Abyss” that “during the Upper Paleolithic, what we call ‘abyss’ and ‘paradise’ may have been undifferentiated. If paradise did once exist . . . where would it have been if not in the caves? In my thinking here, paradise was below, a kind of Hades of the abyss, the initial underworld in which separation and the cycles of livingdying ‘above’ were temporarily superceded” (sic) (221). At this moment in “The Abyss,” I think Eshleman suggests that it is not that there was a paradise that was lost and then transformed into an abyss; instead, the abyss is the embodiment of primordial paradise.

He further elaborates on this idea of the caves as paradise when he says, in “The Abyss,” “The animals engraved and painted on the walls expressed unchanging animal presence in an unchanging domain” (221-22). The cave images then represent a perfect

world of continual life and joy because they are unchanging and stable. He later adds, “Animals transformed into images became sacred precincts, or *temene*, the boundary outlines of which sank, as it were, even deeper moats between the human community and the images’ living counterparts” (223). Eshleman suggests that Upper Paleolithic cave images represent humanity’s attempt to recapture a lost paradise through inscribing animal images into stone. However, this attempt by Upper Paleolithic people failed, and over time, humanity further separated itself from that idealized space, which Eshleman suggests led to even more “anxiety” concerning humanity’s separation from the animal world and “may partially account for the forming of hybrid images in which shamans fused themselves to the types of animal energies they desired to repossess and to control” (223). Thus, Eshleman’s translation of the abyss assumes the cave images represent humanity’s inability to value nature, in and of itself, and its association with nature in a profound way, and that inability has created continual, inherent frustrations within human subconsciousness (223).

Eshleman’s final words for this section embody a contemplation of seeing the abyss through a negative lens. He says, in “The Abyss,” “That we today experience the larger part of our consciousness as a subconscious . . . may be due to avatisms of the old paradise/abyss contaminated by the abyssal negativities of a criminal underworld, a hell of eternal torment and a Satanized Thanatos” (223-24). This is why Eshleman takes great care in re-contextualizing the abyss to fully illustrate the poetic implications that are generated when a poet re-envisions what is considered to be a dark void, but which Eshleman argues is a forgotten paradise. The abyss as a re-constituted paradise is an important component in understanding Eshleman’s poetics. *Juniper Fuse* is an attempt to

engage with ideas and constructs that are read negatively, i.e., misread, and to show the value that exists within those ideas and constructs if poets and readers are willing to traverse through the many paths that open up in our imaginations when we willingly enter into the dark regions of our minds.

Eshleman's *Juniper Fuse* shows how re-examining the abyss and the dark images that exist within it as potent archaic archetypes challenges negative notions of the primitive as being simple or limited in theoretical and poetic scope. Furthermore, his reevaluation of specific archaic spaces proposes the primitive as a kind of metaphorical and epistemological curative for contemporary delusions of superiority and the anxieties that accompany them. Eshleman enacts a strategic primitivism through his exploration of the mythical and mystical resonances of particular abyssal spaces, real and imagined. He is propelled by a sense of wonder at discovering what he believes to be the earliest moments of image creation. In doing so, Eshleman utilizes strategic primitivism to speak out both for and against what he considers to be harmful dominant hegemonic discourses. I think, in a way, and as suggested by Christensen, Eshleman attempts to put things right through his artistic impulses, which further illustrates the breadth of the abyssal void, as it allows for a variety of poetic engagements dependent on the needs of the poet that engages with it.

I argue that the key point of Eshleman's poetry is to express his archaic tuned imagination through an openness and willingness to encounter whatever comes across his mind as he at times contemplates and at other times serves as conduit or bridegroom for primitive/abyssal spaces. For Eshleman, one of the larger implications of his thinking is recognizing and contemplating the rift he sees between the contemporary human and the

primitive animal, which is due to an alienation from primal consciousness. Therefore, his visionary poetics is an attempt to work within the “continuum” of human creativity in order to reconcile the primitive with the contemporary. For Eshleman, his poetry can only be achieved through a mythical, archaic understanding of the world. Thus, Eshleman’s poetry illuminates the value of the “primitive.” In Eshleman’s poetry, the poet contemplates archaic images and archetypes to create a different kind of poetry. In the next chapter, I will argue that Armand Schwerner creates and maintains his own kind of strategic primitivism through his enactment of the trickster archetype in *The Tablets*, which allows him to meditate on how archaic structures can inform contemporary poetry.

CHAPTER FOUR

FABRICATING THE PRIMITIVE: ARMAND SCHWERNER'S *THE TABLETS* AS

IMAGINED ARCHAIC

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Section One: Schwerner's Imagined Archaic and Ethnopoetics

This chapter further explores how analyzing poetry through strategic primitivism shows Ethnopoetics as a movement which entails a self-reflexive approach to the primitive, calling Western values and thinking into question by proposing that the “primitive is complex.” I will show how Armand Schwerner employs strategic primitivism in *The Tablets* by his creation of an imagined primitive. Schwerner's employment of strategic primitivism is the highest form of strategic primitivism, as discussed in this dissertation. *The Tablets* further collapses the parameters of the primitive and poetry through Schwerner's use of writing poems in tablet form to explore the limits of merging the archaic with the contemporary. I argue that because Schwerner

⁴² An original poem by Jay W. Sarver inspired by a reading of Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets*.

considers the primitive an integral part of composing contemporary poetry, *The Tablets* should be read as a serious attempt to merge the archaic with the contemporary rather than as an ironic means of creating a sophisticated simulation of archaic poetry.

Ethnopoets, like Schwerner, reconsider poetry by responding to and reworking various poetic traditions and forms in order to have American poetry participate in the “symposium” of global poetry that Ethnopoetics works towards. This broadening of poetry is important for ethnopoets because they want to work within a tradition of poetry that more fully embraces the concept of a “symposium of the whole,” as opposed to a more limited, purely literate, Western tradition. One of the ways that ethnopoets embrace a wider understanding of poetry is through considering how art and poetries that exist outside of the traditional conceptualization of Western literature can inform contemporary American poetry, e.g., Rothenberg’s project in *Technicians of the Sacred*. Another way that ethnopoets realign poetry is to reconsider the sources of poetic inspiration as stemming from the primitive and arguing for a different sense of poetics in response to that reconsideration, e.g., Eshleman’s affirmation of the poetic primacy of the Upper Paleolithic imagination in *Juniper Fuse*. Armand Schwerner, in his long poem, *The Tablets*, further builds on an ethnopoetic framework by creating his own imagined primitive culture and artifacts. He creates this imagined archaic to question the usefulness of employing the primitive and to probe the desire of scholars, poets, and readers to know the primitive. In this way, Schwerner enacts his own unique form of strategic primitivism.

Schwerner worked on *The Tablets* throughout his life. He published the first section as *The Tablets I-VIII* in 1968 and continued to publish and release recorded

versions of various tablets until 1991. The final edition of *The Tablets* that is discussed in this chapter was published posthumously in 1999 and contains twenty-seven tablets plus a supplemental section entitled “Tablets Journals/Divagations.” Due to the length and complexity of *The Tablets* publication history, Schwerner’s work has received sporadic levels of scholarly attention. The publication dates are relevant to understanding the depth of Schwerner’s work because the rate of various publications of *The Tablets* illustrates how Schwerner created an organic work of art that could freely change with technology and his own philosophical ideas over three decades. For example, Schwerner used computer programs, such as *ReadySetGo*, *Quark Express*, *Fontastic*, and *Fontographer*, to help him create “Tablet XXVI” and “Tablet XXVII.” Also, his growing understanding of Zen Buddhism and the increased attention given to the ideas of the Scholar/Translator character in later tablets helps show the philosophical underpinnings of *The Tablets*.⁴³

The various publication dates of *The Tablets* help clarify why Schwerner’s work has received unsteady levels of scholarly attention over the years. While there has not been an extensive scholarly evaluation of Schwerner’s *The Tablets*, this chapter will discuss several relevant criticisms of Schwerner’s work. Burt Kimmelman, in “Traces of Being: Armand Schwerner’s Ephemeral Episteme,” argues that one day Schwerner’s work will receive the recognition it has currently been denied because the intricacies and breadth of *The Tablets* will no longer be seen as problematic for readers. The intricacies and breadth of *The Tablets*, for Kimmelman, tax readers because Schwerner’s work asks

⁴³ See Willard Gingerich’s “Armand Schwerner: An Interview” for more on how Schwerner used computer software to help compose the later tablets, along with Schwerner’s thoughts on Zen Buddhism and the Scholar-Translator.

readers to question how they understand themselves and poetry (70). While Kimmelman is correct in pointing out the difficulties readers may encounter in Schwerner's *The Tablets*, I argue that it is the high level of ambiguity combined with the imagined primitive that marks Schwerner's work as enacting strategic primitivism, which makes *The Tablets* an important work of contemporary poetry that deserves further scholarly attention.

Hank Lazer, in "Sacred Forgery and the Grounds of Poetic Archaeology: Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets*," points out the inherent complications of reading Schwerner's text due to what Lazer perceives as the limiting qualities of *The Tablets*. Lazer finds Schwerner's use of archaic structures and the S/T as creating a kind of poetry that does not allow the strengths of Schwerner's poetry to be easily discernible. Because Lazer is concerned with locating Schwerner's poetic voice in *The Tablets*, he mainly analyzes the "Tablets Journals/Divagations" section, which was not available to readers until 1999. I disagree with Lazer's criticism because I think that the tablet form and the imagined primitive are essential in understanding Schwerner's poetics and provide a rationale for why Schwerner is writing *The Tablets* in the first place. Lazer's reading of Schwerner's work recognizes the significance and implications of *The Tablets* but does not devote very much space to a majority of the tablets, which, for all of Lazer's constructive criticisms of Schwerner's work, creates an interpretative gap that this dissertation remedies.

In addition, Ellen Zweig, in "Performative Erotics of the Text: Armand Schwerner's Fictions of the Open and the Closed," argues that Schwerner's text invokes performance by calling attention to the procedures of composition. Zweig also connects

Charles Olson's "projective verse" to Schwerner's poetry (95). In addition, Zweig points out that in *The Tablets*, Schwerner illustrates his concern with creating uncertainties through his technique of using the tablet form to compose incomplete poems (95). I agree that Schwerner wants readers to think about the process of his imagined primitive, but at the same time, I think Zweig misses the importance of reading Schwerner as being engaged with the concept of the sacred in his poetry.

In regards to Schwerner and the sacred, Norman Finkelstein, in "The Sacred and the Real in *The Tablets* of Armand Schwerner," discusses the necessity of reading Schwerner's *The Tablets* as an attempt to engage with sacredness through the act of creating poetry and, at the same time, to question that engagement. I think that the sacred in Schwerner's work serves as a way for him to link back to the ideas of Rothenberg in thinking about how poetry is a significant mode of language use that is employed across the globe to reflect on important cultural moments and ideas. For Finkelstein, Schwerner's invocation of the sacred is to probe the relationship between reality and ancient spiritual texts as well as to contemplate the idea that literacy leads to a rift between humans and religious conceptions of the sacred. Finkelstein argues that Schwerner's invocation of the sacred, as Finkelstein understands it, counters earlier criticisms of Schwerner's work as engaging only in deconstructive poetics. I think Schwerner is engaged with questioning reality and the relevance of the sacred in poetry; however, I argue that Schwerner's engagement with the archaic and the sacred is done in order to reconsider the parameters of poetry rather than reflect on how human beings are forced to dwell in a godless reality.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Eshleman's reading of the Upper Paleolithic imagination provides him with a means to create a visionary explanation of the archaic. It is in that vision that Eshleman discovers a new base from which to compose his poetry. This chapter focuses on how Schwerner repositions the archaic in order to create new poetry through inventive translation that relies on his own imagined primitive. Schwerner actively engages with the concept of translating poetically by his creation of an ancient culture (Sumero-Akkadian) and artifacts (clay tablets) of that culture to then translate and interpret by various mechanisms for his readers. Schwerner further complicates the idea of translating poetically through his creation of a fictional Scholar/Translator (S/T), who barges in and out of the text to provide commentary on the tablets. Through the fabrication of the tablets and the creation of the S/T, Schwerner becomes an intellectual trickster poet. His text fully exhibits the usefulness of employing strategic primitivism in his focus on the process of translating and composing poetry as highly interpretative, yet playful, acts.

While this chapter will discuss Schwerner's *The Tablets* in a broad sense to show how he repositions the archaic, and in doing so enacts his own form of strategic primitivism, I will primarily discuss the following four tablets: "Tablet I," "Tablet III," "Tablet VII," and "Tablet XXVI." I chose these four tablets to exemplify how Schwerner plays with the concept of translating poetically and exhibits the variety of poetic forms that Schwerner employs in his work. "Tablet I" will be discussed as a way to introduce *The Tablets* and show Schwerner's archaic context of the imagined primitive. "Tablet III" is included to clearly link Schwerner's work within Ethnopoetics. "Tablet VII" will illustrate how Schwerner employs the tablet form to allow for a playful mix of poetry and

scholarship. “Tablet XXVI” will show how Schwerner’s playful form is an open invitation for readers to more rigorously interpret poetry and the archaic, which lends itself to an explicit discussion of how Schwerner enacts his own form of strategic primitivism. An examination of these four tablets makes it clear that Schwerner is an intellectual trickster poet who intends to pose questions about poetry, scholarship, and the act of knowing the primitive throughout *The Tablets*.

As fabricated, archaic translations, *The Tablets* challenge the notion that knowledge is stable, calling into question the misconception of the primitive as simple and, in turn, offering a significant employment and understanding of the archaic—all aspects of Schwerner’s strategic primitivism. Schwerner accomplishes this repositioning of the primitive throughout *The Tablets*. The text functions as a reflective provocation to readers due to the appearance of the tablets and the inclusion of the S/T. Both the fiction of *The Tablets*’ authenticity and the S/T continually cause readers to doubt their ability to completely discern the text.

The complexity of Schwerner’s imagined primitive is shown in “Tablet I”⁴⁴:

All that’s left is pattern* (shoes?).

*doubtful reconstruction

I rooted about . . . like a sow* for her pleasure

*atavism: a hieroglyph; perhaps ‘a fetal pig,’ ‘a small pig,’ ‘goddess’

the (power)* for all of [us]!

⁴⁴ Schwerner uses “.” to indicate that a passage or word is “untranslatable.”

*perhaps ‘damage,’ if a borrowing; cf. cognate in N. Akkadian:
‘skin-burn’ (13)

With the very first line of the entire work, Schwerner calls particular attention to the form that his imagined primitive has taken: “All that’s left is pattern.” The use of the word “pattern” indicates that the form of these poems is as important as the content of the poems. However, even though Schwerner is hinting at his intentions,⁴⁵ he uses the tablet form in order to ask questions and destabilize meaning. The variations that exist within the tablet illustrate that the text itself is in a state of becoming, flux, or decay.

Schwerner’s fictional S/T, who is responsible for the translations and the commentaries in *The Tablets* and is not Schwerner himself, is uncomfortable with the destabilized meaning and feels compelled to illustrate plausible variations and explanations for the line. Kimmelman suggests that the first line illustrates “the modern world’s purchase on certainty, and even on selfhood, is to be undermined” (72). Kimmelman calls attention to how the first line of “Tablet I” initiates a pattern that will run throughout *The Tablets* concerning the S/T’s shortcomings in being unable to provide a seamless translation of the tablets, which the S/T then tries to make up for by providing very concrete footnotes. For example, the end of the first line has a question about

⁴⁵ Annabel Patterson points to the expansiveness of considering intention in literature in her essay, “Intention.” She suggests that “we are not required to be *regulatory* on the subject” of intention, as “past discussion of intention have promulgated axioms, rules, and even prohibitions” (145). She says further, “Common sense might argue that each literary case is different, as in art history a Jackson Pollock requires a different approach to intention than a Giotto or a van Gogh; and as even this brief essay has indicated, much of the heat generated by the intentionalist controversy could have been avoided if the participants had observed the semantic distinctions between different uses of intention as a term” (146). Patterson’s thoughts about intention apply to Schwerner’s *The Tablets* because each tablet requires a different approach concerning intention.

translating the meaning of the line with the word “shoes.” Also, the S/T notes that the translation of the first line is a “doubtful reconstruction.”

The level of uncertainty that exists in the first six lines of “Tablet I” sets the tone for *The Tablets* as a long poem because the S/T is unable to even allow the first line of the tablet to stand on its own; instead, readers are forced to contend with the S/T by his inclusion of a note and a variant reading for the last word of the line. The S/T has an active role in the poem and, due to that active role, is part of the poem and an aspect of Schwerner’s imagined primitive. The S/T’s role further illustrates the depth of Schwerner’s project because there could be no imagined archaic texts to read unless there was an imagined expert of the fabricated tablets. Thus, the reader of *The Tablets* contends with a guide and interpreter of *The Tablets* who is constantly trying to prove and validate himself, which is part of Schwerner’s intention in using an imagined archaic form.

“Tablet I” continues to illustrate the usefulness of the imagined archaic for Schwerner because he is able to use the conventions of translating ancient texts to his advantage by having parts of each tablet be “untranslatable” and represented as a series of “.....”. This allows Schwerner to ask questions about how poetry is read and how the primitive is interpreted. This context for Schwerner’s imagined primitive is further complicated in the number of notation symbols that he uses in addition to “untranslatable.” He includes “+ + + +” to represent “missing” portions. A “(?)” indicates a “variant reading.” Finally, he uses “[]” to illustrate when notes have been “supplied by the scholar translator” (9).

Schwerner’s use of “untranslatable” segments shows that the S/T does not have enough knowledge concerning the Sumero-Akkadian culture and language; yet, the S/T

continues to translate anyway. In one sense, “missing” segments of *The Tablets* show the shortcomings of attempting to translate poetic works with a sense of exactness or completeness and suggest that every translation will be lacking, even though the S/T attempts to create a unified meaning behind each individual tablet and *The Tablets* as a whole. Of course, “missing” segments denote another major aspect of Schwerner’s poetics: a contemplation of the very limits of knowing the archaic and reality. Schwerner’s use of “variant readings” in *The Tablets* also serves as a way to further probe the limits of knowledge while showing the complexity of archaic images and art, as each individual tablet provides a variety of opportunities for interpretation.⁴⁶ The high degree of interpretative opportunity that each tablet provides a reader is related to the playful, yet serious, level of ambiguity that exists within *The Tablets*.

The intent of each tablet is elusive and showcases how Schwerner actively asks readers to continue to translate or interpret each tablet that they encounter for themselves. The high degree of ambiguity in each tablet relates to why Schwerner uses the imagined archaic context and form that *The Tablets* provides him because he can pose all of these questions and contemplations while having fun with the freedom that his tablet form allows. This intellectual fun pushes readers to consider the very act of interpretation in terms of how knowledge is created and translated by applying meaning to a text. Thus,

⁴⁶ I use interpretation in the sense that Steven Mailloux uses it in his essay “Interpretation” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Mailloux, drawing from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, says that to interpret a text is to explain and translate a text (121). Mailloux says further, “That is, the interpreter mediates between the translated text and its new rendering *and* between the translated text and the audience desiring translation” (121). The idea that interpretation, at its roots, implies translation illustrates that interpretation is more about creating meaning rather than determining meaning.

The Tablets dwells in an indeterminate⁴⁷ state where meaning must always be configured and re-configured: meaning is always in process in *The Tablets*.

“Tablet I” continues to show the level of depth that Schwerner’s imagined primitive allows him in terms of form, content, and context:

war/good-ness/cunt* (thresher?)/marvel/cunt*/bright-yellow/

bright-ochre†/bright-bright-yellow/bright-ochre-

yellow/

bright-yellow-yellow-yellow-ochre-yellow ‡δ

*hieroglyph, probably not syllabic. Very old [graphic spider shape]: conceivably haloed by hair—but rake-like, very much the rake in the Kap-Kol-Bak-Silpotli-Wap frieze in the young consort’s left hand. (See Ouspenskaya: *The Young Consort and the Rake Muckery*, Egypt. Annals, Surah P,P, iii.)

†see Halevy-Cohen, *The Prismatic Function in Early Man: a study in Imperceptible Gradations*, U.U. Press, Ak. 1922-1962

⁴⁷ Gerald Graff in “Determinacy/Indeterminacy” says of the difference between indeterminacy and the much prized ambiguity that New Critics appreciated is that “the concept of indeterminacy claims to threaten the authority of literature and literary interpretation in a way that concept of ambiguity did not. . . . Indeterminacy bespeaks a limitation or failure of a text to fulfill its purpose. . . . The concept of indeterminacy proposes that a radical limitation is built into the activity of literary interpretation, whose very attempt to find a determinate meaning in literary works prevents it from succeeding in this enterprise” (166). Graff’s idea of indeterminacy plays out in *The Tablets* because Schwerner’s work is concerned with reflecting on the very limits of translation in terms of language and meaning.

‡analogue of segmented compass readings? as NE, NNE, etc. We know the god Pri-Prik usually assumed yellow guises in his search for the eighteen fold path. See Marduk, *The Babylonians*, Hirsute VII, Liber A-413, Tigris

δ The entire sequence is a rare example of restriction of categories in on ‘line’ or ‘cadence’ or ‘unit’ or ‘verset.’ Only nominal forms used. (13)

These lines of “Tablet I” repeats the words “yellow,” “ochre,” and “bright” and illustrates how Schwerner’s work mimics aspects of primitive or oral texts in his use of repetition.⁴⁸ Schwerner, then, is utilizing the tradition of repetition that can be found in oral poetry in order to further build up the validity of his imagined primitive. When used in oral poetic traditions, repetition had a variety of functions, such as a means for shamans to create healing magic and for storytellers to build and perform a narrative. That being said, there is a key difference between traditional uses of repetition and Schwerner’s use of repetition in this tablet. The way in which he repeats the words “yellow,” “ochre,” and “bright” does not create an unbroken chain of language; instead, a clear structure of repetition is avoided and meaning is further fragmented in the tablet. In making fictional ancient tablets, Schwerner utilizes aspects of oral traditions, such as repetition, to keep meaning in a transitory state.

⁴⁸ This connects his work to various pieces from Rothenberg’s *Technicians*, as well as María Sabina’s chants (for example, “The Folkways Chant”), a major influence on Rothenberg’s poetics, and Anne Waldman’s “Fast Speaking Woman,” which was also heavily influenced by Sabina. The translations of Rothenberg, the chants of Sabina, and the ethnopoetry of Waldman all utilize repetition in order to bring out the sacred qualities of spoken language.

The above lines of “Tablet I” also contain a lengthy amount of scholarly input from the S/T. In fact, there are only four lines of tablet poetry but thirteen lines of notes and comments. This exemplifies the kind of imagined primitive that Schwerner is enacting in “Tablet I,” which is a trend followed throughout *The Tablets* as the words of the S/T are clearly part of the poem, and the S/T is another creation of Schwerner—a character designed to fulfill the role of the expert. The extent of Schwerner’s intention to fabricate a text that projects uncertainty is fully shown in the actions and thoughts of the S/T that pervade every tablet. The S/T is a fictive representation of the work that literary scholars and translators do in attempting to provide an interpretation of a given text or culture. This composite S/T becomes more fully exposed as a colorful character when readers move further into *The Tablets*.

At issue in *The Tablets* is the question of the reliability of the S/T. Brian McHale in “Archaeologies of Knowledge: Hill’s Middens, Heaney’s Bogs, Schwerner’s Tablets,” calls attention to the reliability of the S/T while discussing the so-called “authors” of individual tablets, “in the case of *The Tablets* it is impossible to determine whether or not the individual ‘authors’ whom the scholar-translator claims to discern in his ancient texts—. . .—have any existence apart from the commentator’s projections. For that matter, it is impossible to determine whether the tablets themselves exist” (249). Early in *The Tablets*, the S/T seems to be a reliable source for interpreting *The Tablets*; however, it is impossible to have an authoritative source in Schwerner’s text because even the voice of authority, the S/T, is continually undermined by the reader’s knowledge that it is all an elaborate fiction. Furthermore, while the S/T is fictional, he provides Schwerner

with a means to question how the primitive is interpreted and the value of interpreting the primitive in contemporary poetry.

The creation of the S/T is not to suggest that scholarship and translation are pointless endeavors; rather, Schwerner uses *The Tablets* and the S/T to contemplate the possibilities and limits of scholarship and translation in knowing the primitive. In essence, Schwerner has created an S/T that is in striking contrast to ethnopoetic scholars-translators like Rothenberg, Eshleman, and himself. I think Schwerner's work, like Rothenberg's and Eshleman's, reevaluates the primitive in order to reflect on what poetry can be when the past is collapsed with the present through dialogue and negotiation with global poetic traditions. I contend that this active dialogue with other poetic traditions can then lead to a broader acceptance of different kinds of poetry, which lends itself to the idea of a symposium of the whole. This is the case because Ethnopoetics pursues an engagement with other poetic traditions to provide opportunities for discussion and reflection between cultures.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Schwerner's *The Tablets*, as a work of the imagined primitive, engages with the archaic in a contemplative or strategic manner in collapsing the archaic and the contemporary. Schwerner is an ethnopoet because of his conscious decision to compose poetry through his own imagined primitive, which helps him create his own kind of strategic primitivism. Also, his connection to Ethnopoetics is historically, as well as conceptually, based. The 1968 publication of *Tablets I-VIII* coincides with Jerome Rothenberg's first publication of *Technicians of Sacred*, a foundational ethnopoetic text, which links Schwerner's lifetime investment in the archaic

with Rothenberg's similar sentiment. In fact, as will be discussed below, an early tablet, "Tablet III," is included in Rothenberg's commentary section of *Technicians*. This link is no accident. The poetry in *Technicians* is meant to inspire other poets to create poetry that invokes the broader definition that *Technicians* offers, along with the repositioning of the primitive for contemporary poetry.

Throughout *The Tablets*, Schwerner enacts a specific aspect of Ethnopoetics that understands the sacred as connected to the composition of poetry implied by the title of Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred*. Schwerner engages with the sacred through his idea of "the poet [as] a namer" or creator of his own realities ("Tablets Journals/Divagations" 130). In doing this, poets such as Schwerner suggest that the act of poetic creation and the sacred can exist within every day, contemporary life. Schwerner says, in "Tablets Journals/Divagations," "not poetry as obeisance to the sacred, but as creation of it in all its activity; not as an appeal for its survival in spite of a corrosive sense that the sacred is lost. but as a movement which itself might add its own small measure of reality" (sic) (130). Schwerner alludes to the ethnopoetic idea of reinterpreting the sacred, as suggested by Rothenberg in *Technicians*, to rethink notions of what constitutes poetry. I think that for Schwerner, this broader conceptualization of the sacred allows him the ability to develop his imagined primitive in a non-ironic way. I argue this because while Schwerner does not see the sacred in a religious sense, he does see the sacred as a way to blend the archaic with the contemporary.

Schwerner's sensibility towards the relationship between the sacred and poetry shows another aspect of his strategic primitivism and can be explicitly linked to

Ethnopoetics when considering the “Origins and Namings” section of Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred*. This section of Rothenberg’s anthology illustrates poetry in terms of sacred creation by the variety of creation stories and myths that have informed various cultures throughout history. These are pulled together in order to show that one of the intentions of Ethnopoetics is to generate a framework that values diverse traditions of various cultures.

Schwerner’s tablet form looks similar to a piece called “The Fragments,” a series of “pyramid texts” created “between the years 2350 and 2175 B.C.” (Rothenberg 474) and reprinted in the “Origins and Namings” section of Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred*. When Schwerner’s *The Tablets* are compared to “The Fragments,” I think it becomes clearer how Schwerner attempts to enact his own form of strategic primitivism through utilizing a primitive form in an imaginative way. In doing so, Schwerner comments on how the sacred can play an important role in contemporary American poetry in his fabrication of the sacred.

“The Fragments” is divided up into parts. “Fragment 1” is as follows:

.....

command

.....

..... of the boat of the evening ...

.....

.....
Thy face is like
.....
.....
.....
..... (34)

This first fragment shares a theme with Schwerner’s tablets because it illustrates the slow effacing of the significance of the individual; the fragment “Thy face is like” could be read as an individual speaker describing another individual. However, the description of the person and the power of one individual’s observations have been eroded through the passage of time and the effects of Nature. This erosion has become part of the meaning of the fragment by its representation as a series of dots.

Rothenberg, in “The Commentaries” section of *Technicians*, speaks to how erosion in “The Fragments” has allowed for the pieces to inhabit a state of flux when he says, “Time & chance have worked on the materials, not only to corrode but to create new structures: as if ‘process’ itself had turned poet, to leave its imprints on the work. . . . But the workers who pieced such scraps together have left their marks too: So something else appears: a value, a new form to attract the mind: . . .” (474). Rothenberg suggests that “Fragment 1” from *Technicians* exhibits a piece of art that has never been completed, as Nature and man have exerted continued influence on how the piece looks, and, therefore, the meaning that is conveyed by the piece has altered over time. Thus, this

fragment, like Schwerner's tablets, illustrates how a piece of art can obtain a state of constant becoming due to the various changes that occur around the piece.

Rothenberg, in "The Commentaries," explicitly associates "The Fragments" with Schwerner's "Tablet III." The following excerpt is from "Tablet III":

my chest empties my chest

I can no longer stand in the middle of the field and +++++++

I am missing, my chest has no food for the maggots

there is no place for the pollen, there is only a hole in the flower

the hummingbird pusnectar

the field is a hole without pattern (shoes?) (19)

In "Tablet III," the reader is given the sense of a narrative that concerns the issues of human emptiness or fragmentation. The narrative continues to suggest that there is something fundamentally wrong with the person speaking. It is unclear whether the speaker in the poem has suffered physically or emotionally—perhaps both. After some contemplation of the person's continued existence—or lack thereof—exhibited by the line "I am missing, my chest has no food for the maggots," the story in the poem shifts to a description of the place that the speaker of the poem is in and brings a hummingbird into the story, further disrupting the potential for a clear pattern of meaning in the tablet.

Also, "Tablet III" serves as an explicit link between Schwerner's work and archaic texts, in this case, "The Fragments" reproduced in Rothenberg's *Technicians of*

the Sacred (34), and further illustrates the association between Rothenberg's work as an editor and translator with Schwerner's poetic translation of *The Tablets*. A further parallel also exists between "Tablet III" and "Fragment 4," which is even closer in appearance to Schwerner's tablets, and it is as follows:

In my wearied, me

In my inflamed nostril, me

Punishment, sickness, trouble ... me

A flail which wickedly afflicts [sic], me

A lacerating rod Me

A handme

A terrifying message me

A stinging whip Me

.....

..... in pain I *faint* (?)

..... ("Fragment 4" 34-35)

"Tablet III" shows how Schwerner is attempting to empty or clear easily discernible meaning out of his poem by utilizing a structure much like that in "The Fragments." Meaning in "Tablet III" becomes muddled, just as meaning in "The Fragments" is mixed-up and rendered incomplete. While it is the case that meaning has become less clear in

both “Tablet III” and “The Fragments,” it does not mean that there is no meaning; rather, both texts act as invitations for interpretation. “Tablet III” is an example of the widespread instability of meaning that permeates *The Tablets*.

In addition, in a note accompanying “Tablet III” in *Technicians*, Schwerner says he uses the tablets as a poetic form for his work because “[these] tonal & textual shifts ... help place in some perspective the contemporary mystique of line-endings & their poetic importance. The question is not, Where does the line end; the question is, When is verse not charged with the power of the varied possible? The question is, What is meaningfulness?” (476). Schwerner suggests that the usefulness of his strategic primitivism asks readers to re-think the importance of line and breath in interpreting poetry and to question meaning in poetry. The open form of *The Tablets* allows Schwerner to circumvent certain trends of twentieth century American poetry, which allows him to move beyond the poetics of Olson’s “projective verse” and to not write like other poets, such as Allen Ginsberg. Schwerner’s chosen form of an imagined primitive helps him put some space between his poetry and the poetry that has come before him.

I argue that Schwerner engages with the Ethnopoetic concept of poet as a namer and creator, and, in doing so, suggests that poetry contains within it the possibility of a sacred act. Schwerner’s idea of the sacred in his poetry is about valuing the use of language as a powerful epistemological tool that allows him the ability to contemplate poetic forms and the relationship between the past and the present. As mentioned earlier, Finkelstein discusses the necessity of reading Schwerner’s *The Tablets* as an attempt to engage with the sacred. The difference between my reading of the sacred in Schwerner’s

work and Finkelstein's reading is that I contend that Schwerner engages with the sacred in a secular sense, whereas, Finkelstein reads Schwerner's interest in the sacred as being related to Schwerner's Jewish cultural heritage.

While I disagree with how Finkelstein reads the sacred in Schwerner's work, his idea that Schwerner's *The Tablets* needs to be thought of as engaging with the sacred serves as an extension of Schwerner's connection to Ethnopoetics, in particular Rothenberg and Eshleman, since *The Tablets* could be understood as an elaborate postmodern joke rather than faithful ethnopoetic research that probes the possibilities of using newly inspired forms based on interpreted archaic models. Finkelstein says that Schwerner is engaging with the sacred in a "modern attempt to reconnect with the spirituality of the archaic and the 'primitive' [that] had to be accompanied by a deep—and deeply ironic—self-consciousness" (259). Finkelstein calls attention to the significance and inherent reflectivity of Schwerner's work, which I have identified as evidence of Schwerner's ethnopoetic sensibilities.

Finkelstein interprets *The Tablets* as comprising a divine comedy and tragedy. He writes, "Encompassing numerous poetic registers and a dizzying array of voices, *The Tablets* is actually that rarest of creatures, a religious comedy—indeed, a divine comedy, with the schlemiel-like figure of the Scholar/Translator as both pilgrim and guide" (260). This reading of Schwerner's long poem stands in stark contrast to my own reading because Finkelstein's reading posits an actual sacred that can be obtained and fulfilled. I argue that Schwerner continually and critically works with the idea of the sacred as a concept in order to reflect on the limits of poetry rather than as an attempt to reconnect

with a particular divine presence or being. This view of the sacred illustrates the pluralistic aspect of Schwerner's work because he is interested in participating in a contemplation and dialogue about the sacred as an aspect of poetry rather than using his poetry to try and obtain a particular relationship with a sacred or divine presence. I think for Schwerner, the sacred can be a part of poetry but the sacred does not have to lead down a particular epistemological or metaphysical path. In fact, if the sacred in Schwerner's work was how Finkelstein understands it as Schwerner coming to some kind of terms with his Jewish cultural heritage, the sacred would not function as a way to create dialogue amongst poetic traditions because the concept of the sacred would be too limited in scope.

The idea of the sacred at which Schwerner hints in "Tablet Journals/Divagations" illustrates two important ideas concerning *The Tablets*. First, poetry is sacred, or is analogous to the sacred, because poetry is about the construction of new modes of thinking about the world around us and about the limits of our imaginations. Second, through the act of visionary poetic creation, poets remake the world, and readers enact and validate that recreated world by sharing in the poets' diverse dreamscapes. *The Tablets* is a contemplation of the sacred and the profane, but by no means does it provide an opportunity for the sacred to be realized because Schwerner, as an intellectual trickster, does not have a particular sacred concept in mind that can be actualized in *The Tablets*. While Schwerner does not engage with the sacred as being able to communicate with or know the divine, he does use the idea of poetic creation as the making of something new and sacred in a way that calls into question notions of poetry and

scholarship. Thus, even though Schwerner has fun in *The Tablets*, there exists a serious undertone to his work that makes it something other than engaging in some kind of post-modern comedy. Furthermore, I think Schwerner does not make a clear allusion to or manifestation of a specific kind of sacred in *The Tablets* because doing so would break down the intricateness of his project. In a way, if Schwerner had a clear aspect of the divine in his poetry, it would create an absolute in Schwerner's imagined archaic that would undermine his ability to continue to probe ideas of poetry and how poetry can be connected to the sacred.

The association between poetry and the sacred is further shown in the aforementioned idea of Schwerner's that "the poet is a namer" ("Tablets Journals/Divagations" 130). The idea of the poet as namer can be seen in the two tablets already discussed: "Tablet I" and "Tablet III." The idea of "poet [as] namer" can be seen in the following lines from "Tablet I": "the ants look (scrounge?) for food / the ground-pig (lower-god?) sucks dry filth for water / the palaces are yellow (vomit?/N?)" (14). Schwerner's poetry functions, at times, as a poetry of observing the ordinary, which can be seen in "Tablet III": "the hummingbird pusnectar / the field is a hole without pattern (shoes?)" (19). In emphasizing the ordinary, *The Tablets* situates the mundane within the sacred through reading the ordinary poetically. The idea of naming reality and the things that exist within it establishes ethnopoets as active makers of poetic realities. Thus, Schwerner's musing on the idea of the poet as creator is an idea that is very much a part of the critical framework that Ethnopoetics employs, which also illustrates how Ethnopoetics can be associated with other types of American poetry—for example, Walt Whitman's use of naming parts of the body in "Children of Adam" from

Leaves of Grass (257). This serves as an example of how Ethnopoetics attempts to negotiate as many different poetic traditions as possible as Schwerner's work reflects ideas from ancient "pyramid texts" to Whitman's poetry of the nineteenth century.

Lazer also reads Schwerner's work as being concerned with the sacred, which categorizes Schwerner as an ethnopoet and associates him with the work of Rothenberg. Lazer's criticism of Schwerner's work is built on what he sees as a work that leaves something to be desired. He says of "Tablets Journals and Divagations," the final section of *The Tablets*, "For me, this Apocrypha ["The Divagations"] becomes the heart of the text itself, where we learn most passionately and exactly what is at stake in *The Tablets*" (143). Lazer focuses on "Tablets Journals/Divagations" because that section of *The Tablets* allows readers to more clearly perceive the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of *The Tablets*, which can help readers build a more solid interpretation of Schwerner's intentions. This is of particular importance to Lazer because he wants to know what Schwerner thinks rather than play the game that Schwerner invites readers to participate in.

Lazer wants Schwerner's intentions to be more clearly understood in order for readers to fully appreciate Schwerner's poetry. Lazer says of Schwerner's work, "his scrupulous avoidance of various modes of 'accomplished' composition severely limits the modes of beauty allowed to take up residence in the text" (144). This is where Lazer's interpretation differs from this dissertation; Lazer's criticism is based on the inability of readers to clearly perceive Schwerner's intentions unless the time is taken to ponder the "Tablets Journals/Divagations" section. I argue in this dissertation that the inability on the part of a reader to clearly see Schwerner's intentions is what makes *The Tablets*

worthy of scholarly attention. In this way, Lazer critiques Schwerner's *The Tablets* because he understands Schwerner's poetic decisions—using the tablet form and the inclusion of the S/T—as Schwerner limiting his ability to clearly express his poetic voice.

I argue that Schwerner's use of an imagined primitive and his association with Ethnopoetics allows him to create a different form of poetry. The tablet form exemplifies Schwerner as an ethnopoet interested in probing the possibilities and limits of Ethnopoetics in order to create new kinds of poetry. Contrary to Lazer, I believe that Schwerner's poetics in *The Tablets* is not a limitation. Schwerner's imagined tablet form enables him to consider the implications of engaging with the primitive in contemporary American poetry in a playful, yet reflective, way. Schwerner's level of play and the serious implications of that play in his poetry will be more fully discussed in the next section in terms of understanding Schwerner as enacting an intellectual trickster poetics and, in doing so, employing his own particular form of strategic primitivism.

Section Two: Schwerner as Intellectual Trickster and His Strategic Primitivism

The freedom of play that Schwerner enacts throughout *The Tablets* illustrates that his ethnopoetic sensibilities embody an intellectual trickster⁴⁹ poetics, which is to say a

⁴⁹ Brian McHale, in "Topology of a Phantom City: *The Tablets* as Hoax," references Schwerner as a "trickster-archaeologist" (89) through his argument that *The Tablets* should be thought of as being part of a tradition of long, archaeological minded poems, such as T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, but also in a tradition of "faux or hoax poetry," which McHale grounds in Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. McHale links Foucault to Schwerner through McHale's reading of *The Tablets* as exhibiting "the ruins" of archaeology (88). Hank Lazer also mentions Schwerner as a "trickster-archaeologist" in "Sacred Forgery and the Grounds of Poetic Archaeology: Armand Schwerner's *The Tablets*" (145).

poetics of instability and willful play.⁵⁰ Ideas of what a trickster is and the effects that a trickster can have on reality are diverse. One idea of a trickster is the Coyote archetype in Native American oral traditions. Gary Snyder in “from ‘The Incredible Survival of Coyote’” says, “In folklorist terms [Coyote Man is] a trickster He’s always traveling, he’s really stupid, he’s kind of bad, in fact he’s really awful, he’s outrageous. Now he’s done some good things too, he got fire for people” (Rothenberg and Rothenberg, *Symposium of the Whole* 426). The idea of Coyote as a trickster would have been familiar to Schwerner because he translated a Coyote poem from the Nez Percé people called “Coon cons Coyote, Coyote eats Coon, Coyote fights Shit-Men, gets immured in a rock-house, eats his eyes, eats his balls, gets out, cons Bird-Boy for eyes, loses them to the birds & gets them back” (Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin* 89-90). Coyote in this poem is tricked by Coon but then gets his revenge and eventually comes out on top of everybody that encounters him and gets away at the end of the poem. In another example of the Coyote archetype, “One for Coyote” from the Skagit people, Coyote tricks a woman into sex by offering her food in exchange for her closing her eyes and lifting up her dress (Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin* 223). Coyote is further associated with sexual acts in “How Her Teeth Were Pulled” from the Paiute people: Coyote is responsible for exorcising teeth from women’s vaginas so that sex can be more pleasurable for both parties involved (Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin* 224). Coyote as a trickster is also thought to be a mad, powerful force in the world as he is described, in

⁵⁰ Carl Jung, in “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure,” describes the qualities of a trickster, in particular “the alchemical figure of Mercurius,” as “a curious combination” of motifs that include “his fondness for sly jokes and malicious pranks, his powers as a shape-shifter, his dual nature, half animal, half divine, his exposure to all kinds of tortures, and—last but not least—his approximation to the figure of a savior” (206). A trickster in this sense embodies an ever changing form of physical and metaphysical qualities.

“Three Songs of Mad Coyote” from the Nez Percé people, as having “Ravening Coyote comes, / red hands, red mouth, / necklace of eye-balls!” (Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin* 225). All four examples described above illustrate that while Coyote served as a trickster archetype for various Native American peoples; his actions were diverse and had various impacts on those around him.⁵¹ What is important to take away from the idea of the trickster is that a trickster is a figure who is always involved in some kind of process or transformation. In this way, tricksters destabilize reality and the lives of those around them. Also, tricksters can be helpful to those around them, but they are always more concerned with their own wants and desires.

Schwerner’s intellectual trickster poetics has at its core the trickster idea of transforming or reimagining reality by merging his contemporary poetic sensibilities with an imagined archaic form. His intellectual trickster poetics calls for readers to engage with imagined historical contexts within each tablet. This invitation to readers is a challenge to actively read and interpret every tablet. After reading each tablet, readers should then consider the implications of each tablet functioning in connection with the other tablets as constituting a single, long poem. Ultimately, I think that reading Schwerner’s work in this way makes reading *The Tablets* worthwhile because it

⁵¹ Another trickster archetypal character is the god Loki from Norse mythology. C. Scott Littleton in *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology* says that Loki was a positive and negative figure for the other gods. Like Coyote, Loki traveled a lot because “he did not have his own dwelling place” (818). According to Littleton, Loki was known for being crafty, and he was capable of changing back and forth from male to female, which allowed him to become pregnant and give birth, which was considered “disgraceful by the other gods” (818). Loki was also noted for “changing his shape into a wide range of different animals: he appears variously as a salmon, a fly, a mare, and a hawk (Littleton 818). A third archetypal figure that exhibits trickster characteristics is the Spider Goddess from the Ainu epic poetry tradition. In “Song of the Spider Goddess,” the Spider Goddess tricks a demon out of kidnapping her by transforming herself into a “reed stalk” and sets up various traps in her home to injury the demon and scare him off (Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred* 293-300).

illustrates the complexity that contemporary ethnopoetry is capable of through a reevaluation of the primitive. This elaborate scheme that Schwerner plays with in his work casts him as a kind of intellectual trickster; enacting a trickster poetics allows Schwerner to collapse his imagined archaic with contemporary poetics and the critical-theoretical discourses that surround it. To create a constantly shifting poem like *The Tablets* requires Schwerner to always reflect on his poetic processes, as well as how he engages with the primitive and the various intellectual discourses that accompany his poetics and the primitive in his work—which is yet another aspect of the intricateness of his strategic primitivism.

Schwerner's intellectual game is in play throughout *The Tablets*, demonstrating the seriousness of his imagined primitive while allowing him the freedom to have fun in creating his own kind of poetic vision. This poetic vision functions as a means of pulling readers into the interpretative game that reading *The Tablets* invites. My suggestion that *The Tablets* exhibits play by no means implies that the work lacks a philosophical seriousness; Schwerner's long poem enables him to perform the processes of translation and interpretation in order to call those acts into question. Richard Schechner, in *The Future of Ritual*, says of performance, "Performance is amoral, as useful to tyrants as to those who practice guerrilla theatre. This amorality comes from performance's subject, transformation: the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become-for worse or better-what they ordinarily are not" (1). This idea of the openness of performance provides particular insight into the work of Schwerner because it is the amoral quality of performance that allows for the freedom of play that is very much a part of Schwerner's poetic project. In addition, the constant presence of the scholar-translator

throughout *The Tablets* situates the scholar and critic of literature as a performer as well. Thus, Schwerner reflects on the limits of the poet and the critic throughout his work, which allows Schwerner the opportunity to continue to keep the roles of poet and critic in flux in *The Tablets*. Schechner further adds that “a recurrent theme” linking various forms of play is “‘provisionality,’ the unsteadiness, slipperiness, porosity, unreliability, and ontological riskiness of the realities projected or created by playing” (39). This “slipperiness” is a theme that can be found throughout Schwerner’s long poem because his shifting text allows for more interpretations than it denies. Schwerner continues to enact a variety of roles in his poetry that allow for a reflexive contemplation of what it means to be a poet, a scholar, and a critic of the primitive in order to call into question the value of doing such things within contemporary poetry.

Schwerner’s engagement with play in *The Tablets* is part of his strategic primitivism because in playing the role of the performing trickster and intellectual, Schwerner tests the limits of his imagined archaic form and context. In a sense, the spirit of play that pervades *The Tablets* provides Schwerner with a rationale to experiment with poetry, the primitive, and the discourses surrounding them. Furthermore, thinking of Schwerner as playing an intellectual game means that he is abiding by certain rules for creating poetry. I think that these rules, e.g. the form, context, and the S/T, allow Schwerner to freely call into question the acts of translating and interpreting poetry. In doing so, Schwerner has created his own form of “projected reality.” Schechner says further of play, “Playing is a creative, destabilizing action that frequently does not declare its existence, even less its intentions. . . . Indeed, art and ritual, especially performance, are the homeground of playing. This is because the process of making performances does

not so much imitate playing as epitomize it” (41). *The Tablets* works as its own “homeground of playing” because every aspect of *The Tablets* has been built by Schwerner so that he can carefully mimic scholarly realities. This flexible engagement with translation, along with the implications of translation for poetry, allows for a radical reworking or dramatic reimagining of the role of a translator-poet, like Schwerner, in contemporary poetry. Schwerner’s unique way of enacting strategic primitivism is evident in the combination of the imagined primitive and an intellectual trickster attitude towards the creation of a particular kind of ethnopoeity. I think this is the case because for Schwerner, significant poetry is generated out of a kind of intellectual and scholarly pursuit that recognizes the importance of plurality in creating scholarly discourses, such as translations and interpretations of poetry. Schwerner’s intellectual trickster poetics is markedly different from the S/T’s translations and interpretations found in *The Tablets* because the S/T is always looking to create conclusive interpretations and close off opportunities for other translations of the tablets.

The extent of Schwerner’s intellectual trickster persona is fully exhibited in the questioning of the S/T and his ability to translate *The Tablets*. The authenticity and usefulness of the S/T’s translations and “sources” become particularly twisted in terms of “Tablet VII.” “Tablet VII” continues the trend of the celebration of scholarship that the S/T has put together through the in-depth discussion of “Henrik L., an archaeologically gifted Norwegian divine” (27). The S/T discusses Henrik L. because according to the S/T, “most of the following Tablet cannot be rendered into English. It has never been recovered” (27). The problem with the translation by Henrik L. is that he translated the tablet into “Crypto-Icelandic, a language we cannot yet understand” (27).

McHale calls attention to this problematic translation and interpretation of “Tablet VII,” “So here is uncertainty introduced into the middle links in the chain of transmission. Moreover, the same corrosive skepticism applies here as applies to [other tablet “authors/sources”]: if their existence is in doubt, so too is the existence of Henrik L. . .” (249). Hence, the issue with translating this tablet is that the translation would require a tapestry of scholarly work which the S/T is unable to provide because he cannot translate the language that Henrik L. used. The S/T’s use of the work of previous translators marks him as being a studious translator that relies and builds on the work of those that came before him. In some ways, this establishes the S/T as being engaged in a similar kind of scholarship as Rothenberg, as was discussed in Chapter Two. This is particularly the case in “Tablet VII” where the S/T relies on yet another fictive scholar/translator created by Schwerner, Henrik L. Henrik L. further creates uncertainty in “Tablet VII” because it is hard to discern when the S/T is making his own statements and when he is relying on Henrik L. The inclusion of Henrik L. continues to show Schwerner’s questioning of scholarly discourses.

Uncertainty continues to build in the S/T’s introduction to “Tablet VII,” when the S/T proposes that Henrik L. added “Lutheran religious material” to the tablet. The S/T says of the alterations of the tablet, “[Henrik L.’s] devoutness ran away with his archaeological fidelity” (27). Apparently, Henrik L. altered lines such as “rötete rötete rötete Jesu Kriste sakrifise” (28) in order to interject Christ into the narrative of *The Tablets*. The S/T’s comment on Henrik L.’s “devoutness” interfering with his ability to objectively translate the tablet further shows how Schwerner, as the poet of *The Tablets*, is critical of the S/T’s non-reflective scholarship. Schwerner has created an S/T who

believes that one can objectively translate material from another culture when, in fact, the S/T has been unable to avoid performing his knowledge of the culture in such a way as to dominate the presentation of the tablets rather than presenting an interesting translation that would allow readers to create their own interpretations.

In “Tablet VII,” Schwerner presents readers with a multilayered tablet that evades scholarly reading because the readers and the S/T must navigate not only the hieroglyphs of the “original” tablet, but also a “secret” language, which the S/T is unable to completely understand for the purposes of his translation of the tablets. For the S/T, the situation with which he is presented in “Tablet VII” turns the tables on him because he engages in a “secret” language of his own through the commentary he provides for each tablet, but he is confronted with the problem of relying too much on a “secret” or specialized language to interpret the tablet. In this way, the S/T must contend with the problems that are generated when there is too much emphasis placed on being able to navigate a specialized discourse to understand a text. In addition, McHale says of the difficulties that exist in translating “Tablet VII,”

There is no reliable structure of transmission here after all, no hierarchy of more and less reliable sources, of witnesses nearer to and farther from some ultimate source. All have been equalized, leveled by onto-epistemological doubt: the tablets and their translations, the ‘authors’ and their redactors, the middlemen and the scholar-translator and the poet Armand Schwerner himself. (249)

However, the lack of authoritative and stable texts does not stop the S/T from further claiming his authority over the tablets as he discusses how two of the segments of the

tablets were “written in classical Old Icelandic” and are, therefore, translatable, which he then follows with an explanation of how they can be translated.

This tablet also introduces a new symbol for reading ancient Mesopotamian texts—a cross enclosed by a circle, which is used to indicate confusion. This new symbol further substantiates Schwerner’s intellectual trickster poetics because he is using a symbol in order to provide some meaning to that which cannot be discerned, but there is still no meaning behind the symbol when it is used. In addition, the new symbol functions as a further call for readers to interpret the tablet. Also, the symbol illustrates how *The Tablets* become more fragmented as a reader moves from one tablet to the next. This is the case because more and more space needs to be given to symbols and notes/comments from the S/T to help create a sense of textual coherence, even though textual coherence is an impossibility. While the symbol is indicative of the interpretative difficulties that Schwerner creates for readers, the symbol serves as a reminder, to both the S/T and the readers, of the S/T’s inadequacies in being able to provide an authoritative translation of the tablets.

Schwerner’s fragmented textual space is effective in revealing the inadequacies of the S/T because it plays on readers wanting a genuine S/T to explain everything and clear up any lingering misconceptions. This is the case even with the full knowledge that *The Tablets* is an elaborate fiction. Thus, Schwerner is just as intent on revealing the desires of readers to know poetry and the archaic as he is in critically probing scholarship and translation.

The unsteadiness of meaning that runs rampant throughout *The Tablets* allows Schwerner to enact an intellectual trickster poetics in his work. This is a valuable

approach to take from Ethnopoetics because Schwerner's poetic approach helps to broaden the possibilities for poetry while also functioning as a rationale for doing so. Schwerner reflects on the primitive, the tablet form and how scholars view the primitive, to make different poetry. Schwerner's work is poetic theory in action because the poetry of *The Tablets* is based on Schwerner's theories on translation and interpretation of the primitive. This idea of poetic theory in action is a key aspect of Ethnopoetics since ethnopoets reflect on the primitive in order to take poetry into different directions.

Schwerner most clearly articulates his intellectual trickster poetics in "Tablets Journals/Divagations." The journal section hints at the power of poetic invention or the imagination. Schwerner writes various fragments in that section, which include the following three: "there is no nuclear self," "The joy of tachisme, play.... Freedom in the concrete small material poetica....," and "poetry of the insane" (131). All three of these fragments exemplify essential parts of his poetics and the uniqueness of his strategic primitivism: they all three call into question the idea of a stable self (contesting the "nuclear self"); the ability of poetry to actively engage with the multifaceted self, and in doing so, being free to create whatever the mind wishes to construct ("the joy of . . . play"); and the refusal of cultural norms and expectations in the construction of poetry (the "insane").

In the above ideas, Schwerner challenges what it means to read texts, and through that reading, he projects a characterization of the culture that the text emerged from. In no way does either of those aims suggest the formation of truth about the Sumero-Akkadian culture that *The Tablets* come to represent due to the uncertainties generated by the translations and interpretations of the S/T. The inherent instabilities that are present in

Schwerner's work, due to his intellectual trickster persona, create a literary work where intention is obscured and indeterminate interpretation is encouraged. The various manifestations of meaning that readers must contend with allow *The Tablets* to remain in a state of becoming because the act of interpretation can never be fully completed.

Schwerner alludes to this state of becoming that his work embodies when he says in an interview with Willard Gingerich,

the Tablets on a certain level is a kind of covert autobiography

We change or at least we manifest differently. And all of these changes manifest differently in the work. So since the work is coterminous with my life, and I have no problem asserting that, or admitting that, that there's a parallelism that cannot be figured out ahead of time because it is in fact processual. (n. pag.)

Schwerner's reading of his life and how his work parallels his life further builds the inherently "processual" and transitory nature of poetry that continues to unfold in *The Tablets*. Bradford Haas suggests, in "Making It New: Changing Form and Function in Modern Myth," "*The Tablets* is a textual reality that is constructed to throw us off balance, while simultaneously forcing us to modify our views of the world from a limited linear model to a more open and dynamic plurality" (190). Haas calls attention to how Schwerner's imagined archaic form pushes readers to consider poetry as a textual space that offers possibilities rather than limitations. This further illustrates why Schwerner employs an intellectual trickster persona because that persona allows him to forestall a reader's ability to find interpretative closure in *The Tablets*. Schwerner's poetics slows down interpretation by providing readers with multiple voices in each tablet that need to

be negotiated by the reader before they can begin to piece together ideas about the tablet. The various voices allow Schwerner to keep transforming the narrative of the poem so that the poem can never quite be caught by the reader. There is always some aspect of *The Tablets* that gets away from the reader. Schwerner's questioning of poetry and the primitive throughout *The Tablets* asks readers to hold off on coming to conclusions about the meaning of each tablet and Schwerner's intentions, which causes his readers to consider poetry as a "processual" art that calls for a reader who is willing to continually interpret and renegotiate meaning in each tablet and *The Tablets* as a whole.

The question of the decipherability of *The Tablets* builds from smaller levels of intrusion by the Scholar/Translator, as is evidenced in early tablets where the S/T provides some notes and variant readings. Later on, as will be shown with "Tablet XXVI," the S/T is more interested in providing readers with his musings and technical jargon, in addition to notes and variant readings, than in allowing for readers to create their own interpretations. Thus, when engaging with *The Tablets* and other texts like it, such as "The Fragments," readers need to realize the invitation of interpretation that the text is presenting to them and be open to considering those texts as poetic sites of becoming rather than as defined spaces of knowledge and meaning. This invitation for interpretation emerges from Schwerner's intellectual trickster poetics because he is interested in reflecting on the ways that the past and the present can be conflated in order to facilitate a poetics that allows for opportunities of dialogue between poetic traditions. In addition, the idea of thinking about poetry as enacting sites of becoming links back to a key approach to poetics that Ethnopoetics offers—the reconsideration of oral poetics as

being integral to renegotiating American poetry in accordance with the pluralistic voices of global poetry.

Schwerner's strategic primitivism enacts the Ethnopoetic approach of reevaluating oral poetries and illustrates the danger of putting too much faith in anything that is constructed by the human mind, e.g. traditional scholarly approaches to the primitive. Schwerner questions the limits of academically produced knowledge while at the same time acknowledging the versatility of the imagination. Kimmelman understands Schwerner as a poet with anthropological and translation sensibilities. This biographical information leads Kimmelman to comment, "Schwerner's work presents a fundamental difficulty. This difficulty stems from his demand that readers discard all assumptions about who they are, indeed about what it means to be human; these assumptions . . . are comforting but ungrounded" (70). *The Tablets* is a multi-layered text that asks readers to think critically about not only the act of reading, but also the act of knowing. Kimmelman says, "Schwerner's work is at once primeval and postmodern. The counterposing of these two extremes engenders an absolute provocation" (70). Kimmelman's thoughts on how Schwerner provokes his readers by a meditation of the "primeval and postmodern" illustrates the kind of reader that Schwerner aimed for; *The Tablets* enacts a dialogue of opposites to further invite readers to consider their own interpretative spaces. This challenge to readers is possible through a poetic invention that is dependent upon vision and reflection, which is clearly manifested in "Tablet XXVI."

"Tablet XXVI" illuminates the character of the S/T and Schwerner's intellectual trickster persona as well as how using that persona serves as an invitation to readers to become saturated with *The Tablets*. This is particularly showcased in the continued

exhibition of the S/T's unreliability, which is an aspect of Schwerner's strategic primitivism. Part of Schwerner's strategic primitivism calls into question the ability of scholars to interpret the primitive in concrete ways. Because Schwerner uses poetry as a way to reflect on the limits of scholarship, he sets the S/T up as a character that tries to illustrate his knowledge but only ends up illustrating his own subjective view of each tablet as well as his inadequacies. This tablet opens with a sub-heading: "From the Laboratory Teachings Memoirs of the Scholar/Translator" (70). Schwerner notes in the "Tablets Journals/Divagations," "XXVI, like *I*, to manifest many modes. A kind of preliminary fount" (151). This indicates that Schwerner views "Tablet XXVI" as the beginning of a new turn in the framework of *The Tablets*. Thus, this tablet functions as another twist and turn in *The Tablets* that allows for the poetic project to continually remain in a constant state of becoming.

Schwerner accomplishes this turn by allowing the reader to become more fully aware of, and engaged with, the S/T's method of translation and the S/T's ideas concerning the meaning of *The Tablets*. This happens throughout the first two pages of the tablet, which consist of the S/T's musings about his work and the importance of his work in helping to understand the beginnings of "excursions in subjectivity" (71). The S/T exhibits his obsession with reading the tablets as if the creators of the tablets were contemporary people with contemporary problems and concerns about their social and private identities.

The level of attention that the S/T gives to his ideas about how the archaic creators of the tablets were particularly concerned with exhibiting angst about themselves and society in "Tablet XXVI" illustrates a non-strategic interpretation of the primitive.

This is the case because the S/T is attempting to universalize his experiences across time and cultures. The problem of non-strategic interpretations of the primitive can even be found in the criticism of Schwerner's work. Kimmelman says that "Schwerner's overall literary undertaking reveals how very much the same we and all people are and always have been. The remote past is not so strange after all. But who are we? . . . what can be disclosed is the acute nature, grounded in will and desire, of even the most archaic peoples. *The Tablets* . . . especially seeks to strip away our modern clothing" (71).

Kimmelman is right to point out how Schwerner's work asks us to reflect on our relationship with the remote past; however, I think Schwerner's poetry does not present a past that is completely knowable. That would break down the meditative and critical aspect of *The Tablets* that Schwerner is so intent on achieving. For Kimmelman, this relation to the past comes through the physical union that he reads in Schwerner's *The Tablets* in what Kimmelman characterizes as the "profoundly visceral" nature of the work.

I argue that while Schwerner's work is a meditation on the role of the archaic in the contemporary, it is not an attempt to create a clear cut bridge between the past and present. Schwerner's poetry asks readers to reflect on the possible connections and disconnections between the contemporary and the primitive that exist and are revealed throughout *The Tablets*. These tensions between the past and the present are never fully resolved in the text. In this way, *The Tablets* engages with the idea of the archaic and illustrates strategic primitivism in its continuous probing of the primitive.

"Tablet XXVI" also functions as a reminder to the reader that the S/T is not, by any means, Schwerner himself. I think this reminder is particularly apparent through the

S/T's discussion of "so-called scribes" who may have altered the original intentions of *The Tablets*. The S/T says, "Thus often the line between redactor and author is hard to draw" (71). This is a comment on how we cannot be certain of the original intentions behind *The Tablets* because we do not know how meaning may have been altered by those that helped construct the tablet. While this is always an issue for any kind of archaic translation, the comment also serves to remind the reader of how successful Schwerner's project is because it is easy to forget that we are reading the S/T's thoughts and translations and not Schwerner's. This, then, further shows Schwerner's intellectual trickster poetics because he allows for his own character, the S/T, to become the "author" of *The Tablets*; when in fact, the S/T is only Schwerner's "so-called scribe" who has muddled the meaning of *The Tablets* that Schwerner has constructed. Hence, careful readers of Schwerner should be aware of how he weaves together multiple and divergent voices and perspectives throughout *The Tablets* in order to employ his own form of strategic primitivism and further move his project away from an idealized and authoritative translation that would attempt to accurately and completely explain a text for readers. I argue that in doing so, Schwerner is making the uncertainty of translation an integral aspect of the process in translating ethnographic texts. In this view, *The Tablets* functions as an ethnopoetic text that celebrates the aesthetics of translating carefully but also creatively. This continues to illustrate the value of Schwerner's project because the poetic and critical discourses that are generated out of his intellectual trickster poetics is necessary for creating the kind of questioning of the primitive that *The Tablets* contains.

"Tablet XXVI" further displays and questions the translation methods and scholarship of the S/T when the S/T introduces his concept of

“Mind/Texture/Determinatives” (M/T/Ds), which he claims “truly reveal the nascent stages of the history of consciousness” (71). M/T/Ds are repeatedly used pictographs that look similar to a human head, although the S/T claims that M/T/Ds are a “spatial configuration involving the liver, stomach and gall bladder” (78), and its shading determines the meaning of that particular M/T/D. This tablet is then used as an example to illustrate the importance of the M/T/Ds in providing a wider range of meanings through the alteration of a particular pictograph. McHale says of this tablet and “Tablet XXVII,”

Here, if not before, one grasps how completely the ancient materials have been mediated through the scholar-translator’s eccentric vision. The whole, it turns out, text and commentary alike, has been dominated from the outset, to a degree that we might not have suspected by the scholar-translator’s obsession with uncovering the origins of something like modern consciousness in these archaic traces. (246)

McHale calls attention to how *The Tablets* shows that the S/T works within a scholarly fantasy world of his own creation, which calls into question the relevance of his notations and interpretations throughout the text. This undoing of scholarly authority slowly builds in *The Tablets* to the point that the S/T becomes more and more the center of attention in the work through his prolonged musings and theoretical offerings, as can be seen in “Tablet XXVI.” The S/T’s creation of the term M/T/D and his insistence that it opens up a way to gauge archaic consciousness further shows that the S/T’s concern with translating the tablets is to stake out his intellectual claim on them and produce knowledge by categorization and definition. This illustrates that the S/T is bound within

his academic framework, and, therefore, misses aspects of the tablets that do not coincide with his pre-determined ideas about what the tablets are and what they are about. What is important to note is that the S/T is oblivious to his own subjectivity and proceeds to pronounce judgment on the tablets as if he can exist as a totally objective scholar and translator.⁵²

The problem with the way that the S/T constructs his definitions and categories for interpreting *The Tablets* is that he does so in order to close off other readings of the same pictographs in order to make his interpretations final. He expresses a concern with this when he says earlier in the tablet, “What I do *will* be used by persons and groups unknown, in the predictable and sometimes violent efforts to perpetuate their own agendas in the world. I continue my work, but within such penumbras” (70). The S/T is concerned with readers understanding *The Tablets* his way because he is the expert on such things and has the authority to tell people how to read them regardless of the possible legitimacy of other variant readings.

McHale alludes to the complications of reading *The Tablets* in being privy to the S/T’s musings: “Nowhere in *The Tablets* are we shown the translator actually confronting the artifacts . . . at most we hear him discoursing about them. Rather it is we readers who enact [the scene of discovery] every time we look into *The Tablets* No need to represent the encounter with an artifact when the text itself is that artifact” (247). In this way, the S/T has authority over *The Tablets* due to the limited textual evidence that the reader has available. The S/T’s absolute authority over the text allows him the

⁵² Kimmelman in “Traces of Being: Armand Schwerner’s Ephemeral Episteme” suggests that the S/T is “trapped by his modernity” (74).

opportunity to enforce his own interpretation of the tablets even though he expresses concern over what will ultimately become of his interpretations of the text. His concern with what future readers will do with his work illustrates his discomfort with variant readings of *The Tablets*, which casts him as the antithesis of many ethnopoets, and further illustrates the S/T as the opposite of translators like Rothenberg and Schwerner.

What follows the opening musings of the S/T are five pages of pictographs from “Tablet XXVI,” which at first glance seems to offer a reader with the opportunity to begin to think about constructing their own meaning of the text. However, that is not the case. The S/T follows those pages with a lengthy discussion of his perceptions of the author of the tablet, “most probably conceived by a blind Tiresias-figure who is, exceptionally for that culture, in touch with mind-texture differing strata of consciousness, a particular quality of informed subjectivity most surprising for this period in history” (77). What the S/T has done in this instance is create a myth about the author of the tablet to support his claims concerning how the M/T/Ds in this tablet exhibit man’s earliest known attempt to convey human consciousness through visual expression. Again, this causes another moment of doubt in the mind of a reader because the S/T has no evidence to support his claims about the author of the tablet, except that the idea of the author makes the most sense for the S/T because he understands the tablet as reflecting on human subjectivity. In a sense, the S/T functions as a kind of unreliable narrator, but he is a narrator that believes he understands each tablet, and he thinks of himself as offering readers the fruits of his scholarly labor. But, what has really happened is that the S/T has tricked himself into believing that he has all of the answers.

What becomes clearer throughout *The Tablets* is that the S/T creates and works within his own fantasy rather than doing well-supported scholarly work, which undermines his interpretation of *The Tablets* because he does the exact opposite of what he claims. This aspect of the S/T increases in intensity in the later tablets because the S/T seems to be more and more motivated by the idea that he can write a master narrative about these tablets in his translations and scholarship. The S/T comes up with concepts like M/T/Ds to place his mark on the text and close off interpretations that would not support his grand tablet narrative. Thus, Schwerner's unraveling of knowledge production is most clearly exhibited in the work of the S/T within "Tablet XXVI" because there is more textual space given to the S/T's scholarship and interpretations than there is to the text of the tablet itself.

The extent of the S/T's concern with his interpretations continues to be shown with the perpetuation of the myth of the blind author:

The blind transformer of his private vision, whom merely for purposes of referential convenience I will name Ur-Aryan, attempts to embody his remarkable otherness in the Mind/Texture/Determinatives—we will come upon at least 15 different types, all very near each other in kind, but, as we will observe, remarkably subtly differentiated, each, it appears, indicative of a Way of Experiencing. (77)

The S/T's myth of "Ur-Aryan" serves the purpose of allowing the S/T to further attempt to provide a single narrative for the creation of *The Tablets* and use that narrative to fuel his desire to more completely claim scholarly ownership over how each tablet is to be interpreted. Haas, in "Making It New: Changing Form and Function in Modern Myth,"

further speaks of the issue of knowledge production in *The Tablets* due to the “sources” that the S/T works with or creates: “As we read a text, we might think that we are reading the expression of some ancient individual, but it is not that simple. The texts can be seen as the product of chains of voices, each link potentially placing subjective spin on what is presented” (188). The S/T’s subjectivity, expressed by his obsession with defining the tablet and its author, is further exhibited in the above passage through his insistence on naming the author “Ur-Aryan” in order to further substantiate his claims about the tablet and the “author’s” intent, which he now has the right to proclaim due to his careful construction of the myth of “Ur-Aryan.” This myth was constructed in order to validate the S/T’s claim of the importance of the M/T/Ds in understanding the tablet and, thereby, solidifies his reading of the tablet.

While the S/T attempts to solidify his interpretation of “Tablet XXVI,” the S/T’s authority is always undercut by Schwerner as author of both the texts that the S/T interprets and the S/T himself. This illustrates an important aspect of Schwerner’s project because it is indicative of Schwerner’s intellectual trickster poetics, which creates a reality in order to play with that created reality. In addition, the S/T serves as an example of how rigid scholarship can limit inquiry, whereas ethnopoeists, like Schwerner, reevaluate the primitive in order to encourage inquiry.

Thirteen pages into “Tablet XXVI,” the S/T finally begins to provide his translation of the tablet, which he does through offering four variants that exist within the tablet. What is interesting about the final pages of this tablet is that the S/T is willing to concede that there are variant readings of the tablet, but he ends the tablet with the following consideration of variant *dd*:

To the degree that I am involved in the process of formation of the canon of this sacred material, and to the degree that I will be responsible for the slamming of the gates to any future inclusions, I have experienced a certain resistance against the placement of the segment “**Where is he, mouth of the ear ...**” after the affecting brevity of variant *dd* and the monumental presence of 162 Jemdet Nasr cave wall graphics. I tend to think that in the interest of their teachings earlier redactors might very possibly have omitted the rhetorically diffusing movement following such inspirational apotheosis. But palaeography is not propaganda. (sic) (95)

While the S/T recognizes that variants exist within the tablet, he believes that he is establishing the authoritative and final reading of those variants and *The Tablets*. His concluding claim that his work engages in science and not belief illustrates how effectively he has convinced himself that his reading is objective. He claims this in spite of the fact that his reading is built upon his insistence that “Ur-Aryan” created “Tablet XXVI” in order to explore ideas of the “Self.” The S/T’s reliance on a myth of his own creation further calls into question his reliability as a scholar-translator. Hence, the S/T’s reading of the tablet is based on evidence and theories of his own subjectivity rather than on the myth of objectivity that he consciously subscribes to. In this sense, Schwerner’s intellectual trickster poetics is successful as the weaknesses of the S/T’s objective project are revealed to be a trick that the S/T has unknowingly performed on himself.

Schwerner’s open invitation for his readers to dwell in a poetic realm of uncertainty is an integral part in understanding how *The Tablets* enacts a form of strategic primitivism. Furthermore, Schwerner’s intellectual trickster poetics can be associated

with Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* because Rothenberg insists on broadening out the scope of poetry through considering sacred texts and oral traditions as being poetic. However, Schwerner's work stands in contrast to Rothenberg's in terms of how each employs strategic primitivism. Rothenberg, in *Technicians of the Sacred*, works with existent primitive poetic traditions to illustrate the possible range that poetry can have if poets and scholars are willing to embrace a broader definition of poetry. Thus, for Rothenberg, the idea of the primitive and the various particular manifestations of the primitive are to be considered by contemporary poets as examples for other directions that poetry can be taken in. Schwerner's strategic primitivism is different from Rothenberg's because Schwerner presents an imagined primitive as opposed to an actual primitive. Schwerner's imagined primitive is fundamentally more reflective than Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* because Schwerner creates a primitive mode rather than illustrating various primitive modes. In addition, Schwerner is responding to Rothenberg's call to take poetry in new directions through a reconsideration of the primitive.

Schwerner's work can be associated with Clayton Eshleman's *Juniper Fuse*, as discussed in the previous chapter, due to Eshleman's insistence in the value of re-evaluating the archaic in order to create new poetry. Eshleman's strategic primitivism invokes a historic primitive—the Upper Paleolithic imagination represented on cave walls—to illustrate the value of reconsidering the primitive for contemporary American poetry. Eshleman understands the Upper Paleolithic moment as the source of all human creative endeavors. Schwerner's strategic primitivism pulls readers into a fabricated experiment that contemplates the poetic limits of the primitive that is based on

Schwerner's own contemporary poetry rather than a particular historical primitive. A key difference between Eshleman's strategic primitivism and Schwerner's strategic primitivism is that Eshleman's poetry stems from a careful interpretation of the archaic that re-envisioning poetry as beginning with the Ice Age and moving through the ages to Eshleman and beyond; Schwerner, however, composes poetry as running parallel with the archaic. Eshleman interprets archaic art for contemporary purposes. Schwerner employs a form of imagined archaic art grounded in contemporary perceptions of the primitive.

Schwerner also insists that readers consider the sacred and the archaic in *The Tablets*. However, he invokes the sacred and the archaic to create a frame that is grounded in those concepts in order to reflect on how poets and readers interpret the sacred and the archaic. While Schwerner employs the sacred and the archaic in a different manner than Rothenberg and Eshleman, he still engages in strategic primitivism because *The Tablets* exist due to Schwerner's own interpretation of the value of seeing the sacred as being linked to poetic creation and seeking out the primitive in contemporary poetry. Schwerner's work contends with ideas of the sacred and mimics the primitive in order to reflect on the possibilities that the sacred and the primitive have to offer.

The Tablets demands a careful reader who is willing to dwell in a poetic, intellectual, formal, historical, and cultural space of uncertainty. Because Schwerner is an intellectual trickster poet, *The Tablets* exhibits a consistent level of non-knowing. The text's high level of indeterminacy allows Schwerner the ability to create print poetry that can remain in a transitory or becoming state. *The Tablets* as transitory print poetry links back to the Ethnopoetic idea of the importance of understanding and working with

oral traditions and techniques in order to create different kinds of American poetry.

Schwerner uses oral techniques so successfully in his print poem because he understands poetry as a mode of performance, which enables him to pose serious questions about concepts of the primitive while having fun in the composition of *The Tablets*. Also, *The Tablets* is a poem of becoming because the interpretative work of the reader is never resolved, further illustrating the depth of his strategic primitivism. *The Tablets* is a composite of words and images with the intention of creating an interpretative space that produces uncertainty and invites readers to contemplate it.

Schwerner's employment of strategic primitivism is the highest form of strategic primitivism, as discussed in this dissertation. Schwerner's poetic project is continually oscillating between invoking the sacredness of language and the value of the primitive. He does this to remind readers of how his relationship as poet and our relationship as readers are dependent upon certain understandings of what the primitive is and can be. In this way, Schwerner never stops reflecting on the primitive because each tablet is bringing forth the primitive and re-evaluating our relationship to it. The primitive is inescapable in *The Tablets*.

To read Schwerner's *The Tablets* is to read a text that invites criticism and reflection on the limits of scholarship and translation in being able to know the sacred and the primitive. *The Tablets* as an imagined translation does not exhibit what would typically be thought of as essential translator ethics: being explicit, objective, and true to the source material. This inversion of assumed translator ethics is what allows readers to more actively interpret Schwerner's poem as enacting metaphysical spaces as they engage with each tablet and *The Tablets* as a whole. Kimmelman says, "There is a truth

in Schwerner's texts somewhere—somewhere *not* here—about both history and translation, and quintessentially about writing, that quite human perplexing act maybe occasioned by desire" (76). The lack of ability on the reader's part to discern "truth" in *The Tablets* is due to Schwerner being an intellectual trickster who employs strategic primitivism through serious play in order to destabilize meaning and prevent readers from obtaining a single, concrete interpretation of his work. Schwerner so successfully accomplishes his intellectual trickster poetics in his use of the S/T, partially decipherable texts, and multilingual sources—all of which stem from his imagined primitive. In doing so, Schwerner enacts a poetics that challenges traditional scholarship.

This debate that runs throughout *The Tablets* is facilitated by a Scholar/Translator who, as a character, becomes more and more the center of attention. I argue that Schwerner created the S/T to mimic not only the wants and desires of scholars to know the archaic, but also the desires of readers to clearly understand the past in a compartmental way. As Zweig suggests, "the tablets, in Schwerner's fiction, are covered over with layers of other fictions. They are not there and have never been there" (97). In the end, it is up to readers to discern meaning in *The Tablets* as various voices and discourses emerge and are filtered by the S/T's idealized vision of the past and what it represents.

Schwerner uses strategic primitivism in order to remind readers that when it comes to examining a culture's literary and artistic past, there will always be a desire to get it right, but a corresponding inability on the part of scholars, translators, and readers to do so. Thus, the epitome of Schwerner's intellectual trickster poetics not only turns the mirror on the S/T, but at that same moment, Schwerner also turns the mirror on us as

readers. In doing so, *The Tablets* remains in a constant of becoming—interpretation is always in process and closure is continually circumvented.

CHAPTER FIVE

SHAKING A RATTLE AND BEATING A DRUM: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
ETHNOPOETICS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ETHNOPOETIC
PEDAGOGY

Traversing the range,

—Like walking up and down (or is it across?) the rainbow bridge—

Letting the mind w(o)(a)nder unfettered.

Seeking the sacred,

Searching for meaning in the rubbed out spaces,

Contemplating the primitive in all of its complexity,

Fabricating that which came before.

And, in doing so, making it new, again?⁵³

Section One: A Reflection on Ethnopoetics and Strategic Primitivism

This concluding chapter revisits key aspects concerning the ethnopoetic projects of Jerome Rothenberg, Clayton Eshleman, and Armand Schwerner as discussed throughout this dissertation. It is useful to read Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner together due to their shared interests in working with primitive and sacred texts to create their own unique kinds of ethnopoetry which has been identified in this dissertation as

⁵³ An original poem by Jay W. Sarver.

strategic primitivism. This chapter closes with a discussion of why ethnopoetic texts should be taught as well as provides some commentary on why teaching Ethnopoetics is important—calling for a reframing of how poetics and poetry are taught in the classroom. It is not simply that we need to make the reading list longer by adding ethnopoetic texts; rather, when we read and think about poetry through an ethnopoetic lens, it becomes evident that Ethnopoetics calls for a major pedagogical shift.

Strategic primitivism has been discussed throughout this dissertation as a major concept in understanding the poetics and poetry of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner in their poetic reflections of the primitive. All three poets engage with the idea that the “primitive is complex” (*Technicians* xxv). These poets utilize this complexity to suggest an understanding of art as reflective of the various places and spaces that poets inhabit and call for continual self-reflexivity in terms of how the primitive shapes the contemporary. Ethnopoetics, as discussed in this dissertation, asks poets, scholars, and readers to reconsider the value of the primitive for poetry and the recognition of and negotiation with the various poetic traditions that exist around the world. In this way, the ethnopoetry of Rothenberg, Eshleman and Schwerner moves towards Robert Duncan’s “a symposium of the whole,” which offers an alternate worldview of poetry that attempts to be as inclusive as possible in order to challenge the necessity of a single-minded canonical viewpoint.

The texts of Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner illustrate the value in recognizing the primitive as complex and connected to the contemporary. All three ask readers to reflectively engage with the variety of poetics that exists if we open ourselves

up to the idea that oral and performative works are powerful and creative pieces of poetry. Their work also shows the value of approaching poetry as an active dialogue between various poetic traditions because the work of all three poets illustrates that poetry comes from everyone and belongs to everyone; poetry is an important part of human cultural life. Since this is the case for these ethnopoets, their work also shows that Ethnopoetics strives to maintain an open discussion with various poetic traditions, which entails opening up space in poetry for the primitive, the instability of the trickster, and for poetry as an emergent art, along with the usefulness of thinking about poetry as a challenge or a counter to the value of traditional, Western canonical thinking that poetry is often bound to.

The above sentiments echo the final words in *Technicians*, which come from Rothenberg himself. In his “Post-Face,” he says, “WOULD-THAT-THEY-ALL-KNEW-THESE-SONGS is what I think of you. It seems as if we were beginning to walk. It seems as if we were going as far as the earth is good” (627). While this is Rothenberg’s final statement in *Technicians* and serves as a way to close the text with a desire that readers will understand the intentions behind the text as a movement in the direction of “a symposium of the whole,” the quote also serves as an encouragement to teach the various poetic works that *Technicians* contains. In this way, Rothenberg ends his “range of poeties” with a call for a further engagement with the poetic works beyond the confines of the text, which is developed further in a clear pedagogical sense in his essay “Academic Proposal.”

Rothenberg, in “Academic Proposal,”⁵⁴ states, “For a period of twenty-five years, say, or as long as it takes a new generation to discover where it lives, take the great Greek epics out of the undergraduate curricula & replace them with the great American epics. Study the *Popol Vuh* where you now study Homer, & study Homer where you now study the *Popol Vuh*—as exotic anthropology, etc.” (175). Rothenberg calls for a dramatic shift in the foundations of literary study in his proposal. His sense for the American college classroom is to break from the traditional foundation of literary study in ancient European literature to the “primitive” stories that are collected in the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, for example.

This shift is a complicated one as Charles Bernstein points out in “Poetics of the Americas.” Bernstein says, “The impossible poetics of the Americas does not seek a literature that unifies us as one national or even continental culture Rather, the impossible poetics of the Americas insists that our commonness is in our partiality and disregard for the norm, the standard, the overarching, the universal” (4). Bernstein reinforces the idea of Ethnopoetics that calls for a symposium built on pluralism and dialogue because to do otherwise in terms of “American” literature would be to disregard poetic traditions in favor of other poetic traditions—to maintain a canon of poetry that reflected the ideals of those that maintain the canon. In this way, Ethnopoetics challenges the Eurocentric ideals of poetry.

⁵⁴ Rothenberg originally made these comments in a preface to the 1972 edition of *Shaking the Pumpkin*, but I am quoting from *Prefaces & Other Writings*.

Ethnopoetics pursues this challenge with a dialogic approach to other poetic traditions. Bernstein shares this ethical attempt to recognize the complicated nature of contemporary poetry in the Americas when he says, “The point is to pursue the collective and dialogic nature of poetry without necessarily defining the nature of this collectivity—call it a virtual collectivity . . . : this unrepresentable yet ever presenting collectivity” (5). This indefinable but real “collectivity” of the Americas is what Rothenberg calls for in his “Academic Proposal,” which is one of the reasons why he wants to recast the *Popol Vuh* as an early American classic. Rothenberg takes seriously the idea that American poets should draw from an American tradition in order to create new kinds of American poetry. This in turn requires an ideological shift that is relevant beyond literature courses. For example, Rothenberg says, “Teach courses in religion that begin: ‘This is the account of how all was in suspense, all calm, in silence; all motionless, still, & the expanse of the sky was empty’—& use this as a norm with which to compare all other religious books, whether Greek or Hebrew” (175). It may seem strange that Rothenberg is commenting on how religion courses should be taught, but if you think of the primacy of *Technicians of the Sacred* in understanding Rothenberg’s poetics, it makes perfect sense for him to comment on religion courses; for Rothenberg, there is an analogy between the poetic and the sacred, which reinforces his point for a poetry that negotiates across pluralistic lines in order to destabilize established thoughts about poetry. The idea of poetry as analogous to the sacred has been shown throughout this dissertation as being a key aspect of Rothenberg’s, Eshleman’s, and Schwerner’s works, even though all three poets approach the sacred in different ways.

The remainder of Rothenberg's "Academic Proposal" exhibits one final important aspect of Ethnopoetics—the oral and performative qualities of poetry. Rothenberg says, "Encourage poets to translate the native American classics (a new version for each new generation), but first teach them how to sing. . . . Teach courses with a rattle & a drum" (175). Rothenberg desires to shift the focus of the foundation of the American literary tradition away from a European tradition that prizes literacy to a distinctively American tradition that understands the importance of oral traditions; it is important to rediscover the archaic literary roots that surround contemporary American poets through the acts of translation and learning how to sing. Also, his desire to so drastically change academia echoes his attempt to situate the oral and the performative as being essential in fostering an ethnopoetic understanding of poetry, in particular, and the humanities, in general.

Rothenberg's ideas from "Academic Proposal" call for a different kind of pedagogy: a pedagogy that seeks to challenge pedagogies that are based solely on a literate, Western tradition of poetry to re-imagine what a poetic tradition of the "Americas" that actively negotiates a pluralistic poetic tradition might be like. I think, based on my reading of Bernstein, Rothenberg's proposal is a challenge to cultural norms concerning American poetry because it resists the traditional viewpoint that poetry should support cultural norms concerning poetry and identity. A change in the way that poetry is taught also lends itself to teaching the different kinds of poetry that the works of Rothenberg, Eshleman, Schwerner, and Ethnopoetics in general, pursue. It will not do to just change reading lists for literature course. Yes, Ethnopoetics encourages reading from a range of poetries, but it also suggests that the way in which poetry is read and taught also needs to be reevaluated.

Section Two: Towards an Ethnopoetic Pedagogy

To “teach courses with a rattle & a drum” (175), and in doing so take Ethnopoetics into the classroom, one must take the ideals of Ethnopoetics into the classroom. This calls for an undaunted embracing of “a symposium of the whole,” which does not necessarily mean the need for an all encompassing syllabus on how to teach everything within the whole. However, it does mean that when poetry is taught, it is taught with the recognition that there are multiple interacting traditions of poetry that need to be negotiated and that studying poetry should be a performative as well as a textual based practice.

When we teach poetry in the classroom, it is important for students to engage with poetry in richly textual, performative, and praxis-orientated ways. Thus, Ethnopoetics asks us to think beyond the textual page and act out the art that we are asking our students to engage with. Active, performative engagement with poetry in the classroom moves poetry more in the direction of the transformative ability of poetry that Ethnopoetics alludes to and searches for, and that is where we want ourselves and our students to be. Following through with this kind of pedagogy asks students to work with poetry in a way that encourages them to make an investment in poetry that they otherwise might feel indifferent to; they have been taught that poetry needs to be dissected and rebuilt in order to show the artistic powers of the poet. Teaching poetry in that way makes it seem like poetry belongs on a pedestal with no place in the conversations and cultures of the contemporary world. Teaching students to approach poetry from an ethnopoetic

standpoint helps them to see that poetry can express a variety of different concerns and ideas about culture and the world.

One way to encourage students to engage with “a symposium of the whole” is to ask them to invoke their own sense of strategic primitivism and for the instructor to think about structuring courses and units within a course through a careful consideration of how Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg organize the body chapters of *Symposium of the Whole*: “Workings”; “Meanings”; and “Doings.” Students should be provided with a variety of different texts throughout the course to read and work with. Then, students should move from being able to read and understand a text to creating their own interpretation of the text—first within the text itself and then with the rest of the readings of the course. Finally, students need to take their interpretations and do something with them through a performative act that is left up to each student-performer. This means teaching less material but asking students to do more with each piece throughout the course.

This kind of teaching asks students to sing, to perform, and to write new work in response to what they read. It pushes students to work with poetry like Rothenberg does and make their own translations of texts in order to sound them out; making associations between texts facilitates a dialogue between different poetries. Ethnopoetic teaching encourages students to be like Eshleman and explore the possibilities of poetry and its connection to the deep recesses of the mind. Also, an ethnopoetic pedagogy allows students to enjoy the act of composition based on their readings, like how Schwerner used an archaic form to create contemporary poetry.

My first moment of teaching an ethnopoetic pedagogy and ethnopoetic texts was during the Fall semester of 2010 in my introductory literature course. The catalogue description for the course is as follows: “Introduces students to literatures of various genres through a careful analysis of poetry, fiction, and drama. Includes literature of various time periods, nationalities, and minorities” (“English 121 Humanities Literature”). Throughout the course, my students developed their abilities to: read, think and write about a text; define what literature is and what it means to them; appreciate a wide variety of writing styles; and understand, create and appreciate various interpretations of texts. The course is designed for non-majors that have fulfilled their first college composition course requirement.⁵⁵

I employed an ethnopoetic standpoint that emphasized the primacy of orality and performance while teaching my introductory literature course. I had students read a range of poetries that included selections from Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred*, Eshleman’s *Juniper Fuse*, and Schwerner’s *The Tablets*. I further facilitated an ethnopoetic standpoint in my course through the way that I designed my course. The theme of my course was “Reading a Symposium of the Whole.” I emphasized this theme in my syllabus through a reference to Robert Duncan and his concept of a “symposium of the whole.” I focused on how Duncan’s concept is a theoretical attempt to engage cultures in a dialogue with one another.

With Duncan in mind, I grouped texts together based on geographical location as opposed to genre or chronology. This led me to create three broad units based on

⁵⁵ See Appendix A for the course syllabus.

Rothenberg's regional units in *Technicians: The Americas; Europe, Africa, and the Middle East; and Asia and Oceania*. My course began with *The Americas* because I wanted my students to begin reading and thinking about literature from a geographical place that most of them would think of as home, and thus, someplace familiar. The course moved to *Europe, Africa, and the Middle East* in order to show some of the foundations of American literature and also the variations that exist within literature when you start to read beyond the familiar. This idea continued into the next and final unit of the course—*Asia and Oceania*.

Along with readings, my students had to complete a performance of a text from the class or related to the class. I realized that my students might struggle with working with and performing literary texts, so I began the semester with explaining the importance of performing poetry and some training in interpreting poetry. I wanted my students to become comfortable and interested in reading poetry as early as possible in the course so that they would be more willing to engage with ethnopoeitic texts. In order to facilitate the primacy of the oral and performative elements of all poetry, I, as the instructor, or individual students read aloud the poem that was going to be discussed before a close reading was put into play during class time. By doing this, I reinforced the idea to my students that the first step in working with poetry is to perform it. From an ethnopoeitic standpoint, it is important to spend more time on performance than on close reading because students who spend more time performing poetry begin to see poetry as something that they understand and can work with to create new meanings, and see poetry as a genre that has more to offer than stanzas on a page. Teaching poetry in this

way helped my students take creative chances with their performances—chances that they might not take with literature if I was only asking them to read closely.

Throughout the course, I asked my students to reflect on not only the connections that could be made within each regional unit, but also, between units. Doing so further emphasized the usefulness of designing a course around Duncan's "a symposium of the whole" as my students always had a sense for why they were reading the texts that I asked them to read and how to go about interpreting those texts. I also emphasized the reflective qualities of Ethnopoetics and strategic primitivism by telling my students that as we moved through the units, they were to consider the larger question of what literature is, not only in terms of the texts themselves, but also in terms of themselves as readers.

The first ethnopoetic text that I asked my students to read was "Six Seri Whale Songs"⁵⁶ by Santo Blanco from Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* (227-28). As stated earlier, in order to teach poetry from an ethnopoetic standpoint in the classroom, every discussion of poetry must begin with a performance of some kind. In the case of this class, the performance was a student from each group reading the assigned whale song to their group. Because I had provided enough scaffolding early in the course, my students always knew that the process of working through a poem began with a reading of the poem under review. I believe this is why my students continued to exhibit a willingness to at least give things a try throughout the course; they had a strong sense of how to go about reading a poem and why they were being asked to read it that way. The

⁵⁶ See Appendix B for the complete songs.

students then worked out group interpretations of their assigned song, which we discussed as a class.

In general, we had a good discussion about the whale songs. Also, through the discussion, I was able to introduce a key term in reading ethnopoetic texts: the vocable, as there is a vocable in whale song “4”: “With her mouth on the surface / she draws in her breath—hrrr— / and the smallest fish and the sea birds are swallowed up” (228). I returned to ideas like vocables throughout the course in order to reinforce the oral and performative qualities of poetry. This is an example of a significant ethnopoetic moment in teaching the course because I was asking my students to be attentive to words and letter clusters in terms of the sounds that the letters and words made rather than asking them to read stanzas closely and think about typical close reading conventions like symbolism, for example.

The above example further shows the differences in teaching from an ethnopoetic standpoint than teaching in line with a New Critical approach. I wanted my students to understand the whale song as a poem that was dependent upon their performance of the poem rather than just focusing on the formal conventions of the poem. Finally, the discussion of the whale songs ended with asking my students to connect the poem to other literary texts that we had read—asking my students to craft a careful chain of literature in which they were always asked to reconnect a particular day’s readings with previous readings.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ An interesting side note about this particular lesson was that one group of students wanted to read song “6” symbolically as commenting on colonization: “Fifty sharks surrounded her” (228). But, that

Towards the end of the semester, I had my students begin to more fully engage with strategic primitivism in class with less facilitation on my part. My students were asked to read Kōbō Abe's "The Magic Chalk," a contemporary Japanese short story about a poor artist named Argon who discovers magic chalk and uses it to create his desires, but his desires end up causing him much misery (Abe 315-28); and Hiraga Etenoa's "A Song of the Spider Goddess," an Ainu epic, oral poem about the Ainu Spider Goddess and her abilities to elude the advances of a supposedly powerful demon (Rothenberg, *Technicians* 293-300). I had my students read these two texts because Abe's "The Magic Chalk" comes from contemporary Japanese culture and Etenoa's "A Song of the Spider Goddess" comes from the oral tradition of the Ainu, "who are a native non-Japanese population of Hokkaido Island" (Rothenberg, *Technicians* 575). Thus, what my students were able to experience from the day's reading was a sense of the variety that exists within a particular region.

In addition, I paired these two texts together because they offer two different modes for storytelling—the short story and the epic poem. This second aspect behind why I had my students read Abe and Etenoa played itself out in two senses in that class. First, it provided me with a pedagogical moment to discuss genres of storytelling, which is often an important facet of Ethnopoetics. The other reason that I paired these two pieces together was to provide my students an opportunity to reflect on the conventions

interpretation does not work because it distorts the unified meaning behind reading "Six Seri Whale Songs" as a long poem with six interconnected parts. I used this moment to suggest to my students that not every interpretation works. I think they expect symbolism to play a strong role in every poem. They may think that it is more important than the oral/performance qualities of a poem, which is why it is important to teach ethnopoetic texts and ideas in the classroom to help students see the variety that exists within poetry.

of genre in terms of the short story and the epic poem. I had my students enact their own form of strategic primitivism because, during class, I asked them to work in small groups and reflect on what it means to tell a story by taking either the short story and turning it in to an oral poem or taking the oral poem and turning it into a short story. I asked them to do this in order to put a literate text in dialogue with an oral text to show that both are forms of storytelling, but they both have different conventions.

Once my students began to work on their in-class small group assignment, they moved along rather well. My goal for the day was to “shake the rattle, and beat the drum.” I did not have my students complete any kind of in-class close reading exercises; instead, I kept the focus of the class on my students working together in order to retell a story in a different way. After everyone had finished, each group read their piece to the class, and then I asked them questions that attempted to move them towards metacognition and interpretation: “Why make this choice?” “What did you do to try and change the genre?” I also attempted to comment on content, such as “It was interesting to update the language of ‘Spider Goddess’” when they changed the genre. I thought it was interesting that my class was almost evenly split over which choice they made.

This lesson had a strong sense of orality and performance and asked my students to reflect on storytelling through praxis. The strong sense of orality came through the active process that each group had to work through in discussing how they were going to remake their chosen story. Regardless of the kind of story mode they were going to use, they had to talk out the story first. Also, even the students that chose to alter the oral poem into a literate story still had to have an understanding of the conventions of oral

story telling in order to know what to keep and what to discard in transferring the oral poem into a short story. There was a strong performance quality because my students were asked to change their roles from being a student that listens to the instructor and takes notes to a student that has to make decisions about how to compose a new piece of literature based on a previous piece of literature. Finally, the oral and performance oriented class was capped off by having the students read their new compositions to the class.

It was important for my students to work through this activity because at that point in the semester, we had discussed a variety of different literary texts and the importance of performing texts, but they needed to practice those ideas in order for them to more clearly see how texts that seemed to have nothing to say to each other could be put into dialogue. This lesson showed me whether or not my students fully understood the basic ideas of the course, which were that literature is a diverse grouping of texts and that working with literary texts produces a different kind of understanding of what literature is and how a student can relate to what they read.

The aforementioned examples from my course provide two different ways of using an ethnopoetic pedagogy in the classroom. Through reading and discussing Blanco's "Six Seri Whale Songs," my students were exposed to the idea that poetry can be thought of as song rather than always having to be written and that poetry comes from various poetic traditions from across the globe. In addition, my students learned how to create meaning through performance. Also, my students learned that poetry can have a strong narrative quality to it, which they discovered as we worked together as a class to

connect one stanza to the next. “Six Seri Whale Songs” worked because it asked students to interpret poetry through performance.

In the second example above, concerning Abe’s “The Magic Chalk” and Hiranga’s “A Song of the Spider Goddess,” my students were able to reflect on what it means to tell a story by changing the mode of storytelling. Regardless of whether they choose to retell “A Song of the Spider Goddess” as a short story or “The Magic Chalk” as an oral poem, they had to negotiate between the two modes of storytelling. My students successfully showed that they understood what it meant to tell a story orally and to tell a story in a literate sense. In this way, my students illustrated their ability to enact their own form of strategic primitivism because they had to put the two texts into dialogue and reflect on what and how they wanted to tell their story using a source text. Teaching “The Magic Chalk” and “A Song of the Spider Goddess” in this way allowed my students to have a more active role in how they interpreted each text because they had to make their own decisions on what each text meant and then produce a new text that was performed for the class.

Now that I have provided two different examples of using ethnopoeitic texts in the classroom to teach students the variety that exists within poetry and the importance of oral and performative aspects of poetry, I would like to turn to a discussion of the performance requirement that I created for my class. As I mentioned above, performance is an important part of creating a course based on ethnopoeitic principles, and allowing students to create their own sense of strategic primitivism can help students develop their own interpretations of literature that are based on their engagements with literature.

In order to facilitate a strong performance aspect to my course, I created various guidelines for my students to work within to aid them in creating their own performative interpretations of the literary pieces that I asked them to read throughout the semester.⁵⁸ The key ideas behind the guidelines included: the student-performer will need to complete a performance of one of the texts or authors that was read in the class, or construct and present a creative, multimedia presentation that deals with an idea, author, or text that was addressed in class. Furthermore, regardless of the way that a student-performer chose to complete this assignment, the emphasis of the performance⁵⁹ needed to convey their interpretation of the text on which they were presenting. My rationale behind focusing on performance as a mode of interpretation illustrates the effect that the ideas of Ethnopoetics have had on my pedagogy. As argued above, students do not need to always engage in a close reading in order to successfully interpret a poem.

Performing a poem is a valid form of interpretation. In order to perform a poem, a student needs to have made decisions on what they think the poem means and allow that interpretation to direct their performance of the poem. I think that thinking about performance as a valid form of interpretation is largely ignored within academia because the contemporary university encourages assessments that are easily quantifiable; it is difficult to grade a performance because students might perform the same piece in a variety of different ways, which makes standardization difficult. Also, poetry has been

⁵⁸ For the complete guidelines concerning the performance aspect of the course, see Appendix A, pages 24-26.

⁵⁹ I include multi-media presentations under “performance” because I understand the presentations in this assignment as constituting an academic performance. See Appendix A, page 25.

taught to be primarily a text based genre of literature, which is to be read for the purposes of making logical claims about a particular movement, poet, or kind of poetry. I think that one of the key reasons to pursue performance as a valid form of interpretation is that it allows students a greater freedom in how they work with literature, and it allows them the opportunity to creatively respond to what they read. In both cases, students become active participants in the study of literature.

In order to reinforce the idea of performance as an important mode of interpretation, student-performers were also asked to complete a performer's statement. This statement needed to be 1-2 pages in length. Each statement needed to explain why the student-performer chose the literary piece/author/idea; how the student-performer put together the performance/presentation; why the student-performer wanted to perform/present it in the particular way that the student-performer did; and anything else that the student-performer wanted to address concerning their performance.⁶⁰ I had student-performers complete this performer's statement to encourage the kind of self-reflexivity that is an inherent part of strategic primitivism.

Beyond the requirements of having to complete some kind of performance based on a text that was discussed in class and having to compose a performer's statement, student-performers were free to create their own kind of performance. They could compose their own original story, poem, or skit to perform for the class. Also, they could alter the genre of a literary piece; for example, several student-performers took the plot of

⁶⁰ If two students wanted to complete a paired performance, which was allowed, each student needed to complete their own performer's statement.

a short story and transferred it into a poem, which was by far the most popular choice amongst my students.

My student-performers' inclination towards composing poems to perform for the class was a surprise to me as the semester moved along because my students had a more difficult time interpreting poetry than they did short stories; but, they seemed greatly interested in writing poetry. I felt throughout the semester that this showed a desire to engage with poetry in a way that allowed for the maximum amount of interpretation on the student-performer's part rather than being forced to have to come up with the interpretation that they thought I, as an instructor, wanted them to produce. Student-performers may have also been inclined to compose and/or perform poetry because poetry was performed in class whenever poetry was assigned for a class period. These readings would sometimes be performed by me, the instructor, or a student volunteer. Thus, the performing of poetry was fostered from the first day of class and reinforced throughout the course from both my performances, as an instructor, and the performances of my students.

Overall, the Literary Performance/Multi-Media Presentation aspect of the course was a success. Student-performers tended to be creative, and through their various performance choices, they reinforced the idea that having students read across "a symposium of the whole" helped them to contribute to that symposium in their own creative way, which helped them to develop their own meaningful interpretations of the text they chose to perform. This is in contrast to the approach that New Criticism would have students take. I did not ask my students to look at poems or stories in order for them

to analyze them for irony or symbolism. Instead, I asked my students to become invested in the texts that we read and in the choices they made to illustrate their interpretation of a text through performance.

My student-performers exhibited a strong desire to do well on their chosen performances and made their performances extensions of themselves to various degrees. Some students used their performance time to offer their interpretation of a text in connection with their lives. Sometimes this was to make a general comment about the world or society, and other times, it was to show how the literary piece impacted them on a personal or emotional level. For example, a portion of the class had a strong emotional response to T. Coraghessan Boyle's "The Love of My Life," a short story about a young couple that has unprotected sex and end up murdering the newborn child in an attempt to cover up the pregnancy (420-431).

Students throughout the semester kept returning to Boyle's short story by offering various interpretations of the events of the short story. Some students chose to change the ending of the story so that both characters received equal punishment. Other students illustrated that they could relate to the story by describing their feelings and thoughts through composing a poem. My students continued to show interest in every new interpretation and performance of the story despite its frequent return in class discussion. This was evident in the amount of questions and comments that students proposed to those members of the class that chose to perform their individual interpretation of Boyle's story.

I believe that my students successfully completed the Literary Performance/Multi-Media Presentation because they were able to create their own interpretations and performances of a variety of literary pieces. From the beginning of the semester, I encouraged the primacy of orality and performance in thinking about literature, and in particular poetry, which provided my students with a strong sense of why performance was important and necessary in order for them to succeed in my class.

While it can be difficult to incorporate an ethnopoetic standpoint into an introduction to literature course, I believe the combination of performance and reflection encouraged my students to interpret literature, and through the process of reflective interpretation, many of my students chose to create their own pieces of literature. This kind of self-reflexivity derived from an understanding of poetry as being performative and allowed my students the ability to enact their own form of strategic primitivism regardless of the genre or type of literary piece they were interpreting and responding to. Thus, the principles of Ethnopoetics can be very useful in designing a course that asks students to approach literature in a way that encourages students to “work,” “make,” and “do” literature—the kind of literary work Rothenberg, Eshleman, and Schwerner are engaged in as shown in this dissertation through a discussion of reading those poets in terms of strategic primitivism.

Regardless of their value,

Regardless of their usefulness,

Regardless of their worthiness,

Regardless of myself;

May my words be true.

(even when they are lies.)⁶¹

⁶¹ An original poem by Jay W. Sarver.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A - Sample Syllabus from an Introduction to Literature Course

Introduction to Literature

Reading a Symposium of the Whole

Instructor: Jay Sarver

Day/Time: MWF 8:00—8:50 am

Office Hours: MW 9:00-11:00 am; F 9:00-10:00 am; or by appointment. Please contact me if you need to schedule an alternate time to meet.

Course Description:

While the class is titled “Introduction to Literature,” I would also like you to consider the subtitle: “Reading a Symposium of the Whole.” This subtitle references Robert Duncan’s idea of a “symposium of the whole,” which is a theoretical attempt to understand how cultures interact and interconnect with each other, while at the same time, respecting the differences between different cultures. Inherent in Duncan’s idea is a move towards a “symposium of the whole,” which is to say that we can and should read beyond our own culture, but at the same time recognize that we can never fully and completely read or even consider everything.

The texts that I have chosen will help further develop the idea of what it means to move towards a “symposium of the whole” and along the way, we will consider what it means to read and think about literature within a global context. This is an important idea that we will consider using a variety of texts including fiction, poetry, and drama. I have chosen texts which fit into three broad units: *The Americas; Europe, Africa, and the Middle East; and Asia and Oceania*. These units will help us read, think about, and

discuss the larger question of what literature is, not only in terms of the texts themselves, but also in terms of ourselves as readers.

Specific Course Objectives:

Students in this course will develop their abilities to:

1. Read, think and write critically about a text.
2. Define what literature is and what it means to them.
3. Appreciate a wide variety of writing styles.
4. Understand, create and appreciate various interpretations of texts.

Required Textbook(s) and Supplies:

- *The Alchemist*, a novel by Paulo Coelho
- *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* vol. 1, a graphic novel/comic by Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill
- Course Packet from Copies Plus (abbreviated CP in schedule)
- Paper and pencil/pen, money for copies, device for saving computer work, notebook or folder, and three exam books

Faithful attendance and active participation:

I begin by assuming that you will be faithful and very active class participants, doing very well and rewarded by my participation grade. My attendance policy rewards strong attendance. **If you show up all the time, participate well, and stay on schedule, you should do well in this course.** That being said, there are some cases where students are perhaps unable or unwilling to come to class. You may miss up to 3 days of class without your grade being adversely affected; however, you cannot make up missed in-

class work if you are absent, including quizzes and exams. Anything more than three absences is excessive. If you miss more than three days of class, then your grade will suffer. For every absence after the third absence, your participation grade will drop half a letter grade for the course.

Attendance will be taken at the beginning of each class, and students who arrive late will be marked tardy. (You are considered late if you arrive after I have taken attendance.) Three tardies are the equivalent of one absence. Please keep in mind that when you are absent from class it is your responsibility to find out what was discussed and stay on schedule with all assignments.

If you miss more than 12 classes (over 25%), I reserve the right to fail you, regardless of the quality of your work.

If you have extenuating circumstances, such as the death of an immediate family member, severe medical problems (not including excuses from the Health Center), court appearances, etc., then these could be considered exceptions to the above attendance policy. These will be determined on a case-by-case basis, and I reserve the right to pass judgment on such cases.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is submitting someone else's work as your own (including material from classmates, books, newspapers, magazines, the internet, etc.). It also includes using your own work that you have done for another class. **Do not do it.** Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and could result in expulsion from the university.

Classroom Conduct: You should conduct yourself in a courteous and respectful manner, both in terms of how you address your instructor and how you address your fellow

classmates. You are an adult and are expected to act as an adult. This means no cell phones ringing, no texting, etc. You must also respect the opinions and questions of your classmates; it is fine to disagree but not fine to disrespect what someone has to say. If you are doing any of these activities during class, you will not receive your participation points for the day; it will be as if you weren't in class at all.

Course Grading: Percentages which determine final grades are as follows:

Daily Work/Participation*	15%
Quizzes	10%
Response Papers (6)	20% total
Literary Performance, including Artist Statement	5%
Exams 1 and 2	30% total
Exam 3 (Final exam)	20%

Letter grade equivalents in percentages are as follows:

A 100–90%; B 89–80%; C 79–70%; D 69–60%; F 59% and below

***Participation** is more than just coming to class. You must be prepared, do the readings and bring them to class, do the assignments, and be engaged in all classroom activities. If you do all of these things, you will receive 2 points for the day. If you participate to a lesser degree, you will receive 1 point for the day. If you do not participate at all (i.e. don't come to class or sleep during class), you will receive a zero for the day.

Units and Course Assignments:

This course is divided into three units: *Unit 1: Americas*; *Unit 2: Europe, Africa, and the Middle East*; and *Unit 3: Asia and Oceania*. The units have been grouped according to region in order to provide you with a range of readings from across the globe. You will

read, discuss, and write about a variety of literature for each unit. There will be short quizzes along with response papers and an in-class exam for each unit to allow you a chance to write about what you are reading and thinking about.

Response Papers

You will write six short papers (1-2 pages typed) in response to the readings that we are doing over the course of the semester. These response papers are not summaries of what you have read, but rather responses to what you have read and thought about. You should think about the following ideas as you write (you do not need to address each point):

- Your first impression of the text(s)
- Problems of understanding or reading
- The author's style and its effect on your reading of the text
- Emotions and associations you experienced as you read
- Characters or situations that reminded you of real life
- Sections, ideas or characters that you really liked or disliked
- How the text(s) related to the theme of the class or the unit

These are just a few suggestions for what you can address in your response papers. You are free to write about any text that we have read between the last assigned response paper and the current response paper that you are working on, unless otherwise indicated on the schedule. In your response, you need to mention specific examples from the text to illustrate what you are talking about. Your response papers should demonstrate good use of grammar and mechanics, and they should have clear organization, i.e. paragraphs with

transitions. Each response paper is due at the beginning of class on the dates shown on the schedule. **If you are late to class on a day that a response paper is due, your response paper is considered to be a late paper, and you will receive a reduced grade for the assignment.** See the late paper policy listed below.

All response papers are expected to be typed, double-spaced, with one inch margins, in Times New Roman 12-point font. Multiple pages must be stapled, not paper clipped or loose. All response papers must be handed in on paper during class time unless otherwise requested.

Literary Performance/Multi-Media Presentation

As part of your grade for this course, you will need to complete a performance of one of the texts or authors that we read as a class or construct and present a creative, multimedia presentation that deals with an idea, author, or text that we have read as a class.

Regardless of whether you choose to do a performance or presentation, you should realize that the emphasis should be on your ability to convey your ideas about the text you are performing or the information that you are presenting. This is to provide you with an opportunity to illustrate your interpretation or re-interpretation of a work or writer (meaning you can choose to perform or present a different work by a writer that we read for the class that is not in the syllabus) that we have read in this class.

If you chose to perform a text for the class, you may compose your own original story, poem, or skit to perform for the class that illustrates an understanding of a text that we have read in the class. Also, you are allowed to alter the genre of something that we read for class; for example, you could take a short story and turn it into a poem, etc. If you write your own original piece, alter a piece, or bring in another piece by an author we

have read, you must bring a copy for the class to read from the doc-cam or have an electronic copy available to have up on the projection screen while you perform.

If you chose to do a multi-media presentation, you need to do more than just a power point presentation. You should think about ways to combine video, web pages, audio, etc. into your presentation in order to create an informative and interesting presentation for the class. This option provides you with an opportunity to synthesis your understanding of a text, author, or idea across media. In doing this, you will be completing an academic performance.

You may complete a solo performance/presentation or a performance/presentation with a partner. Solo performances/presentations should be no longer than 5 minutes in length and Pair performances/presentations should be no longer than 10 minutes in length. I will pass out a sign-up sheet during week 3 of the semester. You will be asked to sign-up for a specific date and type of performance/presentation (solo or pair) on that sheet.

At least two classes before your performance/presentation, you must let me know via email or in class what piece you are going to perform/present. If you do not tell me what you are performing/presenting by that time, then I will assign a performance piece for you. If you cannot attend class on the date of your performance/presentation, your performance/presentation will be moved to the bottom of the list, and you may perform/present during that date if time permits.

Along with your performance/presentation, you will be asked to compose a 1-2 page performer's statement. This statement should explain why you choose the literary piece/author/idea, how you have put together the performance/presentation, why you want to perform/present it in the particular way that you are going to perform/present it,

and anything else that you would like to say about the literary piece/author/idea and your anticipated performance/presentation of it. If you are performing/presenting as part of a pair, both you and your partner need to complete and turn in separate statements that are original to each student. This written statement will be due at the beginning of class on the date that you perform/present. It should follow the same format guidelines as the response papers.

Late Assignments: If you turn in your response papers or written statement after I take roll for the day, your paper is considered late, and you will not be able to score higher than a 75% on the paper. You may turn in a paper up to one class day late with the penalty of 25% deducted from your grade for the assignment. You may turn in a paper up to two class days late with a penalty of 50% deducted from your grade for the assignment. I will no longer accept the assignment after two class days beyond the original due date, and you will receive a zero for the assignment. These penalties remain in effect even if you are absent from class, unless you are absent due to extenuating circumstances.

Quizzes

You will have a short pop quiz whenever I deem it necessary to test you on the readings for the day. Pop quiz questions will only concern the readings that I asked you to do for that day.

In-Class Exams

There will be three in-class exams for the semester, one after each unit. **You will need to purchase an exam book for each exam. You may not reuse an exam book.** Exam books can be purchased at the Co-Op Store. All three exams will be open book. Exams 1

and 2 will have four short answer prompts. You will be asked to choose two prompts to write about. You will have the entire 50 minute class period to complete your exam.

Exam 3 will be administered during the final exam period on Friday, Dec. 17 from 8:00 am-10:00 am. Exam 3 will consist of four short answer prompts and an additional essay prompt that will ask you to consider the course as a whole. You will have the entire 2 hour exam period to complete your exam. Each one of your answers for all three exams should directly address the prompt(s) and provide specific examples about the literary pieces that you chose to write about. Your answers should demonstrate good use of grammar and mechanics, and they should have clear organization, i.e. paragraphs with transitions. The essay prompt on the final exam should also have an introduction and conclusion. *Please note in fairness to all of the students in the class, you must be available to take the Final Exam on Friday, Dec. 17 from 8:00 am-10:00 am.*

Course Schedule: The following schedule is tentative and may change according to the class' needs and progress. Students will be informed of changes in class.

Week	Date	What to read, what is due:
1	8/30	First day of class: What is literature?
	9/1	<i>Unit 1: The Americas:</i> “How Do I Read Poetry?”; MacLeish: “Ars Poetica” and Collins: “Introduction to Poetry” (both in CP)
	9/3	“How Do I Read Short Fiction?” and Alexie: “This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” (both in CP)
2	9/6	Labor Day: No Class
	9/8	Blanco: “Six Seri Whale Songs” and Alvarez: “Snow” (Both in CP)
	9/10	Boyle: “Love of My Life” and Olds: “Topography” (both in CP)
3	9/13	Bambera: “Raymond’s Run”; and Hughes: “The Weary Blues” and

		“Mother to Son” (all in CP)
	9/15	“How Do I Read a Play?” and Glaspell: <i>Trifles</i> (both in CP)
	9/17	Poe: “The Raven” and “Annabel Lee” (both in CP)
4	9/20	<i>The Alchemist</i> : Introduction, Prologue, and Part 1
	9/22	<i>The Alchemist</i> : Part 2, and “An Interview with Paulo Coelho” (book or CP)
	9/24	<i>The Alchemist</i> discussion continued Response Paper #1 due
5	9/27	<i>Performance Day 1</i> Read Duncan: “Often I Am Permitted to Return to a Meadow” (CP)
	9/29	Gerstenberg: <i>Overtones</i> (CP)
	10/1	Read Carver: “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (CP)
6	10/4	Borges: “The Book of Sand” and Cisneros: “The House on Mango Street” (both in CP)
	10/6	Anonymous: “The Fragments”; Schwerner: “Key to Symbols” and “Tablet XXV”; and Williams: “Like Attracts Like”(all in CP)
	10/8	Ives: <i>Sure Thing</i> (CP) Response Paper #2 due
7	10/11	<i>Performance Day 2</i> Read Eshleman: “Winding Windows” (CP)
	10/13	EXAM 1
	10/15	<i>Unit 2: Europe, Africa, and the Middle East</i> : Shakespeare: “Sonnet 130” and “Sonnet 138” and Donne: “The Flea” (all in CP)
8	10/18	Blake: “The Lamb”; “The Tyger”; “Holy Thursday [I.]”; and “Holy Thursday [II.]” (all in CP)

	10/20	Joyce: “Eveline” and Yeats: “Sailing to Byzantium”(both in CP)
	10/22	Kafka: “Before the Law” and Beckett: <i>Krapp’s Last Tape</i> (both in CP)
9	10/25	Moore and O’Neill: <i>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i> vol.1 parts 1-3
	10/27	Moore and O’Neill: <i>The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen</i> vol.1 parts 4-6
	10/29	Moore and O’Neill: “Allan and the Sundered Veil” (illustrated story that follows part 6 of <i>League</i>) Response Paper #3 due
10	11/1	<i>Performance Day 3</i> Read Anonymous: “The Fox” (CP)
	11/3	Cortázar: “Axolotl” and Popa: “Burning Shewolf” (both in CP)
	11/5	Head: “Life” and Tutuola: “ <i>from My Life in the Bush of Ghosts</i> ” (both in CP)
11	11/8	<i>Performance Day 4</i> Read Anonymous: “Drum Poem #7” (CP)
	11/10	Achebe: “Dead Men’s Path” and Mahfouz: “Half a Day” (both in CP)
	11/12	al-Khal: “Cain the Immortal” and all versions of Khayyam’s “Rubai XII” and “Rubaiyat” (all in CP) Response Paper #4 due
12	11/15	EXAM 2
	11/17	<i>Unit 3 Asia and Oceania</i> : All versions of Li Po’s: “Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon” and Bei Dao: ““He Opens Wide a Third Eye ...”” (both in CP)
	11/19	<i>Performance Day 5</i> Read Yang Lian: “Crocodile 1-15” (CP)

13	11/22	<i>Thanksgiving Break</i>
	11/24	
	11/26	
14	11/29	Bashō: “Four haiku” and Wright: “Haiku” (all in CP)
	12/1	Abe: “Magic Chalk” and Etenoa: “A Song of the Spider Goddess” (both in CP)
	12/3	Ha Jin: “The Bridegroom” (CP) Response Paper #5 due
15	12/6	<i>Performance Day 6</i> Read Shuntarō: “ <i>from With Silence My Companion</i> ” (CP)
	12/8	Singh: “The Wog” and Anonymous: “What She Said to Her Girl Friend, and What Her Girl Friend Said in Reply” (both in CP)
	12/10	Thammachot “On the Route of the Rabid Dog” and Pitpreecha: “The Defiance of a Flower” (both in CP) Response Paper #6 due
16	12/13	<i>Performance Day 7</i> Last day of class Read: Anonymous: “The Daybreak”; Adcock: “Poem Ended By Death”; and Anonymous: “The Woman Who Married A Caterpillar” (all in CP)
	12/15	Final exams in progress—no class
	12/17	Final Exam Meeting, Leonard 218, 8:00 am—10:00 am EXAM 3

Appendix B - "Six Seri Whale Songs" by Santo Blanco (Seri):

1

The sea is calm
there is no wind.
In the warm sun
I play on the surface
with many companions.
In the air spout
many clouds of smoke
and all of them are happy.

2

The mother whale is happy.
She swims on the surface, very fast.
No shark is near
but she swims many leagues
back and forth, very fast.
Then she sinks to the bottom
And four baby whales are born.

3

First one comes up to the surface
in front of her nose.
He jumps on the surface.
Then each of the other baby whales

jumps on the surface.

Then they go down
into the deep water to their mother
and stay there eight days
before they come up again.

4

The old, old whale has no children.
She does not swim far.
She floats near the shore and is sad.
She is old and weak
she cannot feed like other whales.
With her mouth on the surface
she draws in her breath—hrrr—
and the smallest fish and the sea birds are swallowed up.

5

The whale coming to shore is sick
the sharks have eaten her bowels
and the meat of her body.
She travels slowly—her bowels are gone.
She is dead on the shore
and can travel no longer.

Fifty sharks surrounded her.

They came under her belly

and bit off her flesh and her bowels

and so she died. Because she had no teeth

to fight the sharks.