

Good Words: Chief Joseph and the Production of Indian Speech(es), Texts, and Subjects

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Abstract. Chief Joseph, who gained fame during the Nez Perce War of 1877, is one of the best-known Indian orators in American history. Yet the two principal texts attributed to him were produced under questionable circumstances, and it is unclear to what extent they represent anything he ever said. This essay examines the publication history of these texts and then addresses two questions about the treatment of Indian oratory in the nineteenth century. First, given their uncertain provenance, how and why did these texts become so popular and come to represent Indian eloquence and an authentic Native American voice? Second, what was the political significance of Indian speech and texts of Indian oratory in the confrontation between Euro-Americans and Indians over land? I argue that the production and interpretation of Indian speech facilitated political subjugation by figuring Indians as particular kinds of subjects and positioning them in a broader narrative about the West. The discursive and political dimensions of the encounter were inseparable, as Indian “eloquence” laid the way for Indian defeat. I conclude by advocating a disruptive reading of Indian oratory that rejects the belief that a real Indian subject lies behind these texts in any straightforward sense. To make this argument, I draw on linguistic anthropology and critical theory, analyzing firsthand accounts, newspaper reports, and descriptions of Indian speech and Nez Perce history.

In 1879 the *North American Review* published an article titled “An Indian’s View of Indian Affairs” that was attributed to Chief Joseph, or In-mut-too-yah-lat-lat (ca. 1840–1904). Joseph had gone to Washington, DC, to urge lawmakers to allow his small band of Nez Perce (Nimiipuu) Indians to return to the Northwest, from which they had been exiled since the end of the Nez Perce War of 1877. Near the end of the article, he laments

Ethnohistory 54:3 (Summer 2007) DOI 10.1215/00141801-2007-005
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the injustice resulting from the empty promises of “so many chiefs” in Washington:

I have heard talk and talk, but nothing is done. Good words do not last long unless they amount to something. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now overrun by white men. They do not protect my father's grave. . . . I am tired of talk that comes to nothing. It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and all the broken promises. There has been too much talking by men who had no right to talk. Too many misrepresentations have been made, too many misunderstandings have come up between the white men about the Indians. (Joseph 1879: 431–32)

Discourse, and Indian speech in particular, played a crucial role in Nez Perce land-claim negotiations and historiography. Joseph's own words have lasted a long time and have had enduring appeal. By 1879 Joseph had become one of the most famous Indian orators in American history, and his noble eloquence and tragic story have continued to receive wide recognition.¹ Another, even better known, text attributed to Chief Joseph is the speech he allegedly gave upon his surrender to General Oliver O. Howard and Colonel Nelson A. Miles at the end of the war, in October 1877. This much shorter speech, which consists of or concludes with some version of the declaration “From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever,” is often celebrated as one of the best exemplars of Native American oratory and has been published in countless histories and anthologies.²

Both of these texts, however, were produced under questionable circumstances, and it is unclear to what extent they represent anything Chief Joseph ever said. Since Joseph spoke only Nez Perce (a Sahaptian language), these two written English texts minimally require attention to issues of translation and transcription. The broader ideological context in which they were produced, however, may be even more significant.

This essay is driven by two related questions. First, given their uncertain provenance, how and why did these texts become so popular and come to represent Indian eloquence and an authentic Native American voice? Second, what was the political significance of Indian speech and texts of Indian oratory in the confrontation between Euro-Americans and Indians over land? I will argue that the production and interpretation of Indian speech indirectly facilitated political subjugation. Central to my discussion will be an analysis of Euro-American ideas about Native American language use. Linguistic anthropologists have come to recognize the significance of language ideologies—that is, culturally specific ways of imagining language and its social functions—in mediating broad sociocultural phe-

nomena and language structure and use. Language ideologies inform the way speakers understand particular linguistic features to index particular social positions, groups, and relationships, and vice versa. So in the case of Native American speech, the historical and racial predicament of Indians is seen to determine the way they use language, and, conversely, their speech is understood to point to and confirm that predicament. Language ideologies are particularly evident in metadiscourse (speech about speech), and I will thus devote considerable attention to this discursive mode.

One caveat before I begin: what follows is a focused analysis of the treatment of Indian speech (and particularly Chief Joseph's speech) by Euro-Americans, not a comprehensive study of the relationship between Euro-Americans and the Nez Perce. I will be attempting to understand instances in which Euro-Americans praised Indian eloquence. Yet this romantic response was by no means universal. Euro-American attitudes toward Indians in the nineteenth century were diverse and often contradictory. This ideological complexity is evident in Robert McCoy's (2004) deconstructive history of the Nimiipuu, in which he convincingly argues that Euro-Americans silenced and subjugated Indians through hegemonic historiography and public memory making. His aim is to recuperate Nez Perce voices in the telling of Nez Perce history in order to correct ethnocentric representations. McCoy maintains that Euro-Americans were able to turn Chief Joseph into an image that suited their own beliefs, denying him autonomous agency and silencing the rest of the Nez Perce. On the one hand, McCoy disregards words attributed to Chief Joseph (mentioning the surrender speech and *North American Review* text only in passing), but on the other hand, he uncritically praises a first-person account of Indian-white relations attributed to another Nez Perce (McWhorter 1983 [1940]). McCoy's attempt to include Nez Perce "voices" in Nimiipuu historiography, while admirable, thus remains undertheorized and problematic. I consider my work to complement his. While he critiques the silencing of the Nez Perce, I am troubled by celebrations of Indians speaking. He more comprehensively addresses the range of Euro-American attitudes toward Indians, especially the belief that Indians were savages who had to be subdued and assimilated, while I analyze how a seemingly contradictory discourse of Indian eloquence had much the same effect.³

The Nez Perce Story

An increasing number of white settlers penetrated Nimiipuu lands in present-day Washington, Oregon, and Idaho after 1850, and reservation treaties were signed in 1855 and 1863 (see Josephy 1997 [1965]). Several

bands, including Chief Joseph's, refused to recognize the treaties or cede their land, and thus became known as "nontreaty" bands. By 1876, when General Howard arrived to negotiate an end to the dispute, the majority of Nimiipuu had moved onto the Fort Lapwai reservation and begun to assimilate. The nontreaties, who continued to resist the government, have subsequently received the most attention. Howard was a deeply religious Civil War veteran who had been involved in a number of humanitarian causes. Joseph was a respected statesman and orator, not a war chief, but Howard and his men quickly correlated his outspokenness in negotiations with military authority (Brown 1972). In 1877 overwhelming pressure from settlers and the government finally forced the nontreaty bands to agree to move to the reservation. But when violence broke out in June, the Nez Perce decided to avoid fighting by leaving the area. Approximately 750 men, women, and children marched more than fifteen hundred miles through the Northwest, pursued by troops led by General Howard and others, whom they fought along the way. Outnumbered, exhausted, and facing a bitter winter without adequate supplies, most of the Nez Perce finally agreed to a truce with Colonel Miles on 5 October 1877, fewer than fifty miles from the Canadian border. They were then removed to the Oklahoma Indian Territory and would not return to the Northwest (to the Colville Reservation in Washington) until 1885, decimated by disease and relocation.

Reports of "the Nez Perce War" reached distant readers with epic grandeur in 1877. Indian wars, especially after General George Armstrong Custer's defeat in 1876, loomed large for Euro-Americans, whether they experienced them directly in the West or indirectly through the media. Grandiose depiction was typical of this period in American history, when westward expansion came to represent Manifest Destiny and the struggle between civilization and savagery. Romantic and mythical accounts of the flight of the Nez Perce immediately became popular and continue to inspire the American imagination today.

Historiographical conventions helped to highlight the literary quality of the encounter. Descriptions of nineteenth-century Nez Perce history unfolding in chapters suggest that the course of history follows a pre-ordained plot and unfolds according to a narrative logic.⁴ Writers also tend to describe the Nez Perce conflict of 1877 in particular generic terms. Harvey Chalmers (1962) begins his narrative with a "Cast of Characters," as if the text were a dramatic script. Treating Joseph synecdochically, Chester Anders Fee (1936: 304) eulogizes: "Joseph's story is more than that of a lone man. It is the story of the American Indian, concentrated in one life and made noble and tragic. The fate of a whole race stands

embodied in him. In his own person he acted it out, as if on a Greek stage, repeating the words and deeds given him by Aeschylus [Greek tragic dramatist]. His tragic defect (in the dramatic sense) was his loyalty to the people he led.”

Similarly, in discussing Chief Joseph, Thomas Sanders and Walter Peek (1973: 311) write that “the Native American has been a paradigm of the classical tragic hero. Of noble birth, indeed, he has been reduced to low estate as a result of one overwhelming flaw. His flaw: honor and belief in the word. In a dishonest world where language is a weapon in the battle for possession, that is a tragic, tragic flaw” (for a critical analysis of Indians as tragic heroes in American literature, see Sayre 2005).⁵ An alternative genre to the tragedy was the epic (e.g., Greene 2000: xii; H. A. Howard 1941: 15; Josephy 1997 [1965]: xix). The Nez Perce struggle was a fitting conclusion to the epical history of the opening of the Northwest to white settlers. Epics require heroes, and Howard and Joseph proved to be a good match in contemporary accounts.

I believe these textual conventions convey an isomorphism between lived events and historiography. If the participants in these events—especially Joseph and Howard—are seen to be playing out roles in a ready-made drama, their literary personas and discursive stances become highly significant; they become literary characters. Helen Addison Howard (1941: 10, 16) thus suggests (unironically) that “no novelist could ever have conceived such a tale” as the Nez Perce saga and that Chief Joseph’s “character fulfilled the fondest desires of novelists who would depict the ‘noble red man.’”

In the case of Nimiipuu land-claim negotiations, talk and translation were often foregrounded in metadiscursive commentary. Treaty negotiations, like council meetings, often involved bounded stretches of formal discourse (see Barbeau 1932: 452; Strickland 1977: 376; Vanderwerth 1971: viii, 4, 8; Wroth 1975 [1928]: 326). Some critics have pointed out the theatrical character of these meetings, again highlighting the blurred distinction between life, performance, and literature (e.g., Sayre 2005: 13–14). Both the right to speak and the meaning of what was said were frequently contested, and translation was a major problem (e.g., O. O. Howard 1877b: 593; Josephy 1997 [1965]: 417, 498). General Howard reported that in May 1877 one Indian urged the interpreter “in the most pointed manner” to translate correctly. Then another Indian said, “‘We want to talk a long time, many days, about the earth, about our land.’ The answer was, ‘Mr. Monteith [the Nez Perce Indian agent] and I wish to hear what you have to say, whatever time it may take; but you may as well know at the outset that in any event the Indians must obey the orders

of the government of the United States” (O. O. Howard 1972a [1881]: 54; see also O. O. Howard 1972b [1907]: 250).

This exchange illustrates the irony of treaty negotiations: much attention was paid to talk and translation, and much depended on discourse. Yet the conclusion of all this talk was foregone: the nontreaty Indians, like all other Indians, simply had to move to the reservation, no matter how much they had to say about it. Euro-Americans were participating in a story to which they already knew the ending. If the politics of the encounter were so overdetermined, why did the interpretation of Indian speech receive so much attention? Were negotiators simply going through the motions of civil interaction when military domination was always the basis of what was really going on? Euro-Americans, including representatives of the Army, may have hoped that they could talk the Indians into relocating without a fight, so from a pragmatic perspective the negotiations were not pointless. But to call the process of dispossession a “negotiation” in the first place is euphemistic, which leads us back to the question of what role talk played in the encounter.

I will argue that Indian speech was a fundamental, not incidental or epiphenomenal, component of the politics of encounter. The way Euro-Americans engaged with Indian speech produced and reproduced for them an Indian subject or character that fit perfectly within a larger narrative framework, that is, an epic of civilization and conquest in the West, of domination and land appropriation (see also McCoy 2004). The discursive and political dimensions of the encounter were inseparable, as Indian “eloquence” laid the way for Indian defeat. This is not to say that Euro-Americans were conscious of this connection or strategically used reports of Indian speech to accelerate dispossession (to which they were devoting considerable *material* resources). The relationship I hope to illuminate was deeply cultural and broadly ideological rather than functional. The treatment of Indian speech may not have been directly coercive, but it did constitute an aspect of American hegemony and an implicit justification for the outcome of the conflict over land.

Two Texts

The Surrender Speech

Certainly the most captivating episode of the Nez Perce saga of 1877 was the final one, in which Chief Joseph surrendered to Colonel Miles and General Howard and allegedly delivered his renowned speech. On 5 October more than four hundred Indians—the majority of those who had made it that far—submitted to the Army in the Bear Paw Mountains of Mon-

tana. Yet it remains unclear what, if anything, Chief Joseph said to Miles and Howard on that day, for the records are unreliable. Most debate has centered on whether Joseph delivered a speech in person to Miles and Howard or relied on two Nez Perce scouts serving the Army to send a message from the Nez Perce camp.⁶ Another issue concerns translation. Haruo Aoki (1989: 16) notes that Chief Joseph “spoke in the Nez Perce language. His words had to be translated into English by an interpreter, who in all likelihood was Arthur Chapman [a white man who knew Nez Perce]. In other words, no one who wrote published accounts of the end of the war directly understood what Chief Joseph said.” Finally, the effects of conversion of a verbal performance into a written text must be considered. For some critics, each of these modes of mediation (conveyance via messengers, translation, and transcription), each of uncertain quality, diminishes the authenticity of the text. Yet contradictory accounts of the surrender raise larger issues and lead us to question whether Chief Joseph made any kind of speech at all on that day.

Aoki (1989) has carefully analyzed firsthand accounts of the surrender, and I have adopted and expanded upon his corpus (see table 1). He divides the accounts into three categories depending on whether they feature a long text (mostly 151 to 155 words), a short text (11 to 15 words), or no mention of any statement by Joseph whatsoever. He concludes that the long text represents a message sent by Joseph and the short text a speech delivered in person (although several sources break this pattern) (ibid.: 19). (Aoki analyzes differences among the texts more closely than I will here.) It is striking that some key sources make no mention of Joseph’s declaration whatsoever, although this does not prove that he never made a statement.

The first short version of Chief Joseph’s statement that Aoki found (text 4) was published in the *Chicago Times* on 26 October 1877: “From where the sun stands, forever and ever, I will never fight again” (The “Bible Chief” 1877).⁷ The first long version (text 5) was published on the same day in a Bismarck, Dakota Territory, newspaper:

Tell General Howard I [know] his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking-Glass is dead. Ta-hool-hool-shoot is dead. The old men are all dead. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who leads the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food; no one knows where they are—may be freezing to death. I want time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. May be I shall find them among the dead. Hear me my chiefs: I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where

Table 1. Firsthand reports of Chief Joseph's surrender (after Aoki 1989)

No.	Aoki's No.	Text	Delivery	Date	Publication	Source
1		None		1877 (6 Oct.)	Miles 1877: 4	Miles
2		None		1877 (25 Oct.)	O. O. Howard 1877a	Howard
3		None		1877 (25 Oct.)	The Pursuit and Battle 1877	Wood?
4	1	Short	In person	1877 (26 Oct.)	The "Bible Chief" 1877	Howard?
5	2	Long	Message	1877 (26 Oct.)	Joseph'[s] Speech in Full 1877	Wood?
6		None		1877 (1 Nov.)	The Captive Chief 1877	Sutherland?
7		Long	In person?	1877 (16 Nov.)	Wood 1877	Wood
8	3	Long	Message	1877 (17 Nov.)	The Surrender of Joseph 1877: 906	Probably Wood
9	4	Long	Message	1877 (26 Dec.)	O. O. Howard 1877b: 630	Wood
10		None		1878	Sutherland 1980 [1878]: 44	Sutherland
11	5	Short	In person	1879	Joseph 1879: 429	Allegedly Joseph
12		None		1881	O. O. Howard 1972a [1881]: 269	Howard/Wood
13	6	Long	Message	1884	Wood 1884: 141	Wood
14		Long	In person	1893	Wood 1893: 439	Wood
15	7	Short	In person	1896	Miles 1896: 275	Miles
16		None		1907	O. O. Howard 1972b [1907]: 299	Howard
17	8	Short	In person	1911	Miles 1911: 178-79	Miles
18		Short	In person	1925	Boyd 1925	Boyd
19	9	Short	In person	1936	C. E. S. Wood, letter to L. V. McWhorter, Jan. 31 (McWhorter Papers, Washington State University Library) (see Aoki 1989: 16)	Wood
20	10	Long	In person	1936	Wood 1936: 329-30	Wood

the sun now stands I will fight no more forever. (Joseph'[s] Speech in Full 1877)

“He who leads the young men” evidently refers to Ollikut, Joseph’s brother. The people who ran away (the previous night) were those who did not want to give up and followed White Bird on to Canada.

Most, if not all, of the firsthand reports of a long text may be traced to Lieutenant Charles Erskine Scott Wood, General Howard’s aide-de-camp, and all the reports of a long speech delivered *in person* are definitely his. Sherry Smith has provided an interesting account of Wood’s complex relationship with Indians, describing him as a transitional figure between nineteenth-century transcendentalism and twentieth-century relativism (1996: 153). “From earliest childhood, then, Wood juxtaposed the army and the Indian in his mind, the military representing regimentation, despotism, and tyranny; the Indian, freedom and resistance to authority” (ibid.: 150). Smith suggests that Wood, a writer and amateur folklorist, “had the trappings of a soldier but the soul of a poet” (ibid.), and David Lavender (1992: 320) adds that he “had literary ambitions and an active imagination.” Aoki (1989) considers him simply unreliable, and Mark Brown (1972: 16) damns him for prostituting the truth (see also Brown 1967: 161; Lavender 1992: 322).

In his contradictory reports of the surrender, Wood changed his story at least from long-message to long-speech-in-person to short-speech-in-person and back, and his first report (text 3?) may not have referred to any communication whatsoever. Aoki (1989: 20) notes that Wood may have been wrong in all of his accounts, but cannot have been right in all of them. Bruce Hampton’s (1994: 370) suggestion that Wood altered the circumstances of the surrender throughout his life in order to cast “both Joseph and himself in more dramatic roles” seems reasonable. The alterations were effective, and despite its questionable reliability, the long speech delivered in person has become the favorite version of historians and anthologizers.⁸

Further questions arise when we examine the context of the encounter and assess whether a speech, and what kind of speech, may have fit in. Merle Wells (1964) argues that using the terms *war*, *retreat*, and *surrender* is a simplistic imposition of Euro-American military conceptions on the events of 1877 (see also Aoki 1989: 20–21; and Lavender 1992: 324; cf. Greene 2000: xiv). This terminological incommensurability relates to the chronic aggrandizing of Chief Joseph’s role in the affair and a misunderstanding of Nimipuu social organization. Miles “deceived himself by construing the war as a two-sided military operation and by supposing that, when he dealt with Joseph, he was dealing with the military commander

of the Nez Perce Indians.” In actuality, Joseph negotiated only on behalf of himself and those who chose to follow him; he “had no army to surrender and no authority to make other Nez Perce warriors come to any agreement or terms” (Wells 1964: 37). Only the Army would have found a “surrender speech” appropriate, then, and furthermore would have enjoyed publicizing the Indians’ pathetic defeat (Aoki 1989: 20). Considering all of these textual, historical, and cultural problems, it is entirely possible that Wood—hardly a reliable source—fabricated the whole story and composed the surrender speech himself according to his own literary and political inclinations. I agree with Smith (1996: 151) that “the speech’s authorship is one of those historical controversies that will probably never be resolved.”

The North American Review Text

While many contradictory reports of the Nimiipuu surrender exist, much less has been written about the production of the 1879 *North American Review* text, which commentators have been more willing to take at face value qua text. To begin with, there is only one version of it—the one published in the *Review*. (The text has been republished a number of times verbatim in histories and anthologies and as a booklet.) So little do we know about the origin of the text, and so little has that origin been explored, that it is almost as if Joseph *wrote* the article. “An Indian’s View of Indian Affairs” was published in the April 1879 edition of the *North American Review*. It includes an introduction by William H. Hare, a missionary to the Sioux, who begins with a statement typical of white attitudes toward Indian speech:

I wish that I had words at command in which to express adequately the interest with which I have read the extraordinary narrative which follows, and which I have the privilege of introducing to the readers of this “Review.” I feel, however, that this *apologia* is so boldly marked by the charming *naïveté* and tender pathos which characterize the red-man, that it needs no introduction, much less any authentication; while in its smothered fire, in its deep sense of eternal righteousness and of present evil, and in its hopeful longings for the coming of a better time, this Indian chief’s appeal reminds us of one of the old Hebrew prophets of the days of captivity. (Joseph 1879: 412)

He goes on in this laudatory and often romantic language to summarize the article and comment on Indian affairs, but the three-page introduction provides no clues into the origins of the article.⁹ The text attributed to Chief Joseph is nineteen pages long. In it Joseph introduces himself, his

people, and their beliefs; recounts Nez Perce relations with Euro-Americans since the expedition of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark; details their land-claim negotiations and the hostilities of 1877; and pleads for policy reform. The essay begins, “My friends, I have been asked to show you my heart. I am glad to have a chance to do so,” and concludes, “In-mut-too-yah-lat-lat has spoken for his people. Young Joseph. Washington City, DC” (Joseph 1879: 415, 433).

The *North American Review* text resulted from a trip Joseph made to Washington in January 1879 to lobby lawmakers on behalf of the exiled Nimiipuu. Unfortunately, twentieth-century scholarship on the origins of the text was shoddy, leading to wide-ranging misinformation. Some writers maintain that the text resulted from an interview with Joseph, while others suggest that its source was a public speech Joseph made in Lincoln Hall. Neither is exactly correct, according to a crucial 1879 article in the journal *Council Fire* that most researchers have overlooked (Young Joseph 1879).¹⁰ This anonymous piece is told from the perspective of Alfred Benjamin Meacham, the journal’s editor and the man responsible for Joseph’s trip to Washington and his Lincoln Hall appearance. The author describes the Lincoln Hall event and the speech itself, which was translated by Arthur Chapman, who was also present at the 1877 surrender (for other descriptions, see Broken Pledges 1879; and A Shameful Story 1879). Chapman “caught the words and the inspiration [of Joseph], and with scarcely a perceptible break except in the change of tongue and voice, filled the hall with wild, untrammelled oratory for one hour and twenty minutes, disturbed only by frequent demonstrations of approval by the vast audience.” The author goes on to state, “Want of space forbids giving the speech in full, in the *Council Fire*. Those who feel an interest in Joseph may find in the *North American Review* for April, the substance of this speech, besides many other matters of interest as dictated by Chief Joseph, with Capt. Chapman interpreter, and the editor of the *Council Fire* [Meacham] amanuensis.” We also learn that “in preparing the article for the *Review* above referred to, General [*sic*] Miles was invited to the office of the *Council Fire*, and the whole matter was talked over with Joseph” (Young Joseph 1879: 22–23).

These statements suggest that the *North American Review* text was based *in part* on Chief Joseph’s Lincoln Hall address, but that it did not result from any one speech event. It was not, in other words, simply a transcription of a translated “speech” or interview but a product composed by Meacham. This revelation opens up a whole series of questions regarding Meacham’s role in assembling the article and finally shifts critical focus from Joseph as alleged speaker. It is not simply that Meacham, as “amanuensis,” recorded and edited Chapman’s translation of what Joseph

“dictated” (over the course of his time in Washington). Rather, Joseph is altogether displaced as speaker by the *conference* in the magazine office (with the enemy, no less) that preceded the article’s publication. Instead of the text representing a bounded chunk of speech by one speaker on one occasion, it represents a negotiation or conversation over a period of time between at least four people (Joseph, Chapman, Meacham, and Miles), and possibly more. Given this process by which it emerged, it is more like a written composition than a transcript of speech. (Note, however, that the opening and closing of the text give the appearance of a speech.) These additional critical problems have been most thoroughly addressed in the burgeoning literature on Indian autobiography and point to the blurred boundary between the genres of oratory and autobiography (e.g., DeMallie 1984; Holler 2000; Krupat 1985, 1989: 132–201, 1994; Murray 1991: 49–97; but see how Krupat 1985: 57–58 deflects criticism from Chief Joseph’s 1879 text by categorizing it as a speech).

The text has elicited a range of responses from commentators, who have speculated about its reliability in terms of translation, transcription, and editing (e.g., Brown 1967: 15; Chief Joseph’s Own Story 1879: 586; Josephy 1997 [1965]: 450n; Lavender 1992: 337; McWhorter 1980 [1952]: 502–3n). Yet the crucial revelation of the *Council Fire* article is that the 1879 text was composed by Meacham, not “spoken” by Chief Joseph, and not merely transcribed. While this ultimately may be unsurprising, it has the effect of evacuating the text of the aura of speech. It becomes impossible to critique the way the written text distorted the original spoken message when we realize that there never was one original message and that therefore *the written text is the one and only original*. While being able to specify more precisely the conditions of the text’s production would be gratifying, I argue that it will always be impossible to factor out distortions to get to the “real” Chief Joseph. In this sense, the text is indeed originary, though for the opposite reasons it claims for itself and that others have claimed for it (as a transcription of Chief Joseph’s speech). I will return to this possibility in my conclusion.

Language Ideologies and the Production of Native American Speech

These two texts attributed to Chief Joseph have been celebrated as exemplars of Indian eloquence and valued for their authenticity, both of which relate to a complex set of language ideologies. Eloquence is inextricably linked to ideas about Native Americans and the characteristics of their languages. Authenticity is not simply a matter of the relationship between

written documents and the conditions of their production, or with the reliability of historical sources, although these issues are significant. More fundamentally, it is a construct that relates to ideas about subjectivity and language use, about the ways in which speakers “voice” their selfhood and the capacity of written texts to capture and convey that voicing. In exposing the uncertain conditions in which these texts were produced, I am not seeking to discredit their authenticity by showing what really happened. Rather, I am interested in why they were deemed authentic in the first place.¹¹

Natural Language

Euro-Americans frequently commented that Indians were children of nature and spoke “her eloquent language” (Indian Eloquence 1828; see also Indian Eloquence 1986 [1836]: 4; and Sheehan 1969: 350). This natural language confirmed that Indians occupied an earlier, more primitive developmental stage than civilized man (see Murray 1991: 8–9). One characteristic feature of primitive language was its reliance on metaphor. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1998 [1781]: 294–95) theorized early on that the first languages were purely figurative and poetic, and nineteenth-century writers commonly suggested that Indians had to resort to metaphor to express their thoughts due to the poverty of their languages. Their rich use of figurative language, however, only made their speeches more lofty and impressive (Clements 2002: 79–102; Indian Eloquence 1986 [1836]: 5; Lossing 1870: 800; Sheehan 1969: 350–51).

Reliance on metaphor also contributed to the natural affectivity of Native American speech. Unrestricted by education or the rules of rhetoric, Indians eloquently expressed their feelings in touching orations (e.g., Barbeau 1932: 452). John Heckewelder remarked in 1819, “The eloquence of the Indians is natural and simple; they speak what their feelings dictate without art and without rule; their speeches are forcible and impressive, their arguments few and pointed, and when they mean to persuade as well as convince, they take the shortest way to reach the heart” (quoted in Clements 1996: 97). Similarly, a newspaper reported in 1832 that a series of Cherokee speeches were “full of pathos and feeling” and that “the simple story of their wrongs, related in the unsophisticated language of nature, went to the heart with irresistible power. . . . There was not an unmoved heart, nor an eye in the room, that did not glitter with the tears of pity” (quoted in Strickland 1977: 382). According to one description of an Oneida oration, “The tears ran plentifully, all the time Scondooa was speaking, from his own eyes, and those of every one of the council. The most hard-hearted man would have melted into tears, could he have been

present and heard the speech in the Indian tongue, the inflections and tone of which are peculiarly expressive and moving" (Tracy 1871: 545).

Reports of Indian speech such as these are filled with references to the heart, which I interpret as a clue to ideas about subjectivity, voicing, and self-presence that informed encounters between Indians and whites. On the one hand allusions to the heart related to Victorian sentimentality and a penchant for highly emotional experiences (thus the gushy descriptions above). Yet the heart represents the seat not just of emotions but indeed of the self. Before he reportedly "died of a broken heart" in 1904 (Joseph 1997 [1965]: 643), Chief Joseph frequently referred to his own heart and the hearts of others in this way. "My friends, I have been asked to show you my heart," begins the *North American Review* text. "I believe much trouble and blood would be saved if we opened our hearts more. . . . What I have to say will come from my heart, and I will speak with a straight tongue" (Joseph 1879: 415). Yellow Wolf, a Nez Perce man, recalled telling an Army general, "My heart and your heart are like shaking hands," suggesting the possibility of two hearts coming into direct contact with one another, as if unmediated by language (as in a heart-to-heart talk) (McWhorter 1983 [1940]: 17; see also O. O. Howard 1972a [1881]: 29; 1972b [1907]: 239). These references, both by white authors and attributed to Indian speakers, appeal to a pervasive Western language ideology according to which language is used to express intentionality and interiority. The heart is a symbol for a coherent, sovereign, individualized self that is exposed through language, but that ultimately can be made accessible in a direct, unmediated communion—this was the *touching* quality of oratory. It was not the language itself that was impressive; quite the contrary, it was the experience of language falling away.

Indeed, Euro-Americans relished being able to penetrate Indian speakers and believed oratory rendered the otherwise obscured native accessible. A writer in 1836 described oratory as "a key to the character" and "the most perfect emblem of their character, their glory and their intellect":

In these we see developed the motives which animated their actions, and the light and shadows of their very soul. The iron encasement of apparent apathy in which the savage had fortified himself, impenetrable at ordinary moments, is laid aside in the council-room. The genius of eloquence bursts the swathing bands of custom, and the Indian stands forth accessible, natural, and legible. We commune with him, listen to his complaints, understand, appreciate, and even feel his injuries. (Indian Eloquence 1986 [1836]: 4–5; cf. Sorber 1972: 229)

David Murray (1991: 36, 41–42) notes that this self-serving colonialist claim to be able to recognize the essence of Indian identity, to “read them like a book,” involves a reversal of the normal view of public and private, such that what Indians say in public to whites is more expressive than what they say in private among themselves.

The affectivity and accessibility associated with Indian speech related to ideas about linguistic directness. Commentators often praised Indian speech for its simplicity, brevity, and succinctness (e.g., *Indian Eloquence* 1828; Barbeau 1932: 454–55). Indian orators were able to convey a great deal with few words due to some basic features of their languages. Before Ferdinand de Saussure’s contributions to linguistics, theorists such as Rousseau and Johann Gottfried von Herder proposed that language was originally imitative and iconic (not symbolic), depending on gesture and onomatopoeia. This natural iconicity accounted in part for the immediate, touching impact of Native American speech. “One of the most consistent claims made for primitive languages has been that they are simple, concrete and, like their speakers, inextricably linked to nature. In this way they connect us to an original language rooted in things rather than ideas, and without the slippages and ambiguities of civilised speech and writing.” Reliance on concrete images, “reflecting a lack of intellectual development on the part of the Indians, means that concepts must be built up from objects and their qualities or associations, thus preserving a vividness and natural power lost in civilised speech” (Murray 1991: 16, 42).

This vividness was the result of iconic and imagistic constructions that rendered Indian speech *picturesque*. According to one author, the Indian “images forth his eloquence in every sentence” (*Indian Eloquence* 1828). Similarly, Lawrence Wroth (1975 [1928]: 332) states that a Delaware orator “presented in his words a picture that needed no explanation to his hearers of either race.” Murray shows that nineteenth-century characterizations of Indian languages as “polysynthetic” or “incorporative” provided a phonetic grounding for this understanding. Daniel J. Brinton, for instance, argued that Indian languages relied on clusters of words instead of connecting separate words grammatically, so that each clause was expressed in one phonetic complex. He reasoned that “a thought presented in one word is more vivid and stimulating to the imagination, more individual and picturesque, than when narrated in a number of words” (quoted in Murray 1991: 23), and Murray adds, “It has the instant fusion of the metaphor, rather than the progression of an argument, it is ‘presented’ whole rather than ‘narrated’ in sequence” (*ibid.*). This semiotic simplification—reducing speech to image—was a crucial mechanism by which authenticity adhered to Indian speakers such as Chief Joseph. Indian speech made an

immediate impression and was able to be taken in all at once, undigested and uncomplicated by time-consuming interpretation.

The more general Western notion that speech is primary and writing secondary complemented these ideas about Native American languages. Speech is associated with the voice, breath, and interiority while writing is seen as exterior and mechanical, an imperfect representation or reproduction of speech, the “signifier of the signifier.” As Jacques Derrida (1976) has shown in his critique of logocentrism, this commitment to the primacy of speech closely relates to a philosophy of being and presence, according to which speech represents self-understanding and self-presence, writing absence and self-alienation. Spoken words, meaning, and even signified objects are indivisibly laminated, allowing speech transparently and naturally to reveal truth and feeling. Thus in the present case, the fact that Indians were *speaking* enhanced the qualities already associated with their language— affectivity, directness, and subjective authenticity (see also Clements 2002: 16–18; and Gustafson 2000). The fact that they were preliterate was even more important, since the acquisition of writing was thought to transform the human mind; orality represented a state of being and consciousness.¹²

Text and Context

In addition to these language ideologies, Euro-American ideas about the context and textual representation of Indian orations informed their interpretation of Indian speech. I now want to suggest that the content of speeches and the particular circumstances of their delivery were subordinated to and abstracted so that they simply reinforced a larger, preexisting narrative about the inevitable demise of the American Indian. This narrative structured the texts’ imagined macrocontext.¹³ Murray (1991: 36) argues that in records of Native American oratory,

the Indian speech is presented in a dramatic context which has the effect of making it already overdetermined for the white reader. As a result the speakers are “framed,” so what they are saying is actually less important than the fact and manner of their saying it. This, I would suggest, is one way of explaining the appetite for speeches whose content offered an often devastating criticism of white actions. Even as the Indians nobly and eloquently complained, that very nobility and eloquence was confirming the inevitability of their disappearance.

Reports of oratory “turn the whole event into a drama or tableau signifying the inevitable defeat of the Indian. . . . Once the noble orator comes to be seen as an actor in a larger historical drama a large part of the power of

what he says comes to depend upon a melancholy sense of dramatic irony available to the reader or spectator and not to him. His words have been overwritten" (ibid.: 40; see also McCoy 2004).

One piece of evidence for this subordination of content to context lies in discussions of the textual representation of Indian oratory. Commentators often maintained that transcripts provided inadequate records of speeches due to poor translation and the difficulties of reproducing verbal performances (e.g., Tracy 1871: 543, 545). Yet Murray shows that just as the limitations and absences in primitive languages rendered them poetic, loss of meaning in translation and transcription actually contributed to the aesthetic effect of Indian speech. The fragment or ruin became more potent and evocative than the original whole. Caveats about loss of meaning paired with assurances about the quintessential, transcendent quality of Indian expression shifted emphasis to the frames or imagined contexts of speeches. Murray (1991: 43–44) argues that "one of the effects of seeing Indian speeches as fragments, as expressions of something more than themselves, is to draw attention away from the actual details of the speech's transmission and of its political implications." He also notes "an irony in the use of the speaking and self-representing Indian to represent something else entirely. . . . The point of communication thus comes to represent its opposite, by concentrating on the speech as *moment* rather than part of a dialogue; by making it into tableau rather than process."¹⁴

Nowhere is the subordination of what Indians said to how they said it clearer than in remarks about the appealing sound and paralinguistic features of Native American speech. Testifying to the impression made by a Cherokee speaker, Thomas Jefferson declared, "His sounding voice, distinct articulation, animated action, and the solemn silence of his people at their several fires, filled me with awe and veneration, *although I did not understand a word he uttered*" (quoted in Strickland 1977: 375; my emphasis). Similarly, the manner, gestures, and magnetism of the Oglala leader Red Cloud, as well as "the eloquence of his hands," were enough to impress an 1880 audience that otherwise had to suffer his words in translation (Balgooyen 1968: 30).

Commentators emphasized not only the sound of Native American speech but also the physical appearance of Indian speakers, suggesting that a speaker's appearance was at least as meaningful as what he said. "What can be imagined more impressive," one writer asked in 1836, "than a warrior rising in the councilroom to address those who bore the same scarred marks of their title to fame and to chieftainship? The dignified stature—the easy repose of limbs—the graceful gesture, the dark speaking eye, excite equal admiration and expectation" (Indian Eloquence

1986 [1836]: 5; see also Bierwert 1998: 284). The Nez Perce, and especially Chief Joseph, were often described as “picturesque” (e.g., O. O. Howard 1879: 59; 1972a: 52, 274). Lucullus Virgil McWhorter (1983 [1940]: 14) reported that the Nez Perce Yellow Wolf, whose story he published, “stood 5 feet 10½ inches in his moccasins, and his weight was 187½ pounds. . . . Tragedy was written in every lineament of his face.” Donald MacRae (1981 [1925]: 4) described Joseph as “a wonderful specimen of the Indian, standing six feet tall, straight as an arrow and wonderfully handsome, his features being as clear-cut as chiseled marble” (see also *A Shameful Story* 1879). (Portrayals of manly, statuesque Indians contrast with images of emasculated, defeated Indians after their surrender, as I will show.) Listeners could expect impressive oratory from an Indian of impressive stature. Such was the case with Chief Joseph’s 1879 speech in Lincoln Hall: “Nearly six feet in height, muscular and robust, dignified and manly in bearing, he won the audience ere he began” speaking (Young Joseph 1879: 22). Thus the audience need not even hear what the speaker has to say. Apprehending the Indian as a spectacle rather than a speaker, by gazing rather than listening, effectively silences him.

This interest in the appearance of Indian speakers, sound of Indian speech, and macrocontext of inevitable demise reduces discursive complexity to something simpler. The interpretation of Indian speech precedes the speech itself: whites know what Indians are going to say (or, more important, what the impact of Indian speech will be) before they open their mouths. This interpretive simplification ensures the accessibility and appeal of Indian oratory. Dialogue, process, and historical contingency are reduced to an image that is nonsyntactic and atemporal, a label that succinctly comprehends what is going on and lends it an uncomplicated immediacy. I will develop this theme by examining picturesque descriptions of Chief Joseph’s surrender, in which the event becomes a tableau in the epic of the West.

Picturesque Surrender

As I have shown, reports vary as to what, if anything, Joseph said when he capitulated to Miles and Howard, but most emphasize the surrender’s picturesque quality. Wood (1936: 329) described Joseph and his entourage as they arrived at the scene of surrender as “a picturesque and pathetic little group.” In another account, he conveyed the surrender’s silent dignity:

It was nearly sunset when Joseph came to deliver himself up. . . . So the little group came slowly up the hill to where General Howard, with an aide-de-camp, and General [*sic*] Miles waited to receive the

surrender. As he neared them, Joseph sat erect in the saddle, then gracefully and with dignity he swung himself down from his horse, and with an impressive gesture threw his arm to its full length, and offered his rifle to General Howard. The latter motioned him toward General [*sic*] Miles, who received the token of submission.

Those present shook hands with Joseph, whose worn and anxious face lighted with a sad smile as silently he took each offered hand. (Wood 1884: 141-42)

The rifle is highly symbolic in most accounts, and its submission conveys meaning in the place of language. Even when words are exchanged in this interaction (and some accounts insert the surrender speech here), gesture plays an important role. In one version, Joseph approached Howard “and with a gesture, implying ‘all is over,’ offered his rifle to him” (The Captive Chief 1877). Without saying a word, the Indian expresses a great deal. Other accounts have Joseph raising his hand toward the sky as he uttered “from where the sun now stands” (Boyd 1925; Miles 1911: 178-79). This also seems to be the favorite posture in paintings of the surrender, including Frederic Remington’s. Gesture, like sign language, was thought to be the most natural, least conventional mode of communication, and thus well suited to Indians, especially as a supplement to speech (O. O. Howard 1972b [1907]: 534-38; Murray 1991: 17-18). The picturesque quality of the surrender allows it to be taken in all at once: through a single expressive gesture, we *see* the end of a long struggle. A complex chain of events—indeed, the entire history of the Nez Perce—is collapsed into a single image that renders everything but the concluding surrender irrelevant (see McCoy 2004: 140-42).

Some descriptions of the Nez Perce surrender feature a sympathetic nature that reflects and heightens the gloom of the encounter (e.g., Beal 1963: 255; Wood 1893: 439). In 1877 Thomas Sutherland, who was with Howard’s troops at the time, wrote:

As the sun was dropping to the level of the prairie and tinging the tawny and white land with waves of ruddy lights, Joseph came slowly riding up the hill. . . . The Indian camp lay in the lengthening shadows as the little group came up from the darkening valley into the higher light which showed their wretchedness [*sic*], Joseph . . . lifted his head, and with an impulsive gesture, straightened his arm toward General Howard, offering his rifle, as if with it he cast away all ambition, hope and manly endeavors leaving his heart and his future down with his people in the dark valley where the shadows were knitting about them a dusky shroud. (Quoted in Brown 1967: 408)

This is the Indians' sunset. Even as they climb up the hill into the light to join their (former) white adversaries, they are confined to the darkness from which they came, now with a deathly finality.

This thematic linking of surrender and death (rather than rebirth, transformation, or emergence) is common in reports of Indian oratory. For instance, Merrill Beal sets out to debunk misconceptions about the picturesque character of the Nez Perce surrender. He notes that at the end of arduous campaigns, Indians usually lacked their "colorful ceremonial costumes" and "presented a nondescript, ragged appearance." As he continues, however, his imagined scene becomes more vivid: the sight and smell of dead horses and soldiers "disclosed the stark misery of war. Resentment, frustration, defiance, and resignation produced an atmosphere of tremendous pathos." In order to deepen this sense of pathos Beal (1963: 365) inserts Indian speech:

One of the spectators on this occasion was a wounded Cheyenne former chieftain named Hump. He had served Miles in this campaign, having killed two Nez Percés with his own hands. As he viewed Chief Joseph's surrender, he may have remembered the occasion when he made the following statement to Colonel Miles: "Alas! Alas! For my race, it is passing away." Then, after meditating a few moments, he took off his belt and gun and handed them to Miles. Then he pointed to his ponies and said, "Take them, I am no longer either a chief or a warrior."

In this most pathetic statement, we see that Indian identity crystallizes at the point of surrender. It is at this moment that the Indian is most noble, most tragic, most authentic. His heightened potency is partly due to the liminality of the deathlike transition from manhood and tradition to servility and assimilation. Surrender represents the climax of selfhood, and after surrender the Indian, no longer a warrior, ceases to be an Indian altogether and goes on to fight with the white man against other Indians in their crystallizing moments.

The Death of the Indian

This relationship between identity and death was an important part of the emergence and popularity of surrender speeches as a genre of Native American oratory. In the nineteenth century, the melancholia associated with Indians fed into the larger popularity of funerary themes and elegiac literature. The elegy was an oratorical mode particularly well suited to Indians, who were thought to be a vanishing race, their individual surrenders and deaths synecdochic of their collective passing (on the treatment

of dying Indians in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century collections of Indian oratory, see Murray 1991: 34–35; see also Clements 2002: 20–21). Whites were as interested in the figurative as they were the literal death of Indians. Many lamented (with characteristic imperialist nostalgia) the passing era of real, authentic Indians and the coming age of Christianized, civilized Native America.

This passage was particularly evident among the Nimiipuu, the majority of whom had settled on a reservation and begun to assimilate by 1877. It was the minority nontreaty bands who inspired the most ire, fascination, and sympathy as the last holdouts of an older, more traditional way of life (for a comparison of “the two classes of Indians,” see Howard’s Nez-Percé War 1881: 95). McCoy (2004: 99–101, 146) shows that this obsession with the nontreaty Indians and the war of 1877 has allowed the Nez Perce nation to be written out of history, the reservation Indians completely forgotten as they started down the road to assimilation and vanished from Euro-American consciousness. For if, as Alvin Josephy Jr. (1997 [1965]: xx) suggests, the Nez Perce as a whole represent “a very proud and noble fragment of the American Northwest,” McWhorter (1980 [1952]: 493) is able to claim that after the defeat of the nontreaties, “in a real sense the Nez Perce nation was to be no more.” (Note that, in fact, the Nez Perce nation exists still today.) Lavender’s (1992: 326) observation that Wood “plumbed deep” with respect to Chief Joseph’s surrender speech to touch “the infinite sadness of a race’s defeat and death” is all the more telling considering Wood’s disinterest, and that of other sympathetic writers, in Christian, educated, literate Indians: “They dismissed as suspect those Indians who had been to boarding schools and learned English. They considered them no longer Indian, tainted by Anglo-American culture and thus no longer authentic.” These writers never doubted their authority to define Indian authenticity (Smith 1996: 150).

This focus on authenticity (and its loss) deflected attention from the actual decimation of Indian populations. Surrendering Indians evoked the same delectable pathos as dying Indians, but without the moral uncertainty. Assimilation, imposed by whites but naturalized as inevitable and just, became the burden of the Indian and exonerated whites from the guilt of genocidal campaigns. Even whites who fought passionately against Indians were able to lament their defeat and assimilation once they no longer posed a threat, almost to *reproach* them for surrendering.¹⁵ And the fighting itself was retrospectively incorporated into the narrative. Euro-Americans, from those who fought the Nez Perce in 1877 to present-day historians, have made a point to praise the courage, skill, and civility that the Nez Perce demonstrated during the fighting, suggesting not only that

the Indians were right to defend their freedom but also that the fighting itself was a proud testament to Indian warrior identity. The logic here is that fighting—and losing—is what Indians do. The idea of Indians' not only fighting, but fighting for cultural survival, proved doubly irresistible for whites when combined with the dramatic irony of the Indians' inevitable defeat.

If focusing on the figurative death of Indians was morally convenient, praising Indian eloquence helped to aestheticize (and thus further sanitize) the encounter. Consider, for example, William Tracy's (1871: 545) commentary on the breakup and diminution of the Iroquois Confederacy:

Few of the race which have left us such specimens of eloquence still survive. . . . Some of them have adopted the civilization and the religion of the white man. . . . And it is probable that, within not many years, the only remnants of the race will be found mingled with and lost in the blood of the white man. The themes which awaked their eloquence have passed away. They are now hardly children of the forest. The poetic elements with which their lives were surrounded have ceased to exist. Their language, singularly soft and beautiful in its tones and articulation, is daily becoming extinct, and soon it may be that all that shall be left of Indian eloquence will be its history.

Murray (1991: 43) notes that the effect of Tracy's elegiac response is not political but simply heightens "the pathos, and here the occasion of the pathos is not even the passing of the Indian but, in an ultimate example of the aestheticisation of the Indians' condition, the passing away of the eloquence itself." Indian speech making was thus a crucial component of surrenders, marking them as both political and literary moments, military defeats and opportunities for text collection. The ability of the Indian to speak his own elegy was morally and politically reassuring and confirmed the dramatic inevitability of defeat.

Another effect of attributing eloquence to the dying Indian was to severely circumscribe Native Americans' capacity for speech and self-representation. As I have suggested, the peak of Indian identity and its characteristic features—authenticity, nobility, tragedy—came at the moment of death. The Indian was seen as most potent at the very point his defeat was assured. That is, his potency was relegated to one apocalyptic *moment* beyond his control. If the dying (surrendering) Indian was eloquent, the dead (assimilated) Indian was silenced, no longer of much interest to Euro-Americans (McCoy 2004: 151, 162). So if dying provided an occasion for the native to speak, surrender inevitably foreshadowed muteness and disempowerment. Death and speaking therefore mutually impli-

cated one another. And it was Euro-Americans who orchestrated Indian deaths, sometimes attempting to prolong and savor them. An eyewitness to a speech made by a Sioux leader in 1868 reported:

As he warmed up to his subject he became more impassioned; his robe dropped to the ground, leaving him dressed only in a breech clout of embroidered broadcloth and porcupine-decorated and beaded moccasins. . . . From one of the wounds in his side (he had been stabbed several times by American soldiers in an unsuccessful attempt to capture him one night while he was sleeping) blood trickled down his bare trunk; whether it had been opened for this dramatic occasion or whether it had never healed I do not know. (Quoted in Balgooyen 1968: 31)

This observer considered it possible, even fitting, that the dramatic spectacle of an almost naked, bleeding Indian was deliberately staged.

The appeal of wounded, bleeding Indian orators carried over to the production and collection of Indian texts. Virginia Irving Armstrong (1971: xx) stated in the preface to her anthology of Native American oratory:

The entire pathos of the fate of the Indian in North America is contained in the following pages; in them his voice rises and returns as a living thing, tortured, scarred, plaintive, yet always eloquent. In essence, his words, plain or poetic, can never be completely lost; once read they are bound to remain hauntingly in the mind, as vividly beautiful as the remembered sight of a pheasant left bleeding to death in the snow.

If the words of past Indian orators live on in written records, their power depends on the ability of anthologizers to keep the dying, bleeding Indian in front of the reader, who then experiences the pathos of passing life. In fact, the entextualization of Indian oratory itself (that is, the production of written texts based on speech) evoked the transition from orality and self-presence to literacy and self-alienation. Walter Ong (1982: 14–15) has argued that members of oral cultures realize that writing means both survival and loss of self, so they “have to die to continue living.” This paradox echoes Armstrong’s promise that dying Indians live on in her anthology. Yet with Indians, this new life is nothing more than a prolonged, textualized death for whites to enjoy.

Textuality and Subjectivity in Indian Oratory

Where has my argument up to this point left Chief Joseph? This difficult question boils down to what kind of subject we understand him to be. As

I have suggested, promoters claimed that textual representations of Indian oratory transparently revealed an authentic, accessible Indian subject. At the same time, the way they presented Indian texts allowed for the preclusion of interpretation itself, enhancing oratory's affective immediacy and shifting focus from the social, linguistic, and political complexities of individual encounters to an imagined macrocontext. To return to the first question I posed at the beginning of this essay, then, it was the promise of raw, authentic subjectivity and of unproblematic, politically reassuring speech events that ensured the enduring appeal of texts attributed to Chief Joseph.

According to this understanding of subjectivity and textuality, texts transparently re-present authentic Indians. The speaking Indian is prior to and privileged over the written text. In contrast, I argue that these texts *constitute* their subject. Far from being secondary, the texts come first, and the Indian is but an accretion of them. Consider first of all how the texts did *not* transparently re-present Indian speech. Even in face-to-face encounters, Euro-Americans usually understood Indian speech only in translation (although they may have found the *sound* of the speech impressive in itself). The complexity and significance of translating between Native American and European languages cannot be overestimated. Furthermore, encounters were always textually mediated, informed by textually sustained preconceptions about Indians, Indian languages, and what encounters with Indians were like.

Yet Chief Joseph's reputation depended less on the authentication of the relatively few people who actually *heard* him in person than on that of *readers* who encountered the speeches in writing. It was the circulation of Indian speech in print that guaranteed its widespread popularity. Most Americans, then, had never actually heard Indians orating but only perused Indian speech-as-writing in newspaper and magazine articles or anthologies. To understand how these written texts constituted rather than transparently re-presented their subject, we must consider the dual processes of text production and reception. Produced exclusively by and for Euro-Americans, supposed transcripts of Indian oratory presented Indians in an original way. The white man's invention of the American Indian has been well documented (e.g., Berkhofer 1978), and, especially in the case of Chief Joseph's speeches, it seems likely that the texts' production involved as much invention as straightforward reportage. This invention probably resulted as much from ignorance and misunderstanding as from notions about what Indians should be or say.

But even if we charitably assume that reporters did their best to write down what Indians really said, their texts still powerfully represented and

displaced Indian speakers due to the very nature of textuality. Thus enter the reader, whose importance may trump that of either speaker or writer/transcriber. Readers encountered texts first and did so in an overdetermined ideological framework. In the reader's engagement with the text, the speaking Indian is altogether absent or imaginary. The texts, regardless of how accurate they were, thus came to represent Indians, in the sense of standing for them, independently of speech events. (This textual displacement of the speaker clearly is not limited to Indians and does not simply result from misrepresentation. It is a fundamental function of textuality itself, as Michel Foucault [1977], Roland Barthes [1989], and other critics have demonstrated. Authorship, as a particular subjective mode, becomes a function of reading.)¹⁶

To summarize this process by which actual speech became subordinate to written representations of it, let me return briefly to Chief Joseph's 1879 Lincoln Hall address. Newspaper articles confirm that Joseph did indeed speak on this occasion (which is more than we can say for the 1877 surrender). However, given his impressive physical appearance, "he won the audience ere he began" speaking. This statement comes from the *Council Fire* article that both recounts the speech (without publishing a transcription of it) and advertises the *North American Review* article, which presents itself as a quasi-transcript but makes no mention of any actual speech event. And yet many nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators, most of whom have completely overlooked the *Council Fire* article, state that the *Review* text is a reproduction of "a speech" given by Joseph at Lincoln Hall. If what Chief Joseph had to say was irrelevant to the audience that had come to hear (i.e., see) him, it is even more so to readers. A speech event that was in fact politically important is totally subsumed by a written text that makes no reference to it. Instead of the actual speech being the source of the published text, the published text—originally ambiguous regarding its own production and badly misanalyzed by later critics—has become the official source of the speech.

Because of this reversal—transcript preceding speech—I argue that Chief Joseph exists today primarily as a textual construct, a product of the texts attributed to him. This is not to say that Chief Joseph never really acted in the world or spoke—he did both. Nor does my argument require me to claim that there is no correspondence whatsoever between what Joseph said and the records of his speech—there may be some (for example, the *North American Review* text may have been *inspired* by Joseph's remarks in Washington). However, we will probably never be able to specify that correspondence with any certainty, and I believe that other tasks, such as understanding the implications of the textual production of

Joseph's subjectivity, are more pressing. Joseph is a textual accretion to the extent that the alleged transcripts of his speech (and accounts of his actions, for that matter) have superseded and displaced him as an agent and speaker. Chief Joseph as agent is inaccessible to us due to the ways his subjectivity has been textually and ideologically mediated. The records of his speech represent something other (namely, the results of a long historical encounter, a complex set of language ideologies, a conquest narrative, etc.) than what he may have said. I am arguing that it is impossible to get to the "real" Chief Joseph through these texts, not only because the texts were complexly fabricated, but because the "real" Chief Joseph does not exist behind them. Chief Joseph as actor/speaker quickly became replaced by Chief Joseph as imagined and imaginary source of the texts ascribed to him (McCoy 2004: 151). As the texts came to define him, that imagined subject became far more powerful than the original. Indeed, it appropriated originality. Note that I am *not* arguing that once Chief Joseph spoke, his speech became external and independent of him, and that as it became entextualized and began to circulate it took on a life of its own beyond his control. Such an argument would reinscribe the primacy of speech and the speech event, the secondariness of writing. It is precisely this process of entextualization, and claims to transparent re-presentation, that are problematic here (simply for historical reasons).

Critiques of authorial presence in texts evoke the larger poststructuralist assault on the centered subject and the related rethinking of the concept of voice. Voicing has been especially problematic for analysts of texts attributed to Native Americans but produced by whites. Murray (1991: 52) asks, "What terms do we use to talk about the effect of authorial presence in a text? Talk of hearing a 'voice' has been used in the past to try to fix and guarantee a meaning, through the location of authorial intention, and has certainly become justifiably rather suspect." Murray and others have turned to Mikhail Bakhtin's consideration of voicing as the incorporation of the words of others into one's own discourse as an alternative model.

This problem of voicing in Native American literature has political implications. Murray (*ibid.*) attempts to avoid a critical stance that denies subaltern speakers presence of self in language, simply reproducing relations of subordination and domination. He aligns himself with Arnold Krupat, who has defended his own references to Indians' "speaking" in written texts: "I am cognizant of the problematics of textuality in both voice and text; I know that the writer is never present and that nonpresence cannot literally speak." Krupat (1989: 19–20) appeals to Bakhtin in order to retain "the metaphor of the author as speaker" and concludes, "It is no

accident that those of us who work with hitherto marginalized materials show a certain reluctance to give up the voice in favor of the text as recently defined.” Murray (1991: 52) advocates “a recognition of the collaborative, and sometimes resisting, role of *reading* in the creation of this voice, which in this case means being aware of the impossibility of finally pinning down any historical figure’s ‘real’ voice.”

I agree with these theorists that denying Indian speakers textual self-presence may be disempowering, but I also see another, even opposite, danger that may result from *defending* the “Indian voice” in these texts. Poststructuralists aside, commentators have long delighted in “pinning down” real authorial presence in Indian oratory. Indeed, as I have been arguing, it is precisely the transparency of textual representations and the subjective authenticity behind them that have guaranteed the popularity of these texts. This earlier critical confidence is not only theoretically suspect but has had real political consequences. I conclude with some reflections on how the production and interpretation of Indian speech—and the ascription of eloquence and authenticity to Indian speakers—may have facilitated the political and military subjugation of native peoples in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion: Toward a Disruptive Reading of Native American Oratory

The original title of this essay was “Talk That Comes to Nothing,” a phrase taken from Joseph’s *North American Review* article. My original intention was to explore the systematic misinterpretation of Chief Joseph’s speech about land and indigenous territorial rights in negotiations with the United States. U.S. Army officials never recognized the logic behind Nimiipuu territorial claims due to a complex set of beliefs about Indians, land use, and American expansion and because it was in their country’s best interest to reject Indian claims, relegate tribes to reservations, and finally open the Northwest for wholesale settlement. Conflict over land still interests me, but the more I worked with “Chief Joseph’s speech,” the more I realized how problematic the texts were. I also began to realize that the title I had chosen was misleading, that Joseph’s words had in fact come to a great deal. Indeed, I was increasingly amazed by *how much* his words had come to convey, how widely they circulated, and how enduring was their popularity. I was faced with reconciling General Howard and many other Americans’ simultaneous eagerness to divest Indians of their land base and to praise speeches in which Indians defended their territorial rights. Now that I have come to the end of the road, I partly wish that

Chief Joseph's talk *had* come to nothing, or at least had come to something *else*. I regret that Native American speech did not provide a more effective weapon against Euro-American expansion and domination, a more forceful instrument in land claims (see Strickland 1977). But equally regrettable is the ideological force that Indian speech did come to have. The failure and the success are complicit: part of the reason Indians were unsuccessful in defending their land was the aura associated with their speech.

A major theme of this essay has been the relationship between literary convention and interpretation and the politics of encounter between Indians and Euro-Americans. One important effect of the language ideologies I have described was that Euro-Americans were able to dismiss Indian speech as metaphorical, poetic, and pathetic rather than legitimately political. For example, few Euro-Americans recognized that Nimiipuu spiritual beliefs about the relationship between humans and land informed a real *political* understanding of territory. Instead, they spurned what Indians had to say in negotiations about their territorial rights as figurative and irrelevant (e.g., O. O. Howard 1972a: 64). Even the classification of Indian speech as "oratory" (a speech genre) emphasized form and artistic quality over political content. The aestheticization of political negotiation—turning a political moment into a literary one—ensured the impotence of Native American land claims.

Yet if Army officials never really took Indian speech seriously, how do we account for all the attention paid to talk, negotiation, and the interpretation of discourse? I contend that they understood the opening of the American West in narrative terms as the realization of a national epic. Indians played a crucial role in the drama, and the speech of individuals such as General Howard and Chief Joseph provided a sort of dramatic script. The way Euro-Americans interpreted and celebrated Indian speech and produced and circulated texts of Indian oratory precisely positioned Indian subjects in this predetermined narrative framework. Indian eloquence, inextricably linked to primitiveness, confirmed that Indians as a race were doomed and dying; the more eloquently they spoke, often uttering their own elegies, the more certain was their passing. In other words, Euro-Americans set up an Indian that they could justifiably defeat by putting words in his mouth.

I do not mean to suggest here that they did this deliberately or self-consciously but rather that the treatment of Indian speech was an important part of the broader sociocultural context in which Indians were being subjugated. Some Euro-American ideas about Indians—such as the idea that they were subhuman savages—contributed directly to military conquest and political dispossession, but I do not believe that the language

ideologies I have been describing were intentionally directed at subduing native populations. Nevertheless, romantic notions about Indian eloquence and authenticity helped to widen the power differential between the two groups. Written texts of Indian oratory effectively provided reminders of Native Americans' impending demise and of American supremacy. Furthermore (and ironically), when Euro-Americans praised Indian eloquence they effectively *silenced* (and thus disempowered) actual Indian speakers. This is true for two reasons. First, it was Euro-Americans who controlled the production and circulation of texts of Indian oratory, which, as I have shown, did not always correspond to what Indians really said. Second, texts always displace their "authors." Treating these texts as transparent re-presentations of authentic Indian subjectivity, such that texts came to stand for agents, was therefore a powerful expression of Euro-American hegemony. This interpretive stance left Indians exposed in a politically dangerous and ultimately indefensible position.¹⁷

In conclusion, then, I advocate a reading of Native American oratory that troubles the association between the speaking and self-defeating Indian, the complicity between the Indian's rhetorical success and political failure. A first step toward this end would be to reject the idea that texts transparently reveal Indian subjects. Disrupting the perceived equivalence between Indian speakers and written representations of their speech means that the texts can no longer bear all the weight of interpretation and that speakers may no longer be so easily overwritten.¹⁸ A critical analysis of the texts and of their production complicates the interpretive process and forces us to consider historical contingency, social complexity, and particular discursive circumstances, deaestheticizing and repoliticizing the encounter. Such a disruptive reading would entail radically dissociating the Indian speaker from the supposed transcripts of his speech, *not* by recognizing the texts as mere remnants or corruptions of an authentic original, but, quite the contrary, by acknowledging their constitutive, originary power. In deliberately treating these texts as powerful representations (not re-presentations) of Indian speech we might open an interpretive gap that preserves the fundamental alterity of the communicative encounter, shunning too easy a hermeneutic substitution of text for speaker. The object of study shifts from how the texts reveal an accessible, legible Indian subject to how they produce that subject. Reading these texts as such will dispense of the Indian as the author of his own demise, the pronouncer of his own elegy.

The political implications of this proposal are considerable, since it seems to disempower Indians in precisely the way Krupat and Murray anticipated. The Indian speaker becomes totally inaccessible, his "voice"

totally unrecoverable. We are faced with the crucial question famously posed by Gayatri Spivak: Can the subaltern speak? Does the indigenous subject retain any autonomous agency in the bounds of the colonial encounter or is that agency entirely co-opted by the colonizer? These questions are of utmost importance in the study of Chief Joseph and his speech but are beyond the scope of this essay. My project is more modest, and admittedly preliminary. I merely seek to introduce a measure of caution in the interpretation of Native American oratory, to warn against the dangers of traditional interpretive approaches. Affirming Chief Joseph's inaccessibility may, however, be a step forward, providing a sound critical foundation for the future.¹⁹ In the end, critiquing the conditions under which textual representations of Native American oratory were produced may do Indian speakers a greater service than either blindly praising their eloquence, earnestness, and authenticity or pointing out their impotence and failure. This critical stance does not represent a middle ground between trusting praise and outright dismissal. Such alternatives revolve around the wrong question: How accurate are these textual representations of original speech? Rather, my approach shifts the focus of analysis to process and the politics of encounter: How has Indian speech been produced and interpreted, what have been the political effects of that interpretation, and how might we subvert those effects?²⁰

My hope is that evaluating the complex politics of interpretation may somehow empower, rather than disempower, Indian speakers, causing us to be more cautious and deliberate in our own political positioning vis-à-vis Indian speech. Careful skepticism might be a way to truly honor Chief Joseph's resistance against the U.S. Army rather than effectively celebrating his role as an unwitting accomplice in the subjugation of his people. In any case, a sustained analysis of text production clarifies the dimensions of the conflict, which was not just a political and military struggle over land driven by ideas about race and civilization but also a complex discursive encounter in which language ideologies played a powerful role.

Notes

I gratefully acknowledge the thoughtful comments of Raymond Fogelson, Grant Jones, Elizabeth Povinelli, Michael Silverstein, Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, and two anonymous reviewers on earlier versions of this essay.

- 1 Another famous Indian orator, Chief Seattle, has also received some useful critical attention (Bierwert 1998; Furtwangler 1997; Kaiser 1987; Low 1995).
- 2 Writers occasionally quote other speech and "speeches" by Joseph, but these two texts are by far the most popular and most widely cited and have circulated best as independent, bounded text objects.

- 3 My analysis in this article is purely textual, but another method worth considering would be fieldwork on living Nez Perce oral traditions and public history. How do Indians today understand Chief Joseph as a speaker and resistance leader? Crisca Bierwert (1998) provides a model of such an approach in her interesting discussion of how Suquamish people have remembered and commemorated Chief Seattle (cf. McCoy 2004: xiii–xiv).
- 4 To cite but a few examples, Josephy suggests that the Nez Perce “story” has a climax and a tragic ending (1997 [1965]: xx), constituting a “sad and super-dramatic chapter of our western expansion” (Greene 2000: xii; see also Slickpoo 1973: 193). General Howard (1972a: 100) described the events at the beginning of the war as a “chapter of horrors.” This phrase comes at the beginning of an actual chapter in his book, but it also suggests that the war unfolded in discrete chunks that could be narratively organized.
- 5 Note that these authors use masculine pronouns to refer generically to Indians. Throughout this essay I will adopt this common convention when discussing the synecdochic Indian of the Euro-American imagination, recognizing that one of the homogenizing effects of abstract references to “the Indian” is the exclusion of women.
- 6 Critics have argued that if the text was a message, it should not be considered oratory (e.g., Aoki 1989: 21; Brown 1972). Differentiating “speech” and “message” in this way (assuming that Chief Joseph made the same statement one way or the other) suggests that what Indians say in the absence of whites does not constitute speech making, or at least that oratory depends on certain participant frameworks (see Murray 1991: 36).
- 7 Joseph’s *North American Review* article (text 11) also mentions a short speech (Joseph 1879: 429), but as I will show, this article is hardly a reliable source.
- 8 Wood made several attempts throughout his life to explain his contradictory reports of the surrender, citing unauthorized revisions, editing errors, and lost copies, but intertextual cross-referencing only further undermined his reliability (see Brown 1972: 15; Hampton 1994: 369; Wood 1936: 329–30).
- 9 I have also been unable to locate archival records for the *North American Review* or its editor during this period (or any other records relating Joseph to the *Review* itself).
- 10 A number of historians (e.g., Beal 1963: 318; Josephy 1997 [1965]: 639; Lavelander 1992: 336) evidently base their analysis of the *Review* article on a paragraph in Clark 1945: 218, which states that Joseph delivered his Lincoln Hall address on 14 January 1879, a date now universally cited. But J. Stanley Clark misreferenced *his* source (the 1879 *Council Fire* essay), which gives 17 January as the date of the speech (Young Joseph 1879: 22). Clark mentioned only the speech itself, not the *North American Review* article, but if scholars had bothered to consult his reference, much confusion could have been avoided regarding the origins of the text. (A survey of the *Washington Post* [14 January, 16 January, 17 January; Broken Pledges 1879] for the dates Joseph was in Washington makes it clear that Joseph spoke only once at Lincoln Hall, on 17 January.)
- 11 Euro-American ideas about Native American oratory and eloquence were informed by whites’ changing conceptions of rhetoric and public speech in general. For example, Jay Fliegelman (1993) has described the eighteenth-century “elocutionary revolution,” which placed new value on “natural” language and expressive performance. Kenneth Cmiel (1990) tracks changing and com-

peting ideologies about speech in the nineteenth century, and Sandra Gustafson (2000) analyzes the relationship between oratory and power in America through 1800, discussing Indian oratory and the ideal of authenticity, among other topics.

- 12 In his study of the emergence of writing and printing in oral societies, Walter Ong develops this theory, prevalent among nineteenth-century writers. He describes “characteristics of the psyche in oral cultures,” “oral states of consciousness,” and the “psychodynamics of orality” and concludes that “more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (Ong 1982: 30–31, 78; see also Goody 1977). Michael Harbsmeier (1989) has convincingly historicized and denaturalized this distinction, describing the process through which orality and literacy themselves became identity diacritics in early modern Europe. For a useful summary of debates surrounding the impact of literacy on oral societies, see Bender 2002: 11–14.
- 13 “Context” is never monolithic or given but is determined through social interactions, in which participants negotiate the relevance of a wide range of social conditions (see Bauman and Briggs 1990: 66–72). In this case, we may roughly distinguish between microcontext (the particular circumstances of a speech event) and (imagined) macrocontext (Manifest Destiny and the Indian’s inevitable demise). If nineteenth-century commentators emphasized the macrocontext of Indian oratory, later formalist critics have insisted on autonomous texts that are independent of, rather than embedded in, context (e.g., Wroth 1975 [1928]: 328). These opposite approaches to textual analysis both minimize the significance of *microcontext*, draining speeches of any political meaning related to the particular circumstances in which they were delivered.
- 14 Anthropologists and folklorists concerned with the ethnopoetics and “total translation” of verbal art, working largely with Native North American material, have also tended to view the written text as a secondary, imperfect record of the primary speech event (see Clements 1996: 8–14, 199–205; Hymes 1981; Krupat 1987: 118–25; and Tedlock 1983). And as James Clifford (1986: 112–19) has demonstrated in his critique of the ethnographic pastoral, lamenting the loss of tradition and bemoaning the inability of ethnographic texts to capture cultural wholeness are closely related in anthropological discourse.
- 15 This is not to say, of course, that all Euro-Americans mourned Indian assimilation and acculturation. Many fervently desired for Indians to be civilized and Christianized. For example, Richard Henry Pratt, a quintessential assimilationist, was a reformer and humanist. His motto, “Kill the Indian and save the man,” suggested no remorse. But note that assimilationists and romantics alike believed the cultural death of the Indian was inevitable.
- 16 “Authorship” also implies a particular relationship between speech and subjectivity. Krupat (1982: 328–32) remarks that in the nineteenth century Indians were rarely considered authors, because for Euro-Americans authorship meant the private origination of individual personalities. Indian oral texts were understood as anonymous, collective productions without discrete origins. In contrast, Euro-Americans could easily associate Indian oratory with single, prominent individuals. This view of oratory did not always match indigenous understandings. Harry Robie (1986: 114–15) has shown, for instance, that Iroquois orators were understood to be voicing collective interests and relying on

traditional rhetorical patterns, not expressing their individuality or originality as speakers.

- 17 McCoy (2004) critiques this hegemony of texts from a different angle, arguing that Euro-Americans employed a range of discursive practices to promote a narrative of Indian defeat and a self-serving image of Chief Joseph that masked real social conditions and silenced the Nez Perce by excluding indigenous voices from the historical record.
- 18 This disruptive strategy complements Krupat's (1987: 124–25) call for readers to “unfix” the meaning of texts of Indian oratory “as a necessity of the impossibility of transferring the qualities of oral performance to writing; of the impossibility of any ‘writing’ standing alone and fully present.” Equally impossible, I would add (and this is the point), is transferring the qualities of writing to oral performance.
- 19 Today, multiculturalists are once again championing Indian oratory and literature, advocating the inclusion of Indian (and other subaltern) voices in school curricula and literature anthologies. While the politics of nineteenth-century romanticism and late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century multiculturalism clearly differ, I suggest that the celebration of Indian voices and the quest for authenticity may be dangerous regardless and should be tempered with critical reserve.
- 20 Here I depart sharply from William Clements, who approaches texts of Indian oratory critically, but with the goal of gleaning some understanding of Indian culture from them. (What, he asks, can we learn from each of these texts?) This is a worthwhile aim, but I strongly disagree with his contention that studies that “‘debunk’ messages attributed to Indians as largely or completely the projects of the translators/textmakers/transcribers. . . . are important as long as researchers recall that their principal aim is to create a corpus of authentic texts, not to search out materials that may be fabricated” (Clements 2002: 125). I am not particularly concerned with debunking texts attributed to Chief Joseph, but I am even less interested in authenticating them.

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