

TITLE PAGE

Neihardt's Ghost Dance: The literary creation of Black Elk and Lakota Religion

by

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ABSTRACT

Native American ceremonies are an integral part of understanding indigenous culture. In the early 1900's, John Neihardt attempted to better understand the Lakota culture by interviewing Black Elk about the Ghost Dance of 1890. Originally, Neihardt's intention was to use the information he gathered as a backdrop to his impending novel. Instead, in 1930, he wrote *Black Elk Speaks*, which was based on the interview of Black Elk on Lakota Culture. Originally, the book was touted as a lens into authentic Native American religion; information that was traditionally internal was made available to outsiders. Throughout decades the book has been accepted as a valuable primary source of indigenous culture.

The Lakota Ghost Dance filled a religious void in Lakota culture that resulted from generations of oppression of tribal members by Anglo Americans. The ceremony however, is normally interpreted from the viewpoint of western educated scholars, whereas Lakota viewpoints of the Ghost Dance are normally incorporated as a secondary thought. This is a significant factor when analyzing *Black Elk Speaks* as a Native American autobiography because the history of Black Elk and the facts used to surround the Ghost Dance of 1890 are passed from a traditionally-educated Anglo poet.

Through review of various Native American literary scholars, Neihardt's book is demonstrated as problematic for many reasons. It is more a reflection of Neihardt's perspective than that of Black Elk, as the information presented to readers is diluted or otherwise altered and the phrasing is not original to Black Elk himself. Furthermore, the book elevates the perpetual question of authorship and its role in Native American autobiographies.

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INTROCUCTION TO NEIHARDT'S GHOST DANCE

In the early 1900's, John Neihardt, poet and novelist, attempted to better understand the Native American Ghost Dance to propagate a backdrop in his impending western-themed novel. After meeting with and interviewing Black Elk, who was considered a Holy Man within the Sioux people of South Dakota, Neihardt changed the scope of his work to document the stories and prophetic visions of Black Elk himself. In 1932 Neihardt published *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of the Oglala Sioux, As Told by John Neihardt*. The book had an enormous influence on the reputation of Black Elk and Neihardt as it became recognized as an authoritative source documenting the Lakota religion. Without it, it is unlikely that Black Elk would be known today outside of his tribe.

Neihardt's work was, and still is to some extent, considered an almanac to Lakota theology, as it offers a lens into an otherwise exclusive culture. However, scrutiny of Neihardt's transcripts has indicated discrepancies between Black Elk's interviews and the publication of *Black Elk Speaks*. For example, when reading *Black Elk Speaks*, one will find that the original transcripts between Neihardt and Black Elk do not align with the content of Neihardt's publication. In Chapter 24, "The Butchering at Wounded Knee," Neihardt says that Yellow Bird shot and killed a soldier at Wounded Knee; however, the transcript does not say the soldier was killed. It only describes him as being shot.¹ Neihardt emphasizes the "death" of the soldier to accentuate the violence of the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Incongruities such as the one described above, challenge the book's role as being representative of the Lakota Nation as it is difficult for someone like Neihardt to fully

¹ John G Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: The Complete Edition*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 326.

comprehend the Native American race in the same way as someone raised as a Native American.² He is doing this by adopting the perspective of a Native American and qualifying the details of the Lakota faith. This is evident as Neihardt wrote *Black Elk Speaks* in the first person, giving himself the authority to determine information most important for the reader. Furthermore, much of the information Neihardt chose to present readers regarding Lakota culture is unsubstantiated. This is significant because *Black Elk Speaks* was published under the guise as a window into Lakota Culture. Despite heightened scrutiny over the decades, the book continues to be considered a source on Lakota culture.

Even though the book can fit into several genres it is most commonly considered an autobiography. Traditionally one would be tempted to categorize it as a biography due to the account of Black Elk's life being written by another individual. The biographical expression in this case is complex due to the appearance of the main character, who is Native American, being depicted by a white American, a third party; that explains the last five words of Neihardt's title, "As told by John Neihardt." If *Black Elk Speaks* is intended to reflect the thoughts of Black Elk himself, then the last five words of the title should read "As told by Black Elk." This implies that the thoughts and words of Black Elk were interpreted and articulated by Neihardt, which confuses the book's content as it is intended to be a form of self-expression.

Scholars find that many autobiographies focusing on Native Americans are highly problematic for a couple of reasons. Consideration of Native American autobiographies should begin by analyzing the perpetual question of authorship due to many Native American autobiographies being compiled, edited, or otherwise transposed to accommodate none-Native

² William Bloodworth. "Varieties of American Indian Autobiography." *Melus* 5, No. 3 (1978): 67.

readers.³ Many early Native American autobiographies were coauthored by non-natives, which means the information gathered to write a Native American autobiography must be translated or explained; which inherently changes the heritage of the information. And because of such influence, ethnologically-oriented autobiographies raise questions of authenticity.⁴ Some contemporary scholars challenge whether such examples are Native American writing at all. It is important to note that *Black Elk Speaks* is an autobiography due to the subject being centered on Black Elk and based on the in-person interviews between Neihardt and Black Elk. However, the differences between Native American autobiographies and their western equivalents raise questions about the literary genre as well as the notion of identity.⁵

The second problem found within Native American autobiographies is the difficulty for non-Native compilers to understand indigenous culture, in which the compilers omit or overlook seemingly erroneous facts that hold indigenous significance.⁶ Due to the idea that many works are told and edited by third parties, it often becomes beneficial for the compiler to reorganize, ignore, or exaggerate details, which inevitably changes the way the information is presented. In the words of Luther Standing Bear, “no one is able to understand the Indian race like the Indian.” This is not to say that only Natives offer insight to indigenous religion but that it is often difficult for many non-Natives to intrinsically understand indigenous culture, resulting in a dilution of information due to interpretation.

³ Tyra Twomey. "More Than One Way To Tell A Story: Rethinking the Place of Genre in Native American Autobiography and the Personal Essay." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 19 No. 2 (2007): 22.

⁴ Bloodworth, "Varieties of American Indian Autobiography," 69.

⁵ Twomey, "More Than One Way To Tell A Story," 22.

⁶ Bloodworth, "Varieties of American Indian Autobiography," 68.

In the case of *Black Elk Speaks*, it is made clear that Black Elk wanted his story told to the world, which is why he agreed to Neihardt's interview request. Neihardt was meant to write Black Elk's story so that it could be "understood" by the world.⁷ This is not a qualitative assessment but rather indicating that both the subject and the author have different agendas. Because of the circumstances in which the book was written, many scholars today question whether they should continue to be categorized as an autobiography or as a completely different genre. When studying *Black Elk Speaks*, one must recognize the complexity that is affiliated with having a book dictated by its subject but written by someone else entirely. However, while there is controversy within the literary categorization of Native America autobiographies, there is still value in reading and studying the genre. For instance, many Native Americans wanted their stories told to the public. In partnering with a resource able to publicize their personal memories and reflections, both Native and non-Native cultures received an account that would not have been produced if not for the assistance of an outside source. Some of the less compromised Native American autobiographies also offer answers or insight to the cultural tradition, identity, history, and individual achievement of specific Native American cultures. Rather than focusing on the nature and genre of the work, it is more important to understand the methodology and amount of third-party influence in the production of the literature.

Take for instance Clyde Holler's allegory of Socrates. In his 1995 book, *Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism*, he compares Black Elk to Socrates arguing that the two are similar in the way their teachings are rendered and understood by others. Holler says that despite their enormous public influence, analyzing the works dictated by either Black Elk or Socrates contain similar problems due to their teachings being entirely situational and

⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

oral.⁸ Socrates' reputation is based on the portrait painted by Plato, through his writings, which is how readers developed an interpretation of Socrates.⁹ The relationship between Black Elk and Neihardt is similar. Black Elk's teachings were passed to Neihardt orally, and his public image and reputation came from the literary construction of *Black Elk Speaks*. In the same publication, Holler argues that much of the information rendered from Black Elk to Neihardt was lost in translation. The interviews between Black Elk and John Neihardt in 1931 were spoken in Lakota, translated by Black Elk's son, Ben Black Elk, and recorded in shorthand by Neihardt's daughter, Enid Neihardt, who then provided John Neihardt with a transcript roughly arranged in chronological order.¹⁰ This is significant for several reasons, primarily that Black Elk and Neihardt were not speaking the same language, which means it is inevitable that information would be lost in the exchange. Secondly, the conversation was transcribed through handwritten notes, which implies it is unlikely that every single word was recorded. Lastly, this speaks to how many hands the information passed through before being edited and then published in *Black Elk Speaks*.

This leads to many discrepancies between the original transcripts from the Black Elk interviews and the final text of *Black Elk Speaks*. Neihardt's reshaping of Black Elk's interviews raises important debates centered around the validity of content published within the book. In order to create a work of literature, Neihardt sacrificed chronological and textual fidelity in order to focus on what he (Neihardt) considered to be important.¹¹ This is a fundamental cause of

⁸ Clyde Holler, *Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press: 1995), 2.

⁹ Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

¹¹ Clyde Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy the Theology of Black Elk Speaks." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 52, No. 1 (1984): 20.

textual discrepancies between the words within Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* and the text from the 1931 interviews from which *Black Elk Speaks* was written.

To assist in proving this, Raymond J DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather* will be used to support the interpretation of the original interview content. In his book, DeMallie reviews and presents the entire body of shorthand notes, transcribed and annotated, from the interviews between Black Elk and John Neihardt. The book is divided into three parts, the first providing a biographical account of Black Elk's Life as both a medicine man and Catholic. The second, presents the full text of the interviews conducted in 1931 which became the basis for *Black Elk Speaks*. The last part is a series of reflections Black Elk Shared with Neihardt in 1944, forming the basis of Neihardt's later work *When the Tree Flowered*.¹² Part two is most relevant in this case in which the differences between *Black Elk Speaks* and the original transcripts are revealed. This makes available a wealth of dialogue not used in *Black Elk Speaks*, as well as clarifications to the text.

DeMallie is more trustworthy than Neihardt for a couple of reasons. First, as a leading anthropological expert on the Lakota, DeMallie has made the Lakota religion more accessible to the scholarly community.¹³ *The Sixth Grandfather* is also a source that clarifies scholarly tension that is debated within *Black Elk Speaks*. John Powers exemplifies this by pointing to DeMallie's footnote clarifying Black Elk's religion stating that most "Oglalas remember Black Elk 'primarily as a Roman Catholic catechist, not as a Lakota medicine man.'"¹⁴ Lastly, DeMallie's

¹² William K Powers, "Reviewed Works: The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teaching Given to John G Neihardt by Raymond J DeMallie." *Ethnohistory* 33, No. 1 (1986): 122.

¹³ Clyde Holler, "Reviewed Work(s): The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt by Raymond J. DeMallie," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, No. 1 (Spring 1987): 144.

¹⁴ Powers, "Review of DeMallie," 122.

The Sixth Grandfather normalizes the transcript. Powers references two editorial challenges when speaking of the original transcripts. One was completely written in shorthand, where the other was notated by a typewriter. DeMallie was able to regularize spelling and punctuation in order for the narrative to become more readable for the audience, which inevitably allows for more clarity of Black Elk's story line.

In conjunction with DeMallie's work, Clyde Holler's 1984 article "Lakota Religion in Tragedy" and John Powers' 1990 work "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," along with several others, will provide further analysis contributing to the theological implications of *Black Elk Speaks*. These two works especially will allow me to demonstrate how Black Elk's religious affiliations are a product of Neihardt's creative influence. These two works discuss the implications of Neihardt's creativity on the portrayal of Black Elk's religion. Both Holler's and Powers' works are leveraged in order to distinguish the difference between the Catholic and traditionalist religious elements found in *Black Elk Speaks*.

In his article, Holler demonstrates that Neihardt "sacrificed strict reporting of Black Elk's theological convictions in order to express his own."¹⁵ Thus, he argues that there is a significant difference between the theology of Black Elk and the theology attributed to him in *Black Elk Speaks*. He claims when using *Black Elk Speaks* for the study of Lakota history, it is important to understand the differences between valid fact, and Neihardt's interpretation of the significant aspects of the Lakota religion.¹⁶ He does this by comparing the unpublished transcripts of the Black Elk interviews with the final text of *Black Elk Speaks*.

¹⁵ Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 20.

¹⁶ Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 41.

Powers is one of the most vocal critics of *Black Elk Speaks*. He argues that Neihardt consciously molded a character that conforms to the Judeo-Christian model in an attempt to satisfy a largely non-Native audience. For Powers, the book misrepresents Lakota tradition to non-critical readers.¹⁷ In order to prove this, he argues the elements of Black Elk's life are decidedly Christian, making it unlikely that he would ignore his religious affiliations in the interviews with Neihardt. For example, Powers argues that Black Elk spent most of his life as a leader of the Catholic Church; especially between 1905 and 1950. He also points out Black Elk mostly explained the Ghost Dance to his followers primarily in Christian terms. He is keen to point out that only a few chapters of *Black Elk Speaks* are focused on Lakota religion; and what is discussed, is rather abbreviated. Elements such as the ones described above will be a key contribution in proving Neihardt's portrayal of Black Elk's religion.

To further challenge the fidelity of *Black Elk Speaks*, Rani-Henrik Andersson and James Mooney will be used to reference and verify historical details surrounding the Ghost Dance of 1890. Both of these academics are well reviewed and accepted by their peers in the field of Plains Indian history. In his 2008 book, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, Andersson discusses the revitalization of the Ghost Dance Movement in the 1880's and 1890's. His book presents information from a larger perspective, drawn from the multiple studies and interdisciplinary interpretations regarding the ceremony. One element that makes Andersson's work unique is the incorporation of the Lakota voice. His study includes the incorporation of six different groups in an attempt to provide a multidimensional realistic and historically sound reconstruction of the Lakota Ghost Dance.

¹⁷ Phillip Arnold, "Black Elk and Book Culture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, No 1. (1999): 92.

Mooney, an American ethnographer, lived with and studied Plains Indians. Throughout his career he produced an impressive bibliography of works documenting the culture and history of a variety of Plains Indian tribes. His book *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, explains the events and facets surrounding the Ghost Dance. Following the massacre of Wounded Knee, Mooney, under the Bureau of American Ethnology, investigated the incident, discovering how much the Ghost Dance influenced the event. In his book, Mooney cites a number of primary source documents in order to detail the songs, dances, and events surrounding the ceremony. Mooney's book is an expansive reference for the Ghost Dance of 1890. The text explains the origins of the ghost dance from the messiah (also seen as Wovoko), all the way through its spread through Native American tribes in the 1890's. Mooney interprets the Ghost dance by tribe and provides a technical breakdown and explanation of each song/dance significant to each group, as well as the context of the dance for each tribe.

Mooney's book is one of the most important to the thesis because it is a fundamental reference that appears in majority of the other sources that are referenced throughout the paper. It is considered fundamental in understanding the Ghost Dance. Mooney spends a considerable portion of his book explaining origin of the Ghost Dance to the Lakotas, as well as the meaning of each Lakota song in the ceremony.

Before analyzing Neihardt's text against DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather*, it is important to understand what the Ghost Dance was and how it was instituted in order to understand its relation to the perspective of Black Elk within John Neihardt's work. This short summary is a lens into Native American ceremonies as an integral part of understanding indigenous culture.

GHOST DANCE SUMMARY

The Ghost Dance filled a religious void in Lakota culture that resulted from generations of oppression by Anglo Americans and is subject to many interpretations and theories. It is normally interpreted from the viewpoint of western educated scholars, whereas incorporation of the Lakota mindset is a secondary thought.¹⁸ Neihardt falls into this category as he tries to sell the Ghost Dance to his readers by morphing Black Elk into a depiction that is entertaining and stereotypical to the typical non-Native American reader. He does this by making Black Elk out to be a traditional Native American while he ignores Black Elk's Christianity and other white civilities. Robert Sayre defines this as "Savagism." Savagism is the stereotypical view of Native Americans through edited and compiled autobiographies.¹⁹ It is important to understand that savagism is not an accurate description of reality or based on how the Native Americans describe themselves, but on how whites have attempted to described them, creating the stereotypical image of "savagery." Sayre claims that those who do not take the time to know and understand indigenous culture will fall victim to cultural conditioning of Native American autobiographies.

For background, The Ghost Dance ceremony emanated from the vision of a Paiute known as the messiah or Wovoko in the late 1880s, and has been identified as a form of Lakota revitalization – a response to white settler colonialism, and as resistance to the white man and his culture/government. The roots of the messiah's doctrine and the Ghost Dance ceremony can be found in several earlier North American revitalization movements.²⁰ Elements of Christianity can be seen in these movements, such as resurrection after death and paradise on earth. One of

¹⁸ Rani-Henrik Andersson. "When the Spirits Arrived: Divergent Lakota Voices of the 1890 Ghost Dance." *Plains Anthropologist* 63 No. 246 (2017): 135.

¹⁹ Robert F. Sayre, "Vision and Experience in Black Elk Speaks." *College English* 32, No. 5 (1971): 512.

²⁰ Anderson, "When the Spirits arrived," 25.

the movements most influential to the messiah, and by extension the Ghost Dance, originated in Nevada in 1869. Led by the Northern Paiute Wodziwob, the objective of the ceremony was to bring all of the dead Native Americans back to life and restore the traditional way of living. This movement was known as the Ghost Dance of 1870. The messiah, being well acquainted with Wodziwob, adopted the movement later in initiating the Ghost Dance of 1890. Other movements such as the dreamer movement of 1870's and the Shaker movement of 1881 also influenced the doctrine of the messiah.²¹ Like the Ghost Dance of 1870, each of these movements contained elements of Christianity in the form of resurrection and restoration of the old ways of life; all elements exhibited in the Ghost Dance of 1890.

The Ghost Dance of 1890 spread to most of the western plain's tribes in a remarkably short amount of time. In essence, the doctrine of the Ghost Dance was that a time would come where the entire Indian population (both living and dead) would be re-united in a restored world.²² The Native Americans would continue to live in this world forever free from death, starvation, famine, and misery. In order to understand the Ghost Dance ceremony, it is important to outline the situation of the Lakota in the late 1880's. As compensation for the Sioux act of 1889, the Great Sioux Reservation was divided into six smaller reservations; which were Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Cheyenne River, Standing Rock, Lower Brule, and Crow Creek. As a result, all of these reservations faced famine, territorial repossession, and shortages of rations.²³ The beef supply was drastically reduced by about two million pounds at Pine Ridge, and one million at other camps causing starvation and hardship among the residents in all of these sections.²⁴

²¹ Anderson, "When the Spirits Arrived," 27.

²² Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 31.

²³ Andersson, "When the Spirits Arrived," 136.

²⁴ Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier 1846-1890*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 238.

The Ghost Dance filled a religious void for many Plains Tribes affected in these destitute areas. For the Lakotas however, the Ghost Dance was nativistic, as it revived and perpetuated their culture and united them with many others out of a common yearning for the traditional lifestyle of the Native American.²⁵ Until the early eighteenth century, Lakotas dwelled on the prairies between the Minnesota and Missouri rivers. Within small groups throughout the mid eighteenth century, the Lakotas were pushed west by Ojibwas and Santee Dakotas to larger plains areas.²⁶ However, the plains offered resources needed to continue a prosperous lifestyle. The plains offered a tremendous amount of space, an abundance of bison, and trade opportunities with non-Native settlers. The Lakotas, best known as being part of the Sioux or Dakotas, arrived to the plains in small independent groups, driving other preexisting tribes away. By the late eighteenth century, the Lakotas were one of the most dominant Plains tribes. Buffalo was one of the primary resources for the Lakota. The acquisition of horses enabled them to hunt more efficiently, increasing the quality of life among the community.²⁷ As a largely nomadic people, the Lakotas largely avoided epidemics by consistently moving anywhere between the Missouri River and Black Hills. In the early nineteenth century, the whites were not yet the enemy of the Lakota, instead they were a valued trade partner, providing guns, ammunition, and other utilities that supported the Lakota daily life. For traditional Lakotas, religion was an inseparable part of everyday life.²⁸ Similarly to other Plains tribes, the Lakotas believed in a sacred cosmic system that surrounded a human, which differentiated the normal everyday world from the supernatural. The sacred supernatural world was embodied in beliefs, mythology, and ceremonies, and was often recreated as religious symbols. As described above, transcendence into the (new) world

²⁵ Andersson, "When the Spirits Arrived," 137.

²⁶ Rani-Henrik Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 5.

²⁷ Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

would come out of the Ghost Dance itself, in which dancers would enter a trance which contained visions of their deceased relatives in the new world that was promised. Wovoko, known in *Black Elk Speaks* as solely as “the messiah,” counseled the Native Americans into the Ghost Dance, along with unification with each other as well as the whites.²⁹

Rumors of the messiah began through letters written by the Shoshone and Arapaho in late 1888/early 1889. Many of these letters claimed the Son of God came to earth somewhere in the west and that he would bring forth a new world. Because of these letters and rumors, many Lakota desired to hear more regarding the messiah in the west, which led to the Lakota sending a delegation to meet the messiah where he resided. Selection of the delegation was of great importance. Before the selection of men were made, a counsel that included the progressive and traditional chiefs was held at Pine Ridge.³⁰ In summary, after Sioux emissaries returned from investigating the Ghost Dance in Nevada, the Ghost Dance was indoctrinated among the Sioux in the spring of 1890.³¹ As the dance continued, the hardship of reservation life worsened, furthermore, tribes were ordered by the U.S. Army to cease dancing. This military response was due to the fear of losing control upon seeing the growing popularity of the Ghost Dance ceremony. The ceremony was performed daily with a growing population of dancers in attendance. The appearance of military troops triggered approximately 3000 Lakotas from Pine Ridge and Rosebud to flee the area. The attempted arrest of Sitting Bull and Big Foots Band led to the massacre known commonly as Wounded Knee in 1890.

²⁹ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 146.

³⁰ Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 31.

³¹ Holler, “Lakota Religion and Tragedy,” 32.

For Neihardt, who originally intended to tell the story of the events at Wounded Knee, the Ghost Dance was an unavoidable part which he was still? able to romanticize in *Black Elk Speaks*.³² The Ghost Dance is set up and portrayed in the book through the lens of Black Elk's perspective, and although the information is summarized in narrative form, most of the material cannot be extrapolated to be reflective of Lakota culture as a whole. Increased scrutiny of Neihardt's construction of *Black Elk Speaks* has resulted in the deterioration of the book as a primary source on Lakota culture. It is commonly declared a work of art more so than an academic publication of any kind.³³ Though the book is more credible as the biography of Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks* should not be considered a reliable source of information on Lakota culture as a whole. By categorizing the book even as a secondary source, the information is implicated to maintain a form of credibility. Black Elk's perspective of the Ghost Dance should not be dismissed; however, there are several key issues with the way the information is presented, preventing it from providing credible insight into Lakota culture. First, it is evident that Neihardt altered the original conversations between himself and Black Elk in order to paint his own rendering of traditional Lakota ceremony. He consistently portrays Black Elk having a larger role in the Ghost Dance than what is understood by contemporary scholarship. He also alters Black Elk's chosen religion of Catholicism in order to give readers a view of an authentic Native American experience. Second, there is limited clarity in Neihardt's coverage of key events surrounding the Ghost Dance, his descriptions are vague, and without the use of outside sources, it is impossible to receive an accurate representation of the events that transpired. All of

³² Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 32.

³³ Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 7.

these examples represent a diverse portfolio of problems which prevent *Black Elk Speaks* from being a trusted and reliable source of information regarding the Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890.

NEIHARDT'S RESHAPING OF TRANSCRIPTS

Throughout most of this essay, the idea of merit is frequently referenced and its significance in determining the validity of information surrounding Lakota culture found in *Black Elk Speaks*. But what is merit, and why is it important in the context of Neihardt's writing? Before one can truly analyze the content of Neihardt's work, they need to understand the scale on which he is being evaluated. Credible writing is objective and can be interpreted differently depending on the individual; however, it can generally be categorized as containing planned and supported information, evidenced with opinions and arguments that are both original and substantiated. As stated previously however, Neihardt's book functions as an autobiography, which means there is no informational question Neihardt is looking to answer; he does not need evidence substantiated by others in order to prove a particular point. The basis of his writing centered wholly around Black Elk. This means that because he is writing an autobiography and the information is from the memory and viewpoint of Black Elk, he can make questionable assertions about people and events; without exhibiting the same scrutiny he would if Neihardt was writing an independent research thesis.

Because the focus of his work is centered on the thoughts and memories of another individual, the scope of *Black Elk Speaks* would be considered a primary source versus a secondary one. The evaluation put forth is intended to appraise the quality of the book's content in order to determine its role as substantial evidence that could potentially be used to understand the Lakota religion. Ideally, the content within an academic study should add substance to thoughts and ideas. This allows the reader to identify what has informed the writer's thinking, as well as to prove the writer's understanding of concepts and theories on the topic. However, if the information used to demonstrate understanding or prove a theory is incorrect, the integrity of

the study likely will be dismissed by readers. This means that if *Black Elk Speaks* is to be used as an authoritative source for subsequent studies, there should be no question as to whether the information in the book is factual.

This idea strongly plays into the debate over whether Native American autobiographies, written or transcribed and then edited by Western scholars, should deserve merit as credible work. If the book is altered or reshaped erroneously by a third party, the information being featured innately will contain falsehoods. As mentioned before, Neihardt creates a heroic Native American caricature that ignores Black Elk's chosen religion and exaggerates his subject's involvement within the Ghost Dance movement. To showcase Neihardt's dominion over Black Elk's narrative, the following text and themes indicate where Neihardt reshapes the original information dictated by Black Elk, by either exaggerating or removing dialogue in order to assist his own agenda. Also emphasized is Neihardt's shaping of Black Elk's theology, in which he makes Black Elk out to appear as a traditionalist and not the loyal Roman Catholic he was. In both of these examples, Neihardt's alterations create an image Neihardt wants his readers to receive.

TEXTUAL COMPARISON

Black Elk Speaks contains a significant number of personal experiences that are recollected by Black Elk and told by Neihardt. Neihardt shapes Black Elk's thoughts and memories through lingual creativity. *The Messiah* was a recounting of Neihardt's interpretation of the events leading up to the indoctrination of the Ghost Dance. In this chapter, Neihardt focuses on Black Elk's thoughts and experiences participating in the Ghost Dance. Caution should be used with the information in this chapter because the content, regardless of authorship, is original to Black Elk, not to be reflective of everyone's experiences or the Ghost Dance as a whole. Even though the content may be appropriated by Neihardt, it is still indicative of Black Elk's life. This is particularly dangerous to a casual reader, because the text is a personification of Black Elk, by Neihardt.

Readers of *Black Elk Speaks* need to know and understand what was said by Black Elk, and what was added or removed by Neihardt. This can be partially determined by juxtaposing the text of *Black Elk Speaks* to the transcripts and annotations from the collaborators' interviews. However, it is important to note that the transcripts themselves are still not removed from the authenticity of the Lakota world. They are really a product of the collaboration between Neihardt and Black Elk.³⁴ The function of the transcript is meant to provide clarity and insight into the differences between the interviews and the publication. It is important to note also that *The Sixth Grandfather* does not contain as many chapters as Neihardt's book; in fact, the three chapters from *Black Elk Speaks* that are analyzed in this essay are summarized in one chapter in

³⁴ Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 20.

The Sixth Grandfather. However, the subject matter in the *Sixth Grandfather* follows *Black Elk Speaks* chronologically, which is how the two texts will be used for comparison.

The first example of textual differences is seen in *Visions of the Other World*, in which textual alterations are apparent within the first line of the chapter. Neihardt wrote:

So I dressed myself in a sacred manner, and before the dance began next morning, I went among the people who were standing around the withered tree. Good Thunder, who was a relative of my Father and later married my mother, put his arms around me and took me to the sacred tree that had not bloomed, and there he offered up a prayer for me.³⁵

Contrary to Neihardt's writing, *The Sixth Grandfather* reads:

So I dressed myself in sacred cloths. I told no one that I was going to join them but I got ready for the next day. Before the Ghost Dance was on the next morning, I got among them around the sacred pole. Good Thunder, an uncle of mine, took me in his arms and took me to the sacred stick, offering a prayer for me here.³⁶

Although some of the differences are subtle, there is much to unpack between the information Neihardt interpreted, what was said by Black Elk, and what was transcribed. The first element to focus on is the difference between “dressed myself in a sacred manner” and “dressed myself in sacred cloths.” The word “cloths” implies that Ghost Dance shirts were already in use; this not

³⁵ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 150.

³⁶ Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 259.

only dates the account but indicates this was not Black Elk's first meeting with the Ghost Dancers.³⁷ It also indicates his participation was not a surprise, as pointed out in the next sentence, because he indicates acquisition of the sacred attire before attending the ceremony.

The second point to focus on is the second sentence of each passage. Neihardt rolls right into Black Elk's attendance of the Ghost Dance whereas the transcript claims Black Elk "told no one that [he] was going to join them" at the Ghost Dance. Although this may seem like a minor detail, it is indicative of Black Elk's initial sentiments surrounding the ceremony. When Black Elk first introduces the Ghost Dance in *The Messiah*, he discusses his initial skepticism of the ceremony; Neihardt keeping his attendance a secret dramatizes the initial feelings Black Elk disclosed. And although the semantics of this sentence may not directly impact the academic legitimacy of Neihardt's portrayal of the Ghost Dance, it is indicative of the smaller details Neihardt determined as unimportant.

The next element of the Ghost Dance skewed by Neihardt encompasses the song Black Elk, Good Thunder and Kicking Bear sang while dancing: "Who do you think he is that comes? It is one who seeks his mother."³⁸ Neihardt explains this song as being: "what the dead would sing when entering the other world and looking for their relatives who had gone there before them."³⁹ According to the transcripts as outlined in *The Sixth Grandfather*, Black Elk said: "To be said in the other world to someone coming from here."⁴⁰

³⁷ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 325.

³⁸ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 150.

³⁹ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 151.

⁴⁰ DaMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 260.

In this excerpt, Neihardt states that the dead will sing upon entering the other world; whereas, Black Elk is stating that the song is being sung to the dead entering the other world, not by them. The significance of this discrepancy is that Neihardt completely reversed the meaning of the song. On the surface, this example may seem miniscule. Some may even argue that this is simply a mix-up, that Neihardt had no intention of misrepresenting the song highlighted by Black Elk. However, the purpose of this essay is to evaluate the information within *Black Elk Speaks*, in regards to the Ghost Dance, for academic integrity. Neihardt reversed the implication and meaning of a song. Intent in this case is irrelevant as the information stated in the book is incorrect. This alters the reader's understanding of the culture and ceremonial song because he/she will be inclined to believe Neihardt's words as being true, which is possibly most detrimental because a non-critical reader is likely to be unsuspecting of the alterations. From a cultural perspective, alterations such as the one described above are how integral knowledge surrounding Lakota religion is diluted. Because readers will likely believe Neihardt's statements, true information surrounding the Lakota ceremony will eventually be eroded if outside research is not conducted.

Lastly, Neihardt attempts to exaggerate the recount of Black Elk's Ghost Dance vision by adding thematic elements and fabricating details not found in the transcript. This is mostly seen in two pieces of his vision, the first being when Neihardt describes Black Elk's feeling of being lifted off the ground. In both the transcripts and *Black Elk Speaks*, the experience is described as a "swinging" motion which results in Black Elk flying through the air towards the other world. Neihardt ends his description of this adding the statement "there was no fear with this, just a

growing happiness.”⁴¹ This implicates Neihardt in suggesting Black Elk experienced happiness which he did not actually say or possibly mean.

The second part of Neihardt’s fabrication of Black Elk’s vision is seen during his interaction with two men after touching ground in the other world. Both *Black Elk Speaks* and *The Sixth Grandfather* describes these men as coming to Black Elk and saying:

It is not yet time to see your father. We will give you something that you shall carry back to your people, and with it they shall come to see their loved ones.⁴²

Neihardt adds two key lines between the statements. In *Black Elk Speaks*, the same line reads:

It is not yet time to see your father, who is happy. You have work to do.
We will give you something that you shall carry back to your people, and with it they shall come to see their loved ones.⁴³

This is significant because Neihardt is adding emotion to the vision in which the “father” or “great spirit” is happy. Nowhere is there any indication in the transcripts or otherwise that Black Elk said this. Also, Neihardt’s statement “you have work to do” builds an image that Black Elk has a larger role in the Ghost Dance than what has been commonly accepted. Neither James Mooney or Henrik Andersson reference Black Elk as having any role in the development of the Ghost Dance. They merely see him as a Ghost Dancer.⁴⁴ Granted, Black Elk did see it as his

⁴¹ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 151

⁴² Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 151.

⁴³ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 152.

⁴⁴ Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 54.

duty to restore unity among the Lakota, but this is overly exaggerated by Neihardt with additions such as this.

These three excerpts are just mere examples of some of the creative liberties Neihardt has taken with the Black Elk interviews, which helps prove that the legitimacy of *Black Elk Speaks* should be called into question. The evidence presented in the *The Sixth Grandfather*, confirms that John Neihardt has altered and removed information in order to create a “bigger” Ghost Dance character. He creates an illusion that Black Elk had a major role in the Ghost Dance, when scholarship has proven otherwise. However, the Ghost shirts, described in the first example, will be explained further later on in this paper as they are an important element to this Lakota ceremony.

BLACK ELK AND CATHOLICISM

The content of Black Elk's visions as articulated by Neihardt, only encompasses elements of the Ghost Dance reflective of traditionalist Lakota values. The overarching point is that Neihardt ignores Black Elk's Catholicism which depicts him (Black Elk) as a theologically traditional Native American; which according to DeMallie, presents the greatest challenge to understanding Black Elk's life and work. The romanticized traditional account of Black Elk and the Ghost Dance appeases to European-American expectations of learning about authentic Native American culture. Most likely a Catholic rendition of the Ghost Dance would not appeal to readers looking for insight into a Lakota ceremony; or those hoping to confirm their romanticized notions of indigenous culture and religion. Routinely Black Elk is interpreted as either a Lakota traditionalist or a Catholic, depending who authored the work.⁴⁵ In most cases, it is reduced to an either/or situation, in which Black Elk was either a full traditionalist and therefore could not be a devout Catholic; or he was a devout Catholic and could not have been a traditionalist. For example, DeMallie's Black Elk made a total commitment to Catholicism and then reverted to traditionalism, whereas Power's suggests Black Elk's religion can be explained as "Dual Participation."⁴⁶ In 1984, DeMallie claimed that Black Elk's Christianity is a large challenge in understanding his life. DeMallie's theory however, is rather unsubstantiated as there is little evidence to confirm or deny the truth. As stated previously, DeMallie's resume is impressive focusing on both Lakota culture and literary implications of *Black Elk Speaks*; specifically, in the context of Black Elk's Christianity and religious symbolism. DeMallie has

⁴⁵ Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 204.

⁴⁶ Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 204.

dedicated a significant amount of work separating Black Elk from Neihardt in order to clarify Black Elk's message and purpose.

Powers, who specializes in the Lakota, questions the theory of dual participation in the context of Black Elk's religion. The concept of dual participation is boggling for many, including ethnologists, anthropologists, and governments, because it is difficult to explain how indigenous peoples, such as Native Americans, participate in two separate discrete religious systems.⁴⁷ This certainly applies to Black Elk because depending on the source, he is either Catholic, traditionalist, or both. Powers proposes that dual participation cannot be assumed to fulfill the same needs. The solution is to discard the idea that Black Elk is dealing with "bi-religion" or "dual religious beliefs" but instead view each theological identification as having separate purposes and fulfilling separate needs. A good example of this can be seen in Black Elk's preaching. He would make followers understand catechistic events through illusions. As he preached the Christian faith, he often would bury a pouch of water and suddenly stamp the pouch, forcing water to rush out of the ground.⁴⁸ However, after the massacre of Wounded Knee, Black Elk developed a sentiment for the traditional older Lakota beliefs. This can be seen as Catholicism and traditionalism adopting representing different sentiments and meaning to Black Elk. It is possible after the killing of many peers, his sentiment for Lakota ceremony grew stronger. It is reasonable to conclude that the debate between Catholicism and traditionalism indicates faith and religious pursuits played an important role in Black Elk's life, although one would not gather such from the text alone.

⁴⁷ Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 205

⁴⁸ Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks," 46.

Neihardt's Black Elk however, sways toward the traditionalist end of the spectrum. Neihardt minimizes the magnitude the Catholic faith had on the course of his life and does not provide an objective account of Black Elk's religion. Instead, he gives selective and romantic interpretations created from Black Elk's interviews. Readers encounter a man who fits the image of a traditionalist more so than a devout Catholic or even a hybrid between the two.⁴⁹ However, in order to understand Neihardt's Black Elk, one must first understand just how Catholic Black Elk was. At the time when Neihardt interviewed him, Black Elk had dedicated himself to the Catholic Church for two decades and was godfather to more than one hundred and twenty-five individuals.⁵⁰ He and his second wife even spent most of their lives, from 1905 to 1950, practicing and participating fully in Catholic programs.⁵¹ It is arguable that most people would categorize him first as a Catholic catechist more so than a conveyer of Lakota belief. This can be seen through his elucidation of the Ghost Dance in decidedly Christian terms.⁵²

It is important to note that Neihardt did not deny Black Elk's Catholicism but altered the text to portray him as a traditionalist. For example, the text of *Black Elk Speaks* never refers to Wovoko as "the messiah." Neihardt only refers to Wovoko as "the sacred man" or the "Wanekia."⁵³ The transcripts however, refer to Wovoko almost entirely as "the messiah." This is an important distinction as Neihardt is removing the Christian reference of "messiah," meaning savior. He is also eliminating Black Elk's Eurocentric influence by using vernacular that sounds Native.

⁴⁹ Joel W. Martin, "Before and beyond the Sioux Ghost Dance: Native American Prophetic Movements and the Study of Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, No. 4 (1991): 679.

⁵⁰ Martin, "Before and Beyond the Sioux Ghost Dance," 679.

⁵¹ Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks," 44.

⁵² Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks," 44.

⁵³ Meaning, "One Who Makes Live."

Another way Neihardt skews the religious view of Black Elk is by omitting Christian details in his text. For example, according to the transcripts, after the man in Black Elk's vision (specified below) disappears, he [Black Elk] specifically states "it seemed as though there were wounds in the palms of his hands."⁵⁴ This statement does not appear in *Black Elk Speaks* implicating Neihardt in painting Black Elk as being a traditionalist.

In another example found in *Black Elk Speaks*, Neihardt writes "Against the tree there was a man standing with his arms held wide in front of him. I looked hard at him, and could not tell what people he came from."⁵⁵ In the transcript, Black Elk specifically states that the man did not resemble Christ, that he [Black Elk] could not tell if he was white or Indian.⁵⁶ Neihardt's omission of the statement, that the man in Black Elk's vision did not resemble Christ is indicative of the Black Elk he was looking to build. If Neihardt would have acknowledged Black Elk's two statements surrounding Christ and his [Black Elk's] familiarity with him, it would have affirmed that Black Elk knew about Christ in enough detail to identify him. It would have also affirmed Black Elk's conversion to Catholicism before the start of the Ghost Dance.

There are two points however that confirm the timeline of Black Elk's adopted Christian beliefs. Episcopalians were the first and only active Christian missionaries on the Sioux reservation between 1879 and 1888, well before the start of the Ghost Dance movement. This provided Black Elk an initial exposure to the elements of Christianity. Secondly, Black Elk joined the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show in 1886, which required that all Indians be Christian.⁵⁷

In 1886 Black Elk sailed with the Buffalo Bill show to Europe for three years. In letters he

⁵⁴ DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 263.

⁵⁵ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 153.

⁵⁶ DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 263.

⁵⁷ Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks," 45

would send home from Europe, he is recorded quoting biblical passages.⁵⁸ This information is a point of contention for Neihardt, who was looking to create a book reflective of authentic Lakota culture. This is due to information being individually reviewed and selected by Neihardt based on his interpretation of importance. It is important to note that most living Oglalas saw and remembered Black Elk primarily as a Catholic, not practicing the traditionalism of the Lakotas. According to Powers, this is a “fact” Neihardt knew, as the disciples who followed after *Black Elk Speaks* were published and revised.⁵⁹ And although Black Elk did join the Ghost Dance, according to reservation informants, he taught the Ghost Dance in a decidedly Christian manner; again, a fact Neihardt ignored.⁶⁰

Contrarily, Neihardt does not portray Black Elk teaching the Ghost Dance at all, much less with a Christian connotation. The expanse of Neihardt’s descriptions of the Ghost Dance, from its conception through the Battle of Wounded Knee, is covered in 20 pages out of a total of a 172-page book, which is not enough space to articulate the religious (Lakota or Christian) implication of the Ghost Dance ceremony. Consider that Rani-Henrik Anderson spent 300 pages covering the topic in his book *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, or that James Mooney needed 331 pages to cover the topic in *The Ghost Dance Religion*. Its length indicates that the scope of the book was not intended to articulate Black Elk’s religion or the implications of the ceremony. This proves that Neihardt uses the Ghost Dance to give readers a supernatural Native American experience, not to articulate the significance of the ceremony.

⁵⁸ Powers, “When Black Elk Speaks,” 45

⁵⁹ Powers, “Review of the Sixth Grandfather,” 122.

⁶⁰ Powers, “When Black Elk Speaks,” 46.

Given the above examples, it is clear there is reason to continue questioning the authorship and integrity of information within *Black Elk Speaks* surrounding Black Elk and Lakota Culture. By citing multiple examples in which text is reorganized, exaggerates, or omits details, it is evident that Neihardt reshaped the words from his interviews with Black Elk. These examples however, are not trivial cases of adjective rewording or grammatical corrections. The examples chosen are substantial alterations that change the meaning of the text to an unwitting reader. Changing the words of a ceremony changes its meaning and interpretation. Similarly, ignoring Black Elk's true spirituality deprives readers and scholars of a true and objective opinion surrounding his theology. Examples such as these only fuel the debate in categorizing the nature of Native American autobiographies.

Due to the lack of textual resolution, there is no choice but to continue categorizing this text as being unreliable and in some cases fallacious. As mentioned previously, a large controversy surrounding Native American autobiographies is the compilers' taking the liberty to reorganize, ignore, or exaggerate details; which changes the way the information is presented. This brings me to my next point in the evaluation of *Black Elk Speaks*, which focuses on the informational clarity of key events that can be authenticated using alternative historical sources.

CLARITY OF KEY EVENTS

As mentioned previously, a major element when analyzing Native American autobiographies is the role and extent the compiler has in explaining, exaggerating, or changing information, even when it comes to the coverage of key historical events. For example, the timeline of the buildup to the Ghost Dance is not explicitly stated. It was also not disclosed that the Ghost Dance was a reaction to unfair treatment such as reservation land reduction, reduced

rations, and reduced faith in Eurocentric government control. Although Neihardt references a series of treaties that reduce land and rations, he does not specify when or where any of these take place.⁶¹ In fact, the reader has no concept of time as Neihardt does not use any dates whatsoever. The timeline is implied to be the late 1880's because of his reference to the 1889 agreement in which the Commissioner of Indian Affairs slashed Sioux beef rations by two million pounds, resulting in immense starvation and famine at the Pine Ridge Reservation.⁶²

As mentioned before, there are several popularized historical focuses Neihardt does not clarify. This is a central point in proving *Black Elk Speaks* cannot be considered an academic source regarding Lakota culture and history. However, it is very complex point in debating the categorization of a true Native American autobiography. Because the topics were decided by Black Elk, Neihardt is not expected to be accountable for the research and clarification of all historical events that were referenced in Black Elk's discussion. On the other hand, if Neihardt is comfortable with adapting topics to fit his needs, then he should be comfortable with clarifying and ensuring accurate histories.

As aforementioned in the previous paragraph, the validity and clarity of Neihardt's coverage of historical events within *Black Elk Speaks*, is a central point in determining the book's validity as a source. Because the book contains errors regarding historical facts, substantiated by alternative sources, Neihardt's audience cannot rely on the book as truth. The information Neihardt presents contradicts other historians, proving the need to investigate the book's content. An example of this is the representation of the Ghost Shirt, and how Neihardt made Black Elk out to have a larger role than he actually did. Another example is the much-

⁶¹ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 144.

⁶² Utley, *The Indian Frontier*, 238.

debated account of the “Delegation,” which was sent from Pine Ridge to meet the messiah. Both of these examples prove the book’s incompleteness when validating or researching documented events found in other sources.

BLACK ELK AND THE GHOST SHIRT

Visions do not have one interpretation or absolute meaning; therefore, this is not an interpretation of Black Elk's Ghost Dance visions but rather accounting for its warped construal by Neihardt. Visions have their role as a historical source, exposing the reader to the intimacy of one's spiritual experience. They also provide a cultural flavor affiliated with the visionary. However, Neihardt is not using Black Elk's vision as insight into the life of Black Elk or Lakota religion. *Visions of the Other World* is a chapter-long summarization of the vision Black Elk experienced when participating in the Ghost Dance. Neihardt skimmed the details of the vision from the transcript in order to hyper-focus on the idea that Black Elk was the founder of the ceremony. In other words, he ignores the elements of the vision that make it a valuable contribution to understanding Black Elk and Lakota faith.

This presents several problems when looking at *Black Elk Speaks* from an academic lens because many peripheral details surrounding the Ghost Dance and Lakota customs are lost because of Neihardt's creation. In doing this, Neihardt is essentially empowering himself with the knowledge and ability to determine the details that are important versus the ones that are excessive. Furthermore, he is creating a vision that will entertain readers more than enlighten them.

Neihardt makes Black Elk out to have a larger role in the Ghost Dance than he actually has. For example, in Neihardt's redaction of Black Elk's first Ghost Dance vision, he states it is Black Elk who brings back the shirts. He says "I knew it was the way their holy shirts were made that they wanted me to take back."⁶³ Contrary to the transcripts, which Black Elk states "I

⁶³ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 153

could see two men coming toward me, they were dressed in ghost shirts like I was dressed.”⁶⁴
This indicates that the Ghost Shirts were already present before Black Elk joined the Ghost Dance movement.

This is further proven by Mrs. Z.A. Parker, a Pine Ridge school teacher, who wrote a thorough eyewitness description a Ghost Dance ceremony held in June, 1890; before Black Elk joined the movement. Her observations were different than what is being claimed by Neihardt as she provides more detail and reasoning behind her observations. In it, she describes the scenery, the ceremonial facets and garb, the roles of high priests, chants, and the order of events in which the ceremony took place. Parker also spends a significant portion of her account describing Ghost Dance Shirts; which is perhaps one of the most important features in connection with the dance among the Sioux.⁶⁵ She claims the wife of a man named “Return From Scout, had seen in a vision that they all wore similar garb; which led to the mass making of sacred garments that ghost dancers wore.” Parker goes on to describe the shirts as being made from white cotton cloth. The women’s dresses were “cut like their ordinary dress, a loose robe with wide, flowing sleeves, painted blue in the neck, in the shape of a three-cornered handkerchief, with moon, stars, birds, etc interspersed with real feathers, painted on the waist and sleeves.”⁶⁶ For the men, ghost dance shirts were made from similar material, shirts and leggings painted red. The shirts were painted blue around the neck and were ornamented with figures of birds, bows and arrows, suns, moons, stars; anything seen in nature. The sleeves were adorned with feathers, tied by the quills, and meant to fly in the breeze.

⁶⁴ DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 261.

⁶⁵ James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*. Introduced by Anthony F. C. Wallace. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 178.

⁶⁶ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, 179.

THE DELEGATION

The chapter titled “The Messiah” is largely indicative of the events leading up to the Ghost Dance ceremony. The information in this chapter is less personal to Black Elk and more indicative of a macro lens in which Neihardt mainly reviews the conditions at Pine Ridge and the initial rise of the messiah. One item Neihardt fails to mention is that it took numerous letters from Utah, Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas, and Oklahoma tribes to ignite interest in the messiah. Those letters prompted tribal leadership to appoint delegators to travel west to verify the rumors; which is annotated in *Black Elk Speaks*. However, due to varying accounts, interpretations, and errors, there is extensive debate over details regarding the delegation – events leading up to it, who was sent, and when they traveled.

Scholars have usually followed James Mooney’s interpretations of the delegation sent to the messiah.⁶⁷ He uses the accounts of George Bird Grinnell, Captain George Sword, and William Sewlyn to emphasize the various understandings of the delegation. Neihardt’s interpretation however, provides a conflicting interpretation to the accounts raised by Mooney. For example, Neihardt claims two separate delegations were sent whereas Dr. George Bird Grinnell, an editor and author specializing in prairie tribes, and William Sewlyn, an educated post master at Pine Ridge both only indicate one. For Neihardt’s “autobiography” to hold academic merit above other accounts, he would need to provide clarity and intimate detail to who the delegates were, how many delegations were sent, and the outcomes.

George Bird Grinnell Ph.D., was an accomplished naturalist and conservationist who took a particular interest in the customs and folklore of the Native American populations. He

⁶⁷ Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 32.

published twenty-six books, many of which were derived from annual visits to the Cheyanne, Black Foot, and many other Plains tribes.⁶⁸ Grinnell would specifically interview elderly tribal members, recording abundant pages of notes surrounding folklore. Mooney claims Grinnell to be one of the best authorities on Prairie tribes and folklore and uses his work to present one of three accounts regarding the messiah and the delegation.⁶⁹

According to Mooney's interpretation of Grinnell, delegates arrived at Fort Washakie, Wyoming in the fall of 1889 to learn and bring back information about the messiah to their respective tribes. Short Bull and Kicking Bear represented the Sioux party of the Dakotas, while Porcupine was the delegate for the Cheyanne of Montana. After learning more, Porcupine, Sitting Bull, and several Arapahos and Shoshoni traveled to Nevada to interview the messiah personally.

And in the Fall of 1889, delegates from these two tribes arrived at Fort Washakie to learn more about the messiah in the west. The principle Cheyanne delegate was Porcupine, while Short Bull and Kicking Bear were the leaders of the Sioux Party. After hearing the statements of the Arapahoe and the Shoshoni, it was decided that some of the Cheyanne should return to and report to their tribe, while Porcupine and one or two others, with the Sioux delegates, several Shoshoni and the Arapahoe, Sitting Bull, and Friday should go to Nevada, interview the messiah himself, and learn the whole truth of the matter.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ John P. Holman, "George Bird Grinnell," *Journal of Mammalogy* 19, No. 3 (August 1938): 399.

⁶⁹ Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 62.

⁷⁰ Mooney, "The Ghost Dance Religion," 63.

Mooney claims the same account is stated much differently by Captain George Sword, Sioux Oglala and Police Captain of Pine Ridge. Sword claims the Sioux sent a group of individuals west consisting of Good Thunder and several others in order to verify the rumors after first hearing of him in early 1889. Excitement among the Sioux rose with the returned information and a second delegation was sent in 1890, consisting of Good Thunder, Cloud Horse, Yellow Knife, and Short Bull in order to confirm the reports. After confirming the reports of the first delegation, the Ghost Dance was inaugurated among the Sioux of Pine Ridge spring of 1890.

“The Sioux first heard of the messiah in 1889. According to the statement of Captain George Sword, of that tribe, the information came to the Oglala in that year, through the Shoshoni and Arapaho. Later in the same year a delegation consisting of Good Thunder and several others started out to the west to find the messiah and to investigate the truth of the rumor. On their return they announced that the messiah had indeed come to help the Indians, but not the whites. Their reports aroused a fervor of joyful excitement among the Indians and a second delegation was sent out in 1890, consisting of Good Thunder, Cloud Horse, Yellow Knife, and Short Bull. They confirmed the report of the first delegation, and on this assurance the Ghost Dance was inaugurated among the Sioux at Pine Ridge in the spring of 1890.⁷¹

⁷¹ Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, 63.

The differences between Sword and Grinnell can be seen in several facets. Sword, fails to recognize the fact that multiple tribes that sent representation to the messiah. This can be seen in the lack of detail and names used in his account. Sword also claims there were two delegations sent to the messiah, whereas Grinnell claims there was only one. According to Sword, the first group was sent to validate rumors of the messiah, while the second was to learn more of his doctrine.

William Sewlyn, who was the post master of Pine Ridge, claims the rumors initiated out of talk by Native Americans from western tribes who were visiting Pine Ridge in the fall of 1888. Mooney claims his account is the most correct due to his education and connection with the Sioux tribe; because Sewlyn was a Post Master, he would often assist those who could not read for themselves.

The rumors according to Sewlyn's account did not gain momentum until 1889 when letters concerning the messiah from Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Dakota, and Oklahoma were received. The fall of 1889 yielded a council held at Pine Ridge by Red Cloud, Young Man Afraid, Little Wound, American Horse, and other Sioux chiefs. A delegation consisting of Good Thunder, Flat Iron, Yellow Breast, and Broken Arm (from Pine Ridge); and Short Bull (From Rosebud); and Kicking Bear (from Cheyenne River Agency) were appointed to visit westward agencies in order to learn more about the messiah. Their return in the spring of 1890 aroused intense excitement and acceptance of the messiah and Ghost Dance.

In the fall of 1889, at a council held at Pine Ridge by Red Cloud, Young Man Afraid, Little Wound, American Horse, and other Sioux Chiefs, a delegation was appointed to visit the western agencies to learn

more about the new messiah. The delegates chosen were Good Thunder, Flat Iron, Yellow Breast, and Broken Arm, from Pine Ridge; Short Bull and another from Rosebud, and Kicking Bear from Cheyenne River Agency. They started on their journey to the west, and soon began to write from Wyoming, Utah, and beyond the mountains, confirming all that had been said of the advent of a redeemer. They were gone all winter, and their return in the spring of 1890 aroused an intense excitement among the Sioux, who had been anxiously awaiting their report.⁷²

Sewlyn's account provides the most detail and is almost a hybrid of Grinnell and Sword. First, he recognizes the fact the Ghost Dance was not limited to the Sioux, but all of the tribes in the Dakota plains region. His timeline is consistent with both Grinnell and Sword, in that the first delegation left in the fall of 1889. However, Sewlyn has the first delegation returning in the Spring of 1890, omitting any account of a second delegation being sent. Due to the variation in accounts, it is difficult to determine which is the most valid. Each person has credibility and reason as to why their account is most accurate. If these were the only three accounts available for study, Grinnell's and Sewlyn's would be the most reliable due to their overlap and consistency.

However, Grinnell, Sword, and Sewlyn are mere examples of the variety of accounts that exist on this subject. They are meant only to demonstrate the lack of consistency in accounts which scholars must decipher in regards to this topic. For Neihardt's writing to hold academic merit above other accounts, such as the ones highlighted above, it would need to provide clarity

⁷² Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion*, 64.

and/or detail to who the delegates were, how many delegations were sent, and the outcome. It would be different if other eye-witness accounts did not exist, and *Black Elk Speaks* was the only source of information in regards to the Messiah or the Ghost Dance. However, this is not the case, because Neihardt adopted the information most reputable to the story he created. If someone were reading Black Elk's account alone, they would receive a lot of information that is disputed among scholars today. For example, he asserts the first council meeting of White Clay creek took place in the fall 1889 at the return of the first delegation, which is estimated to actually have taken place in April of 1890.⁷³ This meeting was the official indoctrination of the Ghost Dance, which was officially held for the first time in June of 1890.

Neihardt's provides an extremely different account starting with the "first" delegation sent west; however, he suggests that they went to "see the sacred man with their own eyes and learn if the story about him was true."⁷⁴ According to Neihardt, Good Thunder, Brave Bear, and Yellow Breast were sent to verify the messiah's existence and message; returning that fall "after Black Elk returned."⁷⁵ When the three men returned, they detailed their encounter with the messiah and the "new world" coming; which would "come in a whirlwind out of the west and crush out everything on this world, which was old and dying." The prospective new world that would come from the messiah is summarized by Neihardt as being fulfilled in four ways: there will be plenty of meat, all of the dead Indians will come back to life, all of the killed bison will roam again, and the white man will disappear.⁷⁶ According to Neihardt, the messiah gave Good Thunder red paint and two eagle feathers and taught the three men the Ghost Dance. He said that

⁷³ Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 40.

⁷⁴ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 145.

⁷⁵ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 145.

⁷⁶ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 146.

if their people were to dance the Ghost Dance, they would be able to get to the other world when it came.

The following winter, people were interested in hearing more about the messiah and the Ghost Dance. This led to a second delegation with more people to learn what they could. Based on Neihardt's writing, Good Thunder and Yellow Breast accompanied by two others were sent west to investigate the messiah and learn more of the Ghost Dance. Even individuals from other agencies, like Kicking Bear and Short Bull, accompanied the representatives from Pine Ridge to learn more. According to Neihardt, these men returned the following spring, and hosted meetings to share what they had discovered. It is important to note that Neihardt openly admits Black Elk did not attend these meetings and that his information is based on "gossip he heard."⁷⁷ Neihardt explains that the Great Spirit's son came to the white man and was killed; this time he was coming to the Indians.

There are two items to take notice of when comparing the delegation of *Black Elk Speaks* to other sources. First is the number of delegations sent to the messiah and the second is their timelines. None of the previous examples concur on the aforementioned details. Neihardt claims two separate delegations were sent to investigate the messiah. The first, estimating to have left in late 1888 or early 1889, as Neihardt references Black Elk's return from Europe.

Before I came back, the people had gotten together to talk about this and they had sent three men, Good Thunder, Brave Bear, and Yellow Breast,

⁷⁷ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 147.

to see this sacred man with their own eyes and learn if the story of him was true.⁷⁸

The key words are “before I came back” as Black Elk is estimated to have returned from Europe in the fall of 1889. This sentence is immediately followed up with:

So these three men had made the long journey west, and in the fall after I came home, they returned to the Oglalas with wonderful things to tell.⁷⁹

These two statements allow the first delegation to be dated between late 1888/early 1889 through the fall of 1889; which is not consistent with the Fall of 1889 through spring of 1890 timeline found in Grinnell, Sewlyn, or a variety of other accounts. One could argue it is not unlikely that the first delegation Neihardt is referencing was unofficial, which would not be found in records or translations.⁸⁰ However, there is no clear evidence to suggest this was the case.

Neihardt claims the second delegation was sent in the winter of 1889, returning in the spring of 1890. Again, Neihardt does not use dates; however, they can be deduced from two statements; the first being “during that winter, people wanted to hear some more about this sacred man,” and the second being “then it was spring and I heard that these men had all come back.”⁸¹ If the argument that the first delegation was unofficial is true, then the timeline of Neihardt’s second delegation aligns better with Grinnell’s and Sewlyn’s account; although Neihardt does not reference who exactly was part of the second delegation, making its alignment more difficult.

⁷⁸ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 145.

⁷⁹ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 145.

⁸⁰ Andersson, *The Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890*, 32.

⁸¹ Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 147.

THE LEGACY OF *BLACK ELK SPEAKS*

The significance of Native American autobiographies is that they can offer a lens into an inclusive culture. However, they often can be appropriated by authors and publishers in order to prove or build a specific image. *Black Elk Speaks* is no different. The approach Neihardt took in the creation of *Black Elk Speaks* is to be applauded. Rather than simply reading what others had wrote, he took the initiative to meet and live with Black Elk for several months in order to render the desired information. This is one of the most effective methodologies for researching and developing a topic. However, the original scope of Neihardt's work was not to develop an opinion, but to convey the teachings and culture of the Lakota based on Black Elk's recollection. When evaluating the book's integrity in the context of Lakota religion, it is clear all information derived from the book must be further researched and validated. This is documented and exemplified above in the form of changed content and inaccurate history.

Studies conducted by scholars like DeMallie, Holler, Powers, and many others offer valuable insights to the relationship between Neihardt and Black Elk. These scholars in particular however offer tremendous insight into separating Black Elk from Neihardt by highlighting things such as textual or content errors as well as embellishments from Neihardt. However, *Black Elk Speaks* cannot be assessed simply by studying the relationship between Black Elk and Neihardt.⁸² It is important to analyze the content of the book against the original transcripts as well as historical documentation. Because the information within the book is significantly edited, it is more a reflection of Neihardt's perspective than that of Black Elk, as the information presented to readers is diluted or otherwise altered and not original to Black Elk

⁸² Arnold, "Black Elk and Book Culture," 91.

himself. The Ghost Dance and the events leading to it are interpreted from the viewpoint of Neihardt, whereas Black Elk's original language and reflection of the ceremony is incorporated as a secondary thought. The influence of Neihardt is most apparent in the reorganizing of information or admission of erroneous facts; for example, Neihardt's proclamation that Black Elk invented the Ghost Shirt, or diluting Black Elk's Catholicism. Overall, *Black Elk Speaks* seems to elevate the perpetual question of authorship, rather than the relationship between Neihardt and Black Elk as it was compiled, edited, and interpreted by Neihardt for a western market.

Traditionally, the autobiography should be written by the person it is about. However, in the context of Native American culture, autobiographies are commonly a collection of either translated or transcribed texts about a particular individual; in this case Black Elk. This is a significant factor when analyzing *Black Elk Speaks* as a Native American autobiography because the history of Black Elk and the facts used to surround the Ghost Dance of 1890 are not valid to the critical reader. In Neihardt's defense, at the time when *Black Elk Speaks* was written, the Lakota Ghost Dance was studied mainly from the perspective of white Americans, which is a tradition that had continued up until the late nineteenth century.⁸³ Only recently have scholars begun researching and publishing more based on primary sources categorized as the Lakota voice, for example "When the Spirits Arrived: Divergent Lakota Voices of the 1890 Ghost Dance." In this 2017 article, Rani-Henrik Andersson identifies and highlights a number of Lakota accounts of the Ghost Dance, not previously used. Other examples include Lois

⁸³ Andersson, "When the spirits arrived," 134.

Warren's *God's Red Son* (2017), Andersson's *Lakota Ghost Dance of 1890* (2009), and Jeffery Olster's *Plains Sioux and US Colonialism* (2004).

Black Elk Speaks has been used in university classes for more than twenty years to attempt illustration of cultural practices from the Native American viewpoint.⁸⁴ However, with the emergence of the scholarly pushback, the questions remain, how much is the book actually reflective of Native American Lakota Culture. Its popularity has a direct correlation to its perceived value. Although *Black Elk Speaks* is an astonishing narrative that deserves reading due to the uniqueness of its creation, the book does not provide an accurate portrait of Black Elk or the Ghost Dance. And due to its great popularity, it is still used as a tool for both teachers and amateur historians. Naturally, there is much to be interested in and passionate about in Native American religions; and there is much that can be gathered by reading their history. However, *Black Elk Speaks* occupies a unique role as it has transformed from an academic production to a form of entertainment. Many who buy the book today, do not see it for its contentious nature. Consider the book is ranked number forty sixth in Amazon's Best Seller List for Biographies and Memoirs, number one hundred and fourteenth in Politics and Social Sciences, and two hundred and forty-eight in general history. It becomes clear, that if one looks at the user reviews of the book, most are not taking into account its informational integrity. For example, one review, written November 12, 2013 states "If you read nothing else in Native American history, be sure to read this book!" Another states, "An Important read for the history as well as the spirituality."

⁸⁴ Arnold, "Black Elk and Book Culture," 86.

And there are three hundred and forty-six more just like these. User reviews such as the ones exemplified indicate that the book is being seen as a totally truthful account of Lakota life.⁸⁵

A great amount of literature exists on the role of the Native American autobiography as well as the significance of Neihardt as a transcriber for Black Elk. The individuals cited represent a sample of the varying opinions that have occurred since its publication. The abundance of analyses demonstrates there is still reason to call the book into question, and that there is no clear concurrence of the legitimacy to Neihardt's book. However, although the book serves a function telling the life of Black Elk, readers must be especially cautious if using it to extrapolate information surrounding the Lakota religion and history.

⁸⁵ "Black Elk Speaks: The Complete Edition Customer reviews," Amazon, accessed April 1, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/Black-Elk-Speaks-John-Neihardt-ebook/product-reviews/B00INIXBP2/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_show_all_top?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews

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