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## WHITE MYTHS ABOUT AMERICAN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY: REFLECTIONS ON THE LAKOTA STORY OF “WHEN THE PEOPLE LAUGHED AT *HANWI*, THE MOON”

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**ABSTRACT:** Written from the perspective of a historian of religions, this article focuses on two widely known American Indian ‘creation myths’: Lakota author George Sword’s tale of “When the People Laughed at *Hanwi*, the Moon” and non-native author James R. Walker’s “Creation of All Things from *Inyan*, the Rock.” Though these two stories have often been presented as constituent elements of a pre-colonial (‘purely’ indigenous and non-Christian) Oglala Sioux oral tradition, this paper argues that both stories must be understood as literary productions that could only have arisen in the context of colonialist interactions between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. While the two stories, which feature adventures of the same mythologic protagonists, first seem to be parallel parts of one seamless whole, closer scrutiny reveals profound, even more telling differences. In short, though the juxtaposition of these two creation stories can teach us a great deal about native storytelling practices, the complex ‘reception histories’ of the two stories (to which this paper makes a modest contribution) can teach us even more about the storytelling practices of non-native, Western academics.

### A. “When the People Laughed at the Moon”: Native Myth and/or Colonialist Discourse?

In one of his earlier works, William K. Powers (1975), a leading academic authority on the Oglalas, the most heavily studied of several Lakota or Western Sioux tribes,<sup>1</sup> endeavored to present a “reconstruction” of the cosmology of the Oglalas for that period of time in which they lived as “a politically discrete entity, that is, from about 1700 to the establishment of the reservation system, about 1868.”<sup>2</sup> Powers was at this point ostensibly concerned, in other words, with an exposition of the cosmological notions of the Lakotas *prior* to their sustained involvements with the culture and religious ideas of European-Americans.<sup>3</sup> To that end, he rehearsed a set of fourteen myths that had been published in a 1917 monograph by James R. Walker, an intriguing figure about whom we will learn much more as this paper proceeds.<sup>4</sup> The first of those myths in both Walker’s and Powers’ presentations, entitled “When the People Laughed at *Hanwi*, the Moon,” to paraphrase freely, goes something like this:<sup>5</sup>

At one time, prior to their habitation of the earth’s surface, the *Pte* (or Buffalo People), the primordial ancestors of the Lakotas, dwelled beneath the earth.<sup>6</sup> The chief of the Buffalo People, who enjoyed a fair measure of prosperity in their subterranean home, was *Wazi* (Old Man) and his wife was a seer named *Kanka* (Old Woman). Their daughter was the very beautiful *Ite* (Face), who was married to the god *Tate* (the Wind). This mixed human-god union had issued in the birth of quadruplet sons

(the Four Winds or Directions), and *Ite* was pregnant with a fifth son. Though the marriage of their daughter to *Tate* established a tie between the Buffalo People and the gods, *Wazi* and *Kanka* were nonetheless not content with their status as humans; they aspired to the power of gods. *Inktomi* (Spider), a devious Trickster, knew of their discontent and thus offered to give them such godly powers if they would conspire with him to make people look ridiculous. *Wazi* was initially frightened and reticent about dealing with unreliable *Inktomi*. *Kanka*, however, persuades her husband that they can actually trick the Trickster by taking what he has to offer, but then later renegeing on their promises to help him.

Suspecting the planned doublecross, *Inktomi* nevertheless seals the alliance by providing *Wazi* and *Kanka* with a charm, which the couple uses to make their already comely daughter *Ite* the most beautiful of all beings.<sup>7</sup> *Ite*, previously a dutiful wife and mother, now becomes increasingly obsessed with her own stunning good looks, and thus neglectful of her spouse and maternal obligations. *Inktomi* exploits and exacerbates *Ite's* vanity even more by telling her that no less than *Wi* (the Sun), chief of the gods, had noticed her exceptional beauty and commented on it. Irrespective of his wandering eye, *Wi*, however, already had a suitably divine wife — namely, *Hanwi* (the Moon), the mother of the gods.

To put his duplicitous plan in motion, *Inktomi* instructs the self-absorbed *Ite* that at the next feast of the gods she should take the vacant seat next to *Wi* because he was tired of his current companion, *Hanwi*, and seeks a younger woman. The scheming *Inktomi* then also manipulates and unsettles *Hanwi* by telling her that her husband *Wi* considered *Ite*, despite her merely human status, the most beautiful of all beings and had invited her to the feast. As the feast begins, *Hanwi*, made anxious by the prospect of a beautiful and young rival, thus stayed behind to adorn herself more than usual. The goddess' late arrival afforded precisely the opportunity that *Ite* needed, and so she was able to slip into *Hanwi's* vacant seat next to *Wi*, chief of the gods. Powers summarizes this climactic portion of the story as follows:

When *Hanwi* [the Moon] arrived and saw *Ite* [a human] occupying her seat, she stood behind *Wi* [the Sun] with her robe over her head. When people saw this, they began to laugh at *Hanwi*. *Inktomi* laughed the loudest. *Kanka* [mother of *Ite*] sang a song of joy, but *Wazi* [father of *Ite*] was still afraid. *Tate* [husband of *Ite*] left the feast and returned to his own lodge, where he painted his face and the faces of his sons black in mourning over the loss of his wife.<sup>8</sup>

The remainder of the story is dominated by the interrogations and judgements of a supremely powerful figure named *Skan*, variously glossed as 'Something that Moves,' 'He Who Gives Movement to All Things,' or simply 'Sky.'<sup>9</sup> *Skan* questions each of the principles about their imprudent involvements in the sordid fiasco. How could it be, *Skan* demands to know, that a mere human was allowed to usurp the place of a goddess? How could so many have involved themselves in this ugly debacle,

which had it eventuated in the public humiliation of *Hanwi*, the mother of the gods? Why, in short, had they allowed the very order of the cosmos to be disrupted?

Unimpressed by their excuses for participating in the chicanery, *Skan* finds nearly everyone to some degree at fault, and thus metes out the following punishments: Because *Wi* (the Sun) had allowed a woman to come between him and his proper wife, *Hanwi* (the Moon) would be free to go her own way. Instead of ruling together, henceforth the Sun would have command only over the day, while the Moon was awarded the separate realm of the night. Because *Ite* had neglected her family, her fifth child would be born prematurely, never grow up normally and live away from her with his father; moreover, because of her vanity, *Ite* would be given a horrid face in addition to her beautiful one, and thus known forever as *Anog-Ite* or Double Face. *Skan* decreed, furthermore, that, for their involvement in the conspiracy, *Wazi* (Old Man) and *Kanka* (Old Woman) would be subsequently known as Wizard and Witch, and that each would be consigned to live in isolation until they learned how to help people. And *Inktomi*, the principal instigator of the whole affair, though the son of a god, was remanded to a lonely life on earth where he could henceforth work his tricky deceptions only on humans.

*Tate* (the Wind), however, who had been guiltless in the whole episode, wins special treatment. Weeping and expressing his continued love of *Ite*, the wife who had abandoned him and their sons, *Tate* implores *Skan*, for the sake of their family, to forgive *Ite's* transgression:

Pity these, my children, for their mother was but a woman and could not have known the consequences of her offense. Others caused her to forget the deference due to the Gods. Let her remain with her sons and let me bear her punishment.<sup>10</sup>

*Skan* shares this profound respect for family relations, but cannot overlook the seriousness of *Ite's* mistakes. Consequently, he rules that *Tate* and his sons may visit *Anog Ite* as often as they wish, but will remain invisible to her “until there is the fourth time,” a new era in which *Tate* will assume an unprecedented leadership role and his offspring will serve as messengers to the gods.<sup>11</sup> In other words, while the unfortunate incident had irrevocably altered the original cosmic arrangement, and while *Tate* and the Buffalo People must now endure a period of difficulty and loneliness, they can look forward to this impending “fourth time” when families will be reunited and prosperity will reemerge. In short, though the world can never return to its former configuration, the future holds a new order, which, while substantially different, will be, at least in some respects, even better than the initial cosmic arrangement.

### **B. Mythic Distortions and Disclosures: Understanding Both Less and More About the Lakotas**

This now well known story of “When the People Laughed at *Hanwi*” — an edited version of which was published for the first time in James Walker’s *The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota* (1917) — most certainly does, as Powers’ privileged

placement of it suggests, provide an exceptionally fortuitous point of departure for understanding Lakota religion, cosmology and mythology. Its instructive prestige does *not* rest, however, on the basis that one might first presume. Though the intimation in the presentation of Powers (and others) is that the story of *Hanwi's* humiliation provides a particularly clear window into 'traditional' Lakota cosmology as it stood *before* substantial involvement with Euro-American culture, and particularly with Christianity, a closer, more critical look will demonstrate that the view into the pre-colonial life of the Lakotas is anything but unobstructed.<sup>12</sup> I will wager, in fact, that this deceptively simple 'creation myth,' together with the complex history of its formulation and transmission, can teach us *both much less and much more* about Lakota religious priorities and orientations than a first glance allows.

Even a casual reader, forced to rely on blunt summaries of summaries, ought to be struck, for instance, by strong parallels between this story and that which appears in the early chapters of Genesis. The sequential movement from an era of harmonious prosperity, albeit beneath rather on the surface of the earth, followed by a transgressive act of arrogance in which humans venture to be like gods, which is then followed by a divine arbiter's imposition of a new, if somewhat less congenial world order, all sounds a bit too familiar to be coincidental. How, though, can we explain the apparent resemblances between the Lakota and biblical stories? To what historical circumstances, what individuals and what motives can those resemblances can be traced? Who initially formulated this so-termed 'myth'? When? Where? Why? Who wrote it down? And who pushed it to publication? And, perhaps most significantly, if this story does *not* provide a very reliable depiction of pre-colonial native cosmology, what can it teach us about Lakota religion? And how can it inform our practices and procedures as students of Native American religion and myth?

Though the route back to the specifics of "When the People Laughed at the Moon" may seem a bit circuitous, I hope by the end of this modest essay to provide provisional answers to all of those questions.

### **C. Two Ubiquitous Concerns: European-Native Contact and Intra-Tribal Religious Diversity**

Two problems slap constantly in the face of the academic student of Native American religions. Neither of these very basic concerns is unique to the study of the Lakotas, and both may seem too painfully obvious to deserve note. Nonetheless, it is, in all likelihood, a lack of attentiveness to the full ramifications of these two sets of issues — the paired fallacies of 'purity' and 'typicality' — that accounts not only for the recurrent misrepresentation of the *Hanwi* tale but, in fact, for the most severe and most recurrent distortions with respect to all non-native apprehensions of Indian religion and mythology.

First is the still oft-resisted but inescapable realization that *the* informing notion for the academic study of American Indian religions and mythologies has been, and will continue to be, the circumstance of contact and interaction between Euro-Americans and Native Americans. Though consensus is rare

in this contentious field, few would dispute that there has been a kind of sea change in sensitivities concerning the lasting and insidious repercussions of colonialism.<sup>13</sup> Americanists working in the early decades of this century, most famously those under the path-breaking influence of Franz Boas, regarded as imperative that they seize the moment, before native culture met with its seemingly inevitable demise, to peel back and push through the ‘corruptions’ of European influence in order to recover that which was uniquely and ‘authentically’ Indian. At present, however, instead of looking past or through purported instances of ‘Europeanization,’ and lamenting the untoward ‘contamination’ of indigenous cultures, more and more scholars are arguing that the methodological high road compels them to train their attention precisely on those circumstances of European-Native contact. It is the messy colonialist intersections — say, cargo cults, nativist resistance movements and captivity narratives — that now draw the greatest attention of progressive historians of religions.<sup>14</sup>

This tendency to focus directly on the so-termed ‘contact zone’ has an intriguingly double-edged effect.<sup>15</sup> On the hand, suppression and avoidance of the hard ‘facts’ of colonialism have become much more difficult. In the wake of heightened sensitivities about the ‘politics of representation,’ scholars have, in a sense, lost their exemption.<sup>16</sup> Academics have been forced to admit that they too may be involved in a kind of myth-making of their own that, albeit inadvertently, is likewise implicated in the on-going transgressions of colonialism. Yet, on the other hand, as the appreciation of the profound insidiousness of colonialism has intensified, scholars are also coming to appreciate the creativity and innovation (especially of natives) that nearly always emerges in those situations. European-Native contact, to be sure, creates the conditions for exploitation and abuse. But such cultural convergences also provide the conditions for the experimentation and discovery of (almost entirely) unprecedented religious possibilities and modes of expression — including, as we shall see in the case of the *Hanwi* story, the formulation of new ‘myths’ to deal with the new dilemmas that colonialism poses.

A second, more obvious but equally pervasive challenge for students of indigenous American religions derives from the plurality of attitudes and voices that have always coexisted within any tribal community. North Americanists have, since the emergence of the field, prized the ethnographic genres of (auto)biography and life history;<sup>17</sup> there is a very long tradition of commentary (occasionally even an overemphasis) on the substantial differences between the perspectives of esoterically trained religious specialists and wider native communities;<sup>18</sup> and toleration of experience-driven individual differences has long been adduced as one of the distinguishing hallmarks of Indian religiosity. Nonetheless, the social scientific urge to synthesize and generalize continues to exercise a powerful, often obfuscating sway. Too often, intra-tribal religious diversity, and particularly the unique accomplishments of specific native individuals — the authorship of very original stories, for example — continue to be obscured by the characteristically modern pursuit of some sort of collective group consensus, however abstracted and idealized. Americanists continue to be seduced by the ill-fated hope of discerning, say, *the* Lakota worldview, *the* ‘authentic corpus’ of Lakota mythology, or *the* ‘typically Lakota’ response to European

culture and Christianity.

For present purposes, it is particularly important to note, for instance, that Lakota groups and individuals, not infrequently at odds with one and other, have, since the mid-nineteenth century (and now), pursued several very different sorts of strategies for maintaining a sense of religio-cultural identity in the face of Euro-American encroachment. Divergent Lakota attitudes toward Christianity — which Indians have construed variously as a threat, a compliment, an irrelevancy and/or an alternative to the truths of indigenous religion — are especially noteworthy. Risking precisely the generalizing tendencies that I am trying to undermine, it is possible for strictly heuristic purposes to differentiate between four alternative Lakota stances.

First, there are, for lack of a better term, resolute Lakota 'traditionalists' or arch-conservatives who position themselves in the lineage of the famously intransigent Sioux leader Sitting Bull insofar as they consider that any accommodation to, or incorporation of, elements drawn from mainstream White society, particularly elements of Christianity, constitutes a 'sellout' of the integrity of indigenous patterns of belief and practice.<sup>19</sup> This is a formulation of Indian religious identity that — as in the case of Sioux scholar Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (1972, 1992) — accentuates the fundamental disparity, and thus apparent irreconcilability, between native and non-native worldviews.

Other Lakotas, however, instantiated most famously by Oglala holy man and Catholic catechist Nicholas Black Elk, opt for a deliberately synthetic approach to the colonial situation.<sup>20</sup> By contrast to so-termed traditionalists, advocates for these more flexible and accommodational approaches to native identity (including, for instance, George Sword who will emerge shortly as the native author of the *Hanwi* story) foreground points of apparent similarity between Lakota and Christian perspectives, and thus argue for their essential compatibility. Aggressively eclectic orientations of this sort, while varied in the extreme, nearly always draft both native and non-native concepts into the creative formulation of a religious perspective that is conceived as, at once, fully faithful to the essentials of 'the old ways' and suitably relevant to a new set of challenges and socio-economic realities.<sup>21</sup>

Though it is the tension between (ill-labeled) 'traditionalists' and 'synthesizers' that will prove most germane to the subsequent discussion,<sup>22</sup> before turning back to more specific creation stories, we should note as a prevalent third option those many Lakotas who respond to the colonial situation by 'oscillating' insofar as they never fully formulate or adopt any consistent, thoroughgoing religious synthesis. In the case of the tumultuous life history of Oglala holy man John Lame Deer, for instance, endless travels and shifting circumstances guide a constantly flexible, strategically improvisational construction of religious identity, which enables him to participate on a situational basis in religious practices that are variously fully indigenous and/or fully Christian.<sup>23</sup>

And finally, a not uncommon fourth possibility are those Lakotas who, either by decision or default, become fully acculturated into mainstream White society inasmuch as they adopt a religious (or

religious) identity that draws in no substantial way on their indigenous ethnic roots. In these frequent cases, native identity may, for instance, be reduced to uncertain family reminiscences about a great grandmother who was Lakota.

#### **D. A More Proper Lakota Cosmogony: “Creation of All Things from *Inyan*, the Rock”**

Historian of religions Mircea Eliade made the notoriously reiterative claim that cosmogonies, stories about the creation of the world, constitute the single most revealing articulations of a group’s religious orientation and priorities.<sup>24</sup> All other myths and thus, in Eliade’s view, all rituals and even all meaningful social life will be, to some important extent, patterned after the cosmogonic story. The singular prestige of cosmogonic myths, particularly in relation to Native American contexts (where creation is more often conceived as an on-going process than a one-time event), is almost certainly overstated.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on the status of Lakota cosmogonic traditions (and the debatable extent to which the *Hanwi* story qualifies as a ‘creation myth’) does, nonetheless, provide an especially revealing arena in which to test the ramifications of thinking differently about those two ubiquitously relevant concerns — White-Indian contact and intra-tribal religious diversity.

“When the People Laughed at the Moon,” while rightly described as a ‘creation story,’ is situated in a primordial era when the proto-human *Pte* or Buffalo People still lived in some subterranean realm, that is, *after* the initial creation of the world but *before* the mythical forebears of the Lakotas had taken their eventual place on the earth’s surface. The most common response to queries about a more strictly cosmogonic story among the Lakotas (questions that are often overdetermined by presumptions of a single, canonical, Genesis-like creation narrative) is a reiteration of the story of “Creation of All Things from *Inyan*, the Rock.”<sup>26</sup> Not inconsequentially, the *Inyan* story, which is also drawn from the Walker collection, features several protagonists that we know already from the *Hanwi* story. Even the most elliptical synopses usually include of the following basic sequence of events:

In the beginning, before there was time and space, there was only *Inyan* (the Rock), surrounded by *Hanhepi* (Darkness or Night). Completely alone, *Inyan* desired something over which to exercise his power. Because there was nothing else, *Inyan* used his own blood to create a great disk he called *Maka* (Earth), who was adorned with blue waters. Having opened all of his veins to create *Maka* and the waters, *Inyan* then shriveled into something hard and not very powerful. Thus, while *Inyan* holds the important distinction of being of the oldest of the gods and the ultimate ‘parent’ of all things, it was *Skani*, the third great god to emerge, the great blue dome of the sky that was formed from the earth and the waters, who would assume the most active role in the subsequent creative processes.

Variably glossed in this story as ‘He Who Gives Movement to All Things,’ ‘Almighty,’ ‘Most Holy’ or just ‘Sky,’ *Skani* enjoyed preeminence over all the other gods and domains.<sup>27</sup> *Skani* (who, remember, was the god that delivers and enforces the punishments in the story of *Hanwi*’s humiliation) is the supreme judge and arbiter of all things. Consequently, when *Maka* (Earth) complains that *Hanhepi*

(Darkness) was everywhere in the world so that it was impossible to see, it is *Skán* that works to resolve the problem by dividing *Hanhepi* into two halves : One half remained Darkness and was banished to the underworld, while the other half, named *Anpetu* (Light), was assigned to illuminate the world. In response to *Maka's* next complaint, that the Earth was now too bright but still cold, *Skán* created *Wi* (the Sun), who was placed high above in order to give heat to the world. *Maka* nonetheless continued to whine, now that she was too hot, so *Skán* next created night and day, which he assigned respectively to *Hanepi* and *Anpetu*.

*Skán's* creative efforts to placate Earth notwithstanding, *Maka* persisted in her nagging and jealous complaints about her status with respect to the other gods. To rectify the incessant squabbling — that is, to establish harmony and a livable world order — *Skán* assembled the four principal gods and explained that, though “we are from one and the same source,” from this time forward a clear hierarchy should prevail.<sup>28</sup> *Skán* then assigned the first place to *Wi* (the Sun), and pronounced him chief of the gods ; to himself, *Skán* assigned the second rank, while nonetheless retaining ultimate authority ; *Maka* was assigned the third place ; and *Inyan*, who is the source of all, was given the fourth rank. Each was provided a respective domain and, to avert loneliness, each was allowed to create a special companion. *Skán's* special helper was *Tate* (the Wind) ; and it was at this point, then, that *Hanwi* (the Moon) was created and assigned her proper place as *Wi's* constant and faithful companion (a privileged status the Moon would retain until *Ite's* fateful usurpation of her seat).

With the previously undifferentiated universe now well organized and the correct order of the foremost gods securely fixed, a cast of numerous lesser gods was created. Each had a distinctive disposition, including not a few who were mischievous and self-promoting. Not surprisingly, therefore, innumerable intrigues ensued so that, instead of resting, *Skán* was constantly required to resolve disputes and punish misdeeds in order to maintain an appropriately harmonious situation. Eventually, largely because various gods were becoming exhausted by their service and requested assistance, *Skán* undertakes the creation of people. From *Inyan* he took the stuff to create human bones, from *Maka* the stuff of flesh, and from the waters the stuff of blood. From these materials, the same substances from which the gods and everything else had been fashioned, *Skán* created two figures — *Wazi* (Father or Old Man) and *Kanka* (Mother or Old Woman), who were the first of the *Pte* or Buffalo People.<sup>29</sup> This was the beginning of (Lakota) humankind, whose main purpose for being was to serve the gods and do their will. The *Pte* were then placed in a subterranean world where they multiplied greatly and lived happy and harmonious lives, though here too, as in the realm of the gods, intrigue and mischief posed frequent challenges to perfect harmony.

Refining and embellishing the world order still more, the story goes on to recount how various plants were created — flowers, fruits, seeds and water-lilies — and then how countless varieties of insects, reptiles, birds and beasts were fashioned and situated in their proper places. Finally, surveying all that he and the other gods had accomplished, *Skán* made the following triumphant declaration :

Creation is now completed. No further power shall be granted for the creation of any other creature. Each living creature shall propagate its kind and all multiple. Each shall exist for a space and then return to whence it came. Others of its kind shall follow while the world exists.<sup>30</sup>

On that note of tidy closure, the initial portion of James Walker's literary cycle ends with the surmise that, "Thus was created all that exists."<sup>31</sup>

#### **E. Ahistorical Interpretations of the *Inyan* Cosmogony: Generic, Not Very Satisfying Insights**

This widely circulated story of the "Creation of All Things from *Inyan*" sheds light on innumerable dimensions of Lakota spirituality. We find in this cosmogony, for instance, a narrative explanation of how a universe that, in one primordial era, was formless and empty came to be comprehensively ordered and full of animated entities of all sorts. Additionally, this story provides an elegantly succinct exposition of what is routinely regarded as the most essential (if hardly unique) theme in Lakota religion: the harmonious interrelation of all elements of the world. Gods, people, animals, plants, even directions, seasons, the earth and water, all exist in an interdependent web of family relatedness by virtue of their shared descent from a common cosmic source or 'parent,' namely *Inyan*, the Rock.<sup>32</sup> Again and again the cosmogonic drama demonstrates that isolation and solitude are unsatisfactory conditions; creation includes, at every level, the creation of relationships, especially 'family ties.' The story provides, in other words, a kind originative basis for the formulaic phrase that continues to open and close nearly every Lakota ritual and social occasion: *Mitak' oyas'in*, "All my relations."

Moreover, while generally optimistic about the universe's basic orderliness, the story likewise accentuates the unpredictability of the world, and thus of human life. By the same token, while people are by nature fundamentally amicable and 'good,' humans, not unlike the gods, are also much inclined to self-interest and foible. Cunning, insubordination and roguish behavior are, if not valued traits, at least well-anticipated realities. Where pure evil and pure goodness are rare in these stories, mischievousness, rascally deception and ambiguity are ever-present themes. Accordingly, the preservation of proper harmony requires *Skan's* constant wisdom and diligence. This is, it seems, a dynamic and thus high maintenance universe where lots of things go wrong, but almost no action is beyond repair. Creation is *not* a once-and-for-all accomplishment. Despite *Skan's* triumphant announcement to the contrary, this world is never perfect and never finished. Order is frequently disrupted, and relationships frequently sundered. But, in this mythic scenario, disruptions and transgressions are, instead of obstructions to world harmony, ironically enough, the necessary catalysts to the on-going processes of creation.

Interpretive 'insights' of this ahistorical sort are, however, if plausible (and very familiar), vaguely generalized at best. The 'myth' may teach us a great deal about the generalized *content* of Lakota religion, but critical scholars are obliged to inquire also into the more historically specific questions of *context*. A creative 'hermeneutics of retrieval,' which adduces broad propositions about Lakota

attitudes but does *not* take much account either of the colonialist circumstances in which this cosmogony emerged nor of the specific individuals who shaped its present form, must be balanced by a more skeptical 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that does attend to those matters.<sup>33</sup> As in the case of the *Hanwi* story, we have to ask also the tough questions about the historical forces that are reflected in this more properly cosmogonic narrative, about the political interests and aims that brought the story into being, about the intended audiences and occasions of its retelling, and about identities and motives of the individuals that carried it to publication. How was this story regarded by the Lakotas of the past, and how by those of the present?

To make progress in addressing any of these important contextualizing questions will require a brief digression into the intriguing person of James Walker, without whose active interventions we would probably have no knowledge whatever of this purportedly Lakota cosmogony.

#### **F. James R. Walker : Doctor, Holy Man, Ethnologist and Author**

James R. Walker, who lived and worked as a physician on the Oglala Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota from 1896-1914, occupies a paradoxical position in the intellectual history of Americanist studies.<sup>34</sup> His extensive writings are, on the one hand, by far the fullest and arguably most authoritative source on nineteenth and early twentieth-century Lakota religion and myth. Though he published only one full monograph during his lifetime, *The Sun Dance* (1917), all serious students of the Lakotas, including native students, rely heavily on his work — which contains, we should recall, the 'original' versions of both the *Hanwi* and *Inyan* stories. Yet, on the other hand, Walker's theoretical orientation and mode of working were, in many respects, antiquated and amateurish even by the academic conventions of his own era. From its earliest emergence, the 'authenticity' of Walker's material was doubted both because of the uniqueness of the 'data' he presented and because of his uncommonly close relationship with his native 'informants.'<sup>35</sup>

It was only with the marvelously ambitious, four-volume collection of Walker's very extensive but previously scattered writings and correspondence, edited by Raymond J. DeMaille and Elaine A. Jahner and published by the University of Nebraska Press beginning in 1980, that scholars are finally afforded the resources necessary to appreciate more fully both the extent of Walker's accomplishment and the complex limitations of this body of literature, which has exercised such profound influence on Western imaginations of the Lakotas.<sup>36</sup> We learn via the rich mix of documents assembled by DeMaille and Jahner, for instance, that Walker, though well (and Western) educated, articulate and industrious in the extreme, had no formal training in anthropology or ethnology. Moreover, though Walker developed an ongoing relationship with Clark Wissler, a prominent anthropologist from the American Museum of Natural History in New York who provided considerable guidance and support for Walker's 'ethnographic' work, Walker chose to ignore the previous written work on the Lakotas.<sup>37</sup> He came to the Pine Ridge Reservation at age 47 as an agent of the U.S. government first and foremost to tend to the medical

needs of the Sioux, particularly tuberculosis, which had reached near epidemic proportions.

Pursuant of his principal initiative as a health care provider, Walker (though formally charged with combating the influence of tribal medicine men) quickly realized that he had to work jointly rather than at odds with his traditional Lakota counterparts. If initially collaborating with native healers only for pragmatic purposes, Walker soon developed an intense, abiding and, by all signs, genuinely empathetic fascination with Lakota beliefs, mythology and ceremony.<sup>38</sup> So close were his dealings with these Oglala elders, in fact, that he was eventually initiated into their secret Buffalo Society (composed at that point of perhaps as few as five members), which provided him access to an esoteric body of knowledge known to only a few (male) Lakotas.<sup>39</sup> As DeMaille and Jahner explain, sometime around 1898, “Walker in effect became a holy man himself,”<sup>40</sup> a privileged status that goes far in explaining the tone and license that he would exert in his recordings and formulations of Lakota traditions.

In addition to shared concerns about the failing physical health of the Lakotas, Walker and the local medicine men were also in agreement that the once-vigorous body of native traditions was likewise seriously imperiled.<sup>41</sup> Faced with the fast rising tide of White-Christian culture, therefore, Walker and a number of Lakota elders — George Sword and Thomas Tyon foremost among them — despite apparently proceeding with somewhat different motives, undertook together to assemble for the first time a written record of traditional myths and beliefs. The wide (and still widening) currency of the stories that Walker recorded demonstrate that he and his Oglala collaborators were, at least in some respects, stunningly successful in their preservation efforts. Few if any corpuses of native narrative enjoy quite the same prestige.

### **G. Idealized, Fictive Consensus: Walker’s Urge to Synthesis, System and Standardization**

Though preservation of Lakota traditions was a shared motive, to imagine Walker as a passive stenographer for native ‘informants’ who simply rehashed the timeless tales they’d learned from previous generations seriously underestimates the active, creative role of either party. Dr. Walker’s very presence among the Lakotas, which was largely precipitated by Indian susceptibility to European-born diseases, together with his heavy reliance on the opinions of a few exceptionally well-informed old men (much better described as ‘collaborators’ or even ‘mentors’ than ‘informants’), expose immediately the decisive relevance of both European-Native contact and intra-tribal religious diversity.

Even if Walker had been able to record with perfect accuracy the stories as he heard them, it is essential to appreciate, for instance, the profoundly complex — and colonialist — ramifications of putting into writing, inscribing as a text, a collection of stories that had existed previously solely as an oral tradition. This was a decidedly, ironically, non-traditional presentation of tradition. Prior to the arrival of Euro-Americans, such literary productions would have been neither possible nor, more importantly, of any particular interest to the Lakotas. And if writing these stories down in one sense rescued them, the codification also had a grimly stultifying, fossilizing effect. Instead of reservoirs of

narrative themes and mythological exemplars to which various individual Lakota storytellers could appeal in order to craft specific stories to suit specific occasions and specific audiences, Walker's written texts, in a sense, froze and confined those storiological potentials in an inflexible succession of words and paragraphs. Once committed to writing, the cosmology and mythology may, in some sense, have been preserved for (a largely non-native) posterity; but the malleability and dynamism, the susceptibility to creative and situational improvisation that had always characterized that body of knowledge, was seriously eroded.

Moreover, as regards (un)willingness to acknowledge a plurality of native voices, Walker was keenly aware of the determinative role of individual storytellers' personal opinions, respective levels of knowledge, idiosyncratic predilections and oratorical styles. But, for him, that lack of uniformity constituted a kind of double-edged predicament. On the one hand, these improvisational gifts worked to augment his claims concerning the comparative sophistication and ingenuity of the Oglala elders. In a 1908 offer to send Wissler some of the myths that he had been collecting, Walker defended their merits by emphasizing, for instance, that "The elaborateness and detail of stories told by these Indians depends much upon the teller just as among the white people."<sup>42</sup> Yet, on the other hand, the liberal deviations of various Oglala narrators led Walker into the frustrating realization that no single 'informant,' even the most well-versed holy man, was able to provide the sort of fully comprehensive account of Lakota mythology to which he aspired.

Walker was, in other words, forced to admit that he almost never succeeded in recording full and complete stories. Alternatively, these stories came to him "piece-meal" or as what he termed "fragments," partial and incomplete vignettes, the multiple versions of which invariably included serious "contradictions" and "inconsistencies." Not only were the multiple variants often, in his view, troublingly inconsistent, they moreover had gaps and omissions, which left important issues unresolved. Thus in another letter to Wissler (1911), once they had resolved to work together in recovering this material, Walker explained with characteristic candor both his principal problem and his operative solution:

While no Indian has been able to give me the complete mythology in a systematic way, I have gotten quite a complete system of it piece-meal which I am attempting to systemize in a manner approved by the older Indians who are probably as good authority on it as exists.<sup>43</sup>

Walker worked, in other words, to suppress rather than accentuate the individuality and creative invention of those 'informants' whom he so respected — a homogenizing agenda that is all the more ironic given Wissler's repeated attempts to steer Walker away from writing synthetic or 'ideal' accounts that obscured disagreements among the Lakotas concerning their myths and rituals.<sup>44</sup> Walker could not, however, be dissuaded. Instead of foregrounding and celebrating the colorfully diversified idiosyn-

crasies of the Buffalo Society's members (a tendency now fashionable in many postmodern circles), Walker took the decidedly modern, even nineteenth-century tact of eradicating disagreement in favor of the presentation of some idealized, largely fictive consensus.

In sum, then, DeMaille and Jahner's astute assessment of Walker's masterwork on the sun dance actually applies to the whole of his presentation of Lakota religion :

*System* is the key word in understanding Walker's approach to the monograph [on the Oglala sun dance]. Inconsistencies at all levels were eliminated. This is a doctrinal account, written as though with intentions of standardizing ritual form and belief for all time.<sup>45</sup>

Walker's accounts of Lakota myths and rituals — and this assuredly constitutes the most grievous limitation of his work — are artificial, idealized syntheses that, disturbingly enough, really correspond to no specific Indian's rendition of a story and no specific performance of an indigenous ceremony.

#### **H. Walker's Literary Epic : The Memorialization (or 'Musemification') of Lakota Myth**

Though a special case in some respects, Walker's now-famous rendition of "Creation of All Things from *Inyan*" is more a caricature of his urge to synthesize, clean up and complete the myths of the Lakotas than an exception. Where other stories in Walker's mixed-genre oeuvre come much closer to verbatim transcriptions of stories he had actually heard, this cosmogony forms the opening section of his final and most freely manipulated composition, "Oglala Mythology," or what subsequent editors would term "James R. Walker's Literary Cycle."<sup>46</sup> Written over the final ten years of his life after he had left South Dakota for retirement in Colorado, this some 200-page work was explicitly conceived as an attempt to sum up and to cast in the most favorable light all of the wisdom that he had acquired during his long association with the Lakotas.

The peculiar strengths and weaknesses of this literary production derive in large part from the peculiar standpoint from which Walker writes. Nearly two decades in the colonialist contact zone had worked a transformation on his sensibilities too. By the time he undertook this project all of his closest Oglala associates in the Buffalo Society (including George Sword) had died. Therefore, in one respect, Walker saw himself as, oddly enough, the 'last of a breed,' a kind of final repository of the special knowledge to which that elite group alone had been privy. In that sense, Walker positioned himself as an 'insider,' an initiate to the esoteric traditions of the Oglalas ; and because none of his fellow initiates had been able to preserve the esoteric wisdoms (though, as we'll note momentarily, Sword had tried by writing in Lakota), the task fell to him. Because he had been confirmed as a shaman, Walker felt both that he had been entrusted with a sacred duty and that he enjoyed the privileged status required to accomplish the task.<sup>47</sup> As he wrote in his final letter to Wissler (1925), which was accompanied by the last draft of the literary manuscript,

I have worked in trying to arrange the Oglala myths as they might have been arranged by an Oglala had he understood the concepts of the narrators and been able to express them in the English language... I want to finish this work before I join the Great Majority for I believe none other has quite as thorough information from the old Indians relative to their ancient traditions as was given to me.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, for all his fraternization with the elders, Walker remained in many respects always an ‘outsider,’ incompletely expert in (or persuaded by) the views and practices of the Lakotas, and steadfastly committed to the superiority of the (‘more evolutionarily advanced’) presuppositions of modern science and Euro-American civilization.

In an important sense, then, Walker claimed the position of a sort of culture-broker, a go-between, uniquely equipped to carry the valuable insights of the Lakotas to the wider Western world. His “literary cycle” is, as Jahner calls it, “a formal attempt to bridge cultures.”<sup>49</sup> But — and this is a crucial difference between him and his native collaborators — Walker saw himself, it seems, as brokering between a Western culture that had a very promising twentieth-century destiny and an Indian one that did not. If Indian lifeways were tragically headed to extinction, as Walker and most of his non-native contemporaries believed, at least the essence of those ways could, if put down in writing, be preserved. If Lakota spirituality had to pass away, it deserved, in his opinion, at least to be memorialized.

Thus, where he saw his earlier writings as a contribution to anthropology, for this last project Walker seems to have aspired to a wider and more popular audience. Buoyed by those conjoined senses of special obligation and special entitlement to refashion Lakota mythology in whatever ways were required, Walker now apparently felt himself much less confined by the disciplinary dictates of scientific ethnography (as he understood them). Here even the pretense of objectivity is largely jettisoned while the impetuses to refine and recast, to synthesize and systematize, are actually pushed to new heights. Now it was his turn, his responsibility in fact, to exercise the poetical license that he had observed in his Oglala mentors. He seemed to assume, for instance, that the same inconsistencies that had so bothered him would confound other Western readers, and thus detract from the myths’ otherwise estimable appeal. To showcase the merits of these stories, and to honor his dual commitments to modern rationality and Lakota genius, Walker thus regarded it as imperative that he shape their mythology into a unified and coherent whole, a “belief system” free of obvious contradictions, incongruities and breaches of logic. As later critics would correctly point out, Walker aspired in this climatic exposition of native mythology to present “The ultimate synthesis and systematization of the Oglala world view. That no Oglala had likely ever produced such a synthesis did not seem to trouble Walker.”<sup>50</sup>

To accomplish that task, it was here that Walker made his most aggressive use of the parallels between the Lakota stories and those of Greek, Roman and Egyptian mythologies, parallels that he had

long noted but previously mentioned only in passing.<sup>51</sup> Though for Walker the choice probably seemed more ‘natural’ than strategic, translating Oglala myth into a kind of Classical literary epic served as an effective means for replacing intimations of savagery and superstition with those of ‘ancient wisdom.’ Playing also on the Eurocentric myths of ‘the noble savage’ and of unilinear evolution, Oglala lore was fitted into a developmental frame where it could be appreciated as equal to other formative (pagan) antecedents to Western civilizations rather than dismissed as merely aberrant or ‘primitive.’ To appeal to a modern American aesthetic, this mythology required a clear beginning and a cast of characters with identifiable and generally consistent personalities — and thus Walker composed the *Inyan* cosmogony as a kind of a narrative-philosophical prelude to the rest of the mythologic epic.<sup>52</sup>

Walker’s decisions to make these shifts in rhetorical strategy were both considered and overt. In his eyes, no deception was required. He is, for instance, completely forthright in (one version of) the introduction to his epic about how this piece differed from his other writings, a crucial distinction that usually disappears in subsequent citations of his work. He stresses in the most direct fashion that the creation scenario he presents is *not* something that he heard in oral tradition, but rather is his own compilation “from statements, references and allusions taken from many stories and teachings by the elder Oglalas.”<sup>53</sup> He is candidly explicit about his ruling editorial principle: “The stories given here are *as* told by Oglala story tellers but revised in order to avoid repetition and bring them into nearly their proper sequence.”<sup>54</sup> And, upon delivery of the final draft in 1925, only months before his death, Walker reminded Wissler that “My former instructors are now all dead, so I have not had the assistance I had when in doubt as to my interpretation of Oglala manuscript [sic].”<sup>55</sup> Claims to ‘authenticity’ in this case depended, in other words, less on the accurate recapitulation of specific mythic episodes and details than on the poetic rendering of the supposed ‘essence’ and wisdom of the stories he had learned from his Buffalo Society cronies.

All things considered, therefore, it is not surprising that subsequent efforts to locate ‘corroborating evidence’ as to the accuracy of Walker’s free formulations of this esoteric mythology were almost wholly frustrated. Beginning in 1928, Franz Boas, who had acquired copies of Walker’s writings from Wissler, made repeated requests to Lakota tribal member and linguist Ella Deloria to search out Indians familiar with the relevant rituals and traditions.<sup>56</sup> In 1937, Boas specifically sent her Walker’s account of creation from *Inyan*, and commissioned her “to verify and correct the mythological content of the material.”<sup>57</sup> Despite continued checking, however, and despite the fact that many elements of the *Inyan* cosmogony did resonate with Indian audiences, Deloria most of all confirmed her initial suspicions that Walker’s ‘myths’ were loaded with features that appeared either twisted or completely unfamiliar to her indigenous contemporaries. The personification of natural phenomena, one of Walker’s most venturesome ploys to recast Oglala stories in a Classical mold, seemed especially anomalous to tribal members.<sup>58</sup> Edgar Fire Thunder, for instance, a Lakota who had been one of George Sword’s friends, epitomized the prevailing non-recognition when he signed a statement for Deloria to the effect that “tales were never

related in that manner.”<sup>59</sup>

In sum, to present the *Inyan* tale as even a rough transcription of a pre-contact Oglala story — as Walker himself never did — is distorting and misleading. This creation story is a colonialist document, born out of the general circumstance of Euro-Native contact and the highly specific life experience of James Walker. Moreover, the ambiguities present throughout the entire Walker oeuvre are in this story thrown into their highest relief. Of all the ‘myths’ in the whole huge corpus, “Creation of All Things from *Inyan*” is, on the one hand, perhaps the most aggressively redacted, most ‘artificial,’ and thus the most vulnerable to charges of ‘inauthenticity’ in the sense that Boas used that term. This story can, from that view, be condemned as a great failure of fair representation. Yet, on the other hand, a compelling case can (and has) been made that Walker was artfully and remarkably successful in fulfilling his largely self-imposed burden to preserve for future generations a set of Lakota, distinctly non-Western fundamental assumptions about the world.<sup>60</sup> His sense of obligation at this late date more spiritual than scientific, Walker composed a mythic swan song of sorts that was intended to eulogize and memorialize a Lakota outlook that seemed to him, like a butterfly in autumn, beautiful but sadly futureless. And though this may seem to most Americanist academics far too great a concession, that the Oglalas never told this precise creation story in precisely this way was, from Walker’s perspective, largely beside the point.

### **I. George Sword’s Contribution : Informant and Author, Lakota and Christian**

Beginning finally to close the circle of this little article, we can now turn back toward the story of “When the People Laughed at *Hanwi*.”<sup>61</sup> Though Walker provides a stimulus to the composition of this tale of the Moon’s humiliation, and it is only via his translation efforts that the story becomes widely known, actual authorship in this case belongs (almost) solely to full-blood Lakota George Sword, or Long Knife as he is less frequently called.<sup>62</sup> That is to say, where the *Inyan* story *must* be understood as Walker’s literary creation, by contrast, in the wake of DeMaille’s and Jahner’s careful work on these materials, scholars can no longer, even as a kind of bibliographical shorthand, ascribe the *Hanwi* story to James Walker.

That the two stories are allowed to collapse into one seemingly seamless narrative, a tendency apparent in nearly all summaries of Lakota creation traditions, is unfortunate but inevitable.<sup>63</sup> The *Hanwi* story was among Sword’s writings that Walker did not translate (from written Lakota to English) until he had left the Oglala reservation and Sword had died ; it came to the doctor’s attention, in other words, precisely as he was composing his literary magnum opus.<sup>64</sup> Walker was sufficiently impressed with the significance of this story that he embellished it somewhat, added a more symmetrical ending, and then grafted his version of Sword’s tale directly into the third main section of the epic.<sup>65</sup> That the plotline of the *Hanwi* story features new adventures for the same characters who were ‘created’ in the *Inyan* story (a script that, though describing ‘earlier’ mythological events, was actually written

later) is, then, hardly a coincidence.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the deliberate narrative continuities and snarled intertextuality notwithstanding, I will insist that it is the *differences* between the two stories — and the *differences* between the authorial perspectives of Walker and Sword — that are really the most instructive to students of Lakota religion.

Walker, as noted, provides disappointingly scant biographical details on even his foremost native contributor.<sup>67</sup> Though we can't be certain whether the extensive cooperation between the two men was grounded in friendship or mutual exploitation, Walker repeatedly expresses his indebtedness to Sword above all others. More than a willing collaborator, Sword acted as the main sponsor and advocate for Walker's 'ethnographic' research inasmuch as it was he that persuaded the other holy men of the Buffalo Society to admit Walker and to share with him what they knew.<sup>68</sup> Sword was, moreover, as Jahner explains, "remarkably well qualified for his role as Walker's primary teacher and as overseer of the immense task of preserving the holy men's teachings in writing."<sup>69</sup> As a shaman, Sword had conducted all of the central Lakota rituals and "medicine ceremonies," including the sun dance. Additionally, he had been a war leader in conflicts against both other Indians and Whites, and later an agency policeman and judge in the Court of Indian Offenses at Pine Ridge.<sup>70</sup> Sword (a.k.a. Long Knife) was, in short, steeped in his indigenous traditions and, by all signs, widely respected by other Lakotas.

In Sword's case, however, the always troubling intimations of 'untainted' old Indian 'informants' who could serve as conduits to the 'purity' of the pre-colonial past are even less adequate than usual. Instead of closing himself off from the onslaught of Euro-American civilization, Sword had made aggressive attempts to learn all he could about the White world. Most importantly (for Walker's purposes), Sword, though never fluent in spoken English, was among the very few older Oglalas who had learned not only how to read but also how to write Lakota in Romanized script.<sup>71</sup> Moreover — and of even greater consequence for understanding the *Hanwi* story — Sword, not unlike Nicholas Black Elk, had taken a leading role in the Christian mission to the Lakotas. As Long Knife explained in his own autobiographical statement, following a stint as the first leader of the U.S. Indian police, "Then I became a deacon in the Christian church, and am so, and will be until my death."<sup>72</sup>

Sword was, therefore, an *almost* perfect anthropological informant. From Walker's and Wissler's perspectives, Sword's enthusiasm for Christianity constituted a non-fatal flaw, a largely irrelevant distraction that could be screened out of their otherwise productive relationship.<sup>73</sup> His native associate's progressive flexibility notwithstanding, Walker determined, it seems, that he could interact with Sword the spokesman and guardian of the old ways (i.e., a 'traditionalist') without becoming much involved with Sword the innovator of new ways (i.e., a 'synthesizer'). Moreover, Sword's rare literary skills, coupled with his deep knowledge and eager willingness to participate in the project, overrode any compunctions Walker may have felt. Thus in addition to facilitating the documentary agenda by orchestrating access to other native leaders, Sword also became the project's most prolific and most direct contributor. In 1896, within months of Walker's arrival on the reservation, Sword gave his

promise not only to discuss Lakota traditions, but to prepare and contribute the innumerable written texts (including the ‘myth’ of *Hanwi’s* disgrace), translations of which would eventually find their way into the various volumes of Walker’s papers.<sup>74</sup>

Predictably, Walker never foregrounds either Sword’s affiliations with Christianity nor his talents as a creative writer, as though either of those attributes might jeopardize the ‘authenticity’ of the information that his most prized source provided. Alternatively, he seizes every opportunity to commend Sword on his deep and thorough command of the tribe’s fading traditions.<sup>75</sup> Irrespective of Walker’s depiction of him as a last link with the Oglala past, however, it now seems more than likely that Sword was a shrewd and enterprising culture broker in his own right. That he was so quick to solidify his special connection with the government physician suggests that he, not Walker, was the principal instigator of their writing project and the controlling force in their relationship. It is very plausible, in fact, that Sword found in Walker precisely the sort of missing link, the distribution outlet as it were, that he required to communicate his ideas across the boundary from indigenous to White culture. Mutual respect seems likely, but there is no question that the two men needed and used each other, partners in a complimentary if asymmetrical match made in the contact zone.

#### **J. The Humiliation of the Moon Reconsidered: A Lakota Christian Look to the Future**

To invoke that provisional typology of divergent Lakota means for preserving and/or constructing a religious identity in the colonial context, Long Knife is, therefore, much more appropriately classed as a ‘synthesizer’ (like Black Elk) than a ‘traditionalist’ (like Sitting Bull). Sword was in a fully open way a Christian leader, though (again like Black Elk) he did not feel that his ‘conversion’ to Christianity in any way diminished his fidelity to Oglala religion. In the view of Sword, who was involved in his own sort of exercise in ‘comparative religion,’ the irrefutable *similarities* between the two religious orientations provided the basis for mutual understanding and cross-cultural conversation, while the notable *differences* ought to serve as impetuses for each side to reconsider and refine its current outlook. Thus, for Sword, to be a Christian provided a means of perpetuating and strengthening his commitments to traditional Oglala culture, not abandoning or replacing those commitments. And nowhere was that sort of deliberative double affiliation more clearly expressed than in the *Hanwi* text.

Recall that “When the People Laughed at the Moon,” in its broadest strokes, describes how, once the world had been created and put into good order, that foundational order was disrupted and then replaced by an alternative, substantially different world order. Recall, in other words, that the climax and turning point of the story is a calamitous transgression in which (proto-)people went where they did not belong, into the realm of the gods, and thus upset the then-prevailing cosmic equilibrium. More specifically, recall that *Ite* (Face), the vainly beautiful daughter of the original human couple *Wazi* (Old Man) and *Kanka* (Old Woman), was “a mortal [who] shamed the Moon by usurping the Sun’s attention and assuming *the wrong place*,”<sup>76</sup> a boldly irreverent act that irrevocably altered the configuration of

relationships among gods and people. *Ite*, in a sense, broke up the marriage of the chief of the gods, and thereby precipitated no less than the separation of the Sun (*Wi*) and the Moon (*Hanwi*) — an event of such moment that the world could never be quite the same again.

The impertinence of *Ite* and her coconspirators definitely disrupted and undermined the status quo. Yet, in this story, rather than plunging the universe into chaos and disarray, her trespass actually set the stage for the establishment of a new order. In this narrative, *Skan* (Sky or ‘Something that Moves’), the creative force who had established the original design of the world by giving life and motion to everything that moves, reemerges with a set of rulings that serves not to re-establish the old order but, even more significantly, to put in place *a new, different and unprecedented cosmic arrangement*, a “fourth time,” as Sword terms it. *Skan*, in other words, exposes in no uncertain terms the impropriety of the actions of *Ite* and the rest, and no excuse can dissuade him from his declaration that what has happened is just not right. So egregious an action cannot go unpunished. Yet, unlike the biblical view of God as an omniscient judge, *Skan* is not charged with legislating proper behavior in order to protect an immutable world order, which he had previously established. In this story, the cosmic design is far more malleable and ever-unfolding. The *Skan* of Sword’s story is, in other words, less impressive as an intransigent moral force than as a creative force, a god who wins the day via his improvisational skill and wisdom in fashioning an alternative, suitably different cosmic configuration.

One-to-one correlations between storiological and earthly realities are never adequate as full interpretations of polyvalent narratives of this sort. Yet in the case of Sword’s very self-consciously composed stories, which by almost no conventional academic definition really qualify as ‘myths’ (though they continue to be presented as such), it seems quite clear that *Ite*’s ill-conceived attempt at usurping the place of the Moon was explicitly intended as an analogue to the similarly cataclysmic arrival of White Americans into the native world. In Sword’s (and everyone’s) view, the established order of the Oglala world had been shattered by the inrush of Euro-American culture. From a native view, White people too had ventured somewhere they did not belong and had committed a transgression for which no excuse was really adequate. But Sword likewise held the much more optimistic — and much less unanimous — view that the onerous colonialist situation in which he lived constituted a disruptive crisis that could somehow set the stage for a new beginning and new world order.

Moreover, were Sword intent on promulgating that hopeful prospect, as he seems to have been, then the unmistakable parallels between the Genesis and *Hanwi* stories begin to take on new significance. Neither incidental nor accidental, those commonalties are perhaps the clearest indicators that Sword, as a Christian deacon and a Lakota shaman, was making a concerted effort to compose narratives that would demonstrate the essential compatibility between the two traditions. Both the *Hanwi* tale and Genesis open with the existence of a harmonious, well-balanced world order; in both, that original harmony is undermined by humans’ discontent with their present status and arrogant attempts to be like gods; and in both, those transgressions are punished by an almighty god who establishes a new cosmic

arrangement in which people come to occupy a substantially different, more challengingly difficult role.

Designed in that way, Sword's account of *Ite's* folly and the expulsion of the Buffalo People from the realm of the gods could, on the one hand, resonate strongly with the biblical account of Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise. Yet, at the same time, by featuring characters well known from Lakota cosmogonic tales, Sword also demonstrated a basic continuity with those indigenous traditions. Ingeniously enough, Sword told one story that would sound familiar, and hopefully plausible, to both Christians and Lakotas. In Elaine Jahner's words,

In one important way, Sword's narratives point toward terms permitting the adaptation to changed cultural circumstances as his tales mediate between Lakota and Biblical beliefs, showing the possible grounds for syncretisms. Sword's stories are close enough to both sets of beliefs to show how one can be interpreted in relation to the other and how philosophical thought stimulated by the Lakota world view could be carried on within the Christian one.<sup>77</sup>

Though the biblical pattern of sin and retribution was *not* prevalent in indigenous mythology, Sword dexterously shaped those themes into a story that the Lakota community could understand and appreciate.

Perhaps less obvious but equally significant, however, are the substantial departures between the *Hanwi* story and Genesis. Besides the important contrast between the omniscient Christian God and the improvisational *Skan*, note also that *Wazi* (Old Man) and *Kanka* (Old Woman), apparent correlates to Adam and Eve, are *not* asexual innocents who lack the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>78</sup> Nor was their original milieu a flawless paradise. To the contrary, Sword's first people are, from the beginning, complex and imperfect humans (parents in fact) with a mischievous, sometimes shortsighted approach to an often unpredictable world — a condition not unlike that evidenced in lots of Lakota mythic figures. Caggy but also naive (no one can really hope to out-trick the Trickster), this primal couple's devious plan is forestalled mainly because they fail to understand adequately what they are up against. Good versus evil, pride versus humility, sin versus proper obedience (probably the bluntly dualistic exegesis of Genesis with which Sword was familiar) are *not* really the crucial issues in Sword's story. Though the world they left behind was hardly perfect, nevertheless, *Wazi* and *Kanka*, like the first human couple in the biblical story (and like the late nineteenth-century Lakotas!), end up losing their customary way of life, and thus are forced to deal with a darker and more difficult set of challenges.

Moreover, again unlike Genesis — but again fully consistent with the constant emphasis on familial interrelatedness in the *Inyan* cosmogony and countless other Lakota stories — Sword's script accentuates the dire consequences of neglecting one's kinship obligations. Marital infidelity and child abandonment are recurrent themes; *Skan's* most frequent and most stinging punishment is isolation framed specifically in terms of separation from one's partner and family; and, not inconsequentially, it

is *Tate* (the Wind), as the long suffering husband of *Ite* but nonetheless reliable father, who emerges as the one who will provide the nucleus of the revitalized social organization in the new age or “fourth time.” Raising a theme that he develops more in subsequent stories, Sword is suggesting, it seems, that the close family ties that have sustained the Lakotas in the past will become, not less, but more important in meeting the challenges of the future. To be without family relationships (in a broad and profound indigenous sense of that term) would be the gravest of tragedies for the Lakotas.

In sum, Sword’s ingenious script provides a way of affirming the truth and viability of Christianity without, however, acknowledging its superiority over traditional Lakota ways. Christianity in his view was not a replacement for Lakota religion, but neither was it irrelevant and wrong. For Sword, Christianity is a catalyst that can put Lakota belief on a new — but still fully ‘traditional’ — trajectory. In his creatively accomodational view, Native Americans and Euro-Americans can learn from each other. Christians can *and ought to be* informed by the insights of Lakota religion, just as the Lakotas *ought to be* informed by the truths of Christianity.

#### **K. Comparing the Creations of Walker and Sword: Notable Similarities, Profound Differences**

How then, after all, are Walker’s “Creation of All Things from *Inyan*” and Sword’s “When the People Laughed at *Hanwi*” similar? And, more importantly, how are they different? How does the former story, along with the respective biographies of the two authors, shed light on the ‘myth’ of the Moon with which we began? What does this comparative exercise teach us about Indian mythology? And what does it teach us about the White myths that have sustained the academic study of Indians?

On one side, the apparent commonalties between the two stories and two authors are sufficiently strong that, for most readers, Sword and his contributions have simply disappeared into the larger Walker corpus. The two men were, in an important way, mutual collaborators, committed to the common goal of assembling the first written record of Lakota traditions; and, somewhat surprisingly, there is even the strong likelihood that the idea for some sort of ‘documentary’ writing project had occurred independently to each man before they actually met. Moreover, oddly enough, they had startlingly similar styles of composition insofar as both were highly systematic, economical and efficient, sometimes even spare in their modes of written presentation. Though Long Knife was skilled also in the oral performative tactics that could stretch a story out over many days, as Jahner notes, “There is nothing extraneous in Sword’s [written] tales; any digressions or deviations are important in explaining allusions.”<sup>79</sup>

Additionally, though both Walker and Sword succeeded in composing stories that faithfully reflect timeworn Lakota sensibilities and presuppositions, it is likewise crucial that we understand both the *Inyan* and *Hanwi* stories as products of the colonialist situation. It should by this point be obvious that the still-lingering tendencies to represent these compositions as rare and ‘uncontaminated’ remnants of pre-contact Lakota cosmology — claims to ‘purity’ that neither of the authors themselves really made

— distort much more than they illumine. Both Walker's analytic syntheses of Lakota mythology and Sword's Christian Lakota narratives constitute intensely hybrid (in some respects, brand new sorts of) cultural productions, written documents that could only have emerged from the contact zone. Both depend upon and deploy cultural resources drawn from native *and* Euro-American traditions. Neither the *Inyan* nor the *Hanwi* story would have — or even *could* have — emerged irrespective of the circumstance of Lakota-Christian contact and interaction.

And finally, with respect to that second informing notion, while both stories assuredly reflect the generalized dynamics of colonial contact, both must also be appreciated as the idiosyncratic creations of unique individuals. Even if Sword or Walker spoke for the whole Buffalo Society (again which neither really claims to do) that would have been a minority position to which only a handful of old men subscribed. To describe either of these stories as 'typicality Lakota' is nearly as inadequate as the bankrupt claims to pre-contact 'purity.'

If the *similarities* between the two stories and two authors are notable, it is, however, the *differences* that deserve even greater attention. Perhaps most importantly, Walker, like nearly all his non-native contemporaries, and Sword, like lots but hardly all of his Lakota contemporaries, had profoundly different expectations concerning the future of indigenous culture. Where Walker shared the widely held opinion that native culture, irrespective of its intrinsic merits, was tragically doomed, Sword was much more optimistic about its long-term survival. The two writers agreed that Euro-Americans were here to stay, and that there would never be a return to the 'pristine' ways of the pre-colonial past. But — and this may be the crucial difference — Sword, apparently unlike Walker, persisted in the hopeful confidence that the Lakotas could, as they had in the face of previous challenges, pull through this crisis and survive.

Accordingly, while the two may have shared a common purpose in assembling an unprecedented written record of Lakota traditions, they operated with very different motives. Walker, presumably because of his commingled senses of genuine appreciation and 'scientific' responsibility, was committed to preserving Lakota mythology as a kind of antiquarian exercise, a contribution to the burgeoning anthropological literature. For him, writing down the mythic tales of the Oglalas was a historiographical exercise in responsible remembering. For Sword, however, recording old 'myths' — and, even more significantly, producing new ones — was by no means a salvage operation or an exercise in 'museumification.' Walker's initiative in memorializing the passing of a noble way of life was predicated on an operative assumption of imminent extinction that Sword would not accept. Instead of historiography and abstraction, Sword's writing project constituted a concrete and central strategy — perhaps *the* paramount strategy — in his attempt to help his people move ahead into a new and very different era of their existence. Sword's incentive for writing, unlike Walker's, was directly connected to aspirations of 'real' social change.

Consequently, their target audiences, if you will, were very different. Where most of Walker's early

writing was explicitly conceived as a contribution to anthropology, and thus aimed specifically at academics, the 'literary cycle' in which the *Inyan* tale appeared was intended for a wider, more popular but still wholly non-native audience. That Walker's stories have since found their way back into tribal communities is, I suspect, more accidental than deliberate. By contrast, Sword's anticipated 'readership,' though much more difficult to ascertain, seems to have included both natives and non-natives. Unlike Ella Deloria, for instance, Sword did *not* seem to have cared much about contributing to the ethnographic record of their tribe. He did nonetheless aspire, through Walker, to reach those Euro-American audiences who needed to be persuaded not only of the depth and sophistication of Lakota spirituality but also of its fundamental compatibility with Christianity. Nevertheless, his principal audience—the constituency that he most urgently hoped to address and persuade—was, I think, his own increasingly fragmented Oglala community.

Sword wanted, in other words, first of all to re-confirm and to offer a systematic 'theological' basis for those other so-termed Lakota 'synthesizers' who, like himself, had embraced Christianity; he endeavored to preach to the converted as it were. But even more urgent was his concern to reach out to those Lakotas who had lost hope in preserving their native ways in the face of Euro-American colonialism. Thus Sword was committed, additionally, to reaching those Lakotas who found themselves on the unfortunate path to full 'acculturation' (the fourth option in the provisional typology); and, furthermore, he wanted to dissuade those more non-compromising 'traditionalists' (the first typological option) away from what he regarded as the similarly untoward expectation of preserving the customary ways irrespective of the encroachment of White society. Via stories like the *Hanwi* tale, Sword hoped to promulgate his progressive, synthesizing view that the Lakotas did not have to cave into the pressures of non-native society, but nor could they expect to insulate themselves fully from those alien influences.

Appreciating the two authors' substantially different expectations, motives and anticipated audiences helps to explain, therefore, why Sword's 'myths' have a decidedly polemical edge that Walker's do not. Even in his freely construed literary epic, Walker was deliberately conservative and deliberately intent on documenting, to the best of his knowledge, an 'exoteric' Lakota mythology, that is, a body of stories that, if unfamiliar in their particulars, nonetheless reflected presuppositions that were widely shared by most late nineteenth-century Lakotas. His goal was to present, if not the actual narrative scripts that the Lakotas had shared among themselves for generations, at least something like a facsimile or a poetic condensation of those stories that would capture the 'essence' of the imperiled Lakota system of belief.

Sword, by contrast, was deliberately progressive and even iconoclastic insofar as he was determined to challenge prevailing, widely held assumptions. His were, in one sense, innovative, esoteric, perhaps even eccentric stories that issued from his closeted consultations with a few similarly reflective holy men; but they were, in a more important sense, unconventional narratives that he hoped would find wide acceptance among his tribal contemporaries. To put the contrast bluntly, Sword's story-making was

much more ambitious and much more socio-politically pragmatic than Walker's. Where the latter hoped that his *Inyan* story would distil and preserve widely held Lakota assumptions, Sword actually hoped to put in doubt and undermine prevailing Lakota assumptions, and thus help to spur a substantial change in the attitudes of his native brethren.

#### **L. The Motivated Myth-Making of Indians : Narrative Resources and Resourcefulness**

Moving now toward some closing reflections, recognition of Sword's polemical approach to 'myth-making' intensifies all the more the irony that the *Hanwi* tale has repeatedly been singled out as the most suitable point of entry into the *pre-contact* cosmology of the Western Sioux.<sup>80</sup> We know now — and Walker knew then! — that Sword was, by design, something of an iconoclast. The story of Ité's transgression and the other narratives that Long Knife conceived and wrote expressly to pass along to Walker were *not* well circulated among the general population, and were never told in the customary oral fashion. As Ella Deloria explained in a 1939 letter to Boas, "the stuff of which they are built is Lakota," but the tales as such had never been in the oral tradition.<sup>82</sup> Irrespective of their prestige among current academics — and irrespective of Walker's stubborn insistence on depicting his closest associate as a last repository of the old wisdom — Sword's stories, as Jahner concludes, "definitely did *not* exist as part of the common, popular [Lakota] traditions about creation."<sup>82</sup>

George Sword's pragmatic rhetorical manipulations, particularly when juxtaposed with the reticence of Walker and subsequent scholars to acknowledge that personal authorial initiative, present innumerable 'lessons' with respect to the myth-making practices both of the Lakotas and of non-native academics. Where 'myth' as an academic category has usually implied a mysteriously ancient and anonymous authorship, a widely consensual community endorsement and a principally (originally) oral mode of presentation, Sword's stories meet none of those criteria.<sup>83</sup> More specifically, Sword's ingeniously composed narratives force us to reconsider the adequacy of those well-worn theories that characterize myths, especially creation myths, as what Mircea Eliade termed "archetypal patterns" and "paradigmatic models," or what Bronislaw Malinowski called foundational "charters."<sup>84</sup> Though conceiving of 'myth' as pattern and paradigm has proven heuristically useful in many situations, the strategic originality of Sword's stories undermines any too-simple presumption that Indian mythologies have functioned as rigid, static blueprints that confined native communities within a changeless routine.<sup>85</sup> To the contrary, in Long Knife's case, Lakota 'myths' are much more appropriately conceived as what one scholar of the Inkas aptly terms "*resources for the motivated construction of identity*."<sup>86</sup>

In other words, that same body of native stories that Walker aspired to systematize and enshrine was, for Sword, a living resource — among his strongest weapons in fact — for engaging the threatening challenges of colonialism. Thus where Walker could be content to summarize and codify the cosmogonic traditions of the Lakotas (an initiative in which he apparently met with a good measure of success), those same stories were only a point of departure for Sword's project. In a sense, Walker's

end was, for Sword, only a means and a beginning. Not nearly so enamored of 'history' as the Western Walker, Sword cared less about safeguarding the record of his people's past and accurately recording *what had been* than about charting a course for *what could be in the future*. Perfecting and memorializing ancient Lakota myths were not his concerns, but Walker's. The rich oeuvre of Lakota stories was, therefore, for Sword, less a catalogue of 'archetypal patterns' to which he and his people had to conform in order to retain their spiritual integrity than a vital cultural resource, a reservoir of possibilities to which the Lakotas could appeal in order to deal with whatever unpredictable exigencies life offered. Sword's deep commitment to the power of Oglala 'myths' was, in short, based on an attitude of active utilization rather than passive compliance.

Moreover, when Euro-America Christians — and the 'myths' that Christians tell — arrived on the scene, a whole new body of storiological options came into Sword's purvey, themes and plotlines that constituted, among other things, additional narrative resources for his so-termed 'motivated construction of identity.' In the contact zone, Sword's range of possibilities, though narrowed in many respects, was also substantially widened. To cut, paste, reconfigure and intertwine indigenous and biblical insights was, in Sword's Lakota Christian view, neither disrespectful to either affiliation, nor was it merely an exercise in abstraction or speculation, 'primitive philosophy' as it were. Myth-making, among the most 'traditional' and most urgent communal obligations of Lakota holy men, was, for Sword, real labor from which one could expect real, tangible rewards. Sword seems to have believed, in other words, just as Walker did, that rotely reiterating the old stories of the Lakota would do little or nothing to improve the colonial plight of the Indians. Yet, unlike Walker, Sword was convinced that creating new stories, new Lakota visions and expectations of the future, built up from all the available narrative resources, could make a very palpable difference. Faced with a '*this-worldly*' crisis in South Dakota, Sword was, it seems, persuaded (or at the very least hopeful) that his highly original 'myth' about an '*other-worldly*' crisis wherein the primordial disruptions of *Inktomi*, *Ite* and the others opened into a new beginning and a "fourth time" could serve somehow as a catalyst to a similarly new beginning for his people.

### **M. The Motivated Myth-Making of Academics: Repairing or Replicating Past Abuses?**

Be that it may, if Sword's pragmatic narrative machinations give us pause to reconsider how Indians work with 'myth,' the convoluted 'reception history'<sup>87</sup> of his stories — the saga of the saga of *Hanwi* if you will — should likewise give us even greater pause to reflect on the ways in which non-natives, particularly White academics, have variously utilized Indians as pawns and 'resources' in their own 'motivated constructions of identity.' The serendipitous conjunction of today's more rigorously skeptical, more explicitly politicized ('postmodern'/'post-colonial') critical climate, together with DeMaille and Jahner's assemblage of so many relevant but previously unavailable documents, positions historians of religions to undertake a radical reinterpretation of Walker, Sword and their literary

works.<sup>88</sup> Faced with ever deeper reservations about ‘objectivity,’ and thus an increasingly compelling call to be much more explicit about the normative judgements that are always at work in our ‘academic’ analyses, late twentieth-century scholars may feel as though the time is finally right to halt the tumbling chain of misrepresentations, to demystify, de-mythologize and to evaluate more fairly all of the players in this complex game of intercultural exchange and exploitation. Yet, while that incentive to ‘set the record straight’ is certain to provide a new chapter to the saga of the *Hanwi* tale (actually lots of new and very different chapters), that the aggressive corrections of today’s cultural critics will provide any substantial improvement is, I think, much less certain.

Admitting to a bit of caricature to make this final point, James Walker, for instance, from one (maybe too generous) perspective, can win commendation as a rugged American individualist, a pioneering humanitarian who braved the frontier in order to devote his entire adult life to sharing his modern medical expertise with the Indians. That view can forgive the self-admitted amateurishness of his ethnographic ventures, a non-professional standing that actually confirms the genuineness of his motives, and instead congratulate him for his success in recording a raft of information about the Lakotas that would otherwise have escaped us. Yet, in the present critical climate, where exposing the pertinacious abuses of colonialism has become a major (not altogether inappropriate) academic preoccupation, we are urged even more strongly to see how Walker’s admiration for the Lakotas was always tinged by an evolutionist’s attitude of superiority and condescension. If the Lakotas were sloppily inconsistent with their myths, he would tidy the stories up and arrange them into a coherent system; if each performance of an Oglala sun dance was a bit imperfect, he would nonetheless distill for the anthropological record an idealized version of the rite; if his native ‘informants’ were intent on dabbling with Christianity, he would filter out those ‘corruptions’ and isolate their more faithfully ‘traditional’ side. In hindsight, we can see that Walker *had* to suppress Sword’s creativity and flexibility in order to sustain his own highly idealized depiction of the Lakotas as a pre-modern people without history, incapable of change, and thus lamentably but inevitably consigned to extinction.<sup>89</sup>

In that more skeptical view, Walker — not unlike John Neihardt, who has been roundly chastised for his infamous, tragically poignant (mis)representation of Nicholas Black Elk as a pitiable old man whose dream had died and whose people were doomed because they could not adapt to the challenges of the twentieth century<sup>90</sup> — must be called to account for at once romanticizing the Oglalas and writing them off. It is easy (and again not inappropriate) to borrow arguments like that of Tzvetan Todorov, who focuses attention on the “moral” rather than historical dimensions of colonialism, in order to (re)assess Walker as one more heir to the “finalist logic” of Christopher Columbus whereby a European imposes his own ethnocentric expectations, and then works out his own confusions, insecurities and sense of ‘self’ via non-empirical, overdetermined imaginations of an indigenous ‘other.’<sup>91</sup> Equipped now with reams of incisive work on the self-legitimizing processes colonialist representation, it is not difficult to see Walker’s commentary on Lakota ritual and myth as both a consequence of and

seminal contribution to a (modernist) White myth about Indians, which served to authorize the exploitative domination of Native Americans by Euro-Americans. According to that now-familiar argument, Walker *has to* be condemned for his hip-deep involvement in a kind of insidious American 'Orientalism.'

By the same token, from our present theoretical horizon — where questions of knowledge and power and the always-political nature of discourse have moved to center stage — Long Knife is even more ripe for reevaluation. Earlier views, beginning with Walker and Wissler but persisting in the still-prevalent utilization of the *Hanwi* story as a cornerstone for the supposed 'reconstruction' of pre-contact Lakota cosmology, most certainly did err in their intimations that Sword was a passive mouthpiece for 'the old ways.' But now we face the temptation of a similarly heavy-handed 'rehabilitation' of George Sword wherein he is 'elevated' him from the status of 'informant' to that of native activist and freedom fighter. Instead of an exotic 'other,' Sword can now be reconfigured as an 'other' that is, after all, very much like 'us' (or like we wish we were). Instead of the remnant of a quick-fading past, Sword becomes in this view a politically savvy savage who read very clearly what was happening in the contact zone, and then borrowed from his colonial, Christian oppressors in order to undermine their imperialist ambitions. In this view, it is Walker and Wissler that were duped, not the naive Lakotas. In this realignment of victims and victimizers, it is Sword who appreciated the political power of discourse and 'myth' in ways that modernist scholars could not.

Or, if we revised our assessments according those strains of postmodern theory that encourage us to appreciate the never-very-systematic character of religio-cultural 'systems,' and thus to validate the idiosyncratic and non-conformist, we could 'rehabilitate' Sword in a different way — say, as a visionary prophet or religious innovator, albeit one who never really succeeds in assembling a substantial following. In that case, the half dozen old men in the Buffalo Society — whom Walker was intent on imagining as the conservative 'religious elite' of the Lakotas and, therefore, the most 'authentic' representatives of his own idealized view of pre-contact Lakota religion — could be re-imagined into something more like a 'new religion,' an embryonic (maybe still-born) American cargo cult. In that more ambiguous revalorization, the author of the *Hanwi* tale and his fellow shaman storytellers are neither protectors of the past nor the vanguard for the future, but more likely a kind of millennialist fringe.<sup>92</sup> More quirky than cunning, this Sword is an avant-guard, philosophically predisposed poet-prophet, whose forward-looking proposals for a way out of the colonialist crisis exercised sadly little influence on the attitudes, let alone the political destiny of the Lakotas.

In the end, however, it is not, in my opinion, the proper task of historians of religions and anthropologists to award George Sword his overdue place among the annals of colonialist resistance fighters or religious innovators. Nor is it our responsibility to hold James Walker's feet to the fire of contemporary critical theory as it were, and to expose just how deeply implicated he was in the moral transgressions of Euro-American colonialism. All those corrective views, while perhaps seeming (at the

moment) fairer and more plausible, also risk being over-corrections or alternative distortions — new, postmodern White myths — that serve to appropriate Indian ‘others’ into yet one more round of Western imaginings about ourselves. To imagine that we are more properly realistic, more responsibly skeptical than a wide-eyed Walker is, I think, to learn very little from the saga of the saga of *Hanwi*. To police the history of (mis)representations — of which there are so many in this scenario — is almost certainly to contribute to it.

Alternatively, I recommend focusing the burden of responsibility, not on Walker and Sword, but on contemporary readers of their writings (myself included of course).<sup>93</sup> Where we can see now that earlier readers of the Walker corpus succumbed too quickly to the Eurocentric fallacies of the ‘purity’ and ‘typicality’ of these Lakota stories, we have an obligation to do better in appreciating the decisive ramifications both of the large, on-going problems of colonialist contact and of the little idiosyncrasies of individual life histories. Where earlier academicians could plead in all honesty that theirs was a modern, scientific perspective, unencumbered by ‘myth’ and disconnected from the abuses of colonialism, we no longer have the luxury of either of those delusions. Consequently, where the mixed motives of Walker and Sword emerge now as the easiest and most obvious targets of our critical reparations, we ought to reserve the hardest scrutiny for ourselves and for the discernment of those new (postmodern) ‘myths’ that we promulgate and protect by reappropriating these two authors’ motivated narratives into our own. Historians of religions are positioned now to make salient new contributions to the reception history of Walker’s and Sword’s writings, but to claim the final word would be to replicate rather than repair the errors of our predecessors.

In closing, therefore — retrieving my opening theme of learning both less and more about (the study of) Lakota religion from the deceptively simple story of *Hanwi*’s humiliation — I have to agree with Elaine Jahner, who is intimately aware of the complexity of the situation, when she contends that “Sword’s tales undoubtedly provide us our most easily accessible narrative view of Lakota beliefs about the formation of the world.”<sup>94</sup> But that ‘ease of access’ can today maintain the pretense of academic inquiry, and can teach us any ‘truth’ about Lakota religion, only if we remind ourselves constantly of the snarled and knotted entanglements between Lakota myth-making practices and our own.

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the often-inconsistent usage of the terms Oglala, Sioux and Lakota, the editors’ Introduction to James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, edited by Raymond J. DeMaille and Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), xxv, explains that “the Sioux themselves [including the Oglalas] used the terms *Dakota* and *Lakota*, depending on the dialect of the speaker, to refer to *all* the Sioux groups.” Emphasis theirs.

<sup>2</sup> William K. Powers, *Oglala Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975, 1977), 68ff. To use Powers’ work as something of a foil to begin this paper is in no way intended to diminish his enormous contribution to our understanding of the religion of the Oglalas, including their involvements with Euro-

American culture and Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> Though there were sporadic interactions between the Lakotas and Christians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, permanent Christian missions were not established until the mid-nineteenth century. See, for instance, Vine V. Deloria, Sr., "The Establishment of Christianity Among the Sioux;" and Harvey Markowitz, "Catholic Mission and the Sioux: A Crisis in the Early Paradigm;" both in *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*, edited by Raymond J. DeMaille and Douglas Parks (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> W. Powers, *Oglala Religion*, 69-85. The relevant source on which Powers primarily relies is James R. Walker, *The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton-Dakota*, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 16, pt. 2 (New York: 1917) [pp. 164-80].

<sup>5</sup> An edited version of "When the People Laughed at the Moon" (which, as I will explain later in this article, was written by Lakota author George Sword), first appeared in Walker, *The Sun Dance*, 164. The most authoritative, easily accessible version of the story is in James R. Walker, *Lakota Myth*, edited by Elaine Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 52-57. Summaries of the myth appear, for instance, in W. Powers, *Oglala Religion*, 69-71; and Elaine A. Jahner, "Lakota Genesis: The Oral Tradition;" in *Sioux Indian Religion*, eds. DeMaille and Parks, 47-49.

<sup>6</sup> See Sword, "When the People Laughed at the Moon;" in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 53-54. Note also that English glosses and translations of the names for the protagonists in Lakota myths (including the use of diacritical marks) vary widely; I have aimed here only for simplicity and consistency.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> W. Powers, *Oglala Religion*, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Sword, "When the People Laughed at the Moon;" in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 54-57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> In fairness, note that William K. Powers, "Lakota Religion;" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, vol. 8, p. 436, describes Walker's *Sun Dance* as "a seminal publication on the cosmology and rituals of the Oglala," but also warns: "Some of the myths should be read judiciously as some of them are obvious romantic reconstructions of Lakota myth from a classical Greco-Roman perspective."

<sup>13</sup> Though I cannot pursue the issue in this brief essay, I should admit my participation here in a widespread but unfortunate tendency to essentialize and reify the heuristic category of 'colonialism.' That is to say, 'colonialism,' not unlike 'religion,' 'culture,' 'society,' 'tradition,' etc. (particularly when one considers 'colonialist' processes initiated by other-than-Europeans) ought to be conceived as a provisional and constructed category rather than a secure historical fact.

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the special merits of cargo cults as a point of departure for studying religion in colonial contexts, see, for instance, Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); and Charles H. Long, "Towards a Post-Colonial Method in the Study of Religion," *Religious Studies News*, vol. 3, no. 2 (May 1995): 4-5. Regarding captivity narratives, see, for instance, Gary L. Ebersole, *Captured by Texts: Puritan to Post-Modern Images of Indian Captivity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> On the notion of the 'contact zone,' see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); and David Carrasco, "Mesoamerica as a New World: Colonialism and Religious Creativity," in *Comparative Studies on the Popular Religions in U.S.A. and Mexico* (Tokyo: Monbushu, 1997), 109-118.

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the 'politics of representation,' see, among innumerable strong possibilities, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> On the intellectual history of Americanist studies, see, for instance, Ake Hultkrantz, *The Study of American Indian Religions*, edited by Christopher Vecsey (New York : Crossroad, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> With respect to the possibility that early scholars of the Lakotas, for instance, were overestimating the privilege and formality of secret holy men's societies (of which James Walker was a part), see Jahner's Introduction to Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> Though Sitting Bull is often deployed by natives and non-natives as an emblem of radical non-compromise, Stanley Vestal, *Sitting Bull : Champion of the Sioux* (Norman : University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 256, quotes him as having advised his people that "When you find anything good in the white man's road, pick it up but when you find something bad... leave it alone." This ought to serve, among other purposes, as a warning about the limitations of the sort of heuristic typology that I am presenting here.

<sup>20</sup> Two good places to enter the enormous literature on Nicholas Black Elk are Julian Rice, *Black Elk's Story : Distinguishing Its Lakota Purpose* (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 1991) ; and Clyde Holler, *Black Elk's Religion : The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism* (Syracuse : Syracuse University Press, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> The aggressively eclectic orientations of the nineteenth-century Ghost Dance religion and the ongoing Native American (Peyote) Church provide perhaps the most prominent exemplars of this 'synthetic' possibility.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding the inadequacy of these labels, it is noteworthy that individuals adhering to each of these first three typological options claim for themselves the title "traditionalist."

<sup>23</sup> See John (Fire) Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer : Seeker of Visions* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> Regarding claims to the unique prestige of cosmogonic myths, see, for instance, Mircea Eliade, "Cosmogonic Myth and Sacred History;" in his *The Quest : History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1969), 72-87 ; or chapter 2 of his *The Sacred and the Profane : The Nature of Religion* (New York : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957).

<sup>25</sup> With respect to insistences that the Lakotas have been much more concerned with creation as an on-going process than a one-time event, see, for instance, Vine Deloria, Jr., "The Problem of Creation;" in his *God is Red : A Native View of Religion* (Golden, Colorado : Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 78-97 ; and Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 53.

<sup>26</sup> As I will explain momentarily, the 'original' source for this story of the "Creation of All Things from *Inyan*, the Rock" comes in that portion of "James R. Walker's Literary Cycle" entitled "Creation of the Universe;" reprinted in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 205-245. For short synopses of the story, see, for instance, Marla N. Powers, *Oglala Women : Myth, Ritual, and Reality* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1986), 36-43 ; and Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 45-47.

<sup>27</sup> With respect to Walker's multiple, seemingly inconsistent designations for *Skan*, see Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 37, 207 ; and Jahner's Introduction to *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> See Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 211-212.

<sup>29</sup> These first two *Pte* People are given different names in different versions of the story and even at different points in the same version ; see, for instance, Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 226 ; 289 ; 399, n. 47 ; and 397, n. 24. For simplicity sake, I have retained the names *Wazi* (Old Man) and *Kanka* (Old Woman), which appeared earlier in the *Hanwi* story.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 245 ; quoted in Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 47.

<sup>31</sup> Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 245.

<sup>32</sup> Though it is not apparent in this rough summary, Walker's creation narrative emphasizes repeatedly that the real ground of the unity of all things, gods and humans included, is their shared participation *Wakan Tanka*, the Great Mystery. See, for instance, *ibid.*, 211, 225.

<sup>33</sup> Regarding the complimentary relation between a 'hermeneutics of retrieval' and a 'hermeneutics of suspicion,' see, for instance, Lindsay Jones, *Twin City Tales : A Hermeneutical Reassessment of Tula and Chichén Itzá* (Niwot, Colorado : University Press of Colorado, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> For a concise overview of the relevant biographical information, see DeMaille and Jahner's "James R. Walker : His Life and Work ;" Part One of Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 3-61.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, DeMaille and Jahner's Preface to Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, xxxi ff.

<sup>36</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the first and third volumes of DeMaille and Jahner's collection, respectively on *Lakota Belief and Ritual* and *Lakota Myth*, are of foundational importance. The fourth volume, which is dedicated solely to the work of George Sword (and thus will be of tremendous importance in sustaining or undermining the arguments in the final sections of the present project), was not available when I drafted this paper. The emergence of that work could precipitate major changes in my tentative analysis.

<sup>37</sup> On Walker's extensive interactions with Clark Wissler, including very revealing samples of their correspondence, see, for instance, DeMaille and Jahner's comments in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 14-43 ; and Jahner's Introduction to Walker, *Lakota Myth*.

<sup>38</sup> Though, predictably, condescending remarks are not infrequent in Walker's correspondence — he, for instance, shared the nineteenth-century evolutionist view that the Lakotas were experiencing the difficult transition from 'primitive' to 'civilized' status — empathy, respect and genuine interest seem to have informed all of Walker's interactions with native culture. See, for instance, DeMaille and Jahner's comments in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, "Walker's Autobiographical Statement," in *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>40</sup> DeMaille and Jahner's Preface in *ibid.*, xxxii.

<sup>41</sup> On the Oglala holy men's concern that their traditions would soon be supplanted by Christianity, see, for instance, *ibid.*, xv-xvi.

<sup>42</sup> Walker's letter to Clark Wissler (November 17, 1908) ; quoted by DeMaille and Jahner in *ibid.*, 20. Also see Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 205.

<sup>43</sup> Walker's letter to Wissler (May 28, 1911) ; quoted both in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 30 ; and Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> With respect to Wissler's unheeded objections to Walker's manner of systematizing and blending differing accounts into idealized syntheses, see Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 29-31.

<sup>45</sup> DeMaille and Jahner in *ibid.*, 41 ; emphasis theirs. Regarding Walker's editorial motives, Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 193, suggests that "He believed that with a little systematizing and elaboration of his Lakota materials, he could convince other non-Indians of the special merits of all he had learned among the Oglalas."

<sup>46</sup> "James R. Walker's Literary Cycle" is reprinted in full in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 191-381.

<sup>47</sup> Regarding Walker's sense of obligation to his Lakota associates, see, for instance, DeMaille and Jahner's comments in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 42.

<sup>48</sup> Walker's last letter to Wissler (July 30, 1925) ; quoted in *ibid.*, 43 ; emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 193.

<sup>50</sup> DeMaille and Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 42 ; emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> In one of his introductions to "Oglala Mythology" (quoted in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 292, n. 53), Walker expressed his opinion that "This mythology is much like that of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome in that phenomena of nature were personified and given supernatural attributes." See also Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 193.

<sup>52</sup> Regarding the atypicality of the *Inyan* story even within Walker's literary epic, Jahner in *ibid.*, 194, notes that "the first section of Walker's narrative is more a philosophical document than a literary one."

<sup>53</sup> Walker quoted by Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 193.

<sup>54</sup> "Walker's Introductory Comments ;" in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 205 ; emphasis added. Concerning the status

of these comments, see *ibid.*, 394, n. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Walker's last letter to Wissler (July 30, 1925); quoted in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 43. In a 1921 letter to Wissler, which accompanied his first full draft of the epic, Walker made the much less plausible claim to authenticity by contending that, "Quite all of it has been approved by the older of the Oglala." *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 17-23, provides key excerpts of the fascinating correspondence between Franz Boas and Ella Deloria on the status of the Walker materials.

<sup>57</sup> Boas' correspondence to Ella Deloria (September 30, 1937); quoted by Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 17.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*, 18-23.

<sup>59</sup> Ella Deloria, "Dakota Commentary on Walker's Texts" (1937-38); quoted by Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> See Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 46.

<sup>61</sup> See Sword, "When the People Laughed at the Moon;" in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 52-57.

<sup>62</sup> Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 12-13, discusses, but ultimately rejects, the possibility that the version of "When the People Laughed at *Hanwi*" that Walker presented was not the work of George Sword but actually Thomas Tyon (Gray Goose), an exceptionally well-informed 'mixed-blood' and close friend of Sword's.

<sup>63</sup> The summary of Lakota creation in M. Powers, *Lakota Women*, 36-43, for instance, (not unlike Walker's own epic) merges the two stories.

<sup>64</sup> See Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 47.

<sup>65</sup> See Walker, "The Founding of the Four Directions;" in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 289-81. Regarding the ending that Walker added to Sword's ('unfinished') *Hanwi* story, see Jahner's comments in *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>66</sup> Sorting out the highly convoluted intertextual relationships between the *Hanwi* and *Inyan* stories on the basis of published documents is, to put it mildly, a difficult and uncertain business. Note at least, however, that while Sword had to have written the *Hanwi* story (in Lakota) sometime prior to 1910 (the year of his death), Walker did not apparently translate (or even see) it until after retirement in 1914. Whether he was familiar with the story prior to that is unclear.

<sup>67</sup> The fourth volume of DeMaille and Jahner's collection of the Walker corpus, which deals exclusively with George Sword, should shed considerable light on these matters.

<sup>68</sup> See Jahner's comments in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 43.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> See, for instance, Sword's two-paragraph autobiographical statement; quoted by Jahner in *ibid.*, 43-44; and by DeMaille and Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 74-75.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Though Walker's own attitude toward Christianity remains unclear (to me anyway), it appears that his commitments to the presuppositions of modern science were stronger than to (any version of) Christianity. That he was on occasion accused of complicity in the perpetuation of the 'heathen' practices of the Oglalas, which was in direct violation of his charge as an agent of the U.S. government, suggests (albeit with little certainty) that in matters of religion Walker held a relativistic or perhaps even anti-Christian stance. More information on this matter could certainly help to bolster or undermine my argument.

<sup>74</sup> A strong sampling of Sword's writings appear in Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 74-100.

<sup>75</sup> See, for instance, Walker's comments in a 1919 interview for a Denver newspaper (quoted by Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 43) where he explains that, "Fortunately Long Knife, though he did not speak English, understood sufficiently well to correct misinterpretations of the Oglala dialect."

<sup>76</sup> Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 48; emphasis added. I should note that my comments in this section on the *Hanwi* story owe a good deal to Elaine Jahner's article.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>78</sup> Concerning important differences between Sword's stories and Genesis, see *ibid.*, 50-52.

<sup>79</sup> Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 44.

<sup>80</sup> Recall, for instance, W. Powers, *Oglala Religion*, 68ff.

<sup>81</sup> Ella Deloria's correspondence to Franz Boas (May 12, 1939); quoted by Jahner in Walker, *Lakota Myths*, 22.

<sup>82</sup> Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 51; emphasis added.

<sup>83</sup> Actually the 'myths' in Walker's literary epic, including the *Inyan* creation story, also fail to meet any of the conventional criteria of ancient, anonymously authored, consensual and oral; but Walker, by contrast to Sword, did aspire to present stories that would meet all of those requirements.

<sup>84</sup> See, for instance, Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History: Cassirer, Eliade, Levi-Strauss, and Malinowski* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987).

<sup>85</sup> Though many broadly "Eliadean" interpretations treat myths as fixed and static, Eliade's own emphasis on the notion of the creative "revalorization" of myth provides him (and us) a way of acknowledging the dynamism and flexibility of myth. See, for instance, Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. I: *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>86</sup> See Gary Urton, *The History of a Myth: Pacariqtambo and the Origin of the Inkas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

<sup>87</sup> Regarding the notion of 'reception histories,' see, for instance, Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>88</sup> I do not, of course, mean to imply that there is anything like consensus among that huge, highly contentious collection of contemporary academics who claim (or are assigned) the title "cultural critic." There are, however, particularly in the relation to the field of religious studies, certain widely shared tendencies.

<sup>89</sup> From our present ('postmodern') vantage, it is easy to complain, moreover, that Walker was characteristically 'modern' insofar as he located 'the truth' of 'traditional Lakota religion' in some abstract and generalized ideal, a fictively coherent and systemic whole that was, by his own admission, disappointingly inconsistent with the attenuated rituals and fragmentary myths that he could actually observe.

<sup>90</sup> Rice, *Black Elk's Story*; and Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, for instance, provide nuanced and substantially different (re)assessments of John Neihardt.

<sup>91</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), chapter 1.

<sup>92</sup> Regarding the viable but still unexplored possibility that Sword and the Buffalo Society constituted something like a 'new religion' or an American 'cargo cult,' take special note of the seemingly millennial themes in the *Hanwi* story, specifically the references to an imminent "fourth time." See Sword, "When the People Laughed at the Moon;" in Walker, *Lakota Myth*, 56-57.

<sup>93</sup> In other words, working to choose selectively from the myriad of competing 'postmodern' theoretical frames currently at our disposal, I would recommend that historian of religions jettison the (Enlightenment) modernist 'myth' of objectivity but try to reclaim the Enlightenment (modernist) 'myth' of non-normative inquiry and description.

<sup>94</sup> Jahner, "Lakota Genesis," 47.