Prologue

The Snail’s Clues

As you can see from the lengthy dedication, The Anguish of Snails is more than a book about Native American folklore in the West: It is a work of obligation to those from whom I have learned about everyday Native American life and custom—many of them members of my own family and the Navajo family who so readily adopted me in 1955 when I was a lost nineteen-year-old uranium prospector who came down with pneumonia in their canyon. It is also a work of obligation to my colleagues in folklore and anthropology, many of whom, I believe, have inadvertently distanced themselves from the richness of the Native cultures they study in the name of objective research. This book, then, is an expression of personal responsibility and gratitude to those who saved my life—bodily, spiritually, culturally, and professionally—as well as a professional commentary on the validity and necessity of subjective involvement in the analytical discussion of cultures.

For these reasons, the book contains more than a little emotion and personal bias and demonstrates a less than standard reverence for academic circumspection. I admit these things freely in advance, and I ask scholarly readers in particular to spare me the automatic sermon on objective empiricism. Or spare me at least until we have had a chance to discuss more thoroughly the extent to which scholarly objectivity and emotional distance have really benefitted our attempts to understand the people we so comfortably scrutinize in our writings (where we publish as they perish). My fieldwork experiences have probably not been much different from those of many scholars who have discovered that culturally shaped expressions often defy objective analysis; in fact, we all run into unexpected events which totally change the picture we think we see, which almost derail the project, which confuse or disappoint us. In my case, these unpredictable, uncontrollable moments became so central to
my view of the Navajos that they became the bases of things I never would have learned otherwise—or even suspected. And they became the foundation of my conviction that cultural involvement has more substance than has cultural distance.

For example, I learned a lot about the Navajos’ funeral customs because of their preference that non-Navajos carry out most of the burial work. For me, it wasn’t research that entailed burying three, sometimes four people a week during harsh winter months, and I was troubled when the survivors tried to cheer me up by reminding me that white people enjoy watching people die—a remarkable idea they got from watching our movies. When I took an apparently dying woman to a reservation hospital and discovered the entire staff was away on a two-hour “coffee break,” I found it impossible to play the part of the disinterested bystander. When desperate Navajo friends moved to town so they could feed their children better and were told they could expect to get state welfare assistance just as soon as they joined the local church, it was difficult for me to stay aloof from the political and sociological realities of living in a small religious town. And I found Navajo generosity beyond the reach of conventional understanding when families were willing to share their last bit of food with me, not admitting the slightest concern about where the next piece of fry bread or mutton might come from. My responses at the time were quite personal: they included anger, thankfulness, debt, wonderment—all subversively subjective attitudes which remain central to my thinking about the Navajos to this day.

Nonetheless, whenever I—and other scholars similarly inclined—have used these personal perspectives to resolve ethical issues according to Native preference rather than benefit scholar propriety (say, by withdrawing or destroying dangerous or sensitive texts or choosing to avoid problematic themes), colleagues have issued sharp rebukes and reminded us that we are not Natives and should not romantically make believe we are. On one occasion, after I presented a paper explaining why I did not intend to probe more deeply into the witchcraft level of Navajo Coyote stories, a prominent folklorist took me to task for being subjectively “soft” on Indians and thereby betraying my fellow folklorists. “You’re not a Navajo,” he gratuitously reminded me. “You’re not subject to their beliefs and fears about witchcraft. You’re a scholar and an educated person, and you have the scholarly obligation to delve as deeply as you can into their beliefs, describe them dispassionately and fairly [,] and tell the rest of us what you’ve learned. Otherwise, why do it at all?” My petulant reply, fueled by a bruised ego, was that I valued my standing among Navajos a whole lot more than my reputation among scholars.
But this was a petty thing to say, and it was, after all, beside the point of either engagement or objectivity. I don’t have any special standing among Navajos in general, and I do indeed value my reputation among folklorists. The point is that I do not believe the researcher should have to choose between these two considerations to do good work. The real issues here are the authenticity of the research and the expressions being studied, as well as sensitivity to the people who produce them.

For me, interpretive openness, including my subjective sense of commitment to the topic, is as important as empirical observation to the content and the meaning of this book; indeed, without the complex human connections I have enjoyed with Native people, I simply would not have had the interest—or the intelligence—to take their vernacular expressions seriously. After nearly fifty years of working closely with Native people, you may expect I have developed some insights, perspectives, and opinions based on personal experience. I think I have, and I tend to use them, often in preference to things I have read. To my mind, a subjective approach does not preclude being careful and objective in a discussion; rather, it offers a special vantage point born of experience and engagement and should produce a richer analytical frame of reference. There is—or can be—immense utility in deep involvement.

To be sure, the engaged stance of any sensitive observer unavoidably conditions what is seen and heard, affects any interpretation, and colors any description; the reader thus needs to know that my analytical perspective was initially shaped by accidental experience, not by training, education, vocation, or even volition. My academic training has been primarily in medieval languages and literature; my vocation is a professor of literature with an interest in oral literature, especially ballads. I became an unwitting folklorist years ago in the process of trying to account for the amazing stories and rich customs I encountered when I accidentally fell off the turnip truck of the uranium rush and landed among the Navajos. Perhaps some of my readers have had a far better education for such an encounter than I had: I was totally unprepared for the many years of fascination and frustration that lay ahead. In becoming a participant/observer in Navajo folklore, I ate their food, collected their stories, and had my life saved by them on at least two occasions. You could say that I incurred a debt and make small payments on it by trying to use Navajo—and other Native—folklore to dispel stereotypes and misinformation about Native peoples and their cultures.

Please notice that I said “debt” and not “guilt.” Guilt is a pointless luxury that allows us to feel chastised and then timidly virtuous without having to acknowledge why some interaction with another culture went wrong or having to account for why something struck us as unaccountably
magnificent or eloquent. Inherited guilt simply encourages us to act embarrassed by the terrible acts of our ancestors by continuing to apolo-
gize abjectly for their behavior. But let’s get real: We white folks of today
did not steal the land; we weren’t participants in the Sand Creek
Massacre, or those at Bear River, the Washita, or Wounded Knee; we
didn’t hand Ira Hayes that last fatal drink of whiskey; we didn’t invent
church missions of spiritual and cultural destruction; and we didn’t
enfranchise the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

At the same time, we can’t shrug all these issues off, for we have paid
for many of them with our tithings and taxes. And we have certainly
become the willing owner-inheritors of the vast land treasure of Native peo-
bles, most of it obtained through less than honorable means by our forebears:
How far back can I trace the title for the land my house sits on? Maybe 120
years at the most. If there were no statutes of limitation, I might well be
charged with receiving or buying stolen property. On the other hand,
despite the seamy behavior of our illustrious pioneers, think of the vast
riches freely shared by Native peoples in the form of foods that now feed
much of the world: corn, tomatoes, peppers, squashes, beans, and potatoes,
to name a few. And the several hundred medicines listed in our pharma-
copoeia, including many whose complexity surprises us. And the Native
languages that were used as unbreakable codes in World War II and function
today as tools of discovery in mathematics, physics, biology, and space nav-
igation. Indeed, we are the beneficiaries of remarkable Native gifts, and our
indebtedness will not be paid by expressing vague guilt that our grandfathers
so assiduously stole most of the land (or as an Indian-activist bumper sticker
of the 1970s put it, “We gave an inch; you took three thousand miles”).

Neither will the debt be absolved by the many fraudulent books and
seminars promising to share Native secrets learned after great difficulty
and personal sacrifice from anonymous (or, at best, untraceable) Indian
gurus in the trackless deserts and jungles. Shamanic tours of the Andes;
weekend sweat lodges for seekers of spiritual experiences; the sacred pipe
for beginners; traditional tribal stories for healing, therapy, and profit; pey-
ete high tea for your intergalactic traveling pleasure: All of these show as
much respect for the complexity and depth of Native cultures as
a Eucharist-wafer-and-wine-spiritual-enrichment-workshop for non-
Catholics at the Pink Cactus Saloon demonstrates respect for, or insight
into, Christian theology.

From the painful distortions and garish colors of Charles Storm’s
Seven Arrows to the popular, but fictional (and misleading) books of
Carlos Castaneda, from the pitiful Hanta Yo! to the gentle fraud of The
Education of Little Tree—all of them strangely far more popular than the
various authoritative works which have routinely debunked them—to the many vapid and error-ridden Aquarian guides to Native wisdom, we have chosen kitsch over substance, fiction and wishful thinking over reliable description, white stereotypes over Native perspectives, baloney over truth. In doing so, we have practically enfranchised a generation or two of non-Indian opportunists who claim to give us exclusive guided tours through the sacred and mysterious philosophical innards of the Indian, but most tragically, we have successfully—and with utmost irony—avoided listening to Native people themselves.

As I write this in 2002, a private organization in Utah is advertising a three-day weekend retreat to help you “find yourself and your sacred path.” For a mere $350 (which includes special meals for vegetarians and tipis “for a touch of the past”), you are coached on breathing, taught to walk on glowing coals (“aids in focus and clarity”), and provided with an overnight vision quest and three sweat lodge ceremonies. Although such activities are abhorrent to most Indians and have been dubbed “the white shaman syndrome” by many Native American critics, they have become a bonanza for entrepreneurs of weekend spiritualism. But they don’t offer much insight or information about Natives and their cultures.

Even in the comparatively more reliable arenas of ethnography, anthropology, and literature, interested readers have become accustomed to seeing the Indian through a veil dimly, presented by someone else—usually a non-Native specialist with an academic degree, a reputation to maintain, and an agenda to fulfill. More people have read John Neihardt’s carefully selective Black Elk Speaks—not a fraudulent book, I hasten to say, but one more reflective of Neihardt’s than of Black Elk’s choices—than are familiar with The Sacred Pipe, Black Elk’s own account of Lakota religion and ritual dictated to Joseph Epes Brown with rich commentary.

Admittedly, The Anguish of Snails is not above suspicion, for it is mediated and controlled by someone who is not culturally Native American. I am of course aware that some people who can claim even less Indian “blood” than I do are busily going around the country doing “the Indian thing” for a living. I hope (too optimistically, I’m sure) that at least some of them were brought up by Indian grandmas who taught them what they know. I was not so raised, and I do not subscribe to the notion that Indian DNA carries any built-in cultural depth or ability to articulate complex cultural meanings. What I do believe is that our cultural indebtedness to Native people can be partly addressed by paying serious attention to the kinds of expressions that are appropriate for us to see, hear, and respond to. This kind of serious attention and propriety requires respect,
not adulation; it requires us to share, not intrude and plunder; it requires us to listen for Native voices, not trumpet our own assumptions.

Therefore, I am not going to claim that Native sages like Yellowman, Little Wagon, Tom Yellowtail, Andy Natonabah, Agnes Vanderburg, Jimmy Descheeny, Tully Benally, or Pete Catches enlisted me as a dedicated apprentice and taught me all their shamanistic secrets—which I am now licensed to pass on to you less fortunate, but spiritually deserving, mortals for the price of this book. No: I want to propose a somewhat more radical and less fashionable set of ideas, beginning with the assertion that Indians are by and large not inscrutable, silent, unapproachable people who spend most of their time in secret shamanic rituals. I want to suggest that—far from needing a passionate guide in a baggy shirt and ponytail—you will have little difficulty learning about Indians and their culture if you simply listen to their voices and watch their performances, their expressions—their freely shared folklore—in the routine of their normal lives. Somewhere nearby, right now, Indian people are making fry bread, telling jokes, singing social songs called “forty-nines,” and either dancing powwow or getting ready to do so. You and I could be there, included warmly in these events. The question is, why aren’t we? Why do we insist on staying at home reading someone else’s unverifiable account of Native sacred rituals in the jungles of Manitoba rather than trying to get acquainted with neighboring Native people in their everyday lives? Is it a kind of fear? A grinding of that old inherited guilt? Ignorance? Racial anxiety? Is it just too much work?

To be fair, many non-Native people don’t know how to make the initial approach; they are afraid that their sudden appearance on the Indian scene may be intrusive. And so it may be if someone blunders into a ritual ceremony uninvited or unannounced. Yet even here, the outsiders’ fears are exaggerated, for most Native ceremonies are not secret, and very few are only for Indians. Some are, of course, so obviously some basic and reliable information is useful. And in all cases, normal sensitivity and respect are required. A hint: Someone will tell you if you’re in the wrong place. But don’t worry about it; in fact, for the most part, the places where you may easily meet Indian people are the same places where you meet each other: at home and at social gatherings.

I once asked some white teachers on the Navajo reservation how often they visited the homes of their students, which were, admittedly, scattered at great distances away from the school and reachable only over bone-shattering, washboard roads. “Oh, we’ve tried,” I was assured soberly by several speaking all at once, “but you know, they really don’t like visitors. In fact, when we do drive up to their hogans, they drop everything and run inside
and slam the door. So we got the message; we don’t want to intrude where we’re not wanted.” Since these were teachers who had been there about ten years, I was amazed by how little they had learned about Navajos, impeded as they were by their conviction that the Navajos didn’t want normal contact. They were oblivious to a cultural fact they could have learned at any time by asking their students, but they had overlooked it because they didn’t believe it was there. The Indian side of the story was clarified by Navajo parents in this area, as well as elsewhere on the reservation, who asked me, “Why do white people act like that? They drive up to our place, just like they want to visit. Then, as soon as we get inside and take our places and get ready to have company, they just drive away! Are they trying to make fun of us?”

Now, the teachers wanted to visit the parents, and Navajos do love to have company, so what was happening here? Neither group recognized the normal, customary, everyday visiting habits of the other, and the result was that both groups had their stereotypes strengthened by the experience. But this is a case of everyday culturally conditioned behavior, which can be learned and discussed without a shamanic internship. Knowing a little about the other group’s normal folk customs would have served the situation far better than the superficial political correctness by which the visitors elected not to “intrude”—thus allowing both sides to use their own cultural interpretation to perpetuate the gulf separating them.

This is only one example admittedly, but it suggests that our folk belief about the “distant Indian” may well illustrate what Alan Dundes calls projective inversion, an outlook that blames the other person (in this case, the other culture) for bothersome behavior that really is more reflective of our own attitudes. We interpret some gestures—avoidance of eye contact or lengthy silences—as intentional signs of conversation avoidance, and we judge this “aloofness” or “inscrutability” as a sign of intransigence, of distancing, of deeply confirmed Otherness: empirical proofs that these people are just as unreachable as we expected. By interpreting their normal behavior as a willful gesture, we project the fault for the distancing onto them, which allows us to maintain the gulf with a clear conscience. In this instance, the whites saw Navajos avoiding contact. The Navajos in their hogan, assuming the white visitors were going to act superior and be in too much of a rush for a normal visit, saw their sudden departure as a demonstration of impatience, which many Navajos equate with ill will.

This kind of thinking occurs most readily when we are threatened, or when we do not know very much about another culture, when we rationalize other people’s expressions in our own terms for our convenience and peace of mind. And it happens most easily when we listen primarily to our
voices, not theirs. As this example shows, misunderstanding can and does occur on both sides of the cultural doorway; the big difference is that, while we are not obliged to listen very often or seriously to Indians, they are forced to hear us talking about ourselves all the time. But fortunately there’s much more to a culture than talk: There’s a whole range of cultural expression in the form of everyday custom—folklore.

Assuming that a great bulk of Native American folk expression is available to us, and that, indeed, much of it is performed directly for us, or at least for the mixed culture we are part of; acknowledging, at the same time, that not everyone knows—as those teachers did not know—that the door is usually open and there is a system of good sense and order through which we may feel welcome to visit, I would like this book to present some significant articulations of Native cultural values that are already in our world, ready to be seen and responded to. I want to do this in the way I would introduce you to my Navajo family if I could take you to their hogan—not by sneaking into a healing ritual unannounced on the one hand, or by barging in noisily with the expectation that the Indians are waiting to entertain on the other—but the way Barry Lopez guides his readers along the banks of the McKenzie River in River Notes: The Dance of Herons (1979). He walks us quietly and considerately along the banks, pointing out the indications of life forms inhabiting that zone and suggesting that there is a link between the evidence and ourselves, a connection between nature’s “data” and the sensitive interpreter, an observable, experiential basis for learning not how we are other than the river’s denizens but related to them: “Snail shell—made out of the same thing as your fingernail. Here, tap it—Or a rattlesnake’s rattles. Roll it around in your hand. Imagine the clues in just this. Counting the rings would tell you something, but no one is sure what. Perhaps all that is recorded is the anguish of snails.”

Let’s go along this cultural riverbank together, paying attention to what we actually see and hear that may offer us common ground for speculation, discovery, insight. We won’t pretend to pry into the secret lives of snails, but we will try to account for the patterns in their shells: In our case, the patterns include the traditional Native dances, foods, stories, arts, and medicines that are the purposeful records, the time-tested articulations of shared emotions and values, of living, ongoing cultures. “Imagine the clues in just this.”