The Cry of the Living Creatures: An Omaha Performance of Blessing

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Abstract: Performance is a powerful language. It speaks through an ordered syntax of studied action. From action it creates "syntaction." This article presents two sets of ethnographic texts that describe a traditional Omaha ceremonial performance. The first is a reconstruction of the 19th-century ceremony inscribing the tattooed Mark of Honour on a young woman whose father is completing initiation into the Night Blessed Society. The second is an epilogue stimulated by critical readings of the first text and based on interviews Jillian Ridington and I conducted in 1985 and 1986 with three elderly Omaha women who bore the Mark of Honour. The information in this study complements material presented in *Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe* (Ridington and Hastings, 1997).

Résumé: La performance constitue un langage puissant. Elle s'exprime au moyen d'une syntaxe ordonnée d'action étudiée. À partir de l'action elle crée la «syntaction». Le présent article expose deux ensembles de textes ethnographiques qui décrivent une performance cérémonielle traditionnelle omaha. Le premier texte est une reconstruction de la cérémonie du XIX^{e} siècle gravant la «marque d'honneur» tatouée sur une jeune femme dont le père termine l'initiation dans la société de la nuit sacrée. Le second texte est un épilogue provoqué par des lectures critiques du premier texte et s'appuie sur des entrevues que Jillian Ridington et moi-même avons menées en 1985 et 1986 avec trois dames âgées qui arboraient la «marque d'honneur». Les données de cet article apportent un complément au matériel présenté dans *Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe* (Ridington et Hastings, 1997).

Introduction

This article presents two sets of ethnographic texts. The first is a reconstruction of the 19th-century Omaha ceremony inscribing the tattooed Mark of Honour on a young woman whose father is completing initiation into the Night Blessed Society. My account is based on information about the ceremony that Alice C. Fletcher and her Omaha collaborator, Francis La Flesche, collected in the 1880s, augmented by information from Reo Fortune's 1932 book on Omaha Secret Societies. The second text is an epilogue stimulated by critical readings of the first text and based on interviews Jillian Ridington and I conducted in 1985 and 1986 with three elderly Omaha women who bore the Mark of Honour, referred to colloquially as the "Blue Spot."

I wrote the first text to be an almost filmic reconstruction of the ceremony, relying on Omaha texts and the interpretive language used by Fletcher and La Flesche in their classic 1911 ethnography, *The Omaha Tribe*. I wrote it when I was on the Omaha reservation in 1991, documenting the tribe's reburial of human remains from the former Omaha village of Ton'wontonga. I was also working with Omaha Tribal Historian, Dennis Hastings, on a book, *Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe* (Ridington and Hastings, 1997). Parts of the reconstruction went into a chapter in the book entitled, "A Fragment of Anything to Its Entirety."

I submitted my reconstruction of the ceremony as a text that might stand alone; a dramatic reading of premodern ethnographic texts that were themselves readings of what Omaha informants told Fletcher and La Flesche. Peer reviewers for the journal made some telling comments that led me to expand the study to include material from the interviews with living bearers of the tattoo. The reviewers felt that the paper touched on issues of gender and power that needed to be addressed further. Following the original text, I will quote

from their comments before presenting material from the interviews.

The Language of Performance

Performance is a powerful language. It speaks through an ordered syntax of studied action. From action it creates "syntaction." Its props and actors, sets and blocking, timbre and rhythm, situate both actor and audience in a place where the unfolding of events becomes generative and transformative. Ordinary selves become extraordinary. Boundaries shift and expand. Cosmic forces come into play.

This article describes a ritually empowering and healing performance once known to the Omaha tribe of Nebraska. The performance is a ceremonial tattooing of "the Mark of Honour" on a girl whose father is completing initiation into the "Night Blessed Society." The ceremony takes place in an acoustically charged atmosphere. Sound and action become synesthetic. The girl must maintain absolute silence until the time when the sun casts his shortest shadow. During the episodes of tattooing, the only sound to be heard comes from rattlesnake rattles attached to the tattooer's flints.

The performance is punctuated by songs in what Fletcher and La Flesche describe as the distinctive acoustic signature of the "night blessed" rhythm. They reproduce transcriptions of these songs and their texts in the book. The performance culminates when the girl's body becomes aligned with the centre of the earth and the centre of the daytime sky, the sun's zenith point. This is a point in time, a point in space, and a point forever at the centre of her life. A life-giving force rushes through her and there is a great noise that Fletcher and La Flesche describe as the sound of all life moving over the earth, "the cry of the living creatures." A song text marks this great moment:

> Yonder unseen is one moving
> Noise
> Yonder unseen is one moving
> Noise
> For that reason
> Over the earth
> Noise
> Hio—The cry of the living creatures

This section of the article reproduces a description of the performance from information Fletcher and La Flesche provide in their ethnography. It blends their language of description with an Omaha language of performance. It talks about the language of performance according to both Omaha categories and those of anthropological poetics. The second section of the paper is a tribute to the women I was privileged to meet, who have carried the Mark of Honour through most of the 20th century.

The Omaha Tribe

Like many other Native Americans, the Omahas comfortably represent their underlying philosophical concepts in a language of ceremonial performance. Omaha performances are like texts. They are formal, regular and syntactic. Sometimes song texts and prayers accompany them, but only for emphasis or repetition, not as primary message carriers. Each element of a performance makes sense in relation to other elements and to the whole of which all are parts. Each performance activates material objects that are themselves bundles of textual relationship. Each performance makes sense in relation to others that are complementary to it, in the same way that Omaha individuals, families, clans and societies make sense in relation to the tribal whole. Like an individual or group within the tribe, each component of a performance makes sense on its own as well as in synergy with other parts of the ceremonial vocabulary.

An Omaha ceremonial performance may be understood as a meaningful sequence of individually meaningful images. Each image in the performance vocabulary is like an intelligent and distinctive human being. Each one is like a word or a character of ideographic writing. Each one is also instrumental as a complement to others through varying degrees of likeness and contrast. Together, the scenes and images that make up a performance tell a story. Together, they play upon the associations and memories people bring to the performance.

Like the Omaha tribe itself, any one of its ceremonial performances comes about as a union of images that are complementary opposites. Until the end of their buffalo-hunting days in the 1870s, Omahas conducted a cycle of tribal ceremonies that expressed their fundamental idea that tribal unity exists through the complementarity of male and female principles, sky and earth, day and night. The ceremonies spoke to Omahas about their identity as a single tribe made up of "two grand divisions," the Sky people (Inshta'thunda) and the Earth people (Hon'gashenu). "When an orator addressed the people of the tribe," Fletcher and La Flesche report, "he did not say: 'Ho Omaha! but Ho! Inshta'thunda, Hon'gashenu ti agathon'kahon!'" (1911: 138). The greeting means, "Ho Sky people, Ho Earth people, both sides of the house." Like a family lodge which a man and woman bring about together, the Omahas created their camp circle in a spirit of complementarity. This primary division of the tribe into halves of a circle reflects the Omaha idea that the

process of creation is ongoing through the union of male and female principles in the cosmos at large. Fletcher and La Flesche explain that:

> The Above was regarded as masculine, the Below feminine; so the sky was father, the earth, mother. The heavenly bodies were conceived of as having sex; the sun was masculine, the moon feminine, consequently day was male and night female. The union of these two forces was regarded as necessary to the perpetuation of all living forms, and to man's life by maintaining his food supply. This order or method for the continuation of life was believed to have been arranged by Wakon'da and had to be obeyed if the race was to continue to exist. (Ibid.: 134)

I am writing about an Omaha performance that is doubly textual. The performance is textual in its syntax, and it is literally textual as an act of writing. Tattooing cosmic designs on the body of a living, breathing, growing human person is, itself, a transitive inscription. The medium that accepts the tattooer's text is alive with meaning, the body of a young woman. The texts themselves, a star sign and a sun sign, represent the life-giving complementarity of night and day. The performance ends when these cosmic symbols take their places on the girl's body. It ends when the sun reaches his highest point in the arc he inscribes across the heavens. It ends when his voice reaches down through her body's axis and enters his complement, the earth. The tattooing's inscription is ceremonial. It brings together sun and star, day and night, male and female. It brings them together on the living skin of a young woman's body.

My description of the tattooing engages a further degree of textuality in that I am writing about a performance I never saw. My authority is the written accounts of Fletcher and La Flesche which are themselves based on the stories of people who were witness to the tattooing as it was performed during the 19th century. When I quote from Fletcher and La Flesche I am passing on not only their words but also their interpretations of the symbols that underlie Omaha experience. My writing is a reading of their text, just as their writing was a reading of the Omaha texts they encountered (Ridington, 1993).

Francis La Flesche was both an ethnographer and an Omaha fluent in his language. As a young man, he was witness to many of the tribe's great ceremonies. Alice C. Fletcher was among the first generation of ethnographers to attempt a translation from Aboriginal reality to that of the newcomers. She set herself the task of writing about "fundamental religious ideals, cosmic in significance" that explain "how the visible universe came into being and how it is maintained." She found herself changed by the experience. She wrote:

> Living with my Indian friends I found I was a stranger in my native land. As time went on, the outward aspect of nature remained the same, but a change was wrought in me. I learned to hear the echoes of a time when every living thing even the sky had a voice. (Mark, 1988: 355)

Like Alice Fletcher, I have also been changed by the ethnographic encounter. I hear the same echoes that Alice describes. I hear a resonance of a time when every thing, even the sky, had a voice. I hear that voice in my own time. I listen for the cry of the living creatures in a world that continues to be alive with meaning.

Complementary Images of Empowerment

The Mark of Honour is called Xthexe. According to Fletcher and La Flesche, Xthexe means, "mottled as by shadows." It "has also the idea of bringing into prominence to be seen by all the people as something distinctive." The complement of Xthexe is one of the tribe's most sacred emblems, the Sacred Pole. He (for the Pole is a male person) is called Wa'xthexe. The prefix Wa, Fletcher and La Flesche say, indicates that "the object spoken of had power, the power of motion, of life." Fletcher and La Flesche say that, "The name of the Pole, Wa'xthexe, signifies that the power to give the right to possess this 'Mark of Honour' was vested on the Pole.... The designs tattooed on the girl were all cosmic symbols." The mark on the young woman's forehead stands for the sun at its zenith, "from which point it speaks," and its life-giving power passes through her body and out into the camp circle. The mark on her throat is a four-pointed star radiating from a perfect circle.

Fletcher and La Flesche present the Pole's origin story and the rites surrounding the Mark of Honour in different sections of the ethnography, yet it is clear from their comments that the two are complementary, just as the sun sign and star sign are complementary. The name they share suggests that both are images of the tribe's identity. The Pole's origin story is about the visionary experience of a Chief's son. The performance of tattooing the Mark of Honour brings about a complementary visionary empowerment of a Chief's daughter during her father's induction into the Hon'hewachi, or "night dancing" Society of "those blessed by the night." Members of this society are an "Order of Chiefs" who have gained honour by contributing 100 acts or gifts, "which have relation to the welfare of the tribe." The girl who receives the tattooing becomes known as a "woman chief."

The young woman receives the sun's power when she is at a point on the earth's surface directly between the earth's centre and the highest point in the sun's heavenly arc. Her complement, the young man in the Pole's origin story, receives his power by recognizing the star around which all others turn (Ridington, 1988). Omaha oral tradition explains that the Sacred Pole came to them when the son of a chief saw "a tree that stands burning but is not consumed," in a visionary encounter with the power of thunder. Fletcher and La Flesche interpret Omaha tradition to mean that the young man obtained his vision through the compassion of the night, what they call "the great mother force." Omaha sacred history describes how the son of a chief found the Sacred Pole during a time when the chiefs were in council to devise some means of keeping the tribe together during their travels. The story says that the boy's father told the other chiefs:

> My son has seen a wonderful tree.
> The Thunder birds come and go upon this tree,
> making a trail of fire
> that leaves four paths on the burnt grass
> that stretch toward the Four Winds.
> When the Thunder birds alight on the tree
> it bursts into flame
> and the fire mounts to the top.
> The tree stands burning,
> but no one can see the fire except at night.
>
> (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911: 218)

Both boy and girl come into contact with powers beyond themselves when they are centred in ceremony. Through them, the tribe as a whole becomes centred. One single centre may be found in many places. The Pole is a centre that travels as the people travel. The Mark of Honour worn by a young woman is also such a centre. The young man finds his centre burning beneath the steady star around which the star-world reels as he watches it, amazed, through the night. The young woman finds hers in the cry of the living creatures coming to her like a great wind. She finds herself centred between earth and sky. She becomes a woman of earth who carries both the sky's night and his day on her body. On her forehead is the sun himself. On her throat is a star, "emblematic of the night, the great mother force, its four points representing also the life-giving winds into the midst of which the child was sent through the ceremony of 'Turning the Child'" (ibid.: 505).

Vision comes through a shift in perspective. The young man's lonely vigil through the night shows him how stars circle around a single point of light among their multitude. The tree beneath that central star burns itself into his mind. The night force and his isolation reveal this sky-world to him. The young woman gains her shift in perspective by day, when the sun is at the highest point in his arc. The tattooing performance is nominally the culmination of a man's initiation into the Hon'hewachi society but its language conveys a more universal message. Even today, long after the particular Hon'hewachi initiates have passed into legend and beyond, the tattooed images speak to Omahas about the fundamental principles on which their society is based.

The Hon'hewachi Society

Fletcher and La Flesche give the literal meaning of Hon'hewachi as "in the night-dance." A man obtains membership in this society or "order of honorary chieftainship" by giving away 100 or more gifts or actions known as Wathin'ethe. Fletcher and La Flesche translate Wathin'ethe literally as wa (thing having power), thin (nothing), the (to make or to cause). They say that the symbolic meaning of the name implies that the Wathin'ethe are sacred gifts or sacrifices "for which there is no material return but through which honour is received." These acts or gifts must "have relation to the welfare of the tribe by promoting internal order and peace, by providing for the chiefs and keepers, by assuring friendly relations with other tribes." They are sacred "acts and gifts which do not directly add to the comfort and wealth of the actor or donor, but which have relation to the welfare of the tribe" (ibid.: 202-203). Actions of the Hon'hewachi can be seen to move with a rhythm the Omahas associate with a personal emotion and mythic reality that reveals the order of the cosmos. Fortune called it the "potlatch society" because of the extensive giveaways required to validate membership. Fletcher and La Flesche viewed these exchanges as ways that the union of male and female principles might be felt throughout the tribe. Members of the Hon'hewachi are called Hon'ithaethe, "those blessed by the night" (Fortune, 1932: 148).

According to Fletcher and La Flesche, the true meaning of the name Hon'hewachi is deeply rooted in Omaha philosophy and cosmology. "Wachi," they say, "does not mean 'dance' in our sense of the word but dramatic rhythmic movements for the expression of personal emotion or experience, or for the presentation of mythical teachings." In colloquial Omaha usage, "wachi" also refers to the physical act of love, "rhythmic movements of the night" (John Koontz, personal communication). "Hon'he," Fletcher and La Flesche add, "refers to creative acts, for through the mysterious power of Wakon'da night brought forth day.... Night was there-

fore the mother of day, and the latter was the emblem of all visible activities and manifestations of life" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911: 493-494).

Fletcher and La Flesche say that to the Omaha ear, the rhythm of Hon'hewachi songs is a distinctive signature of the Society's particular emotions of revelation and compassion, just as the Hethu'shka and Wa'wan songs are respectively distinctive of actions in defense of the tribe and of the intertribal alliances symbolized by the Wa'wan or Pipe Ceremony. The activities of the Hon'hewachi Society and the rhythm of their songs evoke an emotion the Omaha People associate with the complementarity of night and day. The Hon'hewachi initiate would compose a song "which had to conform to the rhythmic standard of the initial Hon'hewachi song." The song should reflect the initiate's personal experience of "a dream or vision that came in answer to his supplication" (ibid.: 502-503).

Hon'hewachi rites carry with them the idea of "bringing into prominence to be seen by all the people as something distinctive" (ibid.: 219). They carry with them an invocation of powers revealed by "Night, the great mother force." They carry with them the helping compassion and pity of the Night. "The feminine cosmic force," Fletcher and La Flesche report, "was typified not only by night but by the heavenly bodies seen by night." Its complement is the masculine cosmic force, "symbolized by day and by the sun" (ibid.: 494).

A daughter of the Night Blessed Society initiate receives this body's heavenly power in ceremony for the benefit of the tribe. Although tattooing the Mark of Honour is a singular performance within the overall Night Blessed Society initiation ceremony, it also provides an opportunity for people to visualize and enact the symbolic and ceremonial union of the complementary male and female forces that give life to the tribe. Hon'hewachi songs and rites focus attention on the cosmic union of these male and female principles. They dramatize the creative acts through which "night brought forth day" and "the creative cosmic forces typified by night and day, the earth and the sky" (ibid.: 494-495). They dramatize the creative acts through which the Omahas realize themselves as a people. They bring these acts into prominence to be seen by all the people as something distinctive. They represent "the fundamental ideas on which the tribal organization rested" (ibid.: 495).

The Hon'hewachi Feasts

Fletcher and La Flesche describe the Hon'hewachi ceremony and tattooing performance in the past tense. I have taken the liberty of visualizing these events as if they took place in the present. My description is faithful to the written account, but where possible, I have given explicit reference to information about time of day, quality of light and acoustic ambience that is implicit in the ethnographic account. In my own writing, I have attempted to discover a language of translation that will do justice to the original experience of Omaha performance.

The performance of tattooing the Mark of Honour concludes a four-day set of ceremonies initiating a girl's father into the Hon'hewachi society. In their speeches, society members address their fellows as Hon'ithaethe, "those blessed by the night" (Fortune, 1932: 148). The ceremonies begin with Watha'wa, the Feast of the Count, in which the initiate recounts from memory the 100 or more gifts or sacrifices he has made over a period of years. During the feasting he must also give away the entire contents of his lodge. At the climax of the ceremonies he presents his daughter to the life-giving power of the sun.

As the chiefs and Hon'ithaethe complete the initiation with a final song, the initiate's daughter enters and dances before them. She is the young woman who will receive the Mark of Honour. She is the young woman who will send her children into the midst of the winds. She and the other "woman chiefs" will dance at meetings of the Hon'hewachi. She will carry Xthexe, "mottled as by shadows," among her people when she is an old woman. Her dance before the Hon'hewachi members, Fletcher and La Flesche tell us, "dramatized the awakening of the feminine element—an awakening everywhere necessary for a fulfillment in tangible form of the life-giving power" (1911: 502).

The young woman wears a tunic embroidered with porcupine quills. Her hair is parted in the middle, pulled back across her forehead, and braided behind the ears into thick buns that rest upon her shoulders. Three young women who have already received the Mark of Honour dance with her before the assembled Hon'ithaethe, singing Hon'hewachi songs. Fletcher and La Flesche point out that the song to which the girl dances in preparation for receiving the Mark of Honour "gives the rhythmic model after which all songs that pertain to the Hon'hewachi were fashioned. It therefore represents," they say, "the fundamental rhythm that expressed the musical feeling concerning those ideas or beliefs for which the Hon'hewachi stood" (ibid.: 502). They say that her act of dancing "dramatized the awakening of the feminine element."

The Tattooing

The initiate's daughter begins her preparations to receive the sun's blessing. Early in the morning, servers of the ceremony set up scaffolds on either side of the entrance to her father's lodge. On these they suspend the articles given as fees to validate the ritual. These articles must include 100 knives and 100 awls. The knives and awls are required as emblems of male and female activities and in honour of the hundred count the initiate has accomplished.

The tattooing begins later in the morning when the sun is already high enough to bring heat and to shorten shadow. Two woman already bearing the Mark of Honour prepare food for the assembled guests. The lodge has been emptied of all the initiate's possessions during the preceding days of feasting. Only the final gifts remain on the scaffolds that frame its entrance to the east. Only the girl remains to be given over to the life-giving power of the round sun. Servers of the ceremony then thrust the 100 knives and 100 awls into the ground on either side of the morning fire. The time for the presentation of mythical teachings is approaching.

Behind the hearth at the place of honour, servers of the ceremony lay out "a bed of the costliest robes." They place a pillow toward the east, the direction of the sun's first appearance. The initiate and his guests take their morning meal in the lodge that has been prepared for the work of tattooing. The girl takes her meal with her family in a lodge adjoining the one in which the ceremony is to take place. Then the Hon'ithaethe and women who have received the Mark of Honour sing a song to the girl. Its words are:

They are coming for you
They are coming to tell you
Because it is time. (Lee and La Vigna, 1985)

The morning meals have been completed. Servers of the ceremony escort the girl into the lodge of her father. They lay her with great care and dignity upon the fine robes on the bed of honour. She faces west "for, being emblematic of life, she had to move as if moving with the sun" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911: 503). She wears "a skin tunic embroidered with porcupine quills" (ibid.: 502). When she has taken her place of honour with the chiefs and members of the Hon'hewachi Society, two heralds stand at the entrance of the lodge. The round sun moves in his slow and certain circle closer to the zenith point. The heralds call the names of those who are to sing during the tattooing. They give voice to the war honours achieved by the men who are to sing. Some of these men are already in the lodge as the herald recognizes them. Others enter following his salutation.

A ring of silence encircles the lodge and extends outward into the places where people are living. They respect the blessing of the night that is come among them. They respect the silence into which the round sun will speak. They are careful to keep children, dogs and horses at a distance. The Hon'ithaethe speak among themselves in gentle voices. The lodge has become a holy place. It is to become a centre of the cosmos. It has become a place of waiting for the presentation of mythic teachings. One of the Hon'ithaethe, those blessed by the night, has been chosen to perform the tattooing. He may be considered for the task by right of inheritance. He must also be blessed and protected with power from a vision of the serpent whose teeming life moves over the earth. He must be able to suck the blood and charcoal pigment from the girl's freshly tattooed skin without harm (Fortune, 1932: 175). He must be in contact with the serpent's flashing eyes and moving cry which, in Omaha symbolism, is the noise of "teeming life that 'moves' over the earth'" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911: 506).

Servers of the ceremony prepare charcoal pigment in a wooden bowl. The tattooing chief outlines the sun circle and the star with a flattened stick dipped in a charcoal solution. (In later times, the charcoal was replaced by India ink and the flints and rattles by needles and small bells.) He takes up a tightly bound bundle of flint points. To the flints are fastened rattlesnake rattles. The girl lies on her bed of honour in absolute silence. She must make no noise throughout the ceremony. "If she should do so," Fletcher and La Flesche say, "it was considered as evidence that she had been unchaste. If the healing process was rapid, it was considered a good omen" (ibid.).

Silence surrounds the lodge. The Earth People and Sky People who make up the tribe keep their distance in respect of the sacrifice that is taking place for their well being. The chiefs and Hon'ithaethe begin to chant the sun song:

The sun the round sun
Comes—speaks—says
The sun the round sun
Comes—speaks—says
The sun the round sun
Comes—speaks—says
The sun the round sun
Comes—speaks—says
The sun the round sun
Yonder point
When it comes—speaks—says

The sun the round sun
Comes—speaks—says

"This ancient song," according to Fletcher and La Flesche, "refers to the sun rising to the zenith, to the highest point; when it reaches that point it speaks" (ibid.: 504).

The tattooing chief begins to prick the sun sign into the skin of the girl's forehead. Against the rhythm of the Hon'hewachi song evoking the power of the sun at its zenith point, the girl can hear the dry rhythmic percussion of the rattlesnake piercing her skin and drawing her blood with its flickering fangs of flint. She endures and waits in perfect silence. Above the lodge of her father the sun moves silently toward his zenith point. He moves toward the moment of their meeting. When the sun reaches that point, "it speaks, as its symbol descends upon the maid with the promise of life-giving power" (ibid.).

The dry sound of rattling stops. The girl's forehead is hot with a circle of her own blood. It is hot with the promise of the Hon'hewachi song. It is hot with anticipation of the round sun's movement to the zenith point. The momentary silence that surrounds her anticipates the sun as he comes upon her, as he speaks to her, as he articulates the sounds of the living creatures. Her silence reaches out to receive the life-giving power of his voice as he reaches the highest point.

The tattooing chief bathes her forehead with a cooling charcoal solution. The rattling begins again. The rhythm of the Hon'hewachi again surrounds her. The chief's bundled flint fangs inject the pigment beneath her skin. They complete the sun sign as the Hon'hewachi song comes to an end. Both the song and the sign promise life-giving power when the moment arrives for the sun to align her body between earth and sky. The tattooing chief moves toward the young woman. He is protected from harm by the blessing of his serpent vision. He sucks the mixed blood and charcoal from the freshly tattooed surface of her skin. With his action, the sun sign is ready to receive the teeming cry of the living creatures. Her sign is ready to receive the sun, the round sun, as he moves like living wind in the trees.

There is a pause in the ceremony. The girl can feel the sun sign pressing into her skin at the centre of her forehead. The people will know her by this sign when she is an old woman. They will honour her for it always. She can hear the sound of her own breathing, moving in a rhythm like living wind in the trees. She knows that in time she will send her children "into the midst of the winds" in the ceremony of "turning the child." In silence, the Hon'hewachi rhythm continues to surround her. Her father, the chiefs, the women who serve her in ceremony, the Hon'ithaethe, are suffused with the rhythm of "the great mother force." They are filled with her emotion. They are filled with an "awakening of the feminine element." They are ready to experience the mythic teachings of Hon'he, the "creative acts" by which, "through the mysterious power of Wakon'da, night brought forth day" (ibid.: 494).

The shadow cast by the initiation lodge creeps up into itself as the round sun arches toward the point of midday. The tattooing chief picks up his flint bundle. Its rattles shake her silence like the flickering tongues of heat lightning and distant thunder that penetrate the mystery of a sultry summer night sky. The rattling sound reminds the girl of serpent power, "the teeming life that 'moves' over the earth" (ibid.: 506). It reminds her that the name of the Sky People, In'stashunda, means "flashing eyes." It reminds her that the Sky People "in union with the Earth People, gave birth to the human race" (ibid.: 185). It reminds her that the sky powers bring forth life by descending upon the earth in the form of lightning, thunder and rain.

The time has come for the Hon'ithaethe, those blessed by the night, to think about the night sky and its promise of day to come. The singers give voice to the rhythm of the night dance:

Night moving
Going
Night moving
Going
Night moving
Going
Day is coming
Day is coming. (Ibid.: 505)

As the singers chant these words in the Hon'hewachi rhythm, the tattooing chief resumes his rhythmic penetration of the girl's skin with his bundle of flints. The rattles shake in response to his motions. The rattling sound blends with the words of the song. They penetrate the girl's consciousness as well as her skin. The figure that takes form in hot bright blood upon her throat is a four-pointed star. She remembers that "the star is emblematic of the night, the great mother force." She knows that its four points represent "the life-giving winds into the midst of which the child was sent through the ceremony of Turning the Child" (ibid.). She remembers the star that centres the night sky, the Pole Star, beneath which a chief's son discovered the luminous tree that was to become Waxthe'xe, the Sacred Pole. Her father and the other Hon'ithaethe know that Xthexe, the name of her Mark of Honour, gives her a special relation-

ship to the Sacred Pole. They know that "The name of the Pole, Waxthe'xe, signifies that the power to give the right to possess this 'mark of honour' was vested in the Pole" (ibid.: 219). According to the sacred legend of the Pole, "the Thunder Birds come and go upon this tree, making a trail of fire that leaves four paths on the burnt grass that stretch toward the Four Winds" (ibid.: 218).

The shadow of the initiation lodge has nearly vanished. The sun, the round sun, has nearly reached his zenith point. He is nearly in line with the day and night signs of the girl's body. The Hon'ithaethe sing a song of completion as the moment of alignment draws near. Its words are:

Yonder unseen is one moving
Noise
Yonder unseen is one moving
Noise
For that reason
Over the earth
Noise
Hio—The cry of the living creatures.

The rhythmic rattling that gives voice to the flint's repeated piercing pauses. The tattooing chief bathes the girl's star sign with soothing charcoal. Then he picks up the bundle of flints for the last time. He pricks the pigment into her skin with a final dry rattling of the serpent-tailed flint fangs. He removes the remaining blood and charcoal by sucking with his mouth. The designs are now part of the girl's body. They have taken the places they will occupy on the body of a young mother. They have become centres of the universe that will honour the Omaha Tribe throughout the long life of an old woman.

The sun moves directly into line with the girl's body. His rays come down to her through the smokehole's shadowless shaft of light. They fall upon the girl. She receives his light as "the cry of the living creatures." It is the serpent-like noise of teeming life moving over the earth. It is the noise of the Sky People come to join the People of Earth. The energy of their union passes through the girl's body and into the earth. It passes through the sun sign. It passes through the star sign. It passes through the girl's young womb and into the ancient and constantly fertile womb of the Earth.

"By the union of Day, the above, and Night, the below," Fletcher and La Flesche tell us, "came the human race and by them the race is maintained. The tattooing [is] an appeal for the perpetuation of all life and of human life in particular" (ibid.: 507). The spirit of Xthexe, mottled as by shadows, continues to unite Sky People and Earth People into a single tribe. The creative rhythm of the Hon'hewachi is still very much alive among the Omaha People. Its emotion is still among them for the presentation of mythical teachings.

Language, Performance and the Power of Wakon'da

The Omaha performance of tattooing activates images from a cultural vocabulary of cosmic images. It activates images from Omaha everyday life. It integrates individual experience with the cosmic cycles of the day sky and night sky. It speaks of the complementary male and female principles that define the tribe. It speaks of the teeming life that dwells in the midst of the earth's four winds. The tattooing performance engages these images within the syntax of a cultural language. It speaks through an ordered syntax of studied action. The performance gives voice to the sun at his zenith point. It culminates when he "comes, speaks, says." It reveals his voice in "the cry of the living creatures." The action of this performance creates a meaningful "syntaction" of images from Omaha cultural experience.

The girl's body is central to the performance, as is the space she occupies. The performance reveals a spirit of life within and around her. She is placed "on a bed of the costliest robes" in the place of honour, west of the fire. On its soothing softness, she will endure the flints' piercings. On the bed of honour, she will maintain a studied silence against which the Hon'hewachi songs and the rattlesnake rattles draw forth "the cry of the living creatures." Her young body lies open to the materializing images of sun and four-pointed star. She becomes like the face of a living sundial on which the tattooer writes the signs that evoke a cycle of transformation between day and night. She lies on her bed, facing west, because "being emblematic of life, she had to lie as if moving with the sun" (ibid.: 503). When the writing has been completed, the people hear it as speech. They hear "the cry of the living creatures." As the round Sun comes to her, speaks to her, says to her, the girl's life becomes bonded to all the living creatures.

The language of this performance reflects deeply understood Omaha ideas about relations between spirit and substance. These ideas are expressed in the Omaha word Wakon'da, "an invisible and continuous life [that] permeates all things, seen and unseen." Wakon'da is "a power by which things are brought to pass." In Omaha thought, it is "through this mysterious life and power [that] all things are related to one another and to man." Wakon'da is both a force and a state of being. It manifests itself in two ways. First, it is the force behind motion. "All motion, all actions of mind or body, are because of

this invisible life." Second, Wakon'da causes "permanency of structure and form, as in the rock, the physical features of the landscape, mountains, plains, streams, rivers, lakes, the animals, and man." Wakon'da is not distant and alien to human experience. Rather, "this invisible life is similar to the will power of which man is conscious within himself." Wakon'da "causes day to follow night without variation and summer to follow winter." Wakon'da is responsible for connecting "the seen to the unseen, the dead to the living, a fragment of anything to its entirety" (ibid.: 134).

Omahas view the world's physical forms as points where Wakon'da has stopped. Wakon'da is an intelligence, an "integrity of the universe, of which man is a part." It shows itself in the moving winds and resounding Thunders. It shows itself in the sun's path across the daytime sky, and in his momentary passage through the zenith point to become aligned with the earth's centre. It shows itself in the fixed star of the night sky, the star around which all others turn. It shows itself in the structure of thought and in the mind's quick changes of mood. It shows itself in the cosmic union of male and female principles, each one giving to the other in order to create a completed whole. It shows itself in the cry of the living creatures.

The Mark of Honour written on a girl's living skin has physical form, first as an image held in mind, then as lines drawn in charcoal and finally in the blood heat of her body's contact with the ancient flashing power of flint. Omahas recognize the Mark of Honour as a sacred point where Wakon'da has stopped. They recognize the Sacred Pole as another such point. The performance of tattooing the Mark of Honour is a physical sequence of meaningful images. It assembles a sequence of points, each of which bears the touch of Wakon'da. The lodge in which the performance takes place is a circle, like the Hu'thuga in which Sky People and Earth People come together as a single tribe. The Hon'hewachi songs are singular sound signatures. The girl's body faces west so as to move with the sun's path. Her silence creates a space for the voice that will come to her, speak to her, say to her. Her silence is a point where Wakon'da stops. Her silence invites the cry of the living creatures.

The Omaha tattooing performance furthers transformation and renewal. Its props and actors, sets and blocking, timbre and rhythm, situate both actor and audience in place where the unfolding of events becomes transformative. They situate these people together in a place where Wakon'da is present for all to see. Ordinary selves become extraordinary there. A girl becomes a chief. A face becomes a text. A place becomes the world's centre, a cosmic centre. Boundaries shift and expand. Earth and sky embrace. Cosmic forces come into play. The language of this performance makes possible the revelation of mythic teachings. It gives voice to those blessed by the night. It gives voice to the cry of the living creatures.

Women bearing the Mark of Honour are still alive as I write these words. I am writing from the Omaha reservation in Nebraska. I am here because the tribe is reburying the remains of 106 Omahas that archaeologists removed from the former Big Village of Ton'wontonga 50 years ago. I am here to bear witness to that return. Some of those Big Village people undoubtedly bore the Mark of Honour during their lives. I am here to thank them for the blessing of their presence in this place. Bringing them back to earth on the Omaha reservation will heal some of the pain that Omahas experienced during years of hardship. I am privileged to have been witness to their return. I thank them for myself and for all my relations.

Yonder unseen is one moving
Noise
Yonder unseen is one moving
Noise
For that reason
Over the earth
Noise
Hio—The cry of the living creatures.

Macy, Nebraska—October 1991

Epilogue

Retreat Island British Columbia—May 1997

When I submitted this paper for publication, it went through the normal peer review process. Two reviewers gave readings of the text. Both felt that the paper touches on issues of gender, power and representation that need to be addressed further. The first reviewer wrote as follows:

> My personal reading of this paper is every bit as shaped by my own context and life history as is the author's retelling and (re)presentation of the ritual. I am unable to separate the image of the young girl being ritually disfigured (tattooed) for the purpose of her father's accession to membership in a special society of men from the misogynist violence within Western society. Too long the advancement of men has been enacted on the bodies of women.

The second made similar points:

> One can read this paper as a dramatic depiction of ceremonial ritual but also as a highly gendered account. It

is so well written that the writing may undo the author's purpose because it fully engages the reader, and consequently raises questions that seem to be glossed over in this rereading of Fletcher and La Flesche. The paper describes the "culmination of a man's initiation" as the literal inscription of social order on the body of his daughter. It frames this ceremony in terms familiar in anthropology, as empowerment not just of the initiate but also of the young woman and her community. It describes her body as text but the interpretation comes explicitly from the observer rather than from the sentient human being. This seems to be a question of vantage point—etic vs. emic—and again the vividness of the writing may highlight this. The contrast is framed as between Omaha categories and anthropological categories, but just whose Omaha categories are these? Those of the initiate? Those of La Flesche? And where do anthropological categories of gender fit in?

The ceremony is described as empowering for the young woman, but never in her voice. Increasingly, studies of initiation seem to be deconstructing images of ceremonial harmony. Is there not another perspective whereby this might be absolutely terrifying for her? She is compelled to remain absolutely silent while her forehead and her neck are pierced by sharpened flints: the embodiment of the sun on the forehead, and of a star etched on her neck—and then the tattooing chief sucks the blood from her neck—regrettably, this calls up vampire images for me, as a reader. Again the imagery is compelling. If she makes any noise, this is "evidence that she has been unchaste." "Her silence invites the cry of the living creatures," but she herself is compelled to remain mute.

In answer to the question about categories of representation, what I have written above reflects the categories that Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche used in 1911. They chose to present ceremonial texts rather than material in the voice of the young woman herself. The ethnographic information and overall interpretation comes ultimately from and through La Flesche, but the actual language used in their report is clearly that of Fletcher, who viewed the complementarity of male and female forces as a key to Omaha symbolic and social life. Fletcher read Omaha ceremony to say that, "By the union of Day, the above, and Night, the below, came the human race and by them the race is maintained. The tattooing [is] an appeal for the perpetuation of all life and of human life in particular" (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1911: 507). She wrote that the Blue Spot women dancing before the Hon'ithaethe, "dramatized the awakening of the feminine element—an awakening everywhere necessary for a fulfillment in tangible form of the life-giving power" (ibid.: 502). When Fletcher and La Flesche wrote that the young woman must make no noise during the ceremony, they were reporting what Omahas in the 19th century considered proper. It was Omahas (certainly men, possibly women) who told them that, "If she should do so, it was considered as evidence that she had been unchaste. If the healing process was rapid, it was considered a good omen" (ibid.: 506).

The reviewer went on to ask how the Omaha Blue Spot women might have described their experience. "Did any woman ever cry out? If so, what were the consequences?" Unfortunately, we will never know what an Omaha woman receiving the Mark of Honour in the 19th century experienced in her own voice. Fletcher and La Flesche documented texts and information about ceremonial order rather than actualities. Indeed, the ceremony they described was probably no longer practiced in the 1880s due to severe assimilationist pressure. The experience of women receiving the Mark in the 20th century must have been quite different from that of women receiving it during the tribe's buffalo-hunting days. Fortunately, Jillian Ridington and I were able to speak with three women who bore the Mark of Honour in 1985 and 1986. I will close with an account of what these women told us.

On our first visit to the Omaha reservation, Jillian found herself talking to an Omaha woman sitting next to her in the pow-wow stands. The woman introduced herself as Marguerite La Flesche, and explained that she was a grandniece of Francis La Flesche. Jillian mentioned our interest in the Mark of Honour and to her great surprise, Marguerite said that there were still women alive who bore the "Blue Spot." The next day, September 1, 1985, Marguerite took us to meet Maggie Johnson and Helen Grant Walker, two women who had received the Mark of Honor in the early part of this century. Our visits were short but the women showed us their marks with considerable pride. Maggie Johnson was gracious, but we had difficulty communicating our interest in learning about her experience of receiving the Mark of Honour. She told us she had been 12 or 13 at the time. Marguerite spoke with her in Omaha and told us that she said:

> There's a meaning to that [the tattoo]. It represents, that tattoo on the forehead, to be kind, to be helpful, like to the elder, the little ones, the sick, or whichever, wherever she can, she'll go. That meaning, that mark. I know, there's a lot more to it but that, I'm poor for words and I can't explain.

Helen Grant Walker, who was quite deaf and in poor health, could not really manage a conversation, but proclaimed to us in English:

> I'm glad you come over and seeing us. . . . Thank you come over and see me. My father, he's a great, great chief, that way. He give it away for a hundred horses. The first daughter to put it on. That's why my father put it on me. I'm the first daughter. And he give it away for a hundred horses. And he's head chief. . . . My dad he go by his Indian name. His whiteman, his English name is David Grant. His name, David Grant. That's my father. Mama, Mary Fox Grant, my mother.

The following year we returned to Macy and spoke at greater length with Maggie Johnson and another Blue Spot woman, Mabel Hamilton. Helen Grant Walker had passed away that winter. Before meeting them we spoke with Pauline Tindall, then a 70-year-old administrator at the tribal health centre. She confirmed what Fortune and others had written; that two men, Silas Woods and Robert Morris (whose Omaha name, Moshtinge, means "Rabbit") had done tattooing in this century. She said there was rivalry between them and spoke of some dispute in the tribe about which one had performed the ceremony properly:

> The way that you could tell was that the ones Morris did were crude, Woods did were just perfect; the lines were straight.
>
> They [the Blue Spot women] kept together up until the time they died. I think even the last ones that we had, there was still something being done by the few women that were left, until finally . . . there might be one or two left.
>
> [We mention Maggie Johnson and Helen Grant Walker.]
>
> Both of those would be Woods. The only ones you have left with the old tradition is Mabel Hamilton, I'm pretty sure, 'cause that was a relative of her mother. She was out of that family. And she only has the one on the forehead.

Pauline went on to say that:

> It's almost as if that they're here to end the society. White Christian attitude toward it was very negative, and that, consequently, they just dropped it and a lot of us that were growing up in that era that might have been marked, were not.

She spoke about what being a Blue Spot woman meant to Omahas of her generation:

> I think they were recognized for their saintliness. They had to be good women and they were recognized for that. They were people who were supposed to be good to the poor and the sick, you know, and went about doing good deeds. They were an order that were recognized for that, and their character had to be above reproach.

Later on the same day, we spoke to Mabel Hamilton. We were assisted by her daughter, Maxine Hamilton Parker, and by Ramona Turner. Mabel was about 83 years old at the time. Ramona began by telling us:

> Person that's got that blue mark has to be like a, like a clergyman, you know. They got their doors open for you to talk to you, counsel them, whatever problems like that. That's the way these people are supposed to be, I guess. They're supposed to be good people. They're supposed to have love and caring. Anybody that needs help. They're supposed to be humble. That's the role they're supposed to play. Because that's what, we mentioned it at times, you know; "That lady's got a blue mark. She's supposed to have the wisdom and knowledge and have compassion for everybody." That's the way I was told.

Jillian and I introduced ourselves to Mabel and give her an illustration of a young woman with the blue spot from Fletcher and La Flesche. I told her:

> I wanted to give you a copy of this. It's a picture from old, old time, long time ago. Somebody with the mark. And I've been writing about this, studying about it from a book that was written by Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche. You may have seen that book, *The Omaha Tribe*. And so, I've been trying to take what they told about the ceremony of tattooing and to try to put it in my own words and explain to people. And there are a lot of things they don't talk about in that, so I wondered if you could explain and tell some about your experience of getting the tattooing. Like how old were you when it happened?

Mabel replied:

> Well, I was about four. I was, when they put that on me. My sister was supposed to have that on. She didn't want it. And then Mary Walker, you know Mary Walker. I used to stay with her when I come home from school. And some girls, they put spot on their forehead. Old man Blackberry came and saw her. "Take that off before you go home, girl. That's cost something. Cost lot of money for the people who put it on you," he says. They do, you know. They buy a lot of things for the . . .

Ramona filled in, "Giveaways." I asked, "He had to give away for that?" Mabel replied, "Yeah. And we supposed to be good to orphan kids. To be like church people." Mabel talked about the other tattooer, Silas Woods. "He put some on them. They were big. About big as nickel." I asked Mabel about Fletcher and La Flesche describing the ceremony being done with racks of knives and awls on either side of the fire. She replied, "No, they never had that." I ask about the needles. Ramona said, "Whole bunch of needles, and they wrapped them red hot... just like branding, I imagine." I asked Mabel about how long the tattooing took. She replied:

> Oh, it took long time. I 'bout fighting that old man [laughs]. Kicking him, calling him names to get the hell out of here, I said. [Everybody laughs.] Fighting him all the time. I guess he'd put some cross on my hand. I just hit him. No wonder I got no cross on my hand.

Jillian and I asked how old she had been. Ramona said, "She wasn't supposed to have it. They made her, 'cause her older sister was supposed to." Mabel added:

> When they come to our place, my sister wouldn't have it on her because she wear different trappings like a white man is. And so my dad said, "Well, take this little girl." I troubled, coming and kicking him and everything."

We asked Mabel about where the tattooing was done. She said that it took place in a house, not a tipi. Jillian asked, "Do you know what your father had to pay for it? Did he have to pay money or do some good deeds?" Mabel replied:

> They give furniture and things. That old man, Rabbit, he had some room full of stuff. I was peeking in the window one day and here they had stoves and tables and chairs. They give horses, things.

Jillian asked, "How did you feel about having it done. Were you scared or proud or...." Mabel answered, "I didn't do nothing," and Maxine added, "She wasn't scared." After some further attempts on our part to discover what, if anything, Mabel remembered of the ceremony, it became clear that she had been too young to understand much about what was going on. The story, as we could piece it together, was that her older sister was to have received the Blue Spot, but she ran away "because she wear different trappings like a white man is." We remembered what Pauline had just told us about how, "White Christian attitude toward it was very negative." Thinking about this, Jillian asked Mabel, "Are you glad you had it done?" Mabel replied, "Yeah." Jillian added, "I mean, are you proud now?" Mabel said:

> I'm proud everybody respect me. They ask me, "What's you got that spot on you for?" "That's a church member," I said. "I'm supposed to be good to you orphan kids. When you see orphan child, take him in your house and feed him. Do good things to him. Talk to it when you see them," he says. That's what this spot is for.

I asked Mabel about the Hon'hewachi society, but she and Maxine and Ramona broke into laughter because of the sexual meaning of "wachi" as "rhythmic movements of the night." I said, "I've heard it has another meaning, too. It has a double meaning." Ramona replied, "Yeah, it does." Then we talked a bit about Silas Woods and Rabbit. Mabel told us, "When he [Silas Woods] died, you know, snakes dropped on his coffin." Ramona exclaimed, "A Snake," and Mabel repeated, "Yeah, a snake dropped off from a tree right at his casket." We suspected that this was a reference to the serpent power the tattooer was supposed to possess.

Two days after our meeting with Mabel, Jillian, Dennis and I visited Maggie Johnson again. This time our conversation lasted longer. Maggie began by telling us that she was born on January 30, 1899. She told about having lost both her parents at a very young age and being raised in the family of her uncle, Silas Woods. It was Woods who tattooed her at the age of 12 or 13. Woods also tattooed Maggie's daughter, Rachel, probably the last Omaha woman to receive the Mark of Honor. When I asked her about how her uncle performed the tattooing, she briefly answered the question by saying, "They use needle," and then went on to explain what having the Blue Spot meant to her:

> They told us to, "If one, if one need help, try and help some. If you orphan kids, pity them," said. "That's what for," this one said. So I try that. All of them kids coming in, I just take them in, feed them, want sleep, well I let them sleep. Stay here. Couple days, I let em stay. 'Cause I'm only one left. Their own grandma's died long time ago, and I'm the only one, so I didn't push them away. When they went hungry, why they all come in. 'Bout three, four days ago, all of them come down. Some are sleep on the floor. All of them.

Comments on Gender Issues by Jillian Ridington

As a long-time researcher on violence against women, and an interviewer of the women with the Mark of Honour, I found the reviewers comments of great interest. Was the tattooing a form of violence against women? If we compare it to the standards of our own time and place, the answer is "Yes." The marks were tattooed on girls and young women without their consent, and sometimes against their will. The marks signified their father's status, his ability to give away "100 horses." But the marking ceremony differs from the wife battering, sexual assault and child abuse so prevalent in many cultures (including our own) today. It is different because the Blue Spot was indeed a "Mark of Honour," not a black eye of shame. While the recipient was required to remain silent for a short time, her voice in the community was strengthened for the rest of her lifetime. The Mark of Honour raised the status of the young woman, as well as that of her father. The tattooing was not done in private for the purpose of intimidating and humiliating her; rather, she was celebrated in view of her entire community. The marks were placed on her body by a ritual specialist, not by a partner or parent.

At the time the ceremony was being performed on a regular basis, slavery was still legal and prevalent in the U.S. Children were working in English factories under deplorable conditions, and European women were forced to wear clothes that restricted their movements and damaged their health. As Robert Brain points out:

> Until very recently in the West, the worst kind of body mutilation was imposed on women in the name of Fashion; the contraction of the waist and chest by tight lacing, which resulted in the deformation of the body and its internal organs often led to pulmonary diseases. (Brain, 1979: 82)

While it is important to identify and speak out against violence against women and children, it is also important to look at the context in which actions take place, and the attitudes of the recipients of those actions. If tattooing were still in style among the Omaha, there would no doubt be a sterile tattoo parlour in downtown Macy where women, and men, could go on their own volition to have a tattoo of their choice applied. But the significance of the tattooing, and the rituals associated with it, would be lost. The Blue Spot might still be placed on women, but the responsibility and sisterhood that linked the women who bore it would not be understood by those who saw the mark.

How did the Blue Spot women we interviewed feel about their Marks of Honour? Helen Grant Walker spoke of it with pride—pride in the sacrifice her father had made to have it done, and in the status it gave her in her community. Mabel Hamilton came to appreciate her Mark of Honour more in her mature years. The scared and uncomprehending child had become a wise elder who recognized and accepted the significance of her membership in the congregation of women who bore the mark.

Conclusion

In the first part of the article I treated an ethnographic text (Fletcher and La Flesche) as if it were an ethnographic document. That is, I tried to reconstruct an actuality from what was already an authorially constructed text. One of the reviewers is quite correct to point out that while the authors included song texts in their description of the ceremony, the voice of subjective experience was conspicuously absent. As I told Mabel Hamilton in 1986, "There are a lot of things they don't talk about." Jillian and I tried, in our conversations with the Blue Spot women, to encourage them to "tell some about your experience of getting the tattooing." Only Mabel chose to say much about her experience, and what she told us was how, as a four-year old, she was, "kicking him, calling him names to get the hell out of here."

From what she and the others told us, the role of being a woman who is respected for having the Mark of Honour was more important to them as elders than their childhood experience of receiving the mark. They received it at a time when White attitudes toward Omaha ceremonial life were very negative. We must rely on the information Fletcher and La Flesche provide for an insight into what the ceremony might have meant before the end of the 19th century, but voices of young women from that period must remain shadowed in silence. Are Fletcher and La Flesche correct in reading the tattooing as a pivotal ceremony that "dramatized the awakening of the feminine element—an awakening everywhere necessary for a fulfillment in tangible form of the life-giving power?" Is it necessary for that cosmic awakening to have been a conscious part of the young woman's experience? I like to think that "the cry of the living creatures" gave her the compassion that the Blue Spot women we met still carried with pride. Perhaps it is best to close with the words of Mabel Hamilton.

> I'm proud everybody respect me. They ask me, "What's you got that spot on you for?" "That's a

church member," I said. "I'm supposed to be good to you orphan kids. When you see orphan child, take him in your house and feed him. Do good things to him. Talk to it when you see them," he says. That's what this spot is for.

Like the Sacred Pole of the Omaha tribe, whose name is the same as the Mark of Honor, Blue Spot women have provided their people with a blessing for a long time. All My Relations

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