Wisp

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WISP

by

KAREN ELIZABETH CLEVELAND

Under the Direction of Matthew Sugarman

ABSTRACT

WISP is a forest that requests a reconsideration of the human relationship to nature and to the woods. It beckons the spirit and threads the supernatural through the everyday. The forest installation is comprised of drawings, sound, and suspended inorganic and organic objects that create an intimate entanglement and engages the body and senses. This paper reflects the experiences and the philosophies that led to this installation.

INDEX WORDS: Meditation, Energy, Q1, Taoism, Dualism, Installation, Nature.
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KAREN ELIZABETH CLEVELAND

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
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2011
WISP

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my father, Clinton Bron Cleveland.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d like to thank my thesis committee, Craig Dongoski, Pam Longobardi, Joe Peragine, and Matthew Sugarman, for their guidance, presence and time. I would also like to thank my immediate and extended family, friends and community for all the love, enduring support and assistance with this project. And finally I would like to thank my teacher, Wong Loh Sin See, for his continued presence in my life.
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Once upon a time, I, Chuang Chou (personal name of Chuang Tzu), dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Chou. Soon I awaked, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a distinction. The transition is called the transformation of material things. All things are in constant flow and change, but are different aspects of the One.

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East Glacier Park, Blackfoot Indian Reservation, Montana (1986, Age 8).

I am home on the Reservation. I live in a large white canvas civil war tent that smells of shoe polish and wool blankets. There is a small slit where the flaps tie and small sips of cool air spill in. The tent is outside my great aunt’s house. It is laced in willow twigs and barbed wire to keep the cows out. The cows just wander on the Reservation. They are not fenced, so you have to put up fences keep them out. The tent has green Astroturf floors that tickle the pink pad soft bottoms of my feet. I have a cot and a lantern to read by and a “just-in-case” flashlight. When the sun comes up, I will run quickly through the dewing morning and into the belly of the warm cabin kitchen. I like to watch my great aunt brush her waist length silver hair. She mumbles prayers as she sweeps and twists it into a tight bun on top of her head for the day. When it’s very cold, I will sleep inside with my great aunt. But I don’t care much for the way she smells and how her hot soft breathe mumbles strange names in her sleep.

In the daytime, the wind blows and birch tree silhouettes dance with the light from the sun on the white canvas walls. They are talking and I understand. There is a song. (And it’s a song that the Old Ones sing but that we’ve forgotten, except in our bones.)

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Finding the Bones:

My work is an opportunity to find magic in the everyday. It is about the spiritual and the sublime and their relationship to the mundane and the normal. The installation *Wisp* grew out of both my smaller drawings and my larger installation work done during graduate school.

My smaller drawings, often reference a figure or creature. I do not plan that in advance, but rather, begin the piece by making small marks on the page, which build on each other and activate each other. I will also sometimes add in collaged elements that converse with the small marks. As the marks accumulate and organically take shape, an image or being begins to emerge that materializes and dematerializes simultaneously.

![Figure 1: Coral Reef. 19” x 25”, mixed on paper: 2010](image)

The small circular marks that both make up the figure and energize the figure represent the movement of qi. The figure is solid when the energy accumulates and the disappears, as the
qi disperses. The figure is also made up from elements of its imagined environment. Coral Reef encompasses coral, shells, diagrams of water molecules, and depictions of the cycle of the moon, all elements that influence a place and that are connected to each other. For example, the moon cycle affects the water (ocean tides), which effects coral growth, which in turn effects and sustains animal life. In a way this figure is a depiction of the complex relationship between things, but also the spirit that energizes it.

Figure 2: How We Might Dance. 19” x 25”, mixed on paper: 2009.

My larger installations use drawing to communicate movement and ongoing cycles occurring in nature. They engage the full body and enter the viewer’s space. I conduct “research” by spending long hours in the woods of North Georgia and physically inserting my body into a dialogue with the landscape. I lay in the grass chest down for long hours; I cover my body with leaves, stand in icy mountain streams and crawl through rhododendron thickets. I
physically see trees decaying and new life sprouting from their soft wet wood and feel the currents of energy that organically move through the forest.

When in the studio I recreate the physical feeling of being in the woods. I start with large paper and playful yet mundane and urban-based materials such as sharpie markers, whiteout, ink, Crayola marker, crayons, and glitter to create an organic landscape. The process involves the body in a physical manner turning back to my body “research,” to recreate the feeling I had in the woods. I rip apart and staple pieces of paper together, stretch my body to create limbs and arcs; kneel, crouch and sometime jump to access all places on the paper. Much of the organic feel that imbues the work comes from a place of body knowledge.

I also extend the drawing into three-dimensional space by drawing on the wall and sculpting the paper into leaves and branches. The drawing feels as if it is emerging out of the wall but still connected to it. The rips and tears in the paper mimic the organic feel of a forest.
Elements of the drawing fold into one another, as I blur the boundaries of where we believe something should start and something should end.

The current forest installation *Wisp* also addresses the movement of energy in the woods, the materialization and dematerialization cycle, as well as my personal history. In this installation I use a combination of everyday objects from my childhood and from my present to create an imagined magical world. It weaves together my childhood on the Reservation with my present. The installation hangs mostly from the ceiling and engulfs the viewer with suspended sticks, tree trunks, buttons and more…
Objects from my life on the Reservation include thread, buttons, driftwood, feathers, dried flowers and sage, doilies, glitter, faux animal hides and match sticks. Many of the objects are direct reference to objects found and used around my great aunt’s cabin or my tent headquarter and some are the objects I collected in Montana as a child. Other material references Blackfoot ceremonies I attended and the vast landscape I explored.

Objects that are from my present Georgia home include rhododendron branches, pine tree bark, yard clippings, dried hydrangea bushes, plastic from the cleaners, local beeswax, cotton, and faux berries from my mother’s holiday decorations. All elements from both Montana and from Georgia are connected by red thread. The thread references long sewing sessions with my aunt, but also is a metaphor for the veins of my body, connecting and sustaining life within me, and the veins of my ancestors. I also use faux sinew, a waxy thread that was traditionally made of buffalo or cow intestine by the Blackfoot. All of the objects within the Wisp installation are tied together like a web.
The work culminates in uniting the spiritual and the physical together. The viewer is forced to stay embodied as he or she navigates the space by ducking, stepping, avoiding, bumping through the installation. In this way he or she is made to consider their body, and their body in the space, requiring an absolute attendance to the bodies presence in the space. At the same time, this surreal forest creates as sense of the sublime and wonder. Large tree trunks emerge out of thin air and then deteriorate back into space, matter accumulates and dissipates. The drawings on the wall depict energy materializing and dematerializing through series of marks as they form familiar but unknowable shapes.
Figure 7: Detail from *Wisp*, installation, 2011
The installation is dimly lit in order to emulate the mysterious magical in-between and transition; evening into night and the light that edges up the horizon before the sun. Light also flickers from small orbs that glow in different parts of the installation, which refer to the *will-o’-the-wisp* or Latin *ignis fatuus*, meaning “foolish fire”. Many cultures have different stories about the glowing orbs that float above the ground in the forest, especially near decaying and decomposing organic matter and animal corpses. They are often thought to be spirits that bring messages.
The sound in the installation is also a combination of the spiritual and the physical. I used an IBVA EEG-reading brainwave unit system to record my brain waves while I am in a meditative state. The Alpha, Beta, Theta and Eye-movement waves create an analogue signal, which I then translated into MIDI information, a digital pattern. I recorded trees creaking in the wind then placed them on the pattern, so that the wave patterns trigger when the trees creek. I also did a live example where viewers could listen to the sounds emanating from and reflecting my brain activity while I meditated in the space.
Figure 10: Performance in *Wisp*, installation, 2011
East Glacier, Blackfoot Indian Reservation, Montana (1984, age 6)

My Aunt and I finish hanging the laundry, clothespin by clothespin. The sun will shine through and make shapes on the grass. Laundry spirits, we call them.

In the afternoon we will walk. We will take large rough burlap bags and we will look for special rocks to paint on. Smooth, perfect palm sized stones that sigh when you touch them. We will collect tin cans and aluminum cans for money. We will step through sharp barbed wire fences that have fallen, and she will hold my hand and hold them up for me so I don’t get nicked.

When we are done I will be free to explore on my own. I will make a skirt out of tall prairie grass and dance. Then I’ll lie down in the tall grass, sink my body into the rhythm of the grass song and with my skirt I will blend perfectly.

The Sticks and the Stones:

I spent my childhood immersed in two different cultures and lifestyles. I lived with my parents in Atlanta, Georgia during the fall, winter and spring months. In the summer I traveled across the country to live with my Great Aunt on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation in East Glacier, Montana. I helped her with chores around the house in the early hours of the day and then was released for the rest of the day for my own wanderings and adventures. The landscape was full of magic. There were rolling cool breathed streams filled with soft colored stones, fields of shoulder high grasses, steep hills and ravines, circling eagles, and white barked birch trees, ten-thousand small leaf hands clapping in the wind. There, I felt free and connected. I melted my body into the trees, rivers, and tall grasses and deeply listened to the quiet rhythms and voices embedded in the land. I absorbed its smells, sounds, simplicity and quiet embrace until my cells felt fat, swollen and associated. I never felt alone among trees, animals and the presence that I felt in the
Atlanta felt more confining to me. I struggled as a young child with a learning disability that made school challenging. Life felt like a struggle and I felt restricted by being indoors. My classmates weren’t kind about my slowness to learn and home life was also rocky. I longed for Montana and would often escape there in my mind. Atlanta was mundane to me: houses and buildings, schedules, rules and homework blocked my feelings of freedom and expansiveness. I missed the birds and the sweet prairie wind. There was no time for stories, no thimbles and slow mending, and no naps among the birch trees. As I grew older, the distinction between my two lives, spaces, and selves hardened. The Reservation represented summer and freedom, a place that spoke a language that I knew in my bones and blood where I could freely be myself, without limits or boundaries. Atlanta represented winter, confinement, and a long list of rules, chores and responsibilities. I truly believed that my happiness depended on external factors that were out of my control. I was quite sure that the answers lay in escaping my Self and into the land.

**Sum Faht Meditation Workshop, Atlanta, Georgia (2004, age 24)**

The Teacher: Karen, why do you keep leaving yourself? Why are you in Montana?

Karen: Because it’s nice there.

The Teacher: It’s not nice here?

Karen: No. It hurts.

The Teacher: Ahh! Well then, you make it nice here. Stop leaving your body and your Self and make it nice here.
**Blackfoot Indian Reservation, East Glacier Park, Montana (1984, Age 6)**

During the morning hours at the cabin, I help my aunt. I dust the cabin with real feathers. Then there is the mending: clothes, thimbles, buttons and thread. She mumbles old stories as we work:

Fingers: Old nub swollen knuckles; hers.

Mine, clumsy and small

We will tie two worlds together. *This and that.*

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**Sum Faht Workshop, Roswell, GA (2009, Age 31)**

Teacher: What comes after the future?

Student: What?

Teacher: What comes after the future?

Student: I don’t understand

Teacher: There is past. There is present. And there is future. And then, what?

Student: *silence*…I mean there is….

Teacher: Nothing. Nothing comes after future. There is nothing. Nothing and everything. After all, they are the same thing.
Red Thread (The Veins):

Many different cultures believe in the interconnectedness of all life. Each have different terms that describe a connective system that animates the cosmos. Different belief systems have various names: Prana in Sanskrit, mana in Hindu, spirit or spiritus in Christianity, and wa’kan in Lakota. Historically, Jesuit Missionaries translated the term wa’kan as meaning “sacred.” Yet, Lakota traditionalists and Elders explain that in the Oral Tradition, handed down through the generations, the meaning is far more complex. Albert White Hat, Sr., a Lakota Elder and spiritual advisor, in his book Reading and Writing the Lakota Language, explains the word wa’kan is made up of two words: kan, meaning “the veins of a body” and wa, “meaning all that there is.” To get a better understanding of the word, it is helpful to know the Lakota creation story. White Hat says that in the beginning:

“We come from one source, Inyan, and that source created everything by draining its blood to create. So as each time a creation came in, Inyan’s energy was growing weaker and weaker, and its spirit was draining out and into all things. When creation was completed [Inyan] completely dried up and scattered all over the world [as rocks].”

Therefore, Inyan’s blood runs through all of our veins and his life force connects all of us as relatives.

The ancient Chinese describe this “life-force” as qi, which permeates all of creation and links the parts of our surroundings together. In Chinese, the character for qi literally means “gas”

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2 White Hat Sr., Albert. *Reading and writing the Lakota Language: Lakota Iyapi un Wowapi Nahan Yawapi* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), 203.

3 Ibid., 28
or “ether.” Like vapor, qi is empty and formless. Chuang Tzu, Taoist philosopher from 369-286, explains: Human beings are born [because of] the accumulation of qi. When it accumulates there is life. When it dissipates there is death... There is one qi that connects and pervades everything in the world.”

Fritjof also explains that Taoism focuses on the observation of nature to “discern the characteristics of the Tao,” or the way. For Taoists, nothings stands still …everything grows, changes and transforms. Qi then is the force that links the universe together through movement and animates the cosmos. It flows, cycles and balances the aspects Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang are purposed as opposites, but are cyclical and are dynamically linked, both possessing each other.

Chuang Tzu explains:

There is nothing which is not this; there is nothing which is not that. What cannot be seen by that (the other person) can be known by myself. Hence I say, this emanates from that; that also derives from this. This is the theory of the interdependence of this and that.

These opposites are interwoven and overlay each other, are derived from each other and follow each other.

According the quantum physicist Capra, the notion of qi bears striking resemblance to the concept of the quantum field in modern day physics. He describes this field as, “a tenuous and non-predictable form of matter which is present throughout space and can condense into a solid material objects.” Chang Tsai, a Chinese Neo-Confucian and Taoist philosopher, explains something similar when he described the constantly shifting nature of the universe. Qi collects

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5 Chuang Tzu in Palmer; p.22

6 Capra; p. 147

7 Chuang Tzu in Palmer; 245

8 Capra; 213
and condenses into matter becomes visible “so that there are then shapes” but this condensing is temporary, and the qi in the form will eventually become less dense and the shape will disintegrate.¹⁰ There is a cycle between the invisible and the visible, between the immaterial and the material.

**Blackfoot Indian Reservation, East Glacier Montana (1988, age 10)**

I followed a deer today. Up a rock hillside, into deep woods, and then into a magical clearing. We talked as we climbed together. He said there was someplace special to go, so I followed. And there was. A structure. One tree in the middle and twelve trees encircling it. Cut branches then stretched from tree to tree and all had one branch that radiated to the center tree. It was the most important tree. I could feel it was strong. And was wrapped in multi colored cloth and decorated in quarter-sized bundles filled with tobacco and tied perfectly together with string. I asked my Aunt about it. She said: “SHHH! Don’t talk about such things.”

**In Sum Faht Meditation, Atlanta, Georgia (2011, Age 32)**

The Teacher: Karen, why did you choose these plants for your house? They have not bloomed yet.

Karen: Well, because it’s nice to see. Nice to be here for the process. To watch the blooming take place.

Teacher: Oh, that is nice! Quite a beautiful process, don’t you agree? What makes them grow do you know?

¹⁰ Chang Tsai quoted in Capra; 214.
Karen: Hm...I guess time, and light and nourishment, and the seasons.

Teacher: Yes, that’s true. They will unfold slowly, expand and bloom; and then they will mature and wilt. Then they will die and go back to where they came from. No?

Karen: Yes.

Teacher: Humans are not so different, you know. It is also a beautiful process. And it can’t be rushed.

The Blood:

Humans have their own energy that connects to the rest of creation, yet it is shaped uniquely in all of us. Dr. Neala Peake is a clinical psychologist, who studies subtle energies in the use of psychological healing. In her book, The Journey of Spiritual Cultivation, she explains that this energy “is a mirror - a reflection of who we are, what we feel, and how we think.”10 The flow of qi influences how we come to understand our experiences, see the world and shape our realities. When we are at our best, the life force flows strongly and freely. It becomes stagnant or blocked when we are feeling down or react negatively to life’s circumstances. These blocks are created by separations in the Self. Both Meditation and acupuncture work to dissolve blocks and transcend splits by balancing the flow of qi through the body. Dr. Peake also explains:

Without exception, there is always an absolute correlation between a person's thoughts and beliefs what a person holds energetically - and what happens in his or her life. Since this energy and our psyches are always perfect reflections of each other, energy follows whenever you change your thought patterns. When you achieve balance and open the flow of energy, your life also opens and

10 Peake, Dr. Neala, The Journey of Spiritual Cultivation: Healing Through Meditation and Spiritual Practice (Synergy; 2008); p. 121
becomes more balanced.¹¹

Meditation helps change thought patterns and creates new ones. It also refines the senses, allowing us - over time - to develop the abilities to "read" or interpret other people's energy and become more sensitive to energies in our surroundings.

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**Sum Faht Workshop, Atlanta, GA, (2003, Age 23)**

Teacher: Karen, why do you sleep face down in your bed? You do, you know…sleep face and stomach down…

Karen: To make it all stop.

Teacher: That won’t make it stop.

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**Atlanta, Georgia (1995, age 16)**

I am 16 years old and I am depressed. The kind of depressed where all I can do is stare out the window, pick at the paint chipping paint on the sill and dread having to enter the world. Sometimes I sink my teeth into the soft wood of the sill, hoping it will soothe the ache. I am empathetic, but don’t know there is a word for it yet. I feel people’s emotions and where they store them in their bodies. I see a system of movement in the world, a current that flows and determines how things work together, how they speak to each other. It is a hidden language without words, one that can only be felt. It tells me things about people, their struggles and gifts, and how they are feeling even under the gloss of comfort.

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¹¹ Ibid., 20
My best friends’ mother realized this ability and my quick slide into a hole of sadness, isolation and frustration. She took me to see the Teacher, Wong Loh Sin See, for the first time. He spoke to me that night and he knew about this empathetic language that I felt but could not explain. Yet, he told me to stop looking and reading the language, to stop listening to everything outside and concentrate on my insides. This made me furious because my insides hurt. Out of anger, I tried to dismiss his words. Of course I could not, they stayed, buried deep, a throbbing un-extinguishable coal.

Years later, when I returned to Atlanta from living out West, I began to study with the meditation teacher, Dr. Neala Peake. I later found that she was a student of the same Teacher I had seen many years before, Wong Loh Sin See.

I am now a student of his. I will attempt to explain a little about the Practice, but it is a Taoist practice based in feeling and in energy, and words cannot often access it. As Lao Tzu explains in the Tao Te Ching:

The Tao that can be told
Is not the Eternal Tao.

The name that can be named
Is not the Eternal Name. (Lao Tzu in Mitchell 1988: 3)
The Spirit:

Wong Loh Sin See is pure spirit who is channeled by his student Leong Tan. Leong is from the Chinese community in Malaysia and has spent a great part of his life studying the spiritual and martial arts as practiced in Asia. He was initiated by the Teacher in Kuala Lumpur at Rumah Berhala, Wong Loh Sin See Chee Chung Temple in 1973. He began channeling the Teacher shortly thereafter.

Wong Loh Sin See acts as a mirror, guiding students to see hidden parts of the Self. He teaches that the physical world is a kind of training ground and that every facet of daily life is an integral part of a spiritual path. He teaches that following the Tao is the same as following one’s own heart and acting congruently with one’s own energy. In class, the Teacher addresses very specific aspects of our daily lives that need attention. The focus is not on enlightenment; rather it’s a “middle-path” that emphasizes being a good human being and being true to Self.

The kind of mediation taught by the Teacher is known as Sum Faht, which loosely translated means whatever the heart desires will manifest. Leong Tan explains that meditation is “the blending of personal energy with the energy of the universe” and that it “is the circulation of spiritual energy through the physical body.” Yet, spiritual energy cannot communicate directly with our physical bodies, egos, intellects or rational minds. It must communicate with our intuition, which can feel the flow of energy. The more practiced we become the more in tune we become.

12 to allow a spirit to enter your body in order to talk with living people.


15 Ibid.
Sun Faht combines traditional seated meditation with standing, walking and guided movements. These practices integrate the mind, body and spirit. We begin by sitting or standing quietly and then letting go, allowing the self to just be and surrender to what arises. Sometimes we experience the manifestation of vocalizations, mudras and other spontaneous movements. These experiences are all part of the process of refinement. In guided movements, we stand until we sense movement originating from within; then follow it, never rushing ahead of it or anticipating it with the mind. I have found this practice beneficial to my creative work. Letting go of expectation and following where I feel led. My ego is less attached to the outcome when I am guided by an inner sense of the energy. In this way, I can work with the energy of objects and the space they occupy. I am more satisfied with my work when my body and intuitive sense are absorbed in the process.

Two Medicine Lake, Blackfoot Reservation, Montana (1999, Age 21)

There is a man in the Iinipi (Sweat Lodge).

He makes the sound of the Eagle when he talks.

It frightens me, because his eyes make quick bird movements.

But when he talks, it is the eagle that speaks.

\[16\text{ Ibid.}\]

\[17\text{ also known as a Sweat Lodge or purification ceremony.}\]
The Mending:

Duncan Laurie, in his book, *The Secret Art*, begins by say that art making involves “moving invisible forces.” It is a “bridge to the invisible world, embodying emotion, spirit, meaning and transcendence.” He explains that, historically, native peoples used the creative process for “accessing subtle energies for healing and other work.” Art moves energy and creates transformations.

Much of my work is directed towards transcending and transforming oppositions in my own life, as well as those purposed by my culture. As I have mentioned, such separations stem from splits in my own psyche and life. Both the creative process and meditation (closely related) allow me to work with these splits and transcend them. Instead of believing that magic only exists in Montana, I can make it here. I can pull the mystical into the everyday, pull the red thread of my youth through the city, fasten my Aunt’s buttons like berries and swarms of qi. I attach my grandmothers doilies to limbs like lichen and suspend them like the floating orbs that lived in the woods of my youth. My ancestors are embedded here in this forest.

Shadow spirits are created and interact with the three-dimensional world; things emerge and fall away, come and go. Energy creates forms and then dissipates; elements are falling apart and coming together, collecting and dispersing, as they do in a live forest…. There are no separations here between the mechanical and the handmade, between the organic and the inorganic. All forms lead into each other, everything flows into one another. And the trees speak a rhythmic chorus of creaks and bows.

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18 Laurie, Duncan. *The Secret Art: a Brief History of Radionic Technology for the Creative Individual* (San Antonio, TX: Anomalist, 2009); 5.

19 Ibid., 5.
Sum Faht Workshop, Atlanta, Georgia 2010 (Age 32)

The Teacher: What is the difference between Art and Science?

Student: I’m not sure…. maybe different understandings of truth?

The Teacher: The difference between Art and Science is when the patterns and structure in science can’t hold the energy any longer. Art begins.

Two Medicine Lake, Blackfoot Indian Reservation, Montana (2001, age 23)

Across the lake, mountains rise like wolves from the earth

There are Old Ones here and their voices are on the wind. All places have songs.
Works Cited


