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Performing Serpent Mound: A Trans-Indigenous Meditation

Chadwick Allen

“Serpent Mound is an embankment of earth nearly a quarter mile long, representing a gigantic serpent in the act of uncoiling, with the greater portion of the body extended in seven deep curves nearly to the tip of the tongue of land upon the elevated surface of which it lies. Partly within the open jaws of the serpent is an oval wall of earth representing the open mouth.”
—Emerson Greenman, *Guide to Serpent Mound* (1964)¹

“This long, low embankment snakes its way down a narrow ridge. The tail forms a tight spiral, and the other end widens to join an oval embankment, commonly interpreted as the head, although some have thought the snake is swallowing an egg.”
—George Milner, *The Moundbuilders* (2004)²

One

The majestic Serpent Mound first entered my consciousness as an unlikely juxtaposition. It was not 1964—when the Ohio Historical Society, which has held the deed to the Serpent Mound in southwestern Ohio and operated its site as a state memorial since 1900, revised its 1930s tourist booklet *Guide to Serpent Mound* yet a third time to reflect changing theories about the effigy’s construction, meaning, and purpose—but rather the mid-1980s.³ I was an undergraduate student and, hungry for classes on any aspect of American Indian cultures (there were few choices at my esteemed institution), I enrolled in a course on North American archaeology. My memory is that, in addition to several textbooks, we were assigned a course packet of photocopied articles and chapters written by prominent non-Native anthropologists and historians. Dense

Chadwick Allen is an Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement and Stark Professor of English at the University of Washington. Prior to fall 2015, he was an associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences and professor of English and at the Ohio State University. The author of Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts (2002) and Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies (2012) and coeditor of The Society of American Indians and Its Legacies (2013), he serves as editor of the journal SAIL: Studies in American Indian Literatures. During 2013–14 he was the president of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA).

¹ Emerson F. Greenman, *Guide to Serpent Mound*, rev. ed. (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1964), 1.

² George R. Milner, *The Moundbuilders: Ancient Peoples of Eastern North America* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 79.

³ Chartered in 1885 as the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, in 2014 the Ohio Historical Society changed its name to the Ohio History Connection.

sections of these spiral-bound pages described nineteenth- and twentieth-century mappings, surveys, and excavations of Indigenous mounds and other earthworks, beginning with excerpts from the first major survey, published in 1848, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* by Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis, which includes what is still the most iconic “map” of the Great Serpent (fig. 1). The level of technical detail in the articles and chapters was often numbing for an undergraduate student; the detailed descriptions of human violation were occasionally horrific. Many of the excavated burial mounds, including those sited in proximity to the mysterious Serpent effigy, were located in Ohio, the state in which I now happen to live and work, but was then a (constructed) landscape completely unknown to me.

About the same time, outside of my assigned coursework I read the African American novel *Meridian*, Alice Walker’s semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story published in 1976 and set mostly in Georgia—another landscape I had yet to visit—before, during, and immediately after the 1960s movement for civil rights. Walker’s better-known novel *The Color Purple* had appeared in 1982, and it seemed that everyone I knew at the university had either just finished it or was reading it then. Walker and her work occupied a crucial center of campus discussions about literature, race, gender, and power; the extraordinary success of *The Color Purple* brought renewed attention to *Meridian* and its compelling protagonist Meridian Hill. In an early chapter, it is the memory of a young Meridian’s “ecstatic” encounter with a “sacred” Indian burial mound on her father’s Georgia farm that sets her destiny as an activist, and also as something of a prophet and possibly a saint. Like the Serpent effigy in Ohio, this burial mound in Georgia curves and twists its presence on the land in the sinuous shape of a snake. But where amateur and professional anthropologists since the days of Squier and Davis have emphasized the Ohio Serpent’s dynamic head, speculating, in particular, about the meaning of its mouth apparently hinged wide open—how, as an emissary of the underworld, the Serpent appears to perform a symbolically charged act of swallowing a life-giving egg, or possibly the life-giving disk of that counter-balancing avatar of the sky-world, the sun—Walker emphasizes, instead, the tail.⁴ Moreover, in contrast to the “tight spiral” of the effigy’s tail in Ohio, the tail of Walker’s Sacred Serpent is a coil fantastically large and deep, its curving walls imagined not only as graphic symbol, knowledge encoded into the medium of the land itself, but also as ossuary, as twisting repository for the remains of the Indigenous dead.

I can no longer put my hands on my copy of the archaeology course packet, but what I remember most of its sometimes faded, sometimes off-kilter pages is a sharply defined emphasis on death: black-and-white diagrams of conical burial mounds, rendered in the cut-away style, the cross-sections revealing distinct layers of rock and soil and, often, multiple levels of elaborate human internment—what anthropologists call “stacked cemeteries,” micro-hotels for those enigmatic ancients passed on.⁵ The diagrams were accompanied by series of black-and-white photographs. In some, we witness faceless men performing acts of excavation from the late-nineteenth-century

⁴For additional examples, see Martha A. Potter, *Ohio’s Prehistoric Peoples* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1968); and Robert C. Glotzhober and Bradley T. Lepper, *Serpent Mound: Ohio’s Enigmatic Effigy Mound* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1994). For the theory that the Serpent Mound’s oval-shaped disk represents the sun, see William F. Romain, *Mysteries of the Hopewell: Astronomers, Geometers, and Magicians of the Eastern Woodlands* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2000), 253.

⁵See, for example, Milner, *The Moundbuilders*, 58.

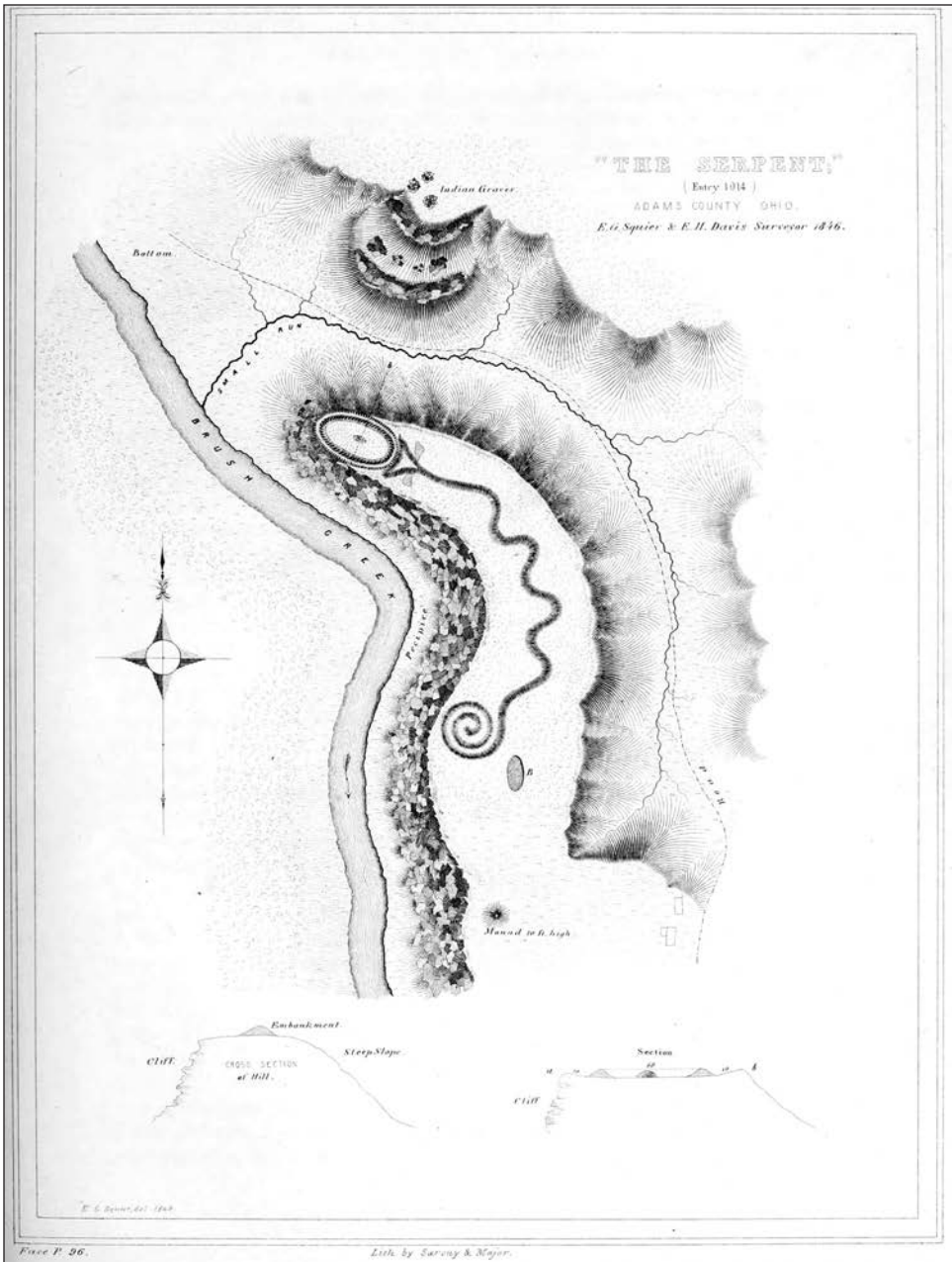


Figure 1. Ephraim G. Squier and Edwin H. Davis's 1846 map of "The Serpent."
(Source: *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* [1848].)

era of road- and city-building, or the 1930s era of WPA civic projects, or the 1960s era of highway and interstate expansion; their shovel-wielding bodies indicate the height and scale of the large mounds they systematically destroy. In other photographs we witness the now-disinterred dead, ancestors the anonymous laborers have exposed and the named anthropologists have labeled, recorded, and displayed, old bones removed

from the earth-womb though sometimes still crouched in fetal positions, sometimes still surrounded by personal items, funerary objects, or otherworld companions, set beside a yardstick or other official measure.

I still have my paperback copy of *Meridian* and reread it in the course of writing this essay, but there are two details I remember most from my first reading. One is very much of the era: Walker begins her novel about the African American civil rights movement, set mostly in Georgia, with an epigraph taken from the deeply tragic final paragraphs of John Neihardt's "as told to" autobiography of a Lakota holy man, *Black Elk Speaks*,⁶ originally published in 1932—about the same time that the first *Guide to Serpent Mound* was produced for tourists—but popularized during the 1960s and '70s as an American "spiritual classic." The passage evokes the 1890 massacre of Lakota at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, when Black Elk was still a relatively young man. Now aged and diminished, in the moment of speaking to Neihardt, Black Elk asserts with devastating certainty: "I did not know then how much was ended."⁷ The other detail runs counter to the findings of anthropologists both amateur and professional: Walker depicts her Southeastern burial mound not in the expected conical or ridge-top style, but rather in the sly shape of a biblical Serpent twisting in the Father's garden. For the right kind of gifted daughter—for the right kind of activist Eve—the deep coils of this burial serpent, Walker asserts, perform a transformative magic. These spiraling walls holding the stacked (Indigenous) dead defy Black Elk's purported sense that a "people's dream" died along with the victims of brutal colonial massacre, and instead propel new ([African] American) life.

I would like to say that I noticed, in my first reading of *Meridian*, how Walker conflates the idea and possible functions of an effigy mound with the idea and possible functions of a burial mound for the purpose of building particular symbols and themes, although I know that such awareness is unlikely. My university course in archaeology notwithstanding, back then I understood little about the diverse types of mounds, embankments, enclosures, and other earthworks constructed by Indigenous peoples for thousands of years across a broad expanse of the eastern third of the North American continent. Indeed, I continue to learn and expand my capacity for understanding. I would also like to say that I noticed how Walker conflates the traditions of the Georgia Cherokee and other mound-building peoples of the Southeast—including the Chickasaw, from whom I trace part of my own ancestry, the Choctaw, and the Creek—with those of the Lakota and other Plains Indians. Indigenous peoples of the northern, central, and southern Plains, but perhaps especially the Lakota "Sioux," experienced a renewed visibility in the 1960s and '70s, during the height of contemporary American Indian activism and the beginning of the so-called American Indian literary renaissance. This was particularly true among liberal-leaning non-Native artists and intellectuals, who celebrated not only older literary works sympathetic to the "plight" of Indians like *Black Elk Speaks*, but also new works in American Indian history told from new perspectives, such as Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*.⁸ Brown's best-selling, popular account of the so-called Indian Wars at the end of the nineteenth

⁶John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961).

⁷See the opening epigraph in Alice Walker, *Meridian* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1976).

⁸Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Henry Holt, 1970).

century, published in 1970, ends with the same tragic quotation attributed to Black Elk that Walker deploys as her epigraph to *Meridian*. I realize that this awareness also is unlikely. It was not until 1984, precisely when I first encountered this juxtaposition of archaeology and African American literature, that the original stenographic notes from the interviews conducted for *Black Elk Speaks* were finally analyzed and made available to the public, published as *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*, edited and introduced by anthropologist Raymond DeMallie.⁹ Although we now had conclusive evidence that the tragic words attributed to Black Elk were actually invented by the non-Native poet Neihardt, it would take years for this information to circulate.¹⁰ And it would take decades for the power of Neihardt's enticing vision of Native American death to begin to dissipate—a process that many of us understand to be ongoing.

Two

Like Neihardt's tragic inventions, Walker's confections of the Indigenous Southeast with the Indigenous Plains and of effigies with burials provoke fascinating questions about their seductive power. It did not occur to me to consider them in any depth, however, until after 1997, when I began my first academic job at Ohio State University and was able to visit Serpent Mound myself (fig. 2). Even then, although I experienced the graphic presence of the effigy in the rural landscape of southwestern Ohio as spiritually potent and found the old-fashioned dioramic displays housed in the state memorial's small interpretive center to be equal-parts fascinating and offensive, it would be another several years before I began to contemplate the differential representations and performances of the Serpent, including my memory of *Meridian*, and how they produce distinctive registers of meaning. These issues came into sharper focus in 2006 with the publication of *Blood Run*,¹¹ an interrelated sequence of earthworks poems by American Indian writer and activist Allison Hedge Coke, whose ancestry includes Cherokee, Huron, and Creek and who is thus a descendant of mound-building peoples. In her poem titled "Snake Mound," Hedge Coke foregoes typical representations of the effigy as inanimate object or graphic sign in need of external interpretation; she imagines, instead, an animate force in possession of its own voice—the Serpent in and as performance.

Blood Run completely reoriented my thinking about mounds and other earthworks: their potential meanings and functions, the significance of their contemporary representation and engagement, the possibilities of their reclamation, restoration, and renewal. In Hedge Coke's vision, however much earthworks may have been destroyed or degraded, however much they may have been misappropriated or misrepresented, they remain vital and continue to embody knowledge. They exist not in isolation, but situated within three- and four-dimensional (Indigenous) worlds; they define space, direct intellects and imaginations, endure and thus move through time. Since I have written at some length about *Blood Run* in other venues, here I will keep my points brief.¹² Hedge Coke imagines the extensive Blood Run earthworks site (located on what

⁹ Raymond J. DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, esp. 52, 55.

¹¹ Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, *Blood Run: Free Verse Play* (Norfolk, UK: Salt Publishing, 2006).

¹² See Chadwick Allen, "Serpentine Figures, Sinuous Relations: Thematic Geometry in Allison Hedge Coke's *Blood Run*," *American Literature* 82, no. 4 (2010): 807–34; and Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*, chap. 5 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).



Figure 2. Aerial view of the Serpent Mound.
(Photo: Timothy E. Black / Newark Earthworks Center.)

is now the South Dakota/Iowa border) not only as alive, but as highly patterned and articulate. In her sequence of sixty-six poems she creates a series of sixty-four persona poems, “Snake Mound” among them, through which thirty-seven distinct elements associated with the site are enabled to “speak.” Thus, at its core, Hedge Coke’s poetic sequence functions as a script, a series of monologues, dialogues, and extended interactions meant for imagined or embodied performance. The full title of the work reveals this purpose: *Blood Run: Free Verse Play*. Moreover, the poet simulates the mathematic and geometric encoding of earthworks and their multiple alignments with one another, with natural features in the landscape like rivers and embankments, and with the sun, moon, stars, and other elements of the greater cosmos in her precise positioning of poems within numbered sections and within the sequence as a whole, as well as in her precise numbering of lines, her precise patterning of stanzas per poem, lines per stanza, words per line, even syllables per word, and, crucially, in how these multiple numerical configurations align, further, with specific content, with wordplay, allusion, and imagery and with building themes. Hedge Coke’s highly patterned script endeavors to move audiences and performers in the present so that they might act on behalf of the future. In particular, her evocation of mounds as systematically patterned and highly articulate is meant to spur action toward their contemporary protection, toward their renewal and future reactivation. Remarkably, in the years since the 2006 publication of *Blood Run*, that positive action has begun.

Hedge Coke’s “Snake Mound” gives voice to a destroyed serpent effigy at the Blood Run site, enabling it to speak on its own behalf.¹³ Simultaneously, and more subtly, the

¹³ In her acknowledgments, placed at the end of *Blood Run* rather than the beginning, Hedge Coke writes: “Once, a snake mound effigy of a mile and a quarter length, much like the worldwide lauded Snake Mound in Ohio State, existed in this very place—Blood Run. The railroad used it for fill dirt” (93).

poem aligns with the physical characteristics and the eight known astronomical alignments of the Serpent Mound in Ohio in its specific language (“mouth undone, / for egg swallow”), in its poetic structure (seventeen lines divided into eight stanzas and eight statements), and in its positioning on the page as the nineteenth persona poem among the twenty-eight persona poems of the book’s second section and within the larger sequence of sixty-four persona poems as a whole.¹⁴ Densely coded with Indigenous knowledge and in possession of its own voice, the effigy is multiply situated in conversation with the voices, encodings, and alignments of other mounds and other aspects of the Blood Run site.

The poet/playwright creates a specific context of juxtaposition and specific set of productive tensions by placing the singular voice of Snake Mound, which speaks only once in *Blood Run*, in direct dialogue with the second appearance of the collective voice of The Mounds, which speak a total of seven times across the sequence. Situated on the left page and composed of seventeen lines of varying lengths divided into six tiered stanzas—visually suggesting the physical shapes of sloped earthworks—The Mounds speak first. In a tone of great reverence, in the opening five stanzas The Mounds describe the deliberate, prayerful process of their original construction and how their aligned bodies “made model” the movements of the sun and moon for “millennia.” In the final, sixth stanza, reverence shifts to ominous foreboding. The Mounds now describe a world turned “inside out,” a world that places “all [they] have come to hold” in “jeopardy.”¹⁵ Facing The Mounds on the right page, Snake Mound is composed of seventeen brief lines of more uniform length divided into eight stanzas, suggesting an articulated, serpentine shape. Although The Mounds’ final word, “jeopardy,” directly foreshadows the fate of the destroyed Snake Mound, whose body was dismantled during settler construction of the railroad, in its opening lines, the effigy calmly responds to this sense of apprehension: “Present invisibility / need not concern.” Here and elsewhere in the poem, the wordplay is productive: although its sinuous body of mounded earth is no longer visible, the effigy remains “present.” In the following lines the effigy states, “[m]y weight remains / heavy upon this land,” with the pun on “weight” (wait) suggesting a period of dormancy and anticipation rather than loss and absence. At lines 12–13 the effigy even claims the endurance of its power to see despite its apparent lack of vitality: “my vision bears / all even still.” At line 16, structurally charged by squaring of the sacred number 4, in four words Snake Mound eschews The Mounds’ nostalgia for the distant past and anxiety about the present to assert a defiantly positive future: “I will appear again.”¹⁶

In performance, specific casting heightens the tensions of the dialogue—in terms of the genders and ages of the actors, for example, or their affiliations with Indigenous communities.¹⁷ Modulations of the performers’ voices, expressions, and gestures add

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 31. Briefly, “17” is the seventh prime, and “7,” often considered a sacred number in Native American traditions, is one of the fundamental units of measure that recurs across the *Blood Run* sequence, along with its multiples. Eight is the number of known astronomical alignments of the Serpent Mound in Ohio. The numeral “8” is related to the sacred number of balance, “4” (4×2), which is also a fundamental unit of measure across *Blood Run*. The numeral “8” is also the cube of the first and only even (balanced) prime number, “2,” rendering “2” three-dimensional ($2 \times 2 \times 2$). The numeral “19” is the eighth prime. The numeral “28” is the product of the sacred numbers “4” and “7” (4×7), and “64” is the cube of the sacred number “4” ($4 \times 4 \times 4$).

¹⁵ Hedge Coke, *Blood Run*, 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷ Hedge Coke has worked with a number of Indigenous communities to stage performances of *Blood Run* as a methodology of healing for historical trauma.

further dimension and nuance, as do the physical orientations of the performers' bodies in relation to the audience and to one another as they speak and listen. When a group rather than an individual performs *The Mounds*, multiple possibilities arise for speaking the collective persona's lines: in unison as a communal multi-voice, sequentially as individual voices that alternate by line or stanza, in an overlapping round, or in some combination of these. Multiple possibilities also arise for configuring the bodies of the actors in simple or complex alignments with one another, with other features of the real or imagined landscape and cosmos, or with the body of the actor voicing Snake Mound, as well as for choreographing how the performers move their bodies, individually or in unison, and thus how they shift and reshift their alignments. In performance, Hedge Coke's vision of the enduring vitality of the mounds becomes fully instantiated, as does her understanding of the significance of alignments that are multiple and simultaneous. The message is thus not simply that Snake Mound continues to articulate knowledge and meaning, to possess voice, despite destruction of its physical body. The seemingly lost Serpent "speaks" because it is aware of interlocutors; its voice remains vital not in isolation, but within a multidimensional dialogue structured by, with, and through other earthworks. Snake Mound's message resides not in its singular voice, but in the complex interactions its voice performs between particular poems and across the larger script of *Blood Run*.

Three

Other Native American artists and intellectuals have engaged the physical characteristics, natural and cosmic alignments, and powerful "voice" of the Serpent Mound, including Choctaw writer and intellectual LeAnne Howe and Guna and Rappahannock actress and playwright Monique Mojica, who are co-developing a new performance piece, *Side Show Freaks and Circus Injuns*, that grounds its dramaturgy in the materiality, abstract-patterning, and multiple functions of Indigenous earthworks. Central to their process for gathering material for the structure and content of the new play has been an extensive "mound crawl," similar to a "pub crawl," of North American mound sites from Louisiana to Ontario. At each site, the playwrights have engaged in what Mojica calls an "Indigenous artistic research methodology . . . that speaks to the embodiment of place."¹⁸

Similar to Hedge Coke's methodology for producing *Blood Run* in which she "composed at the site," Mojica and Howe's methodology is based in the idea of an "embodied research": approaching earthworks in an appropriately respectful manner, spending significant time with their forms, walking their contours, making physical contact, engaging the full range of the human body's senses to listen and feel for song, story, and movement contained within the bodies and remains of earthworks.¹⁹ This methodology also involves "embodied improvisation": actively connecting one's human body to earthworks as sign systems and encoded knowledge by imagining one's way

¹⁸ Monique Mojica, "In Plain Sight: Inscribed Earth and Invisible Realities," in *New Canadian Realisms: New Essays on Canadian Theatre*, vol. 2, ed. Roberta Barker and Kim Solga (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012), 219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 220. Hedge Coke describes her methodology for writing *Blood Run* in her introduction to the anthology *Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas*, which she edited in 2011. She has also discussed her methodology in a number of public presentations, including "Writing Presence: Earth, Rivers—a Workshop in Witness," which she offered during the Western Literature Association conference in Spearfish, South Dakota, on 2 October 2009.

into the lives that have been lived at and through the mounds—that is, the lives of “the ancestors who built them” and of “the peoples who still inhabit the region.”²⁰ In her published essay about these processes, “In Plain Sight: Inscripted Earth and Invisible Realities,” Mojica explains, “[t]he land *is* our archive and our embodied relationship to the land defines Indigenous identities, history, science, cosmology, literature—and our performance.”²¹ As an Indigenous artist, she states, it is her responsibility “to make visible that which has been made invisible. It is a responsibility that compels me to remember things I never knew and restore them to consciousness.”²² Describing her methodology in more detail, she explains that rather than relying upon a journal or camera, “I record and document with my body.”²³ Mojica’s descriptions of her research methodology align with Hedge Coke’s descriptions of her attempts in *Blood Run* “to speak through the vessel despite the self, to image the land, the animal and plant life able to vicariously bear witness, for the essence of particular ghostings and remaining skeletons to be freed through lingual and geometric presence in some way.”²⁴

After publishing an article about Hedge Coke’s “Snake Mound” in 2010, in October 2011 I had the opportunity, along with local Native colleagues, to assist Mojica in visiting research sites in central and southern Ohio, including the large geometric earthworks at Newark, the burial mounds known as Seip and Jeffers, and the effigy Serpent Mound, and to participate in her methodologies of embodied research.

We arrive at Serpent Mound State Memorial on a bright autumn morning. Approaching the park entrance, we immediately notice a large number of butterflies, those living symbols of transformation. They seem to follow us, and Mojica comments that butterflies have been a common experience at other sites. After we smudge ourselves in the parking lot, Mojica suggests we establish our bearings by first viewing the effigy from the observation tower. Built by the Ohio Historical Society over a hundred years ago, in 1908, the tower assists staff archaeologists, no doubt, but primarily enables the gaze of tourists, focusing that gaze toward the effigy and away from the three burial mounds nearby.

We climb. Hands gripping rails, eyes watching the open risers, in a slow single-file procession we ascend the sky-world to behold our relative from the underworld below. Many have speculated about the intended audience for earthworks, especially for large geometric figures like the Octagon at Newark or large animal figures like the Serpent. Why go to so much trouble when the spectacular results of planning and labor could be appreciated only by hawks and eagles, vultures and stars? A few sites might be viewed from adjacent hills, but not all, and no hill affords an overhead perspective. There are theories, of course, involving aliens from outer space. And there are archaeologists who argue that powerful shamans must have directed construction, that a shamanic point of view, an altered state of consciousness, a spiritual experience of elevation or flight—not spaceships—explains the scale, the symbolic significance of these mounds.²⁵

Although I have climbed the tower’s steps on previous visits, when we reach the raised platform I am startled anew. From this aerial position it is possible to perceive the Great

²⁰ Mojica, “In Plain Sight,” 220.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 219 (emphasis in original).

²² *Ibid.*, 221.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Allison Adelle Hedge Coke, ed., “Introduction,” in *Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 4–5.

²⁵ See, for example, James A. Brown, “The Shamanic Element of Hopewellian Period Ritual,” in *Recreating Hopewell*, ed. Douglas K. Charles and Jane E. Buikstra (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 475–88.

Serpent as a whole and thus to contemplate not only its scale as graphic symbol but also its remarkable performance of energy. *It begins in the tail, in the tight fist of the triple-coiled spiral. The spiral opens then expands through seven convolutions of the extending body, the body as a whole turning to follow the distinctive curve of the ridge. Energy culminates in the broad triangular head, mouth seeming to arch wide open, preparing to swallow an oval-shaped disk.* We take it all in, silent, then quietly remark on the beauty of the Serpent's green form in the multi-green landscape. But mostly it is this focused performance of energy, this vector and syntax of signs conjoined atop the arc of the ridge—*coil, waves, triangle, oval*—that we attempt to describe. And we remark on our mixed feelings of awe at the Serpent's survival and yet grief at its colonial capture in the state memorial. Such a telling designation, memorial: historical marker of time frozen in the past, tribute to the fallen dead, gravestone for those lost or forgotten. Static. I recall these lines from Hedge Coke's "Snake Mound": "my vision bears / all even *still*" [fig. 3].

After a time, we collect ourselves and descend the observation tower to walk beside the contours of the undulating body. We note how differences in elevation and perspective affect our perception of each part of the Serpent, and how we now struggle to perceive the effigy as a mimetic figure. Does it matter, we ask, that we cannot see the Serpent in its entirety while standing on the ground? That we must walk to enable perception and, walking, must imagine parts into the whole, connect distinct signs—*coil, waves, triangle, oval*—into the serpentine sentence? Finally, having walked along the full length of the effigy up and back and having discussed how closely the raised body follows the curve of the ridge that extends above the waters of Brush Creek, we wait patiently until the few other tourists present that day finish their tour and leave. Alone with the Serpent, we complete what we have begun to realize is our own performance. We lay our small human bodies against the grass surface of the effigy's massive body, warmed by the sun, to listen and feel.

Each perspective—bird's-eye view from above, human's-eye view standing on the earth's surface, and up close, mound's-eye view lying on the body of the effigy itself—is informative and emotionally powerful in its own way. But it is when we make physical contact, body resting upon body, that we experience the most intense feelings that the Serpent is more than a remarkable feat of engineering, more than a mimetic or abstract symbol linking us to the past, more than a system of encoded knowledge and astronomical alignments, although it is all of these. The Serpent remains a living entity. With our hearts pressed against the fluid, curving form of its body, we are again cognizant of the Serpent's unmistakable performance of energy. Now, however, instead of perceiving wave-like movement from above, as we had standing on the raised platform of the observation tower, we feel waves of subtle motion from below. Mojica recounts in her essay "In Plain Sight": "The serpent writhes and undulates beneath us."²⁶ And suddenly, from our prone positions lying against the effigy's warmed body, we again perceive movement visually as well: threading the grass atop the Serpent's back are the orange and white forms of woolly caterpillars. Like the butterflies encountered at the memorial's entrance, the caterpillars are living symbols of transformation: movement within a designation of stasis. We begin to imagine the myriad forms through which such movement might manifest—in the past, in the present, in possible futures.

As Hedge Coke so powerfully anticipates in *Blood Run*, in our embodied research we experience the effigy as vital and interconnected. Situated within three- and four-dimensional worlds and within highly patterned systems of encoded knowledge, we experience the effigy as continuing to speak, as continuing to perform in, as, and through the land and its transformations: *coil, waves, triangle, oval*.

²⁶ Mojica, "In Plain Sight," 240.



Figure 3. Monique Mojica viewing the Serpent Mound from the observation tower at the Serpent Mound State Memorial. (Photo: Chadwick Allen.)

Four

In the process thus far for developing the performance *Side Show Freaks and Circus Injuns*, Mojica and Howe have written about earthworks and earthworks research both separately and together. In a 2014 essay titled “Embodied Tribalography: Mound Building, Ball Games, and Native Endurance in the Southeast,” for instance, Howe draws on her research with Mojica to argue that “[m]ounds embody stories.”²⁷ As her primary example, she analyzes the large effigy known as Bird Mound, or Mound A, thought to be around 3,600 years old, part of the massive earthworks complex at Poverty Point, Louisiana. Howe makes a compelling case for rethinking our understanding of the large bird effigy, which archaeologists believe was built over a relatively brief period of only three months. The effigy may not be simply a static symbol or icon, but rather the embodied *story* of a key animal figure for Southeastern peoples, the red-tailed hawk: “The total time needed to create a red-tailed hawk, from mating to a fledgling leaving the nest, is approximately ninety days. Three months. Therefore, it would seem that Bird Mound at Poverty Point is possibly a performance mound that embodies the story of the red-tailed hawk from conception to first flight—the story of its creation.”²⁸ Howe’s argument for rethinking the Bird Mound as embodied and

²⁷ LeAnne Howe, “Embodied Tribalography: Mound Building, Ball Games, and Native Endurance in the Southeast,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 26, no. 2 (2014): 80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

encoded *performance* opens multiple possibilities for expanding our understandings of the effigy Serpent.

Mojica and Howe have created a series of improvisations and scripted scenes that draw directly from their embodied research and speculative theories. One scene in progress, based on an improvisation by Mojica, bears the working title "Inside-Outside" and builds from her research experience with me and other colleagues at the Serpent Mound in Ohio and with Howe and others at another serpent effigy located farther north at Rice Lake, near Peterborough, Ontario²⁹ (fig. 4). The brief scene contrasts the perspective "from OUTSIDE an effigy mound" with the perspective "from INSIDE a burial mound." Effigy juxtaposed with burial: I immediately think of Hedge Coke's Snake Mound persona in conversation across the open spine of *Blood Run* with the collective persona of The Mounds; but I also recall the detail of the deep pit, the spiraling well, the grassy, curving wall of the tail of the Sacred Serpent filled with remains of the Indian dead depicted in Walker's *Meridian*. Does Walker's conflation of a burial/effigy possess its own voice or voices? Does it participate in dialogue or embody story? Can it be understood as Indigenous performance?

However seductive the pull toward conflating effigy and burial, similar to Hedge Coke, Mojica resists while still acknowledging the proximity of Indigenous internments to the Serpents; effigies juxtaposed, aligned, and in dialogue with burials, but not conflated. As embodied researcher understood also as performer, and as embodied performer understood also as researcher, Mojica begins the improvisation with movement, with the vectored "approach" *from* "outside" *toward* the Serpent, and then contact:

We weep, belly down. Sobs. Sobs, heart on the serpent, belly on the snake, we feel it, undulate, beneath our bellies, bringing us its song. Thank you. Thank you, for leaving this for us to see, when all is almost gone, your bones pulverized to dust. Add tears and stir. Add tears and stir. Add tears and stir. We reconstitute our broken bodies from your bones. . . Buzzard watches. Shadow bird. Song begins. Serpent writhes, long ago meteor charged, long ago meteor radiating through our spines: three coils of its tail, seven undulations and release. Then circle. The Great Serpent reaching towards water.³⁰

Mojica's embodied improvisation centers attention on key elements of a contemporary Indigenous response to contact with the ancient effigy. Movement toward the Serpent culminates in physical contact. The response is emotional but also spiritual; physical encounter with the effigy evokes the presence of Indigenous ancestors and draws the presence of the natural world, including highly symbolic animals, such as the buzzard (or vulture), often associated with the movements of life and death as a cycle of renewal. This renewal is evoked as well in the imagery of mixing the "pulverized" bones of ancestors with tears in order to "reconstitute" Indigenous bodies in the present. It is at this point that the speaker notes: "Song begins." *Song* is one of the gifts given by the ancestors through the vehicle of the encoded mound.

At the same time, physical encounter with the effigy enables encounter with a previous cosmic contact, encounter with the power of an ancient meteor strike, which, like the evocation of ancestors and the presence of Vulture, represents connections among

²⁹ Another snake mound, badly damaged, is located in High Park in Toronto, Ontario, which Mojica and Howe, assisted by others, also visited during their research.

³⁰ Here and below, with her permission I quote from Mojica's unpublished manuscript of the scene, "Inside-Outside." Ric Knowles served as dramaturg for the improvisation.



Figure 4. Monique Mojica lying on the Serpent effigy at Rice Lake, near Peterborough, Ontario.
(Photo: Ric Knowles.)

upper, middle, and lower worlds. This element is especially intriguing. The Serpent Mound in Ohio not only lies on a distinctively shaped ridge above the Brush Creek Valley, but also on the outer edge of a fifteen-square-mile area of “geological disturbance” bearing a “cryptoexplosion structure” created more than 200 million years ago by the impact of a meteor.³¹ The speaker/performer suggests that the effigy draws on and expresses this ancient cosmic energy in its “writhing” form; in turn, the writhing body of the Serpent transfers the meteor’s ancient cosmic energy into the receptive body of the speaker/performer. Finally, the first part of the improvisation ends with acknowledgment of the effigy’s energy represented in the “three coils of its tail, seven undulations and release” and with acknowledgment of its proximity to water, another link to the lower world. As the improvisation continues, these elements repeat and build. The “Outside” section concludes: “The song begins, and we who think these thoughts as if they were our very own, answer the call.”

³¹ In Robert C. Glotzhober and Bradley T. Lepper’s *Serpent Mound: Ohio’s Enigmatic Effigy Mound* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1994), the authors suggest that the Serpent Mound cryptoexplosion site was created either by an explosive eruption from deep underground or by a meteor or asteroid impact (15–17). More recent investigations using more advanced technology have confirmed that the site was struck by a meteor. Evidence for the meteor impact was reported, for example, on the website of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Division of Geological Survey (<http://geosurvey.ohiodnr.gov/astrogeology/astrogeology-home>). In contrast to Mojica and other Indigenous researchers, the non-Native archaeologists Glotzhober and Lepper are confident that “little evidence exists for any relationship between effigy and geology. . . . The fame of the Serpent Mound cryptoexplosion structure is probably because of the coincidence of its association with the well-known effigy mound” (18).

The improvisation proceeds from the embodied movement of the “Approach from OUTSIDE an effigy mound” that ends in the contemporary, embodied response to “song” to a “Voiced” section “from INSIDE a burial mound.” The improvisation thus acknowledges the presence of burial mounds in close proximity to both the Serpent Mound in Ohio and the Serpent effigy at Rice Lake in Ontario. More precisely, the improvisation juxtaposes an embodied encounter with the effigy with a disembodied voice emanating from a burial mound. The latter, however, continues to rely upon an embodied Indigenous presence as audience, as necessary recipient for these words “voiced” from within the mound. As in Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run*, the song and voice in Mojica’s improvisation are linked closely to the embodied presence of Indigenous descendants able to hear:

It’s time. It’s time, come home and rest yourself in the folds of mother’s skirts. There’s something I must tell you, there’s something you need to know. Once there was conversation, come closer, come closer, I almost have you. Here. Here, here, my most prized possession, needles made from bird bone tucked under my arm, come, come, come, reaching towards water, looking out over power, my most prized possession, my bundle of needles made from bird bone.

Come. There’s something you need to know. We’re here, we’re here, still here. Nothing is lost. We’re here, we are here, still here, nothing lost, you, are not lost. My most prized possession. This bundle of needles, made from bird bone, my most treasured possession, my bundle of needles made from bird bone tucked under my arm. There’s something you must know.³²

The tone of the voice emanating from the burial mound is urgent, its message vital. The ancestors remain; nothing is lost. The repeated detail of the female ancestor naming her most prized possession, her bundle of needles made from bird bone, buried alongside her within the mound, links back to the presence of Vulture at the Serpent effigy and focuses attention on gendered labor and creativity. But the repeated detail also links to the listening presence, the Indigenous descendant, she who is also the ancestor’s “most prized possession.” The improvisation ends with the female, maternal voice from within the burial mound emphasizing life in the movement of breath, and linking this life to creative labor: “Mounds of light and shadow. Breathing, breathing, breathing. Built basket by fifty pound basket. Breathing.”

Hedge Coke also focuses attention on the significance of breath and breathing. The final lines of the opening narrative poem in *Blood Run*, “Before Next Dawning,” voice a gendered prayer for renewal of the endangered land, for renewal of violated earthworks, for renewal of desecrated human remains: “May she breathe. / May she breathe again.”³³ Ultimately, the lines voice prayer for renewal of the living planet as mother, for renewal of the elements of the dynamic cosmos as all our relations.

Five

These and other experiences with the Serpent effigy, its representation and performance, prompted me to revisit Walker’s imagined burial mound in *Meridian*, to reconsider the novel’s seductive confluences, to review the scholarship it has launched,

³² In Hedge Coke’s “The Mounds,” this listening descendant “you” is acknowledged at line 14: “our holy graceful place upon which you now stand, dignified” (30). Other poems in *Blood Run* acknowledge this listening descendant “you” as well.

³³ Hedge Coke, *Blood Run*, 10.

the arguments made about the mound's and the novel's obvious power and potential meaning. Scholars of African American literature, the primary authors of criticism on *Meridian*, both before and after the publication of *The Sixth Grandfather* in 1984, appear uninterested in, or largely unaware of, Walker's confluences, including those scholars who have focused their work specifically on her engagements with *Black Elk Speaks* or Native American symbolism and motifs more generally.³⁴ Recently, researchers interested in "Red-Black" or "Afro-Native" literatures and histories have engaged the novel specifically in terms of its intersections of African American and Native American blood, land, and memory in the South, and these scholars have worked to recover Walker as a writer of both African American and Cherokee ancestry.³⁵ I wondered: has any researcher approached Walker's compelling novel about the ideological, racial, and gender complexities of the movement for civil rights from the Indigenous perspectives of the mounds?

Walker titles the early chapter in which her protagonist encounters the Sacred Serpent on her father's Georgia farm "Indians and Ecstasy." In her seductive descriptions, she not only conflates general details about the Serpent effigy in Ohio with general details about burial mounds, but more specifically she refigures the triple-coil of the Serpent's tail as a large "well," a deep "pit." This well does not resemble the tail of the Serpent in Ohio, but it does bear resemblance to a Plains Indian "vision pit." As explained below, the technology of the vision pit is used in some versions of Plains Indian traditions of the "vision quest," what in Lakota is called *hanble ceyapi*, "crying for a vision."³⁶ No known Serpent mound effigy is located within the borders of what is now the state of Georgia or in other parts of the Southeast. Nonetheless, in Walker's imagination, the Sacred Serpent on the Hill family's farm is "thousands of years old," "full of dead Indians,"³⁷ and constructed as a 500-yard-long "curving, twisting hill" with a "springing head."³⁸ As noted above, similar to the tail of the Serpent Mound in Ohio, the tail of the Sacred Serpent is "coiled." In marked contrast, at the center of this coil Walker has imagined "a pit forty feet deep, with smooth green sides."³⁹ The extraordinary depth of this pit bears no resemblance to any known effigy on the continent, Serpent or otherwise, and its dimensions bear little resemblance to those of actual vision pits constructed by Plains Indians.⁴⁰

³⁴ See, for example, Anne M. Downey, "'A Broken and Bloody Hoop': The Intertextuality of *Black Elk Speaks* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*," *MELUS* 19, no. 3 (1994): 37–45; and Lindsey Tucker, "Walking the Red Road: Mobility, Maternity and Native American Myth in Alice Walker's *Meridian*," *Women's Studies* 19 (1991): 1–17.

³⁵ See, for example, Patricia Riley, "Wrapped in the Serpent's Tail: Alice Walker's African-Native American Subjectivity," in *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African-Native American Literature*, ed. Jonathan Brennan (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 241–56; and Kiara M. Vigil and Tiya Miles, "At the Crossroads of Red/Black Literature," in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American Literature*, ed. James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31–49. These intersections are also an interest of Harilaos Stecopoulos in the epilogue to his broader study, *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898–1976* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

³⁶ DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather*, 83.

³⁷ Walker, *Meridian*, 54.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁰ In his epilogue to *Reconstructing the World*, in a brief aside Stecopoulos attempts to link the deep pit of the Sacred Serpent's tail to the "deep central pit" at the base of some Southeastern burial mounds (165). The comparison does not hold up, given the differences in construction of burial mounds and effigies, and it seems clear, here and elsewhere in the epilogue, that Stecopoulos is largely unfamiliar with earthworks structures.

Walker describes three generations of the African American Hill family as able to access the visionary potential of the coiled pit at the center of the Sacred Serpent's tail. When Meridian's great-grandmother, Feather Mae, enters the deep pit as a young woman and stands at its center:

something extraordinary happened to her. She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air. The green walls began to spin, and her feeling rose to such a high pitch the next thing she knew she was getting up off the ground. She knew she had fainted but she felt neither weakened nor ill. She felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication. Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled.⁴¹

Following this experience, according to family stories, Feather Mae renounces "all religion" that is not "based on the experience of physical ecstasy."⁴² Skipping a generation, the next Hill to have this experience is Meridian's father, a schoolteacher and amateur historian, as well as a farmer. When she witnesses Mr. Hill returning from visiting "the deep well of the Serpent's coiled tail," a young Meridian senses that "his whole frame [radiates] brightness like the space around a flame."⁴³ Finally, a young Meridian herself enters the coiled pit. At first she experiences "a sense of vast isolation" at being "surrounded by the dead," at being "so utterly small, encircled by ancient silent walls filled with bones, alone in a place not meant for her."⁴⁴ But then, willing away her fear, similar to her great-grandmother and father, she experiences the "ecstasy" of transcending her normal consciousness and expanding her vision:

It was as if the walls of earth that enclosed her rushed outward, leveling themselves at a dizzying rate, and then spinning wildly, lifting her out of her body and giving her the feeling of flying. And in this movement she saw the faces of her family, the branches of trees, the wings of birds, the corners of houses, blades of grass and petals of flowers rush toward a central point high above her and she [is] drawn with them, as whirling, as bright, as free, as they.⁴⁵

When Meridian "comes back to her body," Walker's description invokes not only the Plains Indian ritual of the vision quest, but also the ritual of the Sun Dance: "When she came back to her body—and she felt sure she had left it—her eyes were stretched wide open, and they were dry, because she found herself staring directly into the sun."⁴⁶

The vision pit used by some Plains Indians as part of the vision quest does not play a significant role in *Black Elk Speaks*, but it is described in some detail in *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions: The Life of a Sioux Medicine Man*, another "as-told-to" autobiography, written with Richard Erdoes and published in 1972. Walker draws on *Lame Deer* as inspiration for her 1984 collection of poems *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*; the title is taken verbatim from the caption for a photograph of a northern Plains landscape positioned at the center of *Lame Deer*. In the opening chapter, "Alone on the Hilltop," Lame Deer recounts his vision quest at age 16: "I was all alone on the hilltop. I sat there in the vision pit, a hole dug into the hill, my arms hugging my knees as I watched old man Chest, the medicine man who had brought me there, disappear far

⁴¹ Walker, *Meridian*, 57.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

down the valley."⁴⁷ As described by Lame Deer, a vision pit is relatively modest; the vision seeker must "crouch" in its shallow, cramped space. The book's series of illustrations includes a photograph of a younger Lakota medicine person, Leonard Crow Dog, "about to go down into the vision pit."⁴⁸ Standing within the pit, Crow Dog's shoulders remain above ground. Dakota novelist Susan Power describes a vision pit of similar dimensions in her 1994 novel *The Grass Dancer*. When the character Calvin Wind Soldier stands "upright" in the vision pit, which is constructed atop Angry Butte, his head remains above ground.⁴⁹ In the next generation, his son Harley stands in the "same deep pit his father had occupied thirty years before."⁵⁰ His head also remains at least partially above ground, and Harley is aware that in seeking his vision, he stands "simultaneously buried in the earth and thrust into the air."⁵¹

In *Meridian*, in contrast to Hedge Coke's *Blood Run* or Mojica's "Inside-Outside," the Serpent effigy exists in a singular state, isolated in the landscape, with no complex of other mounds and earthworks for juxtaposition, alignment, or dialogue. The one detail of context and potential alignment that Walker includes is the proximity of "a slow-moving creek that was brown and sluggish and thick, like a stream of liquid snuff."⁵² Moreover, the focus of the chapter is on selected individuals who have personal access to the effigy's potential power through their eccentricity and unusual sensitivity. The "ecstatic" experience of that power then confirms each individual's status as exceptional within the African American and white social worlds at the center of the novel.

Meridian and her father each speculate about the purpose of the ancient Indigenous Serpent burial mound and, in particular, its extraordinary forty-foot-deep pit at the tail. In their intergenerational exchange, we witness Walker's attempt to convert Neihardt's tragic discourse on tribal death into the potential for an expanded understanding of enduring life:

Her father said the Indians had constructed the coil in the Serpent's tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of dying: The body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world. But [Meridian] was not convinced. It seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead.⁵³

The scene resonates with ideological and empathetic power. But neither (African American) generation can imagine the mound, the Indigenous peoples who built it, or their descendants as part of a "living" social world. The mound is not only isolated in the landscape, but it possesses neither its own voice nor its own embodied story; it does not evoke energy or performance. Its singular mimetic design, its sinuous shape, is imagined not in relation to Indigenous worldviews that connect upper and lower

⁴⁷ John Fire/Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 11.

⁴⁸ Illustration caption (unpaginated).

⁴⁹ Susan Power, *The Grass Dancer* (New York: Berkley Books, 1994), 205.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁵² Walker, *Meridian*, 56. The use of "snuff" in Walker's description of the creek that runs near the Sacred Serpent seems tellingly ambiguous. On the one hand, snuff evokes tobacco, sacred to many Indigenous North American traditions, as well as life-giving breath, since snuff tobacco is inhaled; on the other, snuff also evokes death and, more specifically, murder, as in the genre of the "snuff film."

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

worlds or that honor relationships between humans and key aspects of the natural world, but rather in terms of Western ideas of psychological “consciousness” and somewhat modified but still recognizably Christian understandings of religious “ecstasy.”

Most significantly, perhaps, neither generation of the Hill family, or their author, appears ready to imagine living Indigenous peoples in the contemporary South. Scholars have drawn considerable attention to the part of the chapter in which Mr. Hill surrenders his deed to the sixty acres on which the Sacred Serpent lies to “the Indian,” the Oklahoma Cherokee named Walter Longknife, who arrives at the Georgia farm on foot in an obvious reversal of the Trail of Tears. Longknife, who Walker strongly associates with Mr. Hill, is figured as a “wanderer” and “mourner,”⁵⁴ a remnant of Cherokee identity who exhibits symptoms of posttraumatic stress not as a result of the intergenerational effects of forced removal, but rather because he “had killed a lot of people . . . in the Second World War.”⁵⁵ After spending “most of the summer camping out on the land,” Longknife returns the deed to Mr. Hill and moves on.⁵⁶ Although the scene is poignant and critics are correct to note the complexity of Mr. Hill’s awareness that his land bears an Indigenous history, it is striking that Walker is unable to imagine Longknife as interacting with the Sacred Serpent itself, with Cherokee kin who tenaciously remain in Georgia, or with other peoples (still) Indigenous to the South. Similar to the imagined burial effigy, Longknife is figured as bereft, as surprisingly alone, in the “land of his ancestors.”⁵⁷ And he possesses no voice of his own.

Not long after Longknife returns the deed to Mr. Hill, “white men in government-issued trucks” arrive to seize his property and the “Indian burial mounds of the Sacred Serpent”—now suddenly made plural—as a “public park” and “tourist attraction.”⁵⁸ In a racially segregated Georgia, African Americans are denied entry, including the Hill family, who has given up its farm. The scene is framed as tragic loss for Mr. Hill, and as a tragedy unique to the mid-twentieth-century South. In many of its key movements, however, the scene follows the history of the creation of the Serpent Mound State Memorial in Ohio more than a half-century earlier. As Robert Silverberg recounts in his popular overview *The Mound Builders*, published in 1970:

In the summer of 1883, F. W. Putnam of the Peabody Museum [at Harvard] came to the Great Serpent. Describing his visit he wrote of the awe he felt at seeing “the mysterious work of an unknown people whose seemingly most sacred place we had invaded. . . . There seemed to come to me a picture as of a distant time, and with it came a demand for an interpretation of this mystery. The unknown must become known.”

The mound then belonged to a farmer who was aware of its scientific importance and who had refrained from planting crops on the site. But Putnam was worried about the Great Serpent’s future. . . . A group of Bostonians raised \$5,880, and in June 1887, Putnam bought the mound for the Peabody Museum. That summer he spent eight weeks restoring it to the condition it had been in when Squier and Davis had made their chart 40 years before. He also built a fence with a turnstile, and installed a hitching post and horse trough for the convenience of visitors. In 1900, the Peabody Museum gave the Serpent to the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society to be maintained as a state park.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁹ Robert Silverberg, *The Mound Builders* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970), 192–94. *The Mound Builders* is an abridged, popular edition of Silverberg’s more academic work, *Moundbuilders of Ancient America: The Archaeology of a Myth*, published in 1968.

Moreover, Walker frames the ecstatic experiences of the Hill family, their bold interpretations of sojourning with “dead Indians” within the deep green coils of the Sacred Serpent, the exchange of the deed, and the seizure of the site to create a state park within more familiar and more limiting dominant traditions for the display of “dead Indians,” their representations, and their artifacts within the square white walls of archives and museums. “Indians and Ecstasy” opens with Meridian’s memory of the “small white room” her father, a student and teacher of history, “had built for himself . . . like a tool shed in the back yard.” The room has “two small windows, like the eyes of an owl, high up under the roof.” The image of the owl associates the room with Western traditions of learning and wisdom (think of the owl of Athena), but at the same time, given the context, it evokes dread, since in some Native American traditions owls are seen as harbingers of death. When a young Meridian peeks into this isolated room, what she sees is Mr. Hill seated “at a tiny brown table poring over a map . . . that showed the ancient settlements of Indians in North America.” It is a scene of the solitary Western researcher at work in a library or archive. The walls of the small square room, moreover, are covered in “photographs of Indians,” including Curtis-style photographs “of Indian women and children looking starved and glassy-eyed and doomed into the camera” and the tragic photographs of the frozen dead after the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee. There are also shelves with “books on Indians, on their land rights, reservations, and their wars.”⁶⁰ The chapter’s ending closes the frame with Meridian’s memory of visiting the state capital’s “museum of Indians,” where she “peered through plate glass at the bones of a warrior, shamelessly displayed,” and her memory of visiting Sacred Serpent Park years after its creation, when African Americans were finally allowed admittance: “she returned one afternoon and tried in vain to relive her earlier ecstasy and exaltation. But there were people shouting and laughing as they slid down the sides of the great Serpent’s coil. Others stood glumly by, attempting to study the meaning of what had already and forever been lost.”⁶¹ Although scholars have worked to read Walker’s chapter in exclusively positive terms, as (only) affirming connections among African Americans and Native Americans, it is difficult to read these final lines as other than a reified version of Neihardt’s tragic discourse at the end of *Black Elk Speaks*, as other than a version of the discourse of inevitable, irrevocable (Indigenous) loss.

Six

As I began work on this essay in autumn 2014 I had the unexpected opportunity to meet Aku Wuwu, a prominent literary critic and professor at Southwest University for Nationalities in Sichuan Province, People’s Republic of China. Wuwu is also a well-published poet of the Yi ethnic minority who writes in both the Yi language and Chinese. He was visiting my Ohio State colleague Mark Bender, a scholar of East Asian languages and literatures who has translated Wuwu’s work into English. This

⁶⁰ Walker, *Meridian*, 53. Interesting questions might be asked about the list of Indians who are named as having photographs in Mr. Hill’s room and how the young Meridian knows these names, which include the famous leaders Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse (although there is no known photograph of Crazy Horse), and Geronimo, but also the lesser known Little Bear and Yellow Flower. Interesting questions might also be asked about the brief description of Mr. Hill’s books on Indians, and about the emphasis and ordering of Walker’s sequence, “their land rights, reservations, and their wars,” which moves in a reverse chronological order to emphasize, again, death.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

was not the Yi poet's first visit to the United States or to Ohio, and he had asked to meet me specifically because of my work on Native American and global Indigenous literatures. During a previous trip to the States in 2005 Wuwu had met several Native Americans in different parts of the country and had visited Indigenous earthworks in Ohio. Thinking about connections to his own people and traditions in southwestern China, he had composed a number of pieces about his experiences, including a poem titled "Indian Serpent Mound" in Chinese (in its English translation titled "Serpent Mound").⁶² The poem is now part of a forthcoming manuscript, *Coyote Traces: Aku Wuwu's Poems Concerning His Sojourn in the USA*,⁶³ presented in Chinese with English translations, which Wuwu and Bender shared with me.

Wuwu's "Serpent Mound" is composed of four stanzas. The speaker situates the "mound of serpentine earth," "a great snake / ancient totem of Native peoples" within the Ohio landscape, speculates about its potential meanings, and attempts to relate the effigy and its meanings to the "wisdom of the East." Read on its own, the poem draws attention, foremost, for the seeming novelty of its Asian perspective on an Indigenous North American phenomenon, but also for the surprising level of perceptiveness in its descriptions and for the subtlety of its expression in English translation. Read in conversation with and through the lenses of the work of non-Native amateur and professional anthropologists, Native American writers and intellectuals Hedge Coke, Howe, and Mojica, and the African American (or Afro-Native) writer and intellectual Walker, the poem draws additional attention, especially to the first line of its second stanza, which begins the speaker's series of speculations about the effigy's possible purpose and meaning. In this first line, the speaker situates the Serpent Mound "Beside the ancestors' tombs"—that is, in proximity to though distinct from burial mounds. As in the work of Hedge Coke and Mojica, the Serpent is understood as part of a larger complex of mounds and earthworks, and there is a significant relationship between effigy and burial mounds, but no conflation.

Having established this key distinction, the speaker suggests that the builders of the effigy may have used "the power of the snake / to prevent invaders from disturbing / their forefathers' sacred space," from disturbing the burial mounds, but immediately notes the effigy's proximity as well to water. "As snakes are also symbols of rivers," the speaker states, "Native civilizations / were inseparable from / the ancient rivers of North America." The speaker intuitively understands the importance of rivers for Indigenous sustenance, but also their importance for travel and movement, their function as Indigenous super-highways. In the third stanza, the speaker speculates further that the Serpent Mound may have been "a cipher" of Native "migration routes," that it may have "mark[ed] recognition of / the directions," that it may have been "—perhaps— / a shrine to worship heaven and earth." In other words, the speaker imagines multiple purposes and multiple alignments.

The poem ends, in the fourth stanza, with the provocative idea that "ancient Natives / took the land of North America as a canvas" upon which they created "cryptic

⁶² In addition to the unpublished manuscript, which includes two versions of each poem, one in Chinese characters and the other in English translation, Bender also provided his character-by-character translation of "Indian Serpent Mound" into English so that, as a reader with no access to Chinese, I could have a better sense of how the translation actually works.

⁶³ Aku Wuwu, "Serpent Mound," in *Coyote Traces: Aku Wuwu's Poems Concerning His Sojourn in the USA*, trans. Wen Peihong and Mark Bender (unpublished manuscript), 14.

portraits . . . with their feet.” As in the recognition of the importance of rivers, in this final image the speaker emphasizes Indigenous movement—*performance*—and he links this intentional, purposeful performance on and across the land—the “ancient Natives” do not *find*, but rather *take* the land “as a canvas”—to Indigenous expression, self-representation, and wisdom. Although his speaker does not hear voice or song emanating from the mound, nonetheless, similar to Hedge Coke, Howe, and Mojica, the Yi poet perceives the effigy’s “snake shape” as embodied story; he imagines the Serpent Mound not as emblem of death or loss, but as enduring evidence of embodied Indigenous performance.

Seven

I designate this essay a *meditation* because I ground my critical perspective not only in conventional research and academic scholarship, but also in embodied encounters with and understandings of the Great Serpent as a dynamic, multidimensional effigy of mounded earth. Many of these encounters were framed as explicit collaborations with other researchers, and therefore, similar to the earthworks themselves, the encounters were planned, performed, and later contemplated within communities of cooperation for seeking and producing (Indigenous) knowledge. Moreover, in this seven-part essay meant to align with the seven convolutions, or “turns,” of the effigy, I endeavor to demonstrate concretely, rather than theorize abstractly, a version of the *trans-Indigenous* by performing a series of interpretative acts *across* and *through* engagements with the Serpent Mound in literary and performance texts marked as both Indigenous and non-Indigenous to North America.

As a critical concept, the *trans-Indigenous* operates in several related though distinct modes. One of these operates as an optics for noticing, describing, and taking critical account of Indigenous-to-Indigenous literary and artistic contacts, interactions, exchanges, and collaborations in all historical periods, but perhaps especially in the mid- and late twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first. This understanding of the *trans-Indigenous* indicates productive ways of seeing. A second mode operates as a set of methodologies for developing studies of Indigenous literatures and other arts, including theatre and performance, that can move among and fully engage registers of inquiry, contextualization, interpretation, understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment marked not only as tribal, local, regional, or national, but also as hemispheric and oceanic and as aspiring toward the global. This understanding of the *trans-Indigenous* indicates productive movements of purposeful juxtaposition. Both the first and second modes center on Indigenous texts and contexts. A third mode, as in this meditation, operates across and through texts produced not only by Indigenous, but also non-Indigenous writers, artists, and intellectuals. Similar to the first and second, this third mode centers on Indigenous texts and contexts, but positioned among a range of “other” voices, perspectives, and interpretative frames. This understanding of the *trans-Indigenous* continues to indicate an Indigenous itinerary, not unlike the Great Serpent’s itinerary of *coil*, *waves*, *triangle*, and *oval*—one that is multiply aligned and multiply relational, never sited in isolation.