SOLVING MYSTERIES OF CULTURE AND SELF
ANITA AND NASPAH IN ANNA LEE WALTERS'S GHOST SINGER

BY MELISSA J. FIESTA

A moment later four mysterious beings appeared. These were White Body, god of this world; Blue Body, the sprinkler; Yellow Body; and Black Body, the god of fire.

Using signs but without speaking, the gods tried to instruct the people, but they were not understood. When the gods had gone, the people discussed their mysterious visit and tried without success to figure out the signs. The gods appeared on four days in succession and attempted to communicate through signs, but their efforts came to nothing.

On the fourth day when the other gods departed, Black Body remained behind and spoke to the people in their own language: “You do not seem to understand our signs, so I must tell you what they mean.”

— Navajo Myth Creation of First Man and First Woman1

As the Navajo creation myth suggests, mystery has long been part of Navajo culture. To readers of Anna Lee Walters’s Ghost Singer, the Navajo tradition of mysterious visitors from another world will come as no surprise. Ghost Singer differs from conventional mystery novels in that the plot does not revolve around one central mystery and its impending solution. Rather, the mysteries in Ghost Singer are multi-dimensional and interrelated. One aspect of the novel that may perplex the modern-day reader is that many of these mysteries remain unsolved. This novel puts us in the position of the first Navajo people. We, too, are uncertain of the significance of our mysterious visitors. The ghost singer visits us and communicates through signs, but we are never sure what they mean.

In “The Values and Vision of a Collective Past: An Interview with Anna Lee Walters,” Professor Rhoda Carroll comments on the mysteries that Walters leaves unresolved:

All through Ghost Singer I had the feeling that you were giving the reader the threads of a solvable mystery. In Anglo tradition, there’s something that wants discoveries made and identities revealed and lost children returned.2

In response to this comment, Walters suggests that she does not solve these

MELISSA J. FIESTA IS A TEACHING FELLOW IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT LEHIGH UNIVERSITY.
mysteries because they do not have “easy solutions.”3 But Walters makes a distinction in *Ghost Singer* that she does not make in her interview between insolvable and solvable mysteries. In this novel, the mysteries range from the appearance of a seven-foot ghost singer to the identity of Anita’s grandmother to the stories that Jonnie Navajo tells to his granddaughter, Naspah. The mystery of the ghost singer is larger than life both literally and figuratively, and his mystery is never resolved. As we see, even the solvable mysteries do not have easy solutions. Rather, these mysteries are solvable only because they involve the everyday lives of individuals.

Mysteries of ancestry and heritage need to be solved for Anita and Naspah to know themselves and to fully participate in their own lives. Anita discovers that she is American Indian and realizes that her once-unknown identity has influenced her life, while Naspah discovers what it means for her to be Navajo. Naspah has an advantage that Anita does not. The mystery of ancestry has been solved for Naspah by the communal knowledge passed down to her. Because Naspah already knows who her ancestors were, she can take a more important step and solve the mystery of what her ancestors believed. In this, we see that the mysteries in *Ghost Singer* systematically graduate from insolvable to solvable, from factual to mythical, from futile to transcendental.

All the characters in the novel confront at least one mystery, although the nature of those mysteries and the way they deal with them greatly varies. The Anglo characters become obsessed with mysteries that should not concern them, such as American Indian remains, artifacts, and private ceremonies. Without any appreciation for the mysteries they attempt to resolve, they frustrate their own efforts. In contrast, the American Indian characters appreciate the mysteries of life and express reverence for life’s phases. Their spirituality helps them accept that not all mysteries can be solved. Unlike the Anglo characters, the American Indian characters do not meddle in the mysteries of other cultures. Only the mysteries that affect them as individuals or as members of a community concern them.

All the Anglo characters fail. They die, go crazy, or invent a solution that does not resolve the mystery. Jean Wurly falls down a flight of steps after admitting to David Drake that she has seen Indian ghosts in the Smithsonian. Geoffrey Newsome jumps from the terrace of his thirteenth floor apartment soon after he finds a “sack of tiny bones” (p. 43) in his apartment.4 Geoffrey feels an “unknown fear” (p. 43) because he cannot solve this mystery in the same way that he solves historical mysteries. He cannot simply sort out the “fragments” and make “the pieces fit into something” he can understand (p. 36).

After Geoffrey’s successor, Donald Evans, confronts the ghost singer, he becomes paranoid, imagining that he “heard things in the corner of the room” and contemplating “how one could kill such a man” (p. 212). Donald and his girlfriend run away from this mystery. Similarly, David tries to forget his sister’s last words to him. After revealing to Naspah that Jean was “acting strangely before her death,” he bites his tongue, feeling that he had “said too
much" (p. 143). David refuses to acknowledge the mystery in life. He believes that a determinable reality exists in all things and that if people "take care to be objective, fair, and thorough" (p. 200), they can solve mysteries. David would argue that the reason he cannot solve the mystery of the Navajo family's lost grandmother is that no records of the slave-raid exist, and "without records, there is no history" (p. 198). For David, history exists in documents. He has difficulty accepting that history also exists within people.

The American Indian characters' response is quite different. Jonnie Navajo does not see any need for records, and he is "unquestionably a historian" (p. 215) who believes in mysteries. David and Jonnie have opposing epistemic views. David cannot understand how a history can exist without written accounts (p. 141), while Jonnie cannot understand why white people keep records "that talk about the people" (p. 24). Jonnie asks his grandson, Willie: "What are those people in Washingdoon going to do with them [boxes of papers concerning the Navajo people]?" (p. 24). Willie laughs and disregards the question because he does not know how to answer. But Jonnie is serious. This question is one that deeply troubles him.

Because Jonnie's knowledge has come from his elders, he believes that "a great deal depends on our relatives, what they teach us" (p. 122) about those who have lived before and about our own lives. We see that Jonnie perpetuates the stories that he has learned and the ways of his elders in instructing his own grandchildren. He helps both Naspah and Willie to understand Navajo beliefs. The grandchildren must reconcile this cultural ideology with their modern lives on their own.

Perhaps the most revealing example of what Jonnie gives to his grandchildren comes at almost the end of the novel and the end of Jonnie's life. Concerned by the mystery of their missing grandmother, Willie says: "But as long as we don't know what happened to the lost child, we are missing a part of our history" (p. 216). When Jonnie responds, he reflects upon what he learned as a young boy and relates his elders' teachings to his grandson's experience: "As a young boy, I was told to care for myself, because of the holy people. They created us" (p. 217). Here, Jonnie suggests the power that the Navajo creation myth has to heal even in modern times. The sense of self-appreciation that Jonnie conveys to his grandchildren gives them the ability to overcome "the odds" (p. 217) and their way of life:

"Don't confuse yourself with thoughts that lead you off the path. Live! Despite all the odds against it, let us live the best way that we can! Take care of yourself, and then these other things will straighten themselves out." (p. 217)

Jonnie conveys this message of self-preservation in the myths and the stories about "the people" (p. 54) that he tells to his grandchildren. In relating the story of their "stolen grandmother" to Willie and Naspah, Jonnie also gives them hope, the hope that her descendants "may come home yet" (p. 217). This mystery may be solved someday; but for now, it is enough to know and to care
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for oneself.

Anita and Naspah demonstrate Jonnie’s message of self-preservation. They solve their mysteries and take responsibility for their lives. Though they are very different women, both are extraordinary characters because they are the only ones who solve their mysteries.

It is worth considering how the mysteries that Anita and Naspah seek to solve differ from those of the Anglo characters. The principal difference between the mysteries that Jean, Geoffrey, Donald, and David choose to confront and those that Anita and Naspah choose is that Anita and Naspah identify with their mysteries. The others attempt to solve mysteries that may or may not interest them personally in order to further their careers. In contrast, Anita and Naspah have every right to solve their mysteries, because these involve their lives. Their motivation is that they want to know more about themselves as individuals and as members of a community.

When we first meet Anita, she is a part Mexican, 69-year-old woman, unaware that she is also part Navajo, who cares for her 100-year-old mother, Rosa. It is the last day of Rosa’s life, and Rosa realizes for the first time that Maria was her mother. Rosa holds up a mirror, and asks Anita “to look inside” (p. 34). She says, “Anita, that is Maria in there” (p. 34). Her last words to her daughter are in the form of a question: “Why didn’t Maria tell me, Anita?” (p. 34). Anita does not have an answer, so she pats “Rosa’s hand and let it go” (p. 34). But Anita cannot let her mother’s question go until she finds an answer and solves the mystery of Maria’s silence.

Anita goes to Taos Pueblo “on instinct” (p. 86). She appears to be looking for clues to her own identity as well as that of her mother. She experiences “momentary confusion” when a young Taos woman at the entrance says: “If you’re Indian, you don’t have to pay” (p. 86). Again, Anita does not know what to say. She watches both the tourists and the Taos people wondering, “Where did she fit?” (p. 87). She admits to herself that she has been confused about her identity for a long time:

Rosa’s death did not cause the confusion and it was not what Rosa had said on the last day. No, it was what Rosa didn’t say all those years. (p. 87)

The old man who thinks that Anita is Cheyenne and who takes her to his sister’s home for a meal asks, “What did you find [in Taos Pueblo]?” (p. 88). She answers, “Nothing” (p. 88). In a sense Anita is like “the tourista” who “come looking for Indian” (p. 88). But Anita is looking for a lost part of herself, her Indian identity.

The next morning Anita follows up her only other lead concerning the life that Rosa kept separate from her. Anita returns to “the same white house” and Beth Williams, the mysterious woman who “Rosa had held in her arms for a long time” (p. 89) some sixteen years before. For Rosa, these visits meant getting reacquainted with family. For Anita, they meant being shut out from a part of Rosa’s life. To the reader, they suggest that Rosa concealed an
important part of her daughter’s identity. Rosa “made Anita promise not to ever mention the trip,” and had Anita wait “outside on the porch” (p. 89). Anita had always felt that “an element of mystery surround[s] this family” (p. 89). The time has come for Anita to solve the mystery.

Anita first confirms Rosa’s last thought. Maria was indeed her mother. Beth then tells Anita the reason that Maria never told Rosa: Maria never knew “for sure that she was Navajo” (p. 93). Beth reminds both Anita and us, “We don’t even know that now” (p. 93). We also learn that Maria had once had the chance to return to Navajo country when her Navajo husband “decided to go back to his country” (p. 93) with their two little boys. But Maria “refused, fearing that she would not be accepted in his country if it turned out that she was not a Navajo” (p. 93). Because Maria never knew her identity, she could never return home, and she could never be a mother to her sons. Perhaps Maria’s confusion over her identity also prevented her from being a mother to Rosa, as well. Maria could not give Rosa a sense of being connected to the past, nor could she share with her “what and who” they were because she never knew herself.

Through Maria and Rosa, who keep what they know of their past hidden from their daughters, we see that what Anita learns is extremely important. By the end of her visit with Beth, Anita knows more about her ancestry than Rosa did. As a result, Anita can return to her Navajo home, just as it had been possible for Maria. Anita does not understand her mother’s need for secrecy at this point in the novel. Rosa may have been “ashamed of her orphanage, the mystery and stigma surrounding it” (p. 94). The question that remains is what will Anita do with her new-found knowledge and identity? Is solving the mystery of Maria’s and Rosa’s silence enough?

Interestingly, Anita refuses to see the Bible where Maria’s and Rosa’s history “is written down” (p. 94). She has solved the mystery of Maria’s silence by asking questions of Beth and by carefully listening to the answers. Anita finds knowledge in other people, as do the other American Indian characters in *Ghost Singer*. Like Jonnie, she does not trust written accounts. Her distrust of writers and what they write is the reason that she does not respond to the “advertisement” requesting that “descendants of Indian slaves in the area contact the writer” (p. 196). Anita finds the advertisement “disconcerting to her new found identity,” and tosses the newspaper into the trash where it will “not trouble or embarrass her any longer” (p. 196). Anita has “learned without a doubt that she was part Indian!” (p. 196). This realization does not trouble or embarrass her, but the advertisement does because it reminds her that other people can distort her identity.

When Anita encounters Jonnie in the Albuquerque airport, she feels at peace with her identity for the first time. She may not speak with Jonnie and Naspah, but in seeing them she recognizes herself in the same way that Rosa recognizes Maria in the mirror. According to Jonnie, knowing oneself is perhaps the only mystery that we can solve:

At first I thought it might be possible to discover what
happened to her [Maria] . . . But it doesn’t matter, grandson, because we know who we are. (p. 194)

Before running into them, Anita feels “displaced” (p. 132), “as if she were floating through time . . . failing to make contact with the world around her” (p. 133). In this frame of mind, she boards the plane where May Lou talks to her relentlessly. May Lou reminds Anita of some of the more painful memories in her life: her husband abandoning her for another woman, her subsequent miscarriage and associative self-blame, her feelings of inadequacy and her low self-esteem. After watching Mary Lou with her children, “Anita longed for a child of her own. Never in all her life had the longing been so acute” (p. 135). She realizes that after losing her infant “in the sixth month . . . she resolved . . . not to fall for a man again,” and keeps “other peoples’ children at arm’s length” (p. 137). Anita seems never to have considered the reasons why she “became a recluse” (p. 137). Here, Anita gains a sense of herself and learns why she made the choices she did.

Solving some of the mysteries of Rosa’s life has prompted Anita to solve some of her own mysteries. More than anything, Anita regrets not having children. She envies Rosa’s other children who have descendants. Maria “had several children. Even Rosa’s boy had children” (p. 138). Anita probably will not be reunited with her Navajo family, and without children of her own, Anita has no one with whom to share her Navajo identity after Rosa dies. No one ever tells Anita that she is Navajo. Anita does, however, experience an awakening and a sort of homecoming when she sees Jonnie whom she identifies as a Navajo:

She felt as if she had been asleep for several days . . . But now she was awake. The old man woke her up, brought her back home. Somehow, it felt good. Yes, she could “feel” again, she wasn’t numb anymore. (p. 145)

Anita’s contact with her Navajo family is momentary, but it seems to be enough for her to know “what and who”6 she is even if she cannot say that she is, without a doubt, Navajo. After this encounter, Anita’s life changes for the better. We leave Anita satisfied with the solutions to the mysteries in her life, secure with her identity, and able to embrace her life in a way that she has not since she was a young woman. She has already “decided” to say yes to a marriage proposal, something that “a year ago, she wouldn’t have considered” (p. 195). And she continues to seek “more information on New Mexico and Indian history” (p. 196), knowing when to believe writers and when to believe herself.

When we first meet Naspah, she is “a petite teenage girl” (p. 11) and a princess representing the Red Point Indian Club in the 1968 Northern Navajo Fair parade. She wears “a black woven dress, an ancient dress faded in places to a spotty brown” (p. 11). A white woman approaches her, wanting to buy the dress for a thousand dollars. Naspah accepts her card, but says:
“The dress belongs to me” (p. 13). Naspah’s friends are impressed by the offer: “One thousand dollars!” (p. 13). But she listens to her grandfather: “Whatever is offered will never be enough” (p. 13). Naspah does not yet know the significance of the dress that she wears, nor the significance of her Navajo identity. The mystery of ancestry that Anita solves, however, has already been solved for Naspah. She knows that she belongs to the Navajo community. Because Naspah already knows her place within her community, she is able to solve the mystery of what she believes as a Navajo. Anita never knows the joy that Naspah comes to know: the joy of sharing in the Navajo way of life with her mind, body, and soul.

Naspah, like Anita, questions her circumstances in an effort to resolve what she finds mysterious about her own life. She specifically asks her grandfather: “Where did the people come from?” (p. 54). Jonnie has “waited a long time for her question” (p. 54). He expects Naspah’s question about the origin of the Navajo people as a natural part of her growing up. He answers, “The people were created by Changing Woman” (p. 54). Naspah is not sure whether to accept Jonnie’s answer: “But . . . the books don’t say that” (p. 54). Jonnie responds that “it doesn’t matter” what the books say because his uncle, Hosteen Nez, told him “that the people came from Changing Woman” (p. 54). Naspah continues to doubt the reliability of her grandfather’s knowledge which differs from what she has learned in school. She questions him further: “And who told this to Hosteen Nez, grandfather?” (p. 54). As Jonnie relates more of their history, Naspah obviously believes him. She not only listens; she becomes involved in Red Lady’s and Maria’s story. Naspah says, “That’s a sad story, grandfather. So much death, so much suffering. All for what?” (p. 57). Of course, here she refers to Red Lady and Maria who were stolen, to Maria who never returned, to Maria’s twin who died at Fort Sumner, and to those who died trying to return to Navajoland (p. 57). Now that Jonnie has told her the myth of Changing Woman and the story of Red Lady’s abduction, Naspah must resolve what these stories mean for her as a Navajo woman.

At this time, Naspah also learns the significance of the dress that she wears as a Navajo princess: “It was the only thing that [Red Lady] carried back to Beautiful Mountain when Tall Navajo brought her back” (p. 58). Naspah is much more aware of what it means to be Navajo after her experiences in Washington, however. She notices beauty in her life where she did not before: “Naspah spoke to the baby girl in Navajo and the baby smiled” (p. 213). For “the first time in her life,” Naspah “really acknowledged a difference between this place and other places in the world” (p. 214). She understands why her Navajo home is beautiful, and why people have died to preserve the Navajo way of life. She feels “a deep sense of belonging to the purple mesas and the blue mountains” (p. 214). She realizes that she is a part of the mountain just as her Indian ancestors “make up the mountain” (p. 58) to use Jonnie’s words, which she has internalized. In “touching a part of herself that she hadn’t reached before” (p. 214), Naspah comes to know that her identity is forever linked to the Navajos who have gone before and those who will come after.
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her. We leave Naspah satisfied with the solutions to the mysteries in her life, secure in her identity, and finding joy in life.

Though Jonnie only alludes to the Changing Woman myth, Naspah's development into a Navajo woman parallels the myth. First Man and First Woman find Changing Woman, and raise her as their own child just as Jonnie raises Naspah. In the Navajo Origin Myth, Changing Woman shares a close relationship with the world around her. Naspah shares a similar affinity with her world. As Changing Woman grows into a woman, the world around her also grows:

As she grew into womanhood, the world itself reached maturity as the mountains and valleys were all put into their proper places.7

When Changing Woman becomes a "grown" woman, her world is "complete and to celebrate . . . the gods gave her a blessing way, Walking-in Beauty."8 This ceremony is "now given to all the Navajo girls when they reach adulthood."9 Walters does not describe this Navajo ceremony. Instead, she shows us Naspah growing into a woman and walking in beauty. By the novel's end, Naspah is no longer a "petite teenage girl" (p. 11). She becomes a Navajo woman. Like Changing Woman, Naspah sees that her world is complete upon the completion of her journey.

Anita and Naspah do not find one another in Ghost Singer. Rather, they discover something more important: "the joy in discovering what and who (they) are."10 Though Anita and Naspah together could solve the mystery of their shared ancestry, Walters does not seek this reunion. She has another purpose for these characters. Anita and Naspah solve the mysteries that have haunted their lives, i.e. that have prevented them from seeing the meaning in their lives. Unlike the Anglo characters, who concern themselves with matters of no fundamental importance for themselves, Anita seeks to solve the mystery of her ancestry. She solves this mystery to her satisfaction, but she continues to be isolated from her culture. Even though Naspah knows her ancestry, she must reconcile the cultural mystery—what her ancestors believed about life—with the life that she must lead. In Ghost Singer, Walters shows us "there's magic in" experiencing "another view of the world besides the one [we've] always known."11 Anita and Naspah embody the hope that American Indians can rediscover the ancestry and the culture Anglos have denied them.

NOTES


3. Ibid.

4. These and subsequent quotations are taken from the first edition of Anna Lee Walters, Ghost Singer (Northland Publishing, 1988).


6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.