

The Oxford Comment

Episode 89: A Spotlight on Native American Language and Religion

Rachel Havard 00:05

The October release of Martin Scorsese's latest film, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, has thrust the sordid history of America's treatment of its indigenous peoples back into the public eye. Of course, it shouldn't take a movie to remind us about past trauma, but in our fast paced social media driven world, it certainly doesn't hurt.

Rachel Havard 00:24

This is Rachel Havard with The Oxford Comment.

Rachel Havard 00:27

On today's episode, the last for 2023, inspired by the themes in *Killers of the Flower Moon*, and in celebration of National Native American Heritage Month in the United States, we're spotlighting two aspects of Native American culture that transcend tribe and nation and have been the recent focus of OUP scholars: language and religious beliefs.

Rachel Havard 00:48

The particular emphasis of our discussions will be on the interaction between indigenous languages and English over the centuries, and how the universal phenomenon of the "near-death experience" has affected the growth and spread of religion amongst indigenous communities in the United States and around the world.

Rachel Havard 01:06

For our first interview on language, we are joined by Rosemarie Ostler, author of *The United States of English: The American Language from Colonial Times to the 21st Century*. She will speak with us about the Native American English dialect, how English became more widely spoken amongst Native Americans, and current programs to preserve Native American languages.

Rachel Havard 01:28

Welcome to The Oxford Comment, Rosemarie. Can you please introduce yourself for us?

Rosemarie Ostler 01:33

Well, I'm a linguist and freelance writer and I specialize in American English. I've written several books about the history of American English, and, most recently, *The United States of English*, which covers how American English got started, how it became, grew different and apart from British English and what it's like today.

Rachel Havard 01:59

Can you explain what Native American English is, please?

Rosemarie Ostler 02:03

Yes, Native American English is a dialect of American English that is spoken by many, not all, but many Native Americans across different tribes and locations; mainly spoken by people who've grown up on

reservations. And it has some distinctive features. One of them, probably most noticeable features, is that it has an intonation pattern that's a little bit different from some other kinds of English. And sometimes been described as sort of a singsong or monotone pattern. And it, the point of it is that it's cross-tribal. So it doesn't matter what your ancestral language was, or where you are in the country, you might still have this same, the same intonation pattern. And this is the kind of thing that you can hear sometimes at intertribal gatherings like powwows. But I just want to say something about what I mean by dialect because some people think that a dialect means that it's non-standard English, which is not right.

Rosemarie Ostler 03:25

Everybody speaks a dialect. So all of us speak some dialect of English. English is just totally made up of dialects, there isn't some kind of pure thing called American English, and then everything else is dialects. Everything is a dialect. So some dialects are a little more distinctive than others. Some dialects have more social status than others. But, basically, saying that you speak a dialect just means that that's the kind of English you speak. And it usually, a dialect is, is pegged to a region. So where you grew up is where you pick up the way you, you later learn to speak. But the difference between regional dialects, which is what lots of people have, and Native American English is that it's not pegged to the region, it's, it's pegged to being a Native American, especially one who grew up on reservation. And so it's really more about identity. All dialects are a little bit about identity, but Native American English is more about the group that you belong to, your ethnic identity or social identity. So, so that's the difference between Native American English and some other kinds of dialects.

Rachel Havard 04:51

Thank you for that. During the 17th century, English-speaking Native Americans were a small minority. When did Native American English become more widely spoken and what factors caused it?

Rosemarie Ostler 05:03

Well, some Native Americans from the very beginning had some English. The first British colonists who came to North America strangely encountered one or two Native Americans who, to their surprise, were speaking English. One of the famous ones was a man named Tisquantum, who was called Squanto by the, by the pilgrims. The Pilgrims were a group of people who settled in Massachusetts; they were Puritans who had come over to start their own sort of religious colony. And one day, he walked up to a group of them and started speaking English. Squanto was someone who had been kidnapped by fishing vessel brought back to England, and spent several years in England, and he had learned, he had learned English while he was there and, gradually, he just sort of made his way back on fishing boats to North America. And that sort of thing happened a small amount, there were probably dozens of, of Native Americans who had either voluntarily or been captured and brought over to England so that the court, the royal court, was able to find out more about North America that way.

Rosemarie Ostler 06:33

So these Native Americans learned English, and they brought it back. And they were able to act as interpreters for the early colonists. So there was always a little bit of English being spoken. And then later on, as there was more government organization and more English speakers were arriving and so on, there was more necessity for negotiating. And so the tribal leaders would often speak some English. But all of this was going on just around the edges of, of the tribes. Most people were speaking their own

language because they did, there wouldn't have been a need for most people to have any English. So what really changed happened in the late 19th century, say, around the 1870s. There was a push by the American government to assimilate Native Americans, make them seem more like the Westerners that, who were settling their country, and they wanted them to fit in. And so they started a program of sending children off to boarding schools. And some of these boarding schools were very far away from where the children originally lived.

Rosemarie Ostler 08:05

So children would be shipped from, the first boarding school was called Carlisle, and it was in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, on the East Coast. So people were being shipped, students were being shipped out from, say, South Dakota or someplace really far away, to these boarding schools and children were being sent from all different tribes who spoke all different languages. And when they arrived there, they were forced, essentially, to assimilate, they had their hair cut, and they wore Western clothes. And one of the big important things was to stop them from speaking their native languages. And so they were forced to speak English. So they gradually were losing their, their own languages, because sometimes they couldn't get back to their homes for years, because they're so far away. So they would kind of lose their skill at speaking their own language. So, it probably, some of the features of Native American English, which is really a 20th century phenomenon, grew out of this boarding school experience. And because people were losing their own language, so being able to speak with a certain kind of dialect, certain sort of intonations and word usages, and so on that is part of your identity, and you're able to identify yourself as a Native American, when you don't have your own ancestral language to, to use anymore. So that's how, that's how a lot of Native Americans started speaking English. That's why they started speaking English because they were more or less forced into it, and their own languages were suppressed.

Rachel Havard 10:03

What was the impact of travel and trade on Native American languages?

Rosemarie Ostler 10:07

There was some of that, you know, early on, in the 18th century. You would find certain men who would join whaling ships and travel with English speakers. Sometimes, people would work in settlers' home. So there was always a little bit of learning and speaking English. But, traditionally, of course, when, when Native Americans did trade and travel with other tribes, or, even, early on with, say, French or English traders, they wouldn't necessarily use English, they would, there are certain trade languages, one is called Chinook Jargon. People used that up and down the Pacific coast. Native Americans, and also, you know, to French or English traders, so that was another option for a common language. Or they would just use interpreters between different tribes or between English speakers. So there was some, you know, English speaking going on, but also people were continuing to use their own languages in their traditional ways of doing trading.

Rachel Havard 11:28

Is there a link between enslavement and loss of language?

Rosemarie Ostler 11:31

Well, there's definitely a link between having your culture oppressed, you know, the, at a certain point, the government was trying to really squash Native American culture, and not so much enslavement, but there, are though there were Native American indentured servants. But you know, it's possible to be bilingual. So people could have been speaking and using English and then also using their ancestral or traditional languages. The real problem was that they, it was really the boarding schools and the sort of insistence on not using your native language and only using English. So that was the thing that had the biggest impact.

Rachel Havard 12:27

What else has contributed to the loss of native languages, would you say?

Rosemarie Ostler 12:32

Well, you know, there's a loss of population. Native Americans are a small group compared with the Europeans and other people who are here, you know, in the country now. So they're surrounded by English speakers and they, of course, have to interact with them, do business with them, and so on. So, especially if young people have been trained to use English with each other, and then they, if they come home from boarding school, and they really aren't used to using their native language, they're used to speaking English. So more and more younger people are speaking English. So you know, all of that has an effect.

Rachel Havard 13:22

Which ancestral Native American languages are still spoken today, and how do you think they have managed to survive?

Rosemarie Ostler 13:29

Well, there's a number of them. They're probably, according to the census, there's probably about 150 Native American languages still being spoken somehow, and that would be out of maybe three or 400 original. Many smaller languages, for example, the Algonquian languages that were spoken along the East Coast when the first British colonists started arriving in the early 17th century, almost all of those have disappeared. They were small languages, just spoken in very small areas. Some of the bigger languages, Navajo is one of the biggest languages that still spoken and they have about 170,000 speakers or so. Ojibwe has a certain number of speakers. There are a lot of Cherokee speakers. And there are smaller languages. California has a lot of small languages where they maybe still have two or three speakers, older people who still are native speakers. So it varies a lot from, from tribe to try.

Rosemarie Ostler 14:41

So what's happening now is that there are many language revival programs. The Navajos had one of the first ones, I think, and they have a big program of teaching it in schools, developing written materials. It's also in, not necessarily native schools, but just in the school system in New Mexico, you can learn Navajo. So they have a good program that I think are having good success with that. One language that got some attention recently was Wampanoag, which is an Algonquian language that is spoken on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and it had disappeared, it had gone completely extinct. But, however, they had written material, because missionaries had written a Bible, translated a Bible into Wampanoag, you know, using just ordinary Western writing system. So they took the Bible and started working through it and building

a vocabulary and a dictionary, and so they've basically brought the language back, revived it from being completely dead, and they are now teaching it to students, you know, to younger kids and, and using it.

Rachel Havard 16:13

That's really good to hear. Finally, what did you find most interesting in your research about Native American English?

Rosemarie Ostler 16:20

Well, you know, I find the, I find what they call ethnic dialects, you know, to be really interesting, because they, sort of, emphasize more, even then with regional dialects, how much the way we speak really is a part of our identity. And you know, that's true for all of us, but I think that it becomes much more evident with, with the kind of dialect where you are really identifying yourself with a group. So I just found that, that interesting, the fact that people who may not have, may not even know their ancestral language, or may have different ones, can still connect through this particular dialect of American English.

Rachel Havard 17:13

Thank you for joining us on the show. It's been a pleasure to talk to you.

Rosemarie Ostler 17:17

It was really good to talk to you. Thank you.

Rachel Havard 17:21

Our next guest is Gregory Shushan, author of *Near-Death Experience and Indigenous Religions*, here to answer our questions about near-death experiences, Native American myths, shamanism, and religious revitalization movements across indigenous cultures in North America.

Rachel Havard 17:37

Welcome to The Oxford Comment. Thank you for joining us. Could you please introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your research area?

Gregory Shushan 17:45

So yeah, my name is Gregory Shushan and I guess the best way to describe my situation within academic research is a interdisciplinary historian of religions. So my background is archaeology and Egyptology, some anthropology, and then I sort of defected to religious studies, because the questions I was dealing with, with ancient civilizations were, were more along the lines of what religious studies looks at. And then I sort of branched out into looking at indigenous religions and different types of societies.

Rachel Havard 18:20

So your book is about near-death experiences. What exactly is a near-death experience, or NDE?

Gregory Shushan 18:27

So a near-death experience is a tricky term, actually. Most commonly, it's an, a type of experience where somebody is clinically dead for a short period of time, as determined by the medical community or the attending doctors or whatever. And when they revive, they report having had spiritual-type experiences,

typically involving leaving their body, entering a sort of realm of darkness, traveling through the darkness, coming out into bright light; they often will meet their relatives, you know, a mother or deceased partner or somebody who died before them, sometimes some kind of spiritual entity of being of light, which they often will associate with a particular religious figure. And then they're told to return, often by this figure or, or by one of the relatives, and then they return to the body and wake up and believe that they genuinely died and went to this afterlife realm.

Gregory Shushan 19:27

What makes the definition tricky, though, is these kinds of experiences can also happen when somebody is, is near death, hence the term, and not actually clinically dead for any period of time. So they can, you know, have a heart attack but, but never have, you know, flatlined and hadn't been declared dead, but still have a near-death experience. And then even trickier is the fact that some people can have them just when they believe that they're going to die or or even spontaneously without the death context. There can be similar types of spiritual experiences that correspond to near-death experience phenomenology. So the term, you know, it really, it should be broken up into sort of "temporary-death experience", "near-death experience," and "spontaneous near-death-like experience," or something like that, but, but the catch-all term kind of covers all of them. And then, not to preempt to the discussion, but there's shamanic experiences can be very much like near-death experiences, and even mimic the context of traveling to an afterlife realm. So I tend to look at those as "shamanic near-death experiences," really.

Rachel Havard 20:40

That's really interesting, thank you. What first sparked your interest in near-death experiences, especially in indigenous religions?

Gregory Shushan 20:48

I had learned about near-death experiences at quite a young age because there's such a kind of popular idea in contemporary society, the subject of various films like Flatliners, and things like this, and they're very much part of, I think, our, our popular consciousness about what death and the afterlife is. And part of me, I didn't really pay a lot of attention to them for a while, and part of me kind of thought, because of all the, you know, heaven imagery and Christian-like, sort of imagery, and the way that books are marketed, you know, I Saw Heaven, this kind of thing. I found them interesting, but didn't really delve into them.

Gregory Shushan 21:24

And then I read a book by Carol Zaleski, who's a theologian and a medieval scholar. And she compared medieval, "otherworld journeys," she called them, of monks and nuns, European Christian monks and nuns, with near-death experiences. And I found that really interesting, because, I started thinking, so this is not just a contemporary phenomenon that can be ascribed to whatever social and religious dynamics are going on in the modern West, this is going back to, to the medieval world. And she had also mentioned a couple of others, there's one from Plato and various other sources. So that kind of planted the seed in my mind about the cross-cultural dimensions of NDEs.

Gregory Shushan 22:07

And then when I was studying Egyptology, I was reading the the afterlife texts, like the Books of the Dead, and the Coffin Texts and Pyramid Texts. And I just noticed that, phenomenologically speaking, there were some similarities that evoked near-death experiences to me, so just going back to that definition—entering darkness, traveling through darkness, going into a realm of light, another world, meeting deceased relatives, meeting a divine entity—all those kinds of things were just very much present in the Egyptian texts. So I started thinking if they're in those texts, and if we have those accounts from medieval Europe, how far can we extend this? And, and is there any way to prove, or at least argue, that the Egyptian texts were, in fact, based on near-death experiences?

Rachel Havard 22:54

That is really interesting. It seems like there's a universal link between darkness and light.

Gregory Shushan 23:02

Yeah, there does seem to be, definitely, that, that association, that one follows the other, for sure. I mean, in the, in the popularized notion of, of NDEs, it's traveling through a tunnel, and then there's the light at the end of the tunnel, which is a, kind of, you know, it's even become an proverbial expression for something good going to happen on the horizon after this dark time. But cross-culturally, it's not so much a tunnel, it's just traveling through darkness. So that's, that's part of the, you know, difficulty of studying NDEs cross-culturally, because there are these thematic elements, which are represented in different sorts of ways, depending on the individual and the culture.

Rachel Havard 23:46

Can you tell us about the role that culture plays in how people experience and interpret near-death experiences?

Gregory Shushan 23:53

Yeah, they're very much, I wouldn't say culturally determined, but culturally colored. It's almost as if there's a sort of baseline background sort of experience, and then a person's culture and individual perceptions and history and, you know, our own sort of internal model-making and symbol-making processes, close to that experience with understandable imagery and make it comprehensible to us even as we're having it. I think that's, that's how it plays out. Whether we're, you know, what kind of conscious processes or subconscious processes are actually involved in that, I think is open to debate, but just as far as modeling the near-death experience goes, that, that's kind of how I think it plays out. And that's demonstrated by the fact that, not only do they differ cross-culturally, but no near-death experiences the same between any two individuals.

Gregory Shushan 24:52

So we have these, these scales for determining whether something is a near-death experience or not. Most famous is the Greyson Scale, named after Bruce Greyson, who came up with it, who's a, an NDE researcher. And the idea is that if a particular experience has, I think seven out of these 21, or whatever sub-experiences, then it qualifies as an NDE. But the fact is, none of them have all of those 21 features, like, there's no example that has every single near-death experience marker to it. So, even aside from the fact that people have different sub-experiences within the experience, than the, the way our culture and individual perceptions model it varies. So just a kind of basest example, a Christian is going to see

the, the being of light and interpret it as Jesus, and a Muslim might see it as Muhammad, and a Buddhist might see it as the Buddha or whatever. And we have examples of, of this, you know, there's a Zuni Native American NDE where they see, the person sees a kachina god. So that's very much a feature of, a dynamic of, of the way NDEs are described.

Gregory Shushan 26:07

Another one is the, I mentioned the tunnel and traveling through darkness. And a lot of small-scale societies, including quite a few Native American accounts, the description is not traveling through darkness or rushing through a tunnel at all, it's actually walking along the road to the other world. And they will even sometimes describe seeing footprints in the sand of all the other souls who had preceded them to the other world. And that's a way of saying that the other world is so populated by all these spirits or ghosts. And then on rare occasions, they'll see somebody walking in the other direction, as they're walking along the path to the other world, they'll see somebody walking the other direction, and that's somebody who is having a near-death experience and is actually returning to their body.

Rachel Havard 26:51

Earlier, you mentioned shamanism. Can you tell us a bit about it, and how shamanic practices across cultures differ?

Gregory Shushan 26:59

Yeah, shamanism, even more than near-death experience, is one of these catch-all terms and often a misused term; it's a fairly problematic term. But as far as my research goes and my focus, I'm most interested in the type of shamanism in which the shaman induces a near-death-type experience. So, basically, other, "otherworld journey shamanism" is probably the best way to describe it. But other forms of shamanism just involve healing or possession or different types of practices that don't have anything to do with, with the other world. But as far as the otherworld journeying shamanism, in a sense, it's a way of replicating a near-death experience, for, for a couple of different reasons. One is to go to the other world in order to obtain some kind of knowledge or information that's, that's privy only to spirits and gods.

Gregory Shushan 27:56

So if you can, while you're in this body and figure out a way to release your soul from the body and travel to the other world, and obtain this information, then you're getting the benefit of near-death experiencers without actually having to die. And cross-culturally, one of the main features of near-death experiences is that they bring about a positive transformation and the person who's had the experience. So, so they'll return from it being a better person, they'll often start treating their family better, becoming more philanthropic, just a more keener sense of justice or spirituality. And just kind of change negative behaviors, addictions, and things like that. So in, in a sense, shamanism reflects that; it's going to the other world in order to, to bring about a positive change, both in the self and within the community. And then there's another type where it's called "soul retrieval," and that's essentially following the soul of a person who is either dead or in danger of dying, and the shaman will leave the body and follow that person to the other world in order to actually bring them back to the body. So it's basically rescuing a person who's having a near-death experience in progress. And then, yeah, bringing back them to the body and they revive.

Gregory Shushan 29:17

Native Americans, there's, there's a complex of myths, called the Orpheus myths. This was named by Ake Hultkrantz, a Swedish anthropologist and historian of religions. And he wrote a great book called *The North American Orpheus Tradition*. And he basically isolated this near-death experience-type myth that occurs throughout the entire continent of North America—as well as in South America and other places—but essentially, it's, it's a myth of soul retrieval. It's a person who dies and then a shaman, or loved one taking the role of a shaman, travels to the other world in order to rescue their, their soul and bring them back.

Rachel Havard 29:59

Though near-death experiences are universal, you say that the ways in which they are experienced and interpreted vary by religion and culture across continents? Could you tell us more?

Gregory Shushan 30:12

Yeah, this ties in a bit with what I was saying about walking along the path or road as opposed to going through a tunnel. But it goes even further than that because, so, so a basic idea about near-death experiences in the West, in contemporary society, is that, once you're in the other world, and you meet this divine being of Light, the reason that you're sent back to your body is some kind of self-development, basically, it really sort of ties into almost New Age-type of thinking, or just, just Western individualism, for the most part. So, so, for example, you'll be told, "No, you need to go back to finish that book you are writing, or you need to go back and finish your, your PhD or, or even take care of your family;" there's things that you haven't done to benefit yourself and your, your immediate loved ones around you. Sometimes, and cross culturally, sometimes it's you need to go back and basically spread the word about the afterlife that we don't die, and that there is this future life to look forward to when your body physically dies. And that's a, that's a, you know, widely recurring, cross-cultural thing.

Gregory Shushan 31:25

But then a very big difference is in some societies, mostly India and China and, and a couple of other small-scale societies around the world, it's a case of mistaken identity, what why you're sent to your body. So you get up to the point of meeting this, this divine being, and instead of being told you need to go back and, and fulfill this obligation or self-development path, the message is, we actually got you confused with somebody else who has the same name. So you know, we were after the Gregory Shushan who lives in Iran, and the one that that lives in San Francisco is the wrong one. So you need to go back. And then then I would wake up in my body having had this near-death experience, and presumably the, the same person with my name in Iran would, would then die for good. So you know, we look at that as kind of amusing because it's in such contrast to how we see the near-death experience, which is so embedded in our minds and our popular consciousness at this point, that some deviation like that, as we see it, does seem pretty odd. But, but it's, surprisingly, recurring around the world, which raises all sorts of questions about, you know, the degree to which these experiences are real and hallucinatory, and whatever else.

Rachel Havard 32:44

What do different indigenous cultures believe about out of body experiences? Could you give us a couple of examples?

Gregory Shushan 32:51

Yeah, I think most indigenous societies, I would say most people; I should qualify that by saying, what I mean is people who have out-of-body experiences, almost, without exception, believe that out-of-body experiences are actually what they appear to be. Hardly anybody has them and thinks, "Oh, I just hallucinated that I, that I left my body." And there was an interesting study done in the 70s where 90—I can't remember how many societies were surveyed but, but quite a lot—but 95% of them believed in out-of-body experiences. And this was all small-scale societies. And when questioned about why they believed in these experiences, they overtly said, "Because either we had them or somebody we know had them."

Gregory Shushan 33:38

It's an, a good example of what's called the "experiential source hypothesis." This is a term coined by the sociologist David Hufford. And it essentially says that spiritual-type experiences, like an out-of-body experience or a near-death experience, actually engender beliefs in the supernatural and religious beliefs. So people believe in out-of-body experiences because they have out-of-body experiences. And people believe in an afterlife, and they make up or they elaborate ideas about an afterlife, based on near-death experiences. And that's kind of one of the main arguments of my work cross-culturally is, is determining the extent to which different cultures are, are basing their, their beliefs on out of body and near-death experiences, and then how they elaborate them and integrate them into society.

Rachel Havard 34:28

Are there cultures that try to deliberately induce near-death experiences, maybe through herbs or medicines?

Gregory Shushan 34:35

Yeah, absolutely. In Africa, there was a society called the Fang people and they ingest a drug called iboga or ibogaine; the god is called the iboga and the drug is ibogaine named after this god. And there was a study in the 50s where they were taking such copious quantities of this this drug, which brings about NDE-type experiences anyway, but they were taking such, such large amounts that they were, appeared to actually die and come back to life. So they were bringing about a near-death experience deliberately.

Gregory Shushan 35:12

And then in a few examples from some Native American cultures and some in Africa, they actually talk about having "clubbed themselves to death" in order to bring out an NDE. And, or even, there's one example of immolation. They actually burn themselves to death to bring about an NDE. And, obviously, that's, that's not really possible. But I think that the idea is, probably, that, that, the, it was a sort of shamanic initiation-type experience that led to the NDE. But there's certainly a link between a sort of performative death and a near-death experience and bringing it about deliberately in those sorts of means. But it's not just in that kind of context that they come about.

Gregory Shushan 35:56

So for example, the Ghost Dance religion in different Native American societies. This was initially brought, kind of emerged from the near-death experience of a man named Jack Wilson, whose, whose Native

American name was Wovoka, and this is in in 1888. He was very ill with a fever, and he lost consciousness. And he went to the spirit world, and he he saw his deceased ancestors. Everybody was happy and forever young, he said. It was this glorious, idealized mirror image of Earth. And he met the, the local god, and he was told that he has to return to his people, and preach a message of love and universal peace and hard work and no fighting, no lying, no stealing. So these kinds of moral strictures. And the reward for, for following these, these instructions would be that when they died, they would attain a positive afterlife, and be reunited with their, their friends, their deceased friends in the other world and have no illness or death or any problems in the afterlife.

Gregory Shushan 37:04

So after he comes back from this experience, he then founds the Ghost Dance religion. And people start following a certain type of shamanic induction, basically, where they dance for extended periods and chant until they get to such a heightened psychological, excited psychological state that they often will collapse. And they have it in mind that they're going to bring about an experience that is to the same realm that Wovoka went to. So it's kind of the they incubate this experience while they're undergoing these, these rituals. So when they collapse, they have a near-death-type of experience. So it's essentially their religious traditions that are replicating NDEs. And part of the reason for that is to once again, attain the same types of positive benefits that the NDE gives people but without having to die. So it was really a way of democratizing NDEs in the afterlife for people without a threat of death.

Rachel Havard 38:08

That's so interesting, thank you. Can you explain what religious revitalization movements are, and if they differ across cultures?

Gregory Shushan 38:18

Yeah, so the Ghost Dance is a good example of a religious revitalization movement. The Salish Native Americans; in 1881, there was a man named Squ-sacht-un, whose, whose English name is John Slocum. He had a near-death experience, he was confirmed dead by everyone present, says the text. And he says, "My breath went out of my body and I died. All at once I saw a shining light, a great light, trying my soul." So you know, trying his soul is kind of a reference to evaluating his, his life experiences in order to determine what kind of afterlife he might slot into. And then he looked, and he saw that his body had no soul, he looked at his own body, and it was dead. So that's a very clear reference to having an out-of-body experience. And then when he revived, he actually died again. And he revived very briefly and died again. And he again saw his body, he was taken by angels. And at some point, he, in the other world, he had a life review.

Gregory Shushan 39:29

That's, I think that's a dynamic I haven't mentioned yet. A life review is when people have a kind of, their whole life flashes before their eyes. Quite literally, they experienced their entire life playing out before them, and often they'll experience it from the point of view of other people involved in, in their life. So if you were hurtful to somebody, then you're going to experience the pain that you inflicted on somebody else. So a version of this was experienced by, by John Slocum, where he went into a house and there was a man sitting there, who asked him if he believed in God. And then he showed him on the wall a picture of John Slocum himself that just was hanging there on the wall. And on the wall, on the picture,

he could see all of his bad deeds of his life that he had committed sort of superimposed on that picture. It's difficult to imagine exactly how that, that was, but that's, that's how he described it. And then he was given the choice of either going to hell at that point, or going back to Earth in order to preach Christianity to people, essentially. So this is obviously not a not a pre-Christian account. So he went back to, came back to life and went to his, his people. And he did actually start teaching Christianity to his people. And he founded the Indian Shaker Church, which is still going to this day, and it integrates certain native shamanic-type practices with Christianity.

Gregory Shushan 40:57

So that's one example of a revitalization movement. It was, it sort of adapted native traditions to Christianity as a sort of survival mechanism, because if they had rejected Christianity completely, then that would be more of a threat in the eyes of the, you know, ruling Europeans. But there are other examples where the Native American person has an NDE and that leads them to actually question Christian teachings and the teachings of missionaries. Part of John Slocum's response to Christianity after his NDE; so, so I mentioned he incorporated Christian teachings with, with indigenous beliefs. And again, just like with the Ghost Dance, his experience was sort of replicated by his followers by entering this this, what they call the "hypnotic condition," where they would start shaking uncontrollably, and that would lead to the to the visionary experience. But what's interesting about this, as far as the responses of Christianity goes is, I'll just quote from the actual text from the 19th century. It says, "The Bible wasn't valued as a book of Revelation anymore. They did not need it for John Slocum personally came back from a conference with the angels at the gates of heaven, and has imparted to the Indians the actual facts and the angelic words and means of salvation. They know there is a heaven for John Slocum had been there. And they believe in hell of fire for the punishment of sinners, because the angels had told John Slocum about it." So, essentially, his authority was considered superior to that of the Bible, and that of the missionaries because he was a native and because he had direct experience. They saw, with their own eyes, that he was temporarily dead, and then they saw him come back and describe this experience. He was also, you know, 1,800 years more recent than Jesus, and he was able to give his testimony and in person and in the local language.

Gregory Shushan 42:55

And then there's other examples of, I can't remember the people offhand, but there was a missionary Le Jeune and this is in the late 18th century. And the Native Americans that he was trying to convert and tell them about eternal damnation and hellfire said, actually, we know that's not true, because one of our people has actually been there and saw that, that that wasn't the case. And then they even questioned the, the idea that there could be eternal hellfire because there's not enough wood in the afterlife to keep burning forever. So, so they kind of, they made these kind of logical, rational arguments based on near-death experiences in the face of missionaries who were arguing strictly from, from a position of Biblical dogma, which is really interesting. And it's the missionaries who start criticizing the Native Americans and saying, you know, they're, they're possessed by demons, it's the devil is talking through them, this is ridiculous, this is irrational; when, when, if we read it with an objective eye, it's actually the Native Americans who were being rational and, and logically trying to understand these experiences and logically responding to missionary teachings because of these experiences.

Gregory Shushan 44:12

So because of that, and because of the revitalization movements, near-death experiences have been a political force in the creation of these kinds of pushback against Christian and missionary and European domination. They're also some examples that predicted the coming of Christians and Europeans. And it's impossible to say now, from, from our standpoint, whether they were true or not, or whether they were retroactively described because they were only recorded once the missionaries and explorers arrived. But it's interesting that, you know, they, they will have said things that, you know, 15 years before the Europeans came, so-and-so had a near-death experience, and they, they saw them coming with weapons and bringing disease and whatever else. So that was another way of validating the experiences as a true revelation, essentially.

Rachel Havard 45:05

Lastly, are there implications in different indigenous religions for beliefs that human beings really do survive physical death?

Gregory Shushan 45:13

Yeah, so another cross-culturally recurring dynamic of near-death experiences is a concern for them to be taken seriously, and a concern for them to be seen as a as a genuine, vertical experience of the other world. There are certain claims that are made that we might find, you know, stretch our credulity, but at the time might, you know, were obviously designed to prove that the experience really happened. So, for example, especially in the Pacific, for example, in Hawaii and Tahiti, there are quite a few examples where people were miraculously able to return to their body, even though decomposition had set in. And they make a real point of saying that, that we understand that this person was so dead, that their body had already started to decompose, and that the experience was so miraculous, that it was able to reverse that process of decomposition. And when the person revived, you know, they were able to carry on life, life as usual.

Gregory Shushan 46:18

And then another one is, is bringing back actual objects from the other world, which is, again, different, very difficult for our contemporary, Western minds to comprehend. But they would say they brought back a particular healing medicine or herb that would cure the people; you know, the, the root of that was probably they brought back the knowledge of it, or some kind of understanding of, of what might lead to developing a cure. But the claim is that they physically brought, brought something back. But as far as our own standards of proof and evidence of an afterlife and verticality go, there aren't a lot of examples, but there is one really interesting one. There's a particular phenomenon in near-death studies, called "Peak in Darien experiences," which refers to a, a poem by Keats, I think, maybe Shelley. But this experience involves a person dying, and while they're dead, they meet the soul of somebody else, who is actually having a death experience, who has just died. And then when they revive, after the near-death experience, they learned that that person actually did die.

Gregory Shushan 47:29

So there's an interesting example of this from the Deg Hit'an people, which formerly called the Ingalik, and this is from 1887. And it's about a, a young girl, who, who she got lost while she was out hunting, and then she was found and taken into a house, and she was very confused. And she then claimed that she had died and left her body. She found herself in a dark room of a house, and then there was nothing

visible but a ray of light. So again, we've got the darkness, and then the light following. There were voices that she could hear and they were wondering why she was there. And then an old woman appeared and waved a wand and illuminated the room at that point. She was then given food, but she felt sick at the idea of eating it, and she couldn't eat.

Gregory Shushan 48:22

And that's a really interesting, not quite uniquely, but typically Native American feature, the idea that if you eat anything in the afterlife, then that's going to, that's, that means you're going to stay, that you're not going to be able to come back to Earth, which, in itself shows a real preoccupation and knowledge about near-death experiences, and the idea that you can die and come back to life. But what's interesting about that, of course, is that, you know, it's reflected in ancient Greek beliefs, so, but with absolutely no, no cultural connection.

Gregory Shushan 48:54

But, anyway, so this, this young girl, she stays in the afterlife for months, supposedly, which might refer to the, to the possibility that that she was in a long-term coma, but those kinds of details aren't given. But one day, she sees her father floating in a log down the river, from the direction from which she had come, and she shouted at him, and he didn't notice her at all. And then she suddenly transformed into a bird, she said, and resumed her own shape of herself and returned back to her body. And when she came back to life, her mother told her, her father had just died while she was in her near-death-state coma. And so she, her vision of seeing her father in the other world, floating down the log in the direction she was leaving, is her father arriving in the afterlife because he had just died and then that was confirmed when she woke up.

Gregory Shushan 49:51

So these kinds of things also convinced people; normally the girl herself who didn't need convincing because she had the experience, but that would convince the people surrounding her that this really was a genuine experience of going to the other world and coming back. And this is also, you know, one of the key types of evidence from contemporary and near-death studies that lead a lot of researchers to argue that, that they're real experiences because how else can you possibly explain seeing the soul of another person in the other world and then coming back and being told that they died while you were unconscious and temporarily dead? To me, that's one of the most inexplicable features of near-death experiences in general.

Rachel Havard 50:36

That feels like a perfect point to end on. Thank you so much for joining us. It's been a pleasure.

Gregory Shushan 50:42

Thank you, too, Rachel, it's been a great conversation.

Rachel Havard 50:45

We want to thank our guests, Rosemarie Ostler and Gregory Shushan, for speaking with us about Native American languages and religious beliefs. Please check out our show notes on the OUPblog for a recommended reading list exploring just a few of the ideas and themes discussed today.

Rachel Havard 51:01

Be sure to follow Oxford Academic on Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and YouTube to stay up to date on upcoming podcast episodes. While you're at it, please do subscribe to The Oxford Comment wherever you regularly listen to podcasts, including Apple, Google, and Spotify.

Rachel Havard 51:17

Lastly, we want to thank the crew of The Oxford Comment for their assistance on today's episode. Episode 89 was produced by Steven Filippi and me, Rachel Havard. Thank you for listening, and have a happy holiday season.