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Native American Traditions (South)

In the introduction to a recent anthology entitled *Native South American Discourse*, the editors observe that no South American Indian has ever won the Nobel Prize “for his oral performances of myths, legends, or political oratory” despite the fact that

every day and every night members of societies in remote areas . . . are creating and performing a remarkable diversity of verbal forms characterized by metaphorical richness, complex poetic and rhetorical processes, and intensely personal styles, all of which are an intimate part of the replication and transmission of their cultural and esthetic traditions.

(Sherzer and Urban 3)

The South American continent is host to a wealth of highly refined oral traditions cultivated by specialists and verbal artists in the native communities. A growing body of ethnographic accounts makes this treasure trove increasingly available, if people accept the invitation to experience verbal artistry in association with its social and cultural

settings. This proviso no doubt judges to venture afield from the traditional literary canon.

Think for a moment of the search across the South American continent. Lévi-Strauss, the foremost methodologist in search in Native South America, has been prodigious in their cultural search outward from the Bororo. He traces a web of mythological connections between the Americas and the native people. *Raw, From Honey, Origin*, a graphic literature reveals in Native South American narrative unsurpassed in any other whole story: Native South American for highly evolved forms of performance making, for songs and ritual ceremonial genealogies. Documentation of verbal forms has earned Native American among the most verbally accomplished. e.g., McDowell, “Mission”; (Hill).

The student who would study the various South America will find aural textures, complex grammatical native modes of reference. All of literature are readily at hand for South Americans. The student performs on their own terms of service of social process and cultural detached literary production of native South Americans displays such as accomplishing rites of mysteries of the cosmos, and rituals. This is not to deny the

settings. This proviso no doubt contributes to the reluctance of Nobel judges to venture afield from the familiar confines of the international literary canon.

Think for a moment of the vast panorama of living oral tradition across the South American continent. It is no accident that Claude Lévi-Strauss, the foremost mythologist of our times, centered his research in Native South America, for the peoples of this region have been prodigious in their cultivation of mythic narrative. Working outward from the Bororo Indians of central Brazil, Lévi-Strauss traces a web of mythological thought that encompasses all of South America and the native peoples of North America as well (see esp. *Raw, From Honey, Origin, and Naked Man*). An extensive ethnographic literature reveals in Native South America a stock of mythic narrative unsurpassed in any world region. But that is far from the whole story: Native South American oral tradition is justly celebrated for highly evolved forms of political oratory and ceremonial speech making, for songs and ritual chants of native doctors, for recitals of ceremonial genealogies. Documentation of these and many other verbal forms has earned Native South Americans recognition as among the most verbally accomplished of the world's peoples (see, e.g., McDowell, "Mission"; Seeger; Bastien; Urban, "Dialogues"; Hill).

The student who would encounter the oral traditions of indigenous South America will find performances imbued with patterned aural textures, complex grammatical and syntactic profiles, and innovative modes of reference. All the delights attaching to the experience of literature are readily at hand in the oral performances of Native South Americans. The student disposed to encounter these performances on their own terms can observe the literary impulse at the service of social process and cultural reproduction. In contrast to the detached literary production of learned elites, the oral poetry of Native South Americans displays verbal art harnessed to practical needs such as accomplishing rites of passage, instructing neophytes in the mysteries of the cosmos, and effecting cures through spiritual channels. This is not to deny the presence of a more contemplative oral

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art in Native South America, as in the emergence of folktale from myth in settings where the indigenous religion has lost its hold on the people (for further information on Native American narrative tradition, see S. Niles).

Approaching Oral Tradition

What, then, is required to enter the magical world of Native South American oral tradition? Full comprehension would entail competence in the language of expression and in the local systems of belief and practice, an ideal beyond the reach of all but a few dedicated researchers. But the situation is not desperate. A partial, mediated, yet genuine appreciation can be obtained through serious exploration of the appropriate resources. Let us begin by rejecting the isolated text in translation, a chimera that can deceive or dispirit the reader. Such unnatural contrivances are the product of a sequence of severances: first, from the social scene of the actual performance; second, from the original expressive medium, the spoken (or chanted, or sung) word; third, from the rhythms, syntax, and lexicon of the original language; and fourth, from the cultural systems that undergird meaning. These texts suffer a devastating alienation to become only pallid reflections of their originals.

The student of oral poetry should seek a closer encounter with the source: the actual telling of a mythic narrative, the actual performance of ceremonial speech, the actual chanting of healer. Important dimensions of indigenous discourse can be retained or recovered in scholarly treatments that have a strong commitment to ethnographic validity. Let me present a checklist for proper handling of oral tradition. To start, we should know the particulars of the performance occasions: Who is the artist? What kind of event is it? How does the audience respond? It is helpful to learn something about the lives and cares of the performers, about their relationship to members of the audience, about the motives and expectations people bring to events of this nature. The point is that the performance of verbal art is situated, or anchored, in social interaction, and social factors influence the style, duration, and content of the performance.¹

From Speech to Writing

Most performances of indigenous South America evince a significant patterning, and these are highly organized in this regard. The move toward phrases of some regularity, and the violence to these structures and to the artists working in Native South America, are solutions to this problem, typically used to capture the flow and "chunkiness" of the original and supplementing these devices with other expressive features such as pauses and accents. The result is a transcription that captures the acoustic quality of the spoken word. Explanatory notes and codes are used to indicate dimensions of vocal sonority.

The implacable problems of transcription in another are well known and remain a central main of oral tradition. Still, the move from a source language to a written form is a disruptive juncture, one that is central to the priority of oral tradition is to be preserved. In South America are natively preserved in Spanish or Portuguese, but the great majority of indigenous languages of the continent are among the experts about classical languages that Native South America are not. In any region of the world. Recorded in at least two hundred native languages, and a hundred different language families. Some of these languages are flourishing (e.g., Runa Simi, and Inga), the latter are dying, but many others are still at the door of extinction. The study of these performances provide a fabulous linguistic and cultural performances drawn from oral tradition.

From Speech to Writing

Most performances of indigenous South American oral tradition evince a significant patterning of the acoustic signal. Ritual chants are highly organized in this aspect, but even casual narrative tends toward phrases of some regularity. Straight prose transcription does violence to these structures and nuances of vocal production. Scholars working in Native South America have developed a range of solutions to this problem, typically using poetic lines and stanzas to capture the flow and "chunking" of speech production (Gumperz) and supplementing these devices with additional codes to retrieve expressive features such as pacing, intonation, voice quality, and others. The result is a transcription that visually suggests something of the acoustic quality of the spoken performance, accompanied by explanatory notes and codes allowing for the recovery of additional dimensions of vocal sonority.

The implacable problems of translating from one language to another are well known and not by any means restricted to the domain of oral tradition. Still, the requirement to translate oral poetry from a source language to a receiver language introduces another disruptive juncture, one that must be handled with care if the integrity of oral tradition is to be preserved. Some oral traditions of Native South America are natively rendered in the national languages, Spanish or Portuguese, but the greater part of this corpus occurs in the indigenous languages of the continent. Although there is debate among the experts about classification and other matters, it is clear that Native South America exhibits as much linguistic diversity as any region of the world. Recent estimates indicate the persistence of at least two hundred native languages representing perhaps one hundred different language families and isolated languages. Some of these languages are flourishing, like Quechua (its forms Quichua, Runa Simi, and Inga), the language of the Incas and their descendants, but many others are stagnant or moribund, and not a few lie at the door of extinction. The native languages of South America provide a fabulous linguistic environment for the creation of verbal performances drawn from oral tradition.

Whenever possible, the native language text should be consulted in conjunction with translations into a major world language. Scholars of Native South America have found ways of incorporating native language texts so that readers can tune into details of grammar, syntax, and lexicon even in the absence of competence in the language. For those readers who are inclined to make the effort, such information offers additional possibilities for contact with the source and confers insights regarding the arrangement and patterning of linguistic forms. In narrative speech, for example, one can monitor the appearance of sequencing morphemes or the distribution of morphemes that express the speaker's attitude toward the events narrated. In ceremonial speech, one can appreciate the construction of especially complex words and phrases, among other features. There is another reason to present native language texts: to preserve languages that are endangered, making the texts available to members of communities engaged in grass-roots efforts to promote usage of their native language.²

Finally, we come to the alienation of oral tradition from its cultural moorings. Performances drawing on oral tradition in indigenous South America are deeply embedded in local contexts of meaning. Separating these performances from their settings leaves them floating without purpose on an ocean of potential signification. Any image, referent, or pattern could mean anything or nothing. It is imperative to provide sufficient cultural background to permit decoding of meaning in terms congruent with native understandings. This is not to suggest that one transparent explication should be sought, for Native South Americans tolerate and even crave ambiguity as much as anyone does. Instead, what is needed is supplementary information that sketches the interpretive templates used by members of the community to assess the meaning of oral performances. A crucial aspect here is a profile of the genre of performance as it is recognized, named, and employed by members of the society.

Resources

Careful attention to these factors can inhibit if not dispel completely the disruptive effects introduced when oral performances are alien-

ated from their natural habitat. The journey from performance to text threatens the vitality and integrity of native South American oral traditions. Advances toward providing a store of verbal artistry.

The teacher might want to consult *Speaking: An Ethnographic Perspective* by Ellen Basso and Colombia, which is an excellent study of a rich repertoire of speech styles and genres. Basso's background on the social and cultural context of the events and then discusses in detail the performance of chiefs in the "gathering of chiefs" and the use of "everyday speech" including "morning talk" and "morning talk." Sherzer notes that "the morphology of the syntactic structure and the metrical parallelism" (186).

Another important resource is the work of Ellen Basso with the Kalapalo community residing in the U.S. *Kalapalo: A Cultural View of the Universe: Kalapalo* provides texts of narrative performances and locates these materials in the Kalapalo worldview. The narratives "clarify the conditions of the world" and are true to the performances. Basso is a "what-sayer," a cop performer. Basso assent. Basso argues that the performances depict and control the world with Kalapalo cosmic entities.

Janet Wall Hendricks's *Death: The Narrative of a Shuar* is a study of a Shuar who inhabit the lowland regions of the Amazon. She presents the life history of the Shuar in his own words. She views

ated from their natural habitats. Although at critical stages on the journey from performance to presentation a set of interventions threatens the vitality and integrity of the result, many scholars of Native South American oral tradition have fortunately made important advances toward providing authentic experience of this invaluable store of verbal artistry.

The teacher might want to consult Joel Sherzer's *Kuna Ways of Speaking: An Ethnographic Perspective*. The Kuna, residing in Panama and Colombia, are absorbed with talk and possess a rich and diversified repertoire of speech styles and speech genres. Sherzer provides background on the social and linguistic environment of Kuna talk and then discusses in detail several forms of Kuna speech: the chanting of chiefs in the "gathering house," the "counseling of the spirits" used in curing events, the chanting associated with puberty rites, and "everyday speech" including conversations, lullabies, laments, humorous talk, and stories. Comparing these different speech forms, Sherzer notes that "the more ritual the speech, the more fixed is the syntactic structure and the more pervasive is the syntactic and semantic parallelism" (186).

Another important resource for the teacher of oral tradition is the work of Ellen Basso with the Kalapalo Indians, a Carib-speaking community residing in the Upper Xingu region of Brazil. In *A Musical View of the Universe: Kalapalo Myth and Ritual Performance*, Basso provides texts of narrative performances and ritual enactments and locates these materials in the context of Kalapalo culture and worldview. The narratives "evoke an illusionary past" in order to "clarify the conditions of the present world" (8). The transcriptions are true to the performances, even recording the contributions of the "what-sayer," a cop performer who provides a vocal counterpoint of assent. Basso argues that the highly patterned vocalizations in ritual events depict and control the different orders of "animacy" associated with Kalapalo cosmic entities (see also E. Basso, *Last Cannibals*).

Janet Wall Hendricks explores a Shuar narrative in *To Drink of Death: The Narrative of a Shuar Warrior*. The Shuar, a Jivaroan people, inhabit the lowland regions where Ecuador meets Peru. Hendricks presents the life history of the legendary warrior Tukup, as delivered in his own words. She views this life history as a valuable linguistic

document, as a source of information on Shuar warfare and culture, and as a story shaped by the circumstances of its performance. She aims "to discover aspects of the language/culture relationship through close analysis of texts recorded in their natural settings" (27).

Two anthologies of essays provide a useful overview of approaches and resources in this area of research: *Native Latin American Cultures through Their Discourse*, edited by Ellen Basso, and *Native South American Discourse*, edited by Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban. Many scholars active in the ethnographic approach to Native South American verbal art have papers in these volumes, and the volumes' contents literally cover the continent in terms of geographical location and genre.³

The reader might also consult the two volumes I have published on speech forms of the Sibundoy peoples of Andean Colombia, *Sayings of the Ancestors: The Spiritual Life of the Sibundoy Indians* and "So Wise Were Our Elders": *Mythic Narratives of the Kamsá*, where I have developed the procedures for handling oral tradition that I recommend here. An example taken from this research follows.

Corn-Planting Day

The Santiagueños, a Quechua-speaking community, live in and around the Sibundoy Valley of Putumayo territory, Colombia. Included in their extensive repertoire of oral traditions are proverblike expressions used to convey kernels of wisdom. These sayings, though utilitarian, are appreciated for their tight acoustic textures and their efficient metaphorical linking of propositions. Initially I encountered them as verbal art miniatures, and only with growing awareness of the language and culture did I begin to piece together their connection to Santiagueño cosmology. As miniatures, they offer a convenient lens through which to inspect the benefits of a scholarly approach like the one advocated in the previous paragraphs.

Let us confine our discussion to one sample text, given in the original Quechua and English translation (see figure). The Quechua original is given as three separate lines conforming to the phrasing

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(corn to plant-*hist* day

sara cuta-ngapa, pullitu-cu
(corn to grind-*purp* chi

atahualpa-ta sita-pu-ngapa
(hen-*acc* to dig-*ben-purp*

On corn-planting day, it is
to grind corn or give it to
the hen will dig up the corn

Key to Grammatical Abbrev

hist historical past

aff affirmative marker

purp purposive marker

pl plural

Source: McDowell, *Sayings 7*

of the saying in performance preserved in the English translation accessible, I provide a parsing. As a consequence, it is possible of this Quechua expression in line 2 based on the purposive but implies action oriented with a twist in the subsequent. Here the addition of the effect of violating the advice.

In addition, we can see one element in the Quechua speaker to take a stand regarding affirmative contrasts with the "they say" or "it is said," and

**Corn-Planting Day:
An Ethnographic Presentation of a Quechua Text**

sara tarpu-sca puncha micha-mi,
(corn to plant-*hist* day bad-*aff*)

sara cuta-ngapa, pullitu-cuna-ta cara-ngapa,
(corn to grind-*purp* chick-*pl-acc* to give-*purp*)

atahualpa-ta sita-pu-ngapa, maqui-ca huaglli-mi.
(hen-*acc* to dig-*ben-purp* hand-*foc* to ruin-*aff*)

On corn-planting day, it is bad
to grind corn or give it to the chicks:
the hen will dig up the corn seed for you, your hand is ruined.

Key to Grammatical Abbreviations

<i>hist</i>	historical past	<i>acc</i>	accusative marker
<i>aff</i>	affirmative marker	<i>ben</i>	benefactive marker
<i>purp</i>	purposive marker	<i>foc</i>	focus marker
<i>pl</i>	plural		

Source: McDowell, *Sayings* 75–76

of the saying in performance; this same three-part arrangement is preserved in the English translation. To make the Quechua text more accessible, I provide a parsing of the words into roots and suffixes. As a consequence, it is possible to point out some interesting features of this Quechua expression. For example, note the parallel structures in line 2 based on the purposive form, which works like an infinitive but implies action oriented toward a specific goal. This form returns with a twist in the subsequent line: The hen will dig it up for you. Here the addition of the benefactive morpheme drives home the effect of violating the advice conveyed in this saying.

In addition, we can see the play of the affirmative marker *-mi*, one element in the Quechua evidentiary system that obligates the speaker to take a stand regarding the truth of each statement. The affirmative contrasts with the reportative *-si*, which has the force of “they say” or “it is said,” and with the interrogative or dubitive *-chu*.

In a strong show of conviction, the speaker here endows her assertion in lines 1 and 3 with the affirmative marker. Finally, the single occurrence of the focus marker, *-ca*, calls attention to the hand as the most important referent in the saying. This brief lesson in the workings of Quechua grammar is hardly enough to make anyone a connoisseur of the language, but it does provide some insight into the expressive medium and its deployment as verbal art. Methods like these decrease the negative effects of committing speech to print; they also make visible the act of translation and thereby render it subject to inspection and questioning.

What about the setting of performance? "Corn-Planting Day" was elicited from a mature woman, doña Margarita, who had planted corn successfully for many years and who was known for her "good hand" for planting. This saying is normally addressed by an older woman to a younger one, perhaps by a mother to her son's wife, especially if the younger woman is preparing to work with corn inside the kitchen on planting day. As is usual with these sayings, the performance venue is the intimate circle of the immediate or extended family, and the occasion is typically one of routine social interaction in the household. In this setting, the wisdom of the sayings is brought to bear on the practical tasks of daily life in an effort to live in harmony with the divine plan.

A Good Hand

Our text is drawn from an oral tradition known in Quechua as *ñingpa-mandacuna imasa rimascacuna*, literally, "how the first people were accustomed to speak," or, more loosely, "sayings of the ancestors." The Santiagueños believe that their ancestors possessed a level of spiritual power that is no longer possible today. Fortunately, the ancestors left behind these sayings, passed from one generation to another, as pithy formulations of their spiritual knowledge. It is a prominent element of Santiagueño philosophy to follow in the footsteps of the ancestors, because adherence to this path protects the individual, the family, and ultimately the community from the many

sources of spiritual danger that can intrude.

"Corn-Planting Day" calls for feeding corn to the chicks so they will come and dig up the seeds and show their good hand for planting.

The women who plant corn on planting day, letting someone else do the digging of the chicks, or even washing their hands with soap after tending to them, will have to break it off with their good hand. (McDowell, *Sayings*)

The Santiagueños speak of a "good hand" as breaking or spreading about the seeds and digging up the newly planted corn. A woman's good planting hand ensures that subsequent planting will not be hindered by corn plants.

This item of Santiagueño wisdom is *alli maqui*, "a good hand." A woman who plants corn seed with success, without turning the soil with her digging, or mice, or insects but instead with her good hand, bearing plants. But the good hand is not an attribute that remains permanent; it is vulnerable, transitory and must be maintained. A good hand is accomplished by a native doctor.

In the old days they cured the animals, the children, the children takes *yagé*, he does the same like that. In order to have my hands cured, to keep them from digging up the seeds, they don't dig it up when

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"Corn-Planting Day" cautions women to avoid grinding corn or feeding corn to the chicks on the day corn is planted, lest the hens come and dig up the seeds and, most significant, lest the women ruin their good hand for planting. As doña Margarita explained:

The women who plant corn either stay away from corn that day, letting someone else attend to the grinding or the feeding of the chicks, or else they will thoroughly scrub their hands with soap after the planting. If you grind corn, you will have to break it down into flour, and that ruins the hand. (McDowell, *Sayings* 76)

The Santiagueños speak of a symbolic contamination that links the breaking or spreading about of corn to the summoning of the hens to dig up the newly planted corn seed. If the corn is spread or broken, a woman's good planting hand will be ruined, which means that any subsequent planting will not result in a high yield of flourishing corn plants.

This item of Santiagueño oral tradition rests on the concept of *alli maqui*, "a good hand." A woman who possesses a good hand will plant corn seed with success. The seed she lays into the ground after turning the soil with her digging stick will not be disturbed by birds, mice, or insects but instead will grow into lush clusters of cob-bearing plants. But the good hand is not an innate possession; nor is it an attribute that remains constant once obtained. It is, rather, a vulnerable, transitory condition that must be achieved and maintained. A good hand is acquired through a spiritual cleansing performed by a native doctor. As doña Margarita put it:

In the old days they cured everything, the house, the field, the animals, the children, the people. The doctor goes, he takes *yagé*, he does the ritual blowing, he dances, he chants, like that. In order to have good corn, my father would have my hands cured, to keep the birds, mice, and everything else from digging up the seeds. And so corn grows well for me, they don't dig it up when I plant. (76)

The cleansing or curing ceremony is performed by the native doctor with the aid of *yagé*, a psychoactive substance used by doctors and their patients to enter the realm of the spirits and ancestors.

Text in Context

On inspection, we find that the text of the saying is but an ephemeral surfacing of an entire sustaining cosmology. Our encounter with the text would be a paltry one in the absence of the appropriate cultural grounding. My own experience with the sayings of the ancestors traced this progression from surface to underlying system, when what I first took to be isolated proverbial expressions eventually came into focus as elements in a pervasive Andean folk religion. A whole spectrum of oral tradition interacts with dimensions of belief and practice associated with a spiritual edifice. Sayings of the ancestors convey nuggets of ancestral wisdom that can be applied to situations of daily life; mythic narratives rehearse the pivotal role of the ancestors in making the world safe for civilization; ceremonial speeches renew the social contract through dedication to the example of the ancestors; ritual chanting known as "singing to the spirits" makes direct contact with the spirit realm.

The Santiagueño example is instructive for any encounter with Native South American oral traditions. Employing the procedures recommended and exemplified above, the student of oral tradition moves from a tentative glimpse of verbal artistry to an appreciation of oral performance as an articulation of ambient social and cultural habitats. A rich world awaits the teacher and student of oral tradition in Native South America who adhere to these guidelines for mitigating the alienation of oral tradition from its natural habitat. Some effort is required in moving beyond surface manifestations to the text in context, but this effort is amply rewarded by entry into one of the world's great storehouses of oral tradition.

Notes

1. For further information on Native American oral poetics, see Jacobs; D. Hymes, *In Vain*; Tedlock, *Finding*.

2. For further information on bell; Manelis Klein and Sta
3. Other important scholarship: Michael Brown; L. Graham; J. oste; Schultes and Hofman

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2. For further information on Native American languages, see L. Campbell; Manelis Klein and Stark; Campbell and Mithun; Rowe; Key.
3. Other important scholarship may be found in Bierhorst, *Mythology*; Michael Brown; L. Graham; Perrin; Reichel-Dolmatoff; Salomon and Urioste; Schultes and Hofmann; Urban, *Approach*.