

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 11 (1998)

Artikel: Between the oral and the written : translatability and the aesthetics of performativeness in Native American Literature
Autor: Isernhagen, Hartwig
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99958>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 10.07.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Between the Oral and the Written: Translatability and the Aesthetics of Performativeness in Native American Literature

Hartwig Isernhagen

The most salient instance of problems that occur in the transition from the oral to the written is probably the translation of sacred knowledge – i.e., of knowledge that is so close to the core of a certain wider body of cultural knowledge as to form the underpinning of its implicit world view. In traditional Native American culture (as in all oral culture[s]), the sacred is unquestioningly present as *story*, but it is frequently or generally not translated as such into contemporary (written) anglophone Native American Literature. What was present in the form of story has had to change its shape.¹ One reason is certainly that there are no *narrative* discourses of the sacred in contemporary English, or in the languages of contemporary Western civilizations in general, that are generally recognized as viable. Concepts and “experiences” of the sacred do of course still exist, but it seems to me that they have largely become either speechless or formulaic. By definition, in modernized secular societies, stories of the sacred do not exist in their original shape: as shared and constantly renewed foundational stories of sacred forces at work, in action – which implies the possibility of sacred plots. There *are* other discourses of the strange and/or marvellous, or of whatever may transgress the limits of normalcy; but they are largely useless because they will at best manifest sunken forms of the sacred in a period that can no longer easily or generally believe in its authenticity. Fantasy literature, for instance, can (indeed) be read like the Bible, or perhaps one should say it can be read as the Bible could in the past be read; but it can be read thus only by those that have lost all orientations central to our civilization, whether we define it in terms of traditional religions or of modern secularization. It can only be read thus

¹ The exception is children’s literature. But this very fact points to the impossibility of the direct translation of oral sacred story into written “high” literature.

by those that have fallen from the context of that literary/cultural system. This is not a new phenomenon. The Wagner of the *Ring* could only become ideologically (rather than aesthetically) viable in a relative religious vacuum.

This does not only affect the relation between traditional native literature (or "orature") and its translations into Western literature. The same systemic gap exists between Native American oral tradition and contemporary Native American literature, which by and large employs the literary system of Western literature. Neither literary system provides discourses of the sacred that would make for a more or less "direct" channel of translation between Native and Western civilizations. What happens if one ignores this becomes apparent in the disastrous fusion of Native American sacred elements and German *Märchen* ones in the ending of Hyemeyohsts Storm's *Seven Arrows*, when the (Cheyenne) seven arrows are equated, with some degree of humor perhaps, but not at all ironically or parodically, with the seven dwarfs, and when "Snow White" becomes an allegory of universal history:

"Green and red apples," Green Fire Mouse said from the hat. "You know that's the symbol of original sin, don't you?"

"Apples?" Rocky frowned. "Yeah, I guess it is, but . . ."

"And," the voice continued from under the hat, "what's happened to Christianity is that it has become an old woman, a wicked witch. You see, the child of this old woman's marriage was poisoned by the apple, and has been asleep. She is a beautiful young maiden waiting for the spirit of peace that is in each of us to kiss her. Then she will awaken. And the paradox, my son, is this. This symbol of the young maiden is multiple. The young maiden is every woman. And she is the symbol of the way, the new lodge, like in the story of the buffalo wives."

"Wow! Grandpaw, you gotta be kidding with all that old time talk!" Rocky almost laughed out loud.

"No, I'm not," the voice from under the hat answered. "It's teaching. And there are seven arrows in the story too. They are called dwarfs. They give away the gems of wisdom of the north to all those who understand. And their hair is white, these seven dwarfs."

"Tell me the story, Grandpaw," Rocky said. "What's the name of the story?"

"The name of the story is Snow White," Green Fire Mouse answered, as he sat up and began his story. "You see, once upon a time . . ." (371)

The sacred is only one instance (probably the most clearly defined one) of the differentiation between the oral and the literate systems: it is the type of perspective upon the world, and the type of "subject matter," that most patently represents the differences between traditional Native American and contemporary Western civilizations. Or: Cultural differences become visible as differences in literary/discursive decorum, which actualize and specify the

general problem of translatability, as it has more recently been foregrounded as the central problem of interculturality by Wolfgang Iser. What has also become apparent in contemporary Native American cultural productions that have attempted to translate sacred traditions has been that the question of decorum changes from medium to medium. Where appropriate “parallel” discourses in the narrower sense are lacking – where there is no written narrative of the sacred into which to translate oral ones –, a change in media (or physical “channels” of communication) may open a “channel” of translatability. This happens programmatically in some types of Native drama, notably that developed by Native Earth and Tomson Highway. When, among all the characters in *The Rez Sisters*, only Marie-Adele Starblanket and Zhaboonigan Peterson – the woman who does not yet know that she is about to die and the half-wit – even begin to recognize in a seagull the Anishnabe/Cree trickster figure of Nanabush, their playfully privileged perspective enables the audience’s spiritual or religious reading of the figure of the dancer on the stage who plays the seagull. The performance becomes a *mise-en-scène* of relations that are narrated in the oral tradition; cf. the following stage direction that introduces the complex:

The same day, same time, in Wasaychigan Hill. Marie-Adele Starblanket is standing alone outside her house, in her yard, by her 14-post white picket fence. Her house is down the hill from Pelajia Patchnose’s, close to the lake. A seagull watches her from a distance away. He is the dancer in white feathers. Through this whole section, Nanabush (i.e. Nanabush in the guise of the seagull), Marie-Adele, and Zhaboonigan play “games” with each other. Only she and Zhaboonigan Peterson can see the spirit inside the bird and can sort of (though not quite) recognize him for who he is. A doll belonging to a little girl lies on the porch floor. Marie-Adele throws little stones at the seagull. (18)

Performativeness here “renders” orality, the performed story “works” where the written one does not. This is certainly in part due to the fact that the performance does not even attempt to recreate an oral story in the fullness of its plot, but rather creates its own plotting of the relation between humanity and the sacred. There is a double act of translation at work here: from one plotting into another, and from one medium into another. Interestingly enough, the performance enjoys greater latitude in dealing with transcendence than the conventionally written text, if only because it can guide the audience’s reaction – always in part a communal one – much more surely than writing can guide the solitary act of reading; but it uses this freedom very carefully here, refraining, for instance, from playing out anything like the full myth. Such translation into performance is a solution to the problem

that Storm did not know how to solve – a solution that is also used elsewhere in Canadian First Nations cultural production.

That performance principles play a significant role in constituting intercultural translatability becomes apparent as one moves out of the narrow confines of the translation of the sacred into the general area of the translation of orality. (One needs to remember, however, that orality pervasively has implications in the Native American tradition, as [re]constituted since the Native American Renaissance, that center on the reality-making, or almost sacred power of the word.) There occur, again and again, types of re-oralization that are characterized by an element of performativeness that functions as the catalyst of translatability: it interconnects the “text” offered to the “reader” with its oral antecedents – or perhaps one should say that it serves to construct the aura of an oral antecedent that in its turn serves as a marker of cultural difference. The strategy obviously falls back on the view that orality is performative, or more performative than literacy.

Some theoretical groundwork is necessary before we can turn to specific examples. The theorem (that orality is more performative than literacy) is less interesting here as a view of what is the case than (to repeat the point) as an indication that performativity creates a sense of difference from literacy that can be read as (re)created orality, that it serves as a marker of cultural difference, and thus becomes one way to make the translation of “The Indian” into the Western literary system possible. Our concern, in other words, is not with what and how much of the performance dimension is lost in translation,² but conversely with what and how much may in what shape be preserved or recreated or newly created. (By the same token, the distinction among these three processes, those of preservation, of recreation and of creation, becomes momentarily irrelevant.) I am not concerned here with lost originals, though I can see the merits of a standpoint like Arnold Krupat’s in the following statement:

We need to acknowledge the very nearly disabling fact that most of us (non-Indians, but a great many Indians, too) are going to experience Native American art almost exclusively in textual form. . . . our desire for lost originals is here not the nostalgia of Western metaphysics but the price of Western imperial history. It is a result of the conquest and dispossession of the tribes that the signifier replaces the act; our script marked on the page is the pale trace of what their voices performed. (324)

² This is, of course, Balz Engler’s topic in “Native American Song . . .”

But then the recognition of guilt here freezes not only the conquerors and dispossessors in a position of ineluctable inauthenticity, but also many or most of the dispossessed and conquered. Translation, in this view, is for *both* a fall from authenticity: from innocent native orality to guilty Western script – not only a thoroughly nostalgic position, but also one that reinscribes the act of dispossession each time it is rearticulated: the Western critic exposes most of current Native cultural production to the suspicion of inauthenticity.

There are two ways out of this quandary. One is to isolate the contemporary intercultural creation of Native authors, with its reliance on principles of translation, from the wider field of hegemonically burdened Native-White cultural interactions. This would enable one to find the guilt and inauthenticity of translation only in White textual productions, *in so far as they are appropriations of the other culture's possessions*. Such a political move might be seen in the present discussion of what happens *within* Native American cultural production today, with its attempt to locate in it performativity as a principle of viable translation, or translatability. I do not really intend such a move. It not only presents logical problems, it is also potentially misleading, in so far as much or most of that creation, and the strategies of translation that it employs, is/are motivated precisely by the writers' reactions to the hegemonically burdened situation in which their communities find themselves, and constitutes itself as an answer to it.

There is nothing left, then, but to fall back on a refusal to write the history of the transition from orality to literacy as a story of sheer loss, and to acknowledge that cultural change, even in as destructive a form as that imposed on Native Americans, is not only disabling. This seems to be the axiom on which, at least, a considerable amount of extremely attractive Native literary production is being built these days. And within this production, we then find performance at work in the above-mentioned sense and with the above-mentioned implications – i.e., as a strategy to translate cultural difference: in Leslie Silko's and N. Scott Momaday's novels and in other texts by these authors, such as Silko's *Storyteller* or Momaday's *The Names* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*; in transcription texts such as the Harry Robinson tapes transcribed by Wendy Wickwire; and in those forms of 'postmodernization' practiced by Gerald Vizenor or Thomas King.

Silko's *Ceremony* – a beloved teaching text precisely because it is so clearcut and programmatic in its definition and rendering of the act of intercultural translation – presents itself as a novel framed by an act of oral storytelling and will replicate that act and thus its own principle of generation inside its body, both as a reiterated interruption of the more "Westernized"

narrative by “Native” oral sections that have aspects of poetry about them, *and* as an allegorical repetition of the story, by the protagonist, in the text. It is particularly the latter that is foregrounded towards the end of the novel as a set piece, as a performance performed both for an audience in the text – the representatives of the story-teller’s community – and for the audience of readers:

It took a long time to tell them the story; they stopped him frequently with questions about the location and the time of day; they asked about the direction she had come from and the color of her eyes. It was while he was sitting there, facing southeast, that he noticed how the four windows along the south wall of the kiva had a particular relationship to this late autumn position of the sun.

A’moo’ooh, you say you have seen her
 Last winter
 up north
 with Mountain Lion
 the hunter

All summer
 she was south
 near Acu

They started crying
 the old men started crying
 “A’moo’ooh! A’moo’ooh!”
 You have seen her
 We will be blessed
 again. (269f.)

That performance is the way (the *only* way) to the re-construction of identity, of community, and of universal order has been established as a fact by the novel before, as its protagonist has had to go through a re-enactment of a syncretistic myth. The ending of the novel, where the moment of story-telling occurs, is charged with implications regarding the constitutive power of performance that have been patiently built up by the narrative, and it is these that feed back into the performance presented in narrative and enhance its performative power.

In Momaday, the performance aspect constitutes the act of speaking, in so far as his discourse, too, again and again attempts to replicate performative acts of speaking, even as it thematizes them. Speaking is doing in Momaday, and in speaking about or naming, the speaker not only positions, but also

becomes him/herself. Such acts are conceived of as intrinsically poetic, and Momaday's discourse straddles the border between narrative and poetry. The same performative gesture informs his novels and poems, and it will generate "prose poems" like those in his *Shields* series, in *In the Presence of the Sun*. In "Bote-talee's Shield," for instance, out of the recognition of significant reality (which takes place in a moment of encounter between self and world that has epiphanic character) there emerges a need for appropriation that has to be legitimated as a gift: it has to be placed within an interpersonal relationship that involves the mutual recognition, and hence *realization*, in the fullest sense of the word, of giver and receiver. (And the text suggests, too, perhaps that the gift only confirms what has already, rightfully, been the case: a proper relatedness of human to nature/spirit.) In the text, the performance of the encounter and of the act of giving constitute reality; and the text, as the performance of the performance, intends the constitution of reality:

Bote-talee found the Spider Woman. In the early morning he went swimming. When he reached the bank he looked directly up into the sun. There, just before his eyes, was a spider's web. It was a luminous, glistening shield. Bote-talee looked at it for a long time. It was so beautiful that he wanted to cry. He wondered if it were strong as well as beautiful. He flung water upon it, heavy water, again and again, but it remained whole and glistened all the more.

Then a sun spider entered upon the web. "Spider Woman," Bote-talee said, "Will you give me this perfect shield?"

"Bote-talee," said Spider Woman, "This is your shield." (83)

In both of these instances, which basically make use of modernist paradigms of sense-making, performance is constructive, constitutive of meaning, and ultimately symbolic and holistic. Transcription texts like Wendy Wickwire's rendering of Harry Robinson's (a major Okanagan traditional storyteller's) "An Okanagan Indian Becomes a Captive Circus Showpiece in England" indicate *ex negativo* where that dimension is present in traditional storytelling: not in the spoken text so much as in the verbal and physical interaction between storyteller and audience, which is situationally bounded and (as in Silko) constitutive of community. The transcription text indicates the importance of this dimension precisely by being unable to offer it to its readers, and by refusing to offer him/her a surrogate, so that he/she will have to provide it imaginatively, or even physically, by beginning to recite the text. The story only comes together in the oral performance of its reading:

This is about George Jim.

He belongs to Ashnola Band those days.

I had it written down, 1886.
 No, I mean 1887.
 That's one year I'm out there.
 That's supposed to be in the 1880s.
 That time, 1886,
 the people, Indians from Penticton,
 all the Okanagan Indians,
 they were sent from Similkameen.
 They all move to Oroville (is now) in the month of August,
 about the last week in the month of August.
 And they all get together in Oroville.
 And that's when the salmon come up.
 Comes up, you know, from way down.
 They come up on the Columbia River
 and they come up on the Okanagan.
 And some of them go up, they split up there.
 Some of them go up the Columbia River.
 They have a good place for catching them there in Oroville.
 Kind of shallow.
 Only a small river. (54)

What the text also impresses the reader with is the unfinishedness of its material presence, or its ultimately arbitrary constructedness out of elements from a repertoire. (Even the title only refers to one of a series of episodes and themes strung together in the text, and not even, one could argue, to the most important one.) The reliance of the finished performance on an open score is as much an aspect of this dimension as the multiplicity of performances that can be based on the same score. That very closure that is intended by the performances of Momaday and Silko is in this dimension as much avoided as it is replicated in the individual reading of the text.

Performance here is strung between the poles of sense-making/closure and indeterminacy/deferral. The latter aspect becomes dominant in the verbal play of King's "The One About Coyote Going West," when a coyote story, in which both the narrator (a trickster figure him/herself) and his visitor Coyote, both highly conscious of the existence of an entire repertoire of Coyote stories and its availability for retelling, attempt to trick one another by an exchange of trickster stories:

This one is about Coyote. She was going west. Visiting relations. That's what she said. You got to watch that one. Tricky one. Full of bad business. No, no, no, no, that one says. I'm just visiting.

Going to see Raven.

Boy, I says. That's another tricky one.

Coyote comes by my place. She wag her tail. Make them happy noises. Sit on my porch. Look around. With them teeth. With that smile. Coyote put her nose in my tea. My good tea. Get that nose out of my tea, I says.

I'm going to see my friends, she says. Tell those stories. Fix this world. Straighten it up.

Oh boy, pretty scary that, Coyote fix the world, again.

Sit down, I says. Eat some food. Hard work that fix up the world. Maybe you have a song. Maybe you have a good joke.

Sure, says Coyote. That one wink her ears. Lick her whiskers.

I tuck my feet under that chair. Got to hide my toes. Sometimes that tricky one leave her skin sit in that chair. Coyote skin. No Coyote. Sneak around. Bite them toes. Make you jump. (180)

The self-referential box-within-a-box pattern, the play with levels of narration, and the unending struggle for discursive power place this story firmly within the postmodern field in which we also find, as perhaps the most prominent Native American player, Gerald Vizenor. His texts, in a collection like *Wordarrows*, do what the title of the volume indicates and what the following beginning of the "Introduction" discusses – they recognize in history a conflict of discourses and a struggle for discursive and generally cultural power:

The oral tradition in some tribal cultures twilled well the fabrics of contention and humor from explorers and fur traders without losing a sacred verbal or visual beat. Those who followed the adventurous fur traders into the woodlands and across the prairie, the white settlers, traveled hard with social and political insecurities in their minds and religious fervor in their hearts. The settlers were strenuous tests of tribal wit and vision. The most barbarous trial of the oral tradition came in federal and ecclesiastic boarding schools where tribal languages and religions were forbidden with the threat of corporal violence, but the oral tradition has prevailed in fine humor over the grim realities of colonial suppression. (3)

Vizenor's texts play off discursive patterns against one another in agonistic patterns that have performative aspects and refuse closure just as much as King's do. And the difficulty of some of Vizenor's passages vanishes as soon as they are "performed": read aloud.

One has to recognize, then, that performance – being strung, as I said, between the poles of sense-making/closure and indeterminacy/deferral – is not a single, unitary thing. This may be precisely one reason why it has become so useful to intercultural literature, whose very central problems it can be taken to "contain":

- in a postmodernist/deconstructive/poststructuralist perspective, performance, utilizing pre-existent repertoires that are by definition multiple, is itself multiple, and always already secondary; it is anti-essentialist, non- or anti-naturalizing, anti-organic;
- in a modernist perspective, as present today in a lot of ethnopoeitics, for instance, performance is primary, organic, single, natural, and the display of an essence: the whole person moves, in it, at once, in a single act, rather than its performance being the evanescent trace of an uncapturable whole.

If this sounds as if I thought that you can do just about anything with the notion of performance these days, this is not quite true. It is the tension within the multiple or multifarious notion of performance, rather than either side in isolation, that is ultimately interesting, and if one had the time, one could go back to Momaday and Silko and point at the deconstructive aspects of their writing, which are less prominent than the constructive ones, but clearly present; and in Vizenor and King one could find subdominant and sublated forms of an organic ideal that fuels their writing. What appears to be in a sort of balance in Robinson/Wickwire seems to be developed in different directions by the two pairs of authors, whom I have provisionally made to stand for these directions here. Between them a space is opened for different forms of performance, or different ways of performing performance. This space, as we know, is extensively being used today not only by intercultural literature, for which Native American literature has stood here, but also by other constructions of "minority" identities, which face the same problems of organic unity and anti-essentialism as ethnic minorities and which are not for nothing so often talked about in terms of performance. The opening of that space could perhaps be traced back to an original "salvationist" postmodernism, which was a programmatically *late 1960s* approach (with all that phrase implies), and for which the names of critics and theorists of performance like Schechner or Blau might in part be made to stand. But that is a different question.

Works Cited

- Engler, Balz. "Native American Song and English Versions: Translation Between Oral and Literate Cultures." *Anglistentag Tübingen 1987*. Ed. Hans-Werner Ludwig. Giessen: Hoffmann, 1988. 209-221.
- Highway, Tomson. *The Rez Sisters*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1988.

- Iser, Wolfgang. "On Translatability: Variables of Interpretation." *The European English Messenger* 4.1 (Spring 1995): 30-38.
- King, Thomas. "The One About Coyote Going West." *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. Ed. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992. 180-187.
- Krupat, Arnold. "An Approach to Native American Texts." *Critical Inquiry* 9.2 (1982): 323-338.
- Momaday, N. Scott. *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961-1991*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992.
- Robinson, Harry [and Wendy Wickwire]. "An Okanagan Indian Becomes a Captive Circus Showpiece in England." *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. Ed. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992. 54-74.
- Silko, Leslie. *Ceremony*. New York: Signet, 1978.
- Storm, Hyemeyohsts. *Seven Arrows*. New York: Ballantine, 1972.
- Vizenor, Gerald. *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites and the New Fur Trade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978.