

Nineteenth-Century Versions of American Indian Poetry

Introducing the text of a Powhatan song in his *Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (1612), William Strachey offers what may be the first literary account in English of Native American cultural performance: "They have likewise their *erotica carmina*, or amorous dittyes in their language, which they will sing tunable ynough: [and] they have contrived a kynd of angry song against us in their homely rhymes, which concludeth with a kynd of Petition unto their *Okeus*, and to all the host of their Idolls, to plague [us]." Confident in his ability to make sense of the Powhatans, Strachey immediately recognizes "rhymes" in their singing, however "homely," and a literary genre, however low. Yet he also quietly admits to a degree of incomprehension. By inventing "a kynd of angry song" and by making "a kynd of Petition," the Powhatans elude his ability to describe them precisely; Strachey's word *kynd* hints at the dimensions of the Powhatans's cultural difference.

This tension – between an immediate presumption of the Powhatans' intelligibility and a persistent, if underarticulated sense of their strangeness – becomes a central tension, historically, in the reception of certain Native American cultural forms. In referring the Powhatan performances to the familiar, Strachey might be said to inaugurate the idea of a North American Indian poetry, whereby, up to the present moment, such forms have been represented and understood *as literature*. In suggesting that such performances may be unlike anything he knows, he anticipates much later attempts, mainly by professional anthropologists, to describe Native cultures on terms closer to their own.

Nothing in the wide array of indigenous forms that becomes "American Indian Poetry" at the hands of missionaries, travelers, litterateurs, and anthropologists over the course of the nineteenth century was intended for the kinds of literary interpretation we produce in relation to works by poets such as Emily Dickinson or John Greenleaf Whittier. While a few of these Native originals were preserved in original language texts, and many were associated with mnemonic pictographs, none was created within a print culture, or meant primarily for pleasure. Although a few were the recent creations of individual "poets," most were traditional. Some were secret and archaic, instruments of power subject to the control of a specific individual or set of initiates; others, like the Minnetare songs (LOA, 2: 679) that Lewis Henry Morgan recorded in the 1860s, were quite literally owned ("it is not uncommon to give a horse for [one]," Morgan notes in his *Indian Journals*, 1859–62). Almost all were associated with a particular activity (healing, gambling, or waging war), or time of day or year, or ceremony, from which they would not have been thought detachable. Each performance was bound up with its occasion.

The distinct orders of reality that find expression in Native performance modes beg questions of the non-Native interpreter who have considered such performances primitive. In the case of a typical song of the Kwakiutl winter ceremonial, for example – a "Hāmats'a Song of the Koskimo" (LOA, 2: 737), translated by Franz Boas – it is the world from which the song must have emerged that seems most in need of clarification:

You will be known all over the world; you will be known all over the world, as far as the edge of the world, you great one who safely returned from the spirits.

You will be known all over the world; you will be known all over the world, as far as the edge of the world. You went to BaxbakuālanuXsi'waē, and there you ate first dried human flesh.

You were led to his cannibal pole in the place of honor of his house, and his house is our world.

You were led to his cannibal pole, which is the milky way of our world.

You were led to his cannibal pole at the right-hand side of our world.

In what sort of cosmos does the singer of this song find himself or herself? Would this have constituted Kwakiutl reality, or some special condition of reality? Who is – indeed, how does one pronounce – BaxbakuālanuXsi'waē, and in what way is he associated with cannibalism? What exactly is a "cannibal pole," and why is it on the right-hand side of things?

In order to begin to get one's bearings in relation to this single song, one has to reconstruct and figure out an entire discursive world. This task would include reading the dense and complex work from which the song is taken (Boas's 1897 monograph "The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians"), other songs, and other ethnographic accounts. In the course of this reconstruction-prior-to-criticism, metacritical questions, just as fundamental, might emerge as well: is close exegetical attention an appropriate way of engaging with such a text? In what sense can or should one interpret it? What sort of discipline would it take to come to know it?

Given the differences that exist between Kwakiutl culture and that of the Passamaquoddy, or the Choctaw, or the Navajo, is it even useful to speak of Native performance as such? Some literary students of Native cultures, such as Gretchen Bataille, confidently assert that "American Indian literature ranks with other great literary traditions of the past and present," but with what kind of instruments have such comparative judgments been made (*MELUS* 6 [1979])? Native American languages, as Daniel Garrison Brinton lamented in the late nineteenth century, are "one of the most neglected branches of learning." Echoing Brinton more than a century later, Karl Kroeber remarks with some frustration (see also Laura Coltelli) on the difficulty of addressing Native literatures in an adequately informed way:

One wants the comparatist to be competent in the language of a text foreign to that in which he writes precisely so that his critical translation will be cogent. But nobody can know more than a mere handful of languages. How, then, can a comparatist deal with the multiplicity and diversity of non-Western literatures? How can I begin to train students in the study of traditional Native American literatures when I cannot possibly know more than an infinitesimal number of the languages involved?

"The loss of a language," Wallace Stevens writes in *Adagia*, "creates confusion or dumbness." The task of recovering from this confusion – of learning how to describe and ask questions of Native forms while recognizing the fullness of their differences – has been subject, at least since the emergence of professional anthropology in the United States in the late 1870s, to an ever-increasing degree of rigor and specialization. With the authority granted by this disciplinary history, an anthropologist could argue that Native song belongs only to a tiny elite of scholars and to Native Americans themselves (who might in turn resent the scholars' encroachments). To approach Native texts with nothing more than a literary sensibility – without a knowledge of their original languages or of broader cultural vocabularies – would be to risk sheer impertinence, whether dilettantish or conscientious. Readers who took such an approach would look like they had an interest in strangeness for its own sake or for the sake of a token inclusiveness.

Some modes of anthropology, certainly, have been insufficiently interested in the complex stylistic features of Native performance. Despite all of their apparent linguistic sophistication, for example, Boas's versions of Kwakiutl song do little to register anything like performative élan, or the turn of voice and gesture. (A number of recent translators – among them Dell Hymes, Elaine Jahner, Howard Norman, Inés Talamantez, Denis Tedlock, and Paul Zolbrod – are attempting to recover this often neglected sense of oral style.) And anthropologists over the last couple of decades have begun to argue about the importance of texts and textual interpretation in their work, in a way that should at least complicate anthropology's claims that it has the primary responsibility, among the western disciplines, for addressing indigenous cultural production.

The most salient reason for deferring questions of disciplinary priority over the so-called traditional Native literatures, however, lies in the idiosyncratic and unreliable character of the *texts* that make up these literatures. In many cases, the oral performance modes of the nineteenth century are simply no longer vital or recoupable, or are at least much changed; their historical reception, which is diminishing and distorting sometimes beyond recognition, is all that remains. Where a continuous and stable performance tradition still exists, why bother with faded and curious representations of it? Indeed, a provisional imagination of traditions now lost, "upstreamed," as ethnohistorians would say, from more recent analogues, matters as much as the idea of fact matters in history: to draw attention to the contingencies of mediation and to give reasons for preferring some versions of history to others. As it is now available to us, however, the Native song and chant of the nineteenth century is a hybrid, para-literary genre in its own right – a record of the Anglo-Indian encounter that reveals as much about an evolving Euroamerican discourse on the Native as it does about the ostensible originals. At once literary and ethnographic, the intensely mediated nature of this record warrants a newly interdisciplinary kind of response – an *ethnocriticism* (to borrow Arnold Krupat's term) that would see traditional Native texts as a new set of objects, with demands that have been incompletely met by literary criticism, ethnohistory, or a functionalist anthropology alone.

The Delaware *Walam Olum* (LOA, 2: 699) could reasonably be included in a selection of nineteenth-century versions

of American Indian poetry: as a significant fake (see the textual note in LOA, 2: 997–98). Ostensibly an ancient historical epic (and published as such as recently as 1993, with the endorsement of the Grand Chief of the Delaware Nation Grand Council), this text recounts the Creation to the arrival of Europeans in America. On linguistic grounds, however, the text appears to have been written much later. Its curious provenance, involving a shadowy "Dr. Ward," suggests the literary convention of the found manuscript, and its plot, which is replete with Old Testament parallels, would seem all too neatly to prove the "Lost Tribes of Israel" theory of Indian origins that was still current in 1820, the year of its supposed discovery. As what is probably the deliberate forgery of a Native American text, the *Walam Olum* has few counterparts. (Daniel Garrison Brinton unwittingly published one song – the work of two Frenchmen who had invented an entire tribal literature – in his 1882 *Aboriginal American Authors and Their Productions*, but he later caught his mistake; in *The Path on the Rainbow*, a still-reprinted anthology of 1914, this particular song is nonetheless singled out for praise as "intrinsically American.") Whether the apparently *legitimate* examples of American Indian poetry produced through the middle of the nineteenth century reveal works that are more original than the fabricated epic is open to question, however. The ideals of accuracy and disinterestedness in ethnographic representation begin to emerge only with the rise of anthropology as a profession, and even then inconsistently. Before this period, Native performance is invariably represented in ways that seem to owe as much to a preexisting discourse on the Indian, or to notions of the literary, as to the qualities of a particular Native original.

Lewis Cass, writing for the *Columbian Star* on April 20, 1822, offers a brief example of Miami song: "I will kill – I will kill – the Big Knives, I will kill" (LOA, 2: 662). While this text may or may not be faithful to a source now lost – there is little evidence either way – it would certainly have conformed to Cass's larger judgments about Native Americans. A defender, against substantial contemporary opposition, of the right of "the Big Knives," or white Americans, to effect a policy of Indian removal, Cass elsewhere argues that Indians bear a "natural hostility to, and even *hatred* of the whites," which arises out of a "natural jealousy" of their superior power. Provoked only by this jealousy, Cass argues, they attack frontier settlements (*United States Review and Literary Gazette* 2 [1827]). Cass's choice of this particular song, at least, out of an undoubtedly broader Miami repertoire, seems to reflect and confirm a preconceived idea of Indian savagery.

Cass appeals explicitly to an idea of the savage in order to criticize the writings of a contemporary translator of Native song, John Heckewelder. "Even without . . . an acquaintance [with actual Indians], with only a common apprehension of what would be the probable character of a *wild* man, most readers would set down many of his representations as absurd," Cass writes. Heckewelder's "Song of the Lenape Warriors Going Against the Enemy" (LOA, 2: 661) does give a more likable and complex picture of Indian subjectivity than "I will kill – I will kill – the Big Knives, I will kill," yet it may be the product of a set of preconceptions nonetheless. First printed in his *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations* (1819), a few years before the Cass text, it begins:

O poor me!
 Who am going out to fight the enemy,
 And know not whether I shall return again,
 To enjoy the embraces of my children
 And my wife.
 O poor creature!
 Whose life is not in his own hands,
 Who has no power over his own body,
 But tries to do his duty
 For the welfare of his nation.
 O! thou Great Spirit above!
 Take pity on my children
 And on my wife!

Cass, a frontier legislator, finds in Miami song a kind of savagery that would justify Indian removal. Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary, presents an Indian capable of the tenderest piety, domestic feeling, and civic pride – sensibilities that would argue not only for the Indian's full humanity but for his susceptibility to and worthiness of conversion.

Despite these apparent overdeterminations, both authors offer a kind of detail in their accounts that cannot be explained away as the product of an "anti-Indian" or "pro-Indian" ideology. In places they write as if, uncertain of what they knew, they had committed themselves simply to record everything. Heckewelder notes, for example, that the Lenape sing "in short lines or sentences, not always the whole at one time . . . as time permits and as the occasion or their feelings prompt them"; Cass remarks on the Indian use of "metaphorical expression" and, indeed, produced a lengthy questionnaire for Indian agents, *Inquiries Respecting the History, Traditions, Languages, Manners, Customs, Religions, &c. of the Indians, Living within the United States* (1823). Part of questionnaire asks, in a way that would seem irrelevant to a goal of clearing the land for white settlement, "do they relate stories, or indulge in any work of the imagination? Have they any poetry? If so, is it poetry with measured verse, or without? Have they any rhymes?"

These questions may contain their own answers, yet they at least suggest Cass's affiliation with later scientific anthropology. While he refers to Indian song and chant as "oral poetry," he offers examples far less to gratify his readers' aesthetic senses than to inform them of facts. Indeed, as William M. Clements usefully observes, it may be that *because* Cass and his contemporaries had few literary ambitions for Native materials, their translations are more accurate than those produced over the next three or four decades. If the idea of literary quality – of rhyme and measured verse – had entered their minds, it might have entirely obscured indigenous stylistic features.

American Indian poetry as such – as a specifically literary genre – appears to emerge alongside the American Renaissance, and most prominently at the hands of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, whose six-volume *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting the History, Conditions and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States* (1851–57) includes the first significant collection of Native American lyric ever published, although this collection is scattered among the myriad sections and subsections of Schoolcraft's work. Hired by Cass as a geologist on an expedition to the upper Mississippi River, Schoolcraft became, with Cass's help, an Indian agent for the tribes around Lake Superior. Schoolcraft married Jane Johnson, the

European-educated granddaughter of an Ojibwa chief; she and her family, in the 1820s, provided him with his first translations of Native texts. By mid-century, Schoolcraft had recognized the literary opportunities such texts afforded, and his own reworkings of them had found a sympathetic audience.

As early as 1815, lamenting the absence of an American national literature and seeking a basis on which to found one, Walter Channing turned to indigenous tradition. "In the oral literature of the Indian," he writes, "even when rendered in a language enfeebled by excessive cultivation, every one has found genuine originality." While Channing stops short of suggesting that European Americans might look toward this oral literature as a source for their own work, others eventually followed his lead. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow not only versified one of Schoolcraft's Indian songs but borrowed considerably from the legends in Schoolcraft's *Algonquian Researches* (1839) for his *Song of Hiawatha* (1855; see LOA, 1: 399). (For a different account of Schoolcraft's efforts, see the essay on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in this volume.) Walt Whitman, apparently unaware of Schoolcraft, had expressed the want of a figure like him in the late 1840s, in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. His sentiments were by no means uncommon for the period:

It were a lucky thing could some itinerant author be found, willing to travel through wood and forest, over prairie and swamp, along the borders of rivers, and upon the bosom of lakes – in short, amid any and every part of what is now the margin of our cultivated American territory at the west and north and gather up the stories of settlers, and the remnants of Indian legends which abound among them. Such would be the true and legitimate romance of this continent.

Schoolcraft not only encouraged this gathering up of Native "remnants" and their literary appropriation but worked himself to "improve" upon texts he had collected, usually from third parties. It has become almost a commonplace in recent essays on the translation of Native American song, following A. Grove Day, to refer to Schoolcraft's dual translation of an Ojibwa "Chant to the Fire-Fly" (LOA, 2: 678) as an example of such improvement: a "literal" version purports to offer ethnographic fact, while a "literary" one reflects a new aesthetic appreciation for the oral production of the Indian. An even more striking example of such reworking can be found in what begins as an untitled Ojibwa war song, "taken from Tsheetsheegwyung, a young Chippewa warrior, of *La Pointe*, in Lake Superior, and translated by Mr. George Johnston." As first printed in Schoolcraft's *Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley* (1825), one of its stanzas reads:

They cross the enemies' line – the birds!
 They cross the enemies' line!
 The birds – the birds, – the ravenous birds!
 They cross the enemies' line, &c.

The subsequent history of this text shows not only the danger of looking to American Indian poetry for what it would reveal of its sources but some of the values involved in mid-nineteenth-century text-making. Schoolcraft introduces the song at first as "poetry, if it be not too violent an application of the term." Like his mentor Cass, he is unwilling to grant much appeal to Native texts in themselves. He does see them, howev-

er, as eminently improvable and as possessed of a kind of curious interest; so he tinkers. Printing another "literal" translation in *Oneóta* (1845), he suppresses repetition and pares down lines – "The birds of the brave take a flight round the sky," for one, becomes "The birds – circling" (LOA, 2: 671). In *Indian Melodies* (1830), he so embellishes his source that it becomes, like *The Song of Hiawatha*, a poem with an Indian theme more than an Indian poem:

They cross the line . . . they cross the line, the birds they
cross the line,
Foreboding to our foes defeat, all by the prophet's sign;
And we will up and follow thence, and we will up and
fight,
And die as erst our fathers died, combatting for our
right.
Our fathers' might,
Ye bards recite,
Raise high the battle cry;
For we will go
To meet our foe,
And like our fathers die.

In the 1840s, Schoolcraft persuaded the poet Charles Fenno Hoffman to offer yet another version:

Bird, in thine airy rings
Over the foeman's line,
Why do thy flapping wings
Nearer me thus incline?
Blood of the Dauntless brings
Courage, oh Bird to thine!
Baim-wä-wä!

That most readers today would probably prefer the literal translations to Hoffman's on literary grounds alone is part of one of the larger ironies in the reception history of Indian poetry: that the semblance of accuracy in itself has been aestheticized at the expense of the seemingly too smooth. The rougher versions, however, are not necessarily more true than the smoother ones. Nevertheless, since Schoolcraft and Hoffman had no knowledge of the Ojibwa language, one can guess that their second- and third-hand revisions, however successful as English verse, were diminishing rather than elucidating. Yet translators began to emerge later in the century who ably balanced their knowledge of Native cultures with an ideal of literate English translation.

Washington Matthews provides a case in point. Stacks upon stacks of notecards, among his papers, testify to the years of amateur labor he devoted to the Navajo language. He also wrote to Edmund Clarence Stedman, editor of *An American Anthology* (1900), hoping (unsuccessfully) to find a place there for Navajo poetry; his translations, free but faithful, have a spare kind of eloquence. One example, the "Song of the Stricken Twins" (LOA, 2: 750), comes from a myth associated with a variant of the Navajo night chant:

From the white plain where stands the water,
From there we come,
Bereft of eyes, one bears another.
From there we come.
Bereft of limbs, one bears another.

From there we come.
Where healing herbs grow by the waters,
From there we come.
With these your eyes you shall recover.
From there we come.

From meadows green where ponds are scattered,
From there we come.
Bereft of limbs, one bears another.
From there we come.
Bereft of eyes, one bears another.
From there we come.
By ponds where healing herbs are growing,
From there we come.
With these your limbs you shall recover.
From there we come.
With these your eyes you shall recover.
From there we come.

One fairly recent example of the reception of Native American texts from within the perspective of western literary history can be found in Andrew Welsh's *Roots of Lyric* (1978). Crediting Native song forms with an unencumbered expressiveness akin to that of western poetry at its oral beginnings, Welsh characterizes the songs of the pan-tribal Ghost Dance religion (among other Native texts) as Ur-forms of the lyric, which are possessed of "communal rhythms" and "deeply rooted in the communal consciousness" in a way that "the most sophisticated poetic traditions" only rarely can be. Like Alice Fletcher, who describes Omaha song in *Study of Omaha Indian Music* (1893) as "nascent poetry," he assimilates Ghost Dance songs to the *primitive*, in the best sense of that term. Reoriented in relation to an evolutionary narrative of western literary history, their non-westerness is made to seem *pre-western*, their most conspicuous quality a freedom from the anxious, belated self-consciousness of modern literary culture.

To a point, the characterization makes sense: Native song and chant probably have more in common with the *Iliad* than with Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*. Yet, if critics dwell on the "earliness" of such forms, they tend to obscure the historical character of Native song and chant. In spite of the still-prevalent romantic association of Native cultures with an immemorial wisdom (as if they were our ancients) – and acknowledging the differences between a western historicism and indigenous ways of accounting for being-in-time – the content of songs and chants recorded in the nineteenth century remains unaffected by European invasion only in the rarest of cases. Most, like the "angry song" Strachey encountered at the outset of English colonization, already register the pressures of a post-contact order, however seamlessly they may have integrated these pressures into an indigenous worldview.

Within its own cultural situation, the Ghost Dance figures more like a last embellishment than a point of bright origin. Conceived in the extreme conditions created by westward expansion, its songs express a yearning, by turns apocalyptic and elegiac, for the restoration of a pre-European world and yoke together a host of distinct cultural traditions, including non-Native traditions, in an uneasy pastiche. Aimed at cultural revitalization, and in part effective as such, they reveal the syncretizing disintegration of the cultures from which they emerged. "Jesus

has taken pity on us," one announces (in James Mooney's version, from the Kiowa, of 1896; LOA, 2: 735):

God has had pity on us,
 God has had pity on us.
 Jesus has taken pity on us,
 Jesus has taken pity on us.
 He teaches me a song,
 He teaches me a song,
 My song is a good one,
 My song is a good one.

Relating his or her vision from within a trance state, the singer affirms this song as "a good one" to indicate the redemptive quality of the world to come. The fact that Ghost Dance songs have achieved a kind of canonical status among nineteenth-century Native texts, however, may have more to do with the way they exemplify certain literary-ethnographic conventions about the nature of Native utterance. Most prominently, their invocation of the idea of a happy beyond, especially from the midst of circumstances so acute, is elegiac in a way that fits the convention of the dying or vanishing Indian, a still-current convention that was already well-established when John Eliot published *Dying Speeches of Several Indians* in 1685. They also concentrate long-standing associations of Native speech with a natural, even a preternatural eloquence. Performed (if one credits the trance state) without artifice or self-consciousness, even without human agency, they appeal to a literary longing, especially pronounced under romanticism, for unmediated vision and more-than-human voice.

This longing produces some wildly generous or at least seemingly generous ethnographic representations in the nineteenth century, and may partly account for the century's proliferation of Indian poems. In his *Song of Myself*, for one, Whitman includes a "friendly and flowing savage" whose orphic persuasiveness is independent even of language – it is "wafted with the odor of his body or breath," and "[f]lies] out of the glance of his eyes." Caleb Atwater, in a chapter of *Remarks Made on a Tour to Prairie du Chien* (1831) on "Indian Poetry," claims that savages "As a people . . . are more poetical than civilized men" (emphasis added). Since the Indian under the mid-nineteenth-century discourse of noble savagism was poetical without even speaking, it is no wonder that the Native texts of the period were treated more as pretexts than in their difficult particularity. Looking at a typical example of Indian poetry, James S. Brisbin finds a poetry of nature – winds with voices and articulate trees. His description in "The Poetry of the Indians" (*Harper's*, 1887) of a singer-orator runs from actual topics (war, love) and definite stylistic features (meter, monosyllables) to "unseen yet beautiful spirits," which transcend both.

War, love, and the chase burst from his lips in weird music, but it is impossible to reduce to metre and connect the flashes of his genius. His monosyllables, his eye, the nod of his head and the waving of hands – all these are potential in his song, and mean more than mere words. Viewed in this light, the winds have voices, the leaves of the trees utter a language, and even the earth is animated with a crowd of unseen yet beautiful spirits.

As right and as prescient as this passage may be in its refusal to accept "mere words" alone as bearers of meaning – at a time

when essential oral features of Native performance were regularly reduced and discounted – it turns on notions of orphic "potential" and Indian naturalness that are indebted more to Whitman and to the noble savages represented in books, it seems, than to the real eloquence of any native performer. More often than not, when later nineteenth-century fieldworkers actually listened to Native song, their reactions were mixed. Albert S. Gatschet's comments on the Klamath Incantation songs (LOA, 2: 711) that he collected in Oregon in the late 1870s are not atypical:

The chorus varies the melody somewhat each time, but this musical variation is so slight and insignificant that the general impression of monotony is not dispelled by it. Quite a number of these songs have very pretty melodies, but by long repetition even these of course must produce tediousness and disgust; other songs have weird and strange tunes, others are quaint, but almost repulsive by their shrill accents.

It would not be too difficult to dismiss Gatschet's response here as an instance of cultural chauvinism – looking for "pretty melodies," he is fairly predictably let down. Yet this stubborn unreceptivity cannot be much worse than Brisbin's more sophisticated and appealing general praise, which the latter offered from an armchair. Klamath chant may simply have been unassimilable, even unpleasant, to a western aesthetic sense of the nineteenth century (and it might be premature to assume that we have since been enlightened). Pleasantness was not what Klamath chant was about in any case: it was meant to heal, not to entertain.

The preliterate nature of Native performance did not guarantee that its *intended* auditors experienced it as a pleasure, or in an authentic or immediate way. Quite a few examples of it, in fact, were esoteric, archaic, or difficult – even subject to exegetical dispute. Stephen Powers writes of the Konkow ceremonies that he witnessed in California in the 1870s: "a number of the words either belong to an occult, priestly language, or are so antiquated that the modern Indians . . . are unable to agree absolutely on their meanings." The singers of the Navajo Atsá'lei Song (LOA, 2: 749), which Washington Matthews translated around the turn of the century, approached their work with something like a hard professionalism, not an effortless orphic genius. As Matthews explains in "The Night Chant: A Navaho Ceremony" (1902):

Although it consists mostly of meaningless syllables, [the song] is perhaps the most important of the whole ceremony. The singers are drilled long and thoroughly in private before they are allowed to sing in public. It is said that if a single syllable is omitted or misplaced, the ceremony terminates at once; all the preceding work of nine days' duration is considered valueless and the participants and spectators may return, at once, to their homes. Visiting chanters, and others who know the song well, having sung it at other celebrations of the rite, listen attentively and, if they note an error, proclaim it.

One never awakens, among Native Americans at least, to find a dream of natural eloquence come true: only to other sets of forms and conventions that are hard to see. If, working within these forms, a Native performer had risen to a moment of real

eloquence, authentic on its own terms – *eloquence* not necessarily being one of these – even professional non-Native observers would likely not have noticed it, because they probably would not have known what to look for.

As such, when Leslie Silko refers to the collection of Native texts as a kind of theft (*The Remembered Earth*, edited by Geary Hobson, University of New Mexico Press, 1981), she at once incisively locates this activity in its imperialist context, but she also may be protesting too much:

[A] racist assumption still abounding is that the prayers, chants, and stories weaseled out by the early white ethnographers, which are now collected in ethnological journals, are public property. Presently, a number of Native American communities are attempting to recover religious objects and other property taken from them in the early 1900's that are now placed in museums. Certainly, the songs and stories which were taken by the ethnographers are no different.

In the exhibition cases of the Museum of the American Indian in New York, red circles mark the places of religious objects returned to the descendants of their original owners – or at least their withdrawal from public view. Should a similar degree of reticence and respect be extended to traditional Native texts? Some were highly sacred, certainly – even meant to be kept secret.

Indeed, removed from the horizons of their original reception, these texts became part of a discourse of savagism inextricably linked to the westward consolidation of American empire. Most of these texts were produced by agents or agencies of the federal government that was dispossessing Native Americans: Schoolcraft's magnum opus (*Historical and Statistical Information . . .*) was made to congressional order, as was the Bureau of American Ethnology, the institution responsible for the large majority of the nineteenth-century texts now extant. Most ethnographers *also* collected objects for national museums; and while a few acted as advocates for Native peoples against official Indian policy – like James Mooney, who successfully protected the peyote rite as a religion – the rest tended in the manner of the times to act upon the hope that their objects of study might someday be assimilated.

It is not at all clear, however, that Native texts were ever efficiently "taken" in the first place, in spite of numerous attempts. Even the phonographs fieldworkers had begun to use around the turn of the century – the most advanced technology of ethnographic collection then available – lacked the magic entirely to carry away, to translate what was vital in what they recorded. The approximations that *were* taken, while they may satisfy the thief with an approximate appreciation and understanding of their owners, offer nothing immanent, nothing like the familiarity and self-possession with which Native Americans continue to perform their cultural inheritance.

MATTHEW PARR

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