

Brian SWANN (ed.), *On the Translation of Native American Literatures* (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, 478 p., (hardcover) ISBN 1-56098-074-5)

Patrick Moore

Volume 15, Number 2, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083212ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083212ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Moore, P. (1993). Review of [Brian SWANN (ed.), *On the Translation of Native American Literatures* (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, 478 p., (hardcover) ISBN 1-56098-074-5)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(2), 193–197.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1083212ar>

Celebrations in recent years have been less elaborate, but still belong clearly to North America and not to Ireland.

Nancy Schmitz has spent ten years on what is obviously a labour of love, a phrase she uses to describe the commitment over many years of the people who organised annual dinners, soirées, parades, religious services and other celebrations, in Québec City and neighbouring communities. Packed with group photographs and proper names, newspaper ads, menus and song sheets, at first glance this looks like the kind of book that will tell the reader dishearteningly more than she wants to know. With her meticulous attention to detail however, Schmitz has produced a work that is at once a rich local history, an absorbing study of popular culture, and a valuable document for our understanding of voluntary ethnicity.

Angela BOURKE
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
University College
Dublin, Ireland

Brian SWANN (ed.), *On the Translation of Native American Literatures* (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992, 478 p., (hardcover) ISBN 1-56098-074-5)

This is a remarkable collection of 23 essays on the translation of Native American literatures by distinguished scholars in English, anthropology, folklore, and linguistics. The editor has gathered together a wide range of truly inspiring essays which illuminate the joys and frustrations of translating native literature.

The presentation is in three parts: the first part presents general essays, the second and third parts present specific works on the native literatures of North, Central and South America. Brian Swann's own introduction, recounting the gradual recognition of Native American literature, flows nicely into the essay by Arnold Krupat which begins with a re-examination of nineteenth century translations of native songs and chants. Krupat goes on to summarize the development of contemporary approaches to academic translations represented by scholars such as Jerome Rothenberg, Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Anthony Mattina, Don Bahr and Leanne Hinton. He presents actual translations by each of these researchers, making his presentation one of the clearest, most useful summaries of developments in this field. Each essay is also followed by an extensive list of references for those who are interested in pursuing topics further.

The piece by William Clements returns to nineteenth century translators who often expressed a racist disregard for native oral traditions. In the following essay John Bierhorst shows how the low esteem of native literature in nineteenth century literary circles has been reversed in recent times. He considers the increasingly important contribution native literature is making to mainstream English and Spanish literature. Bierhorst identifies several prominent writers who have turned to native myths and poetry as sources for their works. The translation process does not end with the simple act of putting native traditions into written English, as these works are themselves often reworked as novels, detective stories, science fiction, and movies.

The final contribution to the first part is by poet and translator, Jerome Rothenberg. Rothenberg feels his own horizons as a poet have expanded through his attempts to express some of the phenomena he encountered in native literature. There are many fundamental dilemmas Rothenberg admits he cannot answer and he gives examples of these from his own translation work. I found his approach to the translation of Frank Mitchell's Navajo horse songs particularly interesting. One of the problems Rothenberg encountered was with the translation of vocables. The approach he took was to create his own English vocables by distilling the vocal essence of English words. He composed syllables such as wnn, nnnn, and gahn for use in his translations. This is a problem which Rothenberg would admit he did not solve. As I read the original transcription of these songs by David McAllester, images of other languages and songs come to mind. The last syllable of the Navajo vocable *e hye-la* brings to mind spoken Slavey and Kaska, languages related to Navajo, where the common particle *la* has a discourse function. When I read *nana yeye 'e*, I think of Slavey prayer songs in which each line ends as *hey-hey-hia* and Inuit *aye-aye* stories where each section ends with the vocables *aye-aye-aye*. It is difficult to find acceptable parallels in English which can be used in translating these songs, and Rothenberg's attempt, "Because I was thnboynngng raised ing the dawn NwnnN go to her my son N Nnn N Nnn N nnnn N gahn" clearly falls short. Most translators simply use like-sounding English syllables for the vocables in their translations. This may sidestep the very problem which Rothenberg yearns to grapple with, but these translators still raise the awareness of this feature of native songs.

The section on North America includes two articles with special relevance for the study of Canadian native literatures. One is a delightful article by Canadian linguist and Salishan scholar, Dale Kinkade, on Pentlatch, the other is a re-evaluation of one of Boas' Kwakw'ala texts by Judith Berman. These two articles have much in common since they both use material originally recorded by Franz Boas, and their analyses reveal much about Boas' interests and methods. Both Kinkade and Berman make extensive and effective use of structuralist analysis of myths in the tradition of Hymes. There is so much more Canadian work with many other languages which deserves recognition that perhaps a Canadian anthology would be in order.

The North American section begins with an essay by Dell Hymes, which is by any standards an epic both in terms of performance and competence. This essay could equally well have been included with the introductory essays since it deals with such a broad range of issues. As indicated by the title of his article, "Use All There Is to Use", Hymes believes passionately in using painfully detailed analysis to structure the presentation of translations. He considers everything from phonetic details to the number of major divisions (two-four, three-five) in the entire text. Thanks to the work of Hymes and others, translators are now much more attentive to the many levels of structure found in native literatures. The difficulty, of course, is knowing how much of this structure to present explicitly in the form of phonetic transcriptions, punctuation, line breaks, indentation, and section breaks. The problem applies equally to native language texts and English translations. Hymes' justification for including almost everything in the translation makes interesting reading. His influence is evident in the many essays in this collection which closely follow his style of analysis and translation. This essay is an important contribution by one of the pre-eminent Americanists.

Peter Whiteley's essay, "*Hopitungwni*: 'Hopi Names' as Literature" is my favourite of the collection. Hopi personal names evoke poetic images with complex ritual associations. His article tells us much about living Hopi communities in the same way that these personal names must remind the Hopi about their own traditions. The names also evoke a tremendous sense of pride that I can only compare to listening to native children speaking their language, or to watching young people singing and drumming. Whiteley's article commands respect both for his work and especially the Hopi who continue these traditions.

The other case studies from North America are well done, and contribute to a further understanding of native traditions in translation. The essays also inspire respect for those who devote themselves to recording and translating this material. Zolbrod's essay on his field experiences with Navajo was especially entertaining. It is difficult to interview and record people in a native language, and each story may be presented in a number of ways. Like Zolbrod, I have encountered some native language texts which were almost incomprehensible, even though I could translate nearly all the words. The native translators who I was working with were able to give the text its proper sense because they are far better attuned to native philosophy and descriptive metaphors. Native translators deserve specific recognition for their contributions to all of the work represented in this collection. There are no native essayists represented, but all of the articles are well informed by native sources and translators.

The studies of texts from Central America reveal clearly how much native speakers familiar with the culture can contribute to the elucidation of texts. The early Mayan, Mixtec, and Nahuatl manuscripts are especially challenging to translate partially because we no longer have native informants from this era.

Willard Gingerich's essay on translating Nahuatl poetry reveals many points of ambiguity that confront the translator of these texts, points which could be resolved if only contemporary translators had access to natives familiar with the traditions. For instance, Gingerich points out that we have no idea of how the rhythm of the *Cantares Mexicanos* (a collection of sixteenth century Nahua chants) relates to the drumming with which it was performed. By comparing various recorded versions of Nahua songs scholars have established that the singers worked closely with each other to maintain the integrity of memorized songs (Karttunen and Lockhart 1980), but we really don't know how they were composed, or who composed them. Similarly it would be useful to know more about the ceremonial uses of the songs, and how specific images related to the ceremonies. As Gingerich notes it is uncertain whether all of the vocables listed by Bierhorst in his translation of *Cantares* are truly vocables or whether some are particles with discourse functions. Short and long vowels were not distinguished by most of the early writers of Nahuatl, creating further ambiguities. Modern translators must also struggle to establish the third person referents of Nahuatl sentences because there are not distinctions in the third person for gender, or for human-animal distinctions. As Gingerich demonstrates, modern interpretations may have a man ravishing a deer-woman, rather than being ravished and devoured himself. Texts recorded in pre-Hispanic logossyllabic scripts present even more formidable barriers to interpretation. The difficulties which modern scholars encounter in their efforts to translate early Meso-American texts are reminders of the important role of native translators in translating contemporary languages and traditions.

Louise Burkhart focuses attention on the reinterpretation of Spanish traditions, specifically the traditions of Saint James, by Nahua translators in the sixteenth century. These translators resisted the domination of Spain by including Nahua concepts in their religious translations, and aligning the interests of Saint James, Jesus, and others with the Nahua people. Burkhart presents several passages from the *Psalmodia christiana* which was written by four Nahua scholars under the direction of the famous sixteenth century Spanish ethnographer, fray Bernardino de Sahagún. The contents of these "psalms" or "songs" are not based on any one original Spanish text, but rather freely combine traditions from the Bible, fictionalized accounts of the lives of saints, Spanish oral traditions and, of course, Nahua traditions.

This creative process continues in many forms among contemporary peoples. Don Bahr's essay on "Translating Papago Legalese" also deals with a translation problem where native people draw on both English and native traditions to create public documents. Bahr's idea of a "textless translation" could be applied to the Nahua songs as well because they are not based on any one original Spanish text, but rather a diverse set of traditions.

Similarly, Dennis Tedlock gives a playful interpretation of a syncretic Mayan origin myth in "The Story of Evenadam". He presents most of what is going through his head while he is listening to and editing the tape recorded story. Although his presentation is light-hearted, he raises a serious point which is not fully addressed in the work of Hymes. He states, "We seem to have entered a world where *every act of representation is also an act of interpretation.*" Tedlock opens a range of expression for the translator, since to him translation is a creative process. His essay is one of the most thought-provoking in this collection.

This volume provides fresh perspectives which will be of general interest to folklorists, anthropologists and others. The essays are well crafted, with abundant material from actual texts. Each writer takes care to explain the native language texts carefully, and provide adequate basic background information. There is also an index with entries for subjects, languages, authors, and source manuscripts which is helpful in locating examples quickly. This is a very useful book which is a credit both to the editor, Brian Swann, and to the Smithsonian Institute which is also sponsoring a series on studies in Native American literature.

Patrick MOORE
Yukon Native Language Centre
Whitehorse, Yukon

Julian RICE, *Deer Women and Elk Men: The Lakota Narratives of Ella Deloria* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1992, 211 p., ISBN 0-8263-1362-0)

Ella Deloria was the first Native American writer to produce a major literary opus both in her own language, Lakota Sioux, and in English. Born near the end of the nineteenth century, her life spanned dramatic changes sweeping Native American societies after 1890. Her childhood and adolescence were spent among Sitting Bull's people, the Hunkpapa, where Lakota was the primary language in her home, but she grew up bilingual because her parents were both fluent in English. She attended Oberlin College, University of Chicago and graduated from Columbia University in 1915 where she studied with Franz Boas and was a contemporary of Margaret Mead. In her continuing work as linguist and ethnologist during and after the 1920s she struggled to balance family responsibilities, care of aging parents, inadequate funding and the continued invisibility of Native Americans—even those like herself—"who had bought the assimilationist promise of prosperity and prestige in return for education and effort" (p. 3).