

Keeping the Word: On Orality and Literacy (With a Sideways Glance at Navajo)

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“Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation.”

Laurence Sterne, *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy*

This article investigates the relationship between “orality” and “literacy.” I take as my starting point the discussion by Walter Ong (1982) of the shift in “consciousness” that resulted from the movement from an “oral culture” to a “literate culture.” I discuss a number of specific examples of the relationship between orality and literacy. My purpose in these examples is to suggest that literacy and orality are kinds of specific linguistic ideologies (see Silverstein 1979) and that we need a much more complex understanding of literacy as an ideological position than Ong has offered. In this article, I wish to explore orality and literacy as complex and interacting notions. My purpose is not so much as to critique Ong (though there will be some of that), but rather to elaborate what we might mean by “orality” and “literacy” as on the ground, linguacultural phenomena (see Friedrich 1989).

I will begin, however, with a discussion of Ong’s critique of the use of the term “oral literature.” I will then turn to the relative fixity of oral literature. In doing so, I suggest that to fully understand “oral cultures” we need to have a more empirically based understanding of oral literatures and orality more generally. I then discuss the various ways that literacy is articulated. I argue that we cannot assume *a priori* that literacy everywhere means the same thing. What does it mean to write poetry in Navajo? Or in Kuna? What does literacy mean to Navajos versus the Nukulaelae (Besnier 1995)? Finally, I take up some of the implications of literacy as a way of artifacting “the word.” Much of this section will be based on specific examples from a wide variety of sources. I believe this is needed as a corrective to the grand theorizing that Ong has put forward. The devil, as they say, is in the details.

On Oral Literature and Orality

Ong spends much time discussing the term “oral literature,” which he considers a “strictly preposterous term” (1982:11). He bases this assertion on etymology, tracing the word “literature” back to the Latin root *litera*, “letter of the alphabet.” Ong goes on to state that (12):

One might argue...that the term “literature,” though devised primarily for works in writing, has simply been extended to include related phenomena such as traditional oral narrative in cultures untouched by writing. Many originally specific terms have been so generalized in this way. But concepts have a way of carrying their etymologies with them forever. The elements out of which a term is originally built usually, and probably always, linger in subsequent meanings.

Leaving aside Ong’s lack of evidence offered for this assertion and the almost metaphysical quality of meaning and etymology, there are a number of ideas that deserve some unpacking. First, etymology, the search for a word’s “true meaning,” is a linguistic ideology (that is, beliefs concerning the form, function, and use of language [see Silverstein 1979 and Rumsey 1990]). This ideology is based on the assumptions of the primacy of the referential or denotational meaning of a word, and represents only one possible linguistic ideology. Alan Rumsey (1990), for example, has suggested that among the Ungarinyin, a northwestern Australian group, there is a focus on pragmatic meaning over wording, on the enactive power of words over their referential function. Similarly, Gary Witherspoon (1977) and Margaret Field and Taft Blackhorse, Jr. (2002) argue that such an enactive ideology is found among Navajo peoples (see also Reichard 1944; Murray 1989). As Witherspoon writes (1977:60), “By speaking properly and appropriately one can control and compel the behavior and power of the gods. This is the ontological and rational basis of the compulsive power of speech.” A crucial feature of this enactive, efficacious, compulsive power of language can be found in the use of metonymy in Navajo ritual prayers (Field and Blackhorse 2002; see also Reichard 1944). Field and Blackhorse describe the dual function of metonymy this way (226):

In Navajo prayers it [metonymy] serves two overlapping functions: it serves as an aesthetic form that marks ritual language as a special genre, lending continuity over time, and it serves a performative function, lending compulsion to the power of the words to summon deities and their protection.

Etymologies, on the other hand, are based on a referentialist (non-performative) and fixed (if not essentialist) view of words (perhaps a by-product of literacy?).

Second, etymologies are naturalizing origin stories (Herzfeld 1997a). Ong traces the root of “literature” to Latin. This is a motivated stopping point, rather than being arbitrary or neutral. By stopping here, Ong privileges certain assertions about the origins of knowledge: we are therefore the intellectual progeny of Rome (and all that might entail). That the root might be traced back further, back into other Indo-European and proto-Indo-European languages, is not addressed. Furthermore, to suggest that, “the elements of which a term is originally built usually...linger” (Ong 1982:12) is to naturalize the relative arbitrariness of any etymological investigation. The truth, if one can still use such a term, is that—granting some use of etymologies to find *Ur*-meanings and not present-day usages (where meaning is created)—we will never know what a root “originally” meant for two reasons. First, we cannot trace a word to its source; rather, we will always make judgments about where to end our search (connecting High Roman Culture with English seems an obvious choice). Second, we cannot assume that a word had “a” meaning; rather we should suspect that words have always had multiple semantic domains, fuzzy boundaries, as well as pragmatic meanings. In short, etymology seems a weak argument for eliminating “oral literature” (see Bauman 1986).

Recent discussions have begun to attend to “literature” as a privileging of certain stretches of language use (discourse). I would now like to take up a useful discussion of literature by Donald Bahr (Bahr et al. 1997:174): “Oral *literature*, including song, arose as a means to fix those thoughts in memorable, recoverable, keepable forms...namely ‘stretches of language (discourse) kept in memory or (later) writing;’ or more simply, ‘kept language.’” He adds that “by ‘keeping’ I mean ‘keeping for *reenactment*,’ including retelling and rereading.” Bahr goes on to discuss three levels of fixity within—specifically—Native American oral literature (174-75). First, he suggests that the highest level of memorization can be found in song, stating “this is the level of perfect (sound for sound) recall.” Indeed, Bahr argues that exact replication of sound over time is a by-product of the song structure—a structure that cements sounds to a repeatable/memorable form (literature). Bahr cites instances of the replication of Pima songs as evidence for the exact reproduction of sounds.

The second level of fixity involves the use of chants, prayers, spells, and orations. According to Bahr (1997:175), “these attain...word-for-word (less rigorous than sound-for-sound) memorization.” Comparing a Pima

oratory recorded in 1901-02 and then again in 1903 by Thin Leather, he concludes that they “were in fact recited verbatim from memory” (1975:10). Correspondingly, Joel Sherzer (1990:240, n. 1) describes how he was able to elicit a verbatim reproduction of a puberty rite chant nine years after the original performance. Greg Urban (1991) compares Shokleng chants recorded in the 1930s by Jules Henry and chants he collected in the 1970s to show the relative degree of overlap between the versions. Finally, Gary Witherspoon (1977) has pointed out that exact repetition in Navajo prayers (*hataál*) is the ideal.¹

The third level concerns longer stretches of narratives (myths, for example) and “are memorized at the level of the episodes: the teller is sure to give essential facts, but there is no guarantee, or intent, that the telling will repeat exactly the same words that were used in previous telling” (Bahr 1997:175). Dell Hymes (1981) has termed this type of memorization “measured verse” and has investigated it in numerous Native American languages (see also Hymes 2003). Hymes has also offered preliminary analysis for Na-Dene (1995). Barre Toelken and Tacheeni Scott (1981) and Anthony Webster (1999) have looked at ethnopoetic structuring in Southern Athabaskan languages (Navajo and Chiricahua Apache, respectively).

Bahr’s distinctions are useful in exposing the variation within oral literature, that is, the variation within oral compositions. Ong seems to assume that orality is everywhere the same, an assumption underlying Milman Parry and Albert Lord’s “oral-formulaic theory,” which they sought to apply to all oral narratives. This position has been usefully critiqued by Ruth Finnegan (1977) and Paul Kiparsky (1976). Both point out that the term “orality” subsumes under its umbrella a wide range of practices, and that some of these practices resemble literacy to varying degrees. It should be added, linguistically speaking, that most language use is in some manner “formulaic.” When one combines various syntactic constituents one is applying a formula. When one uses various phonological rules one is applying a formula. For example, in Navajo there is a tendency in nouns for a word-initial voiceless continuant to become voiced and intervocalic. Thus we find *saad* (“word”) becoming *bizaad* (“her word”) or *łíí* (“horse”) becoming *bilíí* (“his horse”).

Likewise, when one writes a sonnet, a haiku, or a *villanelle*, one is using nothing more or less than a formula (the artistry derives from the creativity employed within the formula). The point is that such practices and

¹ I say “ideal” here because, as Faris (1990:103) points out, such “deviations” may have pragmatic functions (dealing with the sickness, the patient, the surroundings, and so on).

their relative local creative merits—however we define them—need to be investigated. Only then can we make claims about the effects of orality on something called “consciousness.” Sherzer (1990) provides a number of useful empirical examples from the Kuna of the variety of forms that oral literature can take. He makes clear that written and oral literature use devices freely; there is no strict division between orality and literacy (43).

A related notion inspired by Ong and articulated by Dennis Tedlock (1983) is that metrical verse does not occur without alphabetic or syllabic writing forms. This is a curious claim, given that a metrical verse would be following a “formula.” Rumsey (2001) offers a compelling instance of metrical narratives among the Ku Waru. The genre, *Tom Yaya Kange*, has a clear metrical formula. Rumsey argues that it is the aesthetics of Ku Waru that make such a metrical genre possible. He compares it to the Kaluli, another New Guinean people, who do not share the Ku Waru aesthetic of “overwhelm[ing] the audience with a ceaseless flow of sound that keeps their attention focused on the story” (2001:218). Colleen M. Fitzgerald (1998) has also pointed to the meter in Tohono O’odham songs. Metrical verse does not seem to be associated only with “literate” peoples.

I want to now turn to a specific example of the relative fixity or flexibility in oral literature. Sherzer (1987, 1990) has discussed such variation among the Kuna of Panama. He notes that among the Kuna there are two general categories of texts: those that are relatively flexible and dependent on the situation at hand, and those that are fixed or relatively fixed. The first type includes narratives and stories told in gathering houses (Bahr’s third level of fixedness). The second type comprises curing chants, magical chants, and puberty rite texts. However, there is variation in the level of accepted fixity within this second type. For example, Sherzer states that, “not the slightest linguistic variation is tolerated in the puberty-rites texts” (1987:103). On the other hand, he notes (104):

The Kuna also consider curing-magical texts to be fixed. But although curing-magical texts and puberty-rites texts are both memorized directly from a teacher specialist, there are interesting differences in their actual performance. In curing-magical texts, slight variations of an essentially nonreferential nature are tolerated, involving very superficial aspects of the phonology and morphology of the noun and verb suffixation. Thus there exist at least two types of memorization in Kuna.

Clearly we have a difference here in relative fixity. On the one hand we have a fixed text without linguistic variation, and on the other hand we have a relatively fixed text that allows for some non-referential variation. To treat both “fashions of speaking” as if they were the same oral phenomenon

would be to miss the subtle ways that oral literature is circulated, replicated, and perpetuated (in other words, the ways that literatures are variously “kept”).

Concerning the distinction between orality and literacy, Ong has argued that (1982:78): “Writing establishes what has been called ‘context-free’ language (Hirsch 1977, pp. 21-22, 26) or ‘autonomous’ discourse (Olson 1980), discourse which cannot be directly questioned or contested as oral speech can be because written discourse has been detached from its author.” However, this distinction seems to be challenged by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Charles Briggs. Bakhtin suggests a distinction between “authoritative discourse” and “dialogic discourse,” positing that authoritative discourse “permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions” (1981:343). Bakhtin goes on to state that authoritative discourse “remains sharply demarcated, compact and inert” (*idem*). The authoritative discourse is often a word uttered in another language.² This is an example of the spoken word—the oral—as “context-free” language. Further, we can also examine Bakhtin’s distinction between the “epic” and the “novel.” For him the epic is a distanced genre not readily connected to the moment, not “close at hand” (23). The novel, rooted in the “folkloric traditions,” is connected to the here-and-now (21) and (though the form of writing) is not—according to Bakhtin—“context-free.” Similar claims about the dialogic nature of satire or parody could also be made. The epic, on the other hand, here an oral phenomenon, is an “autonomous discourse.” Indeed, it is in the orality of the folkloric tradition that we find connections with the novel.

A further example can be found in Briggs (1988), where it is pointed out that among Mexicanos³ in Northern New Mexico, speech genres range from those that do not allow for critique—“autonomous discourse”—to those that are opened up to a dialogic contextualization. Briggs summarizes (351): “I have argued that the more contextual realm plays a smaller and smaller role in the genres that lie more toward the textual pole of the continuum...the loss of contextual focus is balanced by an increase in the stylistic and ideological stratification of the textual realm.” Note that in both cases these are oral phenomena (be they proverbs or jokes). The clear-cut

² See, for example, the use of Navajo words in English dominant poems. See Webster 2006.

³ These are not the same Mexicanos that we find in Hill and Hill 1986. Those Mexicanos are Nahuatl-speaking peoples who live in Central Mexico. These Mexicanos live in Northern New Mexico and speak Spanish. The reasons for the overlapping terminology are fascinating but wholly irrelevant to this article.

distinction between literacy as an autonomous discourse and orality as uniquely “grounded” discourse seems spurious.

Another difference between orality and literacy that Ong claims concerns the concept of the “word.” He asserts (1982:91) that

I cannot have all of a word present at once: when I say “existence,” by the time I get to the “-tence,” the “exis-” is gone. The alphabet implies that matters are otherwise, that a word is a thing, not an event, that it is present all at once, and that it can be cut up into little pieces, which can be written forwards and pronounced backwards: “p-a-r-t” can be pronounced “trap.”

Leaving aside Ong’s claim that the phonology of the first part of a word has no residual effects (phonetically speaking) on the second part of a word and that the different ways that languages piece together linguistic resources (that is, the relative complexity of morphology for verbs, nouns, etc. and the presence of verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. in a given language), one can offer a critique of this position by examining the play languages of putative oral cultures. One can also see Ong’s position as an expression of a linguistic ideology concerning the “objectification” of words—the turning of words into objects, into things of value (see Silverstein 1979, Moore 1988). This ideology is not unique to literate societies. Robert Moore (1988) has shown how certain “old words” can become objectified as objects of value during language shift.

Consider the evidence from play languages. Sherzer (1976) has shown that among the Kuna the word is a salient unit that can be manipulated for playful expression. For example, among the Kuna there is a play language called *sorsik summakke* (“talking backwards”). The rules for this play language are as follows: take the first syllable of a word and move it to the end of the word. Here are a few examples (21):

osi (“pineapple”) > *sio*
takke (“to see”) > *ketak*
ipya (“eye”) > *yaip*
uwaya (“ear”) > *wayau*

This play language is based on an understanding of a unit that we might term the “word” (based on prosody, phonological changes, and morphological inflections). The first syllable is moved to the end of the “word”—that is, the word can be taken apart and rearranged by an “oral culture.” The object-ness of the word, then, appears to be less a case of “literacy” than of the saliency of a prosodic unit termed the word (that is, the word is an oral phenomenon that writing attempts to replicate).

Finally, I want to turn to another claim by Ong (1982:123, first developed by Goody 1977), namely that “lists begin with writing.” Sherzer (1990:249) has shown how the Kuna curing chants deploy, through parallelism, a complex encoding of the body parts of a snake. This displaying of body parts is nothing more or less than the creation of a list within a specific semantic domain. Likewise, in Navajo curing chants a metonymic catalog is created and the four sacred mountains are enumerated from east to north (Field and Blackhorse 2002: 221). Again, both of these examples present lists in putative oral cultures. Keith Basso (1979) describes a game played by young Western Apache children that involves one youth calling out a lexeme from an inclusive semantic domain (animate sky-dwellers such as *mbúh* [“owl”]). A second child then responds with another lexeme from a different domain that includes one vocalic segment found in the first lexeme. The first youth calls out a lexeme from the original semantic domain that includes a non-vocalic segment found in the second lexeme. The game continues until one player can no longer think of a word within the specific semantic domain with an equivalent vocalic or non-vocalic correspondence that has not been previously used. The game is clearly a compilation, the equivalent of a list. The children must form lists of lexemes within specific semantic domains based on certain phonological criteria. The list did not begin with writing.

The Interactions of Literacy and Orality

In the previous section I discussed the levels of fixity in oral literatures and the variability of orality in general. In this section I want to discuss literacy as a multifaceted practice as well. My point is that just as Ong has assumed homogeneity within orality, he has also assumed homogeneity within literacy. This section attempts to add complexity and heterogeneity to that view.

I begin this discussion with a look at another claim by Ong as to how oral cultures have approached literacy (1982:175): “Oral cultures today value their oral traditions and agonize over the loss of these traditions, but I have never encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible.” Few would disagree with the first part of this statement. Many Native American groups with which I am familiar do agonize over the loss of their oral literature. I would be careful, however, about the relationship between literacy and the decline of oral traditions. Many Navajo poems are inspired by the oral tradition (in specific ways such as the use of particles, parallelism, metonymy, and themes; see Webster

2004). However, an increase in the amount of Navajo poetry written in Navajo has occurred simultaneously with a decline in spoken Navajo (see Hale 1998). Literacy does not entail language maintenance; at best it is a form of language preservation.

Further, as Elizabeth Brandt (1981) points out, not all Native American groups in the southwest have been eager for literacy in their Native languages or for their oral literatures to be written down. As Elizabeth Brandt notes, due to a “Pueblo secrecy complex” where information needs to be controlled by a select few, there has been general resistance to creating orthographies for writing in Native languages as well as to recording them in English.⁴ For example, she observes that (1981:190-91)

Bilingual programs and other programs that necessitate the development of materials are often opposed or severely restricted if they are in the native language and use writing. There is less opposition to the oral mode, particularly if it is not recorded . . . there is generally opposition to writing in both vernacular and in English.

A specific example can be found in the language maintenance programs of the Cochiti Pueblo (Benjamin et al. 1999; see also Benjamin et al. 1998). The Cochiti have intentionally rejected using writing as a way to teach Cochiti. They have done this because of religious concerns too complicated to summarize here with any justice (see Benjamin et al. 1999). However, even without written texts in Keres (Cochiti), there is an active language revitalization program in both the Cochiti schools and in the community more generally. The Cochiti have not “jumped” at the opportunity to change an oral culture in Keres into a literate culture.

Not all “oral cultures” have embraced literacy. On a more complex level, not all “oral cultures” have approached literacy in the same way. For example, many Navajo see literacy as crucial for language maintenance programs (Dick and McCarty 1997; Austin-Garrison et al. 1996), while the Cochiti have eschewed written forms of Keres. Literacy has been imbued with ideological presuppositions. In other words, literacy does not always mean the same thing to everyone.

I turn now to an example from the Arizona Tewa. Paul Kroskrity (1992) reports on an interesting way that he was allowed to record oral narratives in the Arizona Tewa language (106):

⁴ Whiteley (1988) gives a superb account of the different levels of access to knowledge among the Hopi. He goes on to show how this unequal access to knowledge can sometimes explain the events (such as the Oraibi split) in Hopi history.

The data for this paper are not the result of naturalistic collection, but rather the product of elicitation sessions. The chants below are re-creations of recent announcements heard and re-performed by Dewey and Juanita Healing of Tewa Village in July 1979. In addition to the purely technical problem of recording a chant that occurs on a rooftop of a house located in a busy and noise-filled Pueblo, the Arizona Tewa forbid the recording of public performances of any type. This cultural aversion to recording and other literacy-related attempts to “fix” or “capture” performances is well established for both the Arizona Tewa . . . and the Indians of the Pueblo Southwest in general.

What we have here then is a distinction made by some Arizona Tewa between performance and reporting or displaying (in the Hymes’ sense [1981]). It is as if some Arizona Tewa require a removal from the author—the original chanter—to a reporting of the chant in order to allow it to be written down. Written Arizona Tewa must be mediated from its situated, context-dependent usage to a reporting of that usage in order for it to be inscribed. In a way, it must already be decontextualized (detached) and artifactual in order for it to be written down. This is a literacy distinct from Western conventions.

Continuing in the Southwest among the Pueblo peoples, I next consider the Hopi of Arizona. Armin Geertz discusses the use of writing by Hopi “traditionalists” to stake out a political-religious position. Geertz states that (1994:98)

One of the main political tactics employed by the Traditionalists was the frequent use of letters, petitions, statements, and communiqués sent to U.S. government officials as well as to English-speaking support groups. The use of English gave access to an arena otherwise unattainable for an opposition group that chose not to participate in the democratic system.

In other words, the use of writing by Hopi “traditionalists” has been strategic.⁵ As Geertz notes (104),

Traditionalists were constantly plagued by legitimate criticisms of their claims to power, which rested on highly questionable grounds, and yet they criticized the members of the Tribal Council on exactly the same grounds. Writing gave them a chance to create the trappings of power through consistent use of the rhetoric of power. Their audiences were non-Hopis, who by definition were ignorant of Hopi affairs.

⁵ I retain “traditionalists” in quotes because the term describes what can best be described as a kind of political party that opposes the “progressives.” The use of “tradition” is used as a rhetorical device, a validating claim, and a complex of beliefs that I do not have the knowledge or space to describe.

He goes on to point out that the “traditionalists” have been in favor of bilingual education programs and literacy programs on the Hopi Reservation. They also founded an English language newsletter in the 1970s (107). Finally, “traditionalist” Hopis have written down a number of esoteric prophecy narratives that outline what the Hopis should do today. In so doing, they have committed secret knowledge to a written form. The esoteric prophecy narratives have thus gained a wider distribution than was heretofore the case.

The Hopi, like the Arizona Tewa, and other Pueblo peoples, have what Brandt termed a “secrecy complex” (1981) that restricts certain kinds of esoteric knowledge to certain people. Writing such knowledge down “fixes” it and thus opens up the possibility that people who do not have the right to such knowledge will be able to gain access. We have seen here how three Pueblo groups have responded to the introduction of literacy. Each response has been different. They have varied from refusing to allow materials to be written down at all to permitting a mediated version to be written down to using writing as a strategic device in gaining politico-religious authority. In each case we cannot assert a single model of literacy.

The Hopi Reservation surrounds the Arizona Tewa and I have moved from the Arizona Tewa to the Hopi. It would thus seem natural to move from the Hopi to the Navajo, whose reservation surrounds the Hopi Reservation. It is also where I conducted fieldwork.

There is a small cottage industry of Navajo literature. Many of the written materials have been produced by the Navajo Community College Press in Tsaile, Arizona and Salina Bookshelf in Flagstaff, Arizona. The corpus of written Navajo materials includes a collection of poetry by Diné College students (Begay 1998), collections of poetry by Rex Lee Jim (1989, 1995), children’s books (Thomas 2000, Clark 1994, Emery 1996a, 1996b), an oral history of uranium mining on the Navajo Nation (Brugge, Benally, Harrison 1997) a Navajo version bible (American Bible Society 1985), academic articles on Navajo language and philosophy (Suen-Redhouse 1990, Austin-Garrison 1991, and Silentman 1993), a play in Navajo (Mazii 1993), and a number of Navajo-English Dictionaries (Young and Morgan 1987, Neundorf 1983).⁶ The above is only a brief sample. There is also now a CD called *The Navajo Language* (Young and Morgan 1999). Navajo language poetry can also be found on the internet (for example, Red Mesa’s

⁶ There are other dictionaries that have been published, but I chose these two because at least one author was Navajo (the late William Morgan and Alyse Neundorf).

webpage⁷ and at the MIT tribute to Ken Hale⁸). Navajo can also be found on t-shirts today, such as those from the Navajo Language Academy,⁹ from the protest around Arizona Proposition 203 “English for the Children”—which includes the provocative slogan *saad naakigo ‘ayóo nihil’ílí* (“two languages are better than one”)—and from *Béégashii Bikooh* (“Cow Canyon”) trading post. There are also a number of children’s stories available at the Teacher Education Program at the Diné College website, where some of these stories are available on CD (*Hane’ Yázhí* 2001).¹⁰ My point here is not to be comprehensive, but to indicate the variety of forms that Navajo literacy has taken. With new digital technologies such as the Internet and CDs, Navajo literature has expanded into these media as well.¹¹

I should add that Rex Lee Jim has read his poems on KTNN, thus interweaving orality and literacy. Likewise, many of the children’s books produced by the Diné Teacher Education Program can also be listened to as one reads along. Ann Nolan Clark’s *Who Wants to be a Prairie Dog?* (1994) comes with a CD of the story being read aloud by Maybelle Little. Here again we see literacy and orality connected, enmeshed with each other.

While Navajo literacy is expanding in certain areas, it has not been universally accepted and appreciated. When a Navajo language page was introduced in *The Navajo Times*, there were some Navajos who wrote to the paper (in English) in order to criticize the page. One criticism held that by publishing Navajo language texts, the newspaper was opening the language up to being expropriated by non-Navajos. That criticism, no doubt, could be leveled against me.

Daniel McLaughlin (1992) has produced the most complete study of Navajo literacy practices in a community referred to by the pseudonym “Mesa Valley.” He looks at literacy as a set of practices that can be best understood from a sociolinguistic perspective, arguing against a “special

⁷ <http://www.redmesa.k12.az.us/writers/poems.htm>

⁸ <http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/ken/posted/posted.html.#neundorf>

⁹ Thanks to Carlota Smith for providing me with both of these shirts.

¹⁰ The full title of the CD is *Hane’ Yázhí: Children’s Books in Navajo* (2001) and is a collaborative project by students and staff at the Center for Diné Teacher Education at Diné College, in collaboration with the Navajo Education Technology Consortium. I thank Clay Slate for providing me with a copy of this CD.

¹¹ See Silverman 2001 for an interesting discussion of Sepik River narratives and the introduction of cyberspace.

diglossia” where Navajo is used in oral communication and English is the language of written communication. While this distinction is generally true, written Navajo can be found in sites of power such as schools, missions, and the government; more importantly, however, Navajo is also used “in traditional domains, to record ceremonial procedures, for example, and in the home, to write letters, lists, journals, and notes” (151). Several poets with whom I conducted interviews, such as Bernice Casaus and Martha Jackson, kept journals that included their poetry (in Navajo). McLaughlin also notes a general shift in attitudes occurring among the residents of Mesa Valley. No longer is written Navajo seen simply as an aid to record “traditional culture”; rather, the written language is also becoming associated with “thinking it useful primarily for the promotion of self-understanding” (156). Nowhere, perhaps, can this be better seen than in the emergence of Navajo poetry. In such ways, as McLaughlin argues, literacy is an empowering practice for Navajos.¹²

Galena Sells Dick and Teresa McCarty (1999) come to a similar conclusion when discussing bilingual education at Rough Rock demonstration school. They argue that Navajo literacy can be seen as a form of resistance against a dominant Anglo educational system. In their words, “as their classrooms evolve away from the English-dominated routines of basic skills, bilingual teachers are creating new academic contexts for Navajo literacy—their own indigenous literacy, and that of their students. In doing this, they have in effect reclaimed oral and written Navajo for academic purposes” (83-84). Such empowering by-products of Navajo literacy help explain the emotional investment a number of Navajo language instructors had in stopping Arizona Proposition 203, a proposition that could cripple bilingual programs (see also House 2002).

According to McLaughlin (1992) and Dick and McCarty (1999), literacy in Navajo can be seen as an empowering practice. It gives voices to people and possibly aids in “self-understanding.” I want to reiterate that even with the rise of written Navajo (there are more “artifacts” being produced in Navajo than ever before), there is still a language shift to English occurring.¹³ The above authors are not unaware of this shift. Dick and McCarty (1999:69) describe the Navajo language as “imperiled.”

¹² See also Bahr 1992 and Anderson 2001 for two other examples of empowering uses of literacy. Bahr discusses the use of Tohono O’odham legal writings, and Anderson discusses the conversion of liturgy by Northern Arapahos. In both cases, native language literacy has empowering ramifications.

¹³ See Slate 1993; Lee and McLaughlin 2001; Spolsky 2002.

Wayne and Agnes Holm (1995:160-63). have looked at the decline of Navajo for young speakers, observing that children are simply not learning the language at the same rate they were in the 1970s. The percentage of children entering school with some command of the language is declining. Holm and Holm suggest that one way to reverse this shift is to make Navajo “cool” to young people (164). Poetry, rap, and the Internet may provide such an avenue.

I also want to pause here and make an important point that must be kept in mind: many of the Navajos whom I heard speak during the debate on Arizona Proposition 203 argued that the Navajo language was crucial to being Navajo. This is an essentialist position because it assumes an inherent characteristic of Navajo identity is the ability to speak the language. This is a common phenomenon (see Herzfeld 1997b) and, given the circumstances—a perceived and real attack by the dominant society on their language, an understandable rhetorical position. However, one can be Navajo and not speak Navajo. We do not want to fall into the old trap of creating a checklist of features to demarcate who is and is not a Navajo. Thus, while I have focused here on literacy and poetry in Navajo, I am also concerned with poetry written by Navajos in English. This poetry is not more or less authentic than poetry written in Navajo (see Webster n.d.). Navajos have appropriated poetry as a written form in Navajo, English, Navajo-English, and combinations of the three.

Of course, Navajos are not the only indigenous peoples of the Americas currently writing poetry. Ofelia Zepeda (1982) has described Tohono O’odham poetry or “thoughts.” Not only does Zepeda write about Tohono O’odham poetry; she has also published her own poems (1997) composed in both Tohono O’odham and English “translations.” Daniel Lopez (1995) has also published poetry in Tohono O’odham. Likewise, there is poetry composed in Hualapai (see Watahomigie and Yamamoto 1992), in Kuna (Sherzer personal communication), and Yaqui (Molina 1995), among others.

Let us now return to a review of literacy practices and their interactions with orality. Having discussed in some detail a number of Southwest Native American responses to literacy, I want to discuss other ways in which literacy has been actualized. Lisa Valentine (1995) has described the use of hymnals among the Severn Ojibwe of Canada, hymnals written in Cree syllabry. The people speak Ojibwe but read Cree. Valentine points out that while the hymns are often memorized, the hymnals are still used, a practice that within the religious experience seems to ratify the

sincerity or religious efficacy of the hymn.¹⁴ Note that Walter Ong (1982:32) suggested that among oral cultures words—because they were not written—had power. Yet in this case, it is through the enactment of the written word (reading) that religious efficacy is actualized (see, however, Ong 1982:74-75). It is precisely because the word is written that it gains “power.”

Paul Kroeber reports (1997:283) on a writing system developed by an elderly Thompson Salish woman for herself and notes that “it was not used for communication with other speakers of the language, or, for that matter, with professional linguists.” Indeed, the writing system amounted to glossing; that is, it was a metalinguistic system used to record information about the language. Kroeber goes on to describe how it was used (283-84):

On being presented with an English expression, she would first write it down; then pause for a considerable length of time to consider what the “proper” (her term) Thompson equivalent of that English expression would be . . . then, she would write down the Thompson expression. . . . As she did this, she often whispered that expression to herself in a syllable-by-syllable form, apparently deciding on the spot how it should be written. . . . Only after completing each of these steps would she finally read aloud the Thompson expression.

Here we see a fascinating writing system developed for a unique contact situation (the linguistic elicitation session). This is a different kind of literacy than the literacy discussed by Ong. It is a literacy of the moment, based on a metalinguistic interaction between a linguist and the elderly Thompson Salish woman. It was not a writing system meant to be shared and came into Kroeber’s possession only after the elderly woman had died.

Ronald and Suzanne Scollon (1981) discuss the emergence of literacy at Fort Chipeywan among Athabaskan-speaking peoples, clearly following in the tradition of Jack Goody and Walter Ong. For the Scollons, literacy—essayist Western literacy—has become a “crisis in ethnic identity” (53). They argue that Athabaskan discourse patterns cannot be replicated in written forms (*idem*): “an Athabaskan cannot, as an Athabaskan, write easily about Athabaskan things.” From the foregoing it should be obvious that I am dubious of such claims. Clearly, Navajos have been able to use literacy as a way of indexing and asserting “ethnic identity.” Poems, for example, concerning the Long Walk build on a tradition of storytelling and of identity making through stories. Likewise, Sherwin Bitsui’s (2003) deeply personal poems are ways to explore identity. For Bitsui, literacy becomes an avenue

¹⁴ Ward Keeler (personal communication) reports a similar example of reading in Java.

for investigating and asserting identity. Still further, Navajos do write about “things Navajo.” The crisis the Scollons report does not seem to exist for the Navajo, for, as McLaughlin (1992) notes, literacy has become an “empowering” practice for the Navajos with whom he worked.

Broadening the scope of examples, I would now like to look briefly at Niko Besnier’s discussion (1995) of literacy on the Polynesian atoll of Nukulaelae. Besnier shows the relationship between literacy and gender. Among the Nukulaelae, men write sermons and women do not. He also shows how letter-writing can become an “emotionally cathartic communicative event” (93).¹⁵ Letters frequently are ways to express emotional affect. Likewise, they are forms of gossip. Finally, letters serve as vehicles for making economic requests that might be more difficult in face-to-face interactions. The Nukulaelae write down traditional esoteric knowledge, but these textual artifacts are hidden from others; they are not to be shared. Besnier (1995) shows that literacy on this tiny atoll is complex and multifaceted, “embroiled” in the beliefs and values of the Nukulaelae. There is no single view of literacy among the Nukulaelae.

Don Kulick (1992) offers a fascinating study of language shift among the Gapun of Papua New Guinea, explaining the phenomenon as a social process that raises a number of issues concerning literacy. In a survey of the village, Kulick found 84 pieces of printed material. By far the most common forms were liturgical pamphlets and hymnals written in the creole Tok Pisin. However, there were two items that were in English. One of these was an automobile maintenance manual and the other was a book called *Daisy Sing-Along*, which contained a number of songs like “Yellow Rose of Texas” (169). The automobile maintenance manual was occasionally “read” (adults and children sometimes ran their fingers over the drawings of various gears and sockets). The songbook was not read.

Kulick points out that the Gapun villagers do not actually read the religious materials written in Tok Pisin (the native language is Taiap). Rather, they are far more interested in understanding the accompanying pictures in their booklets than in deducing knowledge associated with Christianity and “white” ways. As Kulick states (171), “Gapuners actively and creatively attempt to exploit the links they perceive between the written

¹⁵ I have several examples of this practice, where the writing of poetry allows Navajos—especially Navajo women—to express and release deeply emotional feelings. For example, one Navajo woman read me a poem she had written concerning the death of her sister. Still others explained to me that they sometimes wrote poems about personal frustrations. Nia Francisco’s collection of poems, *Carried Away by the Black River* (1994), deals with a number of deeply emotional issues, including sexual assaults, alcoholism, and domestic violence.

word, Christianity, and cargo in order to bypass the priests and find their own ‘road’ to the millennium.” Literacy, for the Gapuners, is a way to become “white” and obtain cargo. Kulick notes that recently male Gapuners have spent a great deal of time “wondering how they can obtain the ‘forms’ that they have heard will bring them the cargo if one fills them in correctly” (174).

Bambi Schieffelin (2000) outlines influences on Kaluli literacy, focusing on sites. For example, she discusses the importance of missionaries in regulating and introducing Kaluli literacy practices. Due to the nature of missionary activities, many Kaluli associated literacy with orality. Written forms, such as sermons, were to be performed orally. Furthermore, the Bosavi mission focused Kaluli literacy on reading over writing. This situation differs, for example, from both the Navajo and the Nukulaelae, where there is a great deal of writing. Like the Gapun, most of the texts in Kaluli (and Tok Pisin) are produced by outsiders. They are not emergent literary traditions such as those we find among the Navajo, the Tohono O’odham, and the Nukulaelae. Thus, while missionaries such as Father Berard Haile produced Navajo language texts (see Haile 1984), a lively Navajo literature by Navajos has also developed.

For the Navajo, literacy means something different than it does for the Cochiti, the Arizona Tewa, the Nukulaelae, the Gapuners, the elderly Thompson Salish woman, the Kaluli, or the Severn Ojibwe. We should not be surprised at the diversity. These examples suggest that literacy is not a single concept, approached everywhere in the same manner. Rather, literacies are a complex of ideological presuppositions that are implicated in various social, religious, and political milieus. These ideals and milieus vary from place to place, from one domain to another, and literacy—whatever that may mean—varies as well (see Street 1993; Haviland 1996; Collins and Blot 2003). If it varies as an on the ground practice, we cannot assume that literacy will everywhere have the same effects on “consciousness.”

On Literacy

I have argued so far that literacy and orality have much more internal variation than Walter Ong seems to suggest. My purpose has been to document concrete examples of the variability of both orality and literacy. That is, I have tried to problematize these notions of a neutral or natural framework. They are anything but neutral or natural. However, I wish to

conclude this section by discussing some of the implications of literacy as a variable phenomenon and ideology.

Clearly, the above discussions of literacy have shown that “artifacting” the word on the page has implications. I do not know if they so much change “consciousness” as they involve social, political, religious, and linguistic consequences (both intended and unintended). The writing of Hopi prophecies has, according to Geertz (1994:114), broken down the “traditional” distinction between esoteric knowledge and common knowledge: “the written texts impart the illusion of permanence, but they also provide ease of review for the reader. Thus the metaphors of consistency and permanence, upon which prophecy makes its claims to authority and power, seem to disappear in the face of historical and comparative criticism.” The fixation of prophecy narratives has had religious and political consequences. In a similar vein, the Pueblo aversion to fixing their language suggests that they see writing as a way of destroying the esoteric domain of knowledge but also as a way of “capturing” the word. The Arizona Tewa have developed an interesting way to deal with the tension between the spoken and the written. The Cochiti have simply not accepted the necessity of writing Keres down in order to revitalize it. We can also see how writing and literacy have had profound influences on the Gapuners of Papua New Guinea. Literacy, or printed material, is an avenue by which Gapuners may become “white” and receive cargo. Literacy has been situated and incorporated into Gapuner views of the world and the importance they place on change as cultural reproduction.

Literacy also has more immediate ramifications. As Bambi Schieffelin (2000) notes, literacy is also about orthographies, which, she argues, “are never neutral in terms of their logic” (300). This is, to borrow a notion from Mary Bucholtz (2000), a part of the “politics of transcription.” Which spelling acquires the veneer of “correctness” or “standard”? Which orthography gains currency? Does it matter that Gladys Reichard’s Navajo orthography has fallen into disuse and that the Young and Morgan orthography is now current?¹⁶ When Rutherford Ashley (2001:14) writes *hajinei* in a poem (“the place of emergence”), should I also note that Young and Morgan (1987) give the form as *hajínái*? Am I not falling into the trap of “the standard?” Do I privilege one form over the other? Or can I say that Ashley writes in an idiosyncratic Navajo or that he follows a different orthographic tradition? Certainly, many of the Navajo language instructors I have met would mark Ashley’s form as incorrect. I think it pretentious for

¹⁶ See Young and Morgan 1993 on the history of Navajo orthographies.

me to say that one spelling is correct and another incorrect. Clearly, I figured out what the form meant (in that respect it communicated something).¹⁷

One constant criticism I heard from various Navajo language educators concerning the poetry of Rex Lee Jim (1989, 1995) was that he spelled words “wrong.” This pronouncement did not contradict the fact that many Navajo language educators were quite proud of Jim’s writing in Navajo and were quick to mention his work when they heard I was interested in Navajo poetry. They also used his poetry at the Navajo Language Fair at Diné College in March of 2001. High School students recited his poetry. The overall judgment was more a matter of “yes, Jim writes in Navajo but he does not spell ‘correctly.’” In essence, this was an assertion of authority.

Literacy can erase linguistic diversity and dialect diversity by creating a norm. Young and Morgan (1987) is based primarily on the Chinle Valley dialect of Navajo. There are other dialects, and some of that dialect variation is presented in that same resource. However, other than an early study by Gladys Reichard (1945), there has been little investigation of the linguistic diversity within Navajo. One clear example, still retained in Young and Morgan, are the two pronunciations for “snow”: *zas* and *yas*. However, as Reichard noted, there was a whole array of linguistic features that distinguished *zas*- and *yas*-speakers. Does one become the “standard” and the other relegated to the margins? Literacy has ramifications here again.

During my work with Mescalero Apaches on a medical dictionary, I conducted a standard linguistic elicitation session with two elderly Mescalero women, concentrating on body-part terms. At certain points they would disagree on how a word was pronounced. I, of course, was interested in what potentially could have been dialect variations and tried to note both forms. However, the two ladies with whom I was working wanted a decision made concerning the “correct” form. They asked if I had a copy of the *Mescalero Apache Dictionary* that they had worked on a number of years earlier with Scott Rushforth (who was in charge of the medical dictionary project as well). These women were a rarity among the Mescalero Apaches, being literate in both English and Mescalero. I had a copy of the dictionary, which I then produced. From that point on, whenever there was disagreement about the form of the word, they would refer to the dictionary.

¹⁷ I asked Rutherford Ashley the meaning of the word in an interview at the Inn of the Navajo Nation on May 15th, 2001. Ashley actually apologized for the spelling, noting that he had not taken classes in writing Navajo and this was his way of writing the form. The standard creeps in yet again, influencing one’s own view about one’s qualifications for writing Navajo.

When one of them happened to have produced the “correct” or dictionary form, the other would suggest that she had misremembered the form. The dictionary became the arbitrator. On a small scale, this is how “standard languages” get created.¹⁸ I have had similar experiences with Navajo consultants who turned to Young and Morgan (1987) to confirm a particular form. The implications of writing down words in a specific way tends to freeze the words in that form. Dictionaries, by their nature, tend to give the illusion of authority. In this way the act of language preservation—the act of writing down words—creates a stratification within languages, distinguishing a “standard” and a “non-standard” form. In so doing, it lends legitimacy to one group of people and excludes or marginalizes another group or groups. Linguists are thus, in the process of artifacting the word, complicit in the act of prescription that so many of them decry.

There has been much discussion concerning language maintenance and literacy. Some have argued that the only way—or the primary way—to ensure that a language is maintained is to write it down, to create indigenous orthographic literatures. Others have suggested that literacy is not essential to such projects (see the Cochiti example). Some of them look to radio, music, rap, and new literacy technologies such as the Internet as vehicles for language maintenance. Bernadette Adley-Santa Maria, a Western Apache who has been involved in the language preservation project for her tribe, has discussed the concerns she has with literacy and what linguists do to Western Apache when they write it down (1997:135): “I do not want our language exploited and also believe that study of our language should be done only for our people who want to learn their language and not for the wider audience.” Such views can also be found in *The Navajo Times* concerning the Navajo Language page. Adley-Santa Maria, however, is resigned to having Western Apache recorded in writing in order to preserve the language for future generations of Western Apaches. As she remarks (137), “I saw documentation of our language as ‘tools’ for the future because of the rapid acceleration of shift to English occurring in Western Apache.” Literacy here can be a route for both language preservation and maintenance, but it can also be a mode of exploitation (see also Axelrod et al. 2003).

¹⁸ There is also another reason the dictionary was produced. This was the first time I had ever worked alone with these two women, and they were far more used to working with Scott Rushforth. His ability to hear the sounds of Mescalero Apache is much better than mine was or is. I had to repeatedly ask for a form before I felt confident that I had heard it correctly. The dictionary was a shortcut for them. They could always bring it out to end a long series of repetitions of the same form. (The term “correctly” is used here in an ironic sense.)

One distinction, noted by Andrew Cowell (2002), is between locally produced indigenous texts and non-local, large-scale production of indigenous texts (40):

Jeffery Anderson's analysis [2001] of the role of literacy in Arapaho life seems to me largely correct in that literate forms of knowledge are generally detrimental to the traditional, oral-based culture. But we can now begin to see that this is not a feature of literacy *per se*, as many scholars have argued. Rather it is a function of the specific forms that literate texts and knowledge take in large-scale, capitalist societies. In contrast, literacy in small-scale, face-to-face societies in local contexts offers a potential for Arapaho users to become "empowered disputants" rather than mere passive receptors of texts.

Such small-scale collections of poetry in Navajo, like the collection published by the Diné Teacher Education Program (Begay 1998), are then literate, intracultural, communicative acts. This is locally controlled literacy in the indigenous language. One can also look at Vee Browne's (2000) self-published book of poetry, *Ravens Dancing*, which includes a set of limericks in Navajo. One limerick is about Diné Bizaad. More recently (2005), Rick Abasta (a Navajo) has begun producing a "zine"—*Terra Incognita*—that includes poetry, photography, and other visual arts. These are also examples of locally controlled literacy. There are, of course, other sites of literacy production that are not locally controlled. As Cowell (2002) notes, such distinctions in the sites of production of literacy materials may affect the ability of such literate forms to become "empowering." Again, the fact that there are more poems being written in Navajo than ever before, but that the language is still declining, calls into question the viability of any literacy program for indigenous languages to be considered in any measure a "cure-all." We need to better understand the politics of poetry production and the circulation of Navajo poetry, both as a "text artifact" and as a potentially performable oral phenomenon.

Literacy has both social and political consequences. Therefore poetry written in Navajo, as a form of literacy, must be understood as also having political and social consequences. To put it more boldly, written poetry as a form of literacy must be understood within its socio-politico-historical milieu. To write something down—to create a textual artifact—is not a neutral or benign act. It has ramifications, both intended and unintended. Perhaps these are not the ramifications that Ong had in mind when he discussed the issue of literacy. I do not know if literacy causes a profound change in consciousness, as he suggests. However, I suspect that because literacy and orality are both heterogeneous phenomena, not readily isolatable

as either-or categories but existing rather as complexes of practices and ideologies, a single cause such as literacy will be insufficient as an ultimate explanation. That said, I do believe that Ong was right (write?) to ask what the effects of this shift to literacy might be—to ask why and how it matters when we artifact the word, when we keep the word. My position has been to sketch out the ways that they imbue the printed word with ideological significance as well as the ways that they actually employ literacy. I have argued that literacy and orality are implicated in ideologies concerning language and what language can and cannot do.

A number of years ago Keith Basso (1974) urged anthropologists to take up the investigation of what he termed an “ethnography of writing” as a companion to Dell Hymes’ (1974) notion of an “ethnography of speaking.” We need to recognize, I think, the ways that other peoples understand and give meaning to literacy, as well as how literacy and orality are connected in practice. It is only by looking at literacy as an on the ground practice that we may more fully comprehend the implications as a complex of social and ideological phenomena and, perhaps, as a motivator of cognitive changes. In this respect, we need ethnographies of literacies.

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