

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts. By William Clements.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0hr4g260>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 22(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Milne, Derek

**Publication Date**

1998

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

cially the educators. Here, the danger is that they slip below the surface, undermining the laudable project that the authors have in other ways so painstakingly designed, by eliding some central distinctions. Readers wishing to gain a fuller understanding of the complex issues of authorship, authenticity, and representation should recognize that no single volume is likely to provide a complete understanding, and that other works, such as the ones noted above, should be added to the repertoire.

Such caveats should not, however, detract from this volume's many strengths. Colonnese and Owen's book is more than ten years old, and though its more extended summaries of critical arguments on some works is extremely useful, both its primary listings and these critical notes have been eclipsed by time. Similarly, the strengths of the *Dictionary*, its concentration on Native writers and its extended critical essays, precludes the extensive coverage offered here. In this volume, the entries on non-Native writers often provide the most interesting information—that Zane Grey, for instance, that icon of popular Western writers, took strong positions against government and church policies towards Indian communities as early as the 1920s.

Given its limitations, authors of this volume have produced a very professional piece of work. They note that they read every work included, and their thorough and comprehensive entries are evidence of their care. Their inclusion of indexes and critical citations will make this volume useful to its intended audiences of librarians, educators, and general readers, and to specialists in Native American literature as well. If their annotations are taken in the spirit in which they seem to have been written, not as definitive but as competent, useful, and entertaining summaries and opinions on more than four hundred books, even specialist readers will find themselves browsing with pleasure for useful information and overlooked opportunities.

Linc Kesler  
Oregon State University

**Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts.** By William Clements. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. 253 pages. \$45.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

The study of expressive verbal arts among American Indians has been the focus of linguistic anthropology since Dell Hymes

first called for a new approach, the "ethnography of communication," in 1964. Since that time, scholars like Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, Keith Basso, Charles Briggs, William Bright, Anthony Mattina, Joel Sherzer, Barre Toelken, Larry Evers and Felipe Molina, Richard and Nora Marks Dauenhauer, and many others have attempted to study the performative dimensions of oral expressive forms among Native Americans. These relatively recent investigations of performance go beyond earlier approaches to American Indian oral material in the attention they pay to factors like performative context—including genre, setting, and the roles of participants (such as audience involvement), as well as the use of previously ignored stylistic aspects such as indigenous organizational patterns, intonation, pauses, opening and closing frames, vocables, gesture, repetition, and quotatives. Since the advent of verbal art, the challenge for scholars working with the oral materials of American Indians and others has been how best to represent these paralinguistic aspects in textual form, what Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman have called the process of "entextualization."

William Clements' recent collection of essays, *Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts*, is not really a study of verbal art as the title suggests, but a study of how verbal art has historically been studied. This may seem like an insignificant distinction, but it is not. The lie of the title is that "texts" are really an integral part of this study. They may be included to illustrate certain points in the course of one of the chapter's arguments, but they are not really analyzed in the depth we are used to seeing in verbal art studies. The focus here isn't on the texts, but on the contexts and, more specifically, the omission of contextual factors that pervaded the entextualization of American Indian verbal arts prior to the establishment of the ethnography of communication approach. For Clements this includes both the *ethnographic* context, or how a story was collected and ultimately published, and the *ethnic* context, or the circumstances under which the performance genre occurs in a natural setting. Clements contends that historically, when a verbal performance has been transcribed and put into text form either for specialized or popular consumption, an insufficient amount of attention has been given to the circumstances which surrounded the recording, the circumstances which would typically surround the speech event, and the disparity between them. He deftly traces this trend from the Jesuit relations through the twentieth century, and *Native American Verbal Art* emerges as a thorough and readable historiographic examination of attitudes toward

American Indians in the works of a variety of different ethnographers and popularizers. Because of this, Clements' work has more in common with the literary and historical approaches of Roy Harvey Pearce, Robert Berkhofer, Brian Dippie, and to some extent Arnold Krupat (all authors whose work Clements discusses) than it does with that of the anthropological approaches of the verbal art scholars listed above. As a study of verbal art, however, it leaves something to be desired.

*Native American Verbal Art* is divided up into an introduction, nine self-contained chapters treating distinct but related topics, and an epilogue. Using Black Hawk's 1834 autobiography as a starting point, the introduction explains Clements' approach to the subject. As Clements observes, as a textual product, Black Hawk's autobiography is flawed by its capitulation to Euro-American literary ideals, including heavyhanded editing and the use of stereotypical Indian phrases such as "pale face." Importantly, Clements says that in spite of flaws like these, the historical record of American Indian verbal art does indeed have value to contemporary scholars and that he is interested in "recovering something from them despite their limitations" (p. 1). The chapters that follow attempt to do this with a variety of source materials.

The first chapter examines the work of three anthropologists who worked with the Zuni pueblo people: Frank Hamilton Cushing, Ruth Bunzel, and Dennis Tedlock. Clements looks at each through a continuum advocated by literary critic Frederic Jameson, a continuum from "Identity" on the one hand, to "Difference" on the other. The three offer an interesting comparison in this regard. Clements asserts that Cushing was closer to the Identity pole on the continuum, since his translations "suggest a belief that the material could legitimately be rendered according to Euro-American literary conventions" (p. 20). As a student of Boas', Bunzel espoused a cultural relativism that belied a perspective closer to Difference, yet as Clements shows, she interestingly disregarded the effects of Difference in the texts she created, leaving nothing that "suggests that they originated in the verbal art of a culture as far removed from that of most readers of English as the Zuni" (p. 25). Tedlock, whose entextualizations of Zuni oral narratives include a variety of paralinguistic criteria, "incorporates constant reminders of the relevance of the principle of Difference in the media of presentation" (p. 28). Clements' analysis in this chapter is thoughtful, and though the Identity/Difference framework appears only sparingly in the rest of the volume, it is a useful tool for understanding the chapters that follow.

The second chapter, "Situations and Performances," is interesting for its breadth of subject matter. Here Clements discusses an example of a Mandan rainmaking ceremony recorded by artist George Catlin in 1832, a Brulé place-name story collected by explorer Rufus Sage in the early 1840s, and a Kathlamet (Upper Chinook) story recorded by anthropologist Franz Boas and told by Charles Cultee in 1894. Clements concludes that Boas' approach to such verbal art was actually the least sensitive to context of the three and that "even though the Kathlamet materials prepared by Boas represent the most scientifically accurate on a linguistic level, they may reveal less of the true artistry of oral expression" (p. 41). Clements asserts that "the student of Native American verbal art who depends upon translated texts should evaluate them by first investigating exactly what they intend to represent" (p. 43). With this advice in mind, he then turns his attention to Jerome Rothenberg's fairly recent (1972) collection *Shaking the Pumpkin*, which includes "workings" (Rothenberg's term) of American Indian originals into poetic form. While Rothenberg, along with Dennis Tedlock, was an early exponent of the ethnopoetics movement and advocated what he called "total translation" (which included things like vocables and other stylistic features that were difficult to translate), it is clear that Rothenberg's approach to entextualizing oral narratives allows for greater creative manipulation than that of Tedlock and other linguistic anthropologists. In the years that followed the publication of *Shaking the Pumpkin*, criticism of Rothenberg has mounted, coming from American Indian authors like Leslie Marmon Silko as well as other literary critics such as Andrew Wiget. Clements joins these critics of Rothenberg, illustrating with examples that "clearly, the changes made by Rothenberg have no relationship to oral performance" (p. 48). In one of his book's finest moments, Clements also exposes some appallingly sloppy scholarship by Rothenberg, noting that a poem which appears as a "peyote vision" in *Shaking the Pumpkin* actually derives from a chapter in Sam Blowsnake's *Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* entitled "I Get Delirium Tremens and See Strange Things," which describes Blowsnake's experiences with alcohol. Clements quite rightly points out that this transgression is particularly offensive given the belief among adherents of the Native American Church that a peyote vision is sacred, while the ingestion of alcohol is sacrilege.

The third chapter explores the Jesuit records as a source on Canadian verbal art. Given the voluminous length of the records, the archival work necessary to research this chapter is impressive.

While the material is still minimal relative to the total length of the Jesuit records, Clements tries to show that it is, nonetheless, significant. According to Clements, "the value of the reports written by the Jesuits varies according to whether the writer is dealing with myth, song, or oration" (p. 61). Textualizations of myth are virtually nonexistent in the Jesuit records; Clements notes, "instead, the sacred stories of the *sauvages* [as the Jesuits called them] are summarized or simply commented upon" (p. 62). Likewise, songs were not commonly entextualized, though Clements mentions several examples, including a series of Iroquois songs, two untranslated fragments from Montagnais, and a song for the Calumet Dance among the Illinois. Oratory received much more thorough attention in the Jesuit records, though, and the Jesuits (like many others in the centuries that followed) seemed to have a particular interest in the use of figurative tropes in oratory. Clements argues that the reason oratory was included was because it could potentially aid the Jesuit mission; that is, once an Indian was converted, "his or her abilities could be harnessed for the Jesuit cause" (p. 70). Overall, the Jesuit record is not a very good source for information on performance, though Clements does make a fairly good case that it still contains some useful information about verbal art.

A number of chapters in *Native American Verbal Art* examine how verbal art is treated in the work of a variety of individuals—Virginia-militiaman-turned-Cherokee-escort Henry Timberlake (chapter four), anthropological progenitor Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (chapter six), and classical musician and Indian anthologist Natalie Curtis (chapter eight). Each of these chapters, like the chapter on the Jesuits, is forced to conclude that the source under study is quite limited as far as containing accurate information on verbal performance, but like the Jesuit records may yet be somewhat useful. The translation of a Cherokee war song included in Timberlake's memoirs is not really a translation at all, but because it employs Western poetic devices like rhyme and meter, more nearly resembles Rothenberg's "workings." Yet it is deemed valuable, at least, for its content, and Clements notes that "the poem does seem to reflect accurately the military practices of the Cherokees" during the eighteenth century. Of course verifying this wouldn't be possible without the larger ethnographic record, and whether true or not, this fact has little to do with the poem's value as an accurate rendition of verbal art. Much the same can also be said of Schoolcraft, who failed to reproduce paralinguistic elements of performance in his texts and like Timberlake, reworked

them in accord with the stylistic preferences of the mid-nineteenth century. As Clements admits at the conclusion of the chapter, the best that can be said of Schoolcraft's work is that "his narratives, songs, and orations let us identify some of the particular focal points that Indian performers believed important enough to stimulate artistic expression" (p. 128).

Natalie Curtis, who worked to record American Indian music (especially in the Southwestern pueblos) after the turn of the century is also skillfully criticized by Clements for the sentimental, artistic motivations that underlay her collection of songs. Her inclusion is an important one, since it is often the case that an arguably arbitrary distinction is drawn between the studies of verbal art and music. Again, though, Curtis gives little attention in her works to the ethnographic context of the materials which surrounded her collection or to the ethnic context which would typically have surrounded the *in situ* performance of the songs she presents. As Clements shows, Curtis' motivations for collecting the material in the first place were a confluence of a number of ways the dominant culture has historically viewed American Indian expressive arts. First, she suffered from what we might call (after Brian Dippie) the "vanishing Indian" complex. Like Boas and the salvage anthropology school which followed in his wake, Curtis believed that she was collecting for posterity art forms that would otherwise be lost with the advance of "civilization." She was also an "antimodernist," a movement in the early part of this century which advocated a return to a simpler era and a "primal authenticity of thought, feeling and action" (p. 173). Additionally, she saw Indian music as potential raw material for a truly American art form, one that would shun things European and look instead to the American Indian for inspiration. While the view that Indians could provide the impetus for a truly American identity in the arts was common in an early, more insecure period in American history, this kind of aesthetic patriotism dies hard, as Curtis' life and work show. Clements' critical analysis here is among the best in the collection, and in a wonderful understatement he refers to Curtis' "somewhat paradoxical concept of progress combined with artistic conservation" (p. 171).

Several other chapters examine a variety of sources comparatively. One looks at the nineteenth century generally, noting, "The principles that shaped textualization during the early nineteenth century developed primarily from beliefs about the probable effects of the impact of Euro-American civilization on

Indian cultures" (p. 95). Here Clements explains how it was that nineteenth-century textmakers felt they had license to alter the verbal art they were publishing. This resulted in the unfortunate and ubiquitous tendency to make verbal art texts adhere to Euro-American literary standards. He notes that "our records of American Indian verbal art from the early nineteenth century are thus marked by a massive encrustation of Euroamerican embellishment with features judged essential to literature by the vaguely romantic esthetics of the early nineteenth century" (p. 107). Clements observes that it is oratory that comes through the nineteenth century less scathed, in part since American Indian speeches tended to be recorded by "translators who regarded American Indian verbal art as the product of unredeemable savagery," and these individuals were less inclined to edit what they recorded to make it seem more palatable and literary to an American audience.

Chapter seven, "The True Presentiments of the Indian Mind': Linguistic Texts as Data Sources," looks at another trend, the early movement to document Native cultures and how this affected the presentation of verbal art. "Increasingly, when linguistic textualizations of verbal art appeared in translation," observes Clements, "the tendency was to eschew attempts to array them in Euroamerican literary splendor and instead to represent their indigenous qualities" (p. 135). Clements traces this trend through the scholarship of three different individuals: William Warren, Daniel Brinton, and Franz Boas. William Warren, whose mother was Ojibwa, was not a salvage anthropologist, but it was his desire to preserve Ojibwa culture, which he believed was disappearing. Daniel Brinton was the first American professor of anthropology, and though he did virtually no fieldwork among American Indians, he did publish extensively on Native American mythology. Brinton was extremely critical of earlier, more literary attempts to render Indian verbal art on the printed page, dismissing them as often being "simply worthless" (p. 139). Instead, he strove for greater accuracy and less embellishment. His series of publications, which examined the oral traditions of groups as diverse as the Delaware and the Maya, included a linguistic text in the native language, a translation, and an introduction placing the text in its cultural context. With Boas, textual accuracy became the central objective. Clements notes that for Boas, "textualizations of Native American verbal art were meant to function as sources of historical, general ethnographic and linguistic data" (p. 150). It was



Boas' belief that the narratives he recorded acted as a mirror for the cultures from which they came. Therefore it was possible to preserve a dying culture by preserving its myths in print. Boas' approach differed from earlier attempts to document the inevitably vanishing cultures of the American Indian because of the importance he attached to indigenous languages. Yet in spite of the attention he paid to linguistic accuracy, Clements rightly notes that Boas' texts "include virtually nothing about the expressive situations, which he acknowledges cursorily in general introductions to some of his collections" (p. 151).

The chapter on texts as linguistic data sources is an effective precursor to the one that follows on Natalie Curtis, since as Clements shows, she exemplified the same documentary tendency. It is also logical that the chapter which follows the one on Curtis, "The Anthology of Museum of Verbal Art" does so, since Curtis' *The Indians' Book* was perhaps the first anthology of its kind. Clements begins by discussing the nature of museum displays of American Indian objects as "art." As others have claimed before him, the museum display of ethnographic objects such as American Indian cultural patrimony divides these objects from the context necessary to understanding their meaning. He goes on to assert that text-makers have tended to do exactly the same thing, and the evidence he has presented thus far in the collection almost makes this a foregone conclusion. He notes that "Some of the venues in which those texts have been published foreground their museological effect, especially when those venues suggest, like New York City art exhibits—the 'universal' artistic qualities that do not depend upon their cultural contexts" (p. 183). But if the history of entextualizing Native American verbal art up to the twentieth century has been museological, it is the anthology in which the museological impulse finds its strongest manifestation. Clements first discusses George Cronyn's 1918 collection *The Path on the Rainbow*, which he faults for its inclusion of an appendix of poetic "interpretations" of Indian themes, written by Euro-American poets. From Cronyn's collection, he quickly summarizes others that followed, including Nellie Barnes' *American Indian Love Lyrics* (1925), Margot Astrov's *The Winged Serpent* (1946), A Grove Day's *The Sky Clears* (1951), and Rothenberg's *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972). Though Clements asserts that each of these collections is superior to Cronyn's, he also notes that "each of these suffers from such common failings of anthologies as selectivity, downplaying the role of the individual in the creation of North

American verbal art, and ignoring the status of oral expression as event" (p. 189). Once again, we find the sources Clements is investigating totally lacking in the performative dimensions of verbal art. Next Clements turns his critical eye on a more recent but also egregiously presented collection, *The Magic World: American Indian Songs and Poems*, edited by William Brandon. This collection includes about eighty "poems," some of which are "freely adapted" and each is presented without cultural background of any kind. Clements skillfully explains that one entry in the collection, identified by Brandon as an "elegy dream song" is actually three different songs used by the Tohono O'Odham for healing. Though Brandon claims that the "poems speak for themselves," Clements uses this example to show just how fallacious this assumption is and to expose a collection he says represents "the worst in literary museology" (p. 193). Finally, Clements examines a recent (1984) anthology, *American Indian Myths and Legends*, edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz. Clements rightly claims that while this collection looks promising at first, it actually suffers from a number of the same problems that we have seen in the other collections, offering little in the way of cultural context and even less explanation of the etiology of the stories that are included.

Each of Clements' chapters is a well-written, well-researched article in and of itself, and any scholar researching the various topics he covers would be well-advised to consult them. Yet as a study of verbal art, *Native American Verbal Art* is somewhat disappointing. One weakness here is that virtually all of Clements' sources are secondary. Rather than writing on verbal art itself, he is writing about others who have written about it. Moreover, in too many cases, he is addressing topics that have already been written about. Many of the chapters seem almost overly indebted to the works of other scholars.

In other cases, *Native American Verbal Art*, because it is very general and topically quite brief, compares somewhat unfavorably with existing scholarship. Clements' observations about the limitations of the Boasian approach in chapter two are essentially the same as those made by Dell Hymes in several of his articles. More importantly, as an examination of the role of verbal art in Boas' scholarship, Clements cannot offer the same kind of depth of study that is found in Hymes' work or in Judith Berman's brilliant reevaluation of Boas' Kwakw'ala (Kwakiutl) texts, for example, because he doesn't have the expertise in linguistics and ethnolinguistics. One problem Clements rightly

identifies in the more popular treatments of American Indian verbal art is an absence of linguistic knowledge on the part of so-called translators, a condition that can help result in the most inaccurate and overly-poetic kinds of "translations." Yet his own lack of linguistic knowledge would seem to hinder him from being able to locate the hidden worth of older entextualizations in the philological manner of a Judith Berman or a Dell Hymes. Similarly, because of his understanding of Uto-Aztecan linguistics and Hopi ethnolinguistics, David Leedom Shaul is able to make more substantive evaluations of the shortcomings of Natalie Curtis' Hopi song texts than Clements, who must emphasize the attitudes that lay behind their production and not the inaccuracies and technical faults of the translations themselves. This is what I mean when I say that texts are not the focus here, contexts are.

In spite of investigating scholars who primarily viewed American Indian verbal art as "literature," Clements explains in the book's introduction that he prefers to call these storytelling and other performative genres "verbal art" and not "oral literature," as they have been typically called in the past. He convincingly argues that as a term "literature" unavoidably calls to mind a classically European sense of "letters" and bears cultural baggage that is inappropriate for non-Western forms. "Moreover, separating off some portion of verbal expression in a culture as 'literary' may be an etic imposition," he notes (p. 14). Although this is probably also true of "verbal art," his point is a good one. By choosing to refer to this material as "verbal art" and not "oral literature" or "oral poetry," Clements offers a constant and effective reminder to his audience that it is precisely the elements foregrounded in more contemporary studies of verbal art that are lacking in older ethnographic and popular texts, texts which were most often dictated by more literary concerns. The irony is that Clements' study itself doesn't treat the very aspects of verbal performance that contributed to the development of this concept in any detail, nor does he give sufficient attention to the scholars who have done more effective jobs of examining these phenomena. As he says himself, his study is a "history of failure," the traditional failure of ethnographers and anthologizers to pay sufficient attention to these variables. Clements deserves abundant credit for his sensitive and thoughtful documentation of this tendency, and as a study of Euro-American attitudes toward American Indians, the collection stands on its own merit. Yet Clements' own failure, it

would seem, is in not discussing in greater detail more recent works that offer more successful studies of verbal art. The main points of Clements' study, that aspects of ethnographic and ethnic context have been historically ignored, altered, and violated in the production of texts by ethnographers and others, are points that that have already been made by members of this recent ethnography of communication school. Clements' too brief treatment of contemporary work on verbal art is especially disappointing, again because his own study is so indebted to it.

*Derek Milne*  
*Diné College—Shiprock*

**Native Americans, Crime, and Justice.** Edited by Marianne O. Neilsen and Robert A. Silverman. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996. 321 pages. \$65.00 cloth.

As a professor, I always view edited works with the attitude of someone from *Missourah!* In other words, you've got to *show* me. Trying to fit the prior works of other authors into a thematic piece is difficult at best and frequently falls short of accommodating some educator in trying to find readings appropriate for a particular course. Some editors hustle the popular press to present opposing issues, while others stick to selections from scholarly journals. Marianne Neilsen and Robert Silverman have skipped and danced across the entire spectrum to present a dazzling array of deftly selected pieces that do much to drive home the context, mechanisms, problems, and prospects of the generally misunderstood issue of Native Americans, crime, and "justice" (or is it "just us").

If this were a book on religion, the editors might have tried to get a foreword from the Dalai Lama. But this is a work on Native American justice, and they got a foreword from Chief Justice Robert Yazzie of the Diné (Navajo) Nation. Same thing. The chief justice's admonitions come through clearly and with strength, as this champion of the concept of peacemaking has a firm grip of what is needed as Natives try to walk between two cultures. Chief Justice Yazzie's recent keynote address to the March 1997 annual meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in Louisville, Kentucky, expanded greatly on what he wrote in this foreword. It would be worthwhile to study his writings on the concept of peacemaking.