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Coyote Poems: Navajo Poetry, Intertextuality, and Language Choice

ANTHONY K. WEBSTER

We are in constant rapport with an intelligence in which all experiences remote and proximate, “trivial” and “important,” are held like waving reeds in the sensitive transparency of a brook.

—Edward Sapir, *Left-Handed, Son of Old Man Hat*

Much has been written from ethnographic, linguistic, and ethno poetic perspectives concerning Native American oral poetry. Far less, however, has been written from these perspectives concerning written or “orthographic” poetry.¹ For example, many literary critics describe Native American written poetry as inspired by oral tradition (namely storytelling). This seems a vacuous claim unless one can set out the features of the oral genre (tradition) and the written form, and establish a baseline for comparative purposes. It is not enough to claim that poetry is storytelling based on oral tradition; rather, we should have more specific criteria. The aim of this article is to examine a set or genre of Navajo poetry as an emergent literary tradition, employing linguistic and tropic devices that create poetic identities.² I will focus on a set of poems concerning Coyote that have links to oral tradition and will investigate how each poem connects with and diverts from that tradition. I will also investigate the codes or languages used in these poems and the language ideologies that motivate such decisions as which language, which mode of expression is appropriate.

In an important article Edward Spicer discusses the notion of hidden states. He points out that the hidden states are not in fact hiding but rather have been erased from the consciousness of the dominant nation-state.³ He uses the example of Irish literature to show how this works. In late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century England, it was widely assumed that there was no such thing as Gaelic literature. This assumption, however, ignored or denied

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centuries of Gaelic literature (the Bible, for example, was translated into Gaelic before it appeared in English). The point is that there was not a lack of Irish-Gaelic literature but that the dominant English nation-state failed to recognize that literature.⁴ Such hiding of Gaelic literature allowed England to form policies that treated the Irish as illiterate, “barbarous,” and “beyond the pale.” To borrow a notion from Johannes Fabian, it removed the Irish from the present, placing them squarely in the past. That is, they were not coeval.⁵

In a similar way, Navajo poetry has been submerged or hidden. Recognition of Navajo oral poetry, although pronounced as early as the 1880s by Washington Matthews, has been largely ignored by the larger dominant society.⁶ Only recently has an appreciation of Navajo oral poetry, and Native American literatures in general, come to the fore.⁷ Appreciation of Navajo orthographic poetry has been even slower to develop. Indeed, it could be argued that it was the anthropologists Matthews and Edward Sapir who were the recognized poets, although their “fame” as poets has waned (if it ever existed) as Navajo poets like Luci Tapahonso and Rex Lee Jim wax. I hope in this article to express an appreciation of Navajo poetry as Navajo poetry.

JINÍ IN ORAL AND WRITTEN “STORIES”

Many of the Navajo poets I spoke with stated that there is no word for poetry in the Navajo language. Indeed, the closest word offered by Navajo poets I consulted with was *hane'*, “story.” Robert Young and William Morgan’s *The Navajo Language* has no entry for poetry.⁸ Diné College, however, published a book of poetry written for a Navajo-language class and used in other classes entitled *Hane' Naach'ááh*, “decorative stories,” in 1998. But this form seems to be the invention of the Diné teacher’s program and is not widely used among poets. One poet I interviewed did suggest the phrase *Saad Naach'ááh*, “artistic language,” but noted that poetry also involved a “narrative.” It is central, therefore, to understand Navajo poetry as a kind of storytelling, a kind of narrative. In this respect poetry is connected to other kinds of narratives, including verbal art. Many of the poets I interviewed did use the word *poetry* to describe what they do, but when speaking in Navajo, the word *hane'* was used more often than *poetry*.⁹

Coyote stories are an established genre, often referred to as “stories about Coyote, the one who trots” (*Ma'ii jooldloshí hane'* as Timothy Benally writes¹⁰). Regulations—at night and during winter—for the telling of Coyote stories are still maintained (although poems about Coyote and citations of Coyote stories are relatively immune to these regulations). Several volumes that include Navajo Coyote stories have been published.¹¹ The stories have been published in both Navajo-English bilingual collections and English-only collections. Much research on Navajo Coyote stories has also been conducted. The analytical perspectives differ, however.

Barre Toelken and Toelken and Tacheeni Scott have examined Navajo Coyote stories from an ethnopoetic perspective, looking for recurrent structuring devices such as *jiní*, “they say” (*ji-*, fourth-person pronominal, plus *-ní*, “to say”).¹² More recently Toelken has suggested the “sacred” quality of these

narratives and challenged ethnographers to be more respectful of their field “data”—the voices of real human beings.¹³ Toelken, summarizing an account by Little John Benally, explains some of the import of Navajo Coyote stories:

The stories about Coyote are themselves considered so powerful, their articulation so magical, their recitation in winter so deeply connected to the normal powers and natural cycles, their episodes so reminiscent of central myths, their imagery so tightly connected with reality, that elliptical references to them in ritual can invoke all the powers inherent in their original dramatic constellations. In a ritual, an allusion to a well-known line, or speech, or action will summon forth the power of the entire tale and apply it to the healing process under way.¹⁴

Notice that the intertextual citation has pragmatic force. That is, the indexical linkage between Coyote story and ritual becomes creative in the sense that it creates through the power of language use. Toelken has been interested, then, with both the poetic quality of Coyote narratives and their “sacred” and “mythico-poetic” qualities.

Sally Midgette has also compared Coyote stories to personal narratives. Her work has focused on the temporal semantics in Navajo discourse as well as on the use of the progressive aspect as marker of Coyote stories.¹⁵ Building on the work of George Lakoff, Midgette proposes to analyze the progressive aspect using “idealized cognitive models.”¹⁶ She examines the ways Coyote narratives—often built on verbs of speaking—contrast with personal narratives. Again, the focus is on Navajo narratives as linguistic data that may have implications for forms of thought (her first chapter concerns the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis¹⁷).

Finally, early on, W. W. Hill and Dorothy Hill looked at the motifs within Navajo Coyote stories.¹⁸ They were interested in a general typology of myths and compared the motifs found among the Navajo with those involving other Southern Athabaskan-speaking peoples. They argued that based on these motifs, Jicarilla Apache and Navajo are the most similar, followed by Lipan Apache, White Mountain Apache, and Chiricahua. The least overlap between motifs occurred between Navajo and Mescalero Apache. Looking simply at whether each Southern Athabaskan language uses a verb of speaking (such as *jini*) or a narrative enclitic (such as *-ná'a*) in Coyote stories, one finds that Jicarilla, Chiricahua, and Mescalero use a narrative enclitic, whereas Navajo, White Mountain, and San Carlos Apache use a verb of speaking to create larger discourse units in Coyote stories. Lipan uses neither in the only attested version in Lipan Apache.¹⁹ Hill and Hill were interested in motifs of Coyote stories and their distribution among Southern Athabaskan-speaking peoples. They were less interested in poetics than in Coyote motifs as a window into culture history.²⁰

An important ethnopoetic feature in Navajo-language versions is the repeated use of a narrative particle *jini*, “it is said, they say.” Toelken and Scott discuss the discursive uses of this particle in some detail.²¹ In essence, the particle indicates that the narrative is not firsthand information, that a specific narrative genre is occurring, and that it aids in the creation of larger discourse

units—that is, lines (a *lá* Hymesian ethnopoetics).²² Here is a brief example from Haile of the use of the particle:

T'áá iildlosh, n̄t'ée' niilah jiní.

He was trotting right along, but stopped suddenly, it is said.

Dego déé'íí'jiní.

He looked up, it is said.

“Dooládó' honiigai,” ní jiní.

“It certainly is hot,” he said, it is said.

“Hwee k'os hólé' laanaa,” ní jiní.

“I wish that it would become cloudy for me,”
he said, it is said.²³

The use of the particle indexes the occurrence of a specific kind of narrative. As has been reported in the literature, the particle is common in oral performances of Coyote stories.²⁴ For example, Toelken and Scott report that the form *jiní* (sometimes shortened to *jn*) is found thirty-four times in one of Yellowman's Coyote narratives, and it occurs thirty-nine times in a Coyote narrative collected by Harry Hoijer and Edward Sapir.²⁵ More than a hundred tokens of *jiní* appear in a Coyote narrative—“Coyote and Skunk”—as told by Curly Tó Aheedlíinii.²⁶

MA'II AND COYOTE POEMS

Given the importance of Coyote in Navajo oral literature, it should not be surprising to find Coyote used prominently by many Navajo poets.²⁷ For example, one of the earliest examples of code switching from English to Navajo in an English orthographic poem written by a Navajo is found in a poem by Richard David.²⁸ In that poem *Ma'í* (“Coyote”) is indexed through reference to Coyote stories told by the narrator's maternal grandfather.²⁹ The poem indexes both the genre and setting of Navajo Coyote stories. Here is the relevant passage:

He'd make us laugh with the stories of the hated

Ma'í.³⁰

Coyote—*Ma'í* or *Ma'ii*—often appears in Navajo in Navajo poems written in English, and indeed, several poems do center on Coyote. Here are two more examples of code switching from English to Navajo that involve *Ma'í* Coyote:

That which we can only guess to be

Like voiceless vacant villages of old

Coyote, Ma'ii, was always there to see
 What the rest of us are only told.³¹

Beyond the fire *ma'ii* sheds his coyote skin
 and appears as the moral of our story.³²

Again, both poems index the genre of Coyote stories. They are citations of a larger corpus of narratives, intertextual references that gain saliency through code switching (that is, the Navajo forms draw attention to the Navajo nature of Coyote and Coyote stories). Such usages of *ma'ii* or *ma'i* in these poems (and others) act as “ethnolinguistic emblematic identity displays” of the kind Michael Silverstein discusses concerning the continued use of the Kiksht word *Sk'úlia* for Coyote and the code-mixed verb *Sk'uly-ing* for “getting into mischief” among young people who are not native Kiksht speakers.³³ The form perdures as an emblematic identity display that connects intertextually to a larger corpus of oral narratives.

I will now compare these forms of Coyote oral narratives and the use of *jini* to an excerpt from a poem by Rex Lee Jim, a Navajo poet, entitled “*Na'idikiid/Questioning*.”³⁴ Ironically, this poem is from a trilingual collection of poems in English, Navajo, and Gaelic. I first present the Navajo version, followed by Rex Lee Jim's English version (not a translation).³⁵ Finally, I present a somewhat modified version from my own translation. (I have excluded the Gaelic versions because Rex Lee Jim did not do them.)

Na'ízhdílkidgo t'éí hoł ééhózin
 Áko lǫǫ, háádóo ma'ii haaldloozh jini
 Shǫǫgo doo baa hane' da.³⁶

Ask and you will know, my grandson,
 Ahuh, where did coyote start trotting, they say,
 my grandfather?
 Coyote has cold feet and only travels in the winter, my
 grandson.³⁷

Ask and you will know,
 And so, surely, from where does coyote start trotting, it is
 said?
 During summertime those stories are not told.

The first things to note are the differences between the Navajo version and Rex Lee Jim's English version. As mentioned, the English version is not a translation; rather, it is an attempt to get across the meaning or sense of the poem in English. There is a complete absence of kinship terms in the Navajo version. The knowledge that this is the kind of conversation a young Navajo child would have with a grandparent is implicit. Indeed, if one can read Navajo, it may be assumed that one would have the requisite background knowledge to appreciate the implication. The English version makes this

relationship explicit, and, it could be argued, it encourages young Navajos to speak with their grandparents. (Grandparents are, of course, highly valued among the Navajo; Rex Lee Jim has written elsewhere about his maternal grandfather.³⁸) Furthermore, the final lines of the Navajo and English examples vary dramatically. In the English version the answer to the question is left ambiguous and more metaphoric, while in the Navajo version the answer is simply that one cannot tell Coyote stories in the summertime—a well-known prohibition among Navajos.³⁹ The versions differ in both their explicitness and their metaphoric content.

Returning to the particle *jini*, we find it used in the second line of the Navajo version. The particle is repeated later in the poem. In this way the poem can be understood as a kind of “story,” implicated in a corpus of Coyote narratives only referenced here. The particle indexes this poem to a shared stock of knowledge, a shared—or potentially shared—corpus of oral literature. But such knowledge is gained from hearing Coyote narratives in Navajo on winter nights. In this respect, the particle serves a particular epistemic purpose: It indicates that this is *information of which the narrator lacks firsthand experience*. The English “they say” lacks the Navajo particle’s indexical quality. The versions—including mine—are not commensurate. Because languages have histories and are built from implicature, they are entangled in different connotations, different relations, different knowledge bases. That is, every utterance is entangled within languages’ histories. We simply cannot say something new without it also being implicated in prior discourse.⁴⁰

COYOTE STEALS FIRE

The next Coyote poem is also by Rex Lee Jim and appears only in English. It comes from a collection of English poems entitled *spirit echoes spirit* and is part of a larger cycle of eleven Coyote poems:

coyote plays with his tail,
catches it between
his teeth.
mouth catches
fire
black
god guffaws heartily
, resounding
in a thousand pesos⁴¹

Notice the poem’s elliptical quality. It references a specific Navajo Coyote narrative concerning Coyote stealing fire.⁴² The poem also, obliquely—according to Jim—references the story of the Great Gambler through the use of the word *pesos*.⁴³ Again, knowledge of the poem assumes a prior stock of knowledge that was or should be circulated on winter nights from elders to young people. As Rex Lee Jim stated when discussing this poem, “Actually you need to know quite a bit of Navajo stories” to understand the poem.⁴⁴

The stock of knowledge, as Rex Lee Jim explained to me, also derives from living on the reservation, where Coyote is omnipresent:

Coyote is out there . . . killing your . . . sheep and goats. You can hear them howling in canyons during the morning, the evening, the middle of the day, way late at night. You're surrounded by it. . . . Coyote is every part of your life.⁴⁵

The omnipresence, the import of Coyote was also articulated in other daily activities. For example, some Navajos pull their cars or trucks over to the side of the road if a coyote crosses the road in front of them. They will wait until another car or truck drives over the coyote's path before they continue. Navajo consultants would sometimes explain cars sitting on the side of the road by reference to Coyote and this prohibition.

Finally, speaking on the nature of Coyote, Rex Lee Jim continues,

I think he represents . . . curiosity, of being adventurous, taking risks, going beyond your limits, going into the unknown, in order to explore and discover, sometimes he is hurt and sometime he don't [hurt] and sometime he succeed and he is at the core of that human being, of wanting to do things.⁴⁶

There is, according to Jim, something uniquely human about Coyote and his desire for knowledge, his curiosity.

The poem is meant to make the reader think, to make the connections. But the background knowledge—the unstated presuppositions—is distinctively Navajo (at least for Jim). Thus, although this poem appears only in English, the connections, the intertextual references evoked are relatively oblique. A Navajo reader, schooled in the traditional stories, should have access to such knowledge, but outside readers will likely lack the requisite background knowledge. Let me add that by “intertextual” I mean forms, tropes, or references transposed from one domain—one genre—to another or from one utterance to another. That is, intertextual references are part of the larger issue of implicature, which, as Sapir noted, *is* culture.⁴⁷

Notice further, following Toelken, that the intertextual linkages, the citing of a prior discourse—in this case a Coyote story—evoke the power and force of the Coyote story.⁴⁸ Coyote stories are not merely stories; they are also efficacious, evocative, and creative ways of using language—ways that through citations index and evoke the pragmatic power of Navajo Coyote stories. Coyote stories are entangled in knowledge. Reflections upon those entanglements—what Rex Lee Jim calls “thought poems”—are both an intertextual reference to a stock of knowledge and evocative ways of knowing (ways of knowing through Coyote stories). Jim seems to use the indexical citations in a way reminiscent of the use of citations of Coyote stories in Navajo ritual, that is, to call forth the creative potential—the efficaciousness of the words and stories—and imbue one genre with the power of another. To paraphrase Claude Levi-Strauss, such usages are good, then, to think.

OTHER ORAL FEATURES IN NAVAJO POETRY

Before I turn to the final Coyote poem, I will look briefly at how “mentioning” (intertextual linkage), parallelism, and metonymy are all part of the poetry of Rex Lee Jim and how they connect his poetry to specific features of Navajo oral literature. I do this to provide further empirical evidence for the relationship between oral poetry and orthographic poetry and to show that Rex Lee Jim is not the only poet to use mentionings or, for that matter, *jini* in his poetry.

As discussed earlier, intertextual linkages are often used in Navajo ritual.⁴⁹ Rex Lee Jim uses this device—citing Coyote narratives, other oral narratives, and specific rituals in his poetry. In Rex Lee Jim’s poem “*Na’azheeh/Hunting*,” he makes an explicit link to Navajo curing ways (both the English and Navajo versions are by Jim):

Tlig
 Niyol nee ní’íí’
 Tlig
 Nibeedí nee ní’íí’
 Tlig
 Tséghájooghatii nee ní’íí’
 Tlig
 Nikeéyah nee ní’íí’
 Tlig
 Nidiyin nee ní’íí’
 Tlig
 K’ad láá,
 dah náá’diit’áhígíí bii’ doo
 áadi sq’ fíchíí’ bidáádidoogáál⁵⁰

Click
 I stole your breathing
 Click
 I stole your survival tools
 Click
 I stole your living goods
 Click
 I stole your land
 Click
 I stole your gods
 Click
 Now all is ready
 For the next shuttle flight
 The red star will keep it from returning.⁵¹

Although this poem references the space shuttle, there is much in the poem that connects it to oral poetry.⁵² The final line, according to Jim, *áadi sq’ fíchíí’ bidáádidoogáál* / “the red star will keep it from returning,” is from a specific curing way.⁵³ According to Jim, although this poem presents a

negative view of Anglos, a ray of hope remains. The citation from the curing way is not complete, signifying that Anglos still have a chance. Notice also the use of the onomatopoeic form *thig*, which represents the sound of pulling the trigger of a gun. As Matthews points out, onomatopoeic forms are found in a number of Navajo chants and songs.⁵⁴ Notice still further the parallelism within the poem, a prominent feature of Navajo chants.⁵⁵ The formula _____ *nee ní'íí'* is repeated five times. Here is an example from Gladys Reichard:

Shikee biyá ních'i doo,
Shijáád biyá ních'i doo,
Sits'ús biyá ních'i doo,
Shíni' biyá ních'i doo,
Shinéé' biyá ních'i doo

Wind will be beneath my feet,
 Wind will be beneath my legs,
 Wind will be beneath my body,
 Wind will be beneath my mind,
 Wind will be beneath my voice⁵⁶

As Margaret Field and Taft Blackhorse Jr. point out, the parallelism is directed in an “upward-moving” process.⁵⁷ Chants begin on the ground and, as the parallelism iterates, there is a movement figuratively upward (for example, from the feet to the head or from the earth to the sky). The metonymical quality of the parallelism allows the patient to identify with the deity being evoked. Metonymy is thus a crucial feature in Navajo prayers (*hataali*). In the earlier Jim poem (“*Na'azheeh/Hunting*”), a general movement within the parallelism correlates with the upward-moving pattern in the prayer.

The use of metonymy, parallelism, and intertextual linkage can be found in other poems by Rex Lee Jim. Jim describes the poem below (translated by Jim) as “a view from the top. It is a spiritual emplacement of that panoramic view I described from the top of Hamburger Rock within myself.”⁵⁸

Sá'ah naaghái bik'eh hózhóón nishlǫ́igo naasháa doo
Sá'ah naaghái bik'eh hózhóón nishlǫ́igo naasháa doo

Tsilkééh doo tídílnéehii nishlǫ́igo naasháa doo
Ch'íkééh t'áá altsxóní náádleełí nishlǫ́o naasháa doo

Tádídíín ashkii nishlǫ́igo naasháa doo
Anílt'ánii at'ééd nishlǫ́o naasháa doo

K'os díłbít t'áá shee náhoodleełgo naasháa doo
Áah díłbít t'áá shee náhoodleełgo naasháa doo

Níłtsá biká' t'áá shee naatlingo naasháa doo
Níłtsá bi'áád t'áá shee naatlingo naasháa doo

Hózhógo naasháa doo
Hózhógo naasháa doo
Hózhó naasháa doo
*Hózhó naasháa doo*⁵⁹

May I be Everlasting and Beautiful Living, walking
 May I be Everlasting and Beautiful Living, walking

May I be Unwounded Male Youth, walking
 May I be Everchanging Female Youth, walking

May I be Pollen Boy, walking
 May I be Ripener Girl, walking

May Dark Clouds continue to blanket me, walking
 May Dark Mist continue to blanket me, walking

May Male Rain continue to shower me, walking
 May Female Rain continue to shower me, walking

May I be Everlasting Beauty, walking
 May I be Everlasting Beauty, walking
 May I be Everlasting Beauty, walking
 May I be Everlasting Beauty, walking⁶⁰

It should not be surprising that the poem ends with the same line (or a variant) repeated four times. Four—from the four sacred mountains to the four sacred directions—is an important rhetorical device in Navajo oral literature, and as Gary Witherspoon has pointed out, in Navajo chants and prayers things tend to happen four times.⁶¹ This example corresponds with the use of metonyms to create an indexical grounding, as occurs in the earlier Reichard example.⁶² The final four lines also suggest that *hózhó*, “beauty,” surrounds the speaker. The use of four parallel lines connects with the four sacred directions and in this way creates a sense of “surrounding.” Finally, Jim “lifts” the final lines from the Night Way, creating an intertextual linkage between the Night Way, a curing ceremonial, and this poem. Matthews presents line 23 of the “Prayer to the War God and Goddess of the Chase” as *hozógo nasádo*, “happily may I walk.”⁶³ This form is clearly *hózhógo naasháa doo*, which Jim poetically translates as “may I be Everlasting Beauty, walking.”

Similarly, Luci Tapahonso, Laura Tohe, and Nia Francisco use intertextual linkages (to narratives about the Long Walk, for example), parallelism, and metonymy.⁶⁴ A brief example of intertextual linkage in yet another Coyote poem is found in Sherwin Bitsui’s poem “Atlas:”

Coyote scattering headlights instead of stars⁶⁵

Here, Bitsui is connecting with the Coyote narrative in which Coyote is responsible for the placement of stars. Coyote, through impatience, places the stars randomly instead of in the order desired by First Man and First Woman.⁶⁶ Instead of placing stars, though, in Bitsui's poem Coyote places headlights, thus referencing the earlier story and using that mentioning to comment about the present while reshaping it.

Another poet who connects with narrative traditions through the use of *jini* is Luci Tapahonso. Her poem called "Yáadí Lá" (which I gloss as "The Nasty One") ends as follows:

'índa ma'ii nachxoogo tlóódi naghá jiin'
(they said the coyote walked around outside that night pouting.)⁶⁷

Here we see *jini* reduced to *jiin'*, which acts as the hearsay evidential, but with the use of *ma'ii* in the line it also connects back to the stock of knowledge that contains Coyote stories. In this poem an unfaithful man is explicitly linked to Coyote and through the use of *jiin'* (*jini*) to the genre of Coyote stories as well. The orthographic poem employs an oral poetic device.

COYOTE BLUES

The final Coyote poem I examine, by Esther Belin, is a long narrative poem concerning the wanderings of Coyote on the "brown vibe."⁶⁸ The poem is titled "Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe" and is in her collection of poems *From the Belly of My Beauty*.⁶⁹ Whereas Rex Lee Jim uses specific stories, linguistic devices, and idealizations about the proper times to tell Coyote stories to connect them with an oral literature, Belin focuses on the trope and movement of Coyote. Coyote, as several scholars have pointed out, is always on the move.⁷⁰ As Midgette notes, the progressive aspect is the form most closely associated with Coyote narratives.⁷¹ Margot Astrov calls movement the "leitmotif of Navajo . . . literature."⁷² Coyote is the "one who trots." Here is how Belin introduced the poem at a live performance on 6 October 2000 in Bluff, Utah:

When I was at Berkeley there was the a somebody read a poem about a Tohono O'odham I guess sorta relating what an Indian is and who who determines what it is and and who who wants to be one um when I was at Berkeley that was a real issue for a lot of our students and it was really interesting for me all my life I've been told that you know that Indians all over the country all over the world were all related were all connected and and my mom always encouraged us whenever we traveled away from home you know to seek out other Indian people and those are the ones that are sorta our base and it was really ironic that when I got to the university that was such an issue and I think part of being such a huge institution like the University of California they make an issue when we read you fill out boxes of who you are and what your blood quantum is and if you're enrolled if you're not enrolled if you're half-blood or you know mixed or whatever there's so many words that go into that box and emotions and

that really became a stumbling block for us um for awhile some students and it's interesting we fell into that you know that we fell into all those um I guess fabrications of what others wanted us to be and you know a lot of people really didn't know how to deal with it and this is a poem that addresses that.⁷³

This is how the poem begins (characteristically with Coyote on the move):

And Coyote struts down East 14th
feeling good
looking good
feeling the brown
melting into the brown that loiters⁷⁴

The opening line seems clearly to index Coyote stories, many of which begin with a Navajo equivalent of "and" ('*áádoo*, '*áko*), and Coyote is often traveling on a road (in this case East 14th). The use of "and" allows us to insert ourselves into a larger narrative. Coyote has always been traveling, and we now observe one episode in those travels. Implicitly we know that this is not the first of his travels, nor will it be the last. In essence, we join Coyote already in progress. Further, as H. Guillermo Bartelt notes, the use of the discourse marker "and" at the beginning of sentences is a common feature in Navajo English.⁷⁵ Notice also that we begin at a specific, named locale (East 14th). This is similar to many Coyote stories that begin at named locations. These places are often on the Navajo Nation or within *Dinétaah*, locatable in Navajo ethnogeographical knowledge. For example, one of Curly Tó Aheedlíinii's Coyote stories begins this way:

Nléí dibé ntsaa bee násti'ahdǫ́ǫ́' tséyaa hatso hoolyéédǫ́ǫ́' náshjaa'
hastiin jideeshzhee' lá jinií.

Somewhere in a draw of La Plata Range [Big Sheep], along a place called Big Rock Cave, Old Man Owl had started on a hunt [they say].⁷⁶

La Plata Mountain (in Colorado) is an important geographical place for many Navajo (*Dibé ntsaa*, "Big Sheep"). For many Navajo it is the sacred mountain of the North. The placed-ness of Belin's narrative, its indexical grounding, however, is an urban terrain.⁷⁷ She locates Coyote in an urban world, from which he travels (trots).

Belin uses this motif of movement and traces Coyote's travels across the United States. Coyote interrogates the Indian experience in the United States, which includes both rural and urban experiences of Native Americans. Indeed, Belin was raised in Los Angeles and only recently moved back to the Southwest. We find Coyote wandering Oakland and Albuquerque. He converses with Poncas, Seminoles, and Navajos. The poem revels in the ironies inherent in the relocations of Native Americans:

talking that talk
 of relocation from tribal nation
 of recent immigration to the place some call the United States
 home to many dislocated funky brown
 ironic immigration
 more accurate tribal nation to tribal nation⁷⁸

Although the poem does reference Navajos (events occur outside Winslow, Arizona, and along Interstate 40), and Belin scatters a couple of Navajo words into the poem (*bilagáana*, “white person,” and *Dinétaḥ*, the traditional homeland of the Navajo or Diné), nothing anchors it to a specific Navajo oral literature besides the genre (Coyote) and the trope of movement. This poem uses Coyote as a way to explore the situation of modern Native Americans in the political entity called the United States.

LANGUAGE CHOICE

Whereas the three primary Coyote poems I have looked at (“*Na’idíkid/Questioning*,” “Coyote Steals Fire,” and “Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe”) show three ways to connect with Coyote stories, they also reveal something concerning language ideologies.⁷⁹ By language ideologies I mean the reported functions, structures, and domains of use—the “common-sense” articulations of language.⁸⁰ The first poem was originally written in Navajo and was translated into English. The second poem was written entirely in English. The third poem is a mixture of English, American Indian English, and Navajo. There is an irony, I think, in this distribution. The second poem, written by Rex Lee Jim, is perhaps the most oblique of the three. In the English version of the first poem, references that may be obscure to non-Navajos are made explicit. Indeed, the English version does more “explaining” than the Navajo version. The second poem does not explain things; rather, it sets out a number of subtle references to Navajo oral literature, and the reader needs that background to follow the poem. The third poem, perhaps the most narrative-like, explores the state of Native Americans today in rather up-front language. The second poem, the one written entirely in English, is more oblique, more elliptical. It does not force one interpretation; rather, the poem opens up options of interpretation.

The question remains, Why choose to write in English or Navajo? What is the motivation for choosing one code over the other? One obvious answer is that one may not know how to write in Navajo. Belin has discussed her struggles with Navajo in previous writings as her parents did not teach her Navajo as a child.⁸¹ In this respect she is like many Navajos who find a significant Navajo-language shift visible in their own lives. She is actively trying to learn Navajo, however, while using English to show the Anglo world that she can play its game—she can write poetry—and that she can succeed at it.⁸² Writing poetry in English becomes a way to challenge Anglo assumptions about Navajo and Native American capabilities with English. English, in this respect, becomes empowering.⁸³

Rex Lee Jim, proficient in both Navajo and English, writes in both codes. The choice of writing in Navajo could be political, validating the ability of Navajo to be a “literary” language and to express complex and subtle poetic expressions. In this way the use of Navajo is also empowering. It is, to follow James Scott, a “weapon of the weak” or a “hidden transcript.”⁸⁴ As comfortable as this analysis may be, however, it is not the whole story, according to Rex Lee Jim, who stated in a conversation that the choice of which language to use has more to do with the subject discussed in the poem.⁸⁵ The code of the poem needs to align with the content.

Thus poems in Navajo can be seen as resistance, but also as an aesthetic choice. Poets build some poems on alliteration in Navajo, for example, and they relish in the aesthetic quality, the sounds of Navajo.⁸⁶ As Witherspoon and McAllester have pointed out, aesthetics in Navajo is often associated with process.⁸⁷ Or as McAllester has stated, “Beauty is that which does something.”⁸⁸ One of the things it does is make people think about semantics, etymologies, and the like, as Rex Lee Jim argues his poems should do. Ward Keeler has argued that anthropologists may have been too eager to find resistance.⁸⁸ It should be clear that for some Navajos certain things simply cannot be related in English; they must—for poetic, aesthetic, and personal reasons—be related in Navajo.⁹⁰

A few of these points are illustrated in the first example presented in this essay. The poem focuses on an idealized conversation between a grandfather and a grandson. The information given by the grandfather has telltale marks of oral tradition—in this case the use of the epistemic distancing device *jini*, “they say.”⁹¹ As other writers have noted, many Navajo poems have a conversational quality.⁹² Or perhaps stated better in this case, this poem has a dialogic component in which there is an asymmetric knowledge relation (the maternal grandfather has knowledge and the grandson requests such knowledge). It is not a conversation between equals, either between grandson and grandfather or between “reader” and poet (this is clearly indexed in the English version).

The English version, I believe, loses the conversational quality, in some ways becoming even more didactic. It is not the kind of conversation one would typically hear. The choice of language, in this poem and others, often shows that poems written in Navajo and then translated into English become more explicit in the translations, as if poets feel a need to explain more in the English versions. If one can read the Navajo version, then implicitly one will have the requisite background information needed to understand the poem. It is the ability to read Navajo that indexes knowledge about Navajo “traditional” culture. Since literacy in Navajo is still relatively limited, however, the primary medium by which most Navajos gain access to poems written in Navajo is still as oral presentation (public performances, live or on KTNN).

This potential incommensurability between Navajo and English has important ramifications considering the general language shift occurring in the Navajo Nation.⁹³ First, as many writers have noted, many Navajo consider language to be efficacious and creative.⁹⁴ Speaking does things; it creates the world. The language, the code, is important. Second, a language ideology—

as espoused by many Navajos I interviewed—that argues that one code is not commensurate with another demands that we pay attention to the effects of the loss of that code. An ideology that valorizes the differences between Navajo and English also raises important questions about individual creativity and expression. This is particularly true given the widespread importance of both creativity and language among many Navajos. For Belin, English has become an empowering language, but she also longs to communicate in Navajo. As Belin writes, “A degree from UC Berkeley will never change the fact that I cannot understand my grandfather when he asks for more coffee.”⁹⁵ Jim has an option, an ability to play in either Navajo or English as the topic dictates. What one loses in a language shift to English, then, is not so much poetry but the option, the expressive possibilities, the potential (to borrow a phrase from Jim) to explore those issues, emotions, and concerns in Navajo.

ORALITY AND LITERACY: COYOTE POEM STYLE

The final connection has to do with the relationship Coyote poems have to orality or, more generally, the connection between orality and literacy in these poems. Much has been made of the oral quality of Native American written poetry.⁹⁶ I am generally sympathetic to this position. Indeed, several poets I interviewed noted the influence of orality on their poetry, often reckoned in terms of storytelling. I find it somewhat problematic, however, when orality becomes the focus of these poems and is all encompassing. When putative oral features like repetition or conversation are used as indexes of an oral style, they miss the growing literature concerning the literary qualities of oral poetry.⁹⁷ They reify and fix theories such as Jack Goody’s and Walter Ong’s that on close empirical and ethnographic investigation do not seem to hold up cross-culturally.⁹⁸ They have local, not universal, explanatory power, which is why this research has focused on Navajo poetry and a subset genre of that poetry and why I have compared orally transmitted Coyote stories with orthographically transmitted Coyote stories/poems. I seek an explication of local practices that can then be compared cross-culturally.

Maurizio Gnerre, in discussing Shuar literary practices—the writing down of myths—points out that “the instances of creative literacy that those writers produced remain deeply rooted in that oral context of meanings and forms.”⁹⁹ Gnerre comes to this conclusion by comparing the oral and literary forms. I have tried to do the same and to show specific ways orality and literacy overlap. The trope of movement and the uses of parallelism, *jiní*, and intertextual citation (mentions) all connect written poetry with oral practices.

Further, when Native American poetry—written poetry—is described as hybrid (a mixture of literary and oral trappings), we have reified an analytic distinction that may not exist in practice.¹⁰⁰ Theories concerning hybridity often assume two poles that have yet to be clearly defined, and they place Native American poetry as a hybrid of these vacuous poles. This focus generally on Native Americans but particularly on Navajos as “syncretic” is, following James Faris, an anthropological obsession.¹⁰¹ Faris’s work on and recordings of the Nightway “challenge its [anthropological] assumptions

concerning its writing of Navajo history and its assignment of a syncretic, borrowed, derived, and mimetic character."¹⁰² This obsession denies the persistence of poetic forms. It creates "the adaptable Navajo" and obscures connections and perduring forms like the Nightway, for example, that—according to Faris—are "remarkably rigid over time."¹⁰³

Witherspoon, in discussing art among Navajos, writes that "the Navajo emphases upon creativity and control, balance and beauty, actually reflect the basic complementary dualism of static and active."¹⁰⁴ Witherspoon suggests that creativity and control can be found in sandpaintings and that they reflect both dynamism and stasis (creativity involves both change and continuity). He calls this aesthetic of Navajo art "dynamic symmetry."¹⁰⁵ Although this may seem to contradict Faris, I do not believe it does. Forms may perdure, as both Faris and Witherspoon argue, but within those forms there is always the possibility for creativity, continuity in change, or change as continuity. Poetry persists among Navajos, but it changes as it persists. Certain forms, poetic devices, and rhetorical structures perdure. They have not been hiding. The medium may change, but the poetry persists.

Orthographic poetry, with an emphasis on the phonic shape of the message, is already a hybrid—if such a beast exists—of orality and literacy.¹⁰⁶ Writers from Laurence Sterne to Robert Penn Warren have been concerned with the oral quality of their written works.¹⁰⁷ If we are to seek uniqueness—and this may not be the right avenue—it is not in the oral quality of the poetry. Rather, it is found, I believe, in the on-the-ground oral traditions, the locales, the languages, the poetics, the stories, and the potentials and possibilities those stories give us access to through poetry.¹⁰⁸

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NOTES

1. The notion of written poetry proves problematic in the Navajo case. As one consultant pointed out, sandpaintings, body painting, and the painting on religious paraphernalia can all be considered writing. As communicative acts, this point cannot be ignored. I therefore follow Paul Zolbrod, *Reading the Voice* (Salt Lake City: Utah

University Press, 1995). Again, however, this distinction is not total. Certainly, poetry “slams” and performances blur the lines between orthographic and oral poetry.

2. By Navajo poetry I mean poetry written in Navajo, English, or Navajo English (a distinct dialect) by people who self-identify as Navajos. English is the dominant language in Navajo poetry today. That may change.

3. Edward Spicer, “The Nations of a State,” in *American Indian Persistence and Resurgence*, ed. Karl Kroeber (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 27–49.

4. The example and reference to Gaelic are not arbitrary. I am motivated to use them because of Rex Lee Jim’s trilingual book of poetry in Navajo, English, and Gaelic. Rex Lee Jim, *Dúchas Táá Kóó Diné* (Beal Feirste, Ireland: Au Clochan, 1998).

5. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

6. See Washington Matthews, *Navaho Legends* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994). The original edition was published in Boston in 1897 by the American Folklore Society at Houghton Mifflin. It is to Matthews’s credit that he was able to discern Navajo poetics long before others attempted to think that way.

7. Two pieces stand out in the appreciation of Navajo poetics in recent years. See Barre Toelken and Tacheeni Scott, “Poetic Retranslation and the ‘Pretty Languages’ of Yellowman,” in *Traditional Literatures of the American Indian*, ed. Karl Kroeber (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 65–116; Paul Zolbrod, *Diné Bahane* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).

8. See Robert Young and William Morgan, *The Navajo Language* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987). Two terms that were never offered as words for written poetry in Navajo were *sin*, “song,” and *haatal*, “chant.” That is not to say that song does not occur within Navajo poetry. It does, but the formal distinction is maintained between song and written poetry (a kind of storytelling). Indeed, many poets—Luci Tapahonso, for example—will break into song within a poem. This connects to a tradition found among the Navajos wherein song is introduced into narratives. One thinks of the example from Toelken and Scott, “Poetic Retranslation,” where the Prairie Dogs begin to sing after they discover that Coyote is “dead.” See also Fr. Berard Haile, *Navajo Coyote Tales* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 92, where we find this song:

Dlǫ́’í yázhí nánoodah

Dlǫ́’í yázhí nánoodah

prairie-dogs little they-are-dancing-around-in-a-circle-PROG

prairie-dogs little they-are-dancing-around-in-a-circle-PROG

Little Prairie-dogs are dancing in a circle

Little Prairie-dogs are dancing in a circle[.]

See also David P. McAllester, “Coyote’s Song,” *Parabola* 5, 2 (1980): 46–54, where Coyote creates his own song. I thank McAllester for pointing me in its direction. On the use of song in Native American “epics,” see Dell Hymes, “Sung Epic and Native American Ethnopoetics,” in *Textualization of Oral Epics*, eds. Micheal Durr, Egon Renner, and Wolfgang Oleschinski (Berlin: Lincom, 2000), 291–342. According to Navajos with whom I have spoken, poetry has always existed among the Navajos. My concern is with the emergence of written or orthographic poetry.

9. I thank Leighton Peterson and Bennie Klain for pointing this out to me. The use of the term *poetry* by Navajo poets suggests the influence of Western-style schooling, although I would argue that the concept of “poetry” predates such schooling.

10. Timothy Benally, "Ma'ii Jooldloshí Hane: Stories about Coyote: the One Who Trots," in *Coming to Light*, ed. Brian Swann (New York: Random House, 1994), 601–13.
11. See, for example, Haile, *Navajo Coyote*; Pliny Goddard, *Navajo Texts* (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1933), 1–179; Edward Sapir and Harry Hoijer, *Navaho Texts* (Iowa City: Linguistic Society of America, 1942); Franc Newcomb, *Navaho Folk Tales* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967).
12. Barre Toelken, "Life and Death in Navajo Coyote Tales," in *Recovering the Word*, eds. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 388–401; Toelken and Scott, "Poetic Retranslation." For more on Southern Athabaskan ethnopoetics, see Keith Basso and Nashley Tessay Sr., "Joseph Hoffman's 'The Birth of He Triumphs Over Evils': A Western Apache Origin Story," in *Coming to Light*, 636–56; Philip Greenfeld, "Escape from Albuquerque: An Apache Memorata," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25, 3 (2001): 47–71; M. Eleanor Nevins and Thomas J. Nevins, "He Became an Eagle," in *Voices from the Four Directions*, ed. Brian Swann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 283–302; Anthony K. Webster, "Sam Kenoi's Coyote Stories: Poetics and Rhetoric in Some Chiricahua Apache Narratives," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 23, 1 (1999): 137–63.
13. Toelken, "Life and Death"; Barre Toelken, "The Yellowman Tapes, 1966–1997," *Journal of American Folklore* 111, 442 (1998): 381–91.
14. Toelken, "Yellowman," 390.
15. Sally Midgette, *The Navajo Progressive* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).
16. Midgette quoted in George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
17. Midgette, *Navajo Progressive*, 1–9.
18. W. W. Hill and Dorothy Hill, "Navajo Coyote Tales and Their Position in the Southern Athabaskan Group," *Journal of American Folklore* 58, 203 (1945): 317–43.
19. See Webster, "Sam Kenoi's Coyote Stories," 153–54.
20. The distinction between discourse as a window into culture history and discourse as an object to be studied in and of itself is best discussed in Greg Urban, *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).
21. Toelken and Scott, "Poetic Retranslation."
22. For classic statements concerning Dell Hymes's notion of ethnopoetics, see Dell Hymes, *In Vain I Tried to Tell You* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Dell Hymes, *Now I Know Only That Far* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
23. The Navajo text can be found in Haile, *Navajo Coyote*, 91–94. The translation is from 27–30. I have rendered them interlinearly.
24. Toelken and Scott, "Poetic Retranslation."
25. Cited in *ibid.*, 92.
26. See Midgette, *Navajo Progressive*, 137–59. I did the count myself.
27. See, for example, Esther Belin, Timothy Benally, Rex Lee Jim, Sherwin Bitsui, Norla Chee, Roberta D. Joe, Hershman John, and Laura Tohe.
28. Richard David, "Hosteen Race Track Was *shi cheeh*," *Arrow III* (1971): 9–10.
29. I use *ma'i* and *ma'ii* interchangeably because many poets write it in either form and I heard it pronounced both ways—with respect to the length of the final vowel—during fieldwork on the Navajo Nation. One reviewer suggested that the [-i] might be an article marker. I have reviewed the use of the two forms in a number of poems and

have yet to find a clear pattern for their distribution. I think this difference may be a question of writing conventions. Young and Morgan, *Navajo Language*, present the word as *mą'ii* with a nasal [ŋ]. This is the “standard” form. Many Navajo writers, however, omit the nasal hook. This may have to do with font issues. Herbert Landar, “A Note on the Navaho Word for Coyote,” *IJAL* 27, 1 (1961): 86–88, gives a possible etymology for *ma'ii* as a Proto-Athapaskan stem *-mán, “to stink.” Thus Landar suggests that “the Navaho word for coyote is a noun derived prehistorically from a relative expression meaning *the one who stinks, the stinker*” (88; original emphasis).

30. David, “*Hosteen Race Track*,” 9.

31. Shonto Begay, *Navajo Visions and Voices across the Mesa* (New York: Scholastic, 1995), 40.

32. Norla Chee, *Cedar Smoke on Abalone Mountain* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 2001), 36.

33. Michael Silverstein, “The Whens and Wheres—as Well as Hows—of Ethnolinguistic Recognition,” *Public Culture* 15, 3 (2003): 539.

34. Jim, *Dúchas*, 69.

35. Jim’s translation is closer to what Oswald Wernercalls a “stimulus translation,” inspired by the source-language original but not wholly constrained by it. See Oswald Werner, “Ethnography and Translation: Issues and Challenges,” *Sartonian* 7 (1994): 59–135.

36. Jim, *Dúchas*, 69.

37. *Ibid.*

38. See especially Rex Lee Jim, “A Moment in My Life,” in *Here First*, eds. Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 229–46.

39. Toelken, “Life and Death”; Toelken and Scott, “Poetic Retranslation.”

40. For thoughtful discussions concerning the role of implicature, see Edward Sapir, *The Psychology of Culture*, ed. Judith T. Irvine (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1993); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

41. Rex Lee Jim, *spirit echoes spirit* (unpublished ms. in author’s possession), 13.

42. See Haile, *Navajo Coyote*; Hill and Hill, “Navaho Coyote Tales.”

43. Much of the following discussion is based on an interview I conducted with Rex Lee Jim on 19 October 2000 at Canyon de Chelly, Arizona. I tape recorded and later transcribed the interview. The interview was conducted primarily in English, with Jim occasionally code switching into Navajo. More recently Jim has written about his own thoughts on Coyote and presented two Coyote stories in English in Rex Lee Jim, “Coyote Stories,” in *Voices from Four Directions*, ed. Brian Swann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 317–26.

44. Jim, interview 19 October 2000.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. Sapir, *Psychology of Culture*.

48. Toelken, “Life and Death.” See also McAllester, “Coyote’s Song”; David Murray, “Ritual Communications: Some Considerations Regarding Meaning in Navajo Ceremonials,” in *Symbolic Anthropology*, eds. Janet Dolgin, David Kemnitzer, and David Schiender (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 195–220.

49. Toelken, “Life and Death.”

50. Jim, *Dúchas*, 8.

51. *Ibid.*

52. The two are not mutually exclusive. See, for example, Basso and Tessay, "Joseph Hoffman," where Joseph Hoffman used car headlights as a metaphor in his version of the Western Apache origin story as told to Harry Hoijer. I also understand the tragedy of both shuttle disasters. So does Jim.

53. This claim is based on an interview with Rex Lee Jim I conducted on 20 September 2000. Again, I tape recorded and later transcribed the interview. Jim made the claim. I claim no unique knowledge of Navajo curing ways. It was not a topic I felt the permit granted by the Navajo Nation allowed me to investigate thoroughly. For a detailed account of the music and aesthetic ideology behind the Enemy way, see David P. McAllester, *Enemy Way Music: A Study of Social and Esthetic Values as Seen in Navajo Music* (Cambridge: Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1954). For a broad overview of the various curing ways, see Leland Wyman and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navaho Classification of Their Song Ceremonials* (Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association, Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association 50, 1938). On the symbolism involved in Navajo curing ways, see Gladys Reichard, *Navaho Religion* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1950).

54. Matthews, *Navaho Legends*, 27. See also Reichard, *Navaho Religion*, 282.

55. Still the best sources for the examination of Navajo chants are the compilations by Washington Matthews in his *The Night Chant* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995 [1902]) and *The Mountain Chant* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997 [1887]). See also the still valuable Gladys Reichard, *Prayer: The Compulsive Word* (Seattle: Washington University Press, American Ethnological Society Monograph 7, 1944).

56. The original Navajo text comes from Reichard, *Prayer*, 68. The translation and orthographic updating are from Margaret Field and Taft Blackhorse Jr., "The Dual Role of Metonymy in Navajo Prayer," *Anthropological Linguistics* 44, 3 (2003): 224.

57. The following discussion is based on Field and Blackhorse, "Metonymy in Navajo Prayer," 224.

58. Jim, "A Moment," 237.

59. *Ibid.*, 236.

60. *Ibid.*, 236–37.

61. Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977).

62. Field and Blackhorse, "Metonymy in Navajo Prayer," 224–26.

63. Matthews, *Night Chant*, 303.

64. For a more thorough discussion of these issues, see Anthony K. Webster, "Navajo Poetry, Linguistic Ideology, and Identity: The Case of an Emergent Literary Tradition," Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2004.

65. Sherwin Bitsui, *Shapeshift* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003), 6.

66. The story is told by Náłtsos Nigéhani and recorded by Washington Matthews in *Navaho Legends*, 223–24.

67. Luci Tapahonso, *A Breeze Swept Through* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1987), 31. I reconstruct this phrase as follows: *índa*, "and then"; *ma'ü*, "coyote"; *nachxoogo* as *naashchxo'go*, "pouting"; *tlóódi* as *tl'óo'di*, "outdoors"; *naghá* as either *na'aghá*, "a round trip," or *naghá*, "there"; and *jjin'* as the reduced form of *jini*, "they say." Tapahonso's

gloss captures the Navajo form. My thinking on the distinction between “glossing” and “translating” is inspired by Alton Becker, *Beyond Translation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

68. Esther Belin, *From the Belly of My Beauty* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999), 3.

69. *Ibid.*, 3–6.

70. See, for example, Toelken and Scott, “Poetic Retranslation”; Midgette, *Navajo Progressive*; Benally, “Ma’ii Jooldloshí Hane.”

71. Midgette, *Navajo Progressive*.

72. Margot Astrov, “The Conception of Motion as the Psychological Leitmotif of Navaho Life and Literature,” *Journal of American Folklore* 63, 247 (1950): 45.

73. Esther Belin performed this poem at Fandango in Bluff, Utah, on 6 October 2000. I videotaped, tape recorded, and later transcribed the performance. The quote is from my transcript. I thank both Phil Hall and Esther Belin for allowing me to record this performance. I further thank Belin for a number of conversations we have had concerning her poetry.

74. Belin, *From the Belly*, 3.

75. H. Guillermo Bartelt, “Some Observations on Navajo English,” *Papers in Linguistics* 14, 3 (1981): 380. Navajo English is a distinct dialect from both English and Navajo but is influenced by both. For a general overview of American Indian Englishes, see William Leap, *American Indian English* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993).

76. The Navajo text is from Haile, *Navajo Coyote*, 115, and the English text is from Haile, *Navajo Coyote*, 53. The bracketed forms are my additions from the Navajo text. The translation is Haile’s and is not exact. *Dibé ntsaa* is the Navajo form for the La Plata Range and can be glossed as “Big Sheep.” Haile does not translate *jini*, “they say.”

77. For an interesting discussion of the urban influence on Belin, see Dean Radar, “I Don’t Speak Navajo: Esther G. Belin’s *From the Belly of Beauty*,” *SAIL* 12, 3 (2000): 14–34.

78. Belin, *From the Belly*, 3.

79. See Michael Silverstein, “Language Structure and Linguistic Ideology,” in *The Elements*, eds. Paul Clyne, William Hanks, and Carol Hofbauer (Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society, 1979), 193–247; Paul Kroskrity, ed., *Regimes of Language* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 2000); Bambi Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul Kroskrity, eds., *Language Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

80. I am thinking especially of Alan Rumsey, “Wording, Meaning and Linguistic Ideology,” *American Anthropologist* 92 (1990): 346–61.

81. See, for example, Belin, *From the Belly*; Connie Jacobs, “From California to the Four Corners: An Urban Navajo Returns Home: An Interview with Esther Belin,” *SAIL* 12, 3 (2000): 1–13.

82. I interviewed Belin at Sand Island Recreation Area outside Bluff, Utah, on 7 October 2000. I tape recorded and later transcribed the interview.

83. I borrow the notion of the empowering nature of English literacy for Navajos from Dan McLaughlin, *When Literacy Empowers: Navajo Language in Print* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992).

84. See James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

85. Jim, Interview, 19 October 2000.

86. For example, Rex Lee Jim has written a poem concerning *na'asts'qosí*, "mouse," that plays with the alliteration of [ts] throughout. See Rex Lee Jim, *Saad* (Princeton: Princeton Collections of Western Americana, 1995), 37.

87. See Witherspoon, *Language and Art*; McAllester, *Enemy Way Music*.

88. McAllester, *Enemy Way Music*, 72.

89. Ward Keeler, "Style and Authority in Javanese Muslim Sermons," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 9, 2 (1998): 163–79.

90. Another place where this aesthetic ideology, and with it a sense of incomensurability, is found is in humor, especially puns. For discussions of puns in Navajo, see Edward Sapir, "Two Navajo Puns," *Language* 8 (1932): 217–18; W. W. Hill, *Navajo Humor* (Menasha, WI: George Banta, 1943).

91. In many of the Coyote stories published as written texts for educating Navajo children, *jini*—the very marker of orality and lines—is often left out. See Midgett, *Navajo Progressive*, 16.

92. See especially Susan Brill de Ramirez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999).

93. On the language shift occurring within the Navajo Nation, see Clay Slate, "Reversing Navajo Language Shift," *Journal of Navajo Education* 10, 3 (1993): 30–35; Tiffany Lee and Daniel McLaughlin, "Reversing Navajo Language Shift," in *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved?*, ed. Joshua Fishman (Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2001), 23–43; Deborah House, *Language Shift among the Navajos* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

94. See especially Reichard, *Prayer*; Witherspoon, *Language and Art*; Toelken, "Life and Death," for discussions of the creative power of speech.

95. Belin, *From the Belly*, 74.

96. See, for example, Brill de Ramirez, *Contemporary American Indian Literatures*; Robin Riley Fast, *The Heart as a Drum: Continuance and Resistance in American Indian Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

97. See, for example, Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Joel Sherzer, "Poetic Structuring of Kuna Discourse: The Line," in *Native American Discourse: Poetics and Rhetoric*, eds. Joel Sherzer and Anthony Woodbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 103–39.

98. Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge Press, 1982). The distinction between "orality" and "literacy" is a rather old linguistic ideology that helped naturalize social inequalities. This ideologically driven distinction can be traced back at least as far as the work of Robert Wood in the 1760s and 1770s. See Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 99–108.

99. Maurizio Gnerre, "From Headhunters to Writers," in Kay Sammons and Joel Sherzer, eds., *Translating Native Latin American Verbal Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 206.

100. My thinking on this issue has been inspired by Niko Besnier, *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

101. James Faris, *The Nightway: A History and a History of Documentation of a Navajo Ceremonial* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).

102. Ibid., 236.

103. Ibid.

104. Witherspoon, *Language and Art*, 195.

105. Ibid., 198.

106. I borrow this notion from Paul Friedrich, "The Culture in Poetry and the Poetry in Culture," in *Culture/Contexture*, eds. Daniel Valentine and Jeffrey Peck (Berkeley: University of California Press), 38.

107. I am thinking specifically of Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1985 [1759–67]), which both flaunts its literariness and relishes in its orality, and Robert Penn Warren, "The Ballad of Billie Potts," in *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 81–91, which revels in the Kentucky dialect of Warren's childhood. Both attempt to capture orality on the printed page, but only momentarily. I still recall with fondness my father reading/performing "The Ballad of Billie Potts."

108. See also Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 245. In discussing Navajo rug weaving Toelken states: "So the real tradition is not the artifact itself, for it is a particularized statement of traditional premises and assumptions. The tradition is that dynamic process by which premises are shared, performed, understood, and transmitted through time and space among members of a close group."

My argument concerning Navajo Coyote poems resonates with Toelken's perspective concerning Navajo "tradition" as a kind of practice, not solely as artifacts. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me in this direction.

