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**Review of *Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts* by
William M. Clements**

Paul G. Zolbrod

Dine College, Crownpoint, New Mexico

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Native American Verbal Art: Texts and Contexts. William M. Clements. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. x+252 pp. Notes, references and index. \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0-8165-1658-8).

In addressing what its author calls “The Ethnopoetics Movement,” this sensible, well-researched volume demonstrates that recording Native American verbal art is not a new enterprise, tracing it back to seventeenth-century Jesuit records and following it through the present-day. Nor has the task of converting tribal discourse to literature ever been easy. Along with the inevitable hazards of translation, cultural barriers intrude, especially in the transfer of oral performance to the silent page.

William Clements lays a clear foundation for a reasonable perspective. Earlier commentators, he writes, “uncritically assumed” that printed records of orally-based tribal material “provide absolutely reliable information about the nature of American Indian oral expression, even its aesthetic qualities.” At the opposite extreme, “many modern students have dismissed these records as utterly worthless.” Wisely, Clements takes “a middle ground between these positions,” asserting that while older texts may show limitations, “in many cases they represent all we have from an entire verbal heritage.” Instead of rejecting them outright, as many critics today are apt to do with the glib certitude of postcolonial hindsight, he reviews them openmindedly, seeing the history of Native American text retrieval as a story worth knowing.

He ultimately embraces, for example, Henry Timberlake’s flawed early nineteenth-century translation of a Cherokee “war song” into Drydenesque

couplets. Its lines do “depart markedly from Cherokee poetics,” he agrees; but he refuses to dismiss it just because—as Arnold Krupat objects—it may “strike the contemporary reader as . . . very distant from what any eighteenth-century Cherokee warrior might actually have sung.” Misguided as he might have been in his chosen idiom, Timberlake did actually hear the original Cherokee rendition. “Instead of automatically dismissing such performances as nonmusical noise as did most of his contemporaries,” Clements writes, he “evinced some appreciation for the singing of the Cherokees,” which he managed to convey in notes collateral to the translation, which he compiled during “three months’ worth of observing the Cherokees at first hand.”

Clements brings the same open-mindedness to the work of other early ethnopoetic practitioners, from the dismissive seventeenth-century Jesuits all the way through selected eighteenth- and nineteenth-century observers to such early twentieth-century field recorders as George Boas and Natalie Curtis Berlin. Today it is sometimes too easy to fault their efforts, especially among critics long on theory but short on field experience. Commentators like Krupat have not compiled notes of travels with Indian guides in the manner of Timberlake. They never positioned themselves in a tribal setting the way Henry Rowe Schoolcraft did, nor struggled to effect translations with the linguistic exactitude of Franz Boas—however clumsy or artless his English texts ultimately sounded. Such observers of unwritten discourse may exhibit unknowingly the hazards of converting performance to print, but they worked earnestly and often added enough data to reconstruct something of a performance setting, however inappropriate their English.

Clements is somewhat less tolerant of certain twentieth-century anthologizers who pick and choose from the translations of others with no first-hand field experience of their own. Such practice further isolates individual works from their cultural moorings, abetting the distortion that well-intentioned transcription can create. For him contextualization is all-important, and he sees promise in newer kinds of scholarship—like that of Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock, who recognize that it is performance that gives Native American verbal art qualities not as readily evident in the Euro-American literary tradition. He also applauds a developing body of “literary criticism that addresses the aesthetic values of American Indian verbal art on its own terms,” and sees promise as well in more recent anthologies such as Brian Swann’s *Coming to Light*, which “offers a generous sampling of the results of . . . contemporary trends in the textualization of Native American oral expression.”

Quite possibly, then, past shortcomings in Native American text retrieval can be avoided as we continue learning to appreciate North America's indigenous poetic legacy. But "if the present and the future in the study of Native American verbal art seems essentially rosy," Clements still insists that "its past has not been as bleak" as some modern-day proponents of the ethno-poetics movement would suggest. And it is his own careful reading of old texts which makes this volume both fascinating and useful.

Like Roy Harvey Pearce's ground-breaking *Savagism and Civilization*, this work deserves the attention of historians, literary critics, folklorists, and ethnographers, along with specialists in cultural studies, American studies, and of course Native American studies. Its copious, carefully assembled documentation offers valuable direction to scholars wishing to balance field work with archival studies. Eminently readable and even-handed in its treatment of texts and textualizers, it is a model of interdisciplinary research free of any narrowly ideological approach, and thus warrants use by undergraduates. It will also appeal to general readers who have yet to discover the great poetic legacy Native America offers, or those who wish to explore that rich, unheralded heritage more deeply. **Paul G. Zolbrod**, *Diné College-Crownpoint, New Mexico*.