

North-American Natives' Oral Narrative: Spiderwoman Theater's "Sun, Moon and Feather"

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Abstract

There is no doubt that oral tradition is embedded in Native American culture. To the Native Americans, oral tradition is not just about speaking and telling. Simon Ortiz points out, "There is a certain power that is compelling in the oral narrative as spoken by a storyteller simply because the spoken work is so immediate and intimate." ("Always" 66). Therefore, this paper aims at the reading of one of Spiderwoman Theater's plays, *Sun, Moon and Feather* as an exemplary oral narrative based on Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* to contemplate the oral presentation of the indigenous group, Spiderwoman Theater and to anticipate Spiderwoman Theater's claiming their existence in terms of oral-like skills.

Keywords-c Oral Narrative, Spiderwoman Theater, Walter Ong

I. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that oral tradition is embedded in Native American culture. Susa Berry Brill De Ramirez declares that “For several decades, scholars of American Indian literatures have been emphasizing the importance of orality in storytelling tradition” (5). To the Native Americans, oral tradition is not just about speaking and telling or speaking and telling is not just speaking and telling. Simon Ortiz points out, “There is a certain power that is compelling in the oral narrative as spoken by a storyteller simply because the spoken work is so immediate and intimate.” (“Always” 66). Therefore, Gerald Vizenor claims “Tribal words have power in the oral tradition, the sounds express the spiritual energies” (1984: 24). Ortiz explains, “The oral tradition of Native American people is based upon spoken language, but it is more than that. Oral tradition is inclusive; it is the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people. In this respect, the oral tradition is the consciousness of the people” (Woven 7). The study of the oral tradition of Native American literature is as a result significant since it is a study of the “epistemological realities” that “reflect particular ways of knowing.” (Jahner 223) “ and a study of the “living reality” (Allen 33) of the Native American life.

Spiderwoman Theater, a very famous theatrical group founded in 1975 by three Kuna (a people of Panama and Colombia) / Rappahannock (a people of Eastern Virginia) sisters, Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel, and Muriel Miguel. The group takes its name from a Hopi goddess, Spiderwoman who is said to be a messenger and interpreter that was sent by God to teach the people how to weave. Spiderwoman Theater was inspired and thus named the group after Spiderwoman to emphasize “an overlay of interlocking stories, where fantasy and power are comically intertwined” (*Keeper* 230 or *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show* from *Wigwam City*). “Story weaving” consequently is deemed as their feature and dramaturgy (Haugo “Weaving” 238)

The Spiderwoman Theater is also considered as the “longest continually running Native theater ensemble ... and women’s theater in the U. S.” (Haugo “Weaving” 221). Due to their training—Lisa had been trained as a mezzo-soprano and studied dance, Gloria, studied drama and Muriel, dance as well—Spiderwoman Theater is fond of singing, dancing and choreography in their plays to express the ineffable of the indigenous stance. Despite of their productivity, their plays published are few including “*Sun, Moon and Feather*” (1981), “*Winnetou's Snake-Oil Show* from *Wigwam City*” (1991), “*Reverb-ber-ber-ations*” (1992), “*Power Pipes*” (1999), and “*Resistance of Memory*” (2007); honors received include the Obie Award (1985), the awarding of an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts (1997) by Miami University, Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian in New York City (2005), the Spirit Award from American Indian Community House (2009) and Lifetime Achievement Award from the *Women's Caucus for Art* (2010).

As the aforesaid, Spiderwoman Theater is famous for their story-weaving skill on the stage. Generally speaking, on the stage, the three sisters and or other actor/actress would do the chit-chatting improvisationally. The oral tradition of the indigenous culture definitely puts impact toward the three sisters’ creativity. Despite many scholars have put attention and concern on the study of oral narrative in Native American studies, rarely has it been uncovered on the studies on plays which are

supposed to be the best example of orality since, as Ortiz indicates that oral tradition is “the actions, [and] behavior” (7). This paper, as a result, aims at the reading of one of Spiderwoman Theater’s play, *Sun, Moon and Feather* as an exemplary oral narrative based on Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. to contemplate the oral presentation of the indigenous group, Spiderwoman Theater and to anticipates Spiderwoman Theater’s claiming their existence in terms of oral-like skills.

II. WALTER ONG’S ORALITY

Ong’s statement of orality is mainly on the third Chapter which is a valuable theoretical source for this paper because Ong clearly deliberates nine characteristics in oral tradition:

- (i) Additive rather than subordinate
- (ii) Aggregative rather than analytic
- (iii) Redundant or ‘copious’
- (iv) Conservative or traditionalist
- (v) Close to the human lifeworld
- (vi) Agonistically toned
- (vii) Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
- (viii) Homeostatic
- (ix) Situational rather than abstract (36-55)

The nine characteristics are so famous that the general idea of each element and its application in the reading of Spiderwoman Theater’s *Sun, Moon and Feather* will be directly discussed in the next section.

III. SUN, MOON AND FEATHER

Sun, Moon and Feather, like the works by Spiderwoman Theater, is framed by various talks and conversation among the three sisters. The dialogue-like plot thus is not easily summarized because the dialogues are all about the three sisters’ memories arranged achronologically. Generally speaking, the topics of their conversation include: the poverty time, three sisters’ inter-dependence, their self-entertainment by song-singing, their quarrels, their dream, their play house (which may depict their dream too), the pass away of their parents and their self-release when they grown up. Lisa spoke out the last line “It’s warm today” and then, the three sister sing “We three” and off the stage (314).

Lisa has confessed that *Sun, Moon and Feather* is inspired by Anton Chekov’s *The Three Sisters* in an interview by Larry Abbott. To George Z. Patrick, Chekov’s works is a manifestation of Russia’s everyday life which is full of “deplorable banality, cruel senselessness, dull boredom, stunted intellect, and moral emptiness” (658). The little chat in *Sun, Moon and Feather* may seemingly correspond to the boredom described in Chekov’s; however, the oral hue in *Sun, Moon and Feather* rescues the three sisters from such kind of banality.

In addition to the nine characteristics of Ong’s orality, in his *Orality and Literarcy*, Ong also emphasizes the importance of sound. In particular, he relates sound with existence, “Sound exists only when it is going out of existence” and “To test the physical interior of an object as interior, no sense works so directly as sound” (69). He

furthermore explains one by one of every sense: the eye can only perceive the outer appearance; the sense of taste and smell are obviously not related to the digging of human interiority; the sense of touch may help in cognition but only after destroying the detected object¹ (69-70). He declares,

Sounds all register the interior structures of whatever it is that produces them. A violin filled with concrete will not sound like a normal violin. A saxophone sounds differently from a flute: it is structured differently inside. And above all, the human voice comes from inside the human organism which provides the voice's resonances.

Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer.

A typical visual ideal is clarity and distinctness.... The auditory ideal, by contrast, is harmony, a putting together. (70).

Ong praises the power of sound, "Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power" (32) and the power of sound is due to the fact that sound, unlike sight, is not immobility. He exemplifies that "A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead" but if the hunter can hear a buffalo, this means, the hunter "had better watch out: something is going on" (32). Thus, he concludes, "all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is 'dynamic'" (32).

Despite *Sun, Moon and Feather* has been published and may partly be considered a written text, Spiderwoman Theater still shows their favor of sound. At the very beginning, a tape is played on the song of Mozart's K. 546 Adagio and Fugue in C minor. A video called as the poverty tape is shown. The video played silently; yet, Spiderwoman Theater especially point out that the audience still can hear "the sound of the projector" (289). As a result, of all the performance, the audience can hear at least three types of sound: the sound of the projector, the tape, and the actresses' performance. As Ong indicates, "the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings' feel for existence" (70). The multiple or even a little bit noisy sounds explores the multiplicity of human existence, of the three sisters' existence.

Now, based on Ong's uncovering of the nine features of orality, its application to the reading of *Sun, Moon and Feather* will be analyzed one by one.

(i) Additive rather than subordinate

Ong especially gives an example from the Bible in which the Genesis is full of coordinative word, "and". "Oral structures often look to pragmatics" (37). In *Sun, Moon and Feather*, although there are not many and-clauses, most of the sentences are simple ones but not complex ones. Take one of Muriel's lines as an example. Muriel said "I am the only child of my two sisters. I am covered with love and very lonely. I have two friends Pby and Kalleewiko. My mother never talks to me. I live in a house with my mother and father. I'm covered with love and very lonely." (259). Among the six sentences, five of them start by the subject I and all of them are simple sentence with the simple S-V-O structure. It is similar to the and-function in which more information is added with the similar importance. In a complex sentence with words such as although and if, it is essential to recognize which is the main clause and

¹ Ong explains that we can know whether the box is empty or full by the sense of touch but in this way, we have to dig out a hole of the box and thus, the interiority is gone (69-70).

which is the subordinative clause. In *Sun, Moon and Feather*, the simple sentence pattern manifests firstly of all, the piling of layer-after-layer information; secondly, the layer of information in fact is juxtaposed; namely, all information narrated by any sister is considered of equal significance. None of the narration by any of the three sisters should be taken more imperatively.

(ii) Aggregative rather than analytic

The word “aggregative” is like an assemblage of a sum. However, during the assemblage, hidden energy is assembled more strongly. The aggregative feature of oral literature is mostly shown, according to Ong, in the usage of “parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets” (38). Epithets are rarely seen in *Sun, Moon and Feather*; however, the title of the play with three objects paralleled together affirms the aggregative demonstration in *Sun, Moon and Feather*. In her “Spiderwoman Theater’s Legacy,” one of the Spiderwoman Theater’s members’ daughter, Borst depicts, “In Native storytelling, there are three stories. You have continuity and you have creative arc, each coming to the same objective”; “there are different sides to the same story. A three-part harmony worked into one voice to make a chorus. Three voices going and then get to one voice—but anything can happen during the process” (77). To this extent, *Sun, Moon and Feather* appears to be three sisters’ three narratives; yet, the three narratives are aggregated into one voice while at the same, every sister, as every existence, occupies individual existence.

Since this play is about these three sisters’ memories, there are indeed permeated parallel words/sentences which interweave dynamic energy. For example, Gloria mentions her expectation to the sister, Lisa: “I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to be clean, I wanted her to be educated. I wanted her to be cultured” (296). The aggregation of these adjectives: happy, clean, educated and cultured, reverate the stereotypical burden of the indigenous image. It apparently questions if you are clean, educated and cultured, you will be happy. However, these words also painstakingly point to those old old days, when the father and mother suffered, and especially, when the little girls suffered from poverty, as shown in the tape.

(iii) Redundant or ‘copious’

In orality, “Redundancy, repetition of the just said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track” (39). Repetition definitely is frequently used in oral literature.

Simply put, there are two types of repetitions: one is fully repetitive (with every word repeated) while the other, not fully (with one or more than one word modified). The previous example in (ii) in fact is similar to a not fully repetition only that, based on Ong, the aggregative element focuses more on the antithesis contrast.

Mostly, the repetitive words construct a melodious hue like a humming song or even a hymn. *Sun, Moon and Feather* are full of these musical repetitions. Sentences fully repeated include: Gloria claims two times “She [Muriel] belongs here with me” (295); Lisa and Gloria repetitively confessed “I want her [Muriel] to be happy” (296); Muriel repeated “She’s [Gloria’s] suffering” (301). Especially, “we three” are repeated quite often. Even, there is a “We three” song:

Gloria (sings.): We three, were all alone.
Muriel (talks.): Were all alone

Glorai (sings.): Living in a memory.
Muriel (talks): Ah memories.
Gloria (sings.): My echo, my shadow and me.
Muriel (gestures.): My echo, my shadow and me. (297)

Both fully and not fully repetitions can be uncovered in this song. Especially, the sentence, “We three, were all alone” depict their helpless childhood—with their parents around, they still suffered a lot.. From fully to the non-fully repetition of “My echo, my shadow and me,” the three sisters are seemingly transformed the poverty into a religious trinity, a poor but united unity.

(iv) Conservative or traditionalist

Ong expounds that “oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned” (40) and thus, orality is often conservative though “new elements into old stories” can still be introduced (41). At the very beginning of the play, a small mola, a calabash, and a rag doll are put on stage. Especially, mola is a rational quilt from Kuna. It is said Gloria has received her actual mola in 1971 during her first trip to Kuna (Carter 274). The arrangement of mola on stage, on the one hand, is a memorial of their homecoming in 1971; on the other, it also implies a connection between the three sisters and their Kuna ancestors, their tradition.

(v) Close to the human lifeworld

Since molas are still used, the on-stage molas are not separated from human lifeworld. However, The poverty tape, at the very beginning, plays Mozart’s *K. 546 Adagio and Fugue in C minor* extends the play from indigenous world to a wider, human world. To this extent, the indigenous domain is not narrowed down but, like Whiteman’s spider, throws out filament to find connection and association. In particular, one of the note-worthy side of K.546 is the influence of Bach since Mozart has been introduced to the music of Bach by his patron. Thus, playing Mozart’s *K.546*, the play claims to close more to other side of human world where experiences and wisdom are passed down generation after generation for a better human life.

(vi) Agonistically toned

“When all verbal communication must be proceeded by direct word of mouth,” it is thus easily resulted in “violence in early verbal art forms” (44). Whether in *Beowulf* or in *Illiad*, the struggles and especially the violent fightings have put impressed onto the audience/readers. Likewise, *Sun, Moon and Feather* is full of quarrels among the three sisters. They have argued who is the youngest, the oldest, suffers the most and so on. The agonistic disputes are permeated to induce the ending warm weather even worthier.

(vii) Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced

“Getting with it” (45) is essential in oral expression. The performance of a play thus brings the three sisters’ re-participate their past memory and past stories and thus, “So bound together are narrator, audience, and character” (45). Especially, the play, *Sun, Moon and Feather* is composed by continuous words articulated by the three sisters. Almost most of the time, the three sisters have quarrels, they, however, never stopping talking and communicating.

(viii) Homeostatic

The definition of “homeostatic” is living “in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance” (45). It seems that the past memories of the three sisters’ in *Sun, Moon and Feather* are a contrast of such a homeostatic presentation. However, tracing back to the indigenes’ viewpoint of time and space may help solve the problems.

Paula Gunn Allen points out the indigenes deems time “cyclical” (59), “meander” (92) and “achronological” (147). Its standard is ceremonial but not Western machinery (150). Leslie Marmon Silko in her *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* regards it “absurd to attempt to fix the stories in time” (52). To Native Americans, Silko maintains, “There are no future times or past times; there are always all the time” (137). Consequently, in the all-the-time circle, the past is the present is the future. The telling of the past memory is also the telling of the present and the future. Such an idea reverberates Deleuze’s statement, “the image of tomorrow is already contained in our actual present, which will be the past of tomorrow, although we did not manage to grasp it” (Bergson 1992: 101). In telling and re-telling the past, Spiderwoman Theater is also transforming little by little. Therefore, Spiderwoman Theater’s memory narration in fact is also a present description—it is the past that makes the present Spiderwoman Theater.

Silko’s all-the-time conception is demonstrated in the arrangement of the stories in *Sun, Moon and Feather*. As the aforesaid, *Sun, Moon and Feather* is about the three sisters’ past experiences. However, unlike most story-telling, not only is the past experiences told chronologically, the order of these events in fact could be rearranged variously. Figure 1 is the general arrangement of the events told in *Sun, Moon and Feather*. The whole play can be divided into four main items: the three sisters’ memories (which can be sub-decided into comfort from play house (A), memories of tortures (B), the three sisters’ first encounter (C), quarrels (D) and inter-reliance (E)), memories related to parents (F), a parody of a movie (G) and the possible future (H).

Plots and Subplots with Page Number of <i>Sun, Moon and Feather</i>		
Memories closely related to the three Sisters	A. Play House	290, 294 tea party 297 Faking music play 308
	B. tortures	291 Dinner problem 295 Always feeling alone (Muriel) 296 Gloria’s fear 301 Lisa’s broken marriage
	C. 1st Encounter	294
	D. Quarrels	296 298 Escape 300 Who suffers most? 302, 305 On age 303 Complaint
	E. Inter-reliance	296, 297, 299, 300
		295 Family party in Father’s homeland 298 Father asked kids to be bed on time.

Others	F. Of Parents	304 Drunken Father 306 Bought a boat never used it.
	G.. A Movie Parody	309, 311
	H. Future	297 We are three not four. 313 One year after parents' death with good weather 308 Future marriage

The above arrangement is organized by the researcher. However, it is easily uncovered that all the above events can be rearranged. For example, it is never necessary to put the quarrels among the three sisters on age, on their first encounter, and on suffering into a fixed order. The topics of the quarrels of course can be randomly rearranged. Likewise, the starting of the poor life and the ending of the good weather can also be re-constructed; after all, despite of the good weather, the sisters still perceive that they three have to go on themselves. In this way, the three sisters solve the problem of writing where meanings are often fixed. By means of the re-arrangement of the events, the three sisters do not depict how life can be banal but reiterate life is dynamic, full of all possibilities.

(ix) Situational rather than abstract

The adjustable plots of the *Sun, Moon and Feather* has already expounded the situational possibility of life in oral tradition. The fragmented and complex arrangement, however, may bring a question if the play is too abstract in expressing their idea.

Ong confesses that “All conceptual thinking is to a degree abstract” (48). However “Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference that are minimally abstract in the sense that they remain close to the living human lifeworld” (48-49). As a result, Spiderwoman Theater outlines dozens of short events to concretize their daily life. The struggling mood and the life experiences are also demonstrated in Gloria’s net scene.

Gloria is play-acting as .. dragging the net.. as if it is a heavy burden. Drags the net stage left, lowers the net, unloading a heavy burden. Puts the net over her head and it becomes a bridal veil and ... becomes a Madonna, unveils one hand, and begs for pity and mercy. With both hands she claws and searches the net for an escape, then pushes the net as if under great pressure and fights until the pressure wins... She takes the net off. The net becomes a rope and she twists it around her body. She pulls both ends, squeezing the life out of her, then hangs herself. Next she throws it on the floor. The net becomes blood on the sand and she steps back in fear. She runs to it and pokes it with her toe. She lifts up the net with her toe. Then she carries the net in her arms like a dead child. The net becomes a majestic cape and she walks like a queen around in a circle. She walks downstage center and puts the net across her right arm and raises her arm. The net becomes a curtain to hide behind. She pulls the curtain back and peeks out fast. (292-93)

In terms of the transformative function of the net, Gloria is also transformed into Madonna, a bride, a dead child and even a queen. Like the life experiences, there are ups (queen and bride) and downs (dead child). There are also burdens and pressure which may bring out a suicidal thought. With the transformation of the net, Gloria also adjusts herself be it a happy or sad modification.

IV. CONCLUSION

Paula Gunn Allen notes that contemporary Native American fiction has two sides: the oral tradition and Western fiction and its antecedents (26). However, Simon Ortiz declares, “The oral tradition is not just speaking and listening” (658). As Wiget declares, “Where written literature provides us with a tradition of texts, oral literature offers a tradition of performances” (2). Tompson Highway suggests that the Native “oral tradition translates most easily and effectively into a three-dimensional medium. In a sense, it’s like taking the ‘stage’ that lives inside the mind, the imagination, and transposing it—using words, actors, lights, sound—onto the stage in a theatre.” (421). As a result, the study of an oral presentation in a play is justifiable. Wiget furthermore expounds differences between conversation and oratory which “has to do not only with the participants’ shift from private identity to public role but also to an increasingly centralized focus for the event” (2). Namely, in terms of an oratory study and performance, not only is the focus centralized but the scope is extended from the private to the public. Therefore, the study of *Sun, Moon and Feather* is never just an examination of Spiderwoman Theater’s family issues. The oral narrative skill helps to expound the all-the-time indigenous time concept. The possible random rearrangement of these issues tells how things and events are related in a circle-upon-circle-upon-circle (Haugo 228).

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