

**Translating Oral Performance into Written Narrative:  
Inter-textual Audience in the Coyote Stories of  
Simon Ortiz's *A Good Journey***

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Audience plays a leading role in Native American oral performance. Because passing traditions from generation to generation is a primary function of story in Native American traditions, oral performance requires and necessitates audience. Ortiz consciously translates the style and technique of oral tradition into written narrative form in the Coyote stories of *A Good Journey*. In doing so, he embeds an inter-textual audience, existing only when the stories are told. It is on this inter-textual audience, vital to the success of the performance and to the success of the narrative translation, that I intend to focus.

Ortiz states in the preface to *A Good Journey* that he wished to translate oral poetry into written narrative form.

There is a certain power that is compelling in the narrative of a storyteller simply because the spoken word is so immediate and intimate. It was the desire to translate that power into printed words that led me to write *A Good Journey*. I wanted to show that the narrative style and technique of oral tradition could be expressed as written narrative and that it would have the same participatory force and validity as words spoken and listened to<sup>1</sup> (Ortiz 1977, 9).<sup>2</sup>

In translating from oral to written narrative Ortiz developed methods of expressing oral tradition's style and technique that suggest knowledge of the translation theories of Kroeber, Tedlock, and Dundes. These characteristics include "texture" (the morphemes and phonemes of the original language performance), punctuation and line breaks to indicate pace of telling and capitalization, type style and type size variations, and inter-textual parenthetical notes to indicate tone and volume.

Ortiz uses repetition to translate the texture of oral performance. The last four lines of "Telling Coyote" hint at Navaho "hozho" in their repeated assurance of Coyote's survival and return.

. . . hope it don't rain,  
hope the river don't rise.

He'll be back. Don't worry.  
He'll be back. (18)

In the last Coyote story of the book, Ortiz repeats the phrase “and so on” to indicate new Coyote stories the audience might tell:<sup>3</sup>

That Coyote,  
I wonder if he still has that silver buckle  
that everyone was talking about  
or did he already pawn it at one of those  
places “up the line.”  
He's like that you know and then he'd tell  
people who ask,  
“Well, let me tell you.  
I was at Isleta and I was offered  
a good deal by this compadre who had  
some nice rstras of red chili. He had  
a pretty sister. . .” and so on.  
And you can never tell. (101)

Later in the story we hear of another possible story that might be told:

And  
they'd get into a certain story  
about one time at Encinal when he brought  
a wheelbarrow that was missing only one wheel  
to this auntie he liked and he had a story  
for why the wheel was missing. . .  
And so on. (102)

The last lines repeat the phrase introducing yet another story that might be told:

There's this story that Coyote was telling  
about the time he was sitting at his campfire  
and a pretty blonde girl came driving along  
in a pickup truck and she . . . And so on. (103)

Three times within different stories a possible new story is conceived and introduced with the repeated phrase “and so on.”<sup>4</sup> This repetition, as texture, provides a sense of the oral in this written text.

Assonance, onomatopoeia, and sound images are also elements of texture that provide an oral quality to these stories. In “Telling About Coyote” Ortiz describes Coyote as “The existential Man, / Doestoevsky Coyote” (15) repeating the “-oe-/-oy-” diphthongs, identifying the non-Native American storyteller with Coyote storyteller in their common existential twentieth century condition and indicating the “sound” of the story as it might be told. Throughout the stories Ortiz includes sound images—onomatopoetic utterances that are not really words—to indicate “sounds of the telling,” as if the reader were part of the audience hearing the story. Some examples include an utterance of recognition at the last time the storyteller had seen Coyote: “O,/ O yes, last time . . .” (16); crow’s singing, once beautiful, now reduced to “‘Cawr, cawr, cawr,’ Crow sang” (20); Coyote Pehrru’s smugly confident “Hah uh” repeated to the soldiers who want to buy his “magic” bubbling kettle (30-32). These examples of texture translated into narrative form provide the “sound” of oral performance to the stories.

Ortiz uses parenthetical asides, punctuation, and line breaks to indicate pace of telling, simulating the oral tradition. He provides parenthetical asides to create a sense of conversation between storyteller and implied audience. He sometimes provides translations for his Acoma sections in parentheses, as in “And another one”:

“Wah trou yatawah? Pehrru asked.  
And they answered, “Hah uh, wahstou yatawah.”  
 (“Are you eating?”  
 “yes, we’re eating.”) (33)

Ortiz also introduces other audience voices to the narration using parenthetical expressions, as when the voice of his daughter Rainy Dawn intrudes,

One time,  
(or like Rainy said, “You’re sposed to say, ‘Onesa ponsa time,’ Daddy”) (39).



wondering

what to do. (40)

Again, Ortiz's careful attention to line placement and breaks indicates pauses and tonal reading patterns. Finally, organized shorter and longer line lengths hint at the oral performance's narrative speed. Long lines grouped together indicate a slower telling:

The soldiers talked among themselves  
and then, without wanting to appear too eager,  
they said to Pehrru, "Compadre, do you think  
you can give us that wonderful kettle?"  
Pehrru kept on being busy at cooking  
and then he turned to them and said,  
"Tсах dzee wah guwah neh wadi shrouwah drumanoh." (31-32)

Shorter line lengths, on the other hand, speed the telling:

They bargained.  
The soldiers making an offer  
and Pehrru holding back,  
the soldiers raising their price  
and Pehrru seeming to hold back less and less.  
Until the soldiers said,  
"We will give you your weight in gold  
for the kettle." (32)

Such elements and techniques, normally utilized in actual oral performance, suggest the orality of narrative and provide a framework out of which an intertextual audience can be ascertained.

Kathleen Manley, in a 1994 article in *Southern Folklore*,<sup>6</sup> states that contemporary Native American writers like Momaday, Erdrich and Dorris, Ortiz, Walters, and Silko conceive an audience in their written work because they consider "the concept of written storytelling as intertwined with oral storytelling" (122).

The view of storytelling as continuous and of written and oral storytelling as intertwined has led some Native America writers to use specific techniques to create an audience . . . which differs from the usual reading audience and is certainly not the Jamesian ideal audience in which the audience is so absorbed in the text as to be unaware that it has a creator, a narrator, and a context. The techniques include using characteristics of oral

performance, contextualizing the story material, and using narrative strategies which nudge the reader out of absorption in the story so that she or he is aware of the telling of stories and of the storyteller. All of these techniques reduce the distance between storyteller and audience (123).

Ortiz uses these techniques to include an inter-textual audience in the six Coyote stories of *A Good Journey*.

Manley suggests that context—providing a physical, spiritual, and temporal setting—creates a sense of audience within the text. In Acoma tradition, stories are told during specific seasons for specific reasons, all of which would commonly be known to the audience. To create this same common feeling in the written translation, Ortiz must provide context, knowledge that will make the audience within the text conscious of these traditions. Ortiz provides context in these Coyote stories by providing background information for the stories themselves, providing contemporary parallels to ancient tribal traditions and ancient parallels to contemporary stories, and providing familiar geographic markers throughout the book.

Ortiz provides background information on the origins and telling-history of the stories. For example, in “And there is always one more story,” Ortiz traces the story’s origins and concludes, “it must be an old one.”

And there is always one more story. My mother was telling this one. It must be an old story but this time she heard a woman telling it at one of those Sunday meetings. The woman was telling about her grandson who was telling the story which was told to him by somebody else. All these voices telling the story, including the voices in the story—yes, it must be an old one. (39)

For another story Ortiz traces its background and attributes it to various people including “the storyteller himself”—an ambiguous individual who might well be Coyote.

Like myself, the source of these narratives is my home. Sometimes my father tells them, sometimes my mother, sometimes even the storyteller himself tells them.

*“I don’t know how it started,  
but this is the story:*

. . . .

I don’t know if the story is true or not,  
but that’s the story I heard,”  
my father said. (29-30)

These context clues indicate the stories’ origins for the inter-textual audience, providing a familiar history within the tradition.

Ortiz also provides contemporary parallels to ancient traditions and ancient parallels to modern traditions. In “Two Coyote Ones,” Ortiz illustrates the ancient trickster Coyote tradition in the contemporary sheep farming Ortiz’s lucky encounter with a blond lady, seamlessly interweaving ancient with modern, providing context for the new Coyote tale. In “Telling About Coyote,” contemporary “Doestoevsky Coyote” was sighted—

somewhere  
between Muskogee and Tulsa,  
heading for Tulsy town I guess,  
just trucking along (17)

—immediately after ancient trickster Coyote had turned Crow’s feathers black when the animal conference decided when Winter should take place (17). Modern Coyote is given ancient Coyote as a “platform” or tradition on which to build, ensuring Coyote’s survival by passing his along to the inter-textual audience.

Finally, Ortiz contextualizes these stories by presenting specific geographic markers to help the audience picture setting. In “Telling About Coyote,” Coyote, on his way to Zuni, stops to gamble away his fur (15), heads for “Tulsy town” in Oklahoma (17), and sleeps beside the

Arkansas River in Tulsa, maybe with a drunk “Pawnee babe” (18). In “They Came Around, The Wolves—And Coyote and Crow, Too,” we encounter Uncle or Brother Wolf on “mountain trail, desert, / at your campfire” (19). In “Like myself, the source of these narratives is my home,” a rabbit hunt occurs between Acoma and Laguna, with Coyote hiding under a rock ledge (29). In “And there is always one more story,” Quail Women and Tsuushki grind corn and juniper berries near the base of “a tall rock pinnacle / which stands southeast of Acu” (39), around, atop, and at the base of which the rest of the story is situated. Finally, “Two Coyote Ones” occurs “in a summer in southern Colorado...sitting by my campfire” (100) with Rex who, he admits, “was a pretty human dog” when a blonde woman drives up to chat. Says the storyteller, “She lived south of my camp some miles, / just past the bridge over the Rio de la Plata. Her parents and her brothers raised goats” (101). Providing geographic markers contextualizes the stories and places them within a tradition recognized by the audience.

Manley suggests that Native American authors attempt to “nudge” their readers into awareness of story and storyteller, implying an inter-textual audience with whom the storyteller speaks and converses. Ortiz does so by using multiple narrators and voices to obscure the storyteller’s identity, implying conversation within the texts, using second person to create distance between storyteller and audience, and including author intrusions which break the narrative momentum and force the reader to face storyteller and audience.

Ortiz does not always clearly state who tells a story—he forces the audience to follow the narrative and decide for itself. In “Two Coyote Ones,” Ortiz tells parts of the story relating to his experience with the blonde woman, but other stories are introduced that might not have Ortiz as storyteller. Similarly, in “And there will always be one more story,” it is not clear who tells the story or if the story is told by more than one storyteller. Rainy Dawn tells part of the story (39) as

does a young boy who thinks it funny that Tsushki saw Spider Grandmother's butt (41), but Ortiz seems to tell the rest of the story. In another story we see the voice of Ortiz in larger type, the voice of his father or mother in italics, the voice of his father in regular body type, the voice of the storyteller in italics, then finally Pehru and the soldiers talking in the story told by Ortiz or Pehru or the storyteller. In "They Came Around, The Wolves—And Coyote and Crow, Too," a narrator begins, then Uncle Wolf seems to talk for a while, then Crow starts to talk, but the story may be told by Wolf or by the narrator. Finally, so numerous a collection of voices speak in "Telling About Coyote" that clearly Ortiz means to tell about Coyote from all the people and traditions who have Coyote stories, including the Navajo and the Zuni and Pawnee and other tribes. Ortiz changes voices and narrators throughout the stories to create a "telling" event that requires thought and interpretation, forcing readers to identify storyteller and inter-textual audience.

Ortiz creates a sense of implied conversation with the audience, sometimes naming audience members, sometimes recording the audience's contribution to the conversation, sometimes leaving the audience's words within the story to be created by the current reader. Regardless of how the audience is created, the clear fact is that this audience exists within the text itself, emerging and living only through the telling or reading of the story. An example occurs in "Telling About Coyote" in which the storyteller suddenly throws in two questions: "Who? / Coyote?" then goes on to answer the questions; but these questions emerge unsolicited and seem to be a response to questions from the audience. The implied audience questions might include, "Have you seen him lately?" to which the storyteller asks for clarification, "Who? Coyote?" and to which the audience responds, "Yes, Coyote." Another example of this implied dialogue can be found in "And there is always one more story." Rainy Dawn begins one part of the audience



cool it a couple of times” (102). Other author intrusions include editorial commentary in “And Another One:,” ending the story with the statement, “When it was time to get a meal,/ Pehrru was known to be a shrewd man” (34), and previously quoted background information on both “Like myself, the source of these narratives is my home” and “And there is always one more story.”

The oral tradition which provides the backbone of Simon Ortiz’s poetic and storytelling experience requires the presence of a participatory audience, the members of which know the traditions and assumptions of the storyteller already and will pass on the stories and their cultural and tribal traditions to the next generation (Scholes and Kellogg 52-53). Modern anthropological and ethnological transcriptions of the oral tradition attempt to scientifically include this audience in their written versions. Native American writers such as Simon Ortiz also include this concept of audience in their writing. This suggests three identifiable audiences within such works as the Coyote stories in *A Good Journey*: the intended audience for whom the writer writes, the reading audience who ultimately re-creates the text, and the inter-textual implied audience which exists within the words themselves and comes alive only when the stories are told—an audience that perhaps comes from specific members of the audience when the story was performed orally, or that the writer creates in order to tell the story at all. After all, the stories cannot exist without the audience; neither can the audience exist without the stories.

These few things then,  
I am telling you  
because I want you to know  
and in that way  
have you come to know me now.  
 (“I Tell You Now” 165)

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the book *A Good Journey* are from the Sun Tracks series edition printed by the University of Arizona Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ortiz numbers the pages in this volume from the title page onward, though the first visible page number is 15. By doing so, Ortiz includes the title page (page 1), publishing information (2), dedication (3), table of contents (5-7), preface (9), an excerpt from an unidentified interview (11), chapter title “Telling” (13), and an illustration (14) in the narrative; the “journey” of the work includes not only the poems, but the naming and context of the poems. In *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), Leslie Marmon Silko employs a similar method of inclusion using page numbers, so that the healing “ceremony” includes more than the traditional prose of the novel story; it also includes pretexts, sunrise, and even blank space on the pages. I’m not aware of any current formal study of this phenomenon, but I believe that the subject deserves further consideration.

<sup>3</sup> According to Ortiz in the interviews included in the book: “The only way to continue is to tell a story and that’s what Coyote says” (11).

<sup>4</sup> As the last coyote story in the book, the repeated phrase “and so on” provides a perfect image of Coyote’s survival as new stories are told with original old stories. The story ends with the words “And you can tell afterall” (103) which lends strength and power to the one who *can* tell because the stories live on.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Evers’ companion guide to Helen Sekaquaptewa’s “Iisaw Hopi Coyote Stories” details some of the elements of the well-told story; see also Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* and the notes following each story in *Finding the Center*.

<sup>6</sup> The full argument of Manley’s essay, which originally appeared in *Southern Folklore* 51.2 (1994): 121-134, is that hypertext is a method by which the audience can be made aware of the storyteller and of the telling of the story, by which “the distance can be reduced between storyteller and audience,” just as contemporary Native American writers employ the specific techniques she names to achieve the same purpose. The argument has merit, but requires further discussion. Multimedia hypertext might be the next step, providing samples of the oral performance with full motion video and sound, landscape information and photographs or video footage, and the excitement of participating in a living story that will be told forever differently.

<sup>7</sup> Thus punning on the double meaning of the word “tell.”

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