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Writing from the Contact Zone

Native American Autobiography in the Nineteenth Century
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Acknowledgments

This book further develops part of my doctoral dissertation in *Translation Studies*, which was carried out during 2006-2009 at SAGEO Department, University of Bari. Without the scientific and personal support of prof. Maristella Trulli this work would never have been written. I would like to thank her for her intellectual generosity.

Special thanks go to prof. Francesco Marroni who gave me the opportunity to publish my work. I would also like to thank Anna Gomes and Maristella Gatto, and all my colleagues for their creative support and their friendship.

I am also grateful to all the people I have encountered in these years, who have offered their precious suggestions: prof. Paola Zaccaria, and profs. Donald Pease and Donatella Izzo, who I had the pleasure to meet at the Clinton Institute, U.C.D., in 2007. A word of thanks is also due to Lucy Nicholls, and to Cristina Pittiglio, the Italian translator of *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* – namely *Io, pellerossa* – a book prefaced by prof. Giorgio Mariani in 2006.
Restare ai margini di una, due o tre lingue, sfiorare così il fuori campo della lingua e della sua sostanza, è evidentemente una zona di frontiera rischiosa, forse paludosa e poco sicura. Piuttosto una zona mutevole e fertile, o un no man’s land, o …

(Assia Djebar)

La conquista della parola, dell’immaginazione della scrittura è cruciale per chi vive tra più culture, offrendo la connessione tra privato e pubblico, tra identità e lingue diverse. Scrittura e narrazione sono il sito del potere e della sopravvivenza femminile, elemento a un tempo noto e ignoto, che si muove tra cultura ancestrale e acquisita

(Lidia Curti)
to what I have lost
in translation…
Introduction

1. Native American Autobiography between Translation and Cultural Studies. The role of Native American autobiography is analysed in the following pages as seen through the lens of Translation and Cultural Studies, two multi-focal disciplines which have enriched the already existing variety of interpretations centred around the first Native American writing activity in the United States. Both disciplines unite different research areas and fields of knowledge, offering creative connections among, apparently, dissimilar subjects.

Translation appears as a conditio sine qua non when talking about Native American literature, since Native peoples have often penetrated, in the course of the centuries, European awareness with acts of linguistic, corporeal, intellectual, ideological and cultural translation. As “translated beings” par excellence, since their very first encounter with Europeans on the East Coast of the U.S. in the Seventeenth century, Native Americans have had to adopt a new language and a new cultural practice – firstly, that of writing, and secondly of doing this in the acquired language, English – which was unprecedented in their original cultures.

The figure of the interpreter-translator has always been present in the history of the initial contacts between the Europeans and the Natives as the story of Pocahontas – extensively treated in the first chapter of this work – highlights, and as the first Native writings in the Nineteenth century prove. Original Native American writings necessarily were the result

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2 This work considers the history of the contact between Europeans and Native Americans since John Smith’s arrival on the East Coast of America in the Seventeenth century.
of a process of translation: the so-called “as-told-to” stories were indeed collaborative works in which a Native narrator cooperated with an editor and an interpreter, usually European. In the case of the “self-written” stories, they actually were auto-translations by Native writers of their own cultural and linguistic categories into the other cultural system.

Translation is in both cases involved. It is an essential practice in every territorial, linguistic or cultural “contact zone”, namely, those areas which Mary Louise Pratt defined as the location of cultural and linguistic encounter in which peoples geographically separated come into contact and establish relationships\(^3\). It is through the relationships established in years of contacts between the Native peoples of North America and the colonists coming from Europe that the first forms of Native writings emerged. It is indeed essential to remember that Native American tribal cultures were oral cultures, and that Native people started to acquire knowledge of reading and writing after their encounters with the Whites.

Crucial in the process of Native “acculturation” were the so-called *Boarding Schools*, colonist run institutions in which Natives were educated according to European and Christian principles, with the intent of washing away their tribal past. Children were led to forget their Native languages and traditions, they lived far from their families and from their environment and they were pressed to resemble their White peers in their physical appearance. However, notwithstanding the violence perpetrated by the culture of “kill the Indian and save the child” – which is widely described in the Introduction to this work – it is thanks to the use of the European technology of writing that Native peoples started to make their voice heard by a wider White audience.

The first texts written by Native American writers in the Nineteenth century – which are presented and analysed in the second chapter of this work – are mostly characterised by an

autobiographical structure or vein. They are identifiable with the genre of auto-ethnography which Pratt defines as texts joining the story of an “I” with the history of a people. Life Among the Piutes by Sarah Winnemucca, the case study analysed here, epitomizes all this. Together with the other texts, it is indeed built around the life parabola of an individual who is in-between her original culture and the acquired one, divided by different languages, customs, creeds and religions.

The religious question – which subtends as a leitmotiv to the early production of Native writers – is analysed in this study as a watershed between the assimilationist hint of some literary production such as William Apess’ first autobiography (1829) and the polemic and ironic vein of Sarah Winnemucca’s work. As chapter III extensively shows, religion – together with other cultural categories, tribal values and rites – is utilized as a term of comparison between the two worlds. It is indeed through comparison that an auto-bio-ethnographic text, such as Winnemucca’s, becomes a bridge between distant realities highlighting differences and similarities, points of encounter and clashes.

The figure of the ethnographer is associated in this work with that of the translator, both considered “bridge-builders” between cultures, languages and texts. Besides, the “bridge-building” metaphor has been widely used both in Translation and Cultural Studies to define and redefine translation processes through the use of metaphors and concepts, such as negotiation, re-writing, re-narration. “Re-narration” – the image used to describe translation by Mona Baker in her 2008 interview with Andrew Chesterman – is the chosen key concept to conclude this work and to define Sarah Winnemucca’s autobiographical experience.

The concepts of “narration” and “re-narration” are based on the assumption that narrating means selecting sets of possible stories from a more complex and universal unit or Story. The American West has, for instance, been re-read by Native American writers who have taken possession of the right to
interpret the facts, the spaces and the time of History, narrating stories previously unheard.

It is possible to read, or re-read, Native texts from a new perspective: they are considered translations and a re-narrations of the self and of the stories which surround it. This highlights the power of the storyteller, of the subaltern voice which is a figure so dear to Gayatri Spivak. The Bengalese scholar indeed theorized the impossibility of subaltern subjects – women first of all – to be heard, and translated. An impossibility which is discarded by the figure of Sarah Winnemucca – subaltern as a woman and as a Native in the Nineteenth century world of White men and Indian chiefs. Re-narrating a part of History, intertwining it with her own story, the writer managed to speak for herself and for her people from the threshold of two cultures.

The power hidden in this process of narration and re-narration is maintained by ethno-psychologist Clarissa Pinkola Estés, when she states that sometimes a word or a story can be so evocative and strong that it reminds us of our own roots, of the places where we come from. Talking about the magic underneath the oral passing over of stories, Pinkola Estés also affirms that the ones who take upon themselves the responsibility of this art of narrating (and translating) must belong to a line of saints, poets, cantadoras, travellers, witches or fools.

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4 C.G. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in C. Nelson, L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana, Illinois University Press, 1988, pp. 90-104. The term subaltern is here used according to Spivak’s definition: “within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced [...] If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (p. 83).


6 Ivi, p. XXXI.
To conclude – and nonetheless to begin – it is important to highlight again how both Translation Studies and Cultural Studies have worked as theoretical and critical basis to analyse the literary production of Native American people, which is complex and fascinating. Native texts are indeed not easily classifiable under common genre categories and structures. They are out of the generally known limits of time and space, they represent extraordinary events and they are translations in process.

2. The Plan of the Book. As stated above, this study focuses on Native American autobiography which is taken as an example of cultural mediation and translation. Native autobiographical texts indeed “translate” cultural categories from a system into another and operate as alternative narratives. The genre of autobiography, interpreted as an act of self-translation, is analysed through the work of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, an influential and controversial Nineteenth century Paiute’s spokesperson. She was the first woman to write and publish a book in English: Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims (1883). The work takes into consideration the process of cultural transaction of Native American people into European mimics, a legacy which has lasted for many centuries. The coming together of education and religion resulted, in fact, in the eradication of great parts of indigenous ancestral cultures. Although, as Olson and Wilson suggest, “Native Americans were to be remade in the image of European Americans” 7, Native American autobiographies functioned as “counter narratives”.

Translation is, therefore, considered as a broad metaphor for both cultural encounters and clashes. In the last few decades, it has in fact been seen as a vibrant site for cultural production and transmission; a process of negotiation requiring something

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7 J. Olson, R. Wilson, Native Americans in the Twentieth Century, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986, p. 56.
more than inter-linguistic knowledge and ability. In the essay “Translating from the Interstices”, Paolo Bartoloni effectively summarizes the evolution of translation studies in the last thirty years:

The theoretical discourse on translation […] now encompasses not only the traditional precincts of linguistics and literary study but also the areas of cultural studies and postcolonial theory, contributing to reappraising and reviewing issues related to cross cultural encounters, cultural and aesthetic values and tastes […] While remaining very much interested in investigating interlingual exchanges and encounters, translation theory began to look closely at modes of translation within the same language and cultural and aesthetic transactions

The three chapters composing this study focus, respectively, on the analyses of the events which characterized the arrival and the progression of European settlers into the American continent, starting from the Seventeenth century; on the rise and development of a Native American literature, which occurs as a result of linguistic and cultural contact and contamination; on Native autobiography in general and, specifically, on Sarah Winnemucca’s Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims. This book is indeed the chosen case study, representing a complex work in-between two cultures and a “counter narrative” of the American West.

The first chapter analyses the evolution of what Hermann Melville called “the metaphysics of Indian hating”9, referring to the “multi-layered” reality of hate against the Indians, which was constructed over time on the American soil. This chapter examines in depth the relationships established between the first European settlers in North America and the Native peoples who welcomed them, proceeding to the most significant historic

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9 G. Mariani, La Penna e il Tamburo. Gli Indiani e la Letteratura degli Stati Uniti, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2003, p. 17.
events that characterized the relation between the two in the Nineteenth century. The figure of Sarah Winnemucca is portrayed inside the world she lived in and in the context of the other Native voices which rose at the time.

Education is examined as one of the “weapons” the Whites used against the Natives to eradicate “indianess” from them, to “kill the Indian” while saving a child\textsuperscript{10}. Acculturation indeed was instrumental to the transaction-translation of the Native subject into the other’s culture. Translation is here analysed metaphorically as a process of transformation of the existing cultural differences, known as homologation; and literally, as the adaptation to pre-existing models. As argued by Kimberli Stafford in her essay “Disrupting the Categories of Foreign and Domestic”:

Native American peoples were introduced to European awareness through acts of translation, whether linguistic, textual, corporeal, or ideological, in which the validity of the Native position suffered. During much initial contact with Europeans, American Indian cultures and artistic productions, on the rare occasions when they were acknowledged at all, were treated lightly even as they were observed and recorded\textsuperscript{11}.

The second chapter is dedicated to the work of the first Native American writers. It deals with the passage from orality to literacy, and defines Native American autobiography as a specific genre in all its similarities and dissimilarities to Western literary tradition\textsuperscript{12}. Native American autobiographies

\textsuperscript{10} The slogan “Kill the Indian, and save the child” refers to the Nineteenth century experience of the Boarding School, which is extensively analysed in the first chapter of this work as one of the cruellest colonisation practices utilised by the Whites in Northern America. It was based on the Seventeenth century Europeans’ belief that the indigenous populations that they encountered in the New World lacked the elements that constitute civilization.

\textsuperscript{11} K.M. Stafford, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44.

\textsuperscript{12} W.J. Ong - in \textit{Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word}. New York: Methuen and London, 1986 - among others, has discussed the importance of alphabetic writing in the development of Western civilisation. Transforming oral messages into records, there happens to be the introduction
are considered transitional texts par excellence, “combining elements of tribal oral tradition and Euro-American written tradition”\textsuperscript{13}. In this chapter, the practice of translation and auto-translation are compared to the process of ethnographic research. As Paula Ruben and Abraham Rosman state, in their introduction to \textit{Translating Cultures}, “since its inception as a discipline and even in the “prehistory” of anthropology, translation has played a singularly important role”\textsuperscript{14}. In fact, taken in its broader sense, translation can mean the cross-cultural understanding of words, ideas, thought categories, values, feelings etc..

Translation – which is “central to writing about culture”\textsuperscript{15} – allows us to approach the first Native American written texts as “cultural bridges” which challenge the idea of unity and linearity. Both translation and ethnography imply the existence of two cultural systems to be analysed and compared: the ethnographer is called to document the existence of a certain culture by the recording of its practices; the translator is called to produce textual equivalents. Yet, they both work with cultural materials which have to be “translated” to be understood, and they both make use of language. Furthermore, America has always constituted an interesting ethnographical and ethnological field of study, as it epitomises the clash between what was perceived as “civilisation” and “barbarity”\textsuperscript{16}.

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\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} The U.S.A. has always represented a fertile ground for the study of aboriginal cultures. The Smithsonian Institution first, in 1846, and the Bureau of Ethnology then, in 1879, worked for the documentation of American Indian languages, which brought linguistic anthropology to become part of mainstream anthropological research in the country. The term itself “linguistic anthropology” was first used in the 1\textsuperscript{st} Annual Report of the Bureau, published in 1881, thanks to the work of the founder John Wesley Powell. Although