

**“In Navajo we call him little father”/ “In Navajo, we call him ‘shidá’í:”
The emergence and calibration of style by two Navajo poets¹**

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1. Introduction:

When I asked Hershman John what he thought defined a Navajo poetry style recently (3/13/07), he responded by saying, “Besides using Navajo terminology, using Navajo words, and using Navajo stories in poetry?” His question, I think, was rhetorical. Clearly the use of Navajo words, Navajo terminology and Navajo stories are an integral part of the current tradition of Navajo poetry. I have argued as much elsewhere and repeatedly (Webster 2004, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to sketch out something of the natural history of Navajo poetry “style” and to argue that such a style was not a given, but rather has a complex history (see Silverstein and Urban 1996). I do this by looking first at the changes in a specific poem over time. Second, I look at how one Navajo poet has modeled her poetry style on another poet. In doing so, she has also expanded the horizons of options by expanding the genres and traditions that are in dialogue with Navajo poetic styles. There has been an intermingling of genres here. Navajo is a Southern Athabaskan language, spoken—among other places—in the American Southwest.

This paper is discourse centered in its attempt to understand the relationship between the individual and the larger traditions that they both help to create and perpetuate (Sherzer 1987; Urban 1991). That is, I take actual instances of discourse—both written and oral—and compare them over time. This paper attempts to outline something of the calibration that individual poets (i.e., performers) engage in over time. As such I am concerned with two fundamental questions concerning poetry (i.e., verbal art). First, what is the role of multiple genres in the intertextual co-construction of stretches of discourse that we might term “poetry” (be they considered “stories” or “verbal art” by and through others) (see Webster 2004)? Second, what is the role of the creative individual (i.e., poet) in such demarcated instantiations of a “performance” over time (i.e., diachronically)? Phrased differently these two questions ask the age old anthropological query of: What is

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the relationship between the individual and tradition? It reframes that question by adding a temporal or diachronic component so that we can understand how individual poets calibrate their performances over time and in relation to other poets (see Bauman 2004). This work then is in concert with the work of Edward Sapir (1921) and the more recent articulations of the role of the linguistic individual both from a discourse centered approach and a linguacultural approach articulated by, among others, Joel Sherzer (1987), Paul Friedrich (2006), Alan Rumsey (2006), Barbara Johnstone (1996) and Richard Bauman (2004). It takes seriously the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) and attempts to understand the “speaking subject” as a creative individual who is in dialogue with other performers (traditions) and yet simultaneously must articulate a unique (but not too unique) speaking self. That is, the way our speech is filled simultaneously with both “varying degrees of otherness” and “varying degrees of ‘our-own-ness’ (Bakhtin 1986: 89).”

This paper was partially inspired by reading Rumsey’s (2006) recent article, “Verbal Art, Politics and Personal Style in Highland New Guinea and Beyond.” In that article, Rumsey shows how a younger Ku Waru chanter has calibrated his chanting style (through meter) with an older and more famous chanter that the younger Ku Waru had heard on the radio. The older Ku Waru’s chanting style (based on meter) was unique, and it was that uniqueness that attracted the younger Ku Waru to adopt the meter of the older Ku Waru. What we have here, I think, is nothing more-nor-less than the calibration of style and an example of the ways that traditions can be modified, calibrated, and reproduced. Traditions, in Rumsey’s account, are made possible by and through creative individuals for aesthetics reasons (among others). What I will describe for Navajo poets is similar in practice.

2. My Uncle Is a Small Man:

Luci Tapahonso is easily the most famous Navajo poet on the Navajo Nation. While I was doing fieldwork, Navajos would often ask me what I was doing on the Navajo Nation. I would reply that I was studying Navajo poetry. Invariably, they would then recommend the work of Luci Tapahonso. This was true not just of Navajo educators, but of Navajos in general. One story can stand for many here. Once, while driving from Lukachukai, Arizona to Flagstaff, Arizona, my car broke down. I was able to get a tow-truck to tow me the two and half hours to Gallup, New Mexico for repairs. During the two and half hour drive, the tow-truck driver and I talked about a number of things. He explained, for example, some of the differences between how young Navajos speak Navajo compared to elders. We also talked about the rodeo, how he had competed in it, and about traveling with the rodeo. When he asked me what I was doing on the Navajo Nation, I explained that I was studying Navajo poetry. He then recommended the poetry of Luci Tapahonso and the poem about her uncle. That poem is ‘Hills Brothers Coffee’ and it is to that poem I wish to now turn.

Below I present five short excerpts from her poem ‘Hills Brothers Coffee.’ The first is from Tapahonso’s 1987 book of poetry *A Breeze Swept Through*. The second example is from Tapahonso’s 1993 book of poetry *Sáanii Dahataal: The Women are Singing* (note the use of Navajo in the title). The third example is from Tapahonso’s 1997 book of poetry *Blue Horses Rush In* (the travels of “blue horses” is also of some interest). The next example is from a performance that Tapahonso gave in 1995 on LineBreak, a radio program produced out of Buffalo, New York that interviews various authors about their works. The final example is from a public performance I recorded in 2001 at Window Rock, Arizona on the Navajo Nation.

- 1). My uncle is a small man
 in Navajo we call him little father

my mother's brother.
(Tapahonso 1987: 8)

- 2). My uncle is a small man.
In Navajo, we call him, "shidá'í,"
my mother's brother.
(Tapahonso 1993: 27)
- 3). My uncle is a small man.
In Navajo, we call him "shidá'í,"
my mother's brother.
(Tapahonso 1997: 97)
- 4). So essentially what I did was keep the syntax the same
The sentence structure in Navajo is almost the complete opposite of
English
So I'll read it
It's called Hills Brothers Coffee

My uncle is a small man
In Navajo we call him shidá'í
My mother's brother
He doesn't know English
But his name
In the white way
Is Tom Jim
(LineBreak 1995, transcription by Webster)
- 5). I'm going read
Uhm a number of some poems
That you've probably heard before
And that I've learned over the years
That I have to read or
Somebody's gonna sco:ld me [laughter]
So I'll start with Hills Brothers Coffee
Because
Uh I think we could all use a cup of coffee now [laughter]
We'll just have to think about it
Uhm Hills Brothers Coffee

My uncle is a small ma:n
In Navajo we call him shidá'í yáázh
My mother's brother
He doesn't know English
But his na:me in the white way
Is
Tom
Jim
(Window Rock, 18 July 2001)

When Hershman John reflected on a Navajo poetry style, he commented that the use of Navajo words was an obvious feature of that style. That observation is certainly true

today. It has not always been true. The first poetry written by Navajos, that I have been able to locate, dates back to around 1933. That poetry was written entirely in English. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the Bureau of Indian Affairs published a literary journal (oh so ideologically named!) of Native writers called *Arrow*. This journal was a part of a larger effort by the BIA to use poetry as a means to teach English. As such, it should be clear that Navajos seldom used Navajo words in the poetry that was published by this journal. This would change. Nia Francisco published poetry in Navajo in 1977 in the journal *College English* (at the suggestion of David McAllester). But writing in Navajo and code-switching between English and Navajo in Navajo poetry really only takes hold in the 1990s.

We can actually track that development in the work of Luci Tapahonso. In the 1987 version the Navajo kinship term *shidá'í* (my + maternal uncle) is not used. Instead there is an English gloss for the Navajo term. In the later versions the metalinguistic commentary includes that Navajo form and the English gloss has been dropped. Indeed, the later examples seem to implicitly posit a degree of incommensurability between Navajo and English. Tapahonso was at the vanguard of the use of Navajo words in Navajo poetry. This poem tracks that change rather accurately. It would be a mistake, then, to think that the use of Navajo words in Navajo poetry is in anyway a given. There is a natural history to this poem and to the way that it has changed over time. Poetic traditions such as contemporary Navajo poetry do not appear *de novo*, rather they have histories, they are implicated in other genres, and they change over time. Concurrent with the rise of Navajo in poetry has been a rising awareness of Navajo language endangerment and the emergence of pedagogical Navajo literacy.

'Hills Brothers Coffee' is also one of Tapahonso's signature poems. The young tow-truck driver example above speaks to that. As do, I might add, Tapahonso's comments at Window Rock in example 5. Hills Brothers Coffee is a fan favorite and for many in the audience it is an expected poem that she will perform. As she says, if she does not perform certain poems she will be "scolded." I should also add that in the Window Rock example she actually expands the Navajo that she uses. She says not just *shidá'í* (my maternal uncle), but *shidá'í yáázh* (my maternal uncle + little) 'my little maternal uncle.' The use of the affective *yáázh* 'little' adds poignancy to the moment. The audience at Window Rock was largely Navajo and it was pushing ten o'clock at night by the time she finally performed her poetry and this poem (the first poem she performed that night). There is a touch of the feelingful pragmatic iconicity to the use of the affective form. The use of Navajo is then an affective register (Irvine 1990). Note also that the form used in 2001 comes very close to capturing something of the English gloss from 1987.

To summarize this section then. Here is an "iconic" poem by Navajo poet Luci Tapahonso. A poem that many people associate with "the" Navajo poetry style. A part of this style is recognized as Tapahonso's use of Navajo English (as she describes in example 4) and with her use of Navajo words (Navajo syntax is canonically SOV, though sometimes due to a subject-object inversion it can be OSV [see Witherspoon 1977]). But the Navajo word is not in the original published poem. It enters the poem in 1993, is then tweaked in 1995 and is then relatively codified by 1997. The result of this codification can be seen in the 1995 oral performance and in the expandability of Navajo in the 2001 oral performance. My point here is only to show that a poem that many consider an example of the dialogue of English and Navajo did not begin that way. In fact, when we look at it over time we see how Tapahonso has calibrated her own individual style.

3. Breakthrough into Song:

In traditional Navajo narratives, narrative genres such as Coyote stories for example, there is a tendency for songs to be included within specific narratives (Webster 2004). Thus, Prairie Dogs, for example, break into song when they believe that Coyote has been

We sit like that a while
 And then she hums
 “Hey ne yah na.”
 I take the hint
 And sing the old lullaby
 Her great grandmother sang to the child I once was.

Hey ne yah na
 Hey awée yah
 Hey ne yah na
 Hey awée yah
 Hey ne yah na
 Hey awée yah
 Hey hey yah na
 Hey awée yah
 Hey hey yah na
 Awée yah
 Hey ne yah na
 Awée yah
 Awée yah
 Hey ne yah na

(LineBreak 1995, transcription by Webster)

In example 7, the written form, the poem continues with the next stanza after the lines, “I take the hint and sing the old lullaby/her great grandmother sang to the child I once was.” In the oral performance, Tapahonso breaks into song here. She performs the lullaby. I will note that the only possible lexical item that I could identify in the lullaby was *awée* ‘baby.’ The rest are vocables. This is typical from my experience with Navajo lullabies. They are, in my limited experience, normally composed primarily of vocables (this is also true of other Navajo song genres). This breakthrough into song was not unique to this performance. At a number of performances that I have seen Tapahonso perform at, she breaks into song within her poems. In fact, many Navajos I spoke with noted that this was one of the “signature” markers of Tapahonso’s style. Laura Tohe, another Navajo poet, once explained to me that some Navajos expect her to sing when she performs her poetry. Because they have seen Tapahonso perform and an expectation has been created. Tohe, I should note, does not sing at her poetry performances.

It should not be surprising, I think, for young Navajo poets—especially young female Navajo poets—to attempt to calibrate their style with that of a successful and well-known poet such as Luci Tapahonso. It is to just that kind of calibration that I wish to turn. However, the idea that Navajo poets would use song in their poetry, I would argue, is not surprising, though it was creatively selected. It can be traced back to Navajo narrative traditions, where there is the option of including song within the narrative. But the inclusion of song within poetry allows for options and choices, the choices of which songs to include within these poems then becomes a question of the genres that are being put into dialogue and the identities that such choices index.

Tacey Atsitty was a young Navajo woman getting ready to go to college in the fall of 2001 when I interviewed her at the KFC in Shiprock, New Mexico. She had had her poetry published in a Mormon magazine and she was quite proud of the fact that she was a published poet. She had also performed her poetry at poetry slams and at a writer’s camp in Rough Rock that I had attended. During my interview with Atsitty she performed a number of poems for me and graciously gave me a copy of *Eagle’s Eye* with her poem in it. One of the poems she performed for me was ‘Song of a Great Nat’aanii—Shímásanii’ (*nat’aanii* ‘glosses as ‘leader’; shi ‘my’ + ‘maternal grandmother’). Note that the use of

kinship terms seems to be one domain where Navajo forms are interwoven into English dominant poetry. Kinship terms travel across genres, intertextually linking the poet with Navajoness (Webster 2006). They thus become emblematic identity displays through and by their iterability. During the performance, from memory, of this poem at the KFC she broke into the following song—which is also found in the published poem:

- 9) God be'awée nishli
 Dóó kojí' ashííl'á'
 Ni' bikáá' hoghan sheinílá
 Shishchíinii éí bilgo

Interestingly, Atsitty leaves this refrain untranslated in the published version (Atsitty 1999: 34). She did, however, provide a rough translation when she performed the poem for me (the audience consisted of her brother and me). Here is the glossing from my notes:

- 10) I'm a child of God,
 And he has sent me here
 He's given me an earthly home
 With my parents

In both her breakthrough into song and in her use of Navajo words in her poetry she intertextually connects with the poetry of Luci Tapahonso and beyond. As I noted above, Tapahonso sometimes includes songs—such as lullabies—within the oral versions of her poems and Tapahonso was at the vanguard of using Navajo words in her poetry. Atsitty mentioned Luci Tapahonso as one of her influences. Indeed, Atsitty commented on a number of Navajo poets. She was clearly influenced by Luci Tapahonso, but also Laura Tohe and Esther Belin. She had worked with Belin while she was doing poetry slams and very much respected Belin's performance style. Though, it should be noted, that she felt that some of Belin's poetry was too "political."

Finally, I wish to draw attention to the fact that this song also connects with Mormon hymns as well. The lyrics in Atsitty's song mirror the Mormon hymn "I am a Child of God" (Hymns #301). It is a Navajo version of a Mormon hymn. It is an intertextual link to both other Navajo women poets, such as Luci Tapahonso, and to Mormon hymns. In fact, in the performance of this poem Atsitty sang this part of the poem in the high pitch style associated with Mormon children hymn style. Atsitty's use of Navajo in this poem also connects with comments that Pavlik (1992) has made about the Mormon promotion of overt displays of Navajo "culture." Pavlik (1992) suggests that Navajo Mormons see Navajo culture as adornment, thus overt displays of Navajo "culture" such as "traditional clothing" and the use of the Navajo language are encouraged (see Denetdale 2004 on the history of "traditional women's clothing"). The use of the Mormon hymn in Navajo must be understood within that context as well. It, thus, indexes both Navajoness and Mormonness. Atsitty's breakthrough into song is thus imbued with multiple intertextual linkages.

4. Conclusion: On the Calibration of Style.

In this paper I have tried to suggest something of the calibration of style among two Navajo poets (Luci Tapahonso and Tacey Atsitty). This paper, to paraphrase Julie Cruikshank (1998), has been concerned with something of the social life of poetry. While it may be true as Hershman John and others—including myself—have commented that a Navajo poetry style is recognizable by its use of Navajo words, stories, and terminology, it is also true that those poetic devices were not a given. The emergence of such features has a history. We can understand something of that history by looking at actual discursive instances. We can also understand something of that history and calibration by focusing on

the creative individual. The poetic devices that I have outlined here, code-switching into Navajo and breakthroughs into song, are best understood as options. Individual poets make selections from these options and then creatively adapt those poetic features for their own poetic purposes.

Not all Navajo poets breakthrough into song. Laura Tohe, for example, does not break into song. When she was asked about this, she responded that she could not sing. Thus, for her, breaking into song is not an option. What she can do is write in Navajo and thus some of her poetry is written entirely in Navajo (Tohe 2005). That is still a rather rare phenomenon among Navajo poets (Webster 2004). Tohe, Tapahonso, John, and Atsitty all code-switch from English into Navajo in their poetry (as do many others poets [Webster 2004, 2006]). That poetic option has “caught on,” traveled, and become reproducible. It has become—through its iterability—an index of a Navajo poetry style. But, as the example from Tapahonso suggests, that option was not always so overtly there. The use of Navajo—even Navajo kinship terms—in English dominant poems has a history. While it may now seem common place in Navajo poetry, it was not always the case.

Likewise, when Tapahonso breaks into song in her poetry she is tapping into a narrative tradition that includes the breaking into song. Contemporary Navajo poetry is thus in dialogue with the oral tradition. Atsitty, who has been influenced by Tapahonso, takes that option—the option of breaking into song—and puts it into dialogue with another tradition. In this case, Mormon hymns. Here we see the interplay of the creative individual and genre traditions. People listen to and are influenced by the talk—the performances—of others. Genres inter-animate each other. They intertextually link poets, poetics, genres, and identities. Atsitty intertextually links to Luci Tapahonso’s performance style, to the Navajo language and Navajoness, and to Mormonism. It is more than a breakthrough into song. It is a cacophony of intertextuality.

Finally, it is by looking at these specific instances of discourse as historically situated eventings that we can understand the ways that Navajo styles are calibrated (Rumsey 2006). It also allows us to understand the role of the creative individual—in this case poets—in that calibration of styles and ultimately in the creation, adjustments, circulation, and renewal of linguacultural tradition. Linguacultural traditions are accomplishments, aesthetic accomplishments that are entangled in the calibrations, intuitions, imaginations, and expressions of creative individuals. To quote Sapir in conclusion (with adjustments):

[Poetry] is itself the collective art of expression, a summary of thousands upon thousands of individual intuitions. The individual goes lost in the collective creation, but [their] personal expression has left some trace in a certain give of the human spirit. (Sapir 1921: 231)

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