TRANSLATIONS OF MYTHS IN THE POETRY OF PAULA GUNN ALLEN AND WENDY ROSE[1]

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Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo / Sioux) is one of the contemporary American Indian writers to take issue with the myth of Pocahontas, which has been haunting the American imagination for centuries. Thus, the poem in which Pocahontas addresses her husband becomes a telling illustration of the ways in which Allen translates or demystifies a mythical figure, by using American Indian perspectives. In her poetry, Allen also introduces references to Pueblo mythical figures that need to be interpreted for those unfamiliar with them. Similarly, Wendy Rose (Hopi / Miwok), whose worldview is grounded in tribal spirituality, reveals the quintessence of the Hopi creation myth, transforming it artistically and taking care as not to infringe on sacred knowledge. At the same time, she engages critically with the mainstream stereotype of "the squaw" that she resists from a tribal standpoint. Hence, the present analysis aims at demonstrating that the traveling of myths in the poetry of Paula Gunn Allen and Wendy Rose has two directions; on the one hand, the term *translation* represents hereby a process of decoding and filtering myths that pass from the American Indian cultures towards a mainstream readership and, on the other hand, it represents a process of deconstructing the dominant society's myths concerning Native people, especially women, thus re-empowering the latter.

In "Pocahontas to Her English Husband, John Rolfe", Paula Gunn Allen chooses to address the pervading myth of the New World princess who saves the colonizer only to be converted to Christianity and separated from the tribe. Throughout the centuries Pocahontas has been known as the young girl who protected John Smith, one of the founders of Jamestown, when his father's tribesmen were about to kill him. In 1613, she was held hostage by the governor of Virginia and baptized as a Christian. Instead of being sent back to her people, she married John Rolfe, who prospered as a cultivator of tobacco, having learnt the skill from the local American Indians. In 1616, he took his wife to London, where she contracted the

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disease which caused her death. Their son, Thomas Rolfe, returned to Virginia (Hazen-Hammond 50).

The emphasis in Allen's reinterpretation of the famous character falls upon the Native woman's instrumental role in the survival of her white husband in territories that are remote and inimical to him:

> Had I not cradled you in my arms,
> oh beloved perfidious one,
> you would have died.
> And how many times did I pluck you
> from certain death in the wilderness –
> my world through which you stumbled
> as though blind? (Allen 6)

The rhetorical questions insist upon the fact that the land invaded by the European subject, who was ignorant of its secrets, belonged to her and her people. She affirms her sense of identity and ownership by proudly referring to the American wilderness as "my world", while graciously extending her generosity and love to the guest. However, even at a time of openness and willingness to save the other as mentioned in these lines, the feminine speaker anticipates the lack of reciprocal feelings and behavior on her husband's part. She calls him "perfidious", thus characterizing the type of treatment that he found fit to administer in return later on. Allen's Pocahontas also alludes to the betrayal of the European power figures who gave up on the errant emigrants when the latter were in need of support from overseas, but who expected the same long lost sons to return with bountiful treasures and contribute to the prosperity of the kingdom. The gold Rolfe presents to the crown upon return is, in his wife's words, "wrung from a harvest I taught you / to plant. Tobacco" (Allen 6). However, the offering of an expensive commodity to the colonizer, the cultivation of tobacco, is not devoid of its double-edged consequences. This agricultural product did bring benefits to the settlers who learned how to use it, but at the same time, as Pocahontas deliberately notices, it also caused addiction and disease, when misused. The implication is that the American Indian people were not the only ones to suffer from the disasters produced by colonization; the white people's greed for the riches easily obtained from the American soil eventually determined imbalances and (health) problems:

> It is not without irony that by this crop
> your descendants die, for other
> powers than you know
> take part in this as in all things. (Allen 6)

Demonstrating the capacity to see herself reflected in her husband's eyes and to analyze this mirroring in ironic terms, Pocahontas lists a set of labels inscribed in the collective consciousness and shows them to be false. She realizes that, to Christian eyes, she might have appeared to be "a savage maid" or the "dusky daughter of heathen sires" (Allen 6), who needed guidance or "husbandly rule" in order to discover the true religion. This image of helplessness is clearly contradicted by the repeated affirmation of the fact that he was the one in need of being guided and saved in America, not she, the holder of the (religious) knowledge that ensured thriving conditions for the tribal nation she was born into and for the colonizers who resorted to local secrets in order to survive far from home and Christianity. The "savagery" and "heathenism" that her representations have been identified with appear now to be terms that sprang from misperception, intolerance and lack of understanding for other people's beliefs and ceremonies. The lines inserted in Allen's poem point both to a cultural and gender-based clash: "I spoke little, you said. And you listened less" (7). As a matter of fact, in Allen's poem, a Pocahontas who speaks from beyond the grave exposes the fact that it was the (forced) conversion to ways alien to her that brought about her destruction:

> I saw you well. I
> understood your ploys and still
> protected you, going so far as to die
> in your keeping – a wasting,
> putrefying Christian death – and you,
> deceiver, whiteman, father of my son,
> survived, reaping wealth greater
> than any you had ever dreamed
> from what I taught you and
> from the wasting of my bones. (7)

The "savage maid" stereotype generated at a time of deep-rooted bigotry and the supposedly noble religious conversion implemented by the colonizing culture show their absurdity and terrifying effect now, as Allen has demonstrated in the text, using Pocahontas's voice. Moreover, when receiving a voice and the chance to spell out her point of view, Pocahontas labels the white man with such names as "deceiver" and describes his behavior as manipulative, treacherous, selfish and disrespectful of others, setting the records straight in a most empowering gesture. Here Pocahontas is not a victim. In her analysis, Robin Riley Fast explains that the poem "addresses the present, by referring directly or otherwise to the ongoing consequences of colonialism" (187), thus identifying the merit of the poem that consists not only in re-establishing the human dimension of Pocahontas,

a previously distorted historical figure, but also in discussing the current repositioning of the indigenous presence in America.

Among the American Indian writers that revisit the myth of Pocahontas along the lines established by Allen, Heid Erdrich captures it most relevantly in the anthology of poetry that she co-edited with Laura Tohe. Choosing a title for the grouping of poems that portray contemporary Native women's experiences that subvert stereotypes still embraced by the mainstream, Erdrich explains:

> In the title for this section, we revised that historical figure's name to "New Age Pocahontas" in order to convey the popularly accepted notion of a woman whose reality is obscured by a myth adopted into the American consciousness. As a "New Age" Pocahontas, she is also that mystical great-great grandmother whose shared heritage is supposed to bring us all together, even while she serves to distance us. (108)

Reflecting the endeavor of building a common ground while acknowledging tribal differences, the writers in the anthology struggle to make Pocahontas sound and feel like a real woman whose actions and beliefs can be liberated from behind the thick layers of mystification that she has been subjected to and it is Allen's intuition and artistic creation that contributed to the setting of such a direction.

Besides engaging with mainstream culture's myths connected to Native people, Allen's work is intrinsically linked to Pueblo tribal myths that she relates to and translates for a wider readership. In explaining her process of creation to an interviewer, Allen explained that when writing, the creator of literature tunes in to a current of myths that surrounds her: "I think you touch into the mythstream that is always there; it is part of the world; it is part of the universe" (Eysturoy 105). A poem such as "Affirmation" alludes to the poet's conviction that journeys in life lead to the recovery of myths:

> Small things count after all:
> each leaf a tale,
> each journey retracing some ancient myth
> told in shadows and whispers
> under the flickering boughs:
> sacred making (sacrificing).
> The power of Spider thoughts
> so small
> mount, thread by thread. (Allen 88)

In Allen's poetry a mere reverie on nature themes occasions a reconnection to the origins, to the moment of creation, to sacredness. Apparently insignificant elements from immediate reality invite to revelations of a higher order. The mental processes to which a leaf or a bough can lead are "Spider thoughts", here the capitalization of the word indicating the fact that Allen refers to the recurrent mythical figure, the Spider from traditional tales, often referred to as the Grandmother / Spider Woman / Thought Woman. Following the example of the spider who weaves iridescent patterns, the poet weaves together reality and myth, or in Jim Ruppert formulation: "Allen's stance is a highly meditative one wherein she forges connections between mundane and mythic space. Making these connections is frequently referred to as 'going home,' for we see the physical journey often combined with the mythic journey and the personal search" (32). Indeed, through her multifaceted work not only as a poet, but also as a fiction-writer, essayist, critic and activist, Allen initiated the journey home for herself as well as for other Native women writers who engaged with their tribal heritage in their works.

Such a writer is Wendy Rose, often critically introduced as a "confident voice on behalf of mixed-blood, urban, and detribalized Indians" (Godfrey 71). Even if not brought up in a tribal context or as part of a tribal community, Rose's commitment to and knowledge of Hopi culture, to which she is connected since her father belonged to the Hopi nation, infuses her poetry.

In the poem "Sipapu", Wendy Rose invokes the Hopi creation myth, by providing poetic imagery for immemorial beliefs that inform not only tribal storytelling, but also lifestyle and worldview. The conviction that "the Hopis came into being when the people emerged from the Lower World through an opening in the earth" (Courlander 9) induces a profound respect for the land reflected in many aspects of the Hopi culture: agricultural cycles, ceremonial practices, pottery-making. The urgency of preserving the connection with the earth is expressed in lines such as the following:

> covered
> with clay
> we emerge
> we emerge
> over and over
> back and forth
> around the seasons. (Rose, *The Halfbreed Chronicles* 9)

According to Hopi mythology, the people travelled upward through four successive worlds. The last emergence was also the most difficult. After several failed attempts to reach through to the Upper World, the chipmunk,

who was designated to help the people, planted the right seed that grew tall enough to turn into the people's road:

> Once more the chipmunk planted. This time it was a bamboo. The people sang hard and made the bamboo grow straight and tall. Each time they stopped to catch their breath the growing stopped and a joint formed on the bamboo stalk. And when they resumed singing the bamboo grew again. Spider Grandmother went back and forth exhorting the people to sing the bamboo into the sky. Thus it went on. (Courlander 24)

Even if Rose replaces the bamboo with the spruce, thus following a regional variation of the myth or her own poetic instinct, the mythical essence is preserved: people's slow gradual movement upward reflects the rhythms of the song which is meant to engender the growth of the plant and, subsequently, to ensure communal effort and harmony. The plant becomes a "ladder" on which the human chain ("hand by hand", "bone by bone", "foot by foot") advances painstakingly with insect-like gracefulness. Interestingly enough, Rose opts for an iconic correspondence by arranging her lines in the shape of a ladder:

> Hand by hand
> bone by bone
> dancing
> on the ladder
> like mosquitos
> climbing foot
> by foot
> heels hanging
> impressions
> of spruce
> cut
> into flesh
> thumbs wrapped
> in day light
> we emerge
> we emerge. (Rose, *The Halfbreed Chronicles* 8)

If while climbing towards the surface, people have a sense of the sun only in as much as it penetrates through the small opening made in the earth, the moment of emergence is identified with the gustatory sensation of the all-enveloping light: "we stop / in the taste / of day light" (Rose, *The Halfbreed Chronicles* 9). Moreover, the people spring into being with "a sound of birth

/ a whirl of blood / a spin of song" (Rose, *The Halfbreed Chronicles* 9). These final lines constitute the poet's effort to bring the origin myth and common knowledge about birth together. The people's emergence from under the earth is assimilated to a newborn's emergence from its mother's womb, birth being the common denominator.

The poem's success in reconstructing the myth and making it intelligible to a wide readership resides in her use of the first person plural; the repetition of "we" and "our" convinces the reader that the emergence process is lived experience. The poetic self identifies with the Hopi community, while referring to the importance of the "song", her own marker as an artist whose life is intrinsically connected to song-writing / poetry-making. Actually, the poet communicates with the other world, the world of the spirit, the world of the dead, via the "sipapu", which is central to Hopi mythology: "The Hopi entered this world at its middle, through Sipapu …, which is said to be at the bottom of the Grand Canyon to the west of the Hopi villages. It is there that the dead travel to find their way to the world, the "house," below. Sipapu is represented, symbolically, by a covered hole in the floor of the kiva" (Hieb 578-9).

Evidence of the communication mentioned above appears elsewhere in Rose's work since the poet feels that she is a channel that speaks with the voice of her ancestors, uttering their history and pain. In the poem entitled "To Some Few Hopi Ancestors", the self emerges as an (un)willing continuator of ancestral struggle:

> You have engraved yourself
> with holy signs, encased yourself
> in pumice, hammered on my bones
> till you could no longer hear
> the howl of the missions
> slipping screams through your silence,
> dropping dreams from your wings
> Is this why
> you made me
> sing and weep
> for you? (Rose, *Bone Dance* 16)

The poem reveals the principle of interconnectedness that informs the Hopi world view, according to which "the living and the dead, patterns of subsistence, various rhythms of nature – are all systematically interrelated through an elaborate system of reciprocities" (Hieb 580). Even if alive, the speaker in the poem utters the ancient sorrow of the dead; even if living in the profane world of today, the speaker retrieves the sacred, "the holy signs" of old; even if insecure of her immediate purpose in life, the speaker receives

the higher aim of singing the past confidently. Thus, the interrelatedness of all opposites is proven.

While working within the framework of tribal myths and beliefs that are translated in the terms of the mainstream, Rose does not lose sight of the erroneous modes in which the dominant culture relates to indigenous people. Throughout her work, the writer, who was educated as an anthropologist, takes a stand against racist and sexist stereotypes imposed upon Native women. In the chapbook entitled *Academic Squaw. Reports to the World from the Ivory Tower* there are many examples of Rose's position of resistance to the colonization of her spirit. A fierce criticism of the archeological and anthropological methods employed all across America for the study of tribal territories and communities is best expressed in the ending of "Academic Squaw":

> Here I am being trained
> as the bones and clay bowls
> are left open and
> drained. Grandmother,
> we've been framed. (*Academic Squaw*, 12)

The irreverent way in which burial grounds are approached is exposed in lines of bitter revolt and exasperation. Ancestral ceremonial objects with sacred value and more importantly, human remains, are treated as mere items to be studied, exploited, and so they are desecrated. With the consciousness of a subject who feels akin to the people buried on tribal land, the speaker in the poem addresses the paradoxical situation she is in: hoping to obtain knowledge in the academia, she embarks upon a scientific career, but somewhere along the way, she realizes that the entire system is flawed and set to destroy ancient values, hence the sensation of being "framed", or else betrayed and manipulated. Thus the self-portrait encapsulated in the phrase "academic squaw" renders the conflictual nature of her endeavors: in attempting to deconstruct the offensive image of the "squaw" assigned to American Indian women by entering the academia, she discovers that the very scientific domain to which she aspires is detrimental to tribal cultures. Rose herself once commented upon her use of the words in her poem's title: "the term 'squaw' is used in a purely ironic sense. That was really an important thing for two reasons. One is because 'squaw' is an offensive term, regardless of its origin. It is now and has been for many, many years an offensive term much like 'nigger' or 'spic' and has been degrading not only in a racist way but in sexual ways as well" (Bruchac 259). So the only solution left for a Native anthropologist is to work against the problematic methods of anthropology from within the field.

As their texts chosen for discussion show, the two authors are insiders to millennial Southwestern cultures (Laguna Pueblo and Hopi), which have preserved their stories, songs, beliefs, ceremonies, worldview. Tuning to mainstream America whose codes they have also mastered, Paula Gunn Allen (1939-2008) and Wendy Rose (b. 1948) often choose to turn their poetic works into either translations of ancient American Indian myths into terms understandable to the dominant culture or translations of mainstream myths from American Indian points of view, thus furthering cultural exchange and intercommunication.

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