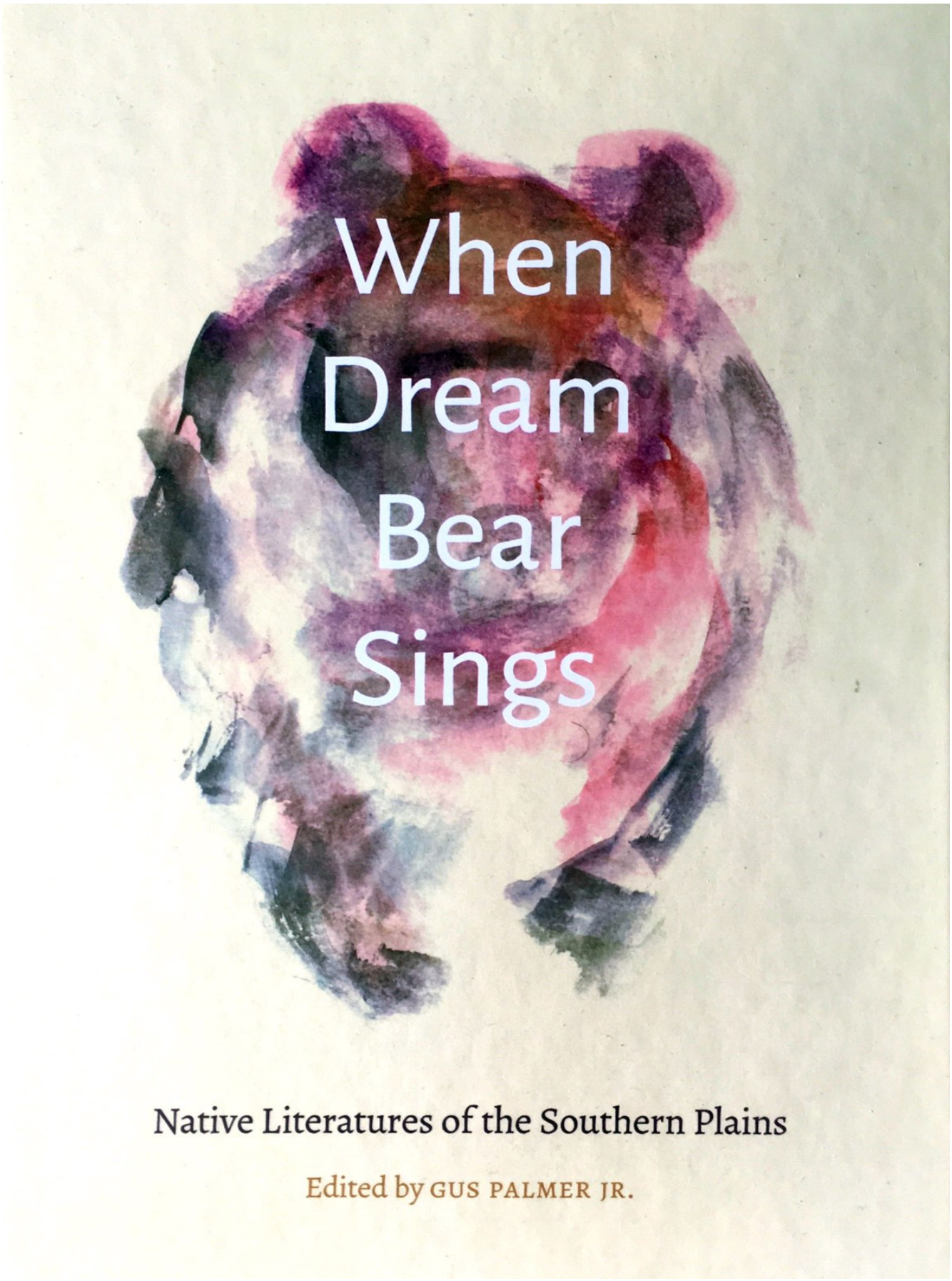
When
Dream
Bear
Sings
Native Literatures of the Southern Plains
Edited by GUS PALMER JR.

BOOK REVIEW

When Dream Bear Sings, Native Literature of the Southern Plains

Edited by Gus Palmer

University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln
Copyright: 2018
Pages: 358
ISBN: 9780803284005 (Hardcover)
ISBN: 9781496208668 (pdf)

By Bertha Miller

The "oral literature" of Algonquian language family speakers has been hidden behind faulty European translations for more than a century. Algonquian nations located in North Central-Eastern North America speaking peoples, (including Gros Ventre, Menominee, Lenape, Mohican, Caddo, Maliseet, Ojibwe, Waskirini, Cheyenne, and Wampanoag among at least thirty-five different nations) make up the largest collection of peoples in North America speaking the Algonquian-based language. Early English speaking interpreters such as Christian missionaries, government agents, military personnel and scholars beginning in the middle 1700s made their attempts at translating what they thought they heard—attempting verbatim translations of sounds and placing their results in text form. The result was that their efforts produced essentially nonsensical renderings of oral presentations—reading like Pidgin English—missing much of the nuance and content. Long before English translation attempts by missionaries, military representatives and European scholars it had fallen to native Algonquian speakers who learned English, French and Dutch to serve as the mediators between the growing number of Europeans and the nations they met at the edge of forests for negotiation of treaties and for trade since early as 1609. It was common for people from the various nations to speak many different languages and dialects, thus affording effective communications between nations. While the speakers from such nations as the Lenape, Wampanoag, Waskarini, and the Mohican who had acquired knowledge of the Dutch, French and English languages well understood that meaning of their own language and they worked to render those meanings into the European languages. Their European counterparts needed to rely on the speakers from these and other nations to comprehend what would be their lifesaving exchanges—supporting trade and minimizing conflicts.

An important element in the translations from Lenape or Waskarini or other nation's language to English or French or Dutch is the "theatre" or ceremonial accompaniments to the speeches. Facial

expressions, hand and body gestures, and ceremonial gifting of wampum belts after each "stanza" of speech are all part of the speech to be translated. When the speech is conveyed in this manner, the "theatre" or associated expressions are part of the information to be conveyed.

Clearly both the nations of Algonquian language speakers possessed an "oral literature" that expressed deep and often profound meaning when one takes into consideration the physical, movement and sound (tonal) elements of speeches. These elements are even more important to the presentation of tales—of stories—given for entertainment, information or instruction. In Gus Palmer's "When Dream Bear Sings" one is swept into a new realm touching on the borders of story and instruction tales reading from the collection of thirty-five stories, fables, instructions and guidance narratives.

The Cheyenne story of the "The Bear and the Coyote" translated by Joyce Twins describes what can happen when two strong competitors meet on a path and seek to dominate the other. And, when they are confronted by a skunk in the midst of their argument over who should control the path they are faced with the formidable stink of the skunk backing up to both of them. The skunk claims the path and the bear and coyote are forced to abandon their argument and run away. There is a lesson in this story about unforeseen powers that render an argument irrelevant.

A history lesson is given by the Cheyenne storyteller Birdie Burns with the title "Birdie's Grandmother's Story of How Corn and Buffalo Were given to the Cheyennes" explaining how in a time of food shortage the Cheyenne came to have corn and buffalo. There is a controversy between two boys—one whose name was the same sound that the wind makes when it blows through the corn stocks and the other whose name was Tassel—having been informed by their dreams to dress in a manner that turns out to be exactly the same—clothes, paint, etc. They are told in their separate dreams, "My grandmother who lives in that mountain" they must go to the mountain and enter the mountain through an opening behind a water fall. Their friends and family watch the two boys enter the mountain and they express concern whether they would "come out alive." The people who watched them go into the mountain waited, and waited all through the day until the "sun was going pretty low." The people had been starving for a long time without buffalo meat for years.

The two boys had been instructed by grandmother about corn and then about buffalo—giving them large wooden bowls of cut meat and corn they could carry out of the mountain. When they did they found that the buffalo meat that had been carefully cut into small pieces "with lots of fat" and the ears of corn that had been roasted were plentiful for all the people to eat. This event led to the restoration of the buffalo herd and the introduction of corn for the people to eat and prosper. Grandmother was the source and the power that made all this possible through dreams given to the two boys. It was the grandmother giver of life that made it possible for the Cheyenne to survive.

Lillie Hoag Whitehorn, a Lenape/Caddo woman living in Anadarko, Oklahoma in 1977 tells the story of how the "Woman Dance" began in "The Lenape Story of the Origin of the Woman Dance." It is a dramatic story of kinship, the power of women and life and death; and the power of Spirit Medicine. The

story affirms the necessity of following instructions closely to avoid a calamity and to bring into being a dance that empowers the women.

Many of the stories are about tricksters who outsmart their opponents lending themselves as instructions for ensuring survival and prosperity in the face of opponents who may be stronger or advantaged in some way. The narrator of "Coyote and Rock Monster, Alonzo Chalepah Senior tells about the Apache or the Ghad-dindé (as they call themselves) whose name translates to "Cedar People." The Apache use a more familiar reference to themselves as Na'isha that literally translates to "thieves" … or more accurately "tricksters." Coyote, as a consequence, plays a major role in many Apache stories reflecting on the needed smart tactics to achieve successes. "Coyote and the Rock Monster" is one example offered in this anthology that dramatically poses the trickster against a formidable foe.

Many stories tell about how people obtain special powers and the importance of holding the knowledge of those powers in secret as Dollie Moore of the Pitahawirata Pawnee describes in her story "The Old Woman and Her Grandson Blessed by a Voice." Such "lesson stories" instruct young ones and remind older ones about the appropriate behaviors in social relations. The translator in Palmer's anthology gives great attention to details such that Moore's story powerfully delivers instructions to listeners.

Storytellers employ stylistic variations in the rendering of their tales giving personal touches that can only be identified with the storyteller. Capturing these stylistic differences can be a complex challenge that translators have to consciously recognize. Failure to do so can undermine the meaning and drama contained in the narrative. What is clear from Palmer's collection of stories—carefully translated from the original languages of the storytellers—is that the rich and powerful oral literature revealed by the narrators and storytellers brings to life a world that continues to exist despite the many efforts to make the world of Algonquian nations disappear. The lessons, instructions, entertaining and historical tales are profoundly human and deeply informative about the cultural reality that stems from thousands of years of living in what is now called North America.

The reality of the world of Lenape, Waskarini, Shawnee, Caddo and many other nations is not only embedded in the Algonquian languages, but in the people who remember the oral literature that is now, thanks to people like Lillie Hoag Whitehorn, Dollie Moore and the other contributors to Gus Palmer's anthology revealed in this valuable collection of translated works.

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"Bertha Miller is a Wenatchee with a degree in Anthropology."

This Article may be cited as:

Miller, B.,. (2019) Book Review: When Dream Bear Sings, Native Literature of the Southern Plains. *Fourth World Journal*. Vol 17, N 2. pp. 106-109.