

# Folk Communities in Translation: Salvage Primitivism and Edward Sapir's French-Canadian Folk Songs

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This essay zooms in on a less known aspect of major Boasian anthropologist Edward Sapir's work: His publication of French-Canadian folk songs in the July 1920 issue of *Poetry*, one of the flagship little magazines where modernist poetry flourished. A review of *Poetry* issues of the first three decades of the twentieth century shows that the magazine's inclusion of these songs is by no means an exception: The magazine's editors display a sustained interest in the cultural productions of "folk" communities, from lyrical imitations of Native American songs and prayers in the magazine's "aboriginal issue" of February 1917 to Cowboy songs and translations of New Mexican folk songs in the August 1920 issue. Sapir's translations of Québécois folk songs for *Poetry* and for *Folk Songs of French Canada* (1925), a volume he co-authored with Marius Barbeau, testify to what we call "salvage primitivism," the convergence of modernist primitivism and salvage ethnography's urge to preserve for posterity cultures deemed on the verge of extinction. A careful analysis of Sapir's theory and practice of translation reveals that his related publications of folk songs in *Poetry* and *Folk Songs of French Canada* deliver on the prospect of salvage to differing extents and with diverging results.

When poets and literary scholars think of *Poetry* magazine, they think first and foremost of its pivotal role in the modernist revolution. At Ezra Pound's urging, T. S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock"

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was published there; as were Pound's own "In a Station of the Metro" and many of his cantos. *Poetry* also published a great number of additional poems that have become fixtures in the modernist canon, among them H. D.'s "The Pool," "Hymen," and "Halcyon"; Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" and "Sunday Morning"; William Carlos Williams's "The Shadow"; Amy Lowell's "The Day that Was that Day!"; and Robert Frost's "Snow."<sup>1</sup> Much of this work was iconoclastic in form and some of it daring in content, prompting angry reactions among the magazine's readers, to which its editor Harriet Monroe responded with comments that bore titles such as "The Enemies We Have Made" (May 1914) and "A Word to the Carping Critic" (November 1917). Yet browsing the magazine's early-twentieth-century issues, now freely available in its complete online archive, one is struck by their inclusion of a wide variety of poetic forms, only some of which can justly be called experimental in a modernist vein. In this essay we focus on another surprise that the early issues of *Poetry* magazine hold in store: their generous inclusion of what was variously called "folk-songs" or "folk-poetry" then. The two surprises are related as the modernist search for new forms often takes a detour through supposedly simpler modes of expression. In the well-documented phenomenon of modernist primitivism – from Gauguin's Tahiti paintings to T. S. Eliot's essay "War-Paint and Feathers" – this engagement is driven by a desire to rejuvenate one's own, Western art and culture through an engagement with artifacts and cultural practices that are perceived as fresher, more authentic, and less corrupted by processes of civilization and modernization.<sup>2</sup> This essay probes what we call "salvage primitivism": the convergence of modernist primitivism and salvage ethnography's urge to

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<sup>2</sup> Frances S. Connelly aptly captures primitivism's double temporal trajectory when she notes its "urge toward deliberate regression combined with an even more compelling desire for rejuvenation" (35). For good accounts of modernist primitivism, see Flam and Deutch; Torgovnick; Gess; and Lemke.

preserve for posterity cultures deemed on the verge of extinction.<sup>3</sup> With its well-known role in the promotion of modernist poetry and its less-explored interest in ethnographic materials, *Poetry* magazine proves a particularly rewarding test case for our exploration of this convergence. In what follows, we first zoom in on major Boasian anthropologist Edward Sapir's contributions to the magazine and then examine this body of work in the context of its author's own theoretical writing on literary translation,<sup>4</sup> in order to provide, finally, a comprehensive assessment of Sapir as a "salvage primitivist." One of our main findings is that, judged by Sapir's own theory of translation, his renditions of Québécois folk songs in the July 1920 issue of *Poetry* and in his and Marius Barbeau's *Folk Songs of French Canada* (1925) deliver on the promise of salvage to differing extents and with diverging effects.

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<sup>3</sup> In Jacob W. Gruber's words in the 1970 essay that introduced the concept of "salvage ethnography": "Though the idea of the corrupting influences of civilization was not a new one – it is, in fact, a continuing theme in Western culture – the idea that such alterations were the necessary price of an indefinite progress was a particular product of nineteenth-century optimism. In the face of the inevitable and necessary changes, in the face of an almost infinite variety of man whose details were essential to a definition of man, the obligation of both scientist and humanist was clear: he must collect and preserve the information and the products of human activity and genius so rapidly being destroyed" (1293). Gruber identifies British anthropologist James Cowles Prichard's alarmist 1839 intervention before the British Association for the Advancement of Science as a foundational moment in this specific branch of ethnographic thought and practice and traces its translation into Boasian anthropology. For a classic critique of salvage anthropology, see James Clifford's "On Ethnographic Allegory," his contribution to his and Marcus's *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. For a more recent, media-conscious account, see Brian Hochman's *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology*.

<sup>4</sup> During the 1920s and 1930s, Sapir was also a regular contributor of critical essays to little magazines. While our focus here lies with his chapter "Language and Literature" from *Language* (1921) and the monograph *Folk Songs of French Canada* (Barbeau and Sapir 1925), Sapir's writings on literature and music offer further vantage points through which his renditions of folk songs can be profitably approached. Sapir's article "Percy Grainger and Primitive Music" (1916), for instance, discusses the views of composer Percy Grainger regarding the merit of the study of folklore music. "The Twilight of Rhyme" (1917), "The Heuristic Value of Rhyme" (1920), and "The Musical Foundations of Verse" (1921), to name just a few other examples, form by contrast an intervention in modernist debates over the value of free verse. Siding with Amy Lowell, Sapir conceives in "The Musical Foundations of Verse" of a form of verse whose rhythm is not defined by patterns of rhyme but by the regular time intervals that characterize classical music. Tellingly, he uses his poem "To Debussy: 'La Cathédrale Engloutie'" to illustrate this concept of modern poetry ("Musical Foundations" 937-38), whereas the folklore translations that he published in *Poetry* and *Folk Songs of French Canada* employ regular rhyme patterns.

*Poetry*'s July 1920 issue begins with a brief introductory poem by Sapir titled "French-Canadian Folk-Songs." The poem is followed by Sapir's translations into English of four of the eponymous songs: "The Prince of Orange," "The King of Spain's Daughter and the Diver," "White as the Snow," and "The Dumb Shepherdess."<sup>5</sup> Immediately following Sapir's translations of Québécois songs, we find another translation, the poet and literary scholar Albert Edmund Trombly's rendition of "Three Children" from "the Old French." Later in the same issue, at the end of its poetry selection, we encounter Sapir's three-page "Note on French-Canadian Folk-Songs." Why this conspicuous presence of "folk songs" in an issue of one of the little magazines where U.S. modernism began? One might think that its editor's decision to publish Sapir's songs is an oddity in one of the major vehicles for experimental modernist poetry. But this is not so, for at least three reasons.

First, the editorial staff of *Poetry* awarded Sapir an honorable mention for this work ("Announcement" 109), thus granting his songs a special status as particularly representative of one kind of literature that the magazine seeks to promote. Further, far from being a rare guest of honor, Sapir contributed regularly to *Poetry*. Between 1919 and 1931, he published no less than twenty-three of his own poems in its pages, sometimes single ones, sometimes groups of poems under headings such as "Foam-Waves" (January 1926) and "Feathered Songs" (July 1927). These twenty-three poems represent only a small selection of Sapir's literary work: During his lifetime, and in parallel to his prolific career as a major voice in U.S. linguistics and cultural anthropology, he produced a substantial oeuvre of over 500 published and unpublished poems. In fact, Sapir was not the only early-twentieth-century anthropologist to write verse. Often under her pen name Anne Singleton, Ruth Fulton Benedict also wrote over 130 poems, thirteen of which were published in *Poetry* in its 1928 and 1930 issues. Margaret Mead, probably

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<sup>5</sup> In his "Note on French-Canadian Folk-Songs," Sapir defers to his collaborator Marius Barbeau's judgment as he classifies these four songs: "*The Dumb Shepherdess* is a religious *complainte*, and is known in the lower St. Lawrence region, both north and south shores. *The King of Spain's Daughter* is a work ballad, especially used as a paddling song, and is based on versions from Temiscouata and Gaspé counties. *The Prince of Orange* is another paddling song, collected at Tadousac, one of the oldest French settlements in Canada, on the lower St. Lawrence. *White as the Snow* is a good example of the genuine ballad; it is one of the best known folk-songs of Quebec, having been recorded in no less than twelve versions" (212-13).



the best-known Boasian anthropologist, wrote over 220 poems, though most of them remain unpublished.<sup>6</sup>

We already hinted at the third reason why the inclusion of Sapir's French-Canadian folk songs in the July 1920 issue of *Poetry* is less of an oddity than may appear at first sight. The magazine's early publication history testifies to a sustained interest in making available the cultural productions of communities then commonly referred to as "folk."<sup>7</sup> Most famously, the magazine's so-called "aboriginal issue" of February 1917 contains lyrical imitations of Native American songs and prayers by four North American poets: Frank S. Gordon, Alice Corbin Henderson, Mary Austin, and Constance Lindsay Skinner. In her editorial comment, Harriet Monroe notes that this work is "[v]ivid [. . .] in its suggestion of racial feeling and rhythm," adding on a more sombre note that

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<sup>6</sup> Previous research has mostly neglected this large corpus of poetry written by three of the most influential twentieth-century American anthropologists, with the exception of the intentionalist, author-centered readings put forward by biographers (Banner; Bateson; Caffrey; Darnell; Howard; Lapsley; Mead; Modell). While the latter tend to reduce the poems to an outlet of personal expression and conduit for private thoughts, Richard Handler's and A. Elisabeth Reichel's articles on Sapir and Philipp Schweighauser's and Karin Roffman's writings on Benedict offer analyses which consider the diverse academic and artistic contexts in which this corpus is enmeshed.

<sup>7</sup> Handler notes that the notion of the "folk society" has been "seductive" to European and North American thinkers "since the eighteenth century at least," featuring prominently, for instance, in nineteenth-century sociological theory and such dichotomies as Marx's antithesis between town and country, Maine's status and contract, Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity (*Nationalism* 63). In the context of ethnographic studies of French Canada, Horace Miner was the first to systematically apply the concept, in the specific sense that Robert Redfield had defined it (*Nationalism* 63-65). The debate among Canadian scholars on the utility of this model followed with a delay of two decades, as part of a current of historical revisionism after World War II. The controversy is a prime example, Handler argues, of "how well sociological models of the folk society match nationalistic visions of a rural Quebec out of which the nation has been born" (*Nationalism* 66). See also Handler, "In Search of the Folk Society."

For a critical analysis of the emergence of "folk" discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which pays particular attention to the categories of folk song and folk music, see Gelbart. Filene starts from its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century origins to make sense of twentieth-century folk music revivalism.

While different in scope and focus, we share with these and many other recent scholars a sensitivity to the politically charged and highly problematic history of categories qualified by the term "folk." To be sure, social constructions marked as "folk" have always been discursively aligned with "the 'savages'" and "'primitives'" to some extent to serve as "foils to modern civilized Europeans" (Gelbart 12).

the danger is that the tribes, in the process of so-called civilization, will lose all trace of it; that their beautiful primitive poetry will perish among the ruins of obliterated states. [ . . . ] The phonograph is a valuable aid to these modern investigators. (Monroe, Sandburg, and Corbin 251-53)

In his editorial comment, Carl Sandburg jokingly suggests that “[s]uspicion arises definitely that the Red and his children committed direct plagiarism on the modern imagists and vorticists” (255).

Further examples abound. In the November 1918 issue, Alice Corbin Henderson, one of *Poetry*'s two associate editors and a contributor to its “aboriginal issue,” reviews *The Path on the Rainbow*, an anthology of Native American songs and chants edited by George W. Cronyn. Corbin, who would publish an anthology of indigenous New Mexican poetry herself in the following year and publish selections of these in the August 1920 issue of *Poetry*, applauds the volume's preservation of “authentic Indian poems,” noting that the study of Native American poetry requires more than the ethnographer's scientific expertise: “it has remained, and still remains, for the artist and poet to interpret adequately many phases of Indian expression” (Corbin, “Review” 41). Having dismissed talk about “the vanishing race” – the very talk that Monroe engages in in her editorial note on the “aboriginal issue” – and having expressed her dislike of the “far-distant-sounding word ‘aboriginal,’” Corbin turns Sandburg's joking comparison between Native American and modernist poetry into an utterly serious statement: “Stephen Crane would have qualified as an Indian poet, and in the *Mid-American Chants* of Sherwood Anderson,” which were also published in *Poetry*, “one finds almost precisely the mood of the songs accompanying the green corn dances of the pueblo Indians” (42). Like Monroe, Corbin is after authenticity, too: She notes the songs' “pristine freshness” (45) and judges them to be “the most consummate, primal art” (46).

As a final example of *Poetry* editors' predilection for “folk cultures,” consider the issue immediately following the July 1920 issue that published Sapir's French-Canadian folk songs. Here we find Cowboy songs, dialect poems of the Western U.S., and Corbin's translations of New Mexican folk songs. In her essay on these songs and poems entitled “The Folk Poetry of these States,” Corbin distinguishes between two types of folk poetry: first, the “instinctive,” “unconscious,” “naive,” “primitive,” and “unsophisticated” productions of the people themselves; second, the reworking of this material by more refined minds, e.g., James Russell Lowell, John Hay, Bret Harte, Joel Chandler Harris, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Vachel Lindsay. Corbin identifies several

types of American folk poetry of non-European stock, among them “the Negro dialect poems of Thomas Nelson Page or Joel Chandler Harris,” which refine the songs and spirituals of “the primitive negro poet” (Corbin, “Folk Poetry” 266); the “primitive poetry of the American Indian” (267); and the “Spanish folk-songs of the Southwest” (269) that Corbin herself is particularly interested in.<sup>8</sup>

What unites all of these folklore contributions to *Poetry* magazine is first and foremost a sustained interest in the cultural productions of folk communities that are imagined to be more primal, more pristine, and more authentic. In this sense, Sapir’s folk songs do fit very well into one of the flagship magazines of the modernist movement, since they tie in perfectly with modernist primitivism in its various guises (from Tristan Tzara’s “Negro Songs” to Picasso’s tribal masks in *Les Femmes d’Alger*). What becomes clearer here than elsewhere is how closely aligned modernist primitivism is with salvage ethnography’s desire to preserve the customs and artifacts of communities that are assumed to vanish in the face of inexorable progress.

Moreover, in particular Corbin’s contributions highlight the extent to which salvage primitivism is a nationalist project. While *Poetry* did publish a number of folk songs from outside of North America – the “Old Folk Songs of Ukraina” in the April 1919 issue are an example – it focused mainly on native songs, claiming them as part of an American national heritage. In Corbin’s words,

The soil has to be turned over; we have to examine our roots to know what they are. [ . . . ] [S]tudents of folk-songs have placed a greater emphasis on the survivals of traditional English ballads in our remote mountain regions than on the more truly native and indigenous material that is all around us, which has been overlooked simply because of its more obvious familiarity and its lack of literary ancestry. (“Folk Songs” 269-70)

For students of American culture, this patriotic enlistment of domestic ethnic and minority communities rings familiar, from the personification of America as a half-naked Native American woman in the famous anti-British cartoon “The able doctor, or, America swallowing the bitter draught” (1774) to the nationalist origins of transnationalism in Randolph Bourne, for whom internal diversity is a sign of external strength, and beyond.

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<sup>8</sup> Corbin’s words of praise are especially troublesome in regard to Page, the most prominent representative of the Southern plantation romance.

While Sapir's contribution to the study of folklore aligns him less readily with such nationalist projects, the career trajectory of his Canadian collaborator Marius Barbeau, with whom he co-authored *Folk Songs of French Canada* (1925), testifies to the nationalist underpinnings of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century folklore vogue in which salvage primitivists were caught up. An immensely prolific researcher and popularizer of French-Canadian folk traditions, Barbeau is widely considered the founder of folklore studies in Canada.<sup>9</sup> As Richard Handler has compellingly shown in *Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec*, the movement of folklorists that Barbeau spearheaded was rooted in an idealized vision of French Canada as an isolated, rural folk society, which was taken to be the authentic essence out of which the present nation had been born (63-75). This romantic nationalist conception of Quebec is apparent in Barbeau's journalistic piece "The Fisher-Folk of Northern Gaspé," which was published in the *Quebec Daily Telegraph* in 1923. It opens with these words:

Isolated and forsaken as they are, on lonely shores, between the boundless waters of the St. Lawrence and the wild *Chicaboc* mountains, the fisher-folk of Northern Gaspé need not be pitied by their sympathetic visitors. [. . .] [T]heir simple life, reminiscent of the past and in close association with nature, brings them many compensations. They suffer less than we do from the evils that sprang out of Pandora's box. And if, as in the ancient tale, a King were again to send his heirs in search of happiness, the lucky third son would find it in a humble Gaspesian loghouse, sheltered far from the hustling crowds, while his elders might fail to detect it in the palaces of the rich and mighty. (2)

Barbeau goes on to interlace snippets of Sapir's translations of French-Canadian songs to illustrate the "delight on returning to the realm of nature," "from the summits [. . .] to the starting point of all human endeavors and creations" (2). Sapir's translation of the song "Three Poisoned Roses," for instance, appears as an "irresponsibly genial" "little ballad," which "quickened notions of courtly glory and frivolity in naïve imaginations" (3).

Despite obvious differences in genre and medium of publication, Sapir's introductory poem in the July 1920 edition of *Poetry* magazine

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<sup>9</sup> For his significance to both Canadian anthropology and a popular appreciation of French-Canadian folklore, see especially the publications of Barbeau scholar Andrew Nurse. Nurse claims that "Barbeau was arguably the most prominent anthropologist in Canadian History" ("But Now" 436) and "may certainly have been the best known" ("But Now" 466 n11).



strikes a very similar tone. In “French-Canadian Folk-Songs,” Sapir notes that the songs he wishes to make heard come from “the past” (l. 1) and calls them “little flowers” (l. 8) that have “tiny roots” (l. 3) and sing a “tiny song” (l. 5), thus indicating their fragility. To the attentive listener, though, these songs offer something precious: “We shall weave him a tiny wreath / For the strange today” (l. 16-17). The meaning of these two final lines of the poem is ambiguous. In the most straightforward reading, “strange” is the adjectival modifier of “today,” suggesting that “today,” that is, present, modern life, is “strange.” This reading is the most probable one because it easily fits the first two lines of the poem’s second stanza, “We are weaving tiny roots / In the strange today” (l. 6-7). In another reading of the poem’s final line, however, “today” refers to the moment at which the songs impact the listener and “the strange” are the recipients of the songs’ gift. A third reading finds that, in singing, the songs weave a “tiny wreath” (l. 16) dedicated to their own strange selves that is then offered to an other. In that case the songs *themselves*, or the community they sing from, are “strange.” In all three readings, the poem highlights the distance between the listener and the songs and attributes redemptive power to those songs. Only by turning “[f]rom the highway” (l. 15), the poem’s spatial metaphor for modernity, can the songs be heard. These “tiny song[s]” (l. 5), these “little flowers” (l. 8), then, either promise to redeem the strangeness of the present or they themselves offer the gift of strangeness. Salvage ethnography’s moral imperative – pithily summarized by Gruber as “the savage is disappearing; preserve what you can; posterity will hold you accountable” (1295) – once more meets modernist primitivism’s desire for enstrangement and rejuvenation.

Interestingly though, Sapir’s companion essay “Note on French-Canadian Folk-Songs” strikes a notably different chord. While it does begin with an assertion of the pristine quality of Québécois culture, which is said to preserve pre-modern French culture because it is unaffected by “[t]he great current of modern civilization” (211), there is no alarmist warning against its impending disappearance. Neither does Sapir wax lyrical about its authenticity. Instead, he acknowledges the extensive research on French-Canadian folk culture done by Barbeau, whom he calls “incomparably its greatest authority” (211). Sapir also comments on how the original folk songs were recorded by phonograph and writing, where the songs were collected, what types of songs there are, and which of these types his selections for *Poetry* magazine belong to. The essay ends with a brief general discussion of some issues of translation that we will return to below. In this “Note,” then, Sapir

wears three different masks: first, that of the poet who can appreciate the quality of these folk songs; second, that of the translator who opts for a literal rather than a lyrical rendition of his material; and third, that of the anthropologist who studies a folk community's artifacts and practices. But Sapir's anthropologist and translator personae are clearly foregrounded here.

That this is so becomes even clearer when we compare Sapir's "Note" to his and Barbeau's joint book *Folk Songs of French Canada*, a collection of French-Canadian folk songs that includes the four translations that Sapir published in *Poetry* plus 37 additional ones. The tone of this volume is markedly different from that of Sapir's note in *Poetry* magazine. In their introduction to the volume as a whole and their brief explanatory notes before each song, Barbeau and Sapir tap deep into nostalgic discourses about the impending disappearance of a primal, authentic culture under the pressures of modern civilization. "Folk songs were once part of the everyday life of French America" (xiii). On this regretful note begins their introduction. The volume ends with an assertion of the songs' vibrant pastness that is reminiscent of Barbeau's "The Fisher-Folk of Northern Gaspé":

[t]he best claim to recognition of the French folk songs of America undoubtedly rests in their comparative antiquity. Sheltered in woodland recesses, far from the political commotions of the Old World, they have preserved much of their sparkling, archaic flavor. (Barbeau and Sapir xxii)

In Barbeau and Sapir's understanding, these songs are understood as an antidote to a modernity that is painted as equally spiritless and desiccated as Eliot's in *The Waste Land*. Here is how this sounds in the introductory note before "The King of Spain's Daughter":

In the leisurely days of old, folk songs and tales provided a favorite entertainment for all, high or low, on land and on the sea, under the open sky and by the fireside in the long winter evenings. [. . .] Ever since man was banned from Eden, work has remained a punishment, a dire law to the many. And the penalty for the sin of Adam has not grown lighter with the lapse of millennia. In a past epoch work was only an incident in life and starvation a too-often recurring accident. Work was the mere provider of necessities, by no means banishing enjoyment out of life, yet, slight as it might be, it was made more attractive by a spontaneous concentration, an artistic refinement unfamiliar to the present generation. Work songs of all kinds sustained the rhythm of the hand in toil, while the mind escaped on the wing of fancy to the enchanted realm of wonderland. Now that labor is sullen under its crushing, mechanical burden, now that profit and luxury

have become the very essence of human endeavor, an ominous silence has invaded the workshop. (Barbeau and Sapir 100)

Passages such as this one abound; they are suffused with a profound sense of nostalgia that is spatial as well as temporal and in this instance even assumes Biblical proportions, taking, in the final sentences quoted here, the form of a jeremiad or, indeed, that of a Marxist account of alienation.

In marked contrast, in his “Note on French-Canadian Folk-Songs” in the July 1920 issue of *Poetry*, Sapir projects the persona of the distanced, objective observer. Why does this poet-anthropologist adopt this particular stance in an essay for one of his era’s major poetry magazines? The answer, we believe, is this: There is no need for Sapir to extol the beauty and authenticity of folk songs here because, for early-twentieth-century readers of *Poetry* magazine, this goes without saying. Others’ interpretations and translations of folk songs, others’ essays on folk songs, and others’ reviews of collections of folk songs provide the framework within which the cultural value of this material is self-evident. Thus, Sapir can adopt the stance of scientific observer to confirm the authenticity of these songs without having to indulge in the same pathos. Sapir’s contributions to the July 1920 issue of *Poetry* magazine are thus firmly embedded in the nexus between salvage ethnography and modernist primitivism without wearing that affiliation on their sleeves.

Yet to determine with precision Sapir’s place in the discourse of salvage primitivism, we need to consider more closely the question of translation. Importantly, Sapir stands out among Boas’s students as the anthropologist who continued his teacher’s strong early interest in linguistics while this interest became less pronounced in Boas’s later research. Thus, apart from his contributions to the emergence of a cultural pluralist and relativist paradigm in anthropology, Sapir is known today primarily for his accomplishments in linguistics, most famously as a pioneer of linguistic relativity and teacher of Benjamin Lee Whorf. In fact, the one full-length book that Sapir wrote in the course of his career is an introduction to the study of language. *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* was first published in 1921 and is today considered a classic in the history of modern linguistics, foundational of its American structuralist school. The final chapter, “Language and Literature,” manifests most strikingly Sapir’s abiding concern for literature. Yet rather than offering a discussion of the relation between language and literature, as its title suggests, the chapter starts by cutting short this very

question: “When the expression is of unusual significance, we call it literature” (236), Sapir declares laconically. After all, the book is called *Language*, not *Literature*. Anticipating objections to his shorthand, however, he adds a footnote:

I can hardly stop to define just what kind of expression is “significant” enough to be called art or literature. Besides, I do not exactly know. We shall have to take literature for granted. (236 n.1)

With the tedious business of literariness out of the way, he is free to focus on what he is really concerned with: how to *translate* literature.

Or rather, whether to do so. For Sapir’s first line of reasoning suggests that “a work of literary art can never be translated” (237); every art is limited by its medium, he presumes, maintaining a “resistance of the medium” (236). “Language,” then, “is the medium of literature as marble or bronze or clay are the materials of the sculptor,” and “[s]ince every language has its distinctive peculiarities, the innate formal limitations – and possibilities – of one literature are never quite the same as those of another” (237). Their effects on the art thus “cannot be carried over without loss or modification” (237). Sapir agrees with the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce in his refutation of literary translation in the *Aesthetic* (1909 [1902]).<sup>10</sup> “Nevertheless,” he immediately counters, “literature does get itself translated, sometimes with astonishing adequacy” (237).

To resolve this paradox, Sapir introduces another layer of language, apart from the “specifically linguistic art that is not transferable,” its phonetic, morphological, and syntactic particularities:

This brings up the question whether in the art of literature there are not intertwined two distinct kinds or levels of art – a generalized, non-linguistic art, which can be transferred without loss into an alien linguistic medium, and a specifically linguistic art that is not transferable. I believe the distinction is entirely valid, though we never get the two levels pure in practice. Literature moves in language as a medium, but that medium comprises two layers, the latent content of language – our intuitive record of experience – and the particular conformation of a given language – the specific how of our record of experience. (237-38)

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<sup>10</sup> In this way, Croce reappears in the final chapter of *Language*, after being acknowledged in its preface as “one of the very few who have gained an understanding of the fundamental significance of language. He has pointed out its close relation to the problem of art. I am deeply indebted to him for this insight” (iii).



Thus, the second layer is “an intuitive basis that underlies all linguistic expression” and “is immediately fashioned out of a generalized human experience – thought and feeling – of which his [the artist’s] own individual experience is a highly personalized selection” (239). Again, Sapir refers to Croce, who, in Sapir’s reading of the *Aesthetic*, uses the term “intuition” to denote this level of a generalized human experience in language.

Croce’s *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic* is notorious for its claim that art is expression but has also attracted much scholarly attention for its conclusion that all artistic expression is language:

Aesthetic and Linguistic [. . .] are not two different sciences, but one single science. [. . .] Whoever studies general Linguistic [. . .] studies aesthetic problems, and *vice versa*. *Philosophy of language and philosophy of art are the same thing.* (234)

It does not surprise, then, that Croce has been resurrected in recent decades as an important precursor of structuralist semiotics and the linguistic turn.<sup>11</sup> It is important to remember, though, that Croce’s *Aesthetic* is grounded in an idealist metaphysics and epistemology. It

is founded upon a view of the creation of meaning as the property of the speaking individual, rather than as the effect of differences within a closed system of signs. [. . .] Rather than Saussure’s argument that meaning is produced by linguistic structure, here it resides in the individual language user. (Burke, Crowley, and Girvin 16)

Croce’s idealist understanding of knowledge as created by the human mind prior to the operations of sensory perception is manifest in his assertion of the “[i]dentity of intuition and expression”: “intuitive knowledge is expressive knowledge, [. . .] intuition [. . .] is distinguished [. . .] from the flux or wave of sensation [. . .], and this form, this taking possession of, is expression. To have an intuition is to express” (18-19). Interestingly, it is precisely this idealism and Croce’s consequent failure to account for the formative role of tradition that Sapir takes issue with in his personal notes:

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, René Wellek’s respective entry in his *History of Modern Criticism, 1750-1950* (“Benedetto Croce”; see also “Joel Elias Spingarn”) and Richard Shusterman’s publications on Croce (“Analytic Aesthetics”; “Deconstruction and Analysis”; “Croce on Interpretation”).

“Expression” is all very well, but what is Croce’s attitude towards the obvious presence of traditional patterns? If art were altogether a matter of individual expression, should there be as close adherence to such traditional forms as we actually find? Either, then, expression is to be defined with reference to social norms, in which case it can hardly be considered as the immediate external correlate of intuition; *or* we must assert that even the most successful expression, the greatest work of art, is theoretically a failure, adulterated by conformity to ready-made types, or at least imperceptibly swayed by powerful analogies. Note that we have precisely the same problem in language. One creates in speaking [. . .], but the material of expression is given by tradition; one is at the mercy of historical limitations. But presumably Croce would grant all that as being implicitly provided for in his idea of “expression.” (“Suggestive Notes” 20-21)

Clearly, Sapir’s two-layered model of language in “Language and Literature” and his acknowledgement of an indebtedness to Croce in his elaborations on both these levels is based on this charitable reading of Croce’s *Aesthetic* as “implicitly provid[ing]” for tradition as “the material of expression,” which is “at the mercy of historical limitations.”

With regard to the question of literary translation, this model entails that “[l]iterature that draws its sustenance mainly – never entirely – from [the] level [of intuition] [. . .] is translatable without too great a loss of character” (Sapir, “Language and Literature” 238). That is, when read against Sapir’s own, first conception of literary translation, we find implicit in the renditions of French-Canadian songs that he published in *Poetry* the assumption that they as well – like the “Whitmans and Brownings” that Sapir cites – partake of an absolute language that is formed out of a universal “human experience” (239).

Yet while going back on the claim that literature is not translatable, Sapir still reserves the highest praise for those that cannot be translated without loss – “the Shakespeares and Heines” in his ranking: literature that presents a “completed synthesis” of the two levels of language, “of the absolute art of intuition and the innate, specialized art of the linguistic medium” (240). Heine, for instance, is able “to fit or trim the deeper intuition to the provincial accents of their daily speech,” so that his audience is left “under the illusion that the universe speaks German. The material ‘disappears’” (240). Despite Sapir’s crabwise recognition that literature is translatable, by evoking an absolute, universal language that connects all human experience, his views firmly rest on a linguistic holism:

Every language is itself a collective art of expression. There is concealed in it a particular set of esthetic factors – phonetic, rhythmic, symbolic, morphological – which it does not completely share with any other language. These factors may either merge their potencies with those of that unknown, absolute language to which I have referred – this is the method of Shakespeare and Heine – or they may weave a private, technical art fabric of their own, the innate art of the language intensified or sublimated. (240)

The latter method is practiced by “the Swinburnes” (240) in Sapir’s classification. It is the holistic conception of language most clearly expressed in this passage that prompts Sapir’s initial dismissal of literary translation and which now reappears as a devaluation of literature that gets itself translated *too easily* and in its entirety – without “resistance of the medium” (236).

Sapir’s holistic conception of language, and of a literary work bound by a specific language as its medium, is also symptomatic of his dual imbrication in modernist aesthetics and anthropological debates, which were connected in Sapir’s time not only through their shared salvage imperative but also through an emerging structuralism. Eric Aronoff’s *Composing Cultures: Modernism, American Literary Studies, and the Problem of Culture* (2013) explores this very convergence, featuring Sapir as a key figure in a network of anthropologists and literary critics who conceived of cultures, literary works, and languages as relative, internally coherent systems of meaning.<sup>12</sup> In “Language and Literature,” this enmeshment of disciplinary affiliations is most explicit in Sapir’s persistent reference to Croce’s aesthetics. Aronoff assumes that Sapir was introduced to Croce’s theory by Joel Spingarn, professor of comparative literature at Columbia University and co-founder of Harcourt, Brace and Company, the publishing house that first printed *Language* (Aronoff 121-22). Spingarn’s reading of Croce is famously captured in his lecture *The New Criticism*, which was delivered at Columbia University on 9 March 1910, and vehemently calls for a new criticism that “clearly recognizes in every work of art an organism governed by its own law” (21).

Sapir’s notion of language as an integrated whole in which “a particular set of esthetic factors” is “concealed” (“Language and Literature” 240) and which creates “the innate formal limitations – and possibilities – of one literature” (237) is further necessary to understand his “pedantic literalness” as a translator, to which he admits in the “Note” on his

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<sup>12</sup> Marc Manganaro has also noted this connection between modernist aesthetics and criticism and early-twentieth-century conceptions of culture in his study *Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept* (2002). Aronoff acknowledges his great debt to Manganaro.

French-Canadian songs (213). His pedantry notwithstanding, two aspects of the French originals were not carried over into his English translations: First, “[n]ot all the originals [. . .] make use of strict rhymes; assonances are often used instead” (213). Second, the songs “can hardly be adequately understood or appreciated” without the music (211), which for him forms an integral part in the meaning-making process, a part which the renditions in *Poetry* also lack. Thus the latter, while testifying to the songs’ involvement in an absolute, universally human language, fail on at least two grounds to represent the second layer and necessary prerequisite for “the greatest [. . .] literary ar[t]” (“Language and Literature” 240) in Sapir’s conception: the specific, coherent meaning-making system of the native language – what Sapir, in idealist fashion, also frequently calls the linguistic “genius” of a culture (*Language* 33 et passim).

By contrast, *Folk Songs of French Canada*, published five years later, presents the songs both in English translation and in French, as well as together with the music as transcribed by the authors in European musical notation.<sup>13</sup> Note, for example, how in “The Prince of Orange” (“Le Prince d’Orange”; Figure 1), the first song in both this anthology

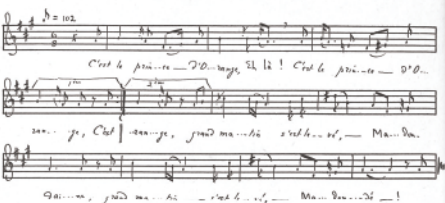
LE PRINCE D'ORANGE	TRANSLATION
 <p>1 C'est le prince d'Orange, Eh là! C'est le prince d'Orange;    grand matin s'est levé, Madonlaine! grand matin s'est levé, Madonlé!</p> <p>2 A-t appelé son page;    "Mon âne est-il bridé?" 3 —"Ah oui, vraiment, beau prince!    Il est bridé, sellé." 4 Mit sa main sur la bride,    le pied dans l'étrier. 5 A parti le dimanche,    le lundi fut blessé. 6 Reçut trois coups de lance    qu'un Anglais 'i a donnés. 7 En a-t un dans la jambe,    et deux dans le côté. 8 Faut aller qu'ri' le prêtre    mais pour le confesser. 9 "Je n'ai que fair' de prêtre:    je n'ai jamais péché! 10 "Jamais n'embrasse' les filles,    h'ors qu'à leur volonté; 11 "Qu'une petit' brunette,    encor j'ai bien payé, 12 "Donné cinq cents liards,    autant de sous marqués."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4</p>	<p>1 'Tis the prince of Orange blood, Eh la! 'Tis the prince of Orange blood, Arose at the sun's flood, Madonlaine! Arose at the sun's flood, Madonlé!</p> <p>2 Called his page and said, "Have they bridled my donkey red?"</p> <p>3 "Yes, my prince, 'tis true, He's bridled and saddled for you."</p> <p>4 To the bridle put his hand, And foot in the stirrup to stand.</p> <p>5 Rode away on Sunday, Was wounded on the Monday.</p> <p>6 Received by greivous chance Three blows of an English lance.</p> <p>7 In's leg the first one sank And two were in his flank.</p> <p>8 Off, while he's yet alive, And bring a priest for to thrive!</p> <p>9 "What need have I of priest? I've never sinned i' the least.</p> <p>10 "The girls I have never kissed, Unless themselves insist.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">5</p>

Figure 1: “Le Prince d’Orange,” in Barbeau and Sapir 4-5.  
Reproduced by kind permission.

<sup>13</sup> To be precise, Barbeau “is responsible [. . .] for the musical transcriptions” (xi).



and the sequence in *Poetry*, the changed arrangement allows the reader to witness the “genius” of the native language: the use of assonances instead of strict rhymes, for instance, which Sapir points out in his “Note” (the assonant “s’est levé” or “Il est bridé, sellé” instead of “blood/flood,” “said/red,” “true/you,” and so forth). This “innate” peculiarity of French-Canadian literary language is lost in translation. In other words, as opposed to his renditions in *Poetry*, the songs presented in *Folk Songs of French Canada* appear as both translatable and untranslatable, as forming an internally coherent, self-contained whole, which may be translated but not without significant loss. In Sapir’s taxonomy, they thus qualify for a place among “the Shakespeares and Heines,” who offer “a completed synthesis of the absolute” and culturally specific art of language (“Language and Literature” 240).

In concluding, let us return to *Poetry* magazine and relate our reading of Sapir’s French-Canadian songs against his own theory of literary translation back to the pervasive salvage imperative that we explore in the first half of the essay. To this we have added that, from the perspective of Sapir the poet, anthropologist, translator, and linguist, *Poetry*’s renditions must fail to a certain extent to deliver on the prospect of salvage. When presented only in English translation, a constitutive literary component, bound to the songs’ source language, is lost. At the same time, it is these translations that were Sapir’s greatest success in modernist literary circles: In addition to its honorable mention, *Poetry* paid Sapir 40 dollars, more than any of his other poems earned him, and *The Literary Digest* immediately published a reprint of “The King of Spain’s Daughter and the Diver,” “White as the Snow,” and “The Dumb Shepherdess.” *Folk Songs of French Canada* was also received very favorably. In a review published in the September 1926 issue of *Poetry*, Monroe grouped together four “Folk-Song Collections,” including Barbeau and Sapir’s anthology, testifying once more to the intricate intertwinement of modernist primitivism and salvage ethnography that we call “salvage primitivism.” “Such books as these are extremely valuable records of a too-perishable past,” she concludes, agreeing with fellow editor Alice Corbin that “[t]he[ir] purpose [. . .] is to preserve these old folk-songs while there is still time” (350). That the songs under review vary widely in their source language and place of origin – from French Canada to Spanish in New Mexico – matters little in this scheme, with the critical distinction being diachronic, between “a too-perishable past” and fast-moving, all-vanquishing progress toward modernity. The specifics of synchronic data, geographic as well as linguistic, must yield to the moral urgency of this salvage operation. Thus while being an avid contributor

and loyal subscriber, Sapir's "pedantic literalness" ("Note" 213) and insistence on linguistic particularity ultimately also set him somewhat apart from the modernist and primitivist mainstream represented by *Poetry*. Given the political ramifications of the allochronism inherent in salvage ethnography, this is not nothing: It equips Sapir's particular brand of salvage primitivism with an attention to synchronic detail that gets in the way of the wholesale projection of spatial differences onto a temporal scale that Monroe's dominant variety involves.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The disenfranchisement of communities that follows from what Johannes Fabian has influentially termed "allochronism," that is, the denial of the coeval existence of spatially remote people by positioning them in an earlier, "savage" or "primitive" stage of human development, has been extensively studied by both historians of anthropology and scholars of primitivist literature. "[T]he mode of scientific and moral authority associated with salvage [. . .] ethnography" is not only based on the "assum[ption] that the other society is weak and 'needs' to be represented by an outsider" but also "that what matters in its life is its past, not present or future" (Clifford 113). As Hochman reminds us, "[w]riters and anthropologists championed the salvage endeavor as a scientific opportunity and a moral imperative, very often turning a blind eye to the realities of survival and change that surrounded them" (xv).

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