Lecture 2: Native American Literature

Objectives

- Understand Native American Literature in its historical context
- Explore its literature
- Debunk stereotypes

HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF NATIVE WRITING

Native American literature did not appear suddenly from a void with the publication of Momaday’s House Made of Dawn. Its 1969 Pulitzer Prize is simply the historical moment when white America – and others – began to acknowledge the great value of Native writing. For centuries, indigenous Americans have written to express themselves and defend their lands, cultures, and sovereignty. From Samson Occom in the seventeenth century to D’Arcy McNickle in the twentieth century, Native writers have voiced their opinions, shared their stories, and advocated for their rights with force and intelligence. Their sermons, essays, autobiographies, histories, poems, plays, and novels offer an extensive foreground and a vital context for the prose and poetry currently earning acclaim.

Written Native American literary history represents an impressive achievement of wide-ranging styles, opinions, and goals, particularly considering the fact that many Native writers were compelled to use English rather than their own languages. Over the centuries, Native writers have adopted and adapted a language that white Americans more often used as a tool of betrayal and dispossession. Treaties, agreements, and laws enacted by Euro-American officials regularly offered empty promises, and non-Native writers consistently distorted indigenous peoples in poetry, periodicals, and fiction.

As a result, the impact of a well-phrased argument was often lost in the barrage of meaningless verbiage. Yet despite white America’s desire to obscure these voices, Indian writers succeeded in accommodating the language to their own needs.

Native American publications provide a pathway leading readers to a more complete understanding of Native history, ideas, and rights. Indian writers help readers look backward to interpret not only the past, but also the present. For Natives, the use of the enemy’s language is a powerful weapon in the fight for self-determination and sovereignty.

Invasion and loss

In 1492, the Americas contained approximately fifty million people. In the area currently occupied by the United States and Canada, population estimates at first contact range to 18 million. Thus, overstating the diversity of indigenous cultures and traditions is practically impossible. Today, in North America alone, nearly six hundred indigenous nations sustain a range of social structures and belief systems.

Nonetheless, all Indigenous peoples and cultures were threatened – either directly or indirectly – by the arrival of Europeans. Diseases decimated indigenous populations. Many tribes endured multiple waves of illnesses, which made them more vulnerable to colonization. From 1617 to 1620, for instance, a pandemic – likely brought from Europe by fishing vessels stopping for water and supplies – killed 90 to 96 percent of the Native population in the New England region. The psychological and cultural trauma – multiplied generationally for all tribes – is immeasurable.

Communities weakened by disease were often further destroyed by warfare and slavery. An often overlooked fact of American history is the enslavement not only of Africans and African Americans, but also of Native Americans. A 1708 South Carolina census identifies 1,400 Native slaves, and a 1730 census from Rhode Island lists 223 Indian slaves (ibid. 106). American Indians captured during war by Euro-Americans were often sold into slavery in the West Indies. Warfare weakened and destroyed many Native communities and cultures. Battles over land occurred regularly, and some escalated to the level of full-scale war. Early wars include the Pequot War of 1636–37, King Philip’s War in 1675 (involving the Wampanoag, Narragansett, Podunk, and Nipmuck), and the French and Indian War (part of the global Seven Years War), which ran from 1754 to 1763. In each case, tribal populations were ravaged, and their lands were taken by American colonists.

Other land grabs were orchestrated with no consideration for tribal sovereignty or peoples. After the American Revolution, the United States negotiated with other nations – not tribal governments – for tribal lands. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803, for instance, removed France as a colonial competitor for Native lands. No indigenous officials were consulted or paid, despite obvious tribal ownership and occupation of the territory. The purchase is often heralded as a world-class bargain, but the U.S. paid France for Indian land. Likewise, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo claimed extensive tribal lands from Mexico, including California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and parts of Colorado, Montana, and New Mexico. Again, indigenous peoples were not consulted or paid during these negotiations for their lands.

These political maneuvers, cultural threats, and apocalyptic events contribute to the historical context for understanding Native writing in English. Indigenous intellectuals often wrote with a mixture of anger, frustration, and sorrow at white treachery and their own dispossession, while their marginalized position in American society compelled them to strike a moderate middle-ground to define themselves and defend their rights.

Adapting to change, writing for change

Facing relentless physical and cultural assaults, many Native people incorporated elements of Christianity into their belief systems, or they converted outright. In the eighteenth century, an increase in missionary efforts by European colonists – particularly during the Christian revivalism of the 1730s and 1740s – sought to Westernize indigenous Americans. Mission schools and Indian "Praying Towns" were established by white reformers on tribal lands, and many Natives took the opportunity to learn to read and write in English. Hundreds of Natives attended programs at Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, and the College of William and Mary during the 1660–70s.

Samson Occom – the first published Native American writer – converted to christianity during this period. His Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul (1772) went through nineteen editions. At the time, it was valued primarily as a temperance tract denouncing the "sin of drunkenness". However, Occom implicitly condemns the white culture that introduced alcohol to Native people, and he subtly equates Moses' execution with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In this way, he suggests the betrayal at the heart of white/Indian relations.

Although several Natives write within this early Christian tradition, including Joseph Johnson (Occom's son-in-law) and Hendrick Aupaumut, William Apess is the best known. An ordained Methodist minister, he directly addressed white Christian readers to decry the hypocrisy of their racism. Apess used biblical references to authorize his opinions and his anger, while defending the dignity and rights of Native people. His autobiography, A Son of the Forest (1829), was his first publication, and an expanded edition appeared within two years. Building upon his success, he published The Experiences of Five Christian Indians of the Pequot Tribe (1833), which extended the range and form of the spiritual autobiography to showcase indigenous Christians facing racism and removal.

Apess was writing at a particularly bleak period of Native American history. By the 1830s, a federal policy of separation and removal had replaced a policy of assimilation-via-Christianity. After U.S. independence from Britain, federal policy increasingly sought to isolate Indians by restricting them to ever-shrinking reservations or removing them entirely from traditional tribal lands. Written treaties became a central feature of this policy, which lasted for nearly a century. Between 1778 and 1870, nearly

400 treaties were ratified. Many were thinly veiled efforts to legitimize land theft using duplicitous legalese and straw-man signatures. Many more were broken.

The history of broken treaties is not only another unfortunate testament to U.S. hypocrisy, greed, and racism, but it is also an essential backdrop and context for reading Native American literature. Even when not mentioned explicitly, the history is never far below the surface.

Trail of broken treaties

The first treaty was signed with the Delaware (Lenape) in 1778 during the American Revolution. Although the Delaware agreed to help the new nation against the British in exchange for statehood, the treaty was not upheld by the U.S. The Delaware signed 18 subsequent treaties that essentially took their land and relocated tribal members from the eastern seaboard to Canada and Oklahoma.

After the War of 1812, the federal government expanded its policy of removal and aggressively pressured eastern tribes to relocate west of the Mississippi River to "Indian Territory" (which became the state of Oklahoma in 1907, further disenfranchising many Indians). Some tribes had allied themselves with Britain during the war – such as the Creeks and Shawnee –and U.S. officials sought to punish them. The Red Stick War (1813–14) against the Muskogee Creek left 80 percent of the tribe dead, and the resulting treaty took 14 million acres of land.

Indian lands were valuable, and, significantly, some tribes were successful competitors within the American economy. The Cherokee, who, in fact, had allied with the U.S. against Britain, were targeted for removal along with the Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles – the so-called "Five Civilized Tribes." They lobbied hard to preserve their remaining lands in present-day Georgia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas, an effort aided by the Cherokee syllabary completed by Sequoyah in 1821. To publicize tribal concerns, Elias Boudinot began publishing The Cherokee Phoenix in 1828 in both English and Cherokee.

Boudinot toured the eastern states in 1826 raising funds and awareness. His published speech, "An Address to the Whites," specifically targeted white readers on behalf of Cherokee people, lands, and rights. It begins by highlighting the similarity between whites and Natives: "What is an Indian? Is he not formed of the same materials with yourself?" Asserting that whites "differ from them [the Cherokee] chiefly in name" (72), he claims "the common liberties of America" (77–78) for all Natives. Boudinot concludes his address by warning of Cherokee extinction, a very literal threat considering the treatment of indigenous peoples over the previous three hundred years.

Despite efforts, the Indian Removal Act was passed in 1830 with President Andrew Jackson's full support. The Cherokee fought it all the way to the Supreme Court but were left with few good options. Boudinot was one of approximately 100 Cherokee who signed the Treaty of New Echota in 1835, which ceded remaining tribal lands. Fifteen thousand Cherokee signed an official protest circulated by tribal council – but to no avail. What followed is known as the Trail of Tears. By 1838, nearly 17,000 Natives were forcibly marched – often at gunpoint – from their tribal lands to Oklahoma. Approximately 4,000 died. Boudinot was killed in 1839 by tribal members for his role in the removal, as were other leaders who signed the treaty.

While eastern tribes were being forced west of the Mississippi River, western tribes were also facing ongoing encroachment and assault. Spanish invaders had entered the southwest as early as 1540 when Francisco Vásquez de Coronado led an army through present-day Arizona and New Mexico (ultimately reaching Kansas). Euro-Americans continued making imperialist incursions into tribal lands, establishing missionaries and trading posts throughout the west. In Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims (1883), Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (aka Thocmetony) offers a personal and tribal history of the years between 1844 and 1883, which includes the 1878 Bannock War. She recounts her childhood fear and helplessness as whites brought disease and took land in Nevada, California, Idaho, and Oregon.

She documents massacres, rapes, and other brutalities perpetrated upon the Piaute and other tribes. As a translator, Winnemucca was in a good position to witness and publicize events taking place in the west. As in the hundreds of lectures Winnemucca gave throughout the United States, Life Among the Piutes sharply criticizes the reservation agents who profited personally without helping Natives or upholding treaty rights, and she was an outspoken and controversial advocate of land rights and reform.

While the Trail of Tears is perhaps the most infamous removal, many indigenous people experienced grief and trauma from military takeovers and outright massacres. The atrocities of nineteenth-century U.S. history are well-documented (although not always well-publicized), and they inform Native thought and writing in the past as well as the present.

New policies, old problems

The period between 1870 and 1890 is often referred to as the "Indian Wars." During this time, tribes still in possession of valuable land were confronted with increasingly dire prospects. In 1871, a shift in U.S. policy occurred with the passage of the Indian Appropriations Act. It stipulated that tribes would no longer be considered separate sovereign nations, so they would not be formally negotiated with. The era of the treaties was essentially over. Moreover, with the end of the Civil War, the U.S.

increasingly turned its attention to western land and resources.As a result, many tribes in the west faced impossible choices. Treaties restricted them to reservations; railroad companies (with military attachments) surveyed routes directly through tribal lands; and buffalo herds were hunted to near extinction. Some tribes, bands, clans, and individuals opted to accommodate white demands, while others forcefully resisted. Although federal troops had more guns and soldiers, Natives achieved some notable victories. The most celebrated is the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876, during which the Lakota and Cheyenne defeated their over-confident attackers, General Armstrong Custer and the Seventh Cavalry. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were among the defenders. Black Elk provides a first-person account of the U.S. attack in Black Elk Speaks (1932); James Welch examines its historical treatment in *Killing Custer* (1994); and Sherman Alexie treats Little Bighorn briefly via his adolescent narrator in Flight (2007).

The victory prompted the U.S. military to shift its strategy, and federal troops began campaigning more in winter, when plains Indians typically divided into smaller groups and thus became more vulnerable. The Lakota epitomized the desperate situation faced by many tribes at this time as they defended their land and rights against U.S. colonial expansion. Located on an ever-shrinking reservation in South Dakota, the Lakota were less able to follow their traditional lifestyles. Buffalo and other game were mostly gone, and whites continued to intrude into their land searching for gold and other resources. Many Lakota were forced to depend upon insufficient agency handouts.

Adding to the cultural clash, some Lakota became adherents of the Ghost Dance religion established by Wovoka (also known as Jack Wilson), a Paiute from Nevada. Practitioners believed that, if they adhered to traditional ways and performed the Ghost Dance, then their ancestors would return from the dead and force Euro-Americans out of North America. This syncretic belief system held that a savior would facilitate the return of all tribal land and the rejuvenation of the buffalo herds. The Ghost Dance gained popularity throughout Native communities in the 1880s, a time when federal officials increasingly suppressed tribal religious practices. The Ghost Dance, in particular, made many white people nervous.

On December 29, 1890, the Seventh Cavalry killed nearly 300 unarmed men, women, and children – practitioners of the Ghost Dance and advocates of tribal sovereignty – on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Charles Eastman, a Lakota doctor with a medical degree from Boston University, went to the site the next day, and he wrote, “Fully three miles from the scene of the massacre we found the body of a woman completely covered with a blanket of snow, and from this point on we found them scattered along as they had been relentlessly hunted down and slaughtered while fleeing for their lives” (Deep Woods to Civilization 111). The event lives in infamy as the Wounded Knee Massacre. Two weeks earlier, Sitting Bull had been assassinated. For many, these events signaled the end of armed resistance by Native Americans, and to this day they epitomize a profoundly tragic historical legacy. In 1970, Dee Brown published *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, a Native-centered perspective of nineteenth-century history.

The situation in Indian country got worse after 1890. A time-bomb was ticking in the form of the General Allotment Act. Passed in 1887 – and sponsored by Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts – the Dawes Allotment Act (as it is also called) eliminated communal land ownership rights for most tribes, instead assigning up to 160 acres to each family (and less to individuals). The directive was intended, ostensibly, to encourage individual enterprise, but it was a disaster. After allotments were distributed, the remainder of reservation land was taken by the federal government and sold to whites. Furthermore, allotments were tax-exempt for only 25 years, so many people lost their land in 1912 (and after) when heavy property taxes came due. Altogether, the Allotment Act cost Native Americans a total of 86 million acres of land in 47 years, and many reservations were made into checkerboards of Indian/white ownership (Janke, “Population” 159–61). Louise Erdrich explores the external pressures and the internal divisions caused by the Allotment Act in her historical novel Tracks.

Allotment threatened to fracture tribal unity in myriad ways. The Act also stipulated that Indian children must attend off-reservation boarding schools (ibid. 162). Rations were withheld from parents who refused to send their children away. By 1920, 70 percent of Native children were attending boarding schools in 14 states (Peyer, “Introduction” 20). English was mandatory. Tribal languages, dress, and hairstyles were prohibited. Boys were generally taught farming and commercial skills, and girls were trained for domestic services. Richard Pratt, a former general and prison warden, who became the first superintendent of Carlisle Indian School in 1879, famously stated, “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man,” a sentiment that broadcasts the destructive nature of the schools. In No Parole Today (1999), Laura Tohe begins her collection with a “Letter to General Pratt,” which implicates him directly in “cultural genocide” (xii). She writes: “Assimilation made us feel ashamed for what we were, where we came from, how we spoke, our stories, our families, how we dressed, and for speaking our language” (x). Her poems simultaneously document the pain caused by the schools as well as the process of de-colonization that she and other Natives undergo as they re-claim their tribal heritage.

Many Native writers have documented their reactions to the boarding schools. Zitkala-Sa (also known as Gertrude Bonin) wrote in 1900 about her experiences at a boarding school, and she expresses anger at the lack of freedom and respect extended to pupils.

Most written accounts of boarding schools emphasize that tribal languages were prohibited and students left ill-prepared either to return to Indian communities or to succeed in white American society. Laura Tohe writes that "[t]he most crippling legacy of boarding schools is the devastation of our native languages and culture. We are still trying to recover from the loss. Separation from home, land, and culture equals loss of identity and language" (American Indian Stories x).

Recovering from loss, and continuing the oral tradition

The loss of tribal languages remains a severe threat to indigenous cultures and beliefs throughout Native American communities. Tribal literatures, in particular, are in jeopardy, despite strong ongoing efforts to preserve them. Before 1492, approximately 300 languages existed within groups. Today nearly 190 languages survive in the United States, but many have limited active speakers, and only 20 languages are currently taught to children by their parents as a first language. Native experts have argued for "the necessity of maintaining their ancestral language because their culture, their ceremonies, and their spiritual history and values can only be transferred through the metaphors inherent in the language and through the cognitive imagery these metaphors invoke".

Historically, tribal knowledge and beliefs are passed from generation to generation using indigenous languages and oral traditions. Tribal oral traditions include stories, songs, and histories as well as prayers, ceremonies, and rituals. They are usually related integrally to the spiritual belief systems of specific tribes, clans, and individuals. Much of the cultural knowledge and context necessary to understand the individual components of tribal oral traditions is available only to tribal members.

Trickster is a notable presence and "cultural hero" in many tribal traditions, appearing variously in the form of Coyote, Raven, Rabbit, Spider, and others. For the Lakota tribe, for instance, the trickster is represented by the spider. For the Kiowa, it's embodied by the coyote. The trickster may be a foolish figure who reveals human avarice. Often the trickster's selfish or mean-spirited actions result in being punished. Although the trickster may hurt others or act wrongly, it is nonetheless regarded as a cultural hero in tribal stories.

Tricksters and trickster-like figures appear throughout Native texts, and they represent an immense source of entertainment and knowledge.

Fiction, poetry, and self-definition

The first half of the twentieth century is generally considered a bleak time in Native American history. Restricted largely to reservations, Natives experienced poverty, racism, and dispossession while the U.S. became increasingly wealthy and powerful on their lands around them. American Indians were not even allowed U.S. citizenship until 1924. In 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act – sometimes called the Indian New Deal – lessened the control of off-reservation boarding schools and shifted power from Washington, D.C. back to Indian communities, encouraging "tribal governments to create their own constitutions, membership, and laws". By 1944, tribal leaders created the National Congress of American Indians to coordinate political efforts and speak with a more unified, powerful voice.

Writers also began to gain recognition, publishing a range of novels, histories, poems, plays, and story collections. Many works published by Indian authors between 1890 and 1960 have gained academic, if not necessarily popular, accolades. Yet recovery and interpretive efforts are ongoing. The writings of E. Pauline Johnson, Alexander Posey, John Oskison, Simon Pokagon, Francis La Flesche, and Todd Downing, among others, are only beginning to receive widespread evaluation. Some others have received much more attention, and healthy debate continues regarding their meaning and merit.

The first novel published by an Indian woman is *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891) by S. Alice Callahan. It uses sentimental romanticism to portray the change of its title character from a Muscogee woman into a Victorian lady amidst the radical transformations of Creek culture generally. Womack labels Callahan's novel "a document of Christian supremacism and assimilation," stating that "the utter lack of any Creek opinions renders invisible the tremendous acts of resistance against Oklahoma statehood that were going on both within the Creek Nation and in alliance with other tribes in Indian Territory". Others defend Wynema as a product of the times.

In 1912, Mourning Dove (aka Christine Quintasket) completed her novel, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range* (1927),but it was not published until after her editor, L.V. McWhorter, made substantial revisions and additions, fragmenting the narrative and muddying its goals. The plot draws heavily upon the popular western melodramas that Mourning Dove reputedly enjoyed.

John Joseph Matthews's *Sundown* (1934), is the story of a mixed-blood man named Challenge whose experiences at a university and in the military foster self-hatred and bitterness toward his Osage heritage. Contextualized by Oklahoma oil wealth and eco-destruction, the final chapters of Sundown detail Challenge's lapses into drunkenness, his movement toward tribal religion, and, ultimately, his desire to enter law school. Robert Warrior argues that the narrative involves much more than an individual identity struggle: "Matthews evokes a historical period of intense importance for Osage people and communities and attempts to sort out how the political strategies of various groups of Osages played out and what possible future might exist". Matthews also published the histories, *Talking to the Moon* (1945) and *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters* (1961).

D'Arcy McNickle's novel, *The Surrounded* (1936), is typically recognized as a literary achievement of the first order. It recounts the internal and external struggles of a mixed-blood man returning to the Flathead Indian Reservation from his city-life as a musician. Although intending merely to visit the reservation before traveling abroad, the protagonist, Archilde Leon, increasingly recognizes the importance of his heritage and reacts against the encroaching Euro-American culture, represented by local opportunists (including his Spanish father) and Christianity (which his mother also comes to reject). Innocent of the two murders of which he is accused, Archilde fights to define his own life rather than become a helpless victim. Although McNickle arranges the narrative chronologically, he uses tribal stories and flashbacks to ground Archilde's decisions within a Native history and context.

Black Elk Speaks appeared first in 1932 to little response, but, when republished in 1961, the collaboration between Black Elk and John Neihardt gained a huge audience. Many readers responded strongly to Black Elk's vision and spirituality. Recently, the "as-told-to" format has rendered the work suspect, and Neihardt is regarded by some critics as an interloper who transformed Black Elk's spiritual vision and life-story into a Christian conversion narrative. From another vantage, however, Black Elk uses Neihardt for his own purposes, documenting a strong sense of identity, history, and spirituality that over-powers his transcribers'efforts to memorialize Indians as vanishing Americans. Two works that appeared after Black Elk's death, The Sacred Pipe (1953) and The Sixth Grandfather (1984), both reinforce his commitment to Oglala culture and belief. Although Black Elk Speaks is certainly a more troubled work because of Neihardt's involvement, it also helped to prepare the path for the unalloyed successes of Momaday, Welch, and Silko among a world-wide audience.

Contemporary Native America

The so-called Native American Renaissance (1968-present) springs from two centuries of writing in English and many more centuries of literary production in indigenous languages. It coincides with an era of social change fueled by the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the counter-culture reaction against the Vietnam War. Native activists fought policies of the so-called "termination era" (from 1954 to 1962), in which Congress sought "to end federal responsibility for Native Americans as stated in treaties and to end health programs and sovereignty", and Red Power groups – comparable to the Black Panthers – critiqued the relocation programs of the 1950s that encouraged Natives to move from reservations to cities. Indigenous leaders increasingly took their fight to the streets, nationally broadcasting their rights to equal legal justice and to federal treaty obligations. Activists took control of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay from 1969 to 1971, as well as Wounded Knee on Pine Ridge Reservation in 1973. Both acts gained national attention, as did the 1972 occupation of the Department of the Interior building in Washington, D.C.

In 1969, Native American Studies programs were begun at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and at the University of California, Berkeley. Over the next 40 years, hundreds of degree programs were established. Also in 1969, Vine Deloria published *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, advancing a forceful academic tradition of indigenous intellectuals that continues today. Native American scholars are increasingly defining the terms of academic debate, calling for more attention to the political and economic threats to indigenous people, land, and sovereignty.