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Text and Context: Teaching Native American Literature

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Diane Long Hoeveler

Silence is a major value in Native American culture, for silence is the token of acceptance, the symbol of peace and serenity, and the outward expression of harmony between the human and natural worlds. The result of this tradition of silence, however, is a limited written record, a limited number of texts produced by Native Americans themselves. This situation allowed the Anglo to step into the void and speak for Native Americans themselves, or more accurately, to claim to speak as their "interpreters." The implication that white culture drew from the lack of a written language in any of the Native American tribes was that these people had nothing of value to say to themselves or to others. It was not until the past twenty years that Native Americans have begun to produce their own literary works written in English with an eye toward communicating with the American population as a whole. Until the publication of Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), the general population had not heard actual Native Americans speak in their own voices—the white culture had been speaking for them. During the past twenty years, however, there has been a veritable explosion of texts coming from the Native American community, and we now have a substantial corpus to use in teaching contemporary Native American literature.

The Unit: Themes for Reading and Writing

I teach contemporary Native American literature as a six-week unit in a secondary course entitled American Ethnic Literature. Although there are several anthologies of Native American literature, my choice as "best" for the high school student is *The American Indian Speaks* (Ed. John R. Milton, 1970, Vermillion, SD: U of South Dakota P). The major value of this anthology lies in its diversity of selections—poems, essays, and short stories all written by Native Americans themselves. There are also essays on Indian art, dance, and music, all of which give the student some necessary theoretical background on how Indian art differs from and must be evaluated by different criteria from white/Anglo art. The other major strength of the collection stems from its contemporaneity—its works are written within the last twenty years and speak to the current situation of the Native American community; yet they retain their resemblance to the oral literary traditions of Native American tribal cultures.

I would not be perfectly honest about the experience of teaching Native American literature if I did not state that my students begin the course with negative stereotypes about "Indians" and extremely limited historical knowledge about the actual treatment of Native Americans in this country. Their attitudes and perceptions have been shaped by John Wayne movies, television programs, and a popular culture that has depicted the "Indians" as bloodthirsty savages who specialized in slaughtering innocent women and children. Rather than start with a lecture that debunks these attitudes, however, I let the literature speak for itself. What emerges from the first group of poems—written by Simon Ortiz, Norman H. Russell, and James Welch—is their overwhelming respect for nature as divine. This theme becomes the topic of the students' first essay. With this background firmly in place, then, it becomes much easier for students to understand the basic value conflict between the white and Native Amer-

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ican cultures. They can see it spelled out in Frank Waters' essay "Two Views of Nature: White and Indian," and they can begin to understand how these two views set the stage for the disaster that was played out throughout the nineteenth century across the western plains.

The second idea we explore concerns the theme of survival as expressed in the literature. The corruption of traditional values and the assault on the Indian family are explored most forcefully and poignantly in "Woman Singing" by Simon Ortiz as well as in the poems of Ronald Rogers and Donna Whitewing. Students are asked to use these works to answer the following questions: What do today's Indians have to do to survive in a white-dominated culture? How has the "white man" corrupted Indian values and traditions? How do Indians feel about this situation? What are some of the contradictions between Indian traditions and the reality of life in contemporary America? At this point in the anthology and the course, students are often overwhelmed with a sense of pessimism and hopelessness at the plight of Indians in contemporary American society, which is why the next unit is a welcome relief and concludes the course on a more positive note.

The major emphasis of the last readings in the anthology and the topic of the last assigned essay focus on the power of Indian traditions, the value of the "old ways," and the relevance of Indian tribal practices and religious beliefs for the Native American today. Works such as "Day with Yaya," "The Turquoise Beads," "My Indian Name," "Clearing in the Valley," and "The Promised Visit" all develop a similar theme: how contemporary Indians can redeem their ethnic identity by preserving the ancient and sacred traditions of Native American culture. But preserving and defending this heritage is no easy task, and the poems at the conclusion of the anthology express some of the difficulties inherent in that effort. The displacement of the urbanized Indian is tragically expressed in Bruce Ignacio's "Lost," while the isolation and friendlessness of the Indian find utterance in Loyal Shegonee's "Loneliness" and Rosey Garcia's "Then and Now." Kay C. Bennett makes the point that Native Americans somehow, miraculously, have managed to survive and preserve their traditions on the reservation, but that the ultimate white weapon against Indian culture—welfare—may succeed finally in wiping out the last vestiges of that carefully nurtured life (see her

Background Reading

One cannot simply teach Native American literature as if the genre began in 1968. If you are like most traditionally trained English teachers, you are probably not conversant with Native American literature; I know I was not. Approaching the field in order to teach it can be a daunting prospect, simply because there is a wealth of fairly specialized material that is quite foreign to the average English teacher. Anyone preparing to teach a course or unit on Native American literature should begin with a careful reading of a few very helpful studies that provide valuable background for teachers: Paula Gunn Allen's *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs* (1983, MLA), Abraham Chapman's *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations* (1975, NAL), and Brian Swann's *Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature* (1983, U of California P).

Once one is confident about one's own preparation, then one must begin by providing students with the necessary background to the field, and this is only gained by studying the traditional Indian oral narratives, the oratory and oral poetry, and the first works by Indians done during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An overview for students can best be provided by using any one of several valuable texts or anthologies of Indian literature including Margot Astrov's *American Indian Prose and Poetry* (1962, Capricorn), John Bierhost, *In the Trail of the Wind* (1971, Farrar), Natalie Curtis, *The Indians' Book* (1968, Dover), and Dennis Tedlock, *Finding the Center* (1972, Dial). In the case of the oral narratives and poetry, one has to point out to students that these works have survived only because whites, primarily anthropologists, went out into the field and transcribed the cosmologies and poems. One has to realize, also, that most Indian writings produced before 1968 are what is known as "told-to" autobiographies. Those Indians who did write themselves were almost solely converts to Christianity, products of Christian educations, writing for the explicit purpose of converting other Indians.

Myth and legend are the other major areas of Indian tradition with which students should be familiar before they begin a study of contemporary literature. The best introductions to Indian mythologies can be found in Andrew Wiget's *Native American Literature* (1985, Twayne) and his *Critical Essays on Native American Literature* (1985, G. K. Hall). His works provide the historical, religious, and cultural background that students need to set the contemporary works in the fullest possible context. By analyzing the origin myths, legends, and oral traditions as fully as possible, students will be able to see the vital continuum that exists between past and present versions of Indian writing. *DLH*

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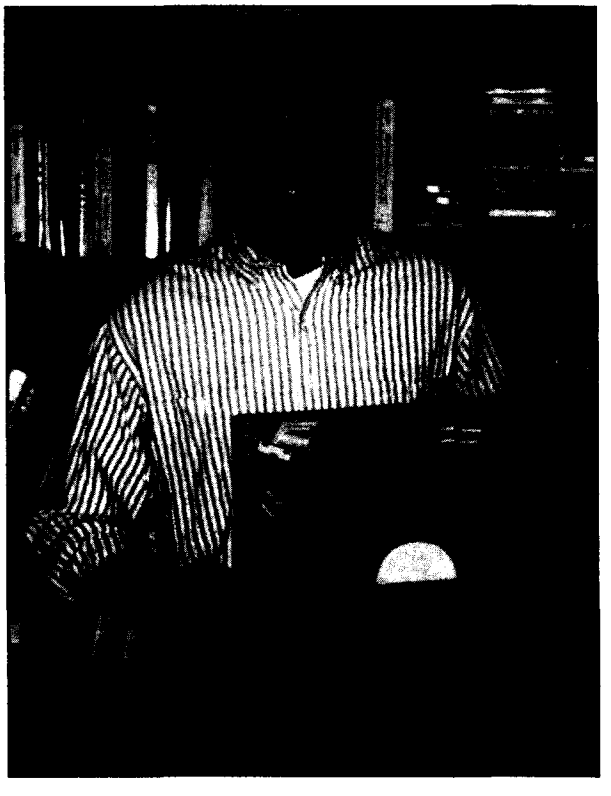
"Letter to the Editor," Milton 171–72). The challenge confronting Native Americans today is not really significantly different from what it has been since the mid-1800s. Preserving one's dignity and heritage has been the challenge of every ethnic group in America. The tragic fact is that the Indians—like the European Jews—have had to survive a virtual attempt at genocide in the process of preserving their traditions. And all of this to a large extent can be traced to bifurcated perceptions of the land as sacred or the land as commodity. That basic dichotomy between Indian and white values underlies and to a large extent precipitated the crisis and the continuing dilemma.

Individual Projects

I assign one individual project that requires the students to read one author in depth or research a topic in Indian history, art, music, or culture. The assignment of this project has produced some amazing results, for in the very act of researching one topic in depth the students uncover more than they could ever discover within the confines of the classroom. One particularly insightful project was on Indian food as symbol in literature and life, with supplementary demonstrations and tastings in class. Another interesting project was an analysis of Indian legends and mythologies, with demonstrations on symbols in Indian blankets, pottery, and sand paintings (purchased by the student's family on vacations to New Mexico). Students have also scheduled a film such as "North American Indian Legends" (1973, Phoenix Films) as a visual accompaniment to their oral presentations. This film, featuring the original legends of Indians in three different geographical regions, provides an effective illustration of how legends express both cultural and spiritual values as well as explanations of natural events. Another student, a virtual expert on contemporary music, presented an extremely informative discussion of current popular music by Native Americans. He started with Buffy Saint-Marie but went much beyond her in analyzing the themes and concerns of Indian protest music today. Other students chose one particular tribe and researched the life, language, food, clothing, and religious and oral traditions unique to that group. The students focused on how the geographical surroundings influenced the tribe's adaptation and traditions, then presented their findings in a panel discussion in which each student was an "expert" on that particular tribe.



Finally, several students chose to read works by major contemporary Native Americans writing today—James Welch, Vine Deloria, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, and Patty Harjo. Novels like *Winter in the Blood, The Death of Jim Loney, House Made of Dawn,* and *Ceremony* all hold a strong appeal for my students. The alienation in these novels speaks directly to the alienation that these adolescents feel, and they identify strongly with the protagonists of these works. The major lesson they learn, however, is that contemporary Native American literature has to be read as imaginative art in its own right, and that it can be evaluated ultimately by the standards applied to all literature. When they write about their personal and tribal experiences, Native Americans are creating imagistic and symbolic worlds, literary visions of truth, not simply political, historical, or sociological tracts. As their final exam in the course, students write on the universal themes developed in Native American literature. They have come to realize that we are all strangers, outsiders within a culture that we all experience as alien to ourselves. In identifying with the Indian dilemma, my

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students learn that we all share basic human emotions and needs for a life of dignity, harmony, peace, and acceptance.

Resources

The other crucial resources that enrich the educational experience of my students are audio visual materials, field trips, and guest lecturers. I will outline here some of the larger themes these resources develop and suggest when and how they would be appropriate to use. Our initial focus is on the characteristics and specific history of Native American literature, and in conjunction with this theme I show the two-part filmstrip "American Indian Literature" (1980, Films for the Humanities). These filmstrips contrast the usual white view of the Indians to the more recent depiction presented by Native Americans themselves. I distribute a worksheet I have made to accompany this filmstrip and ask the students to list in parallel columns the stereotypes about Indians that white culture has propagated in contrast to the way Indians view themselves. This initial exercise helps the students to formulate the differences between white and Indian values, while at the same time it forces them to understand the role whites have played in distorting the image of the Indian. Another two-part filmstrip that can be used in identical fashion is "We Are Indians: American Indian Literature" (1973, Guidance Associates). This filmstrip presents traditional Indian values and symbols on the first tape and shows their desecration by white society on the second tape.

The second theme we address in the unit is the history of Manifest Destiny and its role in altering the Indians' way of life. Students are generally familiar with this idea from their American history course, but we tend to look at Manifest Destiny from the Indians' perspective, which, of course, changes everything. I begin by showing "The North American Indian: Treaties Made, Treaties Broken" (1970, McGraw), which explores in depth the history of one treaty: the 1854 Treaty of Medicine Creek signed by the Indians of Washington state. The second film that continues the historical saga is entitled "The North American Indian: How the West Was Won and Honor Lost" (1970, McGraw) using paintings, newspaper accounts, and photographs to tell the story of the breaking of treaties, the removal of the Indians from the land, and the Trail of Tears. Two other films that contrast with each other are "Custer: The American Surge Westward" (1965, McGraw) and "I Will Fight No More Forever: The Story of Chief Joseph" (1975, McGraw). In these two films we see an important contrast in leadership styles as well as another version of the white/Indian value conflict. Another film which depicts the history of the white and Indian conflict in a very personal way is "Little Big Man" (available on videotape), starring Dustin Hoffman. Students particularly enjoy this film and often choose to read the book by Thomas Berger on which the film is based. The final film in the historical series, entitled "The North American Indian: Lament of the Reservation" (1970, McGraw), is narrated by Marlon Brando and powerfully depicts the results of Manifest Destiny: we see what it is like to live on a Sioux reservation in South Dakota today. The suicide rate among young Sioux teenagers is particularly tragic and conveys to my students the desperation of the young Indian in a direct and effective manner.

The films on Indian history lend themselves to a number of interesting activities. Students enjoy going to the library and using the microfilmed collection of the *New York Times* to see how that newspaper presented the events that led, for instance, to the 1877 conflict between the US Army and the Nez Perces. I have also assigned journal writings in which students take the role of an Indian or white eyewitness to a battle or treaty meeting. Keeping an imaginary diary or writing letters to a friend in the East requires students to project themselves into the past and identify with distant historical events.

The next theme we develop is the struggle for survival and the role legends and myths have played in keeping Indian traditions alive. To supplement this unit I show "The American Indian Speaks" (1973, Encyclopaedia Britannica), which illustrates several viewpoints on the struggle for survival while vividly depicting scenes of contemporary Indian life and problems. A videotape which nicely complements this theme is entitled "Hopi Songs of the Fourth World," a fifty-eight-minute color exploration of life on the major Hopi reservations today (available through Ferrero/New Day Films on videotape). This film provides a detailed examination of the food, living conditions, tribal rituals, and art of the Hopi tribe. Indians have always turned to their culture and

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legends to understand their lives, and to demonstrate how this is still done I show "American Indians: Yesterday and Today" (1981, Filmfair Communications). In this film spokesmen and women from three distinctly different tribes tell the stories of their people and explain how their religious beliefs have enabled them to persevere in the face of tremendous oppression. To make this unit more immediate to my students I construct an analogous situation for them. I ask them to imagine and then write about what their lives would be like if we were invaded by an alien race with a radically different culture, religion, language, and government. Students often choose to imagine an extraterrestrial alien invasion or one by the Russians, and they depict themselves clinging to their "old ways" as the only means they have of maintaining their original identities.

The final audiovisual unit I plan utilized the recent film *The Emerald Forest*, available on videotape. This extremely powerful film shows that white culture is now desecrating and exterminating the Indian tribes of South America, specifically those which have lived in harmony with nature for thousands of years in Brazil. In this film a young white boy, son of an American engineer, is kidnapped by an Indian tribe and raised as the son of the tribe's chief. After years of searching, the father finds his son, but the boy, now considered by the Indians to be a man, has no wish to return to white society. In fact, at film's end he is made chief of his tribe upon the death of the Indian father. This brief summary of the film cannot do justice to its beauty, complexity, or the power it exerts over its viewers. Showing the film is a very effective way to conclude the course, for *The Emerald Forest* makes clear that the policy of Manifest Destiny continues today, displacing the Indians of South America, the latest victims of greed and the commercialization of nature. The film always elicits lively class discussion and debate, and one technique I have found successful is to have students role-play either the father or son, or to take turns debating pro or con positions on the basic question: is it justifiable to destroy the Brazilian rain forest in order to build roads, villages, and dams in the name of "civilization"?

The final resource I have used to bring the course alive for my students is to plan field trips and to bring in guest speakers, neither of which I realize may be possible in every geographical locale. I have taken students to Chicago's Natural History Museum, which houses one of the world's largest collections of Indian artifacts and displays. Entire villages from various geographical settings are reconstructed here, and experts are available to lead the students through the entire wing. Visits have also been scheduled to the Indian collection at Milwaukee's Public Museum, particularly when a special touring exhibit on Indian art was available. Guest speakers have also been invited from the local Indian Cultural Center. I specifically want to contrast the museum displays, which tend to put the Indian under glass as a dead object, to the living guest speaker, who lets the students know that Indians are alive and struggling to preserve their culture and values in the midst of an urban environment.

We no longer try to speak for Native Americans; we simply let ourselves hear them.

Teaching Native American literature has been as much a positive growth experience for me as a teacher as I know it has been for my students. We are no longer trying to speak for the Native Americans; we are simply letting ourselves hear them. We are humbled and shamed by the story they tell of their history, but we are also inspired by the vision of nature they still tenaciously possess. We are involved in their struggle, if only in being better informed.

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Films for the Humanities, P. O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08540. (800) 257-5126

Guidance Associates, Communications Park, Box 3000, Mt. Kisco, NY 10549. (800) 431-1242

McGraw-Hill Films, 110 15th Street, Del Mar, CA 92014. (714) 453-5000

Phoenix Films, 470 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. (212) 684-5910

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