The Cry of the Native American

The average individual’s knowledge of the Native American culture is likely taken straight out of American history books: the “Indians” were the original inhabitants of North America, they helped the first settlers in the colonies only to be forced from their homeland and placed into reservations, they had a great love of nature and the Earth, and they engaged in various religious and spiritual practices. While this description may be historically accurate, it does little to describe who the Native Americans truly were and are to this day. Each of the many tribes of Native Americans had numerous rich oral traditions, often referred to as “oratures,” which far predated the arrival of the colonists. Even when the individual tribes were forced west, the traditions continued to be handed through the generations. Some might think that this oral literature, and eventually written literature, is not as strong as it once was due to the trials the Native American people have suffered; in reality, both Native American orature and literature continue to be produced and are important in today’s American literature, thanks in part to the post-modernist movement. The European invasion, rather than completely eradicating the Native American literary presence, instead strengthened it by forcing the Native American peoples to unite in an effort to conserve their history through their literature, which is still an ongoing genre.

Before one can begin to evaluate Native American literature, one must first form a framework for the traits that outline the genre. To say that any piece of literature focusing on Native Americans or their culture should be part of the genre is incorrect, as many of the writers of these pieces are middle-class whites, who know nothing of the culture save what they have read from other books published by the same community. On the opposite end of the spectrum, it is not safe to say that all pieces published by Native American authors should fall within the genre. If a Native American should write an article describing planting methods, horse training, or any other subject not exclusively related to the culture, it clearly should not be included. It is also not fair to say that all works written by Native American authors regarding Native American ideas should be included. Jack Forbes hits on this point by posing the rhetorical question, “If a Frenchman writes in English for an Anglo-Saxon audience is he a French author and is his work part of French or English literature?” (19). The key word in this question is “audience,” and therein is contained the ultimate definition for the genre: as Forbes says, “Native American literature must consist in works produced by persons of Native identity and/or culture for primary dissemination to other persons of Native identity and/or culture” (19-20). In other words, the pieces must be written *by* Native Americans, with the intent that it be *for* Native Americans, and must observe topics *exclusively* dealing with either the Native American culture or how it has been impacted by outside cultures.

With this definition clearly identifying the boundaries for the genre, one can begin to seek examples to fulfill the criteria. Native American literature poses a problem in this regard, however, as published Native American writing did not come into being until the mid-nineteenth century, with one of the earliest published texts being an autobiography by George Copway, *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-Bowh,* published in 1847 (Porter 39). In order to find the sources of Native American literature, one must look back to the earliest recorded stories within the culture, which came from the storytelling of the oral tradition. One of the first and most told oral tales is that of the “earth-diver,” a story about the creation of the Earth. Every religion has its own form of the creation story: the Chinese have the story of Chaos and the yin and yang, the Jews and Christians have the Genesis myth, and modern-day theologians have the scientific creation, or Big Bang, theory. The general form of the Native American creation myth is somewhat similar to these creation myths, though there are some notable differences: a version dominant in the Great Lakes region, for example, states that at first, “not a thing existed; there was only water and some animal creatures”; the creatures elect the eagle to represent them in a meeting with the sun, the Native Americans’ physical representation of Ke-sha-mon-e-doo, the Great Spirit, and both to think of ways to “find the earth”; a series of animals, typically “the beaver and otter, water birds, the frog and turtle…other birds [and] the muskrat,” attempt to dive down to the bottom of the ocean to find a source of dirt, only to come up empty-handed; finally a weaker water animal, usually a crawfish, muskrat, or turtle, is able to bring up trace amounts of dirt, from which the Earth is created (Wagner 3, Berezkin 115). While the general story is the same in each tribe’s tale, there are a great number of variations, with over “Twenty-five basically similar versions…recorded among the Iroquois of the Great Lakes region” alone (Berezkin 112).

One such version of the earth-diver myth that exists today comes from Günter Wagner’s *Yuchi Tales*. From the summer of 1928 to the winter of 1929, Wagner took several field trips to visit the Yuchi Indians of Central Oklahoma in order to document their oral history (which, to be clear, still falls under the previously established definition of the genre: the literature came from the mouths of Native American people and was documented for other Native Americans). One of the first tales included in the collection is “The Creation of the World,” the Yuchi tribe’s version of the creation myth. This particular version of the myth goes beyond the events of the Earth’s formation by giving an explanation for why the sun shines in the sky (the glow worm, star, and moon all try and fail before the sun is successful), why it only shines for half of the day (a general consensus by the animals, deemed as such to allow for procreation during the dark hours), why squirrels are spotted (the other animals, offended by the squirrel’s pride over his suggestions, attacked him), and why there are mountains and hills (the buzzard, who was keeping watch over the flat ground until it was dry, accidently flapped his wings and made dents and ridges in the surface) (Wagner 2-12).

Because stories such as “The Creation of the World” are the most popularized Native American tales, many assume that their entire oral tradition was based on religion. This is a misguided notion, as the Native peoples had many different story forms. Joy Porter highlights the four major groupings of the Native American oral tradition:

Indian oral literatures…have undergone repeated birth and rebirth on American soil and they continue to provide a foundational heritage for Indian literature of all sorts. Categorized into four porous groupings: ritual dramas, including chants, ceremonies, and rituals themselves; songs, narratives, and oratory, these sacred and non-sacred storied expressions of language articulate, amongst many other things, Indian understandings of the fundamental truths of creation and the origins of human beings and their relationship to the universe. (Porter 42)

Within these four groups there are also many different types of stories. Not every piece of Native American orature dealt with religion, or indeed with serious matters at all; in fact, many that still exist today are simply meant to entertain. One such story, “Rabbit Deceiving Wolf,” recorded by Wagner, has no evident moral or lesson at all. In this tale, rabbit, a notorious trickster who is mentioned in many of Wagner’s recordings, finds wolf, whom he had already tricked into getting whipped once before, and convinces him that a horse which he had seen sleeping in the field is actually dead and ready to be eaten. Wolf, while hesitant at first, eventually gives in to his hunger and agrees to go with rabbit to get the horse. When they arrive, rabbit ties wolf’s tail to the horse’s tail, and tells him to pull the horse out of the field. As soon as wolf begins to pull, rabbit whips the horse until it wakes up and goes thundering off, dragging wolf across the field with it (Wagner 59-61). The tale is devoid of a lesson to be learned, but it clearly holds great humor and entertainment value.

Both the earth-diver myth and “Rabbit Deceiving Wolf” focus strongly on animal imagery, an element which was often incorporated in early Native American orature. Each tribe attributes different values to the various animals, so an overarching definition of the Native American theology of animals is impossible to create; however, by observing the animal theology of the Creek and Cherokee tribes, one can at least get a feel for how seriously the Native Americans consider their animal images. In an observation of these two tribes, Dave Aftandilian summarizes the lessons about animals which were often handed down through Native American orature: first, that animals are more powerful than humans; second, that animals lived on the Earth long before humans did, and therefore have a stronger connection to the Great Spirit, the Native American version of the Christian God; and third, that humans should treat animals with the respect that one would pay a deity (195). The Cherokee and Creek Natives also believe that animals are just as mentally capable as humans, with the ability to “talk, think, create social organizations to regulate their affairs, even perform religious rituals and ceremonies” (Aftandilian 196). Such an example of the animals’ mental aptitude can be seen in the generalized earth-diver story previously summarized, wherein the animals elect the eagle as a representative.

The representation of animal spirits is a large part of Native American cultural history, which plays a large role in the Native American oral tradition. Many of the earliest tales end with a phrase equal to “so it has been told” or “so say our ancestors.” One of the most difficult tasks associated with studying Native American literature is analyzing the oral tradition of the people. Andrew Wiget highlights the problems with a modern critic’s approach to the study:

Traditional folkloric studies of Native American oral literature worked with transcriptions of the verbal component of the performance, as if those “texts” represented the reality. But transcribing an oral performance is, to borrow Albert Lord’s phrase, like “photographing Proteus,” and immediately produces an anomaly that is neither a part of a living folkloric tradition nor of a truly literary one. Consequently, literary criticism of Native American oral literatures founded on a conventional notion of text and evolved from analogies to Western genres, styles, and aesthetic values soon proves of little value. [Written texts] are composed entirely of printed linguistic signs, but…linguistic complexity is only one dimension of form in a speech event. (Wiget 2)

With the simple act of stressing a certain word or changing speed or tone of a passage, a storyteller could easily change the meaning of an entire tale. This factor becomes lost when looking at the written transcriptions, as there is no way of knowing how the tale was meant to be told. Nevertheless, the tales do give insight into the religion, mythology, culture, and everyday lives of the early Native Americans.

The oral tradition of the Native American culture was developed during a period called the “early” phase of Native American literature. Hertha D. Sweet Wong suggests that “Native American [writings] can be organized into three basic historical periods: the *early period* (from pre-Columbian times to the nineteenth century), the nineteenth- early twentieth-century *transitional period* and the *contemporary period* (beginning in the twentieth century, but really burgeoning with what had been called the Native American Renaissance)” (127). The transitional period was arguably the most difficult time period in Native American history, as many tribes were eradicated or forced from their homes due to the idea that they were a “savage” culture. Coupled with the colonists’ idea of manifest destiny, this thought gave the politicians at the time the self-decreed “right” to drive the Natives from their homeland. During this time, individual tribes’ rights were given and taken away at a whim, with almost zero regard for the cultural impact. One strong effect of colonization was that “the [European nations] persisted with the fiction that the indigenous peoples they encountered were homogeneously ‘Indians’ even as they penetrated Native homelands and encountered and negotiated with greater numbers of diverse, and sometimes divided, sets of peoples” (Porter 45). In addition to stripping their individual cultural identities, the white invaders also attempted to strip the Natives’ religion through conversion to Christianity.

One of the most common ways the colonists achieved this goal was through the use of Indian boarding schools. These schools, quoted by David Adams as practicing “education for extinction,” did not allow Native American children to practice their native rituals, speak their native languages, or be involved with any part of their culture (Porter 52). At first, this new generation of white-schooled Native Americans were open to the change, for they believed that if they were fully assimilated to white society, they would be granted their native lands promised to them by the government generations ago (Porter 52-53). This, as history would show, was not the outcome for the Native people. Instead, the Native Americans were continuously forced from their homeland and packed together into reservations of increasingly smaller sizes. The boarding schools did grant the Indians one gift, however: they taught them how to read and write, giving them the tools to preserve their own history.

Under the ever-increasing pressure of the government and larger cultural groups on their culture, the Native Americans turned to new methods of preserving their history. During this time, they began to mimic the emerging trend within white writing, the autobiography. As previously mentioned, one of the earliest published Native American texts, and certainly one of the most influential Native American autobiographies, was *The Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-Bowh* by George Copway. Copway was born in Trenton, Ontario, as a part of the Ojibwa tribe (while he was born in Canada, the Ojibwa tribe covered a large area in both Canada and the northern United States and were considered to be a Native American tribe). His work was likely published because, unlike many of his fellow Native Americans, he “saw that there was a true heaven—not in the far-setting sun, where the Indian anticipated a rest, a home for his spirit—but in the bosom of the Highest” (Copway, *Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh*  9-10). As a converted Native American, the white publishers of the time must have felt that they were given a gift by publishing his work: the Native Americans might easily disregard a white preacher, but if the preacher is a member of their own race, they should be much more receptive. In fact, Copway dedicated much of the later portion of his life to missionary work, working mainly with the Native Americans of the Rice Lake region in Canada, his home territory.

It cannot be said with certainty how many Indians were converted by Copway’s autobiography, but it is clear that it serves as a wonderful preservation of a look into pre-colonized Native American life. As William M. Clements argues,“[Copway’s] autobiography, published when he was especially relishing his notoriety as a Christian Indian missionary, comes most alive when he recounts his preconversion life” (128). Indeed, the earlier chapters of his autobiography are dedicated entirely to the customs of the Ojibwa, the religion, descriptions of the numerous spirits and omens associated with the religion, and traditions of the people. What results from this collection of first-hand experiences is a vivid portrait of many facets of life of the Ojibwa people—a history that might have been lost had it not been recorded. One such description is a detailed account of a hunting trip Copway made with his father. With his family on the verge of starvation, his father has a dream vision in which a spirit tells him to follow a nearby river to a dam, wherein he will find and kill two beavers. When he follows the spirit’s advice, he finds that two beavers are living in a dam upstream. He kills one with a tomahawk, and George kills one with a rifle, and they bring the beaver meat home to their family, who make it through the winter thanks to the bounty (Copway, *Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* 44-46). This short tale encompasses many facets of Ojibwa life: the spirit guide in the dream vision Copway’s father experiences is a typical story among numerous Native American tribes, the father-son hunts were traditional learning experiences for the young men, and the beaver spirit, named “Capa” by the Lakota tribe, was often associated with plenty or bounty, showing the Indians’ relation to animals (Copway, *Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* 48).

In recounting the tales of his youth in such detail, Copway subconsciously preserves the oral tradition as a “reactualization of an idyllic past” (Clements 127). While speaking of his grandfather, a warrior of the Crane tribe, Copway says, “I know the day when he used to shake the hand of the white man, and, *very friendly*, the white man would say, “*take some whiskey*.” When he saw any hungering for venison, he gave them to eat; and some, in return for his kindness, have repaid him after they became good and great farmers” (*Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* 14). This mutual friendship between Native Americans and the white invaders is certainly a rare scenario in the general public’s view of Native American history, one which fits in nicely with Clements’ idea that often Native American writers told their story to provide “evidence of a shared humanity” with the white culture (124). The Native Americans realized the threat to their heritage that came with Euroamerican expansion, and they knew that in order to survive, they must adapt to the new culture. By providing oral tradition that proved that the link existed between white and Indian peoples, they hoped that the transition would be made easier.

In another of his writings, Copway goes into detail about the way in which oral stories were performed, and in doing so gives more insight into the oral tradition than many of the transcribed stories themselves. He says that he has “known some Indians who would commence to narrate legends and stories in the month of October and not end until quite late in the spring…and on every evening of this long term tell a new story” (*Indian Life* 98). These oratures were typically given by the eldest member of the tribe, and were separated into three categories which Copway dubs the “Amusing,” “Historical,” and “Moral” tales, associated respectively with fall, winter, and spring (*Indian Life* 99). He explains that the stories were a daily social event, as nearly the entire tribe would gather around the fire and listen to the stories. While the storytelling was, in part, simply an entertaining way to pass the time before sleep, it also served to bring the youth of the tribe together to share the retellings of the greatest achievements of their ancestors, learn moral lessons, and form a good character to bring honor to their tribe (Copway, *Indian Life* 99-101).

Copway was not the only 19th Century Native American writer to focus on oral literature in his autobiography. Charles Eastman, born a Santee Sioux Indian and one of the founders of the Boy Scouts of America, describes the influence the orature had in keeping the past alive:

True stories of warfare and the chase are related many times over by actors and eye-witnesses, that no detail may be forgotten. Handed down from generation to generation, these tales gradually take on the proportions of heroic myth and legend. They blossom into poetry and chivalry, and are alive with mystery and magic. The pictures are vivid, and drawn with few but masterly strokes. (Eastman 174-5)

In his recount of these tales, Eastman forms an Indian history that is “more romantic than real” (Clements 129). Certainly neither he nor Copway would have remembered exactly in what fashion the tales were told, or whether or not the entire tribe was in attendance, but it did not make much of a difference: the point was that both of these authors kept the traditions of their tribes alive. Having been born into their tribes post-contact with white society, the authors chose to take on the task of the storytellers by retelling the precontact history from the only source they had—the handed-down oral tradition. By telling the stories of the precontact times, the writers could “participate imaginatively in that precontact culture, and when they retold the stories and recounted that experience of hearing them performed, they made that imaginative experience available to their readers” (Clements 130). The oral tradition did more than inform these nineteenth century Indian writers of their culture, it allowed them to feel a part of the culture through the continuation of the oral history into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The shift from the transitional to the contemporary period of Native American literature came not by the flow of time, but by a shift in focus. Transitional period autobiographers had hoped that this change would come—they preserved the cultural heritage for exactly that purpose. Armed with the knowledge of their culture, a new wave of Indian writers is making its mark on the literary world. This new movement is often called the Native American Renaissance, considered to be headed by a select few modern Native American writers, many of whom are the first in their family (or perhaps even their tribe) who have received a great amount of traditional American education. One of these writers is Simon J. Ortiz, a half-blooded Pueblo Indian from Albuquerque, New Mexico. Ortiz, like many Native Americans born in the 1940’s, attended primary school at a Bureau for Indian Affairs. There he was taught the techniques of the English language, but his passion for writing came from the stories of his kinsfolk:

“I never decided to become a poet,” Ortiz has said, suggesting that his relatives transmitted to him the power of words. “An old man relative with a humpback used to come to our home when I was a child, and he would carry me on his back. He told me stories…That contact must have contributed the language of myself.” His father, [a stonemason], would talk and sing as he worked…[Ortiz] remembers his father saying “Underneath / what looks like loose stone, / there is stone woven together. (“Simon J. Ortiz” 2914-15)

Just as it had been in the early days of the Native American tribes, Ortiz learned of his cultural heritage through the stories and songs of his family and ancestors. This influence is evident in the way that many of Ortiz’s poems are written, very closely resembling a song or prayer.

Most of Ortiz’s poems serve as “evidence that the Native American way of life is continuous, despite all the forces that attempt to eradicate it. But his work also tells of the painful costs involved in survival” (“Simon J. Ortiz” 2914). One of his poems which best encompasses the idea of the battle between the survival of tradition and modern-day oppression is “That’s the Place Indians Talk About.” In this poem, Ortiz retells a tale he has heard from an elder Paiute man about the Coso Hot Springs, a spiritual gathering place for the Paiute Indians. The old man describes the connection between the tribe and the springs with a mystical tone:

Listen. / You can hear it. / The stones in the earth rattling together. / The stones down there moving around each other. / When we pray. / When we sing. / When we talk with the stones / rattling in the ground / and the stones moving in the ground. / That’s the place Indians talk about. (Ortiz 2)

This passage shows the deep connection the Native Americans felt with their sacred land. This land, on which the tribe would once camp while visiting the springs, is now occupied by China Lake Naval Station, whose locked security gates surround the springs. In order to gain admittance, the tribe must gain clearance from the Navy: “We go up there to talk with the hot springs power,” says the old man, “but the Navy tells us we have to talk to them” (Ortiz 3). This situation hinders the Indians’ connection with the spirits, but the old man shows faith when he says, “Hearing, / that’s the way you listen. / The People talking, / telling the power to come to them / and pretty soon it will come” (Ortiz 5). Neither the old man nor Ortiz himself will allow the impediment of exterior forces to diminish the prolongation of their traditions.

While it may not be surprising that the Native American written tradition continues to flourish, especially considering that post-modernism advocates the study of all forms of literary study, it might be harder to think that the oral tradition continues as well. Forbes’ article contains a description of a night he spent listening to Chicano and Indian poetry in Sacramento, California, at a reading entitled “One More Canto.” He says, “The quality was excellent but more importantly the audience was extremely receptive and became actively involved. …The Indian-Chicano poetry audience responds in a way that greatly alters the nature of the poem being presented, and many poems combined music, dance, and dramatic flourishes” (21). The ability to captivate and include the audience in the oral tale is an aspect which has existed in the oral tradition since its beginning, mostly out of necessity: “As oral poetry, the song-poems must compel listeners immediately, in the presence of performance, or they will lose their audience, their right to be. The language is by definition…one generation from extinction” (Lincoln 57).

As the next generations of Native American writers continue to bring the traditions of their tribes into the twenty-first century, they face the ever-growing challenge of modernity. With the new, integrated way of life, the Native American writers, poets, and storytellers must determine what characteristics define the twenty-first century Indian in order to continue their legacies. Forced by exterior influences to be a part of the united “Native American” label, yet still holding deep within their spirits the cultural influences of their ancestors, the Native people as a whole continue to produce works which bring the words of their ancestors, the “cries of the Native Americans,” into the modern day:

The central issue is what to fuse of the new and the old, improvisations and continuations from the past….These present-day people believe in themselves as Indians and act on that belief, within their own definitions. They realize themselves within a sense of Indian community. Their Indianness is not individually seized, but tribally granted and personally carried out, as the old ones carried time down to where it is on their backs. In the older traditions, time is not passing around the people; we are time. (Lincoln 188).

By continuing the traditions of their ancestors in their writings and stories, today’s Native Americans breathe new life into a genre that easily could have been eradicated entirely. The oppression of the Native people, the constant slander of their race, the boarding schools which thrust English upon them, the forced exile of the people from their homelands, and even the grouping into the heterogeneous “Native American” were not enough to stop the spread and evolution of the literature of each tribe. Instead, as evident by the persistence of lyric poetry and performances, written poems and stories, and transcripts of centuries-old folktales and ritual stories, the genre continues to thrive.

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