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A Culture of Orality, Missing Their Voice

"Until recently, Native Americans have been treated as if they were peoples, not just without a treasure in words, but almost without words of any kind" (Huntsman, 87). This quote from Jeffrey Huntsman succinctly identifies the overwhelming absence the Native American voice has been subjected to in history, in media, and in schools. Native Americans have been regarded as savages that, as a result, must lack literature in their culture (Huntsman, 88). Even if Native Americans were to possess objects of literature, typical Western thought has hardly considered the notion of including such literature and culture into public education. But there is a plethora of benefits that come with incorporating Native American literature into schools. This paper will explore why teaching Native American literature is important and beneficial, while simultaneously unpacking the challenges that it presents. Topics include: what do literary works from the Western or Eurocentric perspective, which are the primary sources of literacy in public education, miss that Native American literature can provide (i.e. a multicultural approach, an understanding of power differences between groups, etc.? Why and how is written literacy privileged in schools and society? How do the oral tendencies of Native American literature make it challenging to teach?

A significant amount of assigned reading in education explores historical events in America. *The Great Gatsby* is set in the "golden age" of 1920s America; *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores racial tensions in America in the 1930s; *The Scarlett Letter* is placed in Puritan Boston in the 1600s; *Beloved* describes the hardships of previous African-American slaves post-Civil War.

English classes and literature about history are not strangers, and these books provide some insight into what life was like in American throughout history. Where, then, is the Native American voice in these works? Where is the voice of the indigenous people of America found? Often, the answer is nowhere. The problem with this is that the Native American perspective on historical events is absent from the discussion. As Daniel Cole writes in his article "Writing Removal and Resistance: Native American Rhetoric in the Composition Classroom," content in American history focuses on westward expansion and discovery, and the voice of the dispossessed Native Americans is ignored (123). This leads to one key benefit of incorporating Native American literature into education- the perspective of the indigenous people throughout history can be heard. Experiences outside of those of white, Christian, European populations can be read, understood, and internalized with the use of Native American literature.

Marlinda White-Kaulaity, in her piece "The Voices of Power, and the Power of Voices: Teaching with Native American Literature," identifies a number of reasons why teaching Native American literature is beneficial to students. One that she provides is it allows students to understand the historical relations between Native Americans and other groups, and thus the present-day interactions (12). This understanding can be applied to political science, public policy, law, sociology, and even more fields of study. For example, aspiring sociologists could use their understanding of historical Native American relations to study marginalized groups and how they function in a greater society.

Additionally, reading Native American literature prompts students to step outside of themselves and their experiences and learn about a culture that is different from their own. In turn, they are able to more objectively view their own culture, and understand its implications (White-Kaulaity, 14). These lessons will assist students in inter-cultural interactions for the rest of their

lives. Often times asking people, especially youth, to describe their culture is like asking a fish to describe water. If students are taught about other cultures, it offers them the opportunity to identify elements of their culture. For instance, if a class were to read about a traditional Native American ceremony, they may begin to think about the celebrations in their own cultures that they take for granted.

White-Kaulaity also includes a quote from Native American writer Simon Ortiz that summarizes in three reasons why Native American literature is beneficial to include in high school curriculum:

> "1. Indigenous cultural knowledge is an essential part of the cultural community of the present American world.
>
> 2. Land, culture, and community are intrinsically the binding elements of overall cultural connection to the natural landscape of the environment and the world as a whole.
>
> 3. The power of the Indigenous voice comes from the cultural connection to the world. Native American literature is an expression of that connection" (8).

These points reiterate key ideas that have been previously stated as to why the incorporation of Native American literature into school curriculum is exceptionally beneficial to students. The indigenous people of the United States are still here- their culture did not disappear in the same way that much of their land did. Thus, teaching students about the Cherokee and Sioux, tribes that are very much alive and relevant today, reinforces to them that these cultures are not to be neglected or overlooked. On the note of the second point Ortiz makes, very little is taught about the land that is now known as North America before the Europeans came over. Studying Native American literature and stories could offer insight to students about the origins of this land they call home, including where Native American tribes once lived before their displacement.

The typical literary work assigned in a classroom is from the Western or Eurocentric perspectives. While there are merits in a lot of these works, the inclusion of solely these perspectives provides a very biased and one-sided outlook on the world. Gregory Jay in his article "The End of American Literature: Toward a Multicultural Practice" argues that the incorporation of Native American literature in curriculum allows for history to be painted not just with elements of nationalism, but also of colonialism and imperialism (269). Who better to represent these concepts than the very population who was and is subjected to them? Daniel Cole emphasizes the benefit Native American literature can provide as it involves the Native rhetors response to dominant ideologies, such as nationalism, that "marginalized, excluded, and degraded them" (123). He goes on to say that the inclusion of such responses challenges the view of Western traditions, rhetorically and intellectually, as being the foundation and basis for literature courses, but rather as playing a role in the age-old story of oppression and resistance (123). Solely relying on literary works produced by and about dominant Western ideologies excludes and belittles the inclusion of the other voices that are inevitably a part of the same stories. By allowing traditional Western or Eurocentric literature to be represented side by side with Native American literature, the ability for a "contact zone" emerges. Cole cites this concept in his article and explains how it is a phenomenon that enables cultures to engage and clash with one another, particularly in circumstances involving power differentials (123). Ideally, these "contact zones" would provide a level playing field for discussion, where the typical abilities and disabilities of the groups are a non-factor. By employing a contact-zone approach, dominant populations and ideologies can be challenged and even dismantled, while traditionally subordinate ideologies are given space to manifest in ways they typically are unable to.

Dennis Tedlock, in an interview with a Zuni Native American, records the following statement: “When I tell these stories do you picture it, or do you just write it down?” (74). This shockingly direct inquiry raises the question- are we encouraging Native Americans to share the stories of their cultures with us in order to listen and understand, or to translate it into our preferred form of literature? As Gregory Jay puts it, the survival of Native American literature is exceptionally reliant on its translation into a written form- the translation of which was typically mediated by whites (269). Though much of Native American culture is communicated orally, its literature would not even stand a chance at making it to the classroom unless it was written down in English. This exemplifies the truth that written literacy is privileged in schools and in society. This truth does not bode well for Native Americans, as oral storytelling is a major tenant of their culture. Kenneth Roemer, in his piece “Native American Oral Narratives: Context and Continuity” highlights a number of functions that storytelling serves in Native American populations. Many of the stories are “origin stories” about how the tribe came to be (41). This allows Native Americans to understand and appreciate their history and ancestors. Other functions include identifying roles in the tribe, the divulgence of religious practices, the teaching of practical skills like hunting and growing, and the explanation of geography (42). Another function that storytelling is thought to have served, especially for Native Americans in the twentieth century, is as a familiar practice to help withstand the immense changes going on at that time (42). The existence of these indigenous peoples has been threatened time and time again, and storytelling serves an important role in unifying these groups in times of hardship.

It is not just these stories that are important to share, but all of the elements that are included in storytelling- tone of voice, intonation, facial expressions, hand movements. Orality develops organically and is structured in a way that makes it easy to remember. According to Walter Ong

in “Writing is a Technology That Restructures Thought,” this often means that stories are rather repetitive (25). The importance of this repetition is difficult to understand when one reads the story on paper and can refer back to the lines above if need be. However, when a story is spoken aloud, the intonation and facial expressions used by the storyteller aids the viewer and listener in remembering the story. By translating these Native American stories onto paper, the elements that make storytelling so unique are lost. The necessity of this translation from orality to writing stems, again, from the privilege of written literacy. What would it take for a Native American telling a story to be considered a work of literature? Maybe there is a hope, as the new fad of podcasts has set in and people are appreciating what auditory information can accomplish that writing is unable to.

There are indeed difficulties that Native American literature’s orality presents. Those rare few who do undertake the task of transcribing Native American stories into written form more often than not miss key components of the stories that are critical to understanding for the readers. Kenneth Roemer has a lot of thoughts on the components that translators miss when reprinting Native American stories. He argues that very little effort has historically gone into capturing the voice of the storyteller in these translations (46). While this has changed somewhat with the help of Dennis Tedlock’s work recording these stories and incorporating the teller’s stylistic vocalizations onto the paper, it is still something that could use more attention.

These stories also tend to be reprinted as stand-alone, without any semblance of context to support them. Without cultural and literary context, readers miss out on huge elements of the story and often times even what the story is functioning as for the Native Americans (Roemer, 39). For example, if a student was unaware that Native Americans value nature and the environment greatly in their culture, they may not understand why a religious Navajo story describes earth as the

spiritual mother. This explains a key issue that the oral nature of Native American literature presents- that consumers are usually at the mercy of the translators or interpreters of the narratives (Roemer, 44). This gives these translators a significant amount of power in how Native Americans are portrayed and how much information and context the reader of the stories will be provided with in order to understand the culture behind the narrative.

To further nuance this situation, there is the issue of cultural discrepancies between Native American tribes. There are more than 250 Native American nations that are indigenous to the United States (White-Kaulaity, 10). With these different nations come varying religious beliefs, tribal practices, traditions, languages, and ways of writing. It is clear why the role of translator and interpreter is further complicated. However, this variety of cultures should not be viewed as a challenge, but rather as indicative of the necessity that teaching literature from these peoples is. There are just as many differences between Native American nations as between other cultures, and yet they are often all grouped together as a single entity. Allowing students to unravel these misconceptions is yet another way that Native American literature can benefit them.

The truth of the matter is that the treatment of Native Americans is still abhorrent in the United States. This is not simply an issue of the past, but one that persists for as long as we allow it. When will the full integration of Native Americans take place, instead of the isolation that is typical of history? While there are indeed challenges to incorporating Native American literature in the classroom, these challenges are nothing compared to the positive impacts that the inclusion of this traditionally marginalized group would have. The most important thing to keep in mind when going forward with teaching literature from these cultures is to teach it in a way that preserves the dignity of the Native American people and dismantles ancient stereotypes about

them. When students can understand power dynamics like the ones between dominant groups and Native Americans, they will approach future interactions in a more empathetic, cognizant manner.

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