

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

A Matter of Emphasis: Teaching the "Literature" in Native American Literature Courses

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0d6640fv>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 8(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Ballinger, Franchot

**Publication Date**

1984-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## A Matter of Emphasis: Teaching the "Literature" in Native American Literature Courses

FRANCHOT BALLINGER

---

---

At one time I customarily introduced my Native American literature course with a quotation from *The Autobiography of A Papago Woman*. After singing a brief ceremonial song, Maria Chona, the subject, says, "The song is very short because we understand so much."<sup>1</sup> Seeing such cultural ellipses manifested variously in Native American literature, I proceeded to teach as if the major attractions of such compositions were the challenge of decoding cultural allusions. Soon my course could have been more accurately styled "Literature as Ethnography and Ethnohistory" than by its actual title "American Indian Song, Story, Myth." At its worst this approach made the literature only folklore, the quaint representation of dead or moribund cultures. At its best the approach allowed my students instructive insights to Native American cultures.

But as I taught I too learned. What I learned is the mainspring and thesis of this paper: A Native American literature course is best taught as a criticism of the literature.<sup>2</sup> As demonstration of my thesis I will identify the units constituting such a course, treating as I do some major critical issues raised in this approach. It is through the lens of such topics, not only through that of ethnography/ethnohistory, that students best discover what characterizes Native American literature. By no means do I intend literary criticism to be *the* purpose of the course, but it is a significant enough purpose, I believe, to warrant major emphasis without neglecting other ends as well. Moreover, I do not dis-

pute that some student audiences might require more ethnography/ethnohistory than I recommend. Nor do I deny that these are still a significant part of my course. And, finally, I am sensitive to the risk I run of seeming to advocate a perspective more consonant with the Anglo-American bias toward analysis-classification than with the Native American's synthesizing world view.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, there are good reasons for my recommending an emphasis on criticism.

Undoubtedly my earlier pedagogy of literature as ethnography had significant benefits: It eroded stereotypes about Native Americans, it demonstrated the variety (and shared experience and values) of Native American cultures and it introduced students to different cultural perspectives. But, in spite of these benefits, the pedagogy also had severe shortcomings. Discussion focussing on the ethnographic aspects of the literature led to only one level of understanding, that of the work of art as a cultural artifact or as a social document, not as a creation with intrinsic esthetic value. My most telling experience in this respect came through a student who had taken another Native American studies course before mine and who, therefore, had experienced Native American issues more broadly than some other students. After we had completed Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, the student summarily dismissed the novel by asserting, "This isn't representative of what modern American Indians think." Even disregarding the naive dogmatism of that unflinching assertion, my failure to enlarge her (and hence probably others') perception of modern and traditional Native American art was clear.

Jarold Ramsey warns us against "the interpretive pursuit of ethnographic significance [in modern Native American literature] as an end in itself."<sup>3</sup> My own experience has shown me that such a pursuit can be misleading whether in modern or traditional Native American literature. Ramsey goes on to argue that the teacher of modern Native American writing must be both ethnographer and critic. I agree. But more, my experience and the published research and analysis of the last several years suggest that the same dual role, with classroom emphasis on the critic, can and should be the teacher's proper role in any Native American literature course. My goal is to serve Native American traditions well by demonstrating the intellectual, artistic

sophistication and beauty of Native American literature on its own terms. To accomplish this goal I must break the fetters of literary ethnocentrism so that students can discover the unique creative energy in the composition and performance of Native American literature. And, more than incidentally, they will gain new insights to the nature of human verbal creativity. As a literary person in the classroom, I am mindful of the latter goal as a major responsibility.

I do not deny that in very immediate ways artistic judgements and expectations are matters of culture and are, in a sense, "ethnography." For example, most artistic literature of the printed, European-American tradition is not content with rendering action and character alone but evidences as well a subjective, introspective quality in its creation and performance, thus revealing the author's (or persona's) psyche. European-oriented readers assume this esthetic to be part of "literature," when in fact it is only a manifestation of our religious-philosophical-psychological preoccupations. In Native American literature, too, cultural experience leads to esthetics. Who can deny the influence of religious ceremony on the shape of a Navajo song? Or the influence of social mores on a Trickster tale? Michael Dorris provides an extended example of how ethnography shapes esthetics. Recounting a Tansino tale, he shows how that tribe's beliefs about porcupines, staffs and verbal communication shape the tale's imagery, dialogue and characterization.<sup>4</sup> There are many other examples, of course. Such concepts must not be ignored in the classroom. But their presence is a matter of emphasis. Finally, in a literature course, how esthetics reflect the culture or how the culture shapes esthetics must be subordinated to the esthetics themselves.

Having argued this much, I would like to discuss in a generalized fashion how my course approaches this criticism. I offer this discussion not as a model but as an example of how the course in Native American literature can fulfill the goals I have suggested. As I stated earlier I will also address a few of the important critical issues that must be included to acquaint students with this fascinating and challenging literature.<sup>5</sup> The four units in my course are: (1) oral art in the Native American tradition; (2) tribal experiences in the oral tradition; (3) bi-autobiography; (4) contemporary Native American writing.

The first unit, oral art in Native American tradition, examines the nature of the oral tradition in general. Perhaps our first question is a fundamental question of definition. How does the term "literature" in this context relate to its use in the European tradition? What are the dangers of using a term which, as R.D. Theisz reminds us, is etymologically grounded in "Littera" (letter)?<sup>6</sup> Is there a more accurate term for identifying the verbal creations of the Native American oral tradition? If we ignore the implications of etymology to use the term "literature," what kinds of compositions do we include under this rubric? Finally, we speak of Native American cultures in order to discourage generalizations about Native Americans as a whole. Are there also, therefore, Native American literatures?

Additionally, the problems of translation must be treated, for clearly the European literary tradition has influenced and continues to influence the nature of the translations students read. Among the fine discussions available, students should read Gretchen Bataille's essay, "American Indian Literature: Traditions and Translations."<sup>7</sup> Bataille shows that the issue is "not which translations to use, but rather how to make readers aware of the variations and the reasons for the variation." The reasons for variations and the degree to which translations are or are not accurate renderings of Native American poetics are topics which teach students much about creative language.

Beyond these topics, the unit's major thrust should be toward those esthetic principles that characterize the Native American tradition. Prominent among these should be the poetics of creation and performance; the respective roles of tradition, the present community and the individual in creation; when possible, the process of creation; and, finally, the role of audience in performance. From a pedagogical point of view these topics are especially important not only for themselves but also because they build the conceptual framework for the remainder of the course. For this reason, I want to be somewhat more detailed than elsewhere about the themes that students should be introduced to at this point in the term. Most importantly, students should understand that Native American literature might seem strange to them because of the esthetic expectations they have learned from the dominant Euro-American culture. The literary

esthetic of this culture comprises qualities not found in the oral art of Native Americans.

In the European esthetic ("The esthetic of reflection," as Carl Lindahl calls it), one might describe the artistic point of view as centripetal.<sup>8</sup> It is marked by an analytical introspection, a reflectiveness, that reveals the subtle complexities and sensitivities of the writer/persona's psyche. In fact, the focus of a literary work may be the creator's own mind as that individual reflects interpretively upon Self and its experience. The language of this reflection, then, is not merely influenced by the personality choosing it (as is true to a degree in oral art as well), rather language is intended and accepted as the manifestation of a unique individual. Such conditions in turn encourage the audience's interpretive engagement with the artist's mind which has been embodied with relative fixity in the printed word. Hence a "performance" of the literary work leads "back into itself," not outward to the community (Kroeber, 279). In fact the artist and the work may be totally at odds with the community and its values.

In the Native American oral tradition, on the other hand, we are not generally asked to engage with the individual artist, and there is no tradition of interpretation that leads us back into the creation itself. Rather the movement is centrifugal. First of all, it is difficult to conceive of a tale or song that is not consonant in major ways with the community's values and goals. Second, much Native American literature has as its end the well-being of the community. Kroeber illustrates such concepts in showing that the spiritual experience represented by an Ojibway dream song passes from the individual dreamer to his culture. The song "opens outward, away from itself, into ceremonial dance, into public activity, rather than concentrating into itself." Thus private psychic energy becomes public power, making the "participants effective in the natural world . . ." (Kroeber, 278-279).

Our occasional "tradition" of public "readings" notwithstanding, the European tradition assumes an audience removed in one way or another from the artist-performer and, for all practical purposes, having little or no immediate impact on creation or performance. A work might be created even if no audience for it is known to exist. Kroeber's example, and many others, shows that most creations of the oral tradition have no reason to exist but for the culture, the audience, within which it grew or was

created. Given such circumstances, it is understandable that the language of oral art is shaped largely by the community's tradition as it hands down a tale or song rather than by individual temperament. Community might actually do more than govern artistic point of view; community or audience might have a hand in "creation" itself. For example, the Native American audience to a story-telling—immediately present as it is—may spontaneously influence the manner of tale-telling. Or members of a religious society might participate in the shaping of a ceremonial song generated by an individual.

Within such a conceptual framework specific literary topics can be developed: literary types, themes, stylistic traits, etc.—insofar as any of these can be generalized about. There are too many subjects to develop at any length here, but a few brief examples will suggest the range of possibilities.

Repetition is, of course, a stylistic trait to be found in much Native American literature, especially songs and prayers. Euro-American esthetics may find the repetition tiresome, even childish, but looked at from the Native American perspective, it is anything but. Paul Gunn Allen argues convincingly that repetition in Native American ceremony "serves to entrance and to unify—both the participants and the ceremony" by creating "a state of consciousness best described as oceanic."<sup>9</sup> Repetition as part of ceremonial observance services "to transcend [the illusory dichotomy between the isolated individual and the external world], unite people with the All-Spirit [as well as with each other], and from a position of unity within this larger self, effect certain results such as healing one who is ill, ensuring that natural events move in their accustomed way or bringing prosperity to the tribe" (Allen, 125). This aspect of style, then, has performance and audience-directed goals.

Or, for an example of how style is influenced by audience needs, consider the distinction commonly made by Native Americans between mythic and non-mythic stories on the basis of characters and temporal framework. A myth recounts the experience of deities and mythic beings (such as the first people and cultural heroes) in the primordial world before the world took its present shape. Non-mythic stories deal with human beings in their present form experiencing our world, that is, the recognizable world as transformed from the primordial world (this experience might include the supernatural). Through the use of

---

various stylistic devices early in the story (for example, formulaic language and stereotyped order for introducing details), a Native American storyteller might alert the audience to which kind of story it is about to hear.<sup>10</sup>

## 2

Such topics as these of the first unit will focus on general principles and therefore will draw upon cultural specifics only for examples. The next unit, however, should focus on a selection of literature from various Native American cultures and therefore is best organized around culture areas. Obviously this unit requires the most ethnography and ethnohistory, but as I argued earlier only to illuminate the literature; the literature should never become the means of learning the ethnography of a tribe. The major impetus in this unit is toward particularizing the concepts established for the oral tradition by showing how they apply to specific cultures as well as how a culture may diverge from the generalizations. Thus, if one discussed in unit one the principles of fictive ritualizing, that is, the embodiment of ritual elements in fictional form, the ritualizations present in a Navajo tale might be compared with those in a Nez Perce tale. Furthermore, students can discover specific cultural differences and similarities in how songs and stories are transmitted from one person to another and in the conditions of creation and performance, including the important relationship between material, performer and audience.

In spite of the conditions that necessitate students' reading translations of Native American literature, it is possible for the course to lead to reasonably specific esthetic-critical understanding. Teaching this unit, I find the work of such scholars as Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hymes, Karl Kroeber, et. al. invaluable. In fact, along with the readings in Native American literature and criticism, I have chosen Kroeber's *Traditional American Indian Literature: Texts and Interpretations* as a text,<sup>11</sup> for the essays, by various hands, address many of the concerns I've referred to, thereby sustaining our emphasis on criticism. A Tedlock essay, for example, both shows the presence in Zuni of a sort of exegetical tradition and illuminates formal differences between ritual and non-ritual versions of a myth. In another of this book's fine essays, Barre Toelken and Tacheeni Scott analyze the poetics of



Navajo narrative and include material on audience response and influence on the storyteller.

With the exception of the Kroeber collection I have intentionally excluded reference to specific texts and reading assignments. There are a number of very useful titles that individual instructors can choose from. I do, however, have one recommendation regarding assignments and selections. As these first two units explore the esthetics of the Native American tradition, we must guard against presenting this tradition as an expired past by supporting our discussion of principles with recently collected materials whenever possible. In this way students will see that the oral tradition which they are studying is not fossilized language, a quaint remnant of a literary species that has succumbed to a more "fit" European tradition. Oral art is very much a living tradition among Native Americans in spite of the print-oriented culture which surrounds them.

How much emphasis these first units receive in the entire course depends naturally on the individual instructor's goals. I believe that a generous allotment of time should be left to recent literate representatives of the Native American tradition.

### 3

Biography and autobiography are literate forms which, although not a part of the Native American oral tradition, have long been quite popular with Anglo-American readers. Assignments in these forms can be made so as to continue the study of one or more culture areas discussed in the second unit. For example, if the Pueblo Indians have been studied, one might assign Leo Simmons's *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*. There is, of course, some critical question if these forms are Native American literature in any sense but the topical. This is a question I won't presume to answer, but one certainly meriting classroom discussion. For example, to what degree is *Black Elk Speaks* the Anglo-American John Neihardt's story and to what degree is it true to Black Elk's own sense of his life and how it ought to be recounted?

A discussion of the literary and cultural issues raised by Native American bio-autobiography is instructive also as a transition from the units on the oral tradition to a unit on contemporary Native American writing. In bi-autobiography the relationship

between a Native American subject and the writer—whether non-Native American or the Native American person adopting this tradition of European literate introspection—parallels the problems the contemporary Native American writer faces. In fact the creating of either form might well represent the two selves the modern Native American artist must be: the Native American with a story to tell, aware of a non-Indian audience yet sensitive to the aura of one's own culture, the audience that makes the story possible and necessary; and a creator using an alien tradition to address also another culture. Balancing these selves is a complex creative challenge that few non-Native American artists must or choose to confront.

## 4

Discovering how Native American writers have dealt with this challenge is the purpose of the last unit. I recommend either of two formats here. The first allows a brief literary history of Native American writing of the last century with reading selections chosen to illustrate Bernd C. Peyer's contention: "From an imitative style with a predominately self-effacing or at best self-justifying content directed entirely at members of the dominant society (colonial literature) there has emerged a new and original style with a self-assertive context progressively more oriented towards an in-group reading public as well (national literature)."<sup>12</sup>

I prefer the second format in which a representative selection of contemporary writers demonstrates that many Native Americans have accommodated themselves to the "audience" of European tradition while remaining mindful of their own traditions. There is a host of fascinating critical themes that grow from the work of such writers.

Alan Velie, for example, has suggested that James Welch's poetry makes modern surrealism consistent with the Native American tradition of basing spiritual life on vision.<sup>13</sup> Discussing the degree of compatibility or incompatibility between these two traditions can reveal much about the complex creative infusions that motivate an artist.

Leslie Silko and N. Scott Momaday have also fused Anglo-American and Native American literary traditions with sensitive awareness of their audiences. Anyone who has read Silko's

*Ceremony* must be struck by the skill with which she introduces the necessary Laguna background so that the non-Pueblo reader has the sense of sharing Laguna mythic experience. In part she accomplishes this by interweaving Laguna myth with some of the stylistic conventions of fictional realism to dramatize the intersection of the sacred and the mundane that is reflected in Navajo and Pueblo myth through characterization, symbol and structure. At the same time she creates a thematic and symbolic resonance in the tradition of the esthetic of reflection, an inducement to the recurring discovery of the kind of complex patterns associated with the benefits of stabilized, printed language.

In *The Way To Rainy Mountain*, Momaday uses (in ways consistent with modern Euro-American esthetics) ellipses and juxtapositions of images and themes from his tradition so as to create an illusion of shared values between writer and audience. It is also interesting to see Momaday manipulate the basic symbol of the journey as discovery, a familiar enough symbol in all cultures. What at first seems a European-like odyssey of the self proves to be the traditional Native American spiritual journey, as in the vision quest, by which one confirms the reality of the supra-personal as the governing force of life. And, finally, the introductory essay, while undoubtedly informed by Native American perception, has many characteristics of the philosophically discursive essay of the European tradition.

The nature of what I have called the Native American writer's "accomodation" should not be misconstrued. The word is by no means pejorative, for it carries no suggestions of compromised values. Generally the accomodation to two audiences has not been to the detriment of Native American traditions. Psychic identification with tradition and faith in tradition are too intense, as Duane Niatum suggests in his poem, "Raven and The Fear of Growing White."

When the legends cannot feed the village fire,  
When mother spruce answers no child in the dark,  
When hawk fails to reach his shadow on the river,  
When First Woman beats hummingbird to the earth,  
And salmon swims the river until his bones shatter,  
When otter steals the long awaited promises of stars,  
And blue jay stops naming each new storm,  
He will end his fear of growing white.<sup>14</sup>

The import of my remarks is not that accommodation has been a matter of packaging Native American tradition in Anglo-American esthetics, rather that elements of the Anglo-American esthetic have been adapted to the demands of Native American experience, a difficult and not always successful process. In a different context, Joy Harjo, Creek poet, recognizes as much when she writes:

We learn to identify the world by language that we speak. At this point in my life I know only English well, not enough Creek (Muskogee), and some Navajo. As I grow older, write more, sense more, I have come to feel that English is not enough. It is a male language, not tribal, not spiritual enough. It is hard to speak certain concepts, certain visions, certain times and places in the English language.

Just as English is inadequate to express certain Native American perceptions, so too are aspects of Euro-American esthetics. When this is so, it makes for another area of rich critical exploration.

Watching contemporary Native Americans discover an expressive national literature which still communicates with the dominant culture takes us, I believe, to the very heart of their literary endeavors. To students raised academically on the sometimes unsettling diet of culturally alienated writers of the Euro-American tradition, writers whose creating often seems stimulated more by self than by community and whose subject matter is frequently the conventions of art rather than the communal experience, such writers as Silko and Momaday demonstrate that there are alternative ways of viewing self and community and that words can grow from and lead to shared experience and values.

In conclusion, such a course as I have advocated gives a student not only an appreciation of the sophistication and beauty of *Native American literature*, but also treats the well-springs and functions of all literature through a discussion of esthetic problems in relation to culture. The student learns that literature—past and present—is living language, not merely the rigor mortis of the printed page, that this living language of literature is born from observance of esthetic principles as well as from the truths it dramatizes, and that literature lives through and for the people for whom it is created.

## NOTES

1. Ruth Underhill, *The Autobiography of A Papago Woman*. Vol. 46 (Menosha, Wisconsin: The American Anthropological Association, 1936), 23.

2. In this paper, I mean by "criticism" the study of the esthetic principles that govern the creation, performance and ends of a verbal composition that we call literary; that characterize the types of esthetic verbal creations; and that demonstrate how individual works fit in the "canon" of which it is a part, i.e., how the work fits the accepted esthetic modes of its culture.

3. "The Teacher of Modern American Indian Writing as Ethnographer and Critic," *College English*, 41 (October 1979), 165.

4. "Native American Literature in an Ethno-historical Context," *College English*, 41 (October 1979), 150-151.

5. You will note among the issues a definite bias toward those that touch in one way or another on the relationship of creator/performer to audience. This bias does not completely characterize my classroom approach. In this paper it allows me to confront directly the problem of esthetic expectations—Native American or non-Native American—that students must contend with on their way to learning.

6. *Perspectives on Teaching American Indian Literature*. (Spearfish, South Dakota: Center of Indian Studies, Black Hills State College, 1977), 8-10. Much of this paragraph is based on Theisz's discussion.

7. "American Indian Literature: Traditions and Translations." *MELUS*, vol. 6, no. iv (Winter 1979), 20-21.

8. Much of the next three paragraphs is based on the specifics and implications of Lindahl's "On The Borders of Oral and Written Art," *Folklore Forum*, 11 (1978), 94-123; and Karl Kroeber's "Poem, Dream and the Consuming of Culture," *Georgia Review*, vol. 32, no. 2 (Summer 1978), 266-280. Further references to Kroeber's essay are to author and page in the text.

9. "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Indian Perspective on American Indian Literature" in Abraham Chapman, ed., *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 120.

10. See, for example, Dennis Tedlock, "Pueblo Literature: Style and Verisimilitude" in Alfonso Ortiz, ed., *New Perspectives On The Pueblo* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), 219-242.

11. Karl Kroeber, ed. *Traditional American Indian Literature: Texts and Interpretations*. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).

12. "The Importance of Native American Authors." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3 (Fall 1981), 5.

13. Alan Velie, ed. *American Indian Literature: An Anthology*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 274.

14. *The Greenfield Review*, vol. 9, nos. 3-4 (Winter 1981-82), 79. The following Harjo quotation is from her "Biopoetics Sketch For *Greenfield Review*" in the same volume, page 8.