

Introduction

Roots In Story

Why teach Native American literatures? Eight years ago in my Freshman English class, a quiet and slight girl, with long hair, braided and banded, would softly move into her seat, near the front but off to one side. Day after day, her downcast eyes and firm-set mouth would say, "Leave me alone." If she spoke at all, it was in quiet, short responses. But when she wrote, she told stories of her brother's attempted suicide and stories of a nephew, just under two, who had smothered to death the previous summer. She told of her mother's drinking, of her eight siblings, of an absent father, and she sometimes told of her cousins-many of whom were also mixed bloods-living one hundred miles north on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Browning, Montana. Betsy wrote poetry, too. "Feelings on paper," she called it, feelings upon feelings, barbed and penetrating, filling page after page, no matter what the assignment.

As a sophomore, Betsy enrolled in our Montana Literature class. We sat in a circle, but her chair wanted to turn out. Still reluctant to share with the class, she found the seminar format threatening. But she wanted an A. So when her turn came to present her experience with Percy Bullchild's telling of the Blackfeet story, "Napi and the Sun's Leggings" in *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, she moved to stand behind the podium. From there she told us about Napi, the Blackfeet transformer and culture hero whom Creator Sun had entrusted to take care of life on Earth. Napi is "always roaming about for adventure or mostly for food" and always ends up "doing something foolish." In this particular story, Napi repeatedly tries to run away with a pair of "red-winged woodpecker feather fringed leggings," yet every morning he wakes to find himself back in the same tipi where he has first found the leggings, back in the tipi of Creator Sun who gives Napi a final warning: "There is a restriction on those red-winged woodpecker feather fringed leggings of mine and if that restriction isn't complied with, you shall find out the consequences.... Remember and take my advice to you, don't wear them just any time, unless your heart is all given to your Creator" (Bullchild 1990, 47). But Napi disregards

Creator Sun's warning, and, for the sole purpose of admiring himself, he puts on the leggings. As soon as Napi's feet touch the ground, the dry grass begins to burn, and he can escape only when he jumps into the creek. At the end of her retelling, Betsy shared the most important values she found exhibited in this story-honesty and respect. Then, with wide eyes and a still cautious smile, she closed her presentation and said, "Percy Bullchild is my relative."

From that day I watched Betsy's head lift to smile and interact with her classmates, who carried their own varieties of mixed heritages. She was moving into an older new world, confirming an identity rooted in place and story. And the other students' responses to her "Indianness" grew more and more positive, evidence of their growth as well. From the stories they read of her Blackfeet people, they learned that Indian means much more than staggered falls down bar-front steps, much more than "eighteen money"** spent fast on friends and family, and much more than fatherless children with smudged faces. Each student began to realize that being Indian can mean valuing personal sacrifice, respect for others, and generosity. It can mean knowing the absolute necessity of community and the intimate connection to place, knowing the importance of law within ancient tribal texts, and knowing the actual interdependence of all things living. Being Indian can mean Blackfeet, Cheyenne, Crow, or any of more than 500 different Native societies in America today. All of the students began to realize that many of the strong Native cultural values they had found in story were present-or missing-from their own lives. At the end of the year, one of Betsy's classmates wrote, "These stories have certainly destroyed many images I've had of the Old West, images drawn by movies and books, invariably written by whites."

When Betsy was a senior, I heard about her telling Napi stories to her teammates on the volleyball bus. Voices and visions from her ancestral landscape-not generated and not taught, but affirmed in a public school classroom-had helped to provide her with a positive identity and with the spiritual strength to survive both her real and imagined fears. The Blackfeet stories she had read and heard in class had also proved the significance of her relationship with her aging Blackfeet grandmother. Last year, Betsy shared with me this poem she had read at her grandmother's funeral.

* Although the situation may differ from tribe to tribe, on the Ft. Peck and Blackfeet Reservations, "eighteen money" refers to claim money, lease money, per capita payments based on tribally-owned enterprises, or tribal money that is held in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) until the person is eighteen.

Just the other day
I met a woman
with so much life and vigor
I watched her sit for hours
hunched over buckskin beading
her coal black hair streaked
with gray
her hands working patiently with
the needle

Just the other day
I met a woman
who entranced me with her Napi tales
her voice wise with age
pulling me into the story
Just the other day
I held her hand
Singing Silent Night softly to her
till her eyelids heavy from fatigue
slowly slid shut

Just the other day
I had to say good-bye
to a woman I had met not so long ago
my memories held locked away
inside my mind
my eyes puffy from tears
my soul hurting for our loss
my heart relieved for now,
there is no more pain in my
Grandma's soft brown eyes.

--Lizabeth Staber (Blackfeet)

Why teach Native American literatures? The answer is rooted in story. A few years ago, in preparation for reading a play about Norwegian immigrants, I asked my freshman students to talk with their parents and grandparents about their ethnic or national origins and about the circumstances of their ancestors' immigration to America. A few students argued, unwilling or afraid to communicate with either parents or grandparents, while others expressed their frustration with the assignment because they were certain no one at home would know about "immigration" or "ancestors," "places or stories." Eventually they accepted the assignment, and I prepared to assign parts for reading aloud when William, in the last seat, middle row, raised his hand. He asked, "Does Indian count?"

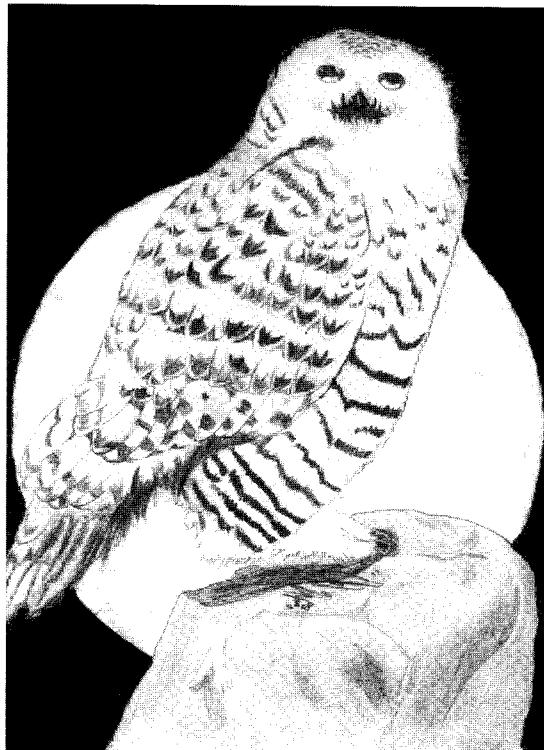
Does Indian count! Struck with the painful irony in his words, I stood speechless, overcome with contradictory emotions of shame, relief, and gratitude for the simple yet powerfully complex question that suddenly exploded into multiple voices and images before me. "Did the Indians' migratory patterns make them immigrants?" "Did the forced removal of Indians from their ancestral lands to prisoner of-war camps and reservations make them immigrants?" "Do my ancestors' deaths from starvation and disease count?" "Do the 'places and stories' of my mother's people count?" "If Indians count, how do they count?" "Does my mother and her dark skin count?" "Do the boarding school experiences of my mother, my father, my grandparents and great grandparents count?" "Do I, sitting in the fourth seat, third row, with my less-than-average grades and my atypical

thinking patterns, count?" "Does my confusion over my identity-white, brown, Scottish, Chippewa/free, son of the mountains and son of alcohol-count?" "Do my feelings of frustration, anger, shame, pride, hope, and joy count?"

Like nearly a fourth of our students in this small Montana community, over one hundred miles from the nearest reservation, William is Native American, a mixed-blood, of Turtle Mountain Chippewa/Cree ancestry. He has hidden his Native heritage and has denounced its value to his peers, hoping to avoid insult and ridicule from those who would associate him with "lazy, irresponsible, drunken savagery." But on this day-hoping not to hear the same answer he and his ancestors had heard for hundreds of years-- William raised his hand and asked, "Does Indian count?"

Later in the school year, William, age 14, wrote and illustrated the following poem:

An Owl	Hoots	in	the
night sitting	on a branch	watching	over
our sick	souls; and when		we
die he	reports to our		family
that we	are gone		and
that	he lifted		us to heaven.



When I asked him to share with the class how he had heard this story-a story similar to one I had heard from a Chippewa/Cree woman the previous year, William smiled and said, "My mother told me, and her mother told her, and her mother told her, and ... that's how I know this story."

At the end of the unit, we posted William's poem on the classroom wall with other students' poetry. The following week, in an essay response to reading *Mourning Dove: A Salishan Autobiography*, Amanda, age 16, commented, "another value of [Indian peoples] is their culture and the way their traditions are followed and respected. As I read [William's] poem, I realized that the spiritual aspect has never left the tribe's beliefs."

Why teach Native American literatures? In an Indian literature class at the University of Montana, I listened to Salish/German poet Debra Earling talk about the ways "education changes the story of your life." I wondered about our educational system in America and the ways that education has affected young people of Native heritage, especially those who are separated from their ancestral landscapes and communities. If their experiences in our public school classrooms have the power to change the stories of their lives, what happens to children who don't hear the stories of their own people? And if they do, what happens when their teachers and texts in the public schools regard those stories as inferior, obsolete, representing wrong values of property and government, and representing inadequate means for survival? What happens to children whose public education is rooted in an alien culture? How do the stories of their lives change? What do they learn to value, what do they learn to reject, and what do they learn about survival when they don't ever hear or read about the suffering, loss, and endurance of their own people? How do they establish positive identities for themselves when voices within their culture are ignored, twisted, and suppressed, and when voices outside their culture decide for them who they are and who they should become? What happens to the relationships among children from differing cultures within classrooms? Do the children from the dominant culture develop an understanding of and respect for the similarities as well as the differences among all peoples? Or do they learn to practice discrimination against all cultures different from their own? I know the answers to these questions-I see their faces at school each day.

Today more than ever before, many educators recognize the undeniable right of children to locate their identities in the stories and experiences of those who have gone before, and the right of all young people to experience the storied landscapes of surrounding peoples and cultures. Consequently, educators are requesting more literatures from multicultural resources. To meet this growing

need, publishing companies are mass-producing textbooks and literatures by and about American Indian peoples.

However, this increased production and availability of resources has not eased the classroom teacher's selection process. Instead, the challenge and responsibility for presenting meaningful and appropriate Native American literatures to students of all ages and races has become more important, yet increasingly more difficult. So much of the new literature represents non-Native cultural voices and is written and promoted apart from any specific tribal or cultural context. Also, many of the new, as well as the older popular literatures, eclipse truths about Native American peoples and reinforce negative stereotypes, which deny the individuality and the humanity of Indian peoples. Whenever we use books and stories that fail to represent American Indian experiences honestly, we risk perpetuating a dangerously racist cultural isolationism.

I realize the power of those stereotypical images whenever I encourage my non-Native students to search for truths outside the boundaries of their history books, because they frequently grow

tense and defensive. However, I have also watched that tension dissolve as they learn to expose and challenge the popular "Indian" stereotypes as well as the stereotypes they themselves live with every day. I have watched the shadow continue to fade whenever young people such as Betsy, William, and Amanda hear and read stories told and written by Native Americans themselves, especially those writers and storytellers from the Native students' own cultural heritages. And when students like Betsy and William bring their rooted stories into the classroom, I watch the shadow disappear. In the 1994 publication *Crossing the Mainstream: Multicultural Perspectives in Teaching Literature*, Eileen Iscoff Oliver provides an excellent, exhaustively researched rationale for the study of multicultural literatures by *all* students. She writes:

Everyone—the many students of color across our country and everybody else—is entitled to know the history and pain and beauty of the world as it has been recorded by artists who come from all of the strands that make up American literary society. . . . May we read, learn, and grow from these experiences and teach our students to do the same. (Oliver 1994, 11)

Why teach Native American literatures? All our students, especially those from mixed family, cultural, or ethnic heritages, struggle to establish individual and unique identities. Nevertheless, by facilitating their growth and understanding of themselves and the worlds around them, teachers can help them confront life with personal dignity, with compassion for themselves and for others, and with hope for a meaningful future. Through Native American oral and written literatures, students can develop a sincere appreciation for the artistic expression and for

the validity and serious complexity of each Native American's personal, cultural, and historical experience, while they also can learn to say with conviction, "Yes, Indian counts!"

Philosophy, Scope and Challenge

In his introductory essay to *Native North American Literature*, Joseph Bruchac writes: "Clearly, the contemporary North American Native experience is a varied one, and the Native writers of Canada and the United States share in the complexity of that experience, just as they share in the richness of the many traditions which make up North American Native literature today. It is a tree with many branches, a tree that grows on the plains and in the mountains, in the deserts and in the cities, a tree which is, through it all, still rooted strong in this land" (Bruchac 1994, xiv). Out of respect for the "rooted" and complex experiences of Native people, *Roots and Branches-a resource among many-has been written with the following philosophy in mind:*

To respect Native voices who speak from a tribal ethnic consciousness as well as from an awareness of the European American cultural impact on them and on their peoples, and to support each student's search for his or her cultural ties to ancient and contemporary writers and storytellers.

Roots and Branches is a resource of themes, lessons, and bibliographies from many cultures and regions. Although the length of the bibliographies prohibits an extensive list of recommended uses for the selections, suggestions for use with other literatures and with themes normally covered in language arts programs are incorporated in several annotations. Also, *Roots and Branches* recognizes various contexts from which these literatures have grown. The three maps in Appendix A provide an introduction to geographical contexts where teachers can find the current location of tribes and reservations as well as the approximate location at the time of European contact. The brief history of federal Indian policy in Appendix B provides a summary of significant dates, events, and their consequences for all people of Native American ancestry. This is especially important since most of the literatures from the last two hundred years reflect the impact of these policies on individual lives. The stereotypes defined in Appendix C are an essential context to recognize, because the proliferation of negative and unrealistic images, beginning with the first European contact, has impacted the lives of all Native Americans and has prevented non-Native people from knowing the truths about Native Americans as individuals. In Appendix D, the Montana tribal philosophies provide strong contradictions to the stereotypes defined in Appendix C. Although they are examples of spiritual and cultural contexts that can

especially assist students who read Montana-based literatures, teachers and students in other areas may use them as examples of what they can discover in their own regions and communities. Since *Roots and Branches* began with the seven Montana tribal cultures and communities, a list of Montana regional publications is included in Appendix E. As a result of ancestral and forced migration patterns, of federal boarding school and relocation programs, and of non-Native encroachment into Native lands, the Montana peoples share cultures, stories, histories, and relatives with Native peoples from across America and Canada. Consequently, the list grew to encompass not only texts and themes from Montana and from the Northwest, North Central, and Plains regions, but from all over the North American continent.

Reading beyond my own cultural and literary boundaries, I found it necessary to investigate the critical landscapes and traditions of Native American cultures. Chapter 2, "Historical and Cultural Literary Contexts," represents the summary of my research and experience with these literatures and cultures. In no way can this summary speak for all Native American traditions, nor can it address all readers of Native American literatures. Instead, I hope that teachers and students who use it as a guideline will establish their own understandings and comparisons as they hear and read literatures from their surrounding Native cultures and landscapes.

There are limitations to this book. Since it cannot provide complete cultural contexts for each work, teachers have the responsibility to educate themselves and to encourage and support their students' own research as they use Native American literatures. In fact, the search is continual and critical. Whenever possible, research should begin with the important primary resources: individuals in local tribal communities, such as elders, Native educators, tribal education directors, tribal culture committees, tribal colleges, and Native American studies departments in regional colleges and universities. Students can listen to tribal leaders tell about the role of story in their communities, and teachers can invite oral historians, elders, and tribal storytellers into the classroom to teach students about their cultural philosophies as well as contemporary issues in their communities. When making connections with tribal peoples, educators should respect the right of all people to be reimbursed for their expertise. Watching Montana Native peoples give tobacco, beaded pins, blankets, and star quilts, as well as monetary gifts, I have observed the great respect they have for the practice of honoring individuals who share themselves for the benefit of the community.

A note about terminology is in order here. I have used the terms "Native American" and "Indian" interchangeably for two reasons. Many people regard "Indian" as a derogatory misnomer "Columbus's mistake"-and they prefer to use the term "Native American," in an attempt to "set things right" and to demonstrate long-neglected respect. On the other hand, University of Montana professor

Debra Earling maintains that Native people, having survived five hundred years of genocide, alienation, and discrimination, have given dignity to the term "Indian." Since most Native people regard themselves first as members of tribal nations and second as "Native American" or "Indian," I have made references in *Roots and Branches* to specific tribal affiliations of individual storytellers and writers whenever possible. However, accurate identification of nation names is also problematic because the French, Spanish, and English conquerors and the agents of the federal government mistranslated and misnamed them. Today, many of those misnomers, such as Sioux, Gros Ventres, and Crow, remain "legal" and familiar. As I attempted to resolve these issues for the purposes of this book, I relied on publishers' and distributors' designations, on references within the texts themselves, on whatever individual storytellers and writers called themselves, and on Native consultants. As a result of my effort to rely primarily on designations within or in association with individual texts, occasional spelling variations exist within this resource. I have also avoided assigning what some scholars might consider "culturally appropriate" nation names, especially when the texts or writers themselves suggest differences.

Roots and Branches does not pretend to be the ultimate scholarly work on Native American literature. In no way does it address all the issues that derive from teaching specific kinds of literatures, but readers will find in this book lists of works by individuals who have made major contributions to the critical study of Native American literatures. For teachers across the continent reading this text, I hope it will stimulate the desire to walk through areas unfamiliar (and yes, scary) to them in order to broaden their own and their students' world views. I hope it will help teachers find ways to integrate Native American literary traditions into language arts classes, as well as provide access to resources that will increase teachers' and students' awareness of the Native American contributions to our national literary history. I also hope that other books will be written from a variety of geographical areas, specifically respecting their particular and unique tribal cultures.

Works Cited

- Bruchac, Joseph. 1994. "A Living Tree with Many Roots: An Introduction to Native North American Literature." In *Native North American Literature*, ed. Janet Witalec. Detroit, MI: Gale Research, Inc.
- Bullchild, Percy. 1990. "Napi and the Sun's Leggings." In *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, eds. William Kittredge and Annick Smith. Helena: The Montana Historical Society Press.
- Oliver, Eileen Iscoff. 1994. *Crossing the Mainstream: Multicultural Perspectives in Teaching Literature*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.