

**Conversations in Story(ality)**

by

Amanda Lynch Morris

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Auburn University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama  
August 9, 2010

Keywords: American Indian rhetorics, pedagogy, writing studies, narrative theory,  
Native American studies, comedy

Copyright 2010 by Amanda Lynch Morris

Approved by

Hilary Wyss, Chair, Associate Professor of English  
Michelle Ann Sidler, Associate Professor of English  
Stewart Whittemore, Assistant Professor of English

## Abstract

In this dissertation, I introduce and define my new term, story(ality), which requires refocused attention on the truths available through nonfiction stories told, written, and performed in a contact zone, which is a social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other. All of the texts used in this dissertation exist in contact zones and are either true nonfiction experiential tales or pretend to be, and all of these texts have the potential to alter the recipient's perception of reality and truth. The project begins with the problematic text *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*, a text that pretends to represent truth and reality, then the dissertation moves on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century to an examination of Native American story practitioners in two non-academic fields: stand-up comedy and web design, and then concludes with a review of helping students use rhetorical sovereignty in a basic composition class to learn more about their own stories and understand their own truths and realities from a new perspective. Further, through analysis of written and digital texts, performances, interviews, and student writing, I explore how Native peoples construct their identities for both Native and non-Native audiences. I complicate these constructions by considering how a white woman's version of Native identity can be equally influential for the right audience compared to the identities constructed by Native individuals, as well as suggesting how effectively contemporary Native story practitioners achieve cross-cultural understanding in different genres. In addition, I also propose that the Native American experiential theory of rhetorical sovereignty has the potential to help students construct and control their own identities and stories. My goal is to obtain a deeper understanding of the rhetorical choices in the nonfiction stories of contemporary Native

intellectuals as they use story (written, verbal, performed), memory, and technology to construct identity and create alliances across multiple communities.

Ultimately, this dissertation connects the humor of stand-up comedians, the technological storytelling capability of a sovereign tribal nation, and rhetorical skills of different Native story practitioners. To connect these diverse groups, I examine their communication methods through the lens of story(ality) and the complicated issue of control. Consequently, this dissertation offers the fields of Native American Studies and Composition and Rhetoric a new term that privileges story, storytellers of nonfiction experience, and changing perceptions of reality. Finally, I call for a more critical engagement with Native American nonfiction works in the composition classroom as a more effective method for students to learn more fruitfully and completely about their own stories.

## Acknowledgments

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the constant support, encouragement, and advice of my committee, family, and friends. Specifically, I would like to thank my chair, Hilary Wyss, for always being in my corner and consistently providing sound and sensible advice in all matters, committee member Michelle Sidler for always supporting my teaching ideas, and committee member Stewart Whittemore for coming on board this project at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour and for providing substantive feedback that clarified many thoughts. As to the content herein, I am utterly indebted to my interview subjects and my students for willingly answering my questions and engaging in numerous conversations that deepened my knowledge and challenged my own ideas, thus shaping this project into something much more exciting than I could have ever predicted. In addition, my parents may not always understand what drives me to make risky and crazy decisions (like pursuing a PhD at this age), but they are a source of much comfort and advice whenever I need them, forever reminding me that they are so proud of me and this is all worth it. Finally, my friends. Oh, my friends. Although I have a wide acquaintance that I value greatly, there are a few individuals who deserve special mention. When I say I would not have successfully completed this journey without the following individuals in my life, I am not overstating. Their humor, good hearts, common sense, willingness to listen and offer ideas, wisdom, and sympathy has brought me much joy, relief, and sanity during this long journey: Victoria Lisle, Amanda Haberstroh, Robin Gosser, Nancy Noe, and Craig Morris. My friends, if you ever need me, I am there.

## Preface

I am a 40-year-old American/Scottish/Irish woman of the colonizing class and my path has led me here. As an adopted child in a privileged home, a high school rebel, I chafed under authority and was a stubborn aggressor. I left home at 18, started working and putting myself through school. I spent eight years working in radio and advertising, attending night classes at Point Park University in downtown Pittsburgh. Ad agencies provide plenty of perks but deaden the spirit and kill the soul. I saved up \$3,000 and quit one Christmas. I became a freelance journalist and traveled all over talking to people, learning and sharing their stories in various written forms. I became interested in Native American culture and history on a trip to North Dakota for a wedding that ended in furthering the journey to Yellowstone National Park, which resulted in a knee-bent-in-mud engagement overlooking Old Faithful. *Massacre at Wounded Knee*, and *The Long Death* (and *Death in Yellowstone*); these are the texts I brought back with me and after reading them, thought there must be more to the story. So I delved.

Delving meant searching, researching, suggesting stories to editors, seeking out the ndn (modern-day term for American “Indian”, often used by Native peoples to distinguish themselves from those individuals from India or simply to express Native pride) presence in Pittsburgh. Oh yes. There are Native peoples in Pittsburgh – Lenni Lenape, to be specific. One opportunity grew out of another. Covering the annual Thunder Mountain Powwow one year for the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* led me to meet a visiting Lakota woman whose husband was a holy man. After talking with me in my journalist mode, she broke out and invited me to join her and two friends for an inipi. It was the most intense spiritual experience of my life. I don’t want

to be Native and have no desire to appropriate anything; however, this and other personal experiences and readings have moved me, inspired me, intrigued me. To say otherwise would be a lie.

Inspiration can move people to change, if they are open. After severely breaking my right ankle and lower leg in 2003 and being told I might never walk normally again, I was ready for a change. Teaching at writers' conferences moved me to realize how much I enjoyed teaching. My path led me back to school and a Master's degree. Pushing through painful physical therapy on pure willpower, I regained my ability to walk normally. My marriage took a back seat while I explored the West one summer, desperate to recover my spirit and sense of joy from two years of stress, work, and pain. While in Yellowstone for three months working as a grill cook and then dormitory manager cleaning toilets, bathrooms, and public spaces, I read Native authors, Native scholarly texts, Native poets, and non-Native histories of Native peoples in my free time, in addition to hiking through pain, and exploring the park through photography. I wanted to learn more about *that* story – the one I wasn't taught in my upper-middle-class high school of “academic excellence.” What I learned made me angry and feel cheated. I processed the knowledge, absorbed the stories, and was determined to move forward. Auburn's warm people, good program, excellent funding, and warm weather attracted me – no ice to break bones on here.

Warm weather is not a reason to pick a graduate school, so the grad school advice columns say. But this is my story, my path, my journey. I make my own rules. I arrived here with one plan, which has since evolved into the current (and very different) project. Even my marriage ending will not stop me; we are on different paths and honor each other's potential, desire, drive, motivation. Entering as a literature specialist, desiring to compare early Native

American writing to early slave narratives, my project has evolved (partially by necessity and partially by changing interests) into the current exploration and a specialty in composition and rhetoric. I am a multi-disciplinary approach.

Exploring these Native scholars and trying to honor tribally-specific cultures, constantly aware of my position as outsider, colonizer, beneficiary of colonization, while trying to achieve that ever-elusive goal of saying something “new” has been challenging. But I am stubborn and this is my story. My motivation is a sincere interest to learn more about how these impressive authors use the language of stories and interject their voices into an intellectual lava flow that at times seems intent on de-storying and un-validating their perspectives and ideas.

Ideas are not static; they are creative contributions to the world, to a field of study, born of imagination. I am not ndn, but I am an idea woman with a vivid imagination, inspired by Native and non-Native stories, including these scholarly and non-scholarly nonfiction stories of continuance and survivance, disruption and joy. Contributing to an ongoing conversation is daunting, but I am stubborn. Please accept this contribution as the respectful offering it is meant to be.

- Amanda Lynch Morris  
9 Aug 2010

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iv
Preface .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: Conversations in Story(ality) .....	32
Chapter 2: Rhetorical Survivance Online: Osage Nation Story(ality) in a Digital Contact Zone .....	69
Chapter 3: Teasing the Funny: Indigenous Stand-up Story(alities) in 21st Century Comedy...	100
Chapter 4: Rhetorical Sovereignty in the Composition Classroom.....	146
Works Cited .....	189
Appendix A: Auburn University Fall 2008 Engl 1100 Course Documents .....	195
Appendix B: Research Participant Consent Form .....	206



## Introduction

“Story is powerful. Story is fluid and it belongs to nobody.”

- Chris Abani, TED Global 2007

“So they try to destroy the stories  
Let the stories be confused or forgotten.  
They would like that  
They would be happy  
Because we would be defenseless then.”

- Leslie Marmon Silko, “Ceremony”

This is a rhetoric story about how individuals use the language of stories to construct identity and carve space for their voices, ideas, and presence in certain communities. Using Native American theory and practice, this project is meant to contribute to the expanding conversations concerning which texts can best help us understand our common human purpose as we celebrate cultural difference inside and outside the academy. By engaging with Native American Studies and Composition and Rhetoric Studies, I use the term “story(ality)” to make a more powerful and direct connection between story and reality, thereby changing an individual’s perception of reality by listening to, reading, hearing, or participating in a story. I wish to complicate my reader’s understanding of several things, including the potential of story to transgress, transform, and tease reality as people verbally and visually insert themselves in various intellectual spaces, how those stories operate in different contact zones, and why bringing Native American theories into the composition classroom as a framing device helps students understand their own stories. My intention is to contribute to a “critical mass of Indigenous intellectuals and non-Indigenous allies” that incorporates “both Indigenous voices

and archival sources.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, by expanding indigenous studies beyond indigenous texts, scholars and students acquire new tools and methodologies for examining stories of experience, which can result in cross-cultural understanding, a long-standing desire in the field of Native American studies.

According to Thomas King (Cherokee/Greek), “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” In the end, the “we” in this statement creates powerful intracultural and crosscultural connections. But Tom King was not the first to make this assessment. N. Scott Momaday’s (Kiowa) Arrowmaker – the “man made of words” makes the claim that language represents the only chance for survival for both the Arrowmaker and his wife, but also the enemy standing outside. In Momaday’s words, “it is a story about story, about the efficacy of language and the power of words” (9). And the story goes something like this: A Kiowa man and his wife were alone in their teepee at night. The man was making arrows by firelight and then testing them by drawing them to the bow to test for straightness. Suddenly, the man glimpses a figure in the gap where the hides were sown together. The person is looking in on the man and his wife, so the man continues making an arrow and says to his wife in Kiowa that someone is standing outside, but they should just continue talking as if of ordinary things. The man then takes up an arrow, straightens it in his teeth, and then draws it to the bow, aiming first one way and then another, all the while talking as if to his wife, “I know you are out there. If you are Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name.” There was no answer, so the man continued drawing and aiming until he came to the place where the person was standing and he

---

<sup>1</sup> From the preface (xi) and introduction (2) of *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, edited by Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Choctaw) and Angela Cavender Wilson (Dakota), published in 2004.

let his arrow fly straight to his enemy's heart.<sup>2</sup> Momaday (Kiowa) explores the idea that storytellers create themselves, their audiences, and their realities through words, through stories, in a particular time and in a particular place. The storyteller has the power to change the story, and thus, change the reality. And he can only accomplish this through language; specifically, the language of stories.

Survivance,<sup>3</sup> intellectual sovereignty,<sup>4</sup> rhetorical sovereignty, rhetorics of survivance, trickster discourse<sup>5</sup> and communitism<sup>6</sup> are all new terms, having been birthed by a community of

---

<sup>2</sup> Mostly paraphrased, with some borrowed phrases from N. Scott Momaday's version of this story from "The Arrowmaker" in *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Vizenor's counter-story is the creation and articulation of a new term: survivance. In fact, just the creation of this term is an act of resistance against domination, genocide, oppression, and silence, which is also the definition of survivance: survival + resistance. More specifically, Vizenor outlines his idea on the first preface page to *Manifest Manners*: "Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories. . . Native stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" and is more than a "mere reaction" against popular simulations of "indian-ness" and thus, the suggested "absence of the real" people (vii, 2).

<sup>4</sup> Warrior introduces the idea of intellectual sovereignty in the third chapter of his first book, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (1995). The first two chapters establish the intellectual context of Vine Deloria, Jr's (Standing Rock Sioux) work in comparison to John Joseph Mathews' (Osage) work, as well as suggesting new ways of reading these two scholars' ideas. But then Warrior addresses the "issues of the role of American Indian intellectuals in the struggle for sovereignty and of how we can make American Indian discourse more inclusive of contemporary American Indian experience" (87). Specifically, he states that contemporary American Indian scholars' "subsequent accountability is, first and foremost, to those communities from which we come," however, he acknowledges that "we can give voice to the voiceless, but we cannot speak for them" (112). And so, intellectual sovereignty in practice means that American Indian scholars "respect tradition. . . by confronting the chaos of contemporary life and asking where we have been and where we are going" (112), while privileging Native voices and experiences. Further, Warrior illustrates intellectual sovereignty as it relates to practical political sovereignty: "It is not a matter of removing ourselves and our communities from the influences of the world in which we live," but it does mean finding ways to intellectually "counter those influences" (114-15). Ultimately, intellectual sovereignty for Native scholars means choosing how to counter external social, political, educational, and cultural influences.

<sup>5</sup> Prolific Chippewa scholar Gerald Vizenor laments with blunt eloquence that "nobody's told a survivance story" in a 2005 *American Indian Quarterly* interview with Blake Hausman (Cherokee) and John Purdy, who identify their conversation partner as an "archetypal trickster teacher" (Winter 2005.) Of course, one of the delightful complications of tricksters is their indefinable, disruptive, comic natures and their continuous and frequent presence in creation and recreation stories. According to non-Native scholar Franchot Ballinger in *Living Sideways: Tricksters in American Indian Oral Traditions*, "some generalizations about American Indian tricksters are possible, but. . . their cultural diversity makes generalizing risky." Ballinger's preface also provides the story of how he came to focus on tricksters (initially to increase his chances of being accepted to a seminar with A. LaVonne Ruoff) and his concern that "some of the best known and most influential essays about North American tricksters were too seldom grounded in American Indian oral traditions and culture," (x) which echoes many contemporary Native scholars' concerns about the necessity of foregrounding any study of Native people and their works in a tribally-specific cultural context. Specifically, Ballinger notes, "American Indians classify stories quite differently from Euro-American scholars," citing such trickster story divisions as myths and historical tales, or differences according to a particular era (creation, the present, etc.). Some trickster stories express a "moral precept" or are narratives for entertainment, which are descriptive terms culled from the Comic Signs and Holotropes section of Vizenor's article

Indigenous scholars in the past 30 years who aim to re-frame and re-clarify their own experiences and ideas. These terms change the landscape of academic discourse within the established fields of American Literature and Composition and Rhetoric, as well as the emerging disciplines of Native American Studies and Indigenous Rhetorics. As an Osage intellectual, Robert Warrior writes of experience and unity in *Tribal Secrets*, “Through Euro-American-style education, we can bring critical knowledge of what has happened in the history of that dominating society that helps explain the situations in which we find ourselves. In fact, perhaps our greatest contribution as intellectuals is understanding our experience in wider contexts. . . . More crucially, we begin to see the importance of choosing carefully whom we invite into the sovereign space that is our intellectual praxis.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, he clearly states that much more is at stake than just an academic-level disagreement: “If our struggle is anything, it is the struggle for sovereignty, and if sovereignty is anything, it is a way of life”<sup>8</sup> Robert Warrior belongs to many

---

from the Summer 1990 issue of *American Indian Quarterly*. These tribally-specific, surface story divisions propose the need to look at tribal trickster figures from an individual Native scholar’s culture when analyzing that scholar’s text, in order to avoid the pitfalls of generalization. Furthermore, Vizenor’s definition of the trickster in “Trickster Discourse” focuses on the comic and communal nature of this figure as it epitomizes the ideas of transformation and healing, and how this cultural figure is “opposed by silence and isolation,” who works from “outside the imposed structure” to create change and “imaginative liberation.” This construct is typically applied to Native fiction and poetry, and in Vizenor’s case, imposed on the author himself. Examples of critical analysis of Native fiction and poetry through a trickster discourse lens abound and include, but are not limited to, the following: Elizabeth Archuleta’s “Refiguring Indian Blood through Poetry, Photography, and Performance Art” in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* (Winter 2005); Silvia Martínez Falquina’s “Beyond Borders: Trickster Discourse in Louise Erdrich's Fiction” in *Beyond Borders: Re-Defining Generic and Ontological Boundaries*, Ramón Plo-Alastrué, ed. (2002); Elaine Jahner’s chapter on “Trickster Discourse and Postmodern Strategies” in her book *Loosening the Seams: Interpretations of Gerald Vizenor* (2000); Azfar Hussain’s *Wicazo-Sa Review* article on “Joy Harjo and Her Poetics as Praxis: A “Postcolonial” Political Economy of the Body, Land, Labor, and Language” (Fall 2000); Patricia Linton’s *Modern Fiction Studies* article “‘And Here’s How It Happened’: Trickster Discourse in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*” (Spring 1999); and Elizabeth McNeil’s *Studies in American Humor* piece “Leslie Marmon Silko's Comic 'World of the Different': *Almanac of the Dead* as Cross-Cultural Trickster Discourse” (1998).

<sup>6</sup> Jace Weaver (Cherokee) coined the term “communitism,” which means community + activism (that benefits the community). With this powerful term, Weaver (Cherokee) creates a philosophical and physical circle of responsibility: Ideas grow out of experiences with the community, manifest physically in books, articles, novels, and conference presentations, and so should return in some meaningful way back to the community and for the community’s benefit.

<sup>7</sup> *Tribal Secrets*, 123.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

communities, as do we all. For example, he is a member of the Osage Nation, the broader ‘academy’, as well as the narrower field of Native American Studies. He is a writer, professor, scholar, author, award-winner, and traveler. These are all communities that share particular discourse styles and purposes, making Warrior an adept border-crosser, shifting between communities for the most effective and persuasive word, phrase, or argument for a given community. Specifically, he knows how to frame a criticism or attack effectively because he understands what each community values. By using indigenous stories and theories, non-Native scholars and students have a more effective pathway to understanding the importance of story and its effect on their communities.

### **Rhetorics of survivance**

American Indian rhetoric scholars Malea Powell (Indiana Miami/Eastern Shawnee/Euramerican) and Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/Mdewakanton Dakota) provide the terminology for the struggle that Native scholars experience. Scott Richard Lyons’ essay, “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What do American Indians Want from Writing?” (CCC, Feb. 2000), answers the title question thusly: That teachers, students, readers, writers, and texts “read history through a contemporary lens and continually beckon forth the public” (466). He suggests that the ability of Native writers to “speak both” Native rhetoric and white man’s rhetoric is “the right and the theory and the practice and the poetry of rhetorical sovereignty” (467). Lyons defines rhetorical sovereignty as “a people’s control of its meaning” and claims this is what American Indians want from writing (447). Two years later, Malea Powell (Miami) published “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians *Use Writing*” (CCC, Feb. 2002), in which she “listens” to how nineteenth-century American Indian intellectuals “use the discourses about Indian-ness. . .in order to both respond to that discourse and to reimagine what it could mean to be Indian. This

use. . . is a critical component of the rhetorics of survivance” (396). Powell addresses what she sees as a “structurally embedded problem. . . the Western Eurocentric focus of the American academy” (398). As a solution, she suggests making “visible the fact that some of us read and listen from a different space, and to suggest that, as a discipline [composition & rhetoric], it is time we all learned to hear that difference” (398). Even beyond the realm of academe, the language of stories is influential, personal, and political for all generations of Native Americans, which is especially evident in those who express stories in such public forums as the performance space, the university classroom, and the Internet. I intend to argue that unconventional, non-academic Native American intellectuals are essential to a fuller understanding of Native American studies and its contributions to the academy. The purpose of studying Native American stand-up comics and the Osage Nation tribal web site is to break with the convention of studying Native-produced fiction and poetry as the only Native subject matter worthy of study in an academic environment. Scholar Devon Mihesuah writes in her introduction to *Indigenizing the Academy*, “Not enough is being written about tribal needs and concerns, but an inordinate amount of attention is focused on fiction” (3). Native comics and tribal web sites speak stories of experience grounded in present-day tribal needs and concerns. Storytelling is a practice that transcends cultures and is a powerful cross-cultural tool for understanding: Native American stand-up comedians and tribal web site decision-makers use the language of stories to create particular story(alities) that affect both contemporary tribal people living in real time and real places outside academe and the broader non-Native audience. Specifically, by studying how a variety of Native peoples use the language of stories to resist, survive, and thrive in 21<sup>st</sup> century society we can deepen our conversation about hegemonic expectations, assumptions, and practices and learn how to overturn them in direct and nonthreatening ways.

My objective is to build on the scholarship of three generations of contemporary Native American scholars while enacting Robert Warrior's call for more attention to Native nonfiction work. By seeking a deeper understanding of the rhetorical choices in the nonfiction survivance stories of contemporary Native language practitioners, I hope to contribute to my reader's knowledge and understanding about these revolutionary storytellers. The way these storytellers use language (written, verbal, visual, performed) to construct identity and carve space for themselves in particular communities challenges what we think we know and demonstrates strategies for any storyteller who wishes to craft a powerful story(ality).

The language I speak of is not necessarily alphabetic or symbolic or visual – it is the language of stories and this language can be delivered in many forms and through different technologies, including writing, speaking, and performing. Music, dance, and photography all convey the language of stories as much as novels, spoken-word poems, and performance art does. Stories themselves are a kind of language – a language of experience, of memory, of reality and of fantasy, of expectation and hope, of fear and doubt. But even simple plot lines typically have a depth of meaning and purpose for a particular culture or group of people. Furthermore, the technologies used to deliver this language are extremely varied and can often be used in concert to speak or write or perform the language of stories. This complex, multi-layered, multi-voiced delivery parallels the complex, multi-layered, multi-voiced experiences embedded in the language of stories.

*A cross-disciplinary project*

We are in a particular moment in Indigenous Rhetorics where more people are becoming more interested in more technologies of communication by Native peoples – for instance, Malea Powell (Indiana Miami/Eastern Shawnee) studies the rhetoric of women's crafts, such as

basketwork; Angela Haas studies rhetorical alliance and American Indian intellectual rhetorical production in digital and visual domains; and the *College Composition & Communication* journal will publish a special Indigenous Rhetorics issue in September 2011. Mine is a cross-disciplinary project that straddles Native Studies (due to the subject and theory focus) and Composition/Rhetoric Studies (due to the positioning of story(ality) within the broader rhetorical tradition). Essentially, I take arguments that have come before (Robert Warrior's call for more focus on Native nonfiction, and his call for more scholarly work related to Native peoples that matters in non-academic contexts) and expand those arguments by attempting to enact them. Humor and digital writing are already areas of study in the academy – Native American voices alter, complicate, and enrich our ongoing stories by challenging our notions of history, reframing our active roles in continuously shaping our stories, and reinforcing the value of repositioning ourselves in relation to those stories.

### **Pausing to look back**

#### *The first generation*

Before leaping into the fray with my own arguments, I would like to lay out an overview of three generations of contemporary Native American scholars to provide a solid foundation of the intellectual arguments upon which current scholarship in Native Studies and Indigenous Rhetorics is based. And the concept of sovereignty is firmly at the heart of most, if not all, of this foundation. Although Native intellectuals have been arguing in writing for sovereignty and the ability to control their own lives since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary Native scholars' works can be broken down into three specific, but overlapping, critical approaches, following what Robert Allen Warrior (Osage) calls "intellectual trade routes."<sup>9</sup> The first generation comes

---

<sup>9</sup> Warrior started his argument about American Indian intellectual traditions in *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (1995) by connecting the works of Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) with John



out of the Civil Rights and Red Power era of the late 1960s and early 1970s and includes such scholars and writers as Simon Ortiz (Laguna Pueblo), N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux), Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo), and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo).<sup>10</sup> This group tends to privilege oral traditions such as storytelling, songs, drama-rituals, and performances usually related to ceremonies within tribal cultural contexts. Simon Ortiz writes in his 1981 *MELUS* article (included in the 2006 collection *American Indian Literary Nationalism*) that for five centuries the oral tradition has been the most authentic way for Native peoples to communicate their resistance to colonialism. In addition to privileging oral traditions, tribal knowledge and the health of the community were also important focal points for these scholars in their writings. This very often meant getting political in an overt way, such as Vine Deloria's call for a "cultural leave us alone agreement," which is a succinct way of arguing for allowing Native peoples to make their own decisions and determine their own political, social, and economic fates without outside interference from white politicians and scholars.

Deloria argues in *Custer Died for Your Sins* that when tribes assert their historic rights (by fact and by treaty), there is still considerable backlash in public opinion. Interestingly,

---

Joseph Mathews (Osage), "two American Indian intellectuals of this century" (xiii). His extensive analysis "highlights the generational nature of Native intellectual discourse" and makes the case "that writers going back at least as far as Samson Occom [Mohegan] have grappled with many of the same issues that remain with us today" (44). This initial effort later developed and expanded into his next book, *The People and The Word: Reading Native Nonfiction* (2005). Ultimately, Warrior uses the metaphor of trade routes to include the "sheer variety of texts. . . and the vast geography from which their writers have come," as well as his own travel itinerary, which all influenced his self-proclaimed fixation on the "particular ways that ideas become mobile and settle elsewhere" (*The People* 181). He cites his mentor, Edward Said, who argued that "no idea travels without being transformed by the process" (*The People* 181). Warrior connects the idea of ideas traveling across space and time, from culture to culture, to the physical idea of trade routes, particularly in the Americas, where "many hundreds of cultures and civilizations that dot the American landscape are connected by those crisscrossing trails" (*The People* 182).

<sup>10</sup> Some major works of the listed authors include the following: (Ortiz) *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, for the Sake of the Land* (1980), *Woven Stone* (1991), *From Sand Creek* (2000); (Momaday) *The Names: A Memoir* (1976), *House Made of Dawn* (1969), *Man Made of Words* (1998); (Deloria, Jr.) *God is Red* (1972), *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1983), *Behind the Trail of Broken Treaties: An Indian Declaration of Independence* (1985); (Allen) *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (1989), *Off the Reservation: Reflections on Boundary-Busting, Border-Crossing Loose Cannons* (1999); (Silko) *Storyteller* (1989), *Ceremony* (1977), *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (1997).

Deloria was a lawyer and activist, in addition to being a scholar and writer, and he was working during an extremely volatile time. His concern was the invisibility or transparency of Native peoples – he argues that the more Indian people try to be themselves, the more they have to defend what they’ve never been – mythical creatures in “stereotypeland,” which is a concern that finds theoretical legs later in Gerald Vizenor’s *Manifest Manners*.<sup>11</sup> In particular, 1973 was a pivotal year in Native American politics and literature while Deloria was making his assertive and poignant statements: the American Indian Movement took over Alcatraz in 1969, occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC in 1972, and the second Siege at Wounded Knee occurred in 1973 – all resulting from Native peoples asserting their rights to exist, to govern themselves, to be left alone by the dominant mainstream culture. This high level of activism resulted in a shift in consciousness both politically and literarily. For instance, prior to 1973, an American Indian literature anthology (note the use of American Indian rather than Native American or indigenous – this naming/labeling also started to change as the 70s progressed) might have included songs, creation stories, chants, and a lone focus on oral traditions; post-1973, that same anthology might be called Native American literature and would focus on short stories, poems, excerpts from novels, and perhaps even plays...but still very little non-fiction, which is Robert Warrior’s bailiwick.<sup>12</sup>

One of Deloria’s most poignant arguments comes when he discusses the differences between Indians and Blacks. His argument states that blacks were considered field animals, so they were enslaved and denied the rights of full citizenship, then were segregated from the more

---

<sup>11</sup> Vizenor is a transitional figure in Native American scholarship – one who connects this first generation with the second and current generations.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, as a brief aside, my recent copy of the Norton American Literature anthology includes Coyote tales and a short story by Sherman Alexie and the 2008 edition of the *Bedford Anthology of American Literature Vol. 1: Beginnings to 1865* includes Native American origin and creation stories and non-fiction samples from Samson Occom, Tecumseh, and William Apess, but all of these inclusions are either extremely short or excerpted. This is progress?

“human” white population once they legally had rights, which led to their Civil Rights Movement. Conversely, he says that Indians were considered wild animals and suffered the reverse treatment from blacks, who possessed nothing that the white population wanted outside their labor. Indians, on the other hand, possessed land, but not in any European sense of ownership; the invaders just knew the Indians worked and lived with the land – land they wanted. Hence, the Europeans granted Indians their humanity so they could strip them of their land; assimilation and forced integration into white society was the Euroamerican answer – conform or die was the message. Resistance to this colonized violence meant that the Indians were seen as ungrateful and Deloria’s point is that Native peoples have always resisted domination, colonization, and genocide both orally and in writing – the problem is that no one is listening.

### *The second generation*

When Native scholars articulate the demand for sovereignty, land return, and treaty rights, they are enacting what Deloria is talking about. Specifically, the second generation of scholars<sup>13</sup> began with Gerald Vizenor (Anishnabe) and his definition of *Manifest Manners* and survivance. Generally, the second generation of scholars and writers includes those who were taught by non-Native scholars and includes Robert Warrior (who studied under Edward Said), Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, and Joy Harjo.<sup>14</sup> However, these scholars also relied on the ideas,

---

<sup>13</sup> For my purposes, I classify the second generation as those scholars writing from the late 1970s through the early 1990s.

<sup>14</sup> Some major works of these listed authors include the following: (Warrior) *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (1994), *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (1997), *The People and the Word: Reading Native Nonfiction* (2005), and *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, which he wrote with Weaver, Womack and Lisa Brooks (2006); (Weaver) *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (1997), *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, and “More Light Than Heat: The Current State of Native American Studies” in *American Indian Quarterly* (Spring 2007); (Womack) *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999), *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, *Art as Performance*, *Story as Criticism: Reflections on Native Literary Aesthetics* (2009), and *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collection*, edited with Daniel Heath Justice and Christopher B. Teuton; (Harjo) *She Had Some*

theories, and resistance of the first generation to polish and refine their own arguments, essentially reinforcing all Native peoples' assertion that 'we have always been here, we are here now, and will always be here'. The ideas of rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons, 2000) and the rhetorics of survivance (Powell, 2002), are third generation theories built on the ideas from second generation literary scholars Robert Warrior and others. Robert Warrior's proposition of intellectual sovereignty (*Tribal Secrets*, 1995) also builds on the ideas of contemporary Native scholars before him, such as N. Scott Momaday's (Kiowa) theory of identity creation through language ("Man Made of Words," 1979) and Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) concept of manifest manners (*Manifest Manners*, 1994). The progressive interdependence of all these ideas provides a foundation on which other Native scholars can build, which helps to establish these intellectuals' continued presence in the academy (regardless of niche or specialization), no matter how troubling their ideas may be to scholars. All of these ideas interconnect and build a community of ideas designed to disrupt traditional academic expectations in the fields of literature and composition/rhetoric. Specifically, Robert Warrior's *The People and the Word* contributes not only to his own definition of intellectual sovereignty (*Tribal Secrets*, 1995), but also exemplifies both rhetorical sovereignty (by showing what American Indians want from writing) and the rhetorics of survivance (by showing how American Indians use writing).

This idea of real presence is what Vizenor grapples with when he defines manifest manners as the "course of dominance" or "simulations" of the Other, which are absences of the real. He uses the example of the movie *Dances with Wolves* and the simulations of "Indians" that play on the manifest manners of the Western audience (*Manifest Manners* 7). You could easily add all of the westerns that Hollywood ever created. He also refers to his experiences as the

---

*Horses* (2008), *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems 1975-2001* (2004), and *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*, which Harjo co-edited by Gloria Bird (1998).

director of a federal desegregation program in a Minnesota high school, where teachers assumed Native peoples were incapable of abstract reasoning and he calls these educated views “manifest manners” (*Manifest Manners* xi). Vizenor’s contribution to the intellectual trade route of Native thought is one of validation, power, strength, and hope for Native peoples. His theory of survivance gives a theoretical name to the experience of being invisible that Native peoples have historically known. This absence, or silence, which is the void Deloria talks about as Native peoples shout into the wind only to be ignored and so ask just to be left alone, is the absence of the real in the “ruins of tribal representations.” Vizenor insists that tribal names and stories are real histories, not discoveries<sup>15</sup>. One example Vizenor cites is the term “Indian,” which has no cultural referent in tribal languages and he calls this term a colonial enactment.

Language is powerful, personal, and political for all generations of Native scholars and writers and this is made quite evident in Craig Womack’s works *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999) and his introduction to *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective* (2008). The question about who has (or should have) power over indigenous identity and representations of that identity transcends the academy, but this omnipresent challenge informs Native scholars and their theories. Womack (Muskogee Creek/Cherokee) states in *Red on Red*, “Native perspectives have to do with allowing Indian people to speak for themselves, that is to say, with prioritizing Native voices. . .they rise out of a historical reality wherein Native people have been excluded from discourse concerning their own cultures” (4-5). Furthermore, in his introduction to *Reasoning Together*, Womack counters the “most consistent and damaging

---

<sup>15</sup> Legendary Oneida comedian, Charlie Hill, also talks about this idea of “discovery” related to indigenous peoples of this continent – at one point during his set for the 1977 Richard Pryor show, he talks about how the Pilgrims are not his forefathers and he connects the Europeans’ arrival with houseguests who just never leave. Funny stuff out of historic pain that is ongoing, which is a motif shared between indigenous peoples and other non-dominant groups within American culture.

critique against Native intellectuals,” which is the “essentialist” label (6).<sup>16</sup> Contrary to these “overarching assumptions about Indians,” Womack and his intellectual counterparts in *Reasoning* “believe theory, in fact, can emerge from novels, poems, plays, and many other forms, including life itself. . . stories are the birthplace of theory (and, in this case, I think the converse is true as well)” (7).<sup>17</sup> In other words, the stories come out of lived experience, which is where the theory also begins. Womack also asserts that “we *are* the canon,” in relation to American literary history; he uses extremely direct and clear language to criticize the assumption that Native writers are somehow outside the canon (*Red on Red* 7). He suggests there are two canons and that the Americans should be figuring out how to fit into the Native canon, since it came first. Womack also tackles the essentialist label, which he defines as “making universal claims in ahistorical modes,” something many Native scholars are accused of and resist, mainly because it’s not true (*Reasoning* 6). In the introduction to *Reasoning Together*, a scholarly conversation among the current generation of Native intellectuals, Womack writes about how he organized the introduction on a timeline with dates and historical references in order to present a credible theory with a commitment to archival sources that includes specific details. His argument is that theory and philosophy don’t exist in a vacuum, but are rather an unfolding story that honors its past and looks toward the future.

In fact, the collection *Stories Through Theories/Theories Through Stories* edited by Gordon D. Henry, Jr., Nieves Pascual Soler, and Silvia Martinez-Falquina (2009) attempts to further the conversation “on the seemingly contentious relationships surrounding the study of

---

<sup>16</sup> Womack explains that *Reasoning Together* has as one of its core missions the objective of making “dates, and particular events, a cornerstone of its approach because [Womack wants] it to be an embodiment of the kind of antiessentialism we hope to uphold. . . we want to show some kind of commitment to archival sources and other kinds of knowledge rather than atemporal, nonhistorical, clichéd analyses such as, ‘Well, . . . I think the frybread probably symbolizes. . .’” (7).

<sup>17</sup> I would add that based on what I heard at the Native American and Indigenous Studies conferences that I have attended, many current scholars still agree that story is the birthplace of theory and theory is also the birthplace of story.

American Indian literature in view of contemporary critical theory” (2). Henry explains in his introduction the intersections and challenges that arise from different Eurocentric theoretical perspectives compared to the potentiality of the story-based theories of Vizenor and King, for instance, including the idea of trickster discourse. In addressing the vital story component of this collection, Henry says, “Stories are intertextual, transcendent, evocative, and arguably efficacious. . .In fact, stories may lead to, may have already led us to, theories and then back again to stories. Further, both theory and story imply acts of perception” (18-19). The idea that perceptions can change intersects well with my concept of story(ality), where a person’s perception of reality changes because of his or her dialectic engagement with story. Most useful is Henry’s statement about how stories and theories engage and interact in order to inform our understanding of the world: “Both theories and stories establish affiliations, break barriers of media and discourse and live inside us. Sometimes insidiously, sometimes transparently, as bodies without organs, as bodies within bodies, to travel beyond the limits of texts, or their own perceived filiations or affiliated origins” (19). Traveling beyond the limits of text or performance or visual presentation is exactly what these Native storytellers do, and that is also the effect on their audiences. The stories stay with us long after the web page is closed or the comedy club is dark or the grades have been submitted. And it is this long-term lingering that helps to change the perception of reality, resulting in a new storyality for the recipient.

Looking toward the future, it is important to note that many of these second generation scholars are still very much alive and working and contributing to this ongoing theoretical story along the intellectual trade route. While the first generation of Native scholars privileged oral traditions across tribal cultures (often Pan-Indian and more general), the second generation emphasize a tribally-specific understanding of community as the basis for not only a nuanced

reading of a Native-produced text (from that community), but also as a way to consider any indigenous works. For instance, Daniel Heath Justice (Oklahoma Cherokee) foregrounds his entire book (*Our Fire Survives the Storm*) on Robert Warrior's concept of "intellectual sovereignty," which he says is the most important moral and philosophical orientation for current Native Studies scholars because this theory insists that work in Native Studies serve the scholar's home community and emerge from the cultural and intellectual realities of that community. Along similar lines, Angela Haas employs decolonial methodology (as defined in such works as Linda Tuhiwai's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) and Waziyatawin Angela Wilson's and Michael Yellow Bird's *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook* (2005) as she traces "American Indian intellectual tradition of digital and visual (dig/viz) rhetoric theories."<sup>18</sup> Her dissertation chair was Malea Powell, a prominent and influential Miami scholar in the fields of Native American Studies and Composition/Rhetoric Studies who is not only an Associate Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University, but she is also the 2011 Chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

### **Moving forward**

Robert Warrior argues for the existence of an intellectual trade route extending back to at least the 17th century, a line of Native intellectuals whose writing "constitutes an intellectual tradition" that has typically been denied Native people by the academy, as well as mainstream America (xiii). Warrior focuses on reading experience through Native nonfiction - his "overarching concern is working out how doing the work of the critic and intellectual can contribute to improving the intellectual health of Native America, its people, and its

---

<sup>18</sup> From Haas' dissertation abstract. Dissertation title: *A Rhetoric of Alliance: What American Indians Can Tell Us About Digital and Visual Rhetoric* (2008).



communities" (xiv). This intellectual trade route of indigenous thought and experience exists in many venues, including the performance contact zone of the stand-up comedy stage and the digital space of tribal web sites, thus giving us an avenue to further break down academic/non-academic distinctions between what subject matter is intellectual and which experiences are relevant for study.

The battle for the intellectual health of Native America continues and I want my work to contribute to it. In fact, Warrior also complains about the "ascendency" of the Native novel "as the focus of modern scholarship, with poetry, drama, autobiography, and other genre literature taking up places behind" (xix). Many Indigenous scholars continually echo this assessment, as Devon Abbott Mihesuah (Choctaw) and Angela Cavendar Wilson (Dakota) do in *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (2004): "Not enough is being written about tribal needs and concerns, but an inordinate amount of attention is focused on fiction" (3). In fact, non-Indigenous allies are also participating in this call, such as Ernest Stromberg's edited collection *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word Magic* (2006), an entire book dedicated to "illuminating our understanding of this intellectual tradition as a powerful rhetorical tradition" (6). Stromberg's collection includes many indigenous authors and non-indigenous allies who focus "their attention on the post-contact rhetoric of American Indian orators and speakers" in an effort to "enrich our understanding of what might be considered Pan-Indian rhetorical traditions developed over five hundred years of ongoing struggle" (Stromberg 5-6). My work here is intended to participate in and expand on this tradition as I position myself as a non-indigenous ally. There seems to be a bothersome ignorance of indigenous intellectual tradition in the general academic environment. As a result, Native scholars and their allies continually point out the absence of this rich tradition.

Institutional racism, imperialist tradition, and basic differences in life experiences may lie at the heart of this ongoing conflict of ideas. Warrior's notion of ideas traveling along intellectual trade routes reinforces the potential for both conflict and understanding: "The process of transporting ideas has often been as informal as formal, and the equation of knowledge and power has been evident throughout history in the favorable relationships between some nations and the inequitable, exploitative ones between others" (*People and the Word* 182). Furthermore, Mihesuah states the issue succinctly in her introduction: "An Indigenous scholar's academic experience—in all its facets—is not the same as that of a white man or a white woman," however, she is committed to continuing the dialogue because she believes "as scholars we have the ability to empower Indigenous peoples" (*Indigenizing the Academy* x). And far from promoting an "us versus them" agenda, of which Mihesuah has often been accused, she clearly states that "a balanced, inclusive methodology is ideal, that is, both Indigenous voices and archival sources are valuable when writing on any topic" (xi).

In addition, another reason Warrior focuses on giving nonfiction texts their "due" is because contemporary Native writers "have continued publishing at least as much, if not more, nonfiction" than fiction. Warrior is arguing for the existence of a tradition so that the academy acknowledges that tradition exists (because many in the academy still don't think it does exist for Native peoples<sup>19</sup>). Native American studies and its current place in the academy is where African American studies was thirty years ago - the rationale for bringing more Native nonfiction into the academic conversation is to help create that critical mass this group needs to finally be considered an equal contributor to any academic conversation. In the end, this is not just a

---

<sup>19</sup> Personal story: One of my family's longstanding friends was a distinguished professor at the Citadel. Upon retiring, he visited my parents in Pittsburgh and when they told him that I was studying "Native American literature," which was close to being correct, his response was, "I didn't know they had literature." This is the ingrained mentality of too many people inside and outside the academy. This is the attitude we must fight against in our scholarship, in our classrooms, and in the public domain.

dissertation for me, but another pathway to understanding a very misunderstood and unknown group of people who, in the end, have many of the same concerns as everyone, but maintain a unique history and perspective that we can all learn from. This idea that difference is denigrated in our society and sameness is put on a pedestal is what my work writes back against.

Like the Arrowmaker, these modern Native intellectuals, from scholars to comedians and tribal webmasters, are using language to (re)create themselves, their audiences (Native and non-Native), and their realities. While the American Indian Movement had both words and physical actions (taking over Alcatraz, the BIA, and gun-fighting with the FBI at Wounded Knee), contemporary Native intellectuals use a wide variety of story technologies as cultural tools to demonstrate agency from silence, oppressed identity and invisibility in the mainstream culture, economy, and ideology, which helps them transform into multi-voiced, re-appropriated, and re-defined (via new term creation) identities and assists in the establishment and maintenance of a visible and real presence. “We have always been here, are here now, and always will be here” echoes across the historical landscape of Native intellectual production.

### **Rhetoric and Story(ality)**

Ernest Stromberg provides an excellent working definition of rhetoric in light of this Indigenous intellectual tradition, as “the use of language or other forms of symbolic action to produce texts (in the broadest possible sense) that affect changes in the attitudes, beliefs, or actions of an audience. In this sense, rhetoric is both an art of persuasion and epistemic—epistemic inasmuch as Native Americans use language to alter our understanding of the world we inhabit” (4). Stromberg’s definition helps me clarify my own concept of story(ality) as it relates to language use altering our perceptions of reality. Furthermore, Angela Haas (Cherokee) sets the stage for a furtherance of American Indian rhetorics in her dissertation, “A Rhetoric of

Alliance: What American Indians Can Tell Us About Digital and Visual Rhetoric.” She cites Malea Powell, Resa Crane Bizzaro, Scott Lyons, and Damián Baca as the “key group of scholars” contributing to the “development of American Indian rhetorics inquiry” since 1999 (23).<sup>20</sup> And her definition of American Indian rhetorics is particularly useful and compelling: “American Indian rhetorics are sign technologies written about/for/by/with peoples indigenous to the Americas to influence public action. Thus, American Indian rhetorical inquiry simultaneously draws upon and contributes to discussions rhetoric, American cultural rhetorics, literacy studies, history, and [American Indian Studies]” (27).

To build off of Stromberg and Haas and to begin this conversation, I must define my framing term, *story(ality)*, and situate the term in the broader rhetorical tradition, pointing out how and why this term is necessary and useful. Essentially, I want my readers to disconnect from our modern connotations of ‘story’ as ‘fiction’ and reinforce (by consciously reconstructing the term) a return to a more 14th through 18th century meaning of ‘story’, that of ‘a narrative presumed to be true; a historical work or incident; a recital of events that have or are alleged to have happened.’” In other words, *story(ality)* refocuses my readers’ attention on the real and the true, rather than expressions of pure imagination and fantasy.

Storytelling that creates or alters reality directly or indirectly via (some type of) language I refer to as *story(ality)*. As Greg Sarris reminds us, who tells the story changes a story’s meaning and the storyteller retains a certain power and influence over a given audience. In

---

<sup>20</sup>Some major works of the listed authors include the following: (Powell) “Blood and scholarship: One mixed-blood’s dilemma” in *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* (1999), “Listening to ghosts: An alternative (non) argument” in *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourse for the Academy* (2002), and “Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing” in *College Composition and Communication* (2002); (Lyons) “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing” in *College Composition and Communication* (2000); (Bizarro) “Making places as teacher-scholars in composition studies: comparing transition narratives” in *College Composition and Communication* (2002) and “Shooting our last arrow: Developing a rhetoric of identity for unenrolled American Indians” in *College English* (2004); (Baca) *Rhetorics of the Americas*, edited with Victor Villanueva (2010), *Mestiz@ Scripts, Digital Migrations, and the Territories of Writing* (2008), and “The Chicano Codex: Writing Against Historical and Pedagogical Colonization” in *College English* (2009).

addition to the teller, the language of stories can alter reality for the readers or recipients, with often uncertain outcomes. Just as Jace Weaver argues for his term, communitism, as being necessary because “no other word. . . carries the exact sense necessary” (43), I, too, argue that story(ality) provides a precise term that encompasses two distinct concepts: story and reality.

Specifically, story(ality) only exists in what Mary Louise Pratt calls a contact zone.<sup>21</sup> It relies on true or real stories (rather than works of fiction or pure imagination), and depends on the intellectual and ideological tension between the storyteller and the audience. The idea that stories are central and fundamental to Natives cultures makes my choice to focus on rhetorical storytelling strategies by Indigenous intellectuals a natural one. Jace Weaver writes, “The importance of story for Natives cannot be overestimated. . . Language and narrative have tremendous power to create community” (*That the People Might Live* 40). In *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, Gerald Vizenor writes, “Native American Indian identities are created in stories” (56). Greg Sarris writes, “Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of culture, and stories are used in a number of ways and for a multitude of purposes” (*Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, 4). In *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*, Linda Hogan asserts, “It was the story that counted, with its fragments of knowledge and myth” (199) and later, “We live not only inside a body but within a story as well, and our story resides in the land” (204). In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen writes, “My mother told me stories all the time. . . and in all of those stories she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be, whom I came from, and who would follow me” (46). When Mary Crow Dog wrote *Lakota*

---

<sup>21</sup> Mary Louise Pratt coined the term ‘contact zone’, defining it as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (*Profession* 34). In 1992, Pratt published *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* in which she clarifies contact zones as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6).

*Woman*, she acknowledged the power of stories as she related her experiences in the American Indian Movement, writing, “Our land itself is a legend. . .The fight for our land is at the core of our existence. . .Once the land is gone, then we are gone too. . .But you can’t live forever off the deeds of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. You can’t wear their eagle feathers, freeload off their legends. You have to make your own legends now. It isn’t easy” (10-11). Countless contemporary Native American writers have stated directly or indirectly the importance of story to their identities and communities, but I will just end with Thomas King’s assessment that “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (*Truth About Stories* 2).

Responding to these Native American storytellers’ insistence on the important role stories play in life, I offer this new term as a way of considering the intentions, goals, and results of storytelling in a contact zone where stereotypes and racist beliefs are in play as legitimate pieces on the chessboard of ideas. In other words, story(ality) is only possible during moments of tension when all are voluntarily participating in the storytelling dialectic. While Socratic dialectic involves an exchange of arguments with counterarguments, originally envisioned as a literal and verbal exchange of ideas, the idea of dialectic transcends this original frame. A storytelling dialectic occurs when the storyteller is speaking truth, usually about lived experiences, to a receptive audience filled with individuals who may or may not agree with the storyteller’s values, beliefs, or perspective. One question that may arise involves whether the *storyteller* can change in this dialectic? Of course. But change for the storyteller entirely depends on the situation and how intimate the audience. In the case of Native American comedians, the comics definitely change the content, character, and delivery of their humorous stories depending on initial audience reactions. However, in the case of a written text where the author researches, interviews, and/or creates a story in order to convince an audience of the legitimacy of an idea

from a distance, then the chances of the storyteller changing is greatly reduced. In this case, the dialectic exists in the virtual or unseen world of ideas.

Furthermore, false storytelling presented as true and real for the explicit purpose of confirming stereotypes and racist beliefs can create an incredibly damaging and confusing story(ality) that can strip the story's recipients of their identities and replace those identities with doubt, despair, and loneliness, or even, ironically, a false sense of security that reinforces implanted beliefs, which is one of my arguments in Chapter One in relation to the problematic text of *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*. According to Greg Sarris, "So much depends on who is telling the story and who is listening and the specific circumstances of the exchange" (*Keeping Slug Woman Alive* 4). Although his argument tends to focus on the positive potentiality of stories to create "intercultural and interpersonal communication and understanding," *Stiya* provides the ideal platform for examining how an appropriated Native storyteller's voice can lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding, in addition to the problematic results of this interaction of storyteller and audience. Sarris explains, "Dialogue, like stories, can work to oppress or to liberate, to confuse or to enlighten. Just because we are conversing with one another does not mean we are understanding one another" (*Slug Woman* 5). Indeed, although the Carlisle Indian Boarding School graduates who received *Stiya* as a gift may have read the story as a comforting reassurance and reflection of the education and experiences they received at Carlisle, they perhaps did not understand the underlying intention of this text as an instrument of the U.S. federal government's primary goal of eliminating Indigenous presence from this land.

Truly, it is hard to read the troublesome text, *Stiya: A Carlisle Girl at Home*. *Stiya* reads like an autobiography of sorts, and asks the reader (any reader, but especially the Carlisle graduate) to believe the truth of its story. However, the multiple layers of identity and false

testimony<sup>22</sup> that construct a version of reality (a white woman's version of reality) really complicates the text, its place in history, and its value as an object of scholarly attention today. Nevertheless, interesting crossroads of ideas do emerge when an effort to uncover the truth is undertaken. The contemporary result of this conflict and conversation of texts across time and space is a story(ality) that continues to speak of power, resistance, and cultural pride. But power for whom, resistance to what, and which culture is privileged by these contrasting texts? Combining the power of storytelling (and the language used to convey stories) with Pierre Bourdieu's idea that "linguistic exchanges can express relations of power,"<sup>23</sup> I suggest that *Stiya* (and all of the other "texts" cited in this project) speak stories of experience from different and multi-layered perspectives in an attempt to alter the power relations between Native peoples and Euramerican culture. Specifically, this project sets out to use Native technologies of communication and stories to enrich all scholarly work.

Beginning this study with an examination of a historical text produced by a white woman working for an Indian boarding school lays down a shifting, discomfiting foundation upon which all other chapters will build. Indigenous peoples have been hurt by irresponsible and flat-out violent language use and *Stiya* is a prime example of this pain as well as providing a way for Native scholars to take destructive and racist texts and reframe them through their own experience and survivance lens. Given to graduates of Carlisle Indian Boarding School in the 1890s, the text reinforced the lessons taught at Carlisle, which were all based on Captain Richard

---

<sup>22</sup> This idea of false testimony in autobiography was inspired by my reading of Linda Anderson's 2001 critical book *Autobiography*. In one of the concluding sections on "Testimonies," she references Nancy K. Miller's "discussion of autobiography as a form of witnessing which 'matters to others'" (126). Anderson bridges this concept with Shoshana Felman's feminist belief that "testimony implies a relationship to events as evidence of truth without being able to provide 'a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events' (Felman 1993: 5)" (127). Furthermore, Anderson makes one more important connection that helps analyze a text such as *Stiya*: "Testimony is called for in a situation where the truth is not yet clear, where there is already a 'crisis of truth'" (127). *Stiya* is nothing if not situated in a crisis of truth and possibly perpetuating false testimony for future generations. Hence, the complications.

<sup>23</sup> From the editor's introduction to Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power*, 1



Pratt's idea of killing the Indian to save the man. English language in particular has been used as a colonial tool of domination, oppression, and control, from treaties to schoolrooms; Native peoples have been battered by the English language. However, they have not been passive participants in their own cultural and political annihilation. Like Michel de Certeau's idea of reappropriation, Native intellectuals from early on through today have reappropriated, incorporated, and used Western languages for their own purposes – to write back against domination and oppression – to resist in sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways.

My goal is to use sources from each chapter in every chapter – for example, in the introductory chapter on *Stiya*, I place this text in conversation in a minor but meaningful way to at least one person, source, idea, or question from each of the other chapters. Each chapter contributes to story(ality) by representing a different medium and space: the first chapter focuses on written texts, the second focuses on digital rhetoric, the third on performance, and the fourth brings the first three mediums together in a pedagogical space. For instance, how can the role of *Stiya*'s author be read through Gerald Vizenor's theory of manifest manners and what, if anything, is ironic or painfully humorous about Native women writers' responses (or lack of response) to *Stiya*? In later chapters on comedy and tribal web sites, reflecting back on Native scholarly theories and weaving those concepts into the discussion will be vital to maintaining the flow of ideas via textual conversation. Therefore, not only will I be talking about conversations in story(ality), I'll be attempting to perform one as well – showing how and why these stories all connect across time and space and are valuable for more than one audience. To that end, the organization of this project is equally important to the content. For instance, beginning with a troubling historical point and text and then moving forward into the present is important to show the consistency across time of certain concerns, such as land and treaty issues, identity creation

through stories, and the roles of community and family. In addition, bookending this project with the feminine voice and experience allows me to emphasize the importance of the female voice in academic work. For this study, I am the storyteller weaving together others' stories into a conversation that transcends a single generation, a single gender, or a single racial designation, that encourages others to consider these texts in a new light, and that potentially influences how and how often Native American non-fiction texts are taught in mainstream composition classrooms.

While the first chapter embraces the mess of *Stiya* in conversation with contemporary Native women academics, I intend to transition into a consideration of the stories told and choices made by Native American wordsmiths outside the academy, beginning with an examination of the Osage Nation tribal web site in chapter two. I plan to examine the production and consumption of story(alities) that the Osage project into the virtual realm and how the web master's visual and verbal choices affect how this online presence is received. In the case of the Osage Nation, one Osage woman appointed by the Chief oversees the overall design and content of the web site, but each individual department has complete autonomy to upload whatever content they deem appropriate. The web design team hired to bring the Osage Nation's message to the web is a non-indigenous company, but the flash banner and much of the site's graphics were created by an Osage graphic designer. Harking back to the impact of *Stiya* and the complications that arise when non-Native people represent tribal story(alities) (even with the tribe's approval, or approval from certain individuals), I expect to unveil both hopeful and disquieting discoveries. This chapter in particular will include interviews with tribal members who participate in the production of their tribe's online presence. Some questions for web master revolve around choices – why this photo, why this tone, how many people were involved in

putting the site together (ie, was it a community or individual effort). Additional questions cover choices related to usage – which sections are most attractive, informative, useful, what do you use the site for, what do users seem to like/dislike about the site, etc.

Transitioning from the virtual world into the very real and emotional world of humor, in chapter three I preface my observations (in person, whenever possible) of several current Native comedians, such as the members of the Powwow Comedy Jam (jokesignals.com), Charlie Hill (Oneida), Howie Miller (First Nations), and others with an examination of Thomas King's book *The Truth About Stories*. As a scholar and writer who overtly uses humor to delve into serious social, economic, and political issues, King's book will provide a solid bridge between academic and non-academic Native worldviews. While Native scholars respond to and theorize about a collective history of land loss, fights for tribal sovereignty, and attempts to get the federal U.S. government to uphold its treaty promises, contemporary Native comedians are theorizing humorously about the exact same issues. Of course, a thread of pain runs through most humor and this is perhaps more true for Native comedians. For example, Navajo/Mexican/Irish comedian Marc Yaffee talks about wanting Native people to have their own TV network – TipiTV – and if he was in charge, he would have game shows like *Survivor Reservation*, *Wheel of Misfortune*, and *Whose Land is it Anyway?* This is a storyteller outside the academy and he is still clearly angry about the land loss, as is Elizabeth Cook-Lynn inside the academy when she wonders what a Native land-reform novel might look like.<sup>24</sup> Both non-academic and scholarly conversations are valuable for my purpose of showing how different story(alities) are created by different Native storytellers, who ironically all focus on the same fundamental issues despite the different delivery methods.

---

<sup>24</sup> From "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism Between 1986 and 1997," Craig Womack's introduction to *Reasoning Together*.

The fourth chapter of my dissertation considers how all of this information can be used productively in the composition classroom, as well as implications for future research. Relying primarily on a Native scholarship framework throughout to deliver a rhetorical analysis within a particular cultural context, I also plan to draw comparisons and make connections to non-Native composition scholars' works to show that the ideas of rhetorical sovereignty and survivance (for instance) apply to other experiential views outside the Native perspective. In addition, by using writers such as Mary Louise Pratt, Min Zhan Lu and Richard Miller, I will firmly tie this project into the field of Composition Studies and its longstanding desire to be more inclusive of traditionally marginalized voices and experiences.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, these non-Native scholars' use of storytelling, the importance of family and memory, the imposition of the English language (and standard "essayist literacy" of the school), and how the scholars' community connections influence their ideas in this field, just as Native scholars experiences in these areas affects their theories. For practical application purposes, framing a class with any of these theories and terms, particularly Scott Lyons's concept of rhetorical sovereignty (a people's control of its own meaning), introducing students to a semester-long engagement with Native-produced texts of all kinds, and encouraging basic writers to make connections between Indigenous experiences and

---

<sup>25</sup> Some major works of the listed authors include the following: (Pratt) *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992, latest revised edition 2007), "The Traffic in Meaning: Translation, Contagion, Infiltration" in *Profession* (2002), and "Apocalypse in the Andes: Contact Zones and the Struggles for Interpretive Power" in *Americas* (1999); (Lu) *Writing Conventions* (co-authored with Bruce Horner, 2008), *Representing the "Other": Basic Writers and the Teaching of Basic Writing* (co-authored with Bruce Horner, 1999), and "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone in *College Composition and Communication* (1994); (Rodriguez) *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982); (Guerra) "Out of the Valley: Transcultural Repositioning as a Rhetorical Practice in Ethnographic Research and Other Aspects of Everyday Life" in *Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy: Identity, Agency, and Power* (2007), "Putting Literacy in its Place: Nomadic Consciousness and the Practice of Transcultural Repositioning" in *Rebellious Reading: The Dynamics of Chicana/o Cultural Literacy* (2004), and "Writing on the Margins: The Spiritual and Autobiographical Discourse of Two Mexicanas in Chicago" (co-authored with Marcia Farr) in *School's Out!: Literacy at Home, at Work, and in the Community* (2002); (Villanueva) *Rhetorics of the Americas*, edited with Damián Baca (2010), "Colonial Memory and the Crime of Rhetoric: Pedro Albizu Campos" in *College English* (2009), and *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color* (1993); (Gilyard) *Rhetoric and Ethnicity* (ed. with Norris Nunley, 2004) *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* (ed. 1999), and *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* (1991).

their own lived realities provides an effective but immensely challenging and resistance-filled pathway to crosscultural understanding and a valuable step toward eliminating misperceptions, misunderstanding, and racism. Rather than theorizing about how this would work, I write from experience and provide self-reflections on the challenges of such an approach, and include anonymous student feedback and sample writings from specific assignments in a level one basic composition class at Auburn University. Once again, in the spirit of Warrior's call to make a difference, by using this knowledge and information about the story(alities) created by Native intellectuals inside and outside the academy, I would like to share my story about how to effectively engage students with an unknown and uncomfortable topic in order to develop their knowledge, understanding, awareness, and tolerance, despite understandable and frequent resistance. Beyond the classroom, story(ality) as a theory has great potential in other domains of study when scholars wish to examine the language of stories in contact zone scenarios, even within social artifacts such as the arts and crafts of a culture. By expanding this study to incorporate personal experience with future research implications, I hope to show the need and usefulness of my new term and idea.

As I progress through my dissertation, a logical, nonlinear thread will evolve between the chapters that allow them to each act as building blocks upon one another, resulting not in a line, but a circle. This introduction not only provides a foundational perspective, but it also acts as a reminder of how far indigenous discourse has come. Progress has certainly been made as more Native communities go online and speak out in new ways to new audiences, but like the Arrowmaker, modern Native scholars, comedians and webmasters are using written, verbal, visual, and performed languages to (re)create themselves, their audiences, and their realities. The Native peoples presented here embody both tribally-specific, national identities AND a pan-

Indian allegiance with each other and non-Native peoples. Aristotle would have us believe in the either/or mode of thinking, and we often impose this requirement on our students. But what about those who live inside a perpetual colonized contact zone where individuals must embrace two or more identities in order to survive? Gloria Anzaldua calls this “mestiza consciousness.” Arnold Krupat calls this *both/and* modes of thought that “predominate in traditional, oral Native communities, persist in Native writing” and he argues this modality operates in 21<sup>st</sup> century Native-produced film as well (*All That Remains* xii). This both/and modality is deeply connected to the idea of a trickster, a character in Native stories that embodies the best and worst of humankind. In this respect, trickster, as a storytelling character who changes what people think they know, provides a solid cultural precedent to modern Native peoples and their embodiment of multiple layers of identities. Many of the Native peoples I have met consider themselves part of many communities, the most important being their tribe in some cases, but this is not the ONLY community.

Ultimately, these modern Native storytellers participate in the ongoing call in Native American Studies to expand and “colonize” non-Native texts through Native strategies. They all speak from experience against silence and domination, and while the material histories and realities of the Native and non-Native groups represented by these language practitioners are different, they do converge on some distinct and important issues such as the role of family and community in the development and ability with language, the importance of leaving home languages alone and acknowledging their value, and finally, the importance and power of naming the problems and attempting to articulate solutions. Instead of non-Native scholars appropriating Native texts, in this contemporary reality, Native texts are appropriating non-Native texts through story(ality), allowing scholars to move forward into a new (re)visioned

future reality woven from the words of storytellers like the ones I explore in this study. As the Arrowmaker reminds us, language represents the only chance for survival and the storyteller has the power to change the story, and thus, change the reality we all share.

## Chapter One

### Conversations in Story(ality)

“An American Indian woman is primarily defined by her tribal identity. In her eyes, her destiny is necessarily that of her people . . . The definitions of woman’s roles are as diverse as tribal cultures in the Americas.”

- Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo)<sup>26</sup>

“I always called her Aunt Susie . . . when she was a young woman she had been sent away to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania . . . She had come to believe very much in books and in schooling.”

- Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo)<sup>27</sup>

“My father and mother, who were at the station waiting for their daughter, rushed in my direction as soon as they saw me, and talking Indian as fast as they could tried to help me from the train . . . I had forgotten that home Indians had such grimy faces. I had forgotten that my mother’s hair always looked as though it had never seen a comb. . . I rushed frantically into the arms of my *school*-mother. . . and cried bitterly, and begged of her to let me get on the train again.”

- “Stiya” (Marianna Burgess)<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> From the opening paragraphs of “Where I Come from is Like This,” the fourth section of Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> From the opening story Silko tells in *Storyteller*, 3-4.

<sup>28</sup> From the opening scene of *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*, written by the white female printing supervisor at Carlisle Indian School 1891, 2-3.



*Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home* uses negative terms and language that stringently and emphatically reinforces one reality while rejecting another. In other words, the difficult story(ality) created by *Stiya* embodies Pierre Bourdieu's idea that "[T]here are no longer any innocent words" (40). This text is a language communication between cultures – not only that of white, Christian, "civilized" culture to indigenous indoctrinates to that culture, but the text also communicates between past and present. When *Stiya's* author, Marianna Burgess, is placed in conversation with contemporary Laguna Pueblo women writers Paula Gunn Allen and Leslie Marmon Silko, the resulting dialogue shows that each of these authors has a particular perspective and ideology to present to their audiences and all employ specific rhetorical strategies to persuade their audiences to believe as they do. Allen, Silko, and Burgess use language purposefully, with cultural bias, and when placing these works in conversation with each other, the result is a story(ality) of power, interpretation, transformation, and performance that calls into question the idea of an autobiographical voice and the problem of using words as weapons of control by de-valuing (an)other's experience<sup>29</sup>.

Absence, silence, and invisibility ruled the day for First Nations peoples in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not presence. According to David Wallace Adams in *Education for Extinction* (1995), "The boarding school, whether on or off the reservation, was the institutional manifestation of the government's determination to completely restructure the Indians' minds and personalities" (97). This "assault on cultural identity" was for a single purpose – to assimilate Native peoples into white culture by stripping them of every vestige of "Indianness" such as clothing, hair, names, spirituality, family, community, and language. The U.S. government, if not directly involved, was most certainly complicit in allowing these schools to operate. Adams writes,

---

<sup>29</sup> I am not suggesting that Allen and Silko use their words as weapons of control the way Burgess may have, rather I am pointing out that this is one of the potential dangers inherent in using words to convey a message or convince any audience of a particular idea.

“From the policymakers’ point of view, the civilization process required a twofold assault on Indian children’s identity. . .As the savage selves gave way, so the civilized selves would emerge” (100-1). Captain Richard Pratt “created the prototype” for the off-reservation boarding school in Carlisle and “liked Indians, but he had little use for Indian cultures” (Adams 51). In fact, Pratt’s guiding principle of killing the Indian to save the man established the basis for his belief that “the Indian’s inferiority, therefore, was cultural, not racial” (Adams 52). Furthermore, Pratt opposed reservations and any sort of land allotment, arguing, “I would blow the reservations to pieces. I would not give Indians an acre of land. When he strikes bottom, he will get up” (qtd in Adams 53). Of course, this ostensibly altruistic intention had some devastating results. Witness the testimonies of boarding school educated adults in *Our Spirits Don’t Speak English* by Rich-Heape Films, a Native American-owned corporation. The documentary is told solely from the Native American perspective, focusing on the stories of lived experience that the speakers recall. Some stories are positive, focusing on the boarding schools as safe havens from alcoholic and abusive home lives, but most experiences are profoundly injurious. Stories presented in this film include child rape, abuse, neglect, and the repercussions associated with having one’s cultural identity forcibly stripped away and being persistently punished if the individual clung to his or her traditions. The level of cruelty and inhumanity presented from the lived experiences in this film are at startling odds with anyone who would defend Indian boarding schools as a positive influence in Native peoples’ lives. And yet, positive outcomes did result. By learning the “enemy’s language,” as Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird call it, these children grew up with the knowledge of both their homes, families, and cultural traditions, as well as knowledge of mainstream culture, expectations, and language. And once again, in language is

power; the power to communicate these awful genocidal deeds in stories that resonate across time and space.

The opening quotes present widely divergent perspectives from two Pueblo women writers and one white female speaking through the imagined perspective of a Pueblo girl returning home from Carlisle Indian School. These quotes embody *story(ality)*. To reiterate, storytelling that creates or alters reality directly or indirectly via language is *story(ality)*. As the introduction establishes, *story(ality)* is only possible during moments of tension when all are voluntarily participating in the storytelling dialectic, which occurs when the storyteller is speaking truth, usually about lived experiences, to a receptive audience filled with individuals who may or may not agree with the storyteller's values, beliefs, or perspective. Essentially, who tells the story changes a story's meaning and the storyteller retains a certain power and influence over a given audience. In addition to the teller, the language of stories can alter reality for the readers or recipients, with often uncertain outcomes, as in the case of the autobiographical texts of Paula Gunn Allen, and Leslie Marmon Silko, and the fictional autobiography crafted by "Embe," or Marianna Burgess. All of these women speak what they believe to be "truth" with their stories, but as history and contemporary study has shown, Burgess's text is a lie masquerading as truth<sup>30</sup>. The most disturbing thing to me about this text is its reception in its own day. Where was the outcry from former Carlisle students who received *Stiya* and were offended by its overt false testimony? Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any offended outcry preserved in the written record, which raises serious questions about the story's reception in 1891 versus our reception of it today.

---

<sup>30</sup> However, to further complicate this issue, I suppose one could argue that Burgess was writing what she believed to be the truth, that she was not under the impression (as we are) that she was falsifying indigenous experiences in order to push the Carlisle agenda. Truth is in the pen and mind of the beholder?

However, uncertainty is not a theme in Janice Gould's "Telling Stories to the Seventh Generation: Resisting the Assimilationist Narrative of *Stiya*," where she states clearly that Burgess "was a foot soldier in Captain Pratt's arsenal of educators at Carlisle and a champion of Pratt's theory of assimilation" (13). Truly, it is hard to read *Stiya* with anything resembling balance for this reason, among others. Not only that, *Stiya* reads like an autobiography of sorts, and asks the reader (any reader, but especially the Carlisle graduate) to believe the truth of its story. However, the multiple layers of identity and false testimony that construct a version of reality (a white woman's version of reality) really complicates the text, its place in history, and its value as an object of scholarly attention today.

### ***Stiya* and the Carlisle message**

It is important to note that story(ality) works many ways, especially when considering the problematic text *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*, which was a powerful reminder of the Carlisle boarding school experience for the students who received this text after graduation. Written and created by Marianna Burgess, the white female printing supervisor at Carlisle, *Stiya*'s voice is "female, intimate, guileless, and fresh" bringing "the Carlisle message closer to home" (Fear-Segal, "Eyes in the Text," 137). And what was the Carlisle message?

Carlisle Indian Boarding School was the first off-reservation school to be designed by Captain Richard Henry Pratt to "destroy the cultural foundations of Native Americans so that they could enjoy full citizenship" (Trafzer et al 14). In order to accomplish this task and lay the groundwork for the many schools that would follow in Carlisle's example, "Pratt established an educational system to isolate Indian children from their families, cultures, and languages where white teachers could indoctrinate them into nineteenth-century American society and the English language" (Trafzer et al 14). Many Native and non-Native scholars have written and edited deep

histories and scholarly treatments of Indian boarding school experiences, including K. Tsianina Lomawaima, Clifford Trafzer, and David Wallace Adams. Lomawaima's first book on the subject of Indian boarding schools grew out of a personal connection – her father attended Chilocco Indian Agricultural School in the 1920s and 30s, and she uses “his reminiscences, and the thoughts and memories of sixty other Chiloccans” to “anchor this narrative.” *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (1994).<sup>31</sup> Although Lomawaima's focus is on Chilocco in the 20s and 30s and not Carlisle in the 1880s and 1890s, her discoveries from speaking with former students of a boarding school experience suggest that although vilification is our first instinct with Indian boarding schools, the reality is much more complicated. According to her research into the history of Chilocco, the boarding school experience at Chilocco fairly mirrors the experience at Carlisle, replete with “military regimentation, manual labor, and enforced uniformity” and an intended focus on English language and “industrial training” (8-9). Interestingly, Lomawaima discovers that the student body and staff did more to structure daily student life than any decree from a far-removed Washington authority. In addition, she presents letters that were sent by former students to Chilocco that reflect widely varying opinions on post-school life. She writes, “Despite Chilocco's strict discipline and literary shortcomings, former students kept up a correspondence with school officials that reveals their attachment and regard for the school” (25). Two such girls who were “working as assistant matrons in the Indian school at Lawton, Oklahoma in 1903” wrote: ““The other day as I was reading the *Farmer and Stock Raiser*, it just made me wish I was back there again, I am such a funny girl anyway, I never do realize how well I like a place until I leave it. . .Annie she cried and is feeling better, I did not cry so I feel worse than ever”” (Lomawaima 26). Such broad

---

<sup>31</sup> Another book on the Indian boarding school experience was co-written by K. Tsianina Lomawaima and Teresa L. McCarty for the Multicultural Education Series edited by James A. Banks: *To Remain an Indian: Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (2006).

laments and longings are not what one expects when thinking of the Indian boarding school experience, but clearly some students benefited and felt that the school improved their lives and futures.

Another scholarly text that grapples with the gray areas and “multiple aspects of the Indian boarding school experience in the United States” is *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences*, edited by Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc (2006). In particular, the editors collectively acknowledge in their introduction the difficulties and dangers of “interpreting the American Indian boarding school experience” in the early years of the twenty-first century: “Difficult because of the diverse views Indian people have about the schools and the various elements of their school experiences. The experience of one boarding school student is different from the experience of other students. . . Interpreting the boarding school experience can be dangerous because we are representing several students, their lives, a different time, and a variety of diverse experiences” (2). This statement respects the complexity of the actual experiences of boarding school students in a way that Burgess’s fictional creation does not. Burgess tried to erase difference by conflating multiple identities into one distilled meta-Indian (“Stiya”) designed to stand in for all individual Indian students at Carlisle, which is why the silence surrounding the reception of this character and her story is so troubling. The people who attended these schools were different individuals with different perceptions and memories of their experiences and these differences were not reflected in Burgess’s text. But she certainly upheld Carlisle’s agenda with *Stiya*, which was to “segregate Indian children from their parents and cultures, gradually integrating them into the white world in a controlled fashion” (*Boarding School Blues* 13).

Similarly, Adams spends an entire book (*Education for Extinction*, 1995) exploring the controversial and problematic issue of Indian boarding schools, but ample evidence of Carlisle's over-arching message to home-bound graduates can be found in chapter nine: Carlisle's graduation ceremony speeches, another form of story(ality). Adams writes,

It was the last opportunity to impress upon the graduates the deep meaning of their school experience. Two themes permeated commencement rhetoric. The first was transformation: Indians had arrived in a state of savagism but now returned thoroughly civilized. . . Second, commencement offered a ceremonially sanctified opportunity for passing on philosophical truisms and heartfelt advice. . . the travails ahead would be numerous. Only moral courage, stiff backbones, and right attitudes could carry the day.  
(274)

Conveniently, this graduation advice inhabits the heart of *Stiya* and shows the "travails" and "heartfelt advice" in action; *Stiya* becomes the testimony needed to convince readers of its inherent truth by creating a particular story(ality) about how Carlisle graduates are to act, think, and behave. Greg Sarris (Coast Miwok/Pomo/Jewish) investigates the problem of reading and listening across cultures and the power of stories, specifically the positive attitude that "any stories can become a basis for intercultural and interpersonal communication and understanding."<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, stories can also be the basis of miscommunication and misunderstanding, as is the case with *Stiya*. Yet another layer to this potential misunderstanding arises when the storyteller intends miscommunication as a propaganda tool<sup>33</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> From Greg Sarris's *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> If that is, indeed, what Burgess was doing.

In “Eyes in the Text: Marianna Burgess and *The Indian Helper*” from the essay collection *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands* (2004), Jacqueline Fear-Segal analyzes *Stiya*’s title page and provides some insight into whether *Stiya* counts as propaganda or not:

The line beneath the title: ‘founded on the author’s actual observations,’ signaled that [Burgess] was also endeavoring to confer authenticity on what lay inside. Written in the first person, *Stiya* is ostensibly the true story of a Pueblo girl’s return to her family and her courageous efforts, against all odds, to live the lessons learned at Carlisle. It is presented as a composite but. . .genuine biography. (136)

Fear-Segal suggests that Burgess was attempting the appearance of authenticity and truth, presenting the story as a trustworthy (auto)biography, thereby sustaining the idea that Burgess was creating propaganda, which is the dissemination of particular doctrines or ideas to benefit an individual or organization and/or to undermine a person or organization. *Stiya* was used for both purposes – to disseminate the doctrines and ideas of Carlisle while simultaneously undermining traditional Pueblo lifeways. Most troubling is the format – *Stiya* is a story, and storytelling seems to be a dearly-held tradition at the center of many Indigenous societies, an idea Burgess was surely aware of. So whose story is it? On the surface, the story appears to be from the perspective and lived experiences of a real Pueblo tribal girl (whose identity is seemingly revealed in the frontispiece photo), but is complicated by the real storyteller—a white woman teacher and printer working for Carlisle.

Barbara Landis, the Carlisle historian, provided valuable biographical information to Fear-Segal, including the following information on the true identity of the girl in the photo and where the name *Stiya* comes from, showcasing Marianna Burgess’s crafty capabilities at appropriation and interpretation: “The photographic studio portrait on the frontispiece of *Stiya*



shows a young Indian woman wearing a long-sleeved, waisted, buttoned-to-the-neck dress, leaning on the back of an ornate Victorian chair. The caption reads, “Stiya, Carlisle Indian Girl.” This picture, however, is not of Stiya Kowacura, the Pueblo girl whose name Burgess had fancied and taken. It is a photograph of Lucy Tsinah, an Apache” (136). Fear-Segal’s endnote indicates that Lucy was married to Burdette Tsinah, a fellow Carlisle student. Furthermore, Fear-Segal succinctly addresses the complicated layers of identity blurring: “In the first two pages of her book, Burgess had already collapsed the identities of two individual women from two very different tribes. She sent “little Stiya” out into the world with a fabricated biography, a multiple identity, and her family name (which Burgess herself had linked to identity) obliterated” (136). The blurring, dismantling, and dismissal of individual identities reflects an absolute disdain for Native peoples generally and Native women specifically on the part of Burgess. However, her wholesale mashing up of Indian women’s names, tribal affiliations, and identities also shows that she understood the rhetorical power of the story she was telling. She knew her audience. She could have made different decisions – Burgess had access to actual Native girls with names and homes and families, but she chose to eliminate those individual identities in favor of a collective Carlisle image of sameness that was reinforced by the daily life and teachings of the school.

Even more complex is Burgess’s motivation. Was this her story, told with personal motives, or was it a planned piece of assimilationist propaganda that Burgess wrote at the behest of the U.S. War Department? Unfortunately, we may never know. All that remains are the scant facts of Burgess’s life, the Carlisle records, and the text of *Stiya*. Also unfortunate is the lack of evidence around the recipients of this tome – where are all the other Aunt Susies and the stories of outraged grandmothers? Somewhat problematic is why this text was potentially more accepted than scorned.

To ensure this acceptance, Burgess creates a particular story(ality) by writing in “an assumed voice” in an effort to shape the behavior of students who had returned to the reservation. According to Fear-Segal’s essay, “Burgess anticipated the situations they would encounter on their return and then wrote the script for how they should respond”(136). Burgess’s text provides a clear answer to the question on every Indian boarding school administrator’s mind, according to David Wallace Adams, “Would returned students serve as a vanguard for progress and civilization or would they sink once again into the morass of self-destructive tribalism?” (275). Just as a non-Native’s perception of Native experience may be altered by reading Paula Gunn Allen’s or Leslie Marmon Silko’s words, so, too, may boarding school-educated Native readers’ perceptions of their own lived realities be distorted by reading a seemingly reassuring text such as *Stiya*.

Perception and distortion of experience are both unavoidable components of story(ality), particularly when context is eliminated or ignored. In the introduction to *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (1989), Paula Gunn Allen asserts Native survivance and the vital necessity of context with her carefully chosen and powerful words:

We are here to testify that our traditions are valuable to us, and that we continue to resist obliteration either of our cultures or of our personhood. Context is important to understanding our stories, and for Indian people that context is both ritual and historical, contemporary and ancient. We are contemporary because we survive in the face of a brutal holocaust that seeks to wipe us out, and our context is as much historical as it is tribal.” (2)

In the case of *Stiya*, which is a story told with a constructed and imagined context, Marianna Burgess is telling the story behind the perceived authentic identity of a Carlisle-educated Pueblo girl; she is telling this story to returned Carlisle graduates; and the circumstances of the exchange involve the printing and production of the story in book form (paid for by whom? Silko suggests the War Department paid)<sup>34</sup>, delivering the book to former students' homes by hand at graduation and by mail, and received and read by those students (and perhaps their families) in the reservation home environment. These circumstances affect how the story of *Stiya* and her experiences were received, in addition to the mollifying effect of certain constructed mother figures. Power and influence over Native cultures through language often came violently through forced language removal and acquisition at Indian boarding schools, but the effects of this particularly heinous attempt at cultural genocide have been long lasting and incredibly complicated, as evidenced by the existence of the text *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*.

### **Female power and authority**

The interconnection of language and power is an old idea, but one worth re-visiting in this new light. Consider Mikhail Bakhtin's idea that, "in revolutionary situations, common words take on opposite meanings. In fact, there are no neutral words."<sup>35</sup> Although his "Discourse in the Novel" focuses on fiction, Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia as "another's speech in another's language" is relevant here: "Language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract

---

<sup>34</sup> Silko spends five pages on *Stiya* and the U.S. government's role in the Carlisle experience in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*. The chapter where this discussion takes place is "Books: Notes on Mixtec and Maya Screenfolds, Pictures Books of Preconquest Mexico." After stating that "the U.S. government had taken every precaution to sever Indian students' ties with their families and tribes," Silko launches into a discussion of *Stiya*, its reinforcement of the "civilizing and instruction" at Carlisle and its reception in her own family. And as for who or what entity was responsible for its publication? Silko writes, "The U.S. War Department published the book in 1881; as far as I know, distribution was limited to Indian boarding school graduates" (161-165).

<sup>35</sup> Qtd. in Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*, 40.

system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world...Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions” (*Dialogic Imagination* 293). One could argue that First Nations people, especially women, have been in a revolutionary situation with language and physical sensory reality since European contact and remain so to this day. In writing about Ohiyesa and the massacre at Wounded Knee in the middle of a chapter called “Silence is My Mother,” Linda Hogan says, “Few people outside our cultures can comprehend the depth of the pain, despair, and, for many of us Native peoples, anger. . .We have not forgotten the past so quickly and easily” (*Woman Who Watches Over the World* 79). For Hogan, whose memoir title reflects the name of a clay woman she purchased on a trip to Mexico, words define and shape the human spirit: “Without them, we fall. . .Language is an intimacy not only with others, but even with the self. It creates a person” (56). Words “anchor” her to the earth, to her personal past, to her Chickasaw history; provide her a pathway of expression for her pain, memories, joys, and struggles as an Indian woman. Instead of crying for a vision, Hogan turns to the power of language to help her survive. She writes, “I live in a place words built” (58). Hogan is not alone; many Native women turn to language for expression or activism, writing back against a sometimes horrific physical reality.

Paula Gunn Allen addresses some of these issues in her scholarly work *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986). For instance, the chapter on “Angry Women are Building: Issues and Struggles Facing American Indian Women Today,” Allen uses words to directly and bluntly get the reader’s attention that “the central issue that confronts American Indian women throughout the hemisphere is survival, *literal survival*, both on a cultural and biological level” (189). The italicized emphasis on *literal survival* and the fact

that Allen names the central issue for American Indian women as survival marks this sentence as a challenge to the status quo and a call for revolutionary change. She goes on to ask why we are horrified at South African apartheid and the “slaughter of native peoples such as the Cambodians, the Palestinians, the Armenians, the Jews” when, as a nation, Americans can’t seem to summon a shred of sympathy or understanding for the physical and cultural genocide that happened in our own country (190). Allen eloquently places American Indian women at the forefront of everyday survival against war, colonization, acculturation, assimilation, sterilization, rape, neglect, and the destruction of “our land, our homes, our past, and our future” (190). In fact, she specifies that Indian women’s current struggles are physical and cultural survival, specifically alcoholism, drug abuse, affluence, poverty, incest, “battering by Indian men” and much more (191). Being a writer, Allen contributes to the survival of Indian women in America, but she also includes writers in her list of women whom she exhorts to continue “doing all we can: as mothers and grandmothers; as family members and tribal members; as professionals, workers, artists, shamans, leaders, chiefs, speakers, writers, and organizers, we daily demonstrate that we have no intention of disappearing, of being silent, or of quietly acquiescing in our extinction” (193).

Language and storytelling in particular are weighed down with social and moral implications, therefore, if stories create reality and identity (via language), then they are infused with power that has societal and cultural foundations and effects. *Stiya* reinforces the absence of Native presence<sup>36</sup> in American geographic and intellectual space, and through commanding and confident language (storytelling), encourages its audience to accept shadows as real. As Malea Powell suggests, “Human existence is haunted by leavings, by disappearance,” and the story of *Stiya* plays its part in this haunting with frightening power and authority.

---

<sup>36</sup> See Gerald Vizenor’s *Manifest Manners*, 1999.

Pierre Bourdieu suggests in *Language and Symbolic Power*, “[I]t is legitimate to treat social relations—even relations of domination—as symbolic interactions. . .one must not forget that the relations of communication *par excellence*—linguistic exchanges—are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized” (37). In the case of Native Americans and the U.S. federal government, a long history of language and stories exists in the form of treaties, and promises (written and spoken), letters, demands, and official Congressional bills that do nothing and go nowhere but make an empty symbolic statement to salve guilty souls.<sup>37</sup> Those Native people who, throughout history, put pen to paper to tell their stories, or who worked with white writers and interpreters to tell their stories, were also negotiating the language power dynamic. Layers of complication between relationships—between speaker and writer, author and audience—reinforce the idea that “there are no neutral words.” Therefore, who tells the story changes how it is told and received, just as the story’s audience may change how the story is told and how it is received.

Ideas of domesticity and mother figures reveal these layered complications in the opening words of three works: Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*, and the children’s novel, *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*, written by Marianna Burgess at the Carlisle Indian Boarding School in Pennsylvania in the 1890s. The story(ality) created about domesticity and mothers by each of these texts may seem initially dissimilar, but upon further investigation of the common word mother, the way the idea of a mother and the way domestic

---

<sup>37</sup> For an example of a recent Congressional bill that fits my description, see House Resolution 3 from the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress in January 2007: “To acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the United States Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States.” My favorite section is the ending disclaimer, which completely negates any chance for tribes to recover monies still owed for stolen and appropriated land: “Nothing in this Joint Resolution authorizes any claim against the United States or serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.” (thomas.loc.gov) Therefore, the U.S. government is only willing to make the apology official, but refuses to act in any meaningful way based on what the apology truly acknowledges. This is merely empty rhetoric that doesn’t matter in the “real lives of real people living in real time” (Robert Warrior, *The People and the Word* xv).

space is constructed in language, you will notice the resonance across cultural boundaries that makes *Stiya* so insidious.

Turning first to the construction of domestic space, Leslie Marmon Silko complicates Euroamerican notions of domestic space and the tasks found in that space. In the opening pages of *Storyteller*, she shows us her Aunt Susie at “her kitchen table with her books and papers spread over the oil cloth” (4). Images are also used in this text and the facing page opposite this quote shows us Aunt Susie outside leaning on a fence laced with barbed wire and looking down at the toddler, Leslie Silko. The effect of this textual/visual juxtaposition places the emphasis on family and experience, rather than adherence to a restricted notion of domestic space. On these two pages, domestic space is everywhere. This idea is reinforced in the story Aunt Susie tells about the little girl who ran away after asking her mother to make yashtoah and failing to find the necessary wood for the fire. The girl’s mother is clearly willing to perform the domestic task of cooking this special food for her daughter, but requires wood, which her daughter is responsible for. The domestic space we see is outside the home, in nature and the “precipitous cliff of Acoma mesa” (8). The focus again is on the tools and actions required for a meal’s preparation, rather than the actual preparation and delivery of the meal itself within the kitchen.

Similarly, Paula Gunn Allen also constructs a much more fluid and companionate domestic space in “Where I Come from is Like This.” In relating memories of all the women she has known, she writes, “Most of all I remember the women who laugh and scold and sit uncomplaining in the long sun on feast days and who cook wonderful food on wood stoves, in beehive mud ovens, and over open fires outdoors” (*Sacred Hoop* 45). This presentation resonates with life and animation and the flow of conversation and food and family. The domestic space is not the location of weakness. Quite the contrary. Allen opines,

We were far indeed from the ‘weaker sex’ designation that white aristocratic sisters unhappily earned for us all. I remember my mother moving furniture all over the house when she wanted it changed. . .My mother used to tell me about the Acoma Pueblo women she had seen as a child carrying huge ollas (water pots) on their heads as they wound their way up the tortuous stairwell carved into the face of the ‘Sky City’ mesa (*Sacred Hoop* 48).

From the perspectives of Allen and Silko, the domestic space is still female-centered, but is a source of power, comfort, control, and independence of thought and action. Against this Laguna perception, consider the perspective and goals of the Women’s National Indian Assimilation (WNIA) reform group in 1885, “dedicated to Native American assimilation” by providing loans for Native peoples to build homes, citing the situation of one “Indian woman” who was successfully “civilized through the medium of a pine floor and a scrubbing brush” (Simonsen, *Making Home Work*, 72).

Jane Simonsen’s *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West 1860-1919* (2006) presents a compelling case for using domestic space as a weapon in the war of assimilation. In fact, it also raises a question in terms of my chapter – was Marianna Burgess possibly a member or supporter of this WNIA organization, or at least aware of the group and its efforts? Could this have influenced her choice to focus so heavily on a constructed and rigid domestic space in *Stiya*? In fact, this construction (literal and figurative) of a physical domestic space was of particular importance to Sara T. Kinney, the head of the WNIA Home Building and Loan Committee, who “credited the house for the woman’s new habits of industry, emphasizing that architecture itself could be a transformative influence” (Simonsen 72). The WNIA’s notion of industry was decidedly in conflict with traditional Native women’s



notion of industry in the home. Take the word industry, for instance. When Allen and Silko write about domestic space and tasks, the word “industry” does not enter the conversation. The implications and connotations of a word like “industry” opposes what the Native women writers are relating about their traditional home and domestic experiences. Industrial spaces are not places of comfort, conversation, and sisterhood where women claim and practice their power and love for family and self. Therefore, right off the bat, these two conceptions of the purpose of a domestic home space conflict in some fairly radical ways. However, this did not dissuade the WNIA from its course: “The WNIA defined women’s domestic work almost exclusively as a barometer of civilization. . . domestic work became not just the work of maintaining home and family but was scientifically legitimated as an engine of civilization itself” (Simonsen 72). Therefore, as these two powerful forces of education and domestic assimilation combine to influence and force change in Native communities, one can see how these communities and the individuals within didn’t seem to stand a chance. Fortunately, many did resist and survive to tell counter-narratives that complicate the entire boarding school system and its insidious agenda.

Jane Simonsen’s alignment of the domestic space with the specific work of mothering seems to reinforce a patriarchal view of this private social space where broader “civilized” morals are grown. Simonsen uses the phrase “mother-work” and describes “women’s virtuosity in creating interiors [as] an important part of a middle class womanhood [that] conferred upon women the responsibility of making an environment that would display the virtues of civilized, moral life” (*Making Home* 76). This focus on interior domestic space is evident in *Stiya*, whereas Allen and Silko both focus more attention on the exterior domestic space. Simonsen does talk briefly about Burgess’s text, calling *Stiya* a “novella,” arguing that Burgess “elaborated on the uses of the architectural object lesson in stimulating work” (89). Furthermore, she continues,

“*Stiya* suggests that pueblo life is barbarous and its political systems tyrannical; the story offers as its replacement a commitment to routinized labor governed by architectural order. . .the book details *Stiya*’s attempts to re-create, as best she can, the architectural and behavioral model of Carlisle” (90). Finally, Simonsen also suggests “the photograph of *Stiya* provides a model of womanhood analogous to the architectural model represented by the image of Carlisle [in the back of *Stiya*]. Like the campus, she embodies an orderly and carefully constructed cultural ideal” (92). Finally, Simonsen damningly concludes, “*Stiya*’s work confirmed the teachers’ professional legitimacy. By adhering to the precepts of Euro-American life, *Stiya* represented the continuing influence of lessons taught in places like Carlisle” (93). This final assessment parallels my suggestion that Burgess was using this fictional amalgamation of a Pueblo girl to express her own power and authority in a world that did not legitimate a woman as an authority figure. Furthermore, Simonsen’s use of “mother-work” throughout her discussion of assimilated domestic space also lends credibility to my attempt to connect the concept of mother in these various texts as a powerful influence force for the original recipients of the *Stiya* story.

Paula Gunn Allen connects the common word “mother” with specific and powerful ideas about womanhood that provides a good starting definition for comparison with the mother idea in *Stiya*. In *The Sacred Hoop*’s fourth chapter, “Where I Come From is Like This,” Allen writes, “The tribes see women variously, but they do not question the power of femininity. Sometimes they see women as fearful, sometimes peaceful, sometimes omnipotent and omniscient, but they never portray women as mindless, helpless, simple, or oppressed” (44). Therefore, in Allen’s opinion, the Pueblo tribal idea of women upholds a sense of female power and authority. In fact, chapter two, “Grandmother of the Sun,” Allen details how “pre-conquest American Indian women valued their role as vitalizers. . .They were mothers, and that word did not imply slaves,

drudges, drones who are required to live only for others rather than for themselves as it does so tragically for many modern women” (27). This idea of a mother in pre-contact indigenous communities “implied the highest degree of status in ritual cultures. The status of mother was so high, in fact, that in some cultures Mother, or its analogue, Matron, was the highest office to which a man or woman could aspire” (28). Oddly enough, this idea is also present in the character Stiya, whom Burgess does not portray as “mindless, helpless, simple, or oppressed,” but rather awards the protagonist the high mother figure status that would be respected in Pueblo home culture. Burgess’s goal in the fictional autobiography is to vitalize the home Native communities with Carlisle sensibilities and Euroamerican domestic practices by using the fictional aberration of Stiya as her exemplary model. According to Marianna Burgess’s appropriated Native storyteller voice, Stiya only shows weakness once – as she clings to her schoolmother and begs to return to Carlisle. From that point on in the story, Stiya seems to be in control of herself, her money, her family, her friends, and even her home Pueblo community to some extent. Lacking any evidence that proves Burgess visited a Pueblo community, one may surmise that she did communicate regularly with Pueblo tribal girls under her tutelage at Carlisle and may very well have learned about this powerful female dynamic. According to Allen, “At Laguna, all entities, human or supernatural, who are functioning in a ritual manner at a high level are called Mother. . .A strong attitude integrally connects the power of Original Thinking or Creation Thinking to the power of mothering. That power is. . .the power to make, to create, to transform” (28-29). It is entirely possible that Burgess chose to present Stiya with powerful attributes to play on the traditional Pueblo idea of influential and transformative feminine authority, in addition to creating a fantasy figure that could embody Burgess’s own unfulfilled desire for true power in an industrialized patriarchal society.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> According to Ann Oakley in her 1976 tome *Woman’s Work: The Housewife Past and Present*, “a decline in

Allen's text provides further evidence of these possibilities as she writes in specific terms about Laguna Pueblo women: "My ideas of womanhood, passed on largely by my mother and grandmothers, Laguna Pueblo women, are about practicality, strength, reasonableness, intelligence, wit, and competence" (44). This is exactly how the Carlisle "school-mother" and Stiya herself are portrayed—as practical, strong, reasonable, intelligent, and competent in the face of a dire and uncivilized situation. Conversely, Burgess portrays Stiya's Indian mother as helpless, simple, mindless, and oppressed. The effect of paralleling the Indian girl with the refined Carlisle school-mother and juxtaposing these two women against the primitive, emotional, "filthy" reservation Indian mother might be reassurance, affirmation of learned Carlisle values, and encouragement to continue the Carlisle ways in the face of community opposition. The community Burgess reinforces for the Carlisle graduates is the world created for them at Carlisle,<sup>39</sup> which is a subtle and invasive move that no doubt persuaded many readers. This was a familiar story with a familiar message, possibly arriving at the right time and certainly capable of altering Native students' perception of communal reality at home.

Familiarity, community, and strong, practical, intelligent mother figures also resonate through Leslie Marmon Silko's memoir, *Storyteller*, adding evidence to Greg Sarris's idea that

---

employment of married women outside the home" between the 1840s to 1914 led to "the rising popularity of a belief in women's natural domesticity" (34). Interestingly, Marianna Burgess was unmarried and worked as a teacher and printer "outside the home," which puts her in the minority of unconventional women in 1891, the year *Stiya* was published. Some respect is due her, however begrudging, for being in a position of power, even if veiled by her fantasy creations, *Man-on-the-bandstand* and *Stiya*. Surely, a woman this creative, motivated, and powerful was disappointed that she could not take full and public credit for all of her work.

<sup>39</sup> The world at Carlisle, along with other boarding schools, "was the institutional manifestation of the government's determination to completely restructure the Indians' minds and personalities," including "a twofold assault on Indian children's identity. . .the tearing down of the old selves and the building of new ones" (Adams, 97 – 101). Part of this identity shifting involved a changing of cultural practices, such as dancing. Angel De Cora (Hinook-Mahiwi-Kilinaka) attended Carlisle and wrote a short story called *Gray Wolf's Daughter* in which the young girl "had for a long time desired knowledge of the white man's ways" (Chaucer.library.emory.edu) But when the girl dances her last festival dance before departing for the white boarding school, her grandmother admonishes, "Schoolgirls can't dance, because they have to wear white men's shoes. If they ask you to wear shoes at school, don't you do it—don't you do it!" The world of Carlisle did not allow for the growth and development of such tribal ceremonies as festival dances, but instead replaced those with gendered white ceremonies, such as the promenade.

“cultural biases influence interpretive acts” (152). Silko’s cultural bias influences her interpretation of Aunt Susie, an important role model for the future writer. For example, when Silko relates her Aunt Susie’s post-Carlisle experience, one phrase stands out: “She had come to believe very much in books and in schooling” (4). The use of “she had come to believe” suggests that Aunt Susie had believed more in something else prior to her Carlisle experiences and although Silko is a learned writer, she seems to imply that perhaps something was lost for Aunt Susie as a result of Carlisle’s influence, even as she gained an appreciation for the written word. In fact, Silko’s respect and admiration for her Aunt Susie is evident throughout *Storyteller*, as well as in other texts, such as the introduction to the catalog of Native American Literature for Lopez Books, where Silko states, “Aunt Susie was a scholar and a storyteller; she believed the *Stiya* book was important evidence of the lies and the racism and bad faith of the U.S. Government with the Pueblo people” (lopezbooks.com). The authority with which Silko writes is convincing and sounds as though Aunt Susie must have directly related this story. But Silko heard this story from her mother after Aunt Susie had passed on, adding layers of interpretation and assumptions onto the original story, which was a reflection of the lived experience.

As for the text of *Stiya*, Silko has nothing but an understandable disdain, calling Burgess’s story “an extension program” that projects all of Burgess’s “fears and prejudices toward Pueblo life into her *Stiya* character” (lopezbooks.com). Two of these fears involved Carlisle students returning to traditional home life back on the reservation and especially the influence of mothers, which might explain why Burgess gives *Stiya* an Indian mother too weak, mindless, and emotional to resist her Carlisle-educated daughter’s “civilizing” influence. The disdain Leslie Marmon Silko has for Burgess and her fictitious and libelous creation seems matched by Marianna Burgess’s disdain of traditional Indian experiences. For instance, consider

the opening scene on page two, where Stiya sees her parents at the train station for the first time in five years:

“My father and mother, who were at the station waiting for their daughter, rushed in my direction as soon as they saw me, and talking Indian as fast as they could tried to help me from the train. My father took my valise, and my mother, seizing me by the arm, threw her head upon my shoulder and cried for joy. (2)

Before going further into this rich text that is so ripe for examination, I'd like to point out the phrases “their daughter,” “valise,” “talking Indian,” and “seizing.” The use of third person (“their daughter”) in a first person sentence is interesting and surely not a typo. Rather, Burgess seems to reinforce the mental and emotional distance that Carlisle created for Indian children by removing them from their homes and shipping them across the country to be educated in English language, technical skills, and manual labor. Furthermore, the terms “talking Indian” and “valise” contrasts Stiya's elevated vocabulary skills to her parents' primitive language and lack of education, and the mother's action of “seizing” Stiya's arm implies violence and force, while her crying for joy implies the mother's lack of control over her emotions, a control exemplified by Stiya's school-mother, whose words on page four advise Stiya, “MY dear girl, you must stop crying.. .This is your mother. She loves you. You will get used to her ways by and by. Come now, be a woman!” The school-mother's advice and behavior are what Stiya follows, reinforcing the Carlisle representative's “practicality, strength, reasonableness, intelligence, wit, and competence” (Allen 44).

The effect on the returned students upon reading *Stiya* must have been powerful, altering their interpretations of reality and experience, while providing a vein of familiarity that crossed the boundary between traditional Pueblo life and the white Carlisle experience in the concept of

strong women who acted with power and authority in their communities. What reads as a devastating and damaging fantasy to contemporary readers may have been received with less scorn than we would like to imagine, which might explain the lack of any recorded outrage beyond Silko's story about Aunt Susie. How possible is it that all of those students who received this text were angry at its appearance and decided to destroy and ignore it? My inclination is to lean toward more rational acceptance that perhaps this text was not as much an object of vilification in its own time as Silko suggests it was within her own family. Hers is just one family's story, after all, one family's experience.

### **Experience of return**

Returning home to the pueblo after years in a foreign land (in this case, Pennsylvania) and reuniting with parents, siblings, friends, and community must have been difficult and certainly required a radical adjustment and perhaps some tough decisions. David Adams recovers and shares the real concerns of Margaret Napawat (Kiowa), from her Carlisle graduating essay: "Think of all the temptations and influence of my people I have to face. This is the commencement of a hard life for me. Alone, in the midst of wickedness I have to struggle. Will you blame me if I fail?" (275). This brief snippet is enlightening, focusing as it does on home being "a hard life," consisting of "wickedness" that this girl must "struggle" against, possibly leading to her failure as a newly educated and "civilized" Indian. This fear of failure was shared by boarding school teachers and administrators, "that the school experience had succeeded only in changing a student's outer appearance, that under the veneer of civilization still beat an Indian heart" (Adams 275). Marianna Burgess breathes life into these fears with Stiya and her homecoming experiences, possibly giving returned Carlisle graduates a comforting connection to the people and ideas they had grown accustomed to in Pennsylvania. While we, as modern

readers, see *Stiya* as purely assimilative and even as evidence of cultural genocide, the more difficult idea to grapple with is that this text may have been received with open arms, hearts, and minds by students such as Margaret Napawat, who clearly felt a sense of trepidation at returning to a world of “temptation,” strong familial influence, and uncomfortable physical circumstances (ie, sleeping on the floor instead of a bed). In other words, perhaps the story(ality) created by *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home* was a welcomed reinforcement of Carlisle-instilled values for those students who evidently accepted and embraced them.

In Chapter eight of *Stiya*, Burgess uses *Stiya*’s friend, Annie G, to effectively represent a returned Carlisle graduate who has succumbed to despair in order to juxtapose this inappropriate response to home life to *Stiya*’s more competent, strong, and sturdy toughness and fortitude. When Annie G. visits *Stiya*, she “sobbed as though her heart would break” and desperately asks *Stiya* if they can “go back to Carlisle, quick” (51-52). *Stiya* dismisses the notion, boasts about her newly purchased chairs, bed, tub, and table bought with the “money earned in the country” that she saved while at Carlisle (53). Several pages are spent on *Stiya*’s frugality and wealth compared to her “poor” community, how pleasant working conditions were at Carlisle, and Annie’s “uncontrollable fit[s] of crying” brought on by the stated prospect of “putting on the Indian dress” (55). *Stiya*’s response to Annie mirrors the Carlisle school-mother’s response to *Stiya* at the train station: “Don’t cry, Annie dear. I’ll tell you what to do. . . I have been sad and angry, and disheartened and homesick, all at once, determined one minute and weak the next. . . We must not be cowards” (55-56). Notice that *Stiya* is “homesick” for Carlisle even though she is technically home on the pueblo. Also interesting is the role reversal that occurs almost immediately upon *Stiya*’s return to her family’s home. Specifically, *Stiya* becomes the



strong, competent mother figure and all of the poor, ignorant women around her become daughters for her to teach and to whom she can impart the wisdom of Carlisle training.

Ignorance apparently abounds in Stiya's own family, according to her high-powered perceptions viewed through the Carlisle lens. Specifically, Stiya takes the mother role away from her natural mother, first by her judgment and then by her actions. Stiya's judgment of her mother begins immediately on the train station platform and increasingly grows once she arrives at her family's abode in the pueblo. If the woman's place in 19<sup>th</sup> century America is in the home, then Stiya's judgment of the home her mother keeps is damning:

The ceiling of the [12 x 14 foot] room was so low that by standing on tip-toe I could reach it. It was very black with age and smoke as well as very dirty, being under part of the flat roof. . .through which the dry chips and dirt were continually dropping. The ceiling was a splendid place, too, for wasps and spiders to build nests and they had done good work during my absence. . .I found another block of wood and sat down, not offering to help my mother get supper, for I was dreadfully tired, and I knew she would rather do the work herself that first night. (11-13)

Without going any further into the strips of drying meat draped with "a million flies," Stiya's judgment of her mother's home and housekeeping capabilities are in direct opposition to the expectations she has from Carlisle. The room is too small for Stiya's trunk, the ceiling is offensively low and dirty, and the presence of insects further reinforces the idea of uncleanness. Consider, too, that the Christian teachings at Carlisle likely emphasized the adage that "cleanliness is next to godliness," which further implicates this Pueblo mother as not just unclean, but wicked as well. Not only that, a block of wood stands in place of a chair, there is no table, and Stiya's mother cooks over an open fire that fills the tiny home with smoke and soot.

The result of this preparation nauseates Stiya: “Had I not watched the supper being prepared, had it been placed on a table instead of on the floor at our feet, I might have felt like eating” (14).

Once again, Marianna Burgess uses Stiya to judge the Indian mother, being careful to distinguish between this undesirable mother and the Carlisle school-mother, with whom she aligns Stiya. As the enlightened and civilized returned student, Stiya becomes Burgess’s proper, controlled, clean, sturdy, reliable, and wise mother figure who can lead this family and community out of a savage darkness cluttered with “dishes back in the corner,” poor lighting, no ventilation, offensive odors, and beds on the floor (16).

In contrast to this unflattering image, modern readers have the stories and experiences of mothers, daughters, and home from Leslie Silko, Paula Gunn Allen, and other Pueblo tribal writers. For instance, Allen writes, “My mother told me stories all the time. . . And in all of those stories she told me who I was, who I was supposed to be, whom I came from, and who would follow me. In this way she taught me. . . that all life is a circle and everything has a place within it” (*Sacred Hoop* 46). The centrality to Pueblo life of storytelling by Pueblo women evidently did not escape Marianna Burgess as she constructed her own story, preferring to be the only storyteller, with Stiya as her mouthpiece. For Silko’s Aunt Susie, stories were clearly a priority as well: “People are sometimes surprised at her vocabulary, but she was a brilliant woman, a scholar of her own making who has cherished the Laguna stories all her life.” (7) Hence, at least for one Laguna Pueblo family (Silko’s), who tells the story changes how it is told and received, just as the story’s audience may change how the story is told and how it is received. Aunt Susie heard stories of experience and passed them on to Leslie Silko, who heard them with certain beliefs, expectations, and assumptions; she then passes some of these stories (selectively) on to us in *Storyteller*. Again, it is important to note that Stiya, and not the Indian mother, tells stories

about how the family is supposed to be. Missing, of course, is any reference to past or future, outside material concerns (before, Stiya lacked nice clothes, furniture, money, and after, she possesses these items and has influenced her father to build a larger house in which to place more possessions). In fact, the drive for material things is antithetical to traditional Pueblo lifeways according to Albert Yava (1888-1990): “The Hopis were not supposed to accumulate wealth, but to be generous with everything.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Burgess grants almost no consideration to complex experiences of family and community in *Stiya*, much less ancestors, their stories of experience, and their value for learning how to live. Allen’s, Silko’s, and Yava’s real lived experiences were much different, but the fact that Burgess does use *Stiya* to tell the Carlisle story in direct and indirect ways to Carlisle graduates indicates her prowess for effective propaganda (a specific type of storytelling with a specific and manipulative purpose).

Despite the seeming disparity in representations of home, mothers, daughters, and community in *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*, one must also consider that some returned Carlisle graduates may have indeed experienced homesickness and longing for the familiarity of the boarding school environment and its hierarchical and linear expectations. Consider one Hampton Institute girl’s letter after returning to Montana: “‘It is so easy for Indian school-boys and girls to say ‘I am going back to help my people and teach them the right way to live.’ But what a different thing to do it!’” This quote from David Wallace Adams’s chapter nine on “Home” suggests that the challenges were equally difficult for male and female returning students and that the “anthropological lens of ‘role continuity’” for young women was incorrect. Specifically, he writes, “Males and females alike faced an uphill struggle of monumental proportions. . . The challenge of economic self-sufficiency fell largely on the

---

<sup>40</sup> Taken from an excerpt of Albert Yava’s life story, *Big Falling Snow: A Tewa-Hopi Indian’s Life and the History and Traditions of His People*, edited by Harold Courlander. This excerpt appears in Arnold Krupat’s anthology, *Native American Autobiography* (1994).

shoulders of returning male students. For girls it was how to apply the lessons learned in domestic training class to the primitive conditions of camp life. . . as many enthusiastic housekeepers discovered, the lessons of domesticity were not easily adapted to dirt-floored tepees and cabins without tables, beds, washtubs, or cooking utensils, innovations often viewed by unsympathetic parents as needless conveniences, inappropriate for Indians” (282-83).

Applying this to *Stiya*, one can see how Marianna Burgess played up these story(ality) of fear and hardship by thrusting *Stiya* into just such a situation as described above, and then granting her both male and female authority – she has the money (economic self-sufficiency) and makes the household decisions related to cooking, cleaning, and furniture-buying.

Therefore, while perception and distortion do play a part in the story(ality) of *Stiya* when compared to recorded and lived experiences of Pueblo people, a modicum of reinforcement, solace, and buttressing act as the foil for a simplistic reading of this text that seems so aware of itself as a linguistic tool of power, depending on the reader’s perspective. Indeed, Adams writes convincingly about the oft-ignored and unaccepted reality that “whatever Pratt’s hopes, the hard truth was that many reservations were bastions of traditionalism or deeply factionalized. . . the evidence suggests that many [students]. . . had a difficult time [adjusting]. It was at homecoming that parents and children first came to realize the cultural chasm that now separated them” (276-77). Plainly, Marianna Burgess was aware of this reality and placed her fictional protégé in the exact position the book’s readers experienced in order to alter their lived realities by showing, through language and story, how to survive and thrive in the home environment. Imagine how different the response to this book might be today if a returned Pueblo student *had* composed the story. However, because of the painful layers of complications that do exist with centuries of misrepresentation and genocide, *Stiya* cannot be received by modern readers as anything but

assimilationist garbage; “an extension program” for Burgess’s (and white society’s) “fears and prejudices toward Pueblo life,” as Silko suggests.

In fact, Silko is bold, direct, and unmistakable in her reading and criticism of Burgess’s story:

The Stiya character Bergess created is detached from land and from village life. The Stiya character has no affection for any family member; every aspect of Pueblo life is repugnant; vile odors and flies abound. Stiya is filled with self-loathing when she remembers that she grew up in this place. She has only loathing for the traditional Pueblo ways. Stiya wonders how she can possibly endure the squalor, and these questions were exactly the sort that the U.S. Department of War wanted Indian school graduates to ask themselves. It was never too late for a Carlisle graduate to move to the city.

(lopezbooks.com)

One can envision some very personal reasons for Silko’s lack of objectivity coupled with a desire to heap on criticism. However, Silko’s lived experience clearly differed from the experience represented in *Stiya*. What about the students who did return to this perceived reality? That doesn’t mean their homes and families were filthy and ignorant, but certainly we can agree that many of these students, after years of training at Carlisle, very likely perceived what Burgess imagined. The key point here is that many of those returned students shared the same lens as Burgess, a lens Silko obviously neither shares nor legitimates. Perhaps Marianna Burgess did not envision her text surviving through the years to be fodder for academic examination. Perhaps we are fortunate that her text did survive to allow us the opportunity to examine this complex communicative situation in a specific way. Bourdieu suggests, “Communication between classes (or, in colonial or semi-colonial societies, between ethnic groups) always represents a critical

situation for the language that is used” (*Language* 40). If this is so, then the communication between Marianna Burgess and the indigenous Carlisle graduates “represents a critical situation for the language that is used.” The language Burgess uses to communicate with these returned students confirms Carlisle’s message on every page, reinforcing the perceived reality that many students likely experienced, having been taught so well at school.

While modern readers may consider texts such as *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home* to be offensive, as scholars, we should approach such complicated stories with a more balanced view of the communication and rhetorical life surrounding it. Tempting though it is to judge *Stiya* as a one-way communicative tool, we must remember that returned students did leave a written record of their experiences and thoughts – and not all of them support this anti-colonization, anti-dominance rhetoric of some contemporary Native scholars. Not only were returned students reading this text, some were writing back to the school about their fears, concerns, and failures at converting their families and communities to the Carlisle method of living. The more pleasant idea that “most homecomings were touching, affection-filled affairs”<sup>41</sup> was certainly true, but another, less pleasant, truth existed simultaneously. For example, David Wallace Adams includes excerpts from the letters and memories of Polingaysi Qoyawayma (Hopi) and Jason Betzinez (Osage), which express concerns over re-acclimating to the home environment, oftentimes under the threat of punishment from their relatives if they refused to comply. Betzinez writes about finding his home community’s behavior “reprehensible” and opposing participation in the January medicine dances, recalling, “If you minded your own business and tried to live in the white man’s way, then the Indians branded you as being some kind of outcast who no longer loved his own people” (Adams 280). In a similar vein, Qoyawayma criticized her parents for not buying “a white man’s bed to sleep on. . .And a table?”

---

<sup>41</sup> Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 277.

You should not be eating on a floor as the Old Ones did. When I was a little girl I did not mind sleeping on the floor and eating from a single bowl into which everyone dipped. But I am used to another way of living now, and I do not intend to do these things” (Adams 277). Surely, Qoyawayma was not the only returned Pueblo student to feel this way. Possibly Marianna Burgess received inspiration from letters such as this one, not only for the comforting Carlisle sentiments, but also for the physical details of the perceived reality of home life on the reservation. Once again, while we may be inclined to brush off these students as brainwashed, a more productive tactic would be to acknowledge that experience, depending on the lens one privileges, is varied, complex, and sometimes unpleasant in a way that makes modern readers uncomfortable.

### **Conclusion & Implications**

Marianna Burgess was a white woman who appeared to embrace the 19<sup>th</sup> century Euramerican ideals of women and motherhood by helping the poor Indian children become civilized, and yet created the powerful fantasy figure of “Stiya,” which was not only a figment of her imagination, but also an important vehicle for Burgess to express her power, authority, and impression of truth about Native American experience as she perceived it as a teacher of Native American children in the boarding school setting. In stark contrast, the texts of Paula Gunn Allen and Leslie Marmon Silko relate warm, positive stories about domestic space, family, and community. The difficulty is accepting that both of these story(alities) are valid and exude particular truths through language. Altering power relations starts with an idea, an idea expressed in words, words that are acted upon, actions that alter experience. These stories of experience overlap and ultimately alter the power relations between Native peoples and the dominant Euramerican culture, then and now. Therefore, we return to the troubling questions posed in the

introduction. If the contemporary result of this conflict and conversation of texts across time and space is a story(ality) that continues to speak of power, resistance, and cultural pride, then what does this truly mean and what are the implications for the academic community and any people (Native or non-Native) who are interested in understanding cultural cross-roads and the transformative effect of stories? Specifically, power for whom, resistance to what, and which culture is privileged by these contrasting texts?

One answer could be the following. The contemporary authors, Allen and Silko, privilege the Laguna Pueblo culture, granting power and authority to Native voices, experience, and ideas that resist the assimilative efforts of the dominant Euramerican culture. On the other hand, Marianna Burgess privileges the white, Christian-based, Carlisle culture, granting power and authority only to those voices (Native or non-Native) who espouse the tenets of that culture and who resist the re-acculturation pains presented by home, family, and traditional community. While one of these perspectives is certainly more comfortable and comforting to sensitive modern readers, the fact is that both views exist in time and space and should be acknowledged and grappled with in order to accept the messiness of our shared histories in this land. Again, the reasons run deep and personal, but writers such as Silko and other contemporary Native writers have nothing to fear from a text like *Stiya*. Its power to influence and shape the perceived realities of susceptible readers has drained away with increased acknowledgement of Native peoples, their rights, and experiences of historical wrongs.

Native and non-Native scholars can benefit from studying such as text as *Stiya* because of its window into the past that is filled with complications that defy the standard American history and culture story(ality). We should resist the urge to hide *Stiya* from the general reading public and academic audiences in particular. Rather, incorporating this text into literature, 19<sup>th</sup> century



American history, and Native Studies classrooms would elevate awareness of the concepts of cultural genocide, the complicated nature of experience, and the power of language to transform and alter reality for readers. All of these classes feature stories told by certain privileged storytellers. Already these classrooms speak stories of experience from select perspectives and as Bourdieu points out, “There is nothing that cannot be said and it is possible to say nothing” (41) In the university setting, too many classrooms feature silence about the unpleasant details of the past and present, essentially saying nothing.

My own reaction to the prospect of saying nothing was to emphatically say something. In summer 2009 and spring 2010, my world literature students experienced story(ality) by reading and hearing stories about American Indian boarding school experiences. Students read Charles Eastman’s *From Deep Woods into Civilization*, which presents a downright rosy experience of boarding school education. Had I not introduced those students to an excerpt from Adams’s book, and about 35 minutes of a documentary on the Indian boarding school experience, they would have had a very different and very positive view of Indian boarding schools. By introducing three perspectives, instead of just relying on one, my students had the chance to think through this troubling aspect of American history and come to their own conclusions. They grappled with the tension between the various experiences presented in these texts, debated the issues raised, and acknowledged that many of them had never even heard of Indian boarding schools. This deficiency in American education exemplifies the systemic problem of sugar-coating American experiences by ignoring reality. Most of my students said that learning about American history in high school and even in college was boring because it focuses on memorizing and regurgitating dates and names (a classic case of Paolo Freire’s concept of “banking education”), without ever deeply exploring individual battles or political and economic

situations. And yes, this is where the bulk of their limited knowledge of Native peoples comes from – history class. Their knowledge of Native Americans extends to being able to name the Trail of Tears, without being able to say much about it. They can name it, but cannot expand on the reality because they were not given the chance to intellectually explore in-depth this damaging history. Students recognize the margins, but cannot automatically reconcile Native American experiences with their own personal, family, and community stories on a local, regional, or national level because it challenges their knowledge of peoples, places, and times. They understand the difference, but are initially uncomfortable with reading and talking about it.

In *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*, Nedra Reynolds uses the metaphors and methodologies of geography to examine literacy practices, conceptions of discourse and different ways of conceptualizing and reimagining acts of writing. Chapter Three, in particular, relates quite closely to my claim here about students interpreting, responding to, and reconciling experiential difference when they encounter it in the composition classroom. Reynolds refers to the process of map-making in relation to how “our ideas about maps need to change in order to reflect how technology is revolutionizing map-making as well as map-reading, document design, and technological reproduction” (79). She takes this idea of literal map-making in relation to physical space and uses it to explore how university students in Leeds, England use their internal mental maps to judge certain areas of the city, based on their experiences. As Reynolds says, “Mental maps, however cognitively housed, are socially constructed. They are a particular form of ‘imagined geography’ that illustrate the complex relationships between the social and the spatial” (84). What she discovered was that her eight respondents “held strong opinions—some of those uninformed—about particular neighborhoods” (89). In Reynolds’ study, “students were able to name the reasons for their

restricted knowledge of Leeds, namely the convenience and a desire to share in ‘student life,’ defined in part by being surrounded by other students” of similar white, middle-class backgrounds (91). Additionally, Reynolds’ study participants also relied on what friends and acquaintances said about certain neighborhoods, “as well as their own impressions of places formed through their regular routes through Leeds” (91). Similar to Reynolds’ student participants, my own students’ knowledge of Native peoples was reliant on scant or sometimes unreliable sources such as movies, history survey classes, and friends. Reynolds concludes, “Students’ highly charged responses to certain places in Leeds and their reluctance to explore neighborhoods beyond ‘student land’ highlights how difficult it is to move learners to have a meaningful encounter with difference” (109). Not only does Reynolds’ scholarship show the value and difficulty of what happens when students encounter difference outside the classroom, but it also suggests that this encounter is possible and can be productive as we seek to “understand not only where our students come from but also what forms of fear or reluctance keep students locked in place” (109). My work with composition students outlined in Chapter Four in this dissertation relates just such an experience with students encountering difference, recognizing margins, acknowledging and then crossing knowledge boundaries in order to see, hear, and think differently about themselves and their place in this world.

By incorporating several perspectives on Indian boarding schools into literature survey classes, I provided several layers of rich information for the students to explore. My attempt to create a storytelling dialectic in the classroom with a positive outcome was mostly successful. The storytellers I presented were all speaking truth about individual lived experiences, the audience of students was partially receptive and mostly uninformed of the base experience, and so had no basis for initial agreement or disagreement. In this particular case, the result seems to

have been improved knowledge, a broadened perspective, and an alteration of the students' interpretations of reality and experience in America's past and present. First, there was the new information about the existence of Indian boarding schools, scaffolded with several perspectives, balanced between positive and negative, and finally, there was the challenge to put this new knowledge into conversation with their existing understanding of America and Native peoples. This was not hard to do and I wish more teachers at the high school and college level would take these extra steps to address the knowledge gap. From the students' perspective, this was some of the most compelling reading we did all semester, and they eagerly participated in lively conversations and debates, and produced some of the strongest writing of both semesters. This is what the power of language and storytelling can do for modern students: help them think in new ways about previously unfamiliar ideas, peoples and information. And thinking in new ways about previously unfamiliar ideas was exactly what Carlisle and other boarding schools required of their students. However, many boarding school students were coerced or violently forced into their assimilative education, whereas students in a modern American educational facility are either gently compelled by federal law (high school) or voluntarily attend by choice (college).

Changing students' perspective about others' or their own experiences parallels, for better or worse, the story(alities) created by three women writers whose words open this chapter. Incorporating these varied cultural perspectives in a core university classroom is not hard to do; it merely requires the will and imagination of the teacher to see it through. Perhaps now is the time to embrace different types of stories, no matter how chaotic or unpleasant they may be, and bring this complicated and thorny debate into the open, thus creating a shared story(ality) based on contemporary community in the spirit of healing and truth.

## Chapter Two

### Rhetorical Survivance Online: Osage Nation Story(ality) in a Digital Contact Zone

“What’s important are the stories I’ve heard along the way. And the stories I’ve told. Stories we make up to try to set the world straight.”

- Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*

“The Internet does nothing without people. . . And so communication and human interaction lie at the very heart of rapid change.”

- Neil Blair Christensen, *Inuit in Cyberspace*

Given the ubiquity of the Internet to transmit messages of identity and cultural affiliation, political discourse, and bald-faced lies with immense speed and saturation, Vine Deloria Jr.’s call for a “cultural leave us alone agreement”<sup>42</sup> has become utterly impossible. With more access to more online and offline technologies, peoples who wish to define themselves, their stories, pasts, presents, and futures, must learn and embrace these new technologies in order to command the production and distribution of these messages.<sup>43</sup> Just as Native Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century re-appropriated the English language for their own political, social, and cultural purposes, modern

---

<sup>42</sup> From *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Specifically, Deloria writes, “The primary goal and need of Indians today is not for someone to feel sorry for us and claim descent from Pocahontas to make us feel better. Nor do we need to be classified as semi-white and have programs and policies made to bleach us further. Nor do we need further studies to see if we are feasible. We need a new policy by Congress acknowledging our right to live in peace, free from arbitrary harassment. We need the public at large to drop the myths in which it has clothed us for so long. We need fewer and fewer “experts” on Indians. What we need is a cultural leave-us-alone agreement, in spirit and in fact” (27).

<sup>43</sup> This implicit reference to Karl Marx’s socioeconomic theory is a purposeful connection – while I am not writing explicitly about economic issues, the social division that exists between the “haves” and “have-nots” when it comes to Internet access and mastery (and the unfortunate assumptions that many have about whether indigenous peoples even still exist, much less have a web presence) do exist in our 21<sup>st</sup> century American society. The assumptions can range from ‘only rich white people have access to and skill with the Internet’ to ‘impoverished peoples on the margin of society have no access or skill with web technology’. I realize that in the academy we like to say we don’t think these things, but many people outside the academy do operate under such assumptions. And this is not an attempt to attack any individual’s character or intelligence, rather to address a socially-accepted reality and grapple with it. As I want this work to transform eventually into a public-access document that many people will read and consider, I do believe it is important to intermittently name and acknowledge these types of thoughts and assumptions in order to reduce their power and authority with a broader audience.

tribal nations are re-appropriating the historically “white, well-to-do, English-speaking North American community”<sup>44</sup> of the Internet to share and show their survivance stories to each other and the world. These digital stories are not simplified stereotypes, but represent complex experiences fraught with both challenges and triumphs. In many cases, the existence of these stories challenge mainstream Euramerican perceptions of both history and present-day reality for Native peoples on American soil. Tribal web designers, or many content-controlling contributors, in the case of the Osage Nation, are responsible for the story threads spun out on the tribe’s homepage, providing an up-to-date information storehouse for tribal members, and new knowledge to an uninformed, but curious, non-Native audience.<sup>45</sup>

This chapter seeks a deeper understanding of the rhetorical choices in nonfiction survivance stories of contemporary Native language practitioners as they use the language of stories (written, visual, aural) to (re)create themselves, their audiences (Native and non-Native), and their realities in the digital realm. By examining the production and consumption of story(alities)<sup>46</sup> that the Osage Nation projects into the virtual realm, I hope to deepen our understanding and appreciation about tribal rhetorical survivance thriving in the virtual world, and how a tribal nation’s identity and message might change as a result of communicating with this digital tool. The Osage site is a particularly good one to begin with because of its extraordinary visual and textual balance between history and modern daily concerns, as well as its democratic nature as a shared space where many tribal individuals share control over the collective tribal identity. This democratic undertone parallels the Osage governmental structure,

---

<sup>44</sup> This description of the historically dominant group on the Internet comes from Mark Warschauer’s “Language, Identity, and the Internet” chapter in *Race in Cyberspace* (2000), edited by Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman.

<sup>45</sup> The Osage tribal members have different needs and purposes for visiting the Osage Nation web site from the non-Native visitors, who may be doing scholarly, personal, or travel research.

<sup>46</sup> Story(ality) results from storytelling in a contact zone that alters or changes the recipients’ perception of reality as a result of listening to or reading the story.

which is based on three branches: executive, congressional, and judicial, and requires the popular participation of the people. In other words, the web site embodies the democratic philosophy and principles of the tribe. In addition, traditional rhetorical concerns such as audience, emotional and ethical appeals, and the challenges of public discourse intersect with tribal identity goals and informational purposes as the web designers and decision makers construct their nations' identities online. Imagine the challenge faced by tribal webmasters who may be culturally invested in sustaining their nation's unique language, practices, and traditions, while also trying to fit this identity into the overwhelming matrix of difference found in cyberspace representations of individuals and groups. When Paula Stabler, the Osage Nation's appointed Communications Officer since 2006, was tasked with developing a web presence for the tribe, her team's early thoughts focused on this potential dilemma. Specifically, they discussed how to best present their nation and the same idea kept coming up, one that provided the foundational direction for the Osage site: "We are a traditional people in a modern time – we are contemporary Osages – we live with and within our culture."<sup>47</sup>

The public face of many tribal nations is now online for all to see and experience, which begs the following questions: what stories are these nations telling about themselves to create certain story(alities), what information are they sharing and why, who produces/writes/develops these stories, who decides the site content, and how are these online nations verbally and visually representing their concrete lived realities to known and unknown audiences who are influenced by what they see on the web site? And most importantly, what impact are these digital representations of tribal identity having on site visitors and their opinion and knowledge of indigenous peoples? How much information about contemporary tribal realities is being conveyed on the nations' web sites? And how does a web designer convey both tradition and

---

<sup>47</sup> From phone interview with Paula Stabler Feb. 13, 2010.

modernity? The answers to these questions are not always easy or safe, but this process of questioning, answering, trial and error on the part of tribal decision makers and their non-Native web designer allies is a necessary struggle for survivance.

As Andrew Feenberg asserts, “Modern technology is no more neutral than medieval cathedrals or the Great Wall of China; it embodies the values of a particular industrialized civilization, especially those of elites that rest their claims to hegemony on technical mastery.”<sup>48</sup> The creative and practical struggle faced by tribal web designers and decision makers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is nothing short of revolutionary – the Internet is not a neutral space and is an incredibly influential force that shapes what people think they know about other peoples and cultures. Related to the idea of the non-neutrality and significance of the Internet is the Selfe & Selfe idea of “computer interfaces as linguistic contact zones” that have the potential to liberate or oppress within the “political and ideological boundary lands associated with computer interfaces” (481-2).<sup>49</sup> In their article, Selfe and Selfe outline an “alternative vision” that involves a more critical approach to the use of computers because “an overly optimistic vision of technology is not only reductive, and thus, inaccurate, it is also dangerous in that it renders less visible the negative contributions of technology that may work potently and effectively against critically reflective habits” of those who use computers (482). Tribes such as the Osage have embraced the technology created by the industrialized global society and are using it reject and resist any hegemonic claims by society’s elites by injecting this technological space with their unique tribal

---

<sup>48</sup> From the preface of *Critical Theory of Technology* (v). Using such theorists as Marx, Habermas, and Marcuse, Feenberg argues for a new critical theory of technology that reconceptualizes “the relation of technology, rationality, and democracy” (3). Happily, this is a useful theory for thinking through how modern tribal nations are democratically engaging internal and external audiences through technology, particularly the Internet.

<sup>49</sup> From Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe in “The Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones,” CCC 45.4 December 1994.



traditions and contemporary experiences. Technical mastery of web design, in this case, is widespread and is not solely in the hands of elites.

When Tom King writes about his episode on a tramp steamer to Australia, he relates the moment that the ship's cook said to him, "You're not the Indian I had in mind" (*Truth* 48). King is talking about his physical appearance, of course, and the identity politics inherent in "looking Indian," but the thread of this dilemma also exists when talking about tribal nations going online, creating their own web presence, stating their own stories of experience in their own choice of languages. This is not to say that tribes don't need help in accomplishing this goal. In the case of the Osage Nation, a non-indigenous web design company was hired by the tribe to help create the tribe's online identity. The company, Onefastbuffalo, and its founder, Ben Jenkins, designed the site according to the tribe's specifications and directions. The complexity of web design often requires any organization to seek out professionals, but who controls the message is usually the hiring company or organization. In this respect, the Osage are not much different from any organization wishing to put forth an online presence; what differentiates them is the fact that they are a sovereign tribal nation living with and within their culture, not a for-profit corporation or non-profit organization trying to make money or garner sympathy for a cause. As a result, their message and audience are vastly different from the other two types of web sites – as a tribal nation, the Osages are using the virtual space of the web site to speak to each other across (sometimes) vast physical distance about their experiences and daily tribal activities (essentially closing that space gap by going online) as well as to an outsider non-Osage audience. Complications can arise when the act of interpreting and translating the nation's messages is filtered through a non-indigenous perspective. Fortunately, Stabler and her team were quite pleased in the end with Onefastbuffalo's design and interpretation of their message.

A fascinating ethnographic study by Neil Blair Christensen published in 2003 explores the continuity of tradition in the face of rapid change. Specifically his work examines how change and difference are the “very dynamic of all social process” as this idea relates to the “cultural and identity affirming use of the Internet amongst Inuit” and how the “cultural identities of Inuit are asserted on the Web by reference to their offline communities” (*Inuit in Cyberspace* 9, 12). This complex notion of integrating online and offline identities goes against the grain of what many cyber-scholars historically argued for, an image of the “stereotyped user [in a cyber-utopia]– a person who is disembodied and free of physical and cultural characteristics – who has momentarily freed his or her mind from matter” (10-13).<sup>50</sup> Christensen finds quite the opposite to be the case with his Inuit interviewees who use a broad range of web pages that transmit “a diverse range of Inuit cultural identities from across the Arctic” (13):

Inuit identities and cultures are not statically bound to cultural characteristics that place them in a certain time and space of hunter-gatherers, but are continuously changing dynamically in relation to time, space and significance of meaning. . .The use of cyberspace as a space where cultural identity is asserted is an aspect of this dynamic adjustment and change in the (re)production of Inuit cultural identities. . .I have found descriptions and uses of cyberspace that are mostly of a specific, common and practical kind. (13)

Instead of focusing on the producers of these web sites, Christensen analyzes how different Inuit individuals use the Inuit web sites, asking such survey questions as how participants use the Internet, how and where they connect from, as well as asking their opinions on such issues as who gains the most from the Internet and whether the Internet changes the Arctic (114). While

---

<sup>50</sup> Christensen states that much “analysis of cyberspace” is “abstract, romantic, mythic, transcendental, technophile or technophobic” and he cites Benedikt (1991), Lanier (1990), Postman (1993), and Rheingold (1993). (13)

his discoveries converge with my own analysis of the Osage web site, our works remain different but complementary in helping scholarly audiences further their knowledge about contemporary tribal peoples' presence in this most post-modern of spaces, the Internet.

The assumption that American Indians are not online is a simplistic rejection of these peoples' complex contemporary existences. Anna Everett, professor of Film Studies at the University of California, touches on the history of such assumptions in her editorial introduction to *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media* (2008), part of the MacArthur Foundation series on the relationship between youth, learning, and digital media. She writes, "Our optimism about the nexus of race and ethnicity, youth cultures, and digital media technologies at this historical juncture is not a contemporary retread of earlier utopian notions that tended to posit information technologies (IT) as a panacea for what ails contemporary humankind. . .rather. . .our guarded enthusiasm for digital media technologies. . .is tempered by our recognition of but not resignation to, the undeniable consequences of a persistent inequality in the deep structures of our nation's IT economy" (1). Furthermore, she briefly reviews the scholarship from the early to mid-1990s, citing it as "national discourse on race matters and technological progress [was] defined by. . .the disabling [binary] rhetoric of the digital divide. . .[and] this notion of a technology gap [between] haves and have nots among underserved groups on the basis of race and class locations" was dangerous territory to tread because of this rhetoric's potential to "become a self-fulfilling prophecy" (2-3). She names Dara N. Byrne, Tyrone D. Taborn, and Antonio Lopez as three scholars whose work is not only in this book, but also turns "the digital divide logic on its head, with their specific case studies, discourse analyses, and critical ethnographies, and historical revisions that explode essentialist constructions of minority youth as low-tech, IT outsiders" (3-4). Ultimately, race and ethnicity

issues are important components to this overall digital use (IT) conversation because they do tend to “form, deform, and reform twenty-first-century American culture,” particularly in digital spaces such as online gaming, social networks, blogs, grassroots community organizing, listservs, and instant messaging (4). And more generally speaking, while it may be very comforting and politically correct to pretend that we are all “Americans,” completely equal in regards to access and opportunity, skill and education, as well as sociopolitical attitudes, the reality is we are a divided nation; divided economically, politically, socially, culturally, and yes, racially and ethnically. So to ignore this and pretend that these issues no longer exist or affect what we think, how we vote, and where we choose to live (much less how we represent ourselves online) is just disingenuous and dishonest. Bottom line, this is an important ongoing conversation with roots in reality and as scholars, we have a responsibility to take it up in all its troublesome complexity.

In the digital domain, as this study about *Inuit in Cyberspace* suggests, modern tribal peoples can remain present in digital spaces in practically powerful ways by using technology to resist, survive, and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And once again, the language of stories is the beating heart of this adaptation and survivance. For instance, several recent stories present on the Osage Nation web site include “Osage Nation emergency assistance for May 10<sup>th</sup> tornado victims,” “Interim Gaming Enterprise Board Appointments,” and an announcement about an Osage language immersion program (May 2010). These stories are not static, but rather change over time and reflect the values of the culture, while maintaining a certain structural continuity (such as the Word of the Week – this is a consistent feature of the Osage Nation web site, but the word changes weekly). Selfe and Selfe note that although the rhetoric of technology often associates computers with the “potential for great reform, they are not necessarily serving

democratic ends” (484). In fact, they argue that computer interfaces are “sites within which the ideological and material legacies of racism, sexism, and colonialism are continuously written and re-written along with more positive cultural legacies” (484). The Osage are participating in this broader conversation as they write and re-write their cultural legacy onto the Internet through the tool of computers.

If “language is a cultural tool and speech is a form of mediated action” (Wertsch 1998), then digital technology is a cultural tool and a web site is the mediated action. From this we can surmise that tribal webmasters create certain story(alities) that not only represent their nation’s beliefs, values, and concerns, but also respond to the limitations of the tool and their<sup>51</sup> individual knowledge of and comfort with using web site building software. For instance, one web designer might be trained and experienced in html code, Flash, and CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), while another might be using a free and intuitive WSIWYG (What You See is What You Get) program that requires no special training other than the ability to read and follow instructions and use a mouse. Therefore, the knowledge and experience of the web site designer may impact what stylistic and content choices he or she makes. As Sullivan and Porter point out in *Opening Spaces: Technologies and Critical Research Practices* (1997), “Far from seeing technology as a neutral tool. . . [Andrew] Feenberg argues for viewing the tool in its context of design and use” (104). As a leading scholar in the critical theory of technology, Feenberg writes back against both instrumental and substantive approaches to technology: ‘instrumental’ being “the view that technology is politically and ethically neutral (and innocent),” allowing for human misuse of the tool, and ‘substantive’ being technology as a tool “having an innate influence on human action. . . it effects a change on human behavior or consciousness” (Sullivan & Porter 104).

---

<sup>51</sup> Not all tribes hire professional web design companies to help them create an online identity. The Osage Nation did just that, but some tribes might not have the financial resources for such an investment, which means someone in the tribe must act as webmaster with potentially limited knowledge of web design.

Linking these ideas of how technology as a tool can influence and change human thought and behavior with James Wertsch's ideas on the consumption and production of "mediational means," which are two processes often intricately related, we see the potential successes and dangers of tribal web sites. Wertsch's approach "involves mediated action as a unit of analysis. . .[and] involves a version of the dialectic between agent and instrumentality" (17), as well as a "focus on the psychological moment of action. . .the irreducible tension between agent and mediational means" as he encourages us to "conceptualize mediated action as a system characterized by dynamic tension among various elements" (23). Taking this idea and melding it with the idea of story(ality) in a contact zone, we see the terms tension, dialectic, truth, and change as guiding principles when examining tribal web sites. Interestingly, in the world of Indian boarding schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "The desire to change Indians is a response to difference as division. American Indians cannot join US society until they have been changed, the difference eradicated" (Stromberg 99). Fortunately, this abhorrent attitude is no longer official policy and tribal peoples are free to be as different and unique as their cultures, and some seek to change mainstream America's collective opinion of Native peoples with written, visual, and verbal stories delivered by Internet messenger (specifically, the web site). In fact, tribes' continued existence in general and presence on the Internet in particular proves their survivance. While "the forces that go into the production of a cultural tool often play a major role in determining how it will be used" (Wertsch 141), tribal web designers must negotiate the needs and goals of their nation with the demands of a somewhat impatient Internet audience, resulting in some intriguing and strategic choices. These choices depend on the identity, technological knowledge, and cultural investment of the webmaster.

*Insider's perspective: Paula Stabler, Communications Officer, Osage Nation*

Paula Stabler manages the Osage Nation site in respect to design and overall content, but each branch of the tribal government and each program within each branch controls their own “vignettes,” which is what they call their individual program sections. First, there is the umbrella site and then each program has a mini-site, which is autonomous, under the umbrella. Paula calls this “free range content.” After working on the development of the Osage Nation site for a year, it officially launched in 2006, the same year Paula was appointed to her Communications Officer position by the Principal Chief, Jim Gray.<sup>52</sup> To put this massive project into perspective, she also does all the event planning, public relations, and publicity for the Chief. As she says, managing the web site is just one aspect of her very busy job and as of February 2010, the site is about 55,000 pages deep. I could almost hear Paula’s head shaking in disbelief over the phone as she said, “I never dreamed it would be this big.” Because the site has grown so large, Paula has many more “vignettes” to monitor and this takes her away from other equally important tasks for the chief’s office; it is a delicate balancing act that Paula must perform as a result of the web site’s extraordinary and unexpected success. The time spent overseeing the tribe’s online identity is a small part of what Paula does on a daily basis, which suggests that a collaborative investment of time from many individuals might be necessary to successfully establish and maintain a tribe’s online identity. Therefore, if one individual is not available and cannot be paid to monitor and maintain a tribal web site, it is still possible to collaborate and achieve an effective web presence.

The original thought behind the site design was “empowerment” as Paula wanted to “kick out the middleman.” She gave authority to the directors of individual programs to upload whatever content they want – they have the freedom to put up as much or as little information as possible and then Paula’s staff manages the overall content and can go back to the directors if

---

<sup>52</sup> According to a follow-up email with Paula on May 19, 2010, “Under the constitution each chief is allowed their own personal staff.”

they notice anything objectionable on any of the sections, but this is rarely a problem. Once Paula and her team had a concept and plan, they contacted the non-indigenous (ally) web design firm OneFastBuffalo and a local Osage graphic designer to work together to design the site and establish connectivity and that was the extent of their involvement. On the official blog of OneFastBuffalo, company founder Ben Jenkins says, “One of my favorite accomplishments was helping the Osage Nation to broadcast its first Tribal Council meeting online. Helping tribes utilize communication tools of today is helpful to them and rewarding for us. Good business too” (onefastbuffalo.com).

When asked if she thought the web site technology was liberating or limiting in their purpose of putting forth an online presence for the Osage Nation, Paula didn’t hesitate to say, “Liberating, especially in a tribal government. We have three separate branches of government – each area can do anything – photos, text, audio, even live streaming, which is by request and has been used.” For instance, they have streamed congressional meetings and their annual sovereignty day celebrations. In this respect, each department within each branch can decide for itself how much information to post, how much of the technology to incorporate, and how often to update.

The biggest challenges Paula and her web team face moving forward are funding, and what she calls “our own capacity to think beyond boundaries – people [here] are really dedicated to what they do every day [the directors], so we’re trying to help them understand what the web site can do for them and what options they have access to in order to get individual program messages out there.” These challenges are significant in that the Osage tribe has historically pushed its own boundaries by opening up its tribal lands to oil lease development, by borrowing ideas from the Cherokee for its 1881 tribal constitution, and by adapting the results of boarding



school education, as many tribal members did in the past. This tribe is marked by adaptability, innovative and inclusive thinking, and certainly a willingness to support and uphold new ideas. Therefore, the fact that the web site is so large and useful to so many tribal departments and yet cannot retain proper funding levels from tribal sources suggests that many tribal decision makers may not yet recognize the web site's value and role in the ongoing story of the Osage people.

### **A Digital Snapshot: "Welcome to the Osage Nation Website"**

The Osage Nation assures that site visitors know they are visiting a unique tribal nation – unique as a tribal nation within the fabric of American culture and unique from other tribal nations with specific concerns and cultural practices.<sup>53</sup> Identity markers that distinguish this nation are immediately visible on the top section of the homepage, including headings in both English and Osage languages. The inclusion of the Osage written and spoken language on the web site reflects the centrality of the website to the language reclamation effort for the Osage people. Its presence on the web site is one of the ways the Osages celebrate and mark their identity as well as a way to inspire Osage people to make their language a regular part of their lives. Thus, the website adds to the already complex and multilayered identities of contemporary Osages. The last first language speaker of the Osage language died about two or three years ago, according to Billy Proctor, the Principle Teacher for the Osage Language Program, but the tribe has about 250-300 second language speakers. And of that number, about 100 are the core group that never misses the language classes constructed around the traditional school year with the exception of the once monthly immersion group that lasts for two hours. As with so many other indigenous languages that are fighting extinction, the Osage Language Program has a serious outreach function and also responds to the community's desire for more language classes. Five

---

<sup>53</sup> These tribally-specific details are important because they reflect the pride that the Osage people have in their heritage, the respect that they have for their traditions, and their willingness to embrace new technologies in order to share their tribal story.

years ago, Proctor says they started with one facility in Pawhuska that has since grown to five regional facilities, but that the only places one might hear the Osage language spoken is in the Native American Church or at dances where prayers or speeches occur. But English is the first and predominant language of the Osage people. This is somewhat problematic for the recovery efforts surrounding the Osage language because Proctor says, “People become fluent by being around it. We have a lot of people who support us, but not a lot who want to put the effort into learning the language; [the Osage language] is a whole different way of thinking [than languages built on Roman letters]. There’s no one left that we can even go to to say ‘are we saying this right?’ It’s a pretty bad situation. On the whole, I don’t think our tribe realizes how bad it is.” As for the written Osage language, the current orthography used as a teaching tool is based on how the Osage language sounds and was completed three years ago by the Language Program director and teachers. Proctor explained that their written language is fluid and changes based on who is writing it down because it relies on sound instead of an alphabet or syllables. For this reason, Proctor and the other Language Program teachers have been investigating written Native languages such as the Cherokee syllabary with the possible intention of creating one for the Osage, but that is very much in the idea stage at present.

In addition to the Osage language, the home page also features other tribally-specific identity markers such as the Osage Nation seal on the main banner (see Fig.1), specific visual designs and colors with meanings unique to the tribe,



Fig. 1

“quick links for tribal members,” a music player in the top right corner that invites the visitor to launch it to hear music recorded live during the nation’s 2008 Sovereignty Day celebration, a main menu of horizontal category links including News, Government, Culture, Minerals,<sup>54</sup> and Gaming, and a Flash box that takes up a full third of the visual space on a standard computer screen with scrolling and fading images of youth, elders, and tribal members in colorful contemporary attire and ceremonial dress, images of beadwork and tree-surrounded Bluestem Lake near Pawhuska, and the interwoven words Sovereignty, Osage Arts, Conservation, and Current Events scrolling and fading in and out in white text. The unifying statement expressed in the Osage language is “We are Osage,” understandable only to those who know the written language and a powerful reflection of the tribe’s collective identity, regardless of where Osages may be in the world. This reflection relates to the idea of rhetorical sovereignty and how the Osage are controlling their own meaning in a digital space.

One of the ways that identity matters is that “technologies make assumptions about who will be using them and how they will be used. . . [and] identity affects how a person is placed in culture, how important they are, how they are treated, and what possibilities are open to them”

---

<sup>54</sup> According to the Mineral Council section of the Osage site, “The Osage Mineral Estate is the oil, gas, and other mineral sub-surface of the approximately 1.47 million acre Osage Reservation,” and the Osage Nation is the “beneficial owner the Osage Mineral Estate. The United States holds title to the Osage Mineral Estate in trust for the Osage Nation. No individual or group of individuals owns the Osage Mineral Estate.” Both Osages and non-Osages can own “headrights,” which is “the right to receive a quarterly distribution of funds derived from the Osage Mineral Estate.” Currently, approximately 25% of Osage headrights are owned by non-Osages. (osagetribe.com) A fuller discussion of the Osage Mineral Estate and its importance to the tribe occurs later in this chapter.

(Slack & Wise 149).<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, this scholarly team notes that “technologies are sometimes used to assign (sometimes challenge) identity” (149). Connecting these ideas to the Osage Nation web site, one can see that Paula Stabler’s democratic approach to sharing responsibility for content with individual program directors rejects certain assumptions about obvious hierarchies of power related to the mastery and use of web site technology. Instead of assuming the program directors and their staffs do not have the necessary mastery of the technology, Paula assumes the opposite –they either have the knowledge and skills or will learn the skills in order to use the web site to their program’s best advantage.<sup>56</sup> And it also seems that the way the Osage Nation is constructing and reconstructing its online identity on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis is an act of resistance against the technology assigning or challenging this group’s collective identity. Rather, this group of people is using web site technology tools to assign its own identity and challenge what non-Osages think they know about Osages. The way this transfer of new knowledge occurs is when non-Osage visitors see the web site, think about the information, text, design, colors, and other content as it relates to modern Osage identity, and then embrace the new perspective that grows out of this virtual experience.

Color, content, and design elements on the Osage site reflect various aspects of Osage traditional and modern identity. Across the main flash section is a continuously scrolling tribal design in yellow with white rims across the center with a background divided between blue above and red beneath. Other elements include a black banner on the bottom left of the screen (again, just on that top section visible in any standard computer screen), containing scrolling white text headlines such as “Minerals Council Meetings for December,” “Click here to see the

---

<sup>55</sup> From *Culture & Technology: A Primer* by Jennifer Slack and J. MacGregor Wise (2005).

<sup>56</sup> Program directors have access to the back end of the site by login with a username and password,

current highest posted price<sup>57</sup>,” and “Ninth annual Christmas Tour, dinner, and tree auction Dec. 12th.”<sup>58</sup> On May 19, 2010, the same headline scroll offers “Official list of judges for retention,” “Housing has weatherization kits available—while supplies last!” and “Opportunities available for Osage student interns and externs.” Clearly, the content of these headlines suggest a particular story(ality) about the Osages and what they consider to be important modern issues: finances, community, government, education, and comfort. In this respect, the Osages really seem no different than any average American group of people, who all ostensibly share these concerns. However, the site style and colors seem to differentiate the Osage with a purposeful nod toward their specific cultural traditions. According to chapter two of *Symbolic and Decorative Art of the Osage People* by Louis Burns (1994), the four sacred colors used in these art forms are blue (often paired with white), red, yellow, and dark (usually black or navy blue). Blue and white symbolize a clear day or a long, tranquil life; red represents the rising sun, life, the known world, and day light; yellow signifies mercy and some form of benefit for the Osages, as well as commemorating the unity of sky and earth; and dark stands for death and the unknown or unseen world. Another important point to note is that paired opposites are frequently used to symbolize more complex ideas, such as pairing the colors for night and day.<sup>59</sup> Overall the effect of this targeted use of meaningful colors in the main Flash element is energizing, suggesting a vibrant, contemporary people with modern concerns, a rich history and respect for tradition.

---

<sup>57</sup> The highest posted price refers to the Osage Mineral Estate, which distributes funds quarterly to owners of “headrights,” or a federally-protected property right. According to the Osage Mineral Council section of the Osage Nation web site, 25% of Osage Mineral Estate headrights are owned by non-Osages, including “Indians of other tribes, non-Indians, corporations, churches, and others” (osagetribe.com/mineral).

<sup>58</sup> These headlines change constantly. The cited headlines were from a site visit in early December 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Additional non-color pairings are also used in the design. For instance, the pairing of people with relevant inanimate objects in the Flash banners for each department: the Government banner includes government officials with the Osage Nation seal and the Culture section features Osages participating in artistic activities and images of the artistic objects.

These observations run counter to Slack and Wise's assessment that "all markers of identity are said to be erased online," which is certainly something that other scholars would argue against. When one is looking at words on a screen. . .one cannot automatically discern the race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity of the writer" (*Culture & Technology* 166). When viewing the Osage Nation homepage, the visitor is struck by the tribe's evident care and concern to represent itself as "a people of tradition, modernity, technology, diversity and energy," as one of my colleagues noted. But above all, the nation seems invested in their Osage-ness, which is an active reversal of the typical lack of identity markers online. Everything on the Osage homepage is imbued with identity markers of the Osage Nation, which makes sense, considering the primary target audience is Osage adults. Paula said, "We focus on Osage people first because they live all over the world," and the web site provides easy access to information. As for the secondary non-Osage audiences, she said amiably, "The more information on the site, the more opportunities to learn about the Osages." Paula and her team seem to proudly announce their collective Osage identity in the digital contact zone of the Internet. As Selfe and Selfe point out, "Within the virtual space represented by these interfaces. . .the values of our culture—ideological, political, economic, educational—are mapped both implicitly and explicitly, constituting a complex series of material relations among culture, technology, and technology users" (485). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the Osage site and how they represent the values of their culture, I have selected two main sections to examine to discover what story(alities) exist and how they work together under the main umbrella to promote rhetorical survivance in this digital contact zone: Culture and Minerals.

*Culture: "We are the present"*

When a visitor to the Osage Nation home page selects the Culture link on the main horizontal menu, she clicks over to a sub-page that shares the same umbrella, but with slightly revised elements. For instance, the Flash banner is noticeably different with the same continuously scrolling tribal design (which is now solid white), sandwiched between sky blue above and red beneath. Harking back to Louis Burns' explanation of color meanings for the Osage, this pairing of blue, red, and white suggests a long, tranquil life in the known world as one potential interpretation. However, according to Cherokee Cheshewalla, the Osage executive administrative assistant for the Wah Zha Zhi Cultural Center<sup>60</sup>, "The webmaster chose the ribbonwork patterns; the WCC wanted a different one [and] as for the colors, there is no significance to that." Obviously, what may be hugely relevant to one person may just be a set of pretty colors to another. This disagreement and potential misunderstanding over a design element like color choice is one of the many conflicts that can occur when multiple designers, decision makers and audiences come into the digital contact zone of a web site. Cheshewalla and her Cultural Center crew wanted different colors, but Onefastbuffalo was unable to oblige them, creating a minor disagreement. Clearly, one of the potential problems that arises from involving many people in the content and design of a tribal web site is that not everyone will walk away completely happy and satisfied with the result. Therefore, who chooses the designs, style, colors, and words can impact how these choices are received by the viewing public. Any web surfer coming across this site might interpret these colors to have meaning, even if she didn't know the meaning. In reality, Cheshewalla says the Cultural Center team "as a whole has input into our website," and yet they were not involved with making the stylistic decisions. However, the story behind the visual design elements and layout of the overall site developed out of a consultation

---

<sup>60</sup> This is the Cultural Center for the Osage Nation, located in Pawhuska, OK. Cherokee Cheshewalla is the executive administrative assistant for the Cultural Center.

between an Osage artist, Paula Stabler and her team, and Ben Jenkins, the non-indigenous owner of OneFastBuffalo, whose part in the story goes like this:

What we did is consult with an Osage artist who simply gave us patterns and color schemes that we could incorporate into design of the site to give it an authentic Osage feel. He did not design the site though...again, he just gave us a gallery of Osage ribbon work and approved color palette...on the colors he gave us in groups of 2..so like pink and green, blue and red.

We did not let each department choose their color scheme because we would have never finished the site...we assigned a 2 color scheme (from the Osage artist's palette) to each department. Only a few did not like theirs and requested changes.

Honestly those color schemes and patterns are just a small part of the process; the main focus is to design a good layout that is easy to use and looks good and then incorporate the patterns and colors schemes to make the design unique to the Osage Nation.

I designed the site myself and still proud of it even though I think it's almost 3.5 years old.

(Ben Jenkins email 5/24/10)

Obviously, Jenkins feels a personal sense of ownership and pride in designing the Osage Nation's online identity and particularly striking is his focus on functionality first ("design a good layout that is easy to use and looks good") and then of secondary concern are the most striking visual elements on every page - the patterns and colors schemes – which he



acknowledges “make the design unique to the Osage Nation.” According to Robin Williams and John Tollett (*The Non-Designer’s Web Book*), the quality of an organization’s web site “should be comparable to the quality of your work, your products, and/or your philosophy. . . because the initial impression from a web site can directly and concretely affect people’s impression of your or your business” (155). In other words, employing a professional or at least learning the basics of good design can help create a straightforward, friendly, professional site that visitors can trust. In fact, the beginnings of this trust start with the functional layout and navigation system: “On every page the initial visual impression is complete within that framework. Also, the navigation is clear—it tells you where you are going, how to get there, and what you can expect” (Williams & Tollett 160). Most importantly, “the main visual impression of the site” should be “well implemented,” say Williams and Tollett, and the design should feature consistency or repetition of elements from page to page (160-61). However, the surface design elements of the Osage site may be the first thing that lay visitors notice, quickly followed by functionality and then the overall Osage identity story, marking a decided difference between a web designer’s perspective and the web user’s perspective. Clearly, Jenkins is a non-indigenous ally to the Osage in particular and tribal nations in general, and has worked extensively with different tribes for various reasons, and not all of them are web design-related. According to the company’s web site, they specialize in “Defining (Brand Strategy), Crafting (Brand Design) and Launching (Web Site Design, eSystems and New Media Development) Brands,” their tagline is “Change perception. Live on,” and they launched INDIG in November 2009, “a Native (as in Native American) Owned Advertising agency specializing in print, TV, radio and new media campaigns for Indian Country but available to all industries” (onefastbuffalo.com). Rather than complicating this discussion, Jenkins’ position in the Osage web site story is vital to

understanding it. He may just be part of the story, along with voices and opinions of the Osage participants, but his participation (along with everyone else's) is essential to how the story gets shaped and told.

Other changes a visitor will notice when switching from the main page to the Cultural section include the images on the banner, which show three very adorable individual children, two images of elders teaching children, a detail of a painting of Chief Baconrind,<sup>61</sup> children's colorful drawings, and a photo of intricately beaded belts.<sup>62</sup> In fact, one of the belts has the same sky blue, red and white color combination as the banner. However, once again, whether this was a purposeful parallel selection is uncertain. According to Jenkins, "For images - we were just given tons of images from the tribe. Not exactly sure where they all came from...but we requested everyday images of everyday real modern Osage people...rather than lots of historical images. One of the main goals of the site was to present the Osage people as modern people doing business in a modern world." In addition, the scrolling, fading words inside the banner are also different from the main home page: Focus on the Arts, Revitalizing the Osage Language, Tribal History, and Commitment to Our Children, which reflects the sentiments expressed in the longer overview on this main Culture section page. And according to Billy Proctor, the Principle

---

<sup>61</sup> To get the story of the painting, which is so prominently featured on the Culture page, I emailed Rhonda Kohnle, the Executive Secretary for the Osage Tribal Museum. This is the story she shared: "This is an oil on masonite painting that was done by Frank Brave, an Osage & Cherokee artist that lived here in Pawhuska. He was 18 or 19 years old when he painted it in 1952 or 1953. A photograph of Chief Baconrind was in the Osage Tribal Museum that inspired Frank Brave. He would walk to the museum from his home in Pawhuska to view the photograph; then he would walk home and paint. He repeated this process until the painting was complete. Soon after, the painting was donated to the Osage Tribal Museum. The painting is approximately 4 feet tall by 3 feet wide. This was Chief Baconrind's daily dress. Today these clothes would be worn for special occasions such as the traditional dances.

Later in life Frank Brave became a commercial artist working for Hall-Mart in Kansas City. In the nineteen sixties he was put into a nationally acclaimed book of American Indian Artists. Currently the son of Frank Brave, Jo Don Brave, also an artist, is working for the Osage Tribal Museum as contract labor assisting with exhibits.

This is a beautiful painting of an Osage Chief by an Osage artist and a perfect choice for representing our Osage people." (email exchange May 21, 2010)

<sup>62</sup> The ratio here is seven contemporary images to one historic image. The math even reinforces what the tribe and designer are trying to do in presenting the Osages as modern peoples living with and within their culture.

Teacher for the Osage Language Program, the two phrases in Osage font in the banner roughly mean “Osage,” “I search/look,” “family,” and “ours,” which generally reflects the overall idea behind the Cultural section. Proctor explained in an email, “When the website was started One Fast Buffalo asked for Osage translations for all the departments. Some programs are very difficult to translate into Osage, but the best attempt was made to capture the ‘thought’ of the programs” (May 2010). When asked about the words on the site, Jenkins responded, “Language revitalization is a big focus for the Osage so we had the idea to incorporate Osage words into the page titles and also the Osage word for the day. The cultural center helped us with translations and Osage fonts of course.”

Furthermore, the sub-sections listed in a menu beneath the banner include links to News & Events, Cultural Center, Language Department, Osage Museum, and Wah Zha Zhi Press. This page in particular seems deeply invested in honoring the past, as evidenced by the words, colors and images of the banner and menu options, as well as the first line of text, which reads, “The culture of the Osage Nation reaches back in time.” This brief story touches on historical documentation of the Osage people, the Trail of Tears, land, population, the importance of traditions, and contemporary Osage identity. In order to allow the reader to learn the Osage perspective, I include here the full third paragraph from this Culture section overview page:

The Osage of today, resonate their culture of long standing traditions by clinging to the lessons of their ancestors. The modern day Osage is educated, diverse and staunch to the fact that being Osage is their identity. Our native culture today is a respectful memorial to our past. We participate in our dance, our feasting and our naming ceremonies because that is what we have left. We do not try to re-create the past, we are the present and our culture is in the present. Like all indigenous cultures, we are a traditional people. No

matter where we roam, we are always "Osage" and that is what brings us back to our Osage Reservation. To commune with each other, to relate to each other and to be recognized each year during our ceremonials as Osages.

Immediately following the narrative are verbal invitations to “Visit the Osage Cultural Center web site,” “Visit the Osage Language Department web site,” and “Visit the Osage Museum web site,” each with active links to those individual sites. The use of “visit” is important, as it suggests an invitation and reflects the attitude that site visitors are guests in the Osages’ digital homespace being guided to improve their knowledge about the Osage people. In addition, “visit” is typically found in the hospitality and tourism industries, and so by using this term, the Osages connect themselves with a broader public conversation and demonstrate their willingness to share their culture with others.

Clearly, the storytelling on the Culture overview page has a distinct opportunity to alter its audience’s perception of reality related to Osage identity and how they define themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The friendly, but insistent, tone employed in the written portion is balanced by the friendly, smiling faces on the banner, and the colorful designs and photos. Meanwhile, the use of the Osage language reinforces the importance of language preservation, which is quite a serious issue. Overall, the Osage Cultural story is a survivance story, told with images, abstract design, color, words, and technology, and reverberating with pride, continuance, and truth, accessible and understandable to anyone willing to read/view this perspective. Story(ality) is achieved when the reader/viewer voluntarily visits the Osage website and enters into a silent dialectic with the information there, absorbing and grappling with the Osage story, which may conflict with preconceived notions about who the Osages are (or the utter absence of any knowledge of these people). In this delectable and joyous tension, new knowledge and a renewed

perception of reality emerges for the reader/viewer and he is no longer wallowing in ignorance,<sup>63</sup>, but instead comes away with a new story that he may keep to himself, share with friends, or choose to ignore. But as Tom King writes, what's important are the "stories we make up to set the world straight" (60).

*Minerals: "affairs of the Osage Mineral Estate"*

Clicking over to the Minerals section, a site visitor quickly discerns a more explanatory, factual, and directive tone. The opening narrative lacks any political undertone, as the Cultural overview has, and seems directed specifically at the local Osage audience, primarily conveying information:

The Osage Mineral Council consists of eight Osage Mineral Council members that serve as the elected governing body for the mineral affairs of the Osage Mineral Estate. The Osage Mineral Council conducts regular meetings every third Wednesday of each month in the Council Chambers located on the Osage Tribal Campus.

The Osage Nation Reservation consists of approximately 1,475,000 acres and is otherwise known as Osage County, Oklahoma. The Osage tribe owns all mineral rights located within Osage County and has an income from all oil and gas found in Osage County. The Osage Nation campus - the heart of the Osage Nation - is located in Pawhuska, Oklahoma.<sup>64</sup>

Every single sentence begins with "The Osage" and contains some specific fact or direction for tribal members. The stark difference in writing style between Culture and Minerals is as if one

---

<sup>63</sup> In the Gorgias dialogue in *Plato on Rhetoric and Language: Four Key Dialogues*, Plato's Socrates character calls ignorance one of the corrupt conditions of the soul (114) and in the Protagoras dialogue, the Socrates character asks if people are cowards because of their ignorance (80).

<sup>64</sup> From the Minerals overview page on the Osage Nation web site at [www.osage-tribe.com](http://www.osage-tribe.com).

turned from the features or editorial section of a newspaper to the main hard news page, or maybe the business page. From emotion to logic in one swift click. In addition to this drier style and increased formality, the Flash banner has changed once again. The color palette is now green, black and white, cut through the middle with the same scrolling ribbon design as the other pages. The colors suggest the unity of the green growing world aboveground with the dark underground of stone and soil where the oil resides, as well as the clash between nature and development. Interestingly, the words have once again changed: The Story of Oil and the Osages, Mineral Rights, Oil and Natural Gas, Preserving Our Environment, and Conservation (which is also a word on the main tribal home page). What captures the attention most is the use of the term “story” on what appears to be a very business-like page, possibly an attempt to capture the visitor’s imagination. In addition, there exists presentation balance between the business of drilling development (Mineral Rights and Oil and Natural Gas) and the responsibility of environmental stewardship (Preserving Our Environment and Conservation), two seemingly opposed concerns. However, the Osage Nation appears to be practically and rhetorically invested in both. Furthermore, the romantic background images are Bluestem Lake from the home page and a photo of a sunset in deep gold, burnt orange and reddish-pink, foregrounded by the silhouette of a denuded tree. Five of the eight individual adults pictured are seemingly captured mid-task over a notebook, a gas line, and a computer, while the other adults appear friendly and smiling, perhaps suggestive of the satisfied tribal members who own and receive the financial benefits of headrights.

Like the storytelling on the Culture overview page, “The Story of Oil and the Osages” begins on the Minerals overview page and presents an equally powerful, if ultimately different, story(ality) to the novice Osage site visitor who stumbles upon this page. There exists no evident

story(ality) for the primary Osage audience if members of the nation already have equal knowledge of this Minerals story. Rather, the story(ality) comes into play with the site visitors who are outsiders to this nation and who may have no idea who the Osages are, much less their business-oriented and practical focus on oil and the environment. This page complicates that visitor's knowledge in profound ways. The very presence of a frank discussion and display of the reality of the Osage Mineral Estate and its current oil and gas leases and pricing issues completely de-romantizes any notion of this tribe as a non-dynamic, history-trapped people; rather, the Minerals story reinforces the tribe's dynamic, modern, adaptable, and practical nature. The Osage are thriving in this 21<sup>st</sup> century world with their oil lease headrights and are using their nation's web site to tell stories about themselves and their historical and contemporary issues as a sovereign tribal nation. Any visitor to this site should come away with a very different view of reality as it relates to the Osage Nation story.

*Outsider perspective*

My observation of the Osage Nation web site includes many observations that any outsider to this tribe might have. For instance, the site's organization is particularly impressive, especially the headings that convey a clear sense of the issues that are most important to the tribe and are very straightforward, the appealing layout, and friendly Flash work that conveys a sense of purpose. Initial impressions imply that this is a very active community concerned with communicating issues that are important to the entire community. But most importantly, visitors may be inspired to dig deeper based on this first fast impression. The site makes the visitor curious to find out more, which seems to be a ringing endorsement of the designers' rhetorical and technological choices in crafting the site. Also impressive is tribal leadership and their evident concern with reaching out to members wherever they are and keeping them informed

about everything from tribal initiatives (like the renewable energy concerns and scholarship opportunities) to current events. Additional practical elements include educational elements for tribal members and non-members related to the tribe's history and culture, particularly the Osage history timeline link, art samples, and Word of the Week.

Furthermore, the public persona of the Osage, as presented by the webmaster suggests that they are concerned with showcasing both their tribe's general good-naturedness (as represented by the pictures) and their tribe's devotion to improving themselves and their situation (as suggested by the menu for the tribe at the right, which shows job postings, Congress recordings, and forums as well as a number of departments.) Overall, the Osage come across as a nation that embraces technology and its communicative potential. While the initial impression of the Osage site does leave the visitor with mostly positive impressions, anyone with experience in web design and technical documentation might be a touch confused by certain design elements that don't completely fit together, such as the two graphical elements of the traditional-looking masthead combined with the Flash banner, which are an unconventional design choice. Despite this potential disjunction, the Osage site does succeed in presenting the tribe as a nation that is interested in upholding traditions as well as exploring newer avenues.

As Slack and Wise ask, "If one's race or ethnicity is part of one's identity and culture, why shouldn't one discuss and declare such things while online? Why should participants deny a central part of their lives while online" (168). Similarly, Mark Warschauer cites the Maori of New Zealand and the Navajo of the southwest US as two indigenous peoples using the Internet to "connect isolated groups of small numbers of speakers and to allow low-cost archiving and publishing as a way to promote language maintenance and revitalization" (157). In the case of the Osage Nation, the tribe declares, discusses, and promotes its proud Osage identity (including



its language) online, a form of digital survivance, which has an invigorating effect on some non-Osage visitors, inspiring them to learn more instead of offending their sensibilities. This result is directly related to the rhetorical choices made by site designers and content producers in deciding what stories to tell and how to present that information about the tribe on the web site. The Osages seem to be leaving very little to chance regarding site visitors' impressions of the nation.

## **Conclusion**

Because we do not live in “America’s presumed postracist, color-blind, and racially tolerant body politic,”<sup>65</sup> but exist in a political, social and cultural intellectual space that still grapples with issues of race and ethnicity, the presence and continuance of alternative cultural perspectives is vital to increasing knowledge about different cultures and decreasing ignorance. Specifically, storytelling that alters perceptions of reality shares a parallel history with human development. Very often, the stories we tell each other about who we are, where we come from, and what we want precede the actual technology developed to fulfill our desires and expectations. I would argue that for most of the site’s visitors, a new story(ality) about the Osage Nation specifically and tribal nations generally has been created – the stories presented in the brief snapshot section altered my test visitors’ perceptions of reality related to the Osage, contemporary tribes, and tribal issues in a modern world; stories these visitors might not have had access to without the delivery system of the Internet.

The challenge to Ben Jenkins, Paula Stabler, Cherokee Cheshewalla, Billy Proctor, and others who worked to bring the Osage Nation web site to life and who continue its story has been to find ways to represent this unique tribal nation as one with roots in tradition and modernity, branches reaching into history and present-day life, an internal and external waterline of change and truth about its collective identity, all culminating in a strong trunk of rhetorical survivance

---

<sup>65</sup> From Anna Everett’s introduction to *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media* (4).

that all site visitors are invited to appreciate, learn from and enjoy. Each of these elements contributes to a new story(ality) in the digital contact zone of the Internet, complicates the tensions between tribal decision makers, web designer, and site visitors, and creates a dialectic in which new knowledge and new perceptions of tribal realities can grow for the benefit of all. The material reality represented by the Osages' use of the Internet as a tool to transmit the values and practical concerns of their culture is a direct contradiction to what Selfe and Selfe claimed in 1994: "Primary computer interfaces do not, for example, provide direct evidence of different cultures and races that make up the American social complex, nor do they show much evidence of different linguistic groups or groups of differing economic status" (485-86). Quite possibly, this was the case in 1994, but now in 2010 a wide range of different cultures, linguistic groups, and different socioeconomic groups are represented online by the direct computer interfaces of individuals within those traditionally marginalized groups. Hopefully, this progress through technology will continue as more tribes interface with computers, as the Osage have done, in order to share their cultural, political, economic, and social realities with the world.

One result of this examination of the Osage Nation web site is the need for comparative research that looks into what other tribal nations are doing with their web presence. No nation addresses this digital contact zone in precisely the same way, but all surely achieve rhetorical survivance and some level of story(ality) that would be worth investigating. This digital web story conversation on a broader scale would work to reduce negative assumptions about modern tribal peoples and might open the door to service learning opportunities in undergraduate and graduate level classrooms. As much as the fiction and poetry of Native American writers contributes to our national sense of who tribal peoples are today, so, too, can the study and engagement of tribal web sites and their design teams improve and complicate what we think we

know about these vibrant, vital “traditional people in a modern time” living “with and within” their cultures. Ultimately, the stories told by tribal nations’ web sites might go a long way towards achieving Tom King’s discovery that some stories are made up “to try to set the world straight.” We just have to agree that the world needs straightening.

## Chapter Three

### Teasing the Funny: Indigenous Stand-up Story(alities) in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Comedy

#### *Introduction*

“Three Indians walked out of a bar sober...” Vaughn Eaglebear looks around at the reservation casino audience, scanning the room amidst the hesitant half-giggles, amused murmurs, and one shout of “that’s right!,” biding his time to complete the punchline. After a full fifteen seconds, he delivers, “It could happen.”

My task in this chapter is not to define Native American comedy<sup>66</sup> or to theorize about stand-up comedy as John Limon does in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*<sup>67</sup>, or even to delineate what makes Native American comedy particularly “Native American.” Plenty of people have done this. In fact, in Taylor’s book, *Me Funny*, several Native comedians and humorists define Native or Aboriginal comedy. Don Kelly (Ojibway) acknowledges that “there are as many kinds of Native comedy as there are Native comics,” but points out the following “common characteristics” of Native humor: teasing, a tendency toward self-deprecation, stories “built on the oral tradition,” but he argues that those who wish to suggest

---

<sup>66</sup> This sentiment was further reinforced by my conversation with the Powwow Comedy Jam guys in Everett, WA, who all agreed that Native comedy is indefinable – to define it would be to limit it and that would essentially make this comedy ineffective.

<sup>67</sup> Limon’s one sentence summation of his theory is “What is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection,” and he pulls heavily from Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection, which he defines as “abasement, groveling prostration” (4). Looking at the comedy of Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, Ellen DeGeneres and many others, Limon writes with a cultural studies point of view, declaring, “Stand-up itself has the structure of abjection insofar as comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial (Are they themselves or acting?). Reality keeps returning to stand-up performance, but the deepest desire of stand-up is to be, with respect to their lives, unencumbered. All a stand-up’s life feels abject to him or her, and stand-ups try to escape it by living it as an act” (6). Taking this claim a step further, Limon then traces a connection to mathematical abstracts, calling his subject “the beautiful abstract geometry of stand-up” that Americans crave (6). Interestingly, he admits not knowing how to “write about the form of a stand-up routine” (8), which is something I intend to grapple with.

Native humor is “the comedy of coping – a response to troubling times, dark days, and oppression” is contradictory. Rather, he argues, “Perhaps the last couple of centuries have sharpened and honed our wit, but laughter has echoed across Turtle Island for centuries. . . I have no problem with First Nations comics who want to be, first and foremost, First Nations comics—more power to them. In fact, we need them. We need the full range because we are diverse peoples. . . Laughter is universal. Comedy is well-trod ground, but Native stand-up comedy is wide-open terrain. There are no boundaries and no borders. It’s undiscovered country. And our people are experts in navigating new territory” (“And Now, Ladies and Gentlemen” 62-65).

Rather, I argue that contemporary Native American stand-up comedy is a form of epideictic rhetoric<sup>68</sup> in the contact zone of the performance space, using generic conventions of stand-up comedy, traditional elements of Native humor, and Aristotelian strategies to challenge what audiences think they know about Native experiences in this land. Instead of the academic arena, this contact zone is the theatrical stage in varying locations (reservation casinos, comedy clubs and festivals, cable television) and the invested parties are the Native American comedians and their Native and non-Native audiences. In order to successfully challenge deeply-held beliefs about Native peoples and their experiences in this particularly loaded contact zone, Native comedians employ a wide variety of techniques and rhetorical strategies that comfortably straddle the disciplines of comedy, Native American Studies, and Classical Rhetoric. The story(alities) created and re-created by Native American comedians challenge some deeply held beliefs and assumptions about Indigenous peoples, primarily that they aren’t funny, humorous, joyful communities with individual, evolving cultures. My own personal, albeit limited, interactions with Indigenous people have been nothing but delightful and even when the subject

---

<sup>68</sup> Epideictic speech is one of Aristotle’s three genres of rhetoric, is intended for public display, and is typically a speech of praise or blame. (*Rhetorical Tradition* 199)

is serious, shared laughter is quick to follow. In this case, Native American stand-up comedians construct epideictic performances with concrete and personal stories, active voice, repetition of ideas, bodily and facial gestures, and an active revision response to each audience. I would like to suggest that Native American comedy is particularly epideictic in that Native comedians must deal with "praise and blame" because of the tense history they share with and against a potentially white-majority audience. Native comics must balance declamation and play (the cornerstones of such rhetoric) in order to achieve the requirements of comedy as a genre, and the intentional "education" of a white audience, or camaraderie with a Native audience. Thus, creation of story(alities) in this situation is also dependent on the comedian's skillful balance of declamation and play. Native American stand-up comedy<sup>69</sup> is an amalgamation of these objectives, but also reaches beyond these boundaries into the realm of historical pain and contemporary lived realities. The potential result may be the necessity for Native comics to privilege praise and blame over other comedic aims (as when the Powwow Comedy Jam frequently switches back and forth between "praising" and "blaming" white/Euroamerican culture and people).

Despite feeling some resistance to defining Native American comedy (particularly stand-up performances), I offer a potential definition that goes beyond these four characteristics:

Native American stand-up comedy teases the audience, relies on self-deprecation for much of its

---

<sup>69</sup>One could also put the study of Native American stand-up comedy in the context of more ancient Native American comic forms such as the sacred clowns who heal through laughter. For instance, the heyoka of the Lakota perform satires to teach and reflect back certain behaviors of the audience to shape the moral and ethical boundaries of the community. Heyokas act contrary to convention and violate the boundaries of rules, social norms, and taboos in order to provide guidance about what those boundaries, rules, and taboos are. Although it is tempting to either compare modern indigenous comedians with the traditional sacred clowns (or trickster figures), or to suggest that these comedians are consciously breaking with these traditional forms, I am not comfortable with either direction. Rather, I would like to acknowledge that humor and comedy in some form has been and remains ubiquitous with Native American peoples.

humor, incorporates stories “built on the oral tradition,”<sup>70</sup> and as a form of public discourse goes beyond entertainment into the persuasive realm of epideictic rhetoric by arguing for Native peoples’ inherent right to survival and sovereignty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a result, Native American stand-up comedy potentially functions as a resistance strategy for cultural survival and as a criticism of mainstream culture, politics, and beliefs about First Nations peoples. Implicit in this resistance and criticism is praise for the living realities experienced by indigenous peoples. In fact, sometimes the praise and blame are explicit in Native American stand-up, as Don Burnstick, Howie Miller, Jim Ruel, and others show in their performances.

When I met the Powwow Comedy Jam team<sup>71</sup> in Everett, WA (Feb. 2009), Vaughn Eaglebear did not do the “Three Indians walk out of a bar sober” joke because there were six people in the audience for their 10:30 show at Marson’s Comedy Club and only two were Native Americans. The “Indians walked out of a bar” joke only seems funny with an insider audience – Native Americans who understand the realities of alcoholism in their midst and who can likewise be self-referential about it and laugh at themselves. This joke doesn’t work the same way with a primarily non-Native audience. In fact, the offense level increases when the teller is white. I use myself as a case in point. After my Everett trip, I prepped my World Literature students that I was about to tell them a joke that is a “not-joke”<sup>72</sup> simply because I’m the one telling it. Then I told them this well-known “Indians walked out of a bar” joke and the response was as predicted

---

<sup>70</sup> From Ojibwa comedian Don Kelly’s almost-definition from Taylor’s *Me Funny*

<sup>71</sup> As of May 2010, this team has broken apart for personal and professional reasons. JR Redwater and Jim Ruel resigned from the group in order to start a new Native stand-up comedy team called Chiefs of Comedy that is designed to appeal to mainstream America while still maintaining the Native perspective, according to JR.

<sup>72</sup> In “How to be as Funny as an Indian,” a chapter in Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Me Funny* (2005), Ian Ferguson defines Aboriginal humor into three categories: “Not Jokes, In Jokes, and Our Jokes” (124). Specifically, he defines “Not Jokes” as “jokes told about Indians, usually at their expense, by people who are, shall we say, non-Native...or, to be more specific, White People. These are commonly known as ‘drunken Indian’ jokes. . . These kinds of jokes are part of the underground canon known as Bigot Humour. . . They are Not Jokes. It’s not just because they are offensive. Much worse; they aren’t funny” (124-25).

– some nervous giggles followed by hands covering mouths and widened eyes.<sup>73</sup> Could this discomfort with such a painful subject<sup>74</sup> prevent the necessary acceptability level for more non-Native audiences to find Native comedians funny? When I asked the Powwow Comedy guys about this, Marc Yaffee (Navajo) first pointed to the fact that there are only three million Native Americans, so the built-in audience is smaller. But when I pushed him on this, he said that the content or subject matter they deal with, particularly the topics that are specific to Native experiences in this land, are sometimes difficult for mainstream audiences to hear and understand. In his oral “foreword” to the Powwow Comedy Jam’s DVD<sup>75</sup>, *Joke Signals*, Oneida comedian Charlie Hill expresses his appreciation for what these “young fast guns” are doing and also sets up the important potential of Native comedians to change how we see ourselves, our nation, and how we talk and think about Native peoples:

I think what they’re doing is wonderful even though everyday to Native people, it’s new to America simply because they don’t know who we are. And when you laugh at people and you understand people and that’s where it is...you get people to laugh...I like that these guys get you to laugh with us and not at us. . .These guys bring a lot of intelligence and different, distinctive points of view. . .It’s nice to see these guys are out and being

---

<sup>73</sup> Comedy’s position as epideictic speech means that it is meant for public display. While some might argue that the classroom is a public space in general and certainly is a contact zone, I sense that the academic classroom is not necessarily the appropriate public space for delivering stand-up comedy (as it is normally intended to be received). In other words, the students in my classroom would naturally not react the same way to the Native jokes that I re-tell in the classroom as they would react to the Native comics themselves telling the jokes in the contact zone performance space of a comedy club or public location designed for a comedy festival. Hence, the performance needs the right public space (with the right audience, whose expectations fit the situation) in order to be successful.

<sup>74</sup> And by “painful subject,” I don’t just mean alcoholism amongst Native American communities. Rather, I mean the very real existence of Native peoples in this land as the “painful” reality that mainstream America has yet to deal with.

<sup>75</sup> This DVD is not commercially available – I purchased directly from the comedians at their show. Commercial availability of and access to DVDs of Native comedy are, well, nonexistent at worst and tough to find at best. Type in “powwow comedy jam” to Amazon’s search engine and results are the Def Comedy Jam DVDs. Type in James and Ernie (who seem to be a very popular Navajo comedy team) or Dawn Dumont (who has performed in New York’s famous comedy club, The Comic Strip) and there are no results. Don Burnstick’s sole comedy CD available on Amazon, *Redskin Club*, is “no longer available.” Tom King’s *Dead Dog Café Comedy Show* from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (radio) in the mid-1990s was amazingly available – all four volumes!



together from four different cultural backgrounds is like an alliance of Indian nations, it's alliance, and together , you know, we've tried before, we've fought the government and they beat us because we got their diseases, we've signed treaties and they broke every one of them, we've tried peace negotiations but there's no such thing as peace in this land. We've tried everything, we've cajoled them, we were nice to them when they got here, but now these four guys, the new Powwow Comedy Jam, they're gonna take this land back one joke at a time, something we've never tried before. (*Joke Signals*)

To reiterate my theory, storytelling that alters reality via language is story(ality). Essentially, who tells the story changes a story's meaning and the storyteller retains a certain power and influence over a given audience. Story(ality) only exists in a contact zone, relies on true or real stories (rather than works of fiction or pure imagination), and depends on the intellectual and ideological tension between the storyteller and the audience. In the end, story(ality) is only possible during moments of tension when all contributors are voluntarily participating in the storytelling dialectic. In addition to the efficacy of the storyteller's tone, gestures, demeanor, and enthusiasm, the language of stories can alter reality for recipients, with often uncertain outcomes. The words used to transmit the comedy are vital. As Ojibwa comedian Don Kelly writes, "Personally, I love comedians who can mine the most toxic topics for relevant insights and social satire. Words carry a lot of weight" (*Me Funny* 59). Just as the opening chapter examined the cross-cultural conversation between author and audience, this chapter adds additional tension by beginning to explore the very real and emotional world of Native American humor. Not only will some of these comedians speak directly to you with their own words, but I also ground my analysis with observations (in person whenever possible) of several current

Native comedians such as the Powwow Comedy Jam, Howie Miller (Cree), Charlie Hill (Oneida), and Don Burnstick (Cree)<sup>76</sup>.

As a scholar and writer who overtly uses humor to delve into serious social, economic, and political issues, Thomas King provides a solid bridge between academic and non-academic Native worldviews. In “Performing Native Humor,” an essay for Drew Hayden Taylor’s collection *Me Funny* (2005), King criticizes the recent increase in academic attention to Native American humor: “One, we’ve decided that Native humor exists, and two, we’ve come up with a general definition. Or description. Or good guess” (Taylor 170). Clearly, King is not a fan of defining Native people or Native humor and argues, rather, that Native humor leans toward the indefinable: “The definition may lie in and change with performance. . .it’s like the wind. We can’t see it. We don’t know where it comes from. And the only time we feel it is when it’s blowing in our face” (Taylor 171). Remaining indefinable preserves the power, authority, and joyfulness of Native humor. To define it too narrowly would sap its strength to persuade, cajole, and comfort. The academy’s love of defining and categorizing people and ideas into neat, easily managed compartments can constrain study and may de-value the insights potentially available with interdisciplinary approaches. To deny our interconnectedness, whether across academic disciplines, or across ethnic divides in comedy, would be to deny our commonality. King says it well: “There are probably cultural differences in humor, but I suspect that what makes Native people laugh is pretty much what makes all people laugh. . .We are at our best when we laugh at ourselves” (Taylor 181). Darby Li Po Price makes a similar observation in “Laughing without

---

<sup>76</sup> Although I focus on male comedians, there are some very funny female Native comedians in the stand-up world, including Dawn Dumont. Not only are male Native comedians hard to find, female Native comedians are even harder to locate in broad public domains such as Youtube. Were I talking about Native American female musicians, I wouldn’t have this problem. Therefore, I took the easy route and am using the most readily accessible Native comedians – further studies and interviews should be conducted to locate and incorporate the female comedienne perspective, but that is another project.

Reservation: Indian Standup Comedians” that appeared in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (1998). Writing about the challenges in performing identities and the choice Native comedians must make in choosing an identity, Price concludes, “Establishing common grounds across ethnic groups creates a collective sense of we-ness” (263). King definitely has a point that Native American humor should not be narrowly defined. And I do like Price’s assessment that “Indian standups perform as intercultural mediators. . .to entertain and educate their audiences” (269). However, I would like to suggest that there are some stark differences between Native American-generated humor and other comedians’ stories. That difference is content and historical context.

Simply put, most Native American comedians<sup>77</sup> refer to or deal with, in minor or major ways during their performances, land, treaty, and reservation issues. And unless I missed something in the history of the United States and Canada, no other group can claim to have these same historical pains and wrongs. These subjects are unique to indigenous experience in this land, especially the fact that Indigenous peoples were here first. One of my favorite Charlie Hill jokes is when he relates to the audience the tale of the heckler one night who told him, “Why don’t you people go back to where you belong?” So Hill says he went and camped in the man’s backyard. Now that’s funny. And it doesn’t matter if it didn’t really happen. The point is clear. Native people were here before the Europeans came and stole the land and we non-Natives are still benefiting from this early theft. This is a painful fact that will not go away and it is prevalent in all of the Native comedians I have observed thus far, just as ongoing colonialism is an issue with the Native scholars I have studied. Therefore, not only do contemporary Native American comedians dialogue with their Native and non-Native audiences using various rhetorical humor

---

<sup>77</sup> In my observations thus far, all of the comedians have dealt with at least one of these subjects, however, as my research and observations continue, I concede that I may well encounter a Native comedian who doesn’t deal with these issues.

strategies, they also employ rhetorical sovereignty, survivance, and communitism by telling humorous stories that speak back against misconceptions about Indigenous experiences.

Take communitism, for instance. Jace Weaver (Cherokee) created the term and defines communitism<sup>78</sup> as “a proactive commitment to Native community. . .to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them” (*That the People* 43). Think in terms of “revision” and “reconstruction” (Weaver 43). Obviously, “communitism is, as the word itself implies, communal. It is part of a shared quest for belonging, a search for community” and Weaver upholds Vine Deloria, Jr. as an exemplar of communitist values, particularly pointing out the “watershed event in Native political thinking and visibility to the dominant culture,” the publication of *Custer Died for Your Sins* in 1969 (125). Weaver recalls Deloria’s “irony and humor tinged with biting satire” as he was “an uncompromising advocate of the personhood and humanity of Indian peoples” (125). Elsewhere in this dissertation, I argue that Native American web designers are also enacting this theory by actively taking a stand regarding how their communities’ stories are written and presented in the public domain. Native comedians keep one voice in their home communities and travel outward with the other voice<sup>79</sup>, engaging non-Native audiences with their experiences, stories, and perspectives that often include difficult and uncomfortable ideas and unfamiliar words. However, laughter is the thread of commonality that allows for potential cross-cultural communication and education to take place. *Shared laughter.*

---

<sup>78</sup> Weaver uses this definition primarily in relation to “Indian literatures” in *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (1997).

<sup>79</sup> Funny aside: One of my favorite Marc Yaffee bits from the Powwow Comedy Jam’s Isleta Casino show involves the issue of Native people and voices: “Native folks, you know a lot of white people think if you’re Native that you have, like, mystical powers. [laughter] This lady asked me after a show, she goes, “Marc, is it true that you Navajos, in your travels, you’re guided by outer voices?” Yes ma’am. It’s called an Onstar Navigation System.” [Six-second laugh]. The reason I point out that this joke got a six-second laugh at a reservation casino is to make a point about the importance of audience.

In 1969, Deloria, Jr. wrote in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, “Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor life is redefined and accepted. Irony and satire provide much keener insights into a group’s collective psyche and values than do years of research. It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs. Rather the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology” (146)<sup>80</sup>. In “How to be as Funny as an Indian,” a chapter in Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Me Funny* (2005), Ian Ferguson writes, “The most surprising thing for most non-Natives is that Indians are funny in the first place” (127). Darby Li Po Price pre-dates Ferguson’s sentiments in “Laughing Without Reservation: Indian Standup Comedians” (1998) from his very first line: “Contrary to the dominant conception of Indians as humorless, stoic, and tragic, humor and comedy have always been central to Native American cultures” (*American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 255). Finally (or not), Price states in the ‘Cultural Critique’ section of his article that “the very existence of Indian standup comedians challenges stereotypes of Indians as lacking a sense of humor” (264). In many ways, shared laughter can bring people of all backgrounds and experiences together and in that moment to recognize our common humanity via the stories told with a particular hybrid use of language.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> And before you balk and think, well, that isn’t the case anymore, ask yourself why we collectively still accept the Washington *Redskins* as an NFL team, name, logo, and all?

<sup>81</sup> Nancy D. Bell writes about “Humor comprehension: Lessons learned from cross-cultural communication” in the Oct. 2007 issue of the *International Journal of Humor Research*, specifically, how humor is perceived and understood in cross-cultural interactions. Her literature review focuses on humor competence as an individual activity related to the situated nature of discourse (Hay & Holmes 2001), how humor understanding is “interactively constructed,” as well as studies on “the use of humor as an ethnic boundary marker” among the Maori and Pakeha (“New Zealanders of European background”) (371). In her own case studies, Bell examines whether an individual’s culturally-based “humor scripts” affect understanding and appreciation of humor. She notes that teasing, in particular, “can have the effect of making that person change his or her behavior” (380). In addition, she writes, “With its strong ability to test for and mark in- and out-group identities, humor can also be used to develop and reinforce affiliation, or even to create distance between interlocutors” (381). Ultimately, Bell argues that the recognition of humor is “likely to be a dynamic construct” and the understanding and appreciation of humor “can be achieved in varying degrees” (384). While Bell worked with conversational humor, I do believe that her discoveries about the possibility of cross-cultural humor understanding bolster my own claim that laughter can be a unifying cross-cultural experience.

JR Redwater, the former Standing Rock Sioux member of the Powwow Comedy Jam, an intercultural/intertribal comedy group that performs all over the country both on reservations and in mainstream comedy clubs and college campuses, cares a great deal about increasing cross-cultural understanding<sup>82</sup>. In a follow-up email interview after our first interaction at one of their shows in Everett, WA, he wrote,

It is important that people understand our perspective, and we think Showtime<sup>83</sup> will help people understand who we are as people and our culture. Indian Humor exists in every Native culture, but most people do not know we are funny. Most of the time, our perspective is injected directly into our sets. But if not, then we add our slang words in and try to explain them as quick as possible. Words like: Snag or Snaggin, Ayyeeez, Chun, Enit, or even the word frybread, powwow, rez, rezz'd out!

In fact, during the set I had the privilege to see, Vaughn Eaglebear (Colville) used “Ayyeeez,” and asked us if we knew what he was talking about. The one Native couple in the audience nodded assent and the rest of us were (and looked) clueless. So he paused his set to quickly explain this is equivalent to “psyche” or “just kidding” and then proceeded to use it liberally throughout his set, knowing that we all now understood what he meant. Furthermore, in response to a query about how important cross-cultural education is to the group, Marc Yaffee (Navajo) responded by email, “Cross cultural education is very important to us. Comedy lets us connect with non-natives in a humorous setting where they are more likely to accept the points we make as they're done in a humorous way.” Finally, Jim Ruel (Ojibwa) had this to say in his email response:

---

<sup>82</sup> Darby Li Po Price concludes, “Indian standups perform as intercultural mediators who share their comic worldviews both to entertain and educate their audiences” (*AICRJ* 269).

<sup>83</sup> Showtime cable television special “Goin’ Native: American Indian Comedy Slam” first aired New Year’s Eve, Jan. 31, 2009. This type of exposure certainly catapults these comedians further into mainstream comedy, which is an extremely positive step toward increasing broader cross-cultural understanding.

Sadly, pretty much anything I say on stage about Native Americans is a teaching moment, b/c in general folks know pretty much nothing about us. Most people are surprised that a Native American could do comedy, so many people have a view of us as being serious and stoic, when just the opposite is true. One of the simple things I did early on in my career was to take popular misconceptions and stereotypes of Natives and turn them on their heads using simple common sense (so the audience would be able to laugh along with and not feel attacked - although that still happens) - for example - calling Thanksgiving 'you're welcome day,' or pointing out why it is silly that I would know the rain dance (duh, my apartment has running water). But in general I don't think I am up there to teach, it just happens because to talk about our world, I have to do a bit of explaining to the general audience so they understand what I'm talking about.

These educational moments, wanted or unwanted, expected or unexpected, directly connect the comedians and their experiences through the cultural tool of language to audiences that may not be familiar with the terms, ideas, and perspectives unique to Indigenous experiences. However, according to Kristina Fagan in "Teasing, Tolerating, Teaching," her contribution to Taylor's *Me Funny*, "To read Aboriginal humor only in terms of its relationship to white society is limiting" (24). As she evaluates Greg Sarris's humorous purpose in *Keeping Slug Woman Alive*, Fagan discovers that his story "tells us a great deal about how he wants us to see him and his own community" (24). Therefore, in considering Native American comedians' perspectives and performance strategies, it is important to recognize the multi-purposed approach and understand that each comedian has different priorities in relation to their white audiences, but all seem to share this tactic of telling us how they want us to see them and their communities.

This story(ality) is vital to building cross-cultural understanding, reducing racism, and is also a form of activism that can benefit these comedians' home communities, although there are no guarantees this positive outcome will result. Ideally, when non-Native audiences are able to connect to a Native cultural perspective through shared laughter with the Powwow Comedy Jam, the chances of that audience continuing to buy into the mainstream belief that Native peoples don't exist and even if they do, they don't have a sense of humor, is greatly reduced. The small opening that this shared laughter creates may inspire people to self-educate about contemporary Native populations, or seek out knowledge that they would otherwise be unaware of, or at the very least lean toward acceptance and away from bald ignorance.

Cherokee intellectual Jace Weaver engages the continuing existence of American Indian intellectual traditions, addresses the question of what “distinguishes written product by Natives from that of non-Natives,” and offers a new methodology and framework for this type of study,<sup>84</sup> writing in his introduction to *That the People Might Live*, “It is important that Native cultures be seen as living, dynamic cultures” (8) as opposed to the colonialist assumptions of cultural stasis and death: “By viewing the Indian as vanishing and Indian cultures as disintegrating, it was possible to view 20<sup>th</sup> century Indians who refused to vanish as degraded and inauthentic. . . It is a vision of the ‘Indian as corpse,’ and the stasis box is only a thinly disguised coffin. An extinct people do not change. Their story is complete” (18). In America especially, we have become disturbingly comfortable with this idea and perhaps this might be one of the reasons why, when we are confronted with Native American comedians exploring issues that touch on this sacred assumption, that we're not quite sure how to react. Surely, not with laughter?! Recall Thomas

---

<sup>84</sup> Specifically, Weaver hopes to “challenge [American Indian intellectuals] to do more extensive critical work of our own intellectual traditions,” especially as it relates to the “critical assessment of Native literature” (ix). His hypothesis is that “Native literature both reflects and shapes contemporary Native identity and community and that what distinguishes it and makes it a valuable resource is what I term in this study ‘communitism’” (ix).



King's wise and prescient perspective on this in his chapter within Taylor's book. He writes, "There are probably cultural differences in humour, but I suspect what makes Native people laugh is pretty much what makes all people laugh. . . We are at our best when we laugh at ourselves" (*Me Funny* 181). Don Kelly (Ojibwa), a stand-up comic who also contributed a chapter to Taylor's book, writes, "I can laugh at myself. And we can laugh together, and at one another" (55).

### ***Contact Zones, Epideictic Rhetoric, and Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries***

Using the recovered text by Guaman Poma as a prelude to her argument in 1991 ("Arts of the Contact Zone"), Mary Louise Pratt presents the concept of contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (*Profession* 34). Specifically, she claims that Poma "exemplified the sociocultural complexities produced by conquest and empire" (34), written as it is in two languages and two styles that reproduce both Inca knowledge and customs and European writing styles and customs. Pratt also introduces the related ideas of an "autoethnographic text," and "transculturation." She defines these as follows: the autoethnographic text is one "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them," involving "a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conquerer. . . often addressed to both metropolitan audiences and the speaker's own community" (*Profession* 35). Transculturation is defined as an ethnographic term coined by Fernando Ortiz, a Cuban sociologist in the 1940s, "to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (*Profession* 35). Pratt claims that transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone. Although Pratt was referring to pedagogy in the composition classroom, these

concepts are quite useful outside the academic setting and when applied to Native American stand-up comedy can provide a sensible theoretical space in which to examine how this particular type of speech operates and what the benefits are for the participants of the comedy contact zone.

Related to contact zones is the interdisciplinary academic field of Native American Studies, arguably a contact zone in and of itself. This field provides useful definitions for studying Native American comedy. In particular, consider Jace Weaver's 2007 *American Indian Quarterly* assessment of "The Current State of Native American Studies," in which he suggests that the characteristics of Native American Studies has an "interdisciplinary character" (235), is "comparative in nature," and "must seek to understand the material from the perspective of Natives," while maintaining a commitment to "Native American community" (236). Thus far, only Drew Hayden Taylor (2005) and Darby Li Po Price (1998) have undertaken studies of Native American stand-up comedy and neither study connects Native stand-up comedy to Native American Studies as an academic discipline, nor do they or any others connect Native American stand-up comedy to epideictic rhetoric. Furthermore, while Native scholars such as Vine Deloria, Jr., Thomas King, and Gerald Vizenor do address Native comedy and humor, they do not include Native American stand-up comedy in their studies, *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), *The Truth About Stories* (2003), and *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (1999), respectively. In *Custer*, Deloria, Jr. comments on the philosophical, legal, and activist realities of Indigenous experiences, writing stories and sharing jokes about the BIA, the differences between the "Indian" and the "black man," and the difficulties inherent in sharing Indian humor with non-Indians, concluding, "Whether Indian jokes will eventually come to have more significance. . . I cannot speculate. Humor, all Indians will agree, is the cement by which the coming Indian

movement is held together.<sup>85</sup> When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive” (166-67). Thomas King shares personal and concrete stories of experience with a humorous storytelling style that effectively draws readers in until suddenly you realize the stories aren’t so funny and his message is rather poignant, direct, and starkly honest. For King, humor is clearly an emotional rhetorical strategy that gains his audience’s trust, but he does not include any mention of Native American stand-up comedy as part of his subject matter. Additionally, in *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor focuses primarily on Native American literature and refers to Alan Velie as “the first scholar to observe the comic and ironic themes in Native American Indian literature. His interpretations were literary, a wise departure from the surveillance of the social sciences. The tribes were tragic, never comic, or ironic, in the literature of dominance” (79). A few pages later, Vizenor declares, “The resistance to tribal humor is a tragic flaw” (83).

One question that arises is why is Native stand-up comedy was excluded from these rich investigations into Native American comedy and humor? For instance, Oneida comedian, Charlie Hill, has been performing stand-up comedy since the 1970s and is fairly well-known in comedy circles, having crossed over into the mainstream by appearing on the *Richard Pryor Show* in the 70s, performing on the *Tonight Show* when Johnny Carson was at the helm, and performing at mainstream venues across the land to this day. Perhaps stand-up comedy just isn’t considered “academic” enough for study. Or perhaps the simple problem is that Native American Studies scholars have been so busy trying to validate their theoretical stances and argue for the inclusion of a long and rich intellectual tradition of writing and thinking that goes far beyond fiction and poetry that none of them has had the opportunity to expand their Native comedy

---

<sup>85</sup> Deloria is referring here to the American Indian Movement.

studies further afield than literature. Notably, Ellen Cushman's Dec. 2008 article on Native scholars and the rhetoric of self-representation related to "identity politics" still focuses on scholars within the academy. However, the publication of her article in the *College Composition & Communication* affirms a broader interdisciplinary interest in Native theoretical work and opens the academic door for more research into Native American rhetorical productions.

Classical Rhetoric offers some specific rhetorical strategies employed by these contemporary Native stand-up comics. Specifically, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* provides the necessary definitions and elements. Particularly applicable to Native comedians is Aristotle's conception of epideictic, or ceremonial, oratory, in which the speaker typically praises or censures someone and is concerned primarily with the present. Aristotle advises us to "take into account the nature of our particular audience when making a speech of praise; for, as Socrates used to say, it is not difficult to praise the Athenians to an Athenian audience" (*Rhetorical Tradition* 199).

Interestingly, this advice converges with John Limon's stand-up comedy theory that the audience makes the joke, which two of the Powwow Comedy Jam members, Jim Ruel and Marc Yaffee, dispute. According to Limon in his *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory*, "stand-up is uniquely audience dependent" (12). In particular, he argues that a two-second laugh is "respectable," a four-second laugh "greet[s] the best joke of a standard *Tonight Show* monologue," and to get a laugh up to six seconds—an extraordinary occasion—you generally need two distinct waves of laughter, as in the case of jokes that are immediately funny and funnier (they are usually self-reflexive) upon reprocessing" (16). This plays into his thoroughly rhetorical theory that the audience creates, or co-creates, the joke. Otherwise, the comedian is left with either a bad joke, or worse, a non-joke. When I suggested this theory to Ruel and Yaffee, their responses were both firm and humorous. Yaffee responded thusly,

I don't agree with the theory that the audience creates the jokes as much as it measures a joke's effectiveness in that given environment when it's delivered. It is amazing how a joke will work so well with some crowds. For instance, an Indian joke told in front of an all white audience could bite the dust while in front of an Indian audience, it might get a four to six second response – it's where the joke is being delivered. A joke in my opinion is still a joke when it is created and enjoyed in the mind its creator. Now the joke may never be validated and liked by anyone else but it still exists at least on paper or in the writer's memory. (Yaffee email April 2009)

Concurrently, Jim Ruel wrote a bit more extensively about why he disagrees with Limon's theory:

I have a very simple joke that on occasion will get 6 seconds of laughter (I've never timed it). It's my usual opening line when I'm not performing with the group.

Hi, my name is Jim Ruel. I'm native american. I hope you enjoy my act ... and the land.

It will get those extended laughs I think largely because I pull a fast one on them. I deliver the line like a line of normal conversation, almost in a cautious pleading voice. I am coming across as this 'beautiful, thoughtful native american who is peace with the earth and very spiritual and cautious' and the words almost sound like that. But I'm really delivering some sarcasm - thanks for stealing our land, you assholes. (and that's probably the line sam kinison would use). Maybe I don't quite understand his theory that the audience creates the joke, but I'm pretty sure there is only one distinct wave of laughter here.

I have a feeling Limon has observed this and could apply his theory to my act but I also think this is a good way to suck the soul out of a comedian. I prefer to think of standup as an art form. To me that means it should be personal, creative and original. You are saying something. (Ruel email April 2009)

The question of whether theory and art can go together is an argument for another day, but Ruel's point is well taken. While theories such as John Limon's (or Aristotle's or de Certeau's or Gerald Vizenor's) can certainly provide scholars a new way of considering the artistic and intellectual output of particular groups and subgroups of people, practical application in tangible and real locations may also require a different lens and perspective. Not all theories can comfortably survive the transition into the world of practitioners.

However, all of these sources seem to agree on the importance of audience and catering the message (or comedy) to that particular audience. Beyond a concern for and awareness of audience, a deeper examination of stand-up comedy in general and Native American stand-up comedy in particular reveals its shared characteristics with traditional epideictic rhetoric.

First of all, stand-up comedy is an art form, therefore has aesthetic and ethical dimensions. Secondly, comedy is ceremonial and has its rules and rituals, comedy is oriented to public occasions and can be celebratory (as with "in" jokes such as "Drunk Indian" jokes and words such as snaggin', ayyeez, and frybread, etc.). Interestingly, comedy is usually concerned with the audience's belief in the present, something that Native American comedy diverges from when the comedians reference the past (land loss, broken treaties, etc.). In this case, the audience's potential belief that contemporary Native peoples either don't exist, or should already be well-integrated into Euramerican lifeways becomes a point of tension when a Native

American comedian references the past to remind the audience that the past is actually present. Hence, Native comics must necessarily use epideictic rhetorical strategies to reflect and resist their shared position with the audience between “praise” and “blame” about the past and present. Related to this idea is the observation that comedy can also eulogize or lament the loss of someone or something such as a culture, way of life, or land, as well as censure those responsible for that loss and advocate a political course of action for the survivors and their allies. In this respect, comedy is concerned with practical knowledge useful in guiding everyday action. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, at its base, comedy can be a form of moral education that can connect people more honestly and respectfully across time, space, and cultures, creating more responsible understanding and cross-cultural interactions. However, one of the dangers inherent to Native American stand-up comedy is the potential to deepen divisions between people, or create indifference, depending on the audience and how a particular audience receives the comedic messages.

More recently, Lois Agnew investigates the challenges of the epideictic genre as a form that can potentially facilitate communication among people with different views. In her 2008 article, “‘The Day Belongs to the Students’: Expanding Epideictic’s Civic Function,” Agnew suggests that an epideictic encounter can “serve the educational function of constructively interrogating and reimagining public values,” even in her example of a violent audience response to a college commencement speech (*Rhetoric Review* 147). She reminds readers to recall Aristotle’s “assumption that any discussion of praise or blame necessarily involves a broader exploration of the public values that would shape the audience’s assumptions concerning the definition of those terms” (150). Citing many contemporary genre theorists, Agnew reiterates that epideictic’s power may reside in its “dynamic capacity to shape the community’s identity”

(151). Interestingly, Agnew's keen assessments all connect with Native American stand-up comedy practices, especially when she accentuates the need for speakers and audiences to come together in a cultural moment where they also "creatively work against those boundaries in order to establish a communicative act that has more than formal significance" (151). The idea of the modern epideictic encounter she defines and explores here dovetails nicely with my observations of Native comedians in the contact zone of the performance space with invested participants.

Finally, the specific performance space where comedy lives deserves some attention. In 1987, journalist Besty Borns tapped into her interviews with the top stand-up comics of the 1980s to create *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-Up Comedy*. Relying on interviews and extensive research into the history of stand-up comedy in America, Borns calls the comedy club "a stormy sea of conflicting purposes," emotionally seducing audiences with the "promise of catharsis through laughter" (14). Focusing heavily on different audience dynamics and how an audience reacts to various types of jokes, and allowing those comics to ruminate about audiences (among other topics), Borns suggests that an "audience's attitude toward a comic's material depends on its members' general range of acceptance" (18). However, she also argues that "stand-up is satire and. . .it is also planting some serious seeds. Logic dictates that if you want to get a message across and the frontal lobe is locked, you go in through the back door" (28). Continuing the focus on message and audience, in *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (2004), Joanne Gilbert investigates the "elements of contradiction, interaction, and spontaneity inherent" in the medium of stand-up comedy. She focuses on how contemporary comics, especially women, are "cultural barometers and cultural critics":



Audiences pay to laugh and to be laughed at. And comics wield rhetorical power in a context in which the marginal are not only accepted but valorized. Within the topsy-turvy world of stand-up comic performance, hierarchies are inverted, power relations are subverted, and a good time is had by all. Because it can avoid inflaming audiences by framing incisive—even incendiary—sociocultural critique as mere ‘entertainment,’ comedy is undeniably a unique and powerful form of communication” (xxi).

More recently, Douglas J. Glick uses Bakhtin’s notion of voicing in narrative chronotopes to explore the verbal art of stand-up comedy in “Some performative techniques in stand-up comedy: An exercise in the textuality of temporalization” (*Language & Communication* 2007). Focusing on the semiotic processes by which language functions humorously, Glick provides a case study on Eddie Izzard, a stand-up comedian from England whose political humor jousts with the history of colonialism. In fact, Powwow Comedy Jam member Jim Ruel also recognizes Izzard’s importance and power; he suggested I study him as a master comedic storyteller working the stand-up stage today.

Finally, Richard Zoglin investigates the sociocultural effect that stand-up comedy had on the American mindset in the 1970s in *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (2008). Zoglin seems to take a more sober and less celebratory approach in suggesting that the “sense of adventure” that was rampant in 1970s “heroic” and “social commentator” comics “has been replaced by the programmed predictability of a General Motors assembly plant. The comics all sound pretty much alike these days, with the same patter to loosen up the crowd (‘Anyone from out of town?’—in thirty years no one has come up with a better icebreaker), the same recyclable loop of stand-up topics (sex, New York subways, commercials for Viagra)” (2). I’m not sure if Zoglin has seen any Native American comics perform, but in my

experience with them and their work, it is entirely possible that this group of comics, with a unique perspective on American experience, might be the “brilliant and radical artists” of our generation, potentially influencing “how we see the world,” perhaps changing “the way we talk and think,” and, of course, making us laugh at each other and ourselves, as the best comedy does (6).

### ***Conceptions of “Story”***

Responding to Robert Warrior (Osage), Jace Weaver (Cherokee), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), Joy Harjo (Creek), Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw), Malea Powell (Miami), Angela Haas (Cherokee), and many other strong Indigenous scholars who call for equal attention to Native-produced theories, as opposed to the privileging of the non-Native voice that occurs in so many disciplines, I am consciously privileging the Native voice in each chapter. From what I have learned thus far, Native American conceptions of knowledge, truth, storytelling, thinking, community, and writing are valuable epistemic strategies for gaining a richer understanding of these issues. For instance, the non-linear, conversational approach to scholarship taken up by the above-cited scholars, as well as important Native scholars and storytellers such as Vine Deloria, Jr., Leslie Marmon Silko, and N. Scott Momaday inspires me to adopt this approach as a way to continue the cross-cultural conversation and perhaps inspire others to look outside the conventional, linear, non-Native-informed frameworks that have become so entrenched in some sectors of academia. However, as Malea Powell stated during her presentation at the 2008 Native American and Indigenous Studies conference (Athens, GA), “I can Derrida you under the table. What I do is harder.” While I cannot make the same assertion, I do understand her point that as scholars, we should all be aware of the conversations and ideas that have come before and use them as needed, but those voices should no longer be privileged to the exclusion of other voices

with equal power, authority, and conceptual strength. To this end, I would like to now present some fairly neutral<sup>86</sup> non-Native perspectives<sup>87</sup> on “story” and “narrative” both in general and as it relates to the output of Native American comedians.

First, let us look at Phillip Eubanks, Associate Professor of English at Northern Illinois University, who uses ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ interchangeably and argues, “A story consists of two or more related, sequential events,” as well as “a complication” that captures “people’s interest” (*What Writing Does* 34). Although he acknowledges that stories “can be vastly more complex,” he does assert the need to narrowly define “what counts as a story” so that “we can broaden significantly the number of places where stories may be discovered” (*WWD* 34). Citing cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner’s, claim that “‘a good story and a well-formed argument are different kinds. . . what they convince *of* is fundamentally different: Arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness’ (p.11),” Eubanks then shows how many current researchers “are finding that narrative and non-narrative texts and thought are profoundly woven together” (*WWD* 35). Furthermore, he asks, “If narrative is as important as current researchers claim, the question that follows is, Important in exactly what way?” (*WWD* 35). Eubanks’s answer is two-pronged: one, narrative itself, as “one of the most observable ways we conceptualize experience and organize memory,” and two, postmodernism’s argument that “the very prevalence of some narratives makes them largely invisible, and, at the same time, inescapably intermingled with institutions, practices, and texts” (*WWD* 35). Eubanks asserts

---

<sup>86</sup> By neutral, I mean non-judgmental in relation to the Native-produced texts and performances used in this chapter. These non-Native scholarly or practical ideas about ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ are neutral insofar as they are substantively disconnected from the specific scope of my content. But as Kenneth Burke reminds us, there are no neutral words, so I felt I must qualify my use of this term.

<sup>87</sup> In the first chapter of this dissertation, three “autobiographical” texts intersect to create conflict and conversation across time and space; the non-Native text, *Stiya*, is particularly problematic and not in any way neutral. However, by putting this difficult text in conversation with the true autobiographies of Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo/Sioux) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), cross-cultural understanding is achieved through a contemporary story(ality) that continues to speak of power, resistance, and cultural pride.

cognitive science's more biological perspective as it helps us understand that the postmodernists are wrong – that “the grand narratives critiqued by postmodernists can reasonably be credited with social power,” and that story is fundamental to thought and memory (*WWD* 36).

My biggest issue with Eubanks's argument is his insistence on narrowly defining story as a quantifiable product consisting of “two or more related, sequential events” and “a complication.” The literature lover in me wants to ask him about non-sequential stories and slice-of-life narratives that upon reflection do make a profound point that may not be readily apparent upon first reading or hearing, or what he would “count as a story.” He mentions novels and newspaper “items,” and his case study involves “stories told by and about Microsoft chairman Bill Gates” (*WWD* 36). But how is this approach complicated by Jim Ruel's opinion that in “saying something” as a comic, he is participating in an imaginative art form where stories are sometimes very short and can be delivered conversationally. For that matter, what about one-liners in which there may not be “two or more related, sequential events” and “a complication”? Further complicating Eubanks' ideas is Ira Glass's <sup>88</sup>assertion that in broadcasting (a decidedly aural medium that is grounded in a variety of texts), a story must consist of an anecdote (which is right in line with Eubanks's sequencing; Glass calls it “a sequence of events”), the need to “constantly raise questions” (what Glass calls “bait”), and a “moment of reflection,” which is the answer to “why the hell you're listening to this story” (“Storytelling #1, youtube.com). Comparing these two definitions of “story” offered by a scholar who is studying stories versus a storyteller who is creating stories for public consumption via the radio or stage raises some important questions that can be applied to the Native American comedians' work in this chapter. In particular, do these comedians' stories mesh at all with either of these definitions and when

---

<sup>88</sup> Ira Glass has hosted *This American Life* on Chicago Public Radio since 1995, a weekly hour-long show that features “first-person stories and short fiction pieces that are touching, funny, and surprising” ([thisamericanlife.org](http://thisamericanlife.org)).

considering the possible communal purpose and potential cross-cultural impact of these stories, which is the more important second element – a complication or a moment of reflection? Or, are they both vital to helping the comedians achieve their story(alities)? Without an audience, without a complication, without a moment of reflection, does story(ality) exist? How should we define “a complication”? How dependent is the story on the audience, if we consider these comedians’ sets as much more complicated and reliant on many communities for their effectiveness rather than simple jokes for pure entertainment?

In order to understand how Native American comedy creates new story(alities) by employing epideictic rhetorical strategies, I intend to analyze the performances, words, gestures, and audiences from Howie Miller (Cree), JR Redwater (Standing Rock Sioux), Jim Ruel (Ojibwe), Vaughn Eaglebear (Colville), Marc Yaffee (Navajo), and Don Burnstick (Cree), all of whom my students enjoyed immensely. In particular, I wish to discover how these comedians speak out from the contact zone and what their comedy does for their communities and how their audiences’ perceptions of reality may be altered by the stories told and performed.

### ***Howie Miller: “Caucasionally-impaired”***

By telling a range of anecdotes (accessible to inaccessible, depending on audience) that clearly emphasize the difficulties and challenges and painful history of Indigenous experiences, Howie Miller praises and blames his non-Native audience to persuade them to see these myriad problems and understand that these public issues are still very much problems for Native peoples, thus altering this audience’s safe, familiar, and potentially incorrect perceptions of indigenous peoples and their experiences in this land. This approach essentially embodies Agnew’s argument about epideictic’s civic function where an “epideictic encounter” can “serve

the educational function of constructively interrogating and reimagining public values” (147), as well as Betsy Borns’ suggestion that the payoff for the audience is the “promise of catharsis through laughter” (*Comic Lives* 14). Of course, the question is catharsis from what? And the answer is comedy provides audience members a true release from the tension of their incorrect assumptions and present beliefs about Native peoples, which leads to a durable purging of these misguided and misinformed assumptions, leading to a new story(ality). Miller’s audience may come to his show not realizing a) what these wrongs are, b) that these are still problems that Native people remain upset about, and c) that the non-Native audience is participating on the wrong side of the story – the ultimate goal may be to change non-Natives’ minds about First Nations issues and their current and historic role in those problems – but humor can be much more effective as a pathway to this uncomfortable knowledge. As Joanne Gilbert pointed out in her study, “Because it can avoid inflaming audiences by framing incisive—even incendiary—sociocultural critique as mere ‘entertainment,’ comedy is undeniably a unique and powerful form of communication” (*Performing Marginality* xxi). Miller also reassures his Native audience that they are not alone in their complaints, while giving them an opportunity to laugh at themselves and their contemporary problems (as a way, perhaps, to relieve and give vent to that pain) that he acknowledges several times stem from historical wrongs (such as relocation to reservations, land disputes, and the stereotype of the drunk Indian - a problem he clearly blames on white society).

Looking specifically at his set from the Winnipeg Comedy Festival (mid-2000s), Miller self-identifies as First Nations<sup>89</sup> and Aboriginal without identifying a specific band<sup>90</sup> or region,

---

<sup>89</sup> According to British Columbia’s first-nations.com, “The term First Nations also avoids the often derogatory connotation associated with the terms native, indigenous and aboriginal.” In the United States, we should strive to identify First Nations people by specific tribe whenever possible. However, I do use all of these terms interchangeably because of the need to distinguish between Native and non-Native scholars, for instance, and this is the quickest path to making that distinction.

<sup>90</sup> First Nations bands in Canada vary by province (Manitoba, Newfoundland, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan, etc), and vary within each province (British Columbia alone has over 270 bands).

perhaps to rhetorically suggest intertribal fellowship to his primarily First Nations audience (the same one that Don Burnstick (Cree), at the same festival, noticed that the number of white people in the audience looked like “salt sprinkled on a piece of moose meat”). After self-identifying as “I’m Native, I’m Indigenous, I’m First Nations, I’m Aboriginal,” Miller then reverses the audience’s expectations about this repetitive opener by ending with a twist, “I’m sick and tired of all the political correct crap, you can just call me ‘caucasianally-impaired’, thank you” while raising his left hand to head height, palm open and then closed, pointing with his index finger to the ceiling, while the audience responds with a distinct wave of acknowledging laughter. This opener achieves two specific goals: 1) It incorporates the epideictic characteristics of repetition, bodily gestures for emphasis, and directly plays with the audience’s belief in the present by calling all of the various opening identities “political correct crap,” which 2) neatly opens the door for Miller to tap into the Native humor characteristic of self-deprecation with “just call me caucasianally-impaired,” which is a new identifying term to the audience that also plays on their assumptions about both Native identity and the rampant political correctness we all share. Finally, this seemingly simple set opener allows Miller to transition into a moment of self-deprecation that also taps into the praise/blame mode, as well as the audience’s belief in the present and provides a moment of instruction, which seems so important to the field of Native American Studies. Specifically, the first joke after the opener is “I don’t mind being Native, though, I like the free stuff. . . [mild laughter]. . . you know, like the land, the education, the health care. I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but here in the city I get free cab rides. [pauses to look around at audience as a gentle wave of laughter rolls out] Well, they’re cop cars, but they get you home.” As a concrete and personal story, which may or may not be an experience that Miller has had, but one that does represent the challenges of being

Native in a racist and bigoted mainstream culture, Miller incorporates again both elements of epideictic rhetoric and elements of Native humor, while playing with the audience's assumptions and expectations of the audience's understanding of aboriginal rights and historic issues, as well as the typical treatment of Native peoples by government authorities and law enforcement. This is a multi-layered and multi-faceted performance at its finest that creates a new story(ality) for the Winnipeg comedy festival audience and the Youtube audience. He emphasizes the stereotype in order to overturn the audience's potential assumptions, which acts as a bridge between fantasy and reality – essentially, Miller challenges what the audience thinks they know about Native experiences and by helping them laugh about those assumptions, he creates a cathartic release and improved knowledge base, at least for those people who saw the original performance and any who stumble upon this Youtube clip.

Miller then launches into a series of stories and jokes that are divided equally between Native-specific and non-Native-specific subject matter. A pattern emerges when breaking Miller's set down that suggests balance: three Native specific anecdotes, and three universal anecdotes not specific to First Nations identities, experience, or communities, but placement is important (arrangement) and ultimately suggests that he privileges his Indigenous audience members, relying on them to help create the joke. Miller starts with two easily accessible Native-specific stories, moves into three universal stories related to jobs, and then ends with an advanced Native-specific anecdote for insiders. The first two Native-specific stories are easily accessible to anyone. Why does he do this? One potential answer is that Miller uses this strategy to gently hook everyone in the audience (Native and non-Native) into following his story path, while he privileges Native-specific stories/issues by beginning and ending with those stories that



cover a broad range of issues in a very short time - racial identity, political, legal, and social ills faced by Indigenous peoples.

For instance, he says that Survivor “ticks him off” because the show has “no Indians,” instead, the producers select “every color of the rainbow on that show except red,” expanding his rant to reasons why the show would never select a Native person – “they’re not going to vote me off the island, they’re just going to vote me to the crappy part of the island and leave me there for 200 years.” This story censures and teases white society for historic and current land use problems and treatment of Native peoples. Of course, this censure and teasing has current resonance, implying that Indigenous peoples have had to survive mistreatment and are still surviving mistreatment, and yet the audience laughs. Clearly, by relying on the epideictic goals of praising Native peoples’ survivance<sup>91</sup>, blaming white society for their involvement or acceptance of this ongoing mistreatment, and meshing those goals with classic Native humor tactics of teasing and self-deprecation, Miller is effectively able to provide his audience a unique type of moral education that will hopefully lead to a greater awareness of damaging mainstream cultural attitudes about Indigenous peoples. Indeed, he also seems to be occupying the almost tangible but somewhat inchoate space between praise and blame, as suggested by Lois Agnew and her re-envisioning of epideictic rhetoric as “educational discourse” that can allow the audience and rhetor [in this case, the comedian] to “move beyond the narrow classical boundaries of praise and blame in order to engage with pressing social issues” (152). The pressing social issue in the Native comic’s world would be this ongoing invisibility that all Native communities suffer in the mainstream consciousness – that when they are thought of at

---

<sup>91</sup>On the first page of Gerald Vizenor’s preface to *Manifest Manners*, he explains survivance thusly, “Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (vii). Further along in the first chapter “Postindian Warriors” he writes, “Performance and human silence are strategies of survivance” (16). Indeed, the idea that performance is a survivance strategy is important when considering Native American stand-up comedy.

all, it is in four-color stereotype vision a la Disney's *Pocahontas* or Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* instead of what is real and present. And what is real and present definitely includes humor.

In fact, Miller's story path is made even more effective when he turns the criticism around and becomes self-deprecating, thus sapping some of the venom out of his strong indictment: "What the heck do I know about hunting and fishing?" This statement reflects the urban/rural divide within Native communities and mainstream assumptions about Native peoples historically being hunters/gatherers. Miller continues, "How do we get Howie off the island, he's so good! I don't know, I brought some rye." After the audience laughs nervously, he looks them over with a side smile and says, "You were thinkin' it," as if to gently scold their assumptions and automatic acceptance of the stereotype of the 'drunk Indian', and alcoholism really IS a problem brought on primarily by white society (at least historically).

### ***Powwow Comedy Jam: "Trail of Laughs"***

The four original members of Powwow Comedy Jam hail from four different tribes and regions of the country, as well as different backgrounds. Marc Yaffee is Mexican, Irish, and Navajo and according to the group's web site, he was "adopted at birth and confused ever since," referencing his joke: "I'm a Mexican/Irish/Navajo, otherwise known on racial surveys as 'other.' I'm a Mexiho. I feel guilty AND oppressed!" In the best tradition of Gloria Anzaldúa, Marc Yaffee inhabits the boundary and lays claim to the space between praise and blame.

JR Redwater is Standing Rock Sioux and has lived most of his life on a reservation, which leads to one of his primary bits: "I didn't even know I could leave the reservation. I was pissed. I was all, 'WHAT?! We can LEAVE?!' I used to stand on the reservation line, looking

out [physically mimes looking out, leaning over an imaginary border line, with his hand to his forehead...then looks at audience and says...] That's where that came from." Gestures, teasing, telling true stories of experience, reversing audience expectations, and playing on their beliefs and misconceptions are some of JR's performance strengths.

Vaughn Eaglebear (Colville) is from the Spokane, WA area and has a quirky, deadpan, one-liner approach that is incredibly astute and cerebral, sometimes catching audience members like myself off guard and causing us to think for a moment about what he really meant. He seems particularly fond of wordplay, as in: "Indian people call laughing midgets Minnehahas...If you ever see an Indian midget playing the tuba, please do not call him Little Bighorn." He also tells funny stories with a twist: "I donated some blood a couple weeks ago and one of the nurses asked if I was a fullblooded Indian...I said not anymore. She said, how much Indian are you? I said 90 percent. She said, what's the other ten percent? I said orange juice and cookies." Laughter follows the moment of understanding.

Finally, Jim Ruel is Ojibwa from Minneapolis, does incredibly accurate celebrity impersonations, such as John Wayne, Sean Connery, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, and has an urban experiential background, which leads him to bits such as: "They're always askin' us stuff, like how to do the rain dance. Why would I know that? My apartment HAS running water, ok?" When I asked these men how they met, they all pointed to the comedy community as the place or activity that brought them together. Essentially, they said that the community of stand-up comedians in general is fairly small and the sub-community of Native American comedians is even smaller – implying that their knowledge of each other was inevitable. And it is fortunate for the rest of us that they did connect and bring this multicultural perspective and comedic alliance to the public domain.

***Jim Ruel: “What are you into? Concrete?”***

For the sake of space, I will only analyze one of the Powwow Comedy team’s performances. However, for my purposes here, Jim Ruel’s performance at the Isleta Casino (on the *Joke Signals* DVD) when he was in the Powwow Comedy Jam provides ample evidence for building my story(ality) case. Ruel’s story path is a particularly good example of both story(ality) and epideictic rhetoric, as well as an interesting proving ground for the questions I raised in the ‘Conceptions of Story’ section of this chapter. Specifically, when considering the possible communal purpose and potential cross-cultural impact of these stories, which is the more important second element – a complication or a moment of reflection? Or, are they both vital to helping the comedians’ achieve their story(alities)? It is important to note here that Ruel is Ojibwe from Minnesota and his audience is primarily Isleta Pueblo (one of the 19 Pueblo groups of the southwest), which does create a contact zone of cross-cultural tension. How should we define “a complication”? What makes a particular element complicated for an audience? How dependent is the story on the audience, if we consider these comedians’ sets as much more complicated and reliant on many communities for their effectiveness rather than simple jokes for pure entertainment? Furthermore, recalling that story(ality) only exists in a contact zone, relies on true or real stories (rather than works of fiction or pure imagination), and depends on the intellectual and ideological tension between the storyteller and the audience, Ruel’s performance at the Isleta Casino puts this theory to the test because his audience is primarily Native American. But Ruel doesn’t praise his Isleta audience. In fact, at a few points in his performance, he lightly mocks their lack of understanding about what he is saying. In one moment, something as seemingly banal as climate becomes the complication upon which Ruel and his audience can

build a moment of reflection where mutual understanding and laughter can be the result. Specifically, one minute and twenty-two seconds into his set, he draws on the sympathies and knowledge of his Native audience by talking about identity problems, “The thing about bein’ half is people don’t know what you are. They see you and try to guess, they’re like, ‘oh pothead!’ [laughter] No, I’m Native American. Oh, you must have the good shit, hook me up! [bigger laugh] That’s not my thing, okay. It’ll be a cold day in Canada before you see me smokin’ a joint.”

At this point, the audience is almost completely silent for several seconds, to which Ruel responds by pausing and making a face that indicates his disbelief that they don’t get the joke. What makes the audience laugh is Ruel’s facial expression and body language as he physically, but silently, reacts to their incomprehension. Granted, his delivery of this last line is pure deadpan, delivered with absolute conversational seriousness. But his delivery speed is so fast, the reversal so clever, and the tone so effective that Ruel leaves his audience in his witticism wake. He follows up his humorously scolding looks with “It’s cold up there. Some of you are like, ‘oh wow, he’s a like a role model to his people, good for him’.” At this point, the audience realizes they have been censured for their lack of understanding and good-naturedly laughs as the comedian laughs at them. But none of Ruel’s set is mean in any way – all censure is delivered gently and in this case, brings people in line with his perspective.

In fact, a majority of Ruel’s set would fall under Ian Ferguson’s definition of In Jokes, or “jokes told by Indians when non-Natives (and this again refers primarily to White People) are in the room”:

These jokes tend to be a little self-deprecating, and they often have a political edge. . . The whole point of In Jokes is their accessibility. Everyone is allowed to laugh, and

everybody is supposed to get the joke. Despite the social commentary of the subject matter or point of view, no one is meant to feel uncomfortable. If there is a little teasing going on, it's supposed to be gentle, not mean-spirited. (*Me Funny* 125-26)

From former girlfriends, edible long underwear, and New Agers to Thanksgiving, dreamcatchers, and “authentic” representations of Indians in Hollywood films, Jim Ruel tackles a wide variety of familiar surface content through personal stories that resonate with anyone comfortable in contemporary America, while simultaneously revealing deeper problems about how Native people are perceived in mainstream America by non-Natives. By performing a set that includes such a heavy emphasis on misperceptions and the outright censure of those misperceptions, Ruel's set targets white people explicitly. Take his bit on New Agers, who, upon finding out he is Native American, make the judgment that he “must be so into nature.” Jim's comeback to this is, “What are you into? Concrete?” Somehow his explicit censure of non-Natives' false assumptions also plays with audience expectations, which keeps people off-guard and thus, more open to laughing at themselves and each other in this new story(ality) space.

Jim's performance makes me laugh every time I watch this DVD and my students absolutely loved him. The jokes can be funny to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people despite the clear one-sided targeting. Why? If I was to point to Jim's laid-back, relaxed on-stage persona that is more academic, intricate, and well-planned than it might first appear, that may be an adequate explanation. I could also point out that he tells good stories. Funny stories. And funny stories appeal to everyone within earshot. However, the transcultural construction and flow of his set allows Jim to traverse dangerous territory that borders on bold accusation in a way that white students find as charming and laugh out loud funny as his Isleta reservation casino audience did. Perhaps the epideictic elements of censure, moral education, aesthetic and ethical

concerns, in addition to playing on the audiences' belief in certain ideas about Native peoples, and the embellishment of facts in order to persuade his audiences of the blameworthiness of these ideas ensure Jim's cross-cultural comedic success.

Combining physical gestures such as making up a ridiculous "rain dance" that includes mainstream dance moves from "YMCA" and "I'm a Little Teapot" with relaxed, but well-placed, gestures in perfect timing with his words, Jim Ruel coaxes his audiences along a path of declamation and play and helps us laugh at ourselves, at our misperceptions about Native peoples, and at our misguided ideas about American history and education. In short, Ruel helps his audiences feel Thomas King's advice, "We are at our best when we laugh at ourselves," and experience Don Kelly's wisdom, "I can laugh at myself. And we can laugh together, and at one another" (*Me Funny* 55, 181). Two excellent examples of this attack that sidesteps the frontal lobe occur during Ruel's Thanksgiving and urban Native stories. The Thanksgiving bit immediately follows the edible long underwear bit, after the audience has warmed up with the Canada-is-cold censure, and the introductory knowledge that Ruel self-identifies as "a half-breed." Ruel transitions into talking about moving to LA and being invited by a friend for Thanksgiving dinner:

He was being all very sensitive. He was like, 'oh my gosh, do you guys celebrate that?' [mild laughter] I was like, yeah we do...but we call it you're welcome day. [laughter] Little different. [Jim begins gesturing with his free arm] Anytime [arm wave forward to indicate 'no problem?'], don't worry about it [pats himself on the back], have some squash [holds hand out front, palm up, and fingers spread wide in a large bowl formation – this gesture quickly turns into the finger, a classic gesture meaning 'fuck off'. This is followed by a fairly long and appreciative laugh].

On one hand, Ruel is sharing a story of experience – the awkwardness of being the lone Native American invited to Thanksgiving dinner and all the politically correct baggage that experience carries.

On the other hand, Ruel is also telling a metastory about a common experience and sentiment likely shared among Indigenous peoples that has both historical and contemporary resonance. Hence, a moment of complication AND a moment of reflection. Historically, his brief comedic tale of 39 words linked to several meaningful physical gestures calls on the audience's awareness and knowledge of the traditional Thanksgiving story where Native peoples help the pilgrims survive their first winter on this land. The tale further relies on the audience's shared assumption that this invasion and land theft was wrong and no holiday can make up for that, no matter how good the mashed potatoes and stuffing. Essentially, by reducing the struggle of Native populations' adaptation and adjustment to their European invaders to a trivialized national holiday where people 'celebrate' this unequal and imbalanced historical relationship, anyone who celebrates this 'holiday' is just as guilty and complacent as the federal government is and was in the metatrivialization of entire Indigenous cultures and belief systems. Jim's Native audience is not only aware of this history they also share in its pain. For white audiences to find this story funny, they must have a certain level of awareness and compassion for the truth, which are not the stories we were taught in grade school about the Indians saving the Pilgrims and feasting together in happy brotherhood. Ruel's seemingly simple story places this official government tale on a platter and then roasts it thoroughly to the enjoyment of all who recognize the truth and accept the fact that the official story is a lie.

Another official story lambasted in Ruel's personal tales involves being an urban Native kid growing up in Minneapolis:



Thing about being an urban Native, people are always, you're, like, always on display. Even in kindergarten. I was the only Native in my class, teacher'd have storytelling time. She'd be like, 'Alright everyone, sit indian style.' [murmured giggles] Everyone's checkin' me out, [points toward audience with a straight arm and pointing index finger] 'hey look, Jim's got a style there!' So I put my legs behind my head [pulls one leg up as if to put it over his head] 'come on everybody let's go!' [laughter] Teacher gets all pissed off. [Mimes teacher's accusing stance] 'Hey that's not Indian style!' 'Hey who's the Indian here?' [laughter] This is the new style lady. [murmuring laughter] Catchin' on at all the strip clubs. [more murmuring laughter] Even my friends, man, they go hunting in the fall and want to bring me along as their tracker. [laughter] I'm like, dude, I grew up in the city, I'm more of a stalker...[hunches down and stalks across stage, laughter ensues]

The first part of this bit should be understandable and recognizable to anyone who survived the American education grade school system. Sitting "Indian style" in school as a child is as familiar to my experiences in Pittsburgh as it was a source of pain and humor for Jim. By turning the tables on his teacher, even if these are exaggerated facts, Jim also turns the table on the ridiculous idea and existence of the phrase and physical stance, "Indian style." As he does with the official national Thanksgiving tale, Ruel takes this educational gem and cuts it apart for all to enjoy. The second part parallels Howie Miller's complaints about why, if he was on *Survivor*, he would never get voted off the island – the assumption that he is inherently skilled at hunting and fishing just because he is First Nations. Ironically, the comment about the stalking also shows up in Don Burnstick's set, but he is differentiating in a self-deprecating way between white men (who date) and Native men (who stalk).

In this case, if story(ality) is only possible during moments of tension when all are voluntarily participating in the storytelling dialectic, then can story(ality) exist and be created when the audience is ostensibly already in agreement with the comic? Finally, what does Ruel's comedy do for his communities? If we can agree that each individual belongs to many communities and Ruel can claim membership in the greater Ojibwa community, the stand-up comedy community, and the broader Indigenous community, then how do these communities benefit from his comedic storytelling performances? The short answer to this question might be that Ruel, as a stand-up comic, proves that Ojibwas and other tribal peoples can make a living in a creative, performance field and brings different stories and experiences to the table of stand-up comedy. However, his comedy is also a source of personal and communal healing for the Native audiences who hear and laugh at Ruel's stories. And for his white audiences, misperceptions are overturned and hopefully minds are opened a bit wider, which may lead to improvements in cross-cultural understanding; one of the morally educative outcomes that this type of comedy offers multiple audiences. Just as Vine Deloria, Jr. was "an uncompromising advocate of the personhood and humanity of Indian peoples" (Weaver 125), so, too, is Jim Ruel. Expressing his rhetorical sovereignty by telling personal stories that do double philosophical and psychological duty, as well as creating laughter among disparate audiences, Ruel actively takes a stand on how his Native communities' stories are told in the public domain. He engages his non-Native audiences with experiences, stories, and perspectives that often include difficult and uncomfortable ideas. However, Ruel has mastered the art of making people laugh at themselves and each other. And laughter can be the thread of commonality that allows for potential cross-cultural communication and education to take place. *Shared laughter in the contact zone.*

***Don Burnstick: “I’ve got nothin’ against white people”***

According to Don Burnstick’s web site, donburnstick.com, “laughter is good medicine,” an idea this experienced Cree (Alexander First Nation) comedian takes on the road with his stand-up performances and injects into his health and wellness anti-addiction, self-empowerment, and “healing through humor” workshops for Aboriginal youth. Growing up on a reserve and surviving a violent youth laced with drug and alcohol addiction, Burnstick’s experiences fuel his comedy in ways that both reach out to and tease non-indigenous audiences while teasing and sharing self-deprecating laughter with his own nation and other First Nations. For instance, one story he performs again and again involves his availability to the different women in his audiences as he uses language to distinguish different national identities:

Wow, good-looking women in the house, man! You know, I just want you to know...I’m uh, I’m single. [raises eyebrows and looks meaningfully at audience with suggestive smile as a sudden burst of low-level laughter erupts. As he launches into the next statement, he uses his hands and arms in a rolling motion, one hand rolling over the other to indicate forward movement.] For the white ladies, I’m eligible. [laughter] For the Ojibwas, I’m snagable. [bigger laugh] For the Crees, I’m shack-up-able. [meaningful eyebrow raised, arms calmly at sides, simultaneous with bigger audience laugh] Couple Cree girls say hey look! He’s not my cousin! Look!

During this last line, Burnstick uses his elbow to pantomime nudging someone next to him while looking back and forth between that person and the stage, thereby changing places momentarily with his female audience members and mirroring back to them one of their potential reactions. He also uses language to distinguish between groups (“eligible,” “snagable,” and “shack-up-able”), and uses his lips to point, which is another “Indian” attribute, according to his bit that

differentiates between First Nations and white people. This final comment combined with the miming, and finger and lip pointing gets the biggest and longest wave of laughter from the audience. The location of this performance (comedy festival stage) and the transcultural makeup of the audience are crucial elements to the creation of a new story(ality) about Indigenous experiences.

Interestingly, Burnstick's Winnipeg Comedy Festival set on Youtube embodies Ian Ferguson's notion of Out Jokes, where the "point is to tell the truth. The humour is less directed outward, towards the dominant culture, than it is focused on the specificity of the Aboriginal way of life. . .Our Jokes can be less accessible than In Jokes and some sort of translation or explanation is often required" (*Me Funny* 128-29). In fact, Ferguson begins his discussion of Our Jokes with an example from one of Don Burnstick's "You Might be a Redskin" performances. Burnstick combines specific Native humor strategies of teasing and self-deprecation with specific Aboriginal content such as jokes about bingo, the toughness of Native women, Native men's romantic deficiencies and the Native audience's apparent misunderstanding of advanced words (celibacy: "Is that a vegetable?") and Indigenous peoples' tendency to owe money. In addition, he privileges Aboriginal experiences while accomplishing the goals of epideictic rhetoric as well by telling personal and concrete stories with a moral guiding edge, repeating ideas, using bodily and facial gestures for emphasis, and by censuring his Native "sisters" for "being a little bit jealous." Finally, Burnstick's reliance on comparing and contrasting Aboriginal and white experiences reinforces his rhetorical sovereignty and showcases his nation's survivance, or survival and resistance against domination and oppression. By naming these actions, behaviors, and perceptions that he essentially argues are ridiculous but evidently so different for Native and non-Native people, Burnstick guides the audience humorously into new

thought territories where all participants now have potentially new ideas about themselves and each other.

A full half of Burnstick's six minute Winnipeg Comedy Festival set explicitly identifies and contrasts Aboriginal and white experiences related to sexual intimacy, work ethic, locking doors, computers, eyesight, opening bottles, and vowel usage. For instance, when Burnstick states, "I've got nothin' against white people. I think every family should have one [laughter]," he employs the rhetorical device of antimetabole<sup>92</sup> to increase the humor, playfully point out difference, and emphasize teasing and self-deprecation: "White men work hard. Indians hardly work. [laughter]." But Burnstick also uses clever word play to the same end: "White people even have foreplay [laughter]. . .it's what I heard [bigger laugh]. Us guys, we have the forearm. [laughter as he pantomimes using his forearm to wake up his partner in bed] Hey, you awake? [laughter] Wake up. I'm home. [big laughter]" In addition, Burnstick uses physical gestures, facial expressions, and fairly elaborate pantomiming to increase the effectiveness of his words, which also gets the audience laughing harder at themselves as he laughs at them. This kind of laughter has the potential to open locked mental compartments and allow audience members to acknowledge and laugh at their differences and themselves in the theatrical contact zone, thus creating a story(ality) that each individual carries away from the show experience. Ideally, this new perception of reality created by Don Burnstick's stories translates into greater understanding and tolerance in daily life.

***"You've heard it now" (or, Implications and Conclusions)***

Ultimately, Native American stand-up comedians are important intellectuals operating outside the academic world to cajole, comfort, tease, influence, and affect how their audiences

---

<sup>92</sup> "Figure of emphasis in which the words in one phrase or clause are replicated, exactly or closely, in reverse grammatical order in the next phrase or clause; an inverted order of repeated words in adjacent phrases or clauses (A-B, B-A)" (americanrhetoric.com)

see and understand Indigenous experiences. Many audience members, such as those who experience Don Burnstick's comedy festival set or Jim Ruel's performances, may be open to acceptance and tolerance, but may have no understanding about the differences in experience between white and Aboriginal peoples. Miller, Ruel, and Burnstick teach through laughter by using epideictic rhetorical strategies combined with the Native humor tactics of teasing and self-deprecation in order to confront their Native and non-Native audiences with the audiences' own assumptions, expectations, and misperceptions about themselves and each other. Laughter results and a greater humanistic understanding grows as a new story(ality) takes hold. In one of Charlie Hill's more recent sets, Graham Greene introduces him by stating, "Back when he started, Aboriginal people struggled to achieve equality and justice and he vowed to perform until that day came along. Well, looks like the poor guy will never be able to retire! [laughter]" (youtube.com). Greene's introduction draws attention to the still problematic inequality that exists between Native and non-Native peoples. This inequality is something that new story(alities) can fix in the short and long term. It all starts with sharing stories and laughter and as Thomas King writes, "Just don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (167). And of course, the implication is that once we've heard the story, we can't go back to not knowing. As with the contact zone of the stage environment, this liminal state we inhabit straddling two different planes of knowledge once we've heard a story is the opening through which story(ality) can instigate ideas of tolerance and understanding, which may ideally lead to action on behalf of Indigenous communities.

Examining contemporary Native stand-up comedy through the epideictic rhetorical lens in order to determine how this comedy benefits the comedians, their audiences, and their various

communities results in some interesting outcomes. First, my brief look three comedians' individual sets sheds the merest glimpse into the effectiveness of this lens and approach, which cries out to be used again on a broader scale, with more depth and more comedians. Second, the acceptance level of the audience and their willingness to participate in the praise and blame cycle, as well as their acceptance to go beyond those boundaries into an intellectual consideration of the pressing social problem of Native peoples' stereotyped existence in the mainstream may be an unusual situation. The Winnipeg Comedy Festival where Howie Miller and Don Burnstick performed dedicated an entire night to Native American stand-up comedy, so the audience knew what they were getting before they arrived at their seats. And for Jim Ruel's set at the Isleta Reservation Casino, the majority of his audience was Isleta Pueblo and while one could argue that urban Ojibwa experiences in Minnesota are clearly culturally different from southwest tribal experiences, which allows for some cross-cultural understanding to potentially grow, I would add that two Indigenous groups have more in common than they do with non-Native groups. In a standard Friday night comedy club, the audience may not realize they will be hearing from a particular cultural perspective. The names of these comedians have no particular "Native American" identity markers, except, perhaps, for the group name, "Powwow Comedy Jam," or perhaps Don Burnstick's last name.

In addition, this comedy that incorporates both epideictic characteristics and markers of Native humor can benefit both the comedians' indigenous communities and their audiences by acting as a bridge between two worldviews. The hope is that this type of comedy opens minds to more acceptance, understanding, and frankly, less racism and misinformed assumptions about Native peoples. Not only have these connections between epideictic rhetoric and Native American stand-up comedy not been made before, I don't think this is due to any problem with

the connection; merely that no one has made the connection yet in precisely this manner. This is a rich relationship to explore because by connecting something so new to mainstream American sensibilities (Native American stand-up comedy) to something so canonical and classic (Aristotelian rhetoric), this particular form of public performance achieves a higher level of legitimacy as a form of speech that has something to offer a wide variety of people, not only in the public domain, but also in the academic fields of classic rhetoric and Native American Studies. These comedians are modern day intellectuals operating in a volatile contact zone on a nightly basis and somehow making it work. We in the academy, both as researchers and as teachers, could learn a lot from the strategies these comedians employ. Facilitating communication between people with different views, inverting hierarchies, subverting power structures, understanding varied perspectives, attempting to create unity out of divisiveness – this is not just a description of a Native American comedian’s epideictic encounter in the contact zone of the theatre; it is also a description of our unique kind of public space and performance as scholars and teachers of writing. The success of these comedians should be studied more and could even be tapped for new pedagogical ideas. Bringing stand-up comedy as a form of epideictic rhetoric into the composition classroom as a thematic focus for a semester would certainly be a start.

When Howie Miller concluded his set for the Winnipeg Comedy Festival, he ended on a very specific Native American experiential implication that his non-Native audience may not fully understand, but it is the heart of his message and the embodiment of the full implication of why Native American stand-up comedy is important to our cultural conversation. The essence of Miller’s message is a unique perspective on American experience; this experience exposes him as a potentially “brilliant and radical” artist of our generation, potentially influencing “how we



see the world,” perhaps changing “the way we talk and think,” and, of course, making us laugh at each other and ourselves, as the best comedy does (Zoglin 6). Once all of us understand the meaning behind this story, Aboriginal comedians will have much less to distinguish themselves from other mainstream comedians because if you get this joke, you are fully aware of the history and reality of Native people in this land. If you don’t get this joke, then these comedians, along with Native scholars and their allies, have much work yet to do. In order to privilege the Native voice, which so few non-Native scholars do, I choose to conclude this essay with Howie Miller’s final set story and let him have the last word. He tells a personal story about something he started doing the year before this set, whenever he is in a big city such as Vancouver:

I’ll hang out Monday afternoon, and I’ll just stand there on a street corner around lunchtime, so all the business guys are walkin’ by, and I’ll just stand there like this [crosses his arms across his chest and looks blankly out] and people’ll walk by and say, ‘hey they sell cigars here now? What the?’ [laughter] No, but uh, [uncrosses arms and starts gesturing with left hand, pointing into the crowd] I’ll wait til one guy walks by, I’ll pick one out, I’ll wait til he gets close, and I’ll be like [puts fist to mouth and clears throat, says the following statement in Ojibwa-style northern dialect] Hey buddy, come ‘ere! [Mimes chewing gum, looks side to side really tough. Laughter. Miller smirks in response to the laughter.] Hey buddy, ya you [gestures toward audience indicating they should join him] come ‘ere, hey. . .[reaches into pants pocket with right hand] Hey buddy! [raises both eyebrows on “Buddy.” Looks straight at camera and holds out fist] Would you like some change?! Ha Haaaa! (youtube.com)

## Chapter Four

### Rhetorical Sovereignty in the Composition Classroom

“‘Water: a Love story’ [Linda Hogan] left me in awe of the author’s rhetorical talent and personal history. . . The power in her story is the reader’s reaction to it; vividly disturbing the psyche clarifies her message.”

- Student 1

“Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*. . .was a story of her heritage, a creation story. It was a story she had heard from her older relatives, a story they wanted to be continued on in future generations. It was a perfect example of what the term rhetorical sovereignty means. Silko told the story the way she had heard it over many years. However, she even says that she only remembers a small part of the story, meaning that what she was going to tell us is what meant the most to her. She controls what the story means by only relating to us the parts she remembers.”

- Student 2

“My favorite reading during this semester was Thomas King’s “‘You’ll Never Believe What Happened’ Is Always a Great Way to Start,” because King’s humor grabbed me. He says in one part, “When I was a kid, I was partial to stories about other worlds and interplanetary travel. I used to imagine that I could just gaze off into space and be whisked to another planet.” I felt connected to this, because I am the same way. I love to dream and imagine and get lost in stories to get away from the mostly stressful real world. It has been one of the many stories I have read this semester that has taught me about writing.”

- Student 3

Framing a basic composition course around storytelling may seem common, while including a Native American theoretical concept such as rhetorical sovereignty may seem unconventional. However, it is in the breaking of conventions that social, cultural, political, and educational progress is possible. By providing students a safe contact zone in which to examine their lives and the world around them in a way that both acknowledges students' interests but also teaches them how to relate their experiences to that of Native Americans can work to reduce racial divisions and potentially eliminate the possible perception of American Indians as exotic Others<sup>93</sup> or as the simplified stereotypes found in sports team names and on product labels. At the Spring 2008 Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAISA) conference in Athens, GA, one scholar said something that inspired me to change my pedagogical approach in the composition classroom, "Experience IS a valid theoretical stance. . .we shouldn't let other people define us." Not only is this idea incredibly important to the burgeoning field of Native American Studies, it is also the cornerstone of rhetorical sovereignty and the work of Scott Lyons and Malea Powell, specialists in American Indian rhetorics. In particular, Scott Lyons' idea is that rhetorical sovereignty is a people's control of its own meaning through language. To reiterate his definition: Rhetorical sovereignty is "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires. . .to decide for themselves the goals, the modes, the styles, and languages of public discourse" (449-50).

---

<sup>93</sup> Not that all students or all Americans think of Native Americans this way. There are many individuals who have seen and read works by and about Native peoples, worked with indigenous populations, and know the laws and history. However, this goal is still a legitimate one based on my experience – enough people do seem to be a bit in the dark about Native peoples' existence in our modern world and have skewed or incorrect impressions about their cultures that my desire to turn on the light is a valid goal. I don't expect my students to agree or even like what they read, hear, and experience, but I do expect them to consider these texts with an open mind. Conversely, to assume that everyone is equally enlightened and knowledgeable about contemporary Native peoples is equally dangerous. In our increasingly global society, more cross-cultural understanding is needed to improve communication of ideas and expectations across the physical and mental borders in minds and hearts.

Scott Lyons's answer to the question "What do American Indians want from writing" is that teachers, students, readers, writers, and texts "read history through a contemporary lens and continually beckon forth the public" (466).<sup>94</sup> He suggests that the ability of Native writers to "speak both" Native rhetoric and white man's rhetoric is the "right and the theory and the practice and the poetry of rhetorical sovereignty" (467). Equating 19th century boarding schools with cultural genocide and citing Luther Standing Bear's *My People the Sioux* as a framing example, Lyons' focuses on the need to make all writing by and about Native peoples public, and affecting tangible change in the public sphere of Native lives. By implying that sovereignty itself is a rhetorical process, he uses phrases such as "rhetorical imperialism" and points out different terms used at the "colonized scene of writing" (453). The concept of appropriation is privileged in Lyons' argument and he is particularly hard on non-Native scholar Bruce Ballenger for suggesting that an "Indian way of remembering" helped him "make sense of his own life and writing" (460). To Lyons, this seems like the pinnacle of colonial oppression, but great writing and compelling literature can inspire readers to think differently about themselves in relation to the writer. How are non-Native scholars supposed to use Native American writings and theories, if at all? Lyons criticizes Ballenger for not addressing "any of the issues facing the people today," which challenged me to consider how I could avoid making the same mistake.

More recently, Lyons takes up the complicated issue of contemporary Indian identity in his book *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*, part of the Indigenous Americas Series from the University of Minnesota Press (2010). In this text, he suggests that "the truths of our lives are not so because of any inherent qualities but simply because we narrate them as truths based on our needs and desires" and that "perhaps another point is that Indians narrate Indianness in a lot of

---

<sup>94</sup> From Lyons' article in *CCC* 51:3 in February 2000: "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want From Writing?"

different ways and in a lot of different venues; this is unavoidable but ultimately a good thing in a world that always veers toward the contaminated and the contradictory” (xiii). The central symbol or metaphor for this text is the x-mark that was typically a treaty signature during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Lyons calls the x-mark “a sign of consent in a context of coercion; it is the agreement that one makes when there seems to be little choice in the matter. . . [it] is a sign of contamination” (1). Furthermore, the x-mark “signifies power and a lack of power, agency and a lack of agency” and Lyons uses it to “symbolize Native assent to things (concepts, policies, technologies, ideas) that, while not necessarily traditional in origin, can sometimes turn out all right and occasionally even good” (3). Thus, his argument seems to embrace a more complex both/and perspective instead of a simplistic either/or approach to broader historical ideas and contemporary lived reality. He narrows his focus down to the x-marks of “identity, culture, and the idea of an Indian nation [as] historically contingent concepts,” in that “modernization that was initiated by treaty signers” is an “unfinished project that can and should be pursued further” (12). Specifically and quite powerfully, Lyons says

The idea of an x-mark assumes that indigenous communities are and have always been composed of human beings who possess reason, rationality, individuality, an ability to think and to question. . . a desire to improve their lot and the futures of their progeny, and a wish to play some part in the larger world. Surely, these characteristics are not the exclusive property of ‘white’ people or the ‘West,’ and to the extent that any of them can be characterized as ‘modern’ . . . they seem associated with the passage of time, not identity.(12-13)

Moreover, Lyons talks about Indian time as that which “tends to move like a people migrating home: in fits and starts, with false beginnings and many fulfilled endings, always looking to both

past and future, always producing diversity. . .For far too long Natives have been discussed exclusively in the past tense, and for far too long modernity has been discussed as if it were strictly a Western imposition” (13). Lyons clearly rejects these assumptions and offers a clear pathway to accepting both Native tradition and modern multiplicity and this is the way that Native-produced works should be introduced to students.

Constructing collective meaning and personal identity through stories of experience are issues that Native American scholars continue to wrestle with in their works. However, these ideas should not be limited to the operating theatre of Native American Studies. A wider application is possible. Rhetorical sovereignty offers students of all backgrounds the chance to view their own stories through an experience-grounded lens that originates from a cultural perspective previously unknown to many.<sup>95</sup> In fact, the basic composition classroom is a contact zone where students’ perceptions of reality can be altered and changed by their interactions with Native American nonfiction subject matter, thus creating a new story(ality) for these young adults. The use of rhetorical sovereignty as the guiding theory also allows students the opportunity to perhaps learn something about themselves, how they project their own stories into the world, as well as how the world attempts to define them as youth, as Southerners, and as women and men.

Teaching students the basic concepts behind rhetorical sovereignty and allowing them to use this theory for their own storytelling can connect them in substantive ways to indigenous individuals’ contemporary stories and improves their awareness about tribal peoples in general, all the while learning to look at themselves, their families, friends, and communities in new

---

<sup>95</sup> Auburn University is a large southern institution with approximately 25,000 enrolled students. According to the university’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment’s Fall 2009 New Student Factbook, enrollment by race averages for 2007-2009 are 86% white or Caucasian, 8% African-American, 2% Hispanic, and .7% Native American. ([https://oir.auburn.edu/newstu\\_factbookFA09.pdf](https://oir.auburn.edu/newstu_factbookFA09.pdf))

ways. This chapter illustrates how the guiding principle of rhetorical sovereignty created new storyalities for students in Auburn University's freshman-level core composition class, English 1100, during the fall of 2008.

Examining and analyzing various First Nations texts for rhetorical strategies, then using those strategies to create texts provides basic composition students a new way of understanding and experiencing their world. The goal of this class was to give students a better understanding of their own lives by using the idea of rhetorical sovereignty as a framing device. By blending this abstract theoretical approach to experience with the powerful action of rhetorical sovereignty (a people's control of its own meaning through language), students learn practical intellectual skills such as accretive thinking, imagination, and storytelling about family, place, and experience. Short assignments and major papers emphasize awareness and reflection about representations of self, family, community, and place.

The theme, "My Story/Our Story," focuses on exploring intellectual skills that arise from tribal cultures and go beyond linear, and classic logical ways of thinking. The goals of the scaffolded assignments include helping students understand oral tradition and storytelling, learn to construct and maintain a positive self-identity and develop their individual voices. Also, students learn to use storytelling to develop layers of information that gradually develop collective and individual meaning. Specifically, these assignments build students' intellectual skills, introduce them to Native Americans in a new way, as well as teach them new terms and open the door to new experiences as college writers and citizens of this nation. Readings came solely from Native American writers and increased in difficulty and controversy as the semester progressed. Surprisingly, the most difficult, complex, and controversial readings were some of the students' favorites. I was honestly expecting the easier and funnier readings to be favored,

but my students connected to the more challenging texts on the abstract idea level, rather than the concrete experience level; which were experiences that they did not share with the writers. In particular, Anzaldua's poems "El Sonavabitché" and "We Call Them Greasers" received the most mentions in students' final reflective essays. However, I must reiterate the importance of scaffolding when using unfamiliar cultural texts. Scaffolding is simply building one assignment into the next, like steps leading up to the top of a building. Each assignment builds on the knowledge and skills acquired in the one before. Comfort and familiarity grows steadily and students are rarely blindsided by unknown tasks because each new assignment contains some elements of the prior assignment. This tactic is particularly important when introducing difficult or controversial materials and perspectives. It is especially important in this context with Native American texts because the experiential information embedded in these texts clashes with students' understanding of American experience and history in general and their personal experiences in particular.

Beginning with lighter fare and moving toward the more difficult and aggressive readings allows students a gently sloping path to climb throughout the semester in order to reach the pinnacle, as opposed to just dropping them on the mountaintop and expecting them to know how to traverse the slopes without prior training. Issues surrounding "American Indian ways of knowing,"<sup>96</sup> including rhetorical sovereignty, are not the sole domain of Native American peoples, but do offer some productive and interesting opportunities for students to examine and explore their own lives, family and community stories, and to learn how to layer information imaginatively to gradually develop meaning for an outside reader. Specifically, the "American Indian ways of knowing" we used that semester were based on Lawrence Gross's definition:

---

<sup>96</sup> This phrase comes directly from the title of Lawrence Gross's article in *Wicazo-Sa Review* (20:2 2005), "Teaching American Indian Studies to Reflect American Indian Ways of Knowing and to Interrupt Cycles of Genocide."



Storytelling to maintain a positive self-identity, uniting the past and present to create a more positive future, and using imagination and accretive thinking (layering/building information to create meaning—not necessarily linear a+b+c structure). The purpose of English 1100 at Auburn University is to develop students' proficiency with key elements of academic discourse, develop their ability to critically and substantially engage with texts, assessing and analyzing those texts' rhetorical features, and to create a focused thesis statement supported by a variety of primary sources. These goals were certainly accomplished by using storytelling and rhetorical sovereignty, but the process was neither easy nor comfortable.

The southern university classroom might be one of the best-suited locations for such a test with rhetorical sovereignty because my students live with stereotypes placed on them by the rest of the nation and each other. In order to emphasize this stereotype and open a connecting pathway to the stereotypes surrounding indigenous peoples, I start the second class by asking students to get out a piece of paper and divide it into two sections. Then I say, "On the top half of the page, draw me a picture of a typical Southerner." That is the extent of my instruction. I do not specify gender, race, or socioeconomic status. Amazingly, every time I have conducted this drawing experiment (with approximately 175 students total over two years), 95% of the drawings show a white man wearing a hat (usually a ball cap), a plaid flannel shirt and boots (sometimes cowboy boots, sometimes work boots). In addition, the props usually include a gun, a dog, a truck, and a whiskey jug. The other five percent tend to be simple line drawings of typical Auburn students (Nike shorts and flip-flops, or long shorts and a polo shirt), self-portraits, or Scarlett O'Hara. Without discussing what these visual results imply, I then ask the students to draw a picture of an Indian chief on the bottom half of the page. At this point, recognition of the intended connection usually occurs to about 30% of the class and those individuals start nodding

and chuckling slightly to themselves while drawing a half-naked and shoeless “Indian” man with feathers in his long, dark, braided hair, a bone choker around his neck, a loincloth around his waist with either a bow and arrow or spear and fire as the additional elements (sometimes these characters also get the whiskey jug). At the sound of the chuckles, I am quick to add that there is no judgment in what they draw; the image that instinctually comes to mind is the important thing to draw and that we will discuss and analyze where that image comes from. When everyone looks around at their neighbors’ images of the typical Southerner, I ask students to raise their hands if what they see visually represents them and their experiences as Southerners. Usually one or two students raise their hands almost apologetically while the rest look embarrassed as they realize they relied on a stereotype that, for the most part, isn’t true for them. The disconnect from personal experience that these students feel during the act of drawing the stereotype that comes to their minds compels the discussion into controversial territory – where do these images come from and how are they reinforced and perpetuated by the entertainment industry, media, and even family and friends?

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

### **Easing into rhetorical sovereignty**

The idea for this theme grew out of my scholarship working with Native American scholars and intellectuals in academic and non-academic contexts, particularly when considering Mary Louise Pratt’s pedagogical contact zone. In chapter three, I argue that Native stand-up comics operate in a performance contact zone, but Pratt’s original concept related to classroom usage, which always intrigued me. Pedagogical contact zones inherently contain challenges, especially when using “unsolicited oppositional discourse” in a composition classroom with traditional rhetorical objectives (*Professing in the Contact Zone* 15). Not only that, just as Pratt

experienced, my theme put “ideas and identities on the line,” which meant anticipating “rage, incomprehension, and pain” as well as “exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom” – the challenges and joys of the contact zone (*Professing* 16-17). In fact, my introduction to Pratt’s contact zone idea in fall 2006 was what initially inspired me to consider trying this theme in a basic composition course. The final paragraph of “Arts of the Contact Zone,” used by Patricia Bizzell as the first chapter of *Professing in the Contact Zone* outlines the “pedagogical arts of the contact zone” that I used as a guide to begin my thinking about how to merge Pratt’s list of required elements with the Auburn University English Department’s list of required objectives. It took me two years to figure it out and generate the nerve to try.

Pratt lists storytelling, identifying with the attitudes and ideas of others, experiments in transculturation, the redemption of the oral, engaging with suppressed aspects of history (including students’ own personal histories), and ground rules for communication across lines of difference as essential elements of cultural mediation (*Professing* 16). This last element actually informed a vital part my basic course philosophy, which I have used since, regardless of the course:

***Please remember that this class is a forum for the generation and respectful communication of ideas.*** As a community of scholars, we will approach all readings and subjects, no matter how controversial, with an open mind and inquiring attitude. We should strive for an atmosphere of respect in which everyone can and should feel comfortable expressing thoughts, opinions, and ideas. Most likely, you will encounter readings and assignments in this class that challenge you and your perceptions of others or particular situations. Effectively responding to those challenges will help you grow as

citizens, readers, and as writers, so I hope that you embrace the opportunity. Hopefully by the end of the semester, you, too, will feel an irrepressible desire to know more about experiences, ideas, and peoples who share the planet with you.

The positioning of my classroom as a mediational space that will contain controversial ideas is intended to both warn and comfort students, particularly freshmen, that in college one grapples with difficult ideas and must learn to navigate, negotiate, and articulate opinions and thoughts in new and respectful ways. On one hand, this course philosophy intimidates students because being in college is an overwhelming new experience and few have been directly challenged in precisely this way by a teacher. On the other hand, most of my students usually begin to embrace this liberating and safe environment and learn to express even the most difficult and controversial of thoughts in ways that receive respectful consideration from me and their classmates. This is one of the greatest joys of teaching in a contact zone with challenging material. But the precedent must be set on the first day in written and verbal forms and does not guarantee harmony or easy passage.

Two reviews of *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together* (2002), edited by Janice Wolff, offer competing impressions of this collection of essays that tackle the implications of Pratt's ideas in actual classroom situations. For instance, Gary Kochhar-Lindgren suggests in his effusive reaction, "Writing, as an opening of the space of shared understanding, carries with it a utopian hope for the future of the (perhaps) larger space of society itself. Writing creates the possibility of justice" (*Pedagogy* 5:1 2005, 153) Conversely, Bill Milligan calls the collection a "broad but provocative overview of the practice, theory, and approaches associated with Mary Louise Pratt's metaphor," but concludes that "contact zone theory creates a dangerous environment for the teacher unskilled in its subtleties and nuances"

(*Pedagogy* 5:1 2005, 150). One of the collection's scholars, Richard Miller, provides ample warning about using controversial topics in a composition classroom contact zone. In "Fault Lines in the Contact Zone," an essay that first appeared in *College English* in 1994 and then in the collection *Professing in the Contact Zone* (2002), Miller addresses the issue of practical action in the classroom when "unsolicited oppositional discourse" is introduced, students react in unpleasant ways, and then the teacher must negotiate a response. What Miller characterizes is not safe, pleasant, or comfortable. Generally, he examines "the heuristic value of the notion of the contact zone when applied not only to student writing, but also to our own academic discussions of that writing" (*Professing* 123). Specifically, he begins with a student essay titled "Queers, Bums, and Magic"<sup>97</sup> that was first publicly introduced at a 1991 Modern Language Association workshop and that quickly spun off conference panels at future MLA and College Composition and Communication conferences that responded to it. Introducing this student work in his own essay the same way it was fragmented and discussed at these national conferences allows Miller the added opportunity of addressing the problem of contextual absence or making judgments based on partial or contradictory information.

Relevant to my situation was the bold resistance evident in this student writing, the potential professorial responses to it, and the idea that the homophobia and violence articulated by the student writer are "cultural commonplaces" (Miller, *Professing* 131). Arguably, the frequent absence of Native peoples from our modern American public conversation is also a

---

<sup>97</sup> According to Miller, "Queers, Bums, and Magic" was "written in a pre-college-level community college composition class taught by Scott Lankford at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, CA, in response to an assignment taken from *The Bedford Guide for College Writers* that asked students to write a report on group behavior. One of Lankford's students responded with an essay detailing a drunken trip he and some friends made to 'San Fagcisco' to study 'the lowest class. . . the queers and the bums'" (*Professing* 124). In addition to asking a man they find on Polk Street if he is 'a fag', the students portrayed in the narrative then drunkenly urinate on a homeless person, whom they proceed to kick for 30 seconds before running away to their car to leave the city. "It's a haunting piece," Miller writes, "One that gave Lankford many sleepless nights and one that has traveled from conference to conference because it is so unsettling" (*Professing* 125).

cultural commonplace that leads to the kind of collective ignorance on display in my students' drawings of an Indian chief. Again, this is not a negative judgment, merely reality showcasing the lack of knowledge that perpetuates ignorance. In my experience, after introducing students to contemporary Native American perspectives, most walk away with new knowledge and a very different idea about ongoing Native presence in this land. Essentially, my approach can create a new story(ality) for students once their preconceived notions about Native absence is challenged and complicated with new information. Therefore, the large-scale ubiquitous lack of knowledge can be corrected one class at a time by teachers at all levels if the nonfiction stories by Native American writers are introduced and analyzed frequently and consistently.

Adding these perspectives to my own readings of the essays in this collection and my growing understanding of the complexity inherent in the idea of contact zones, I was further inspired to carefully plan before attempting to introduce controversial materials into my composition class. During spring 2007, I read Lawrence Gross's 2005 *Wicazo-Sa Review* article on using "American Indian ways of knowing" to teach American Indian studies and suddenly, despite the potential ideological danger of such a connection, the ideas clicked together.

Lawrence Gross provided the other key inspiration for my idea to teach a basic composition class with rhetorical sovereignty and "American Indian ways of knowing" (*Wicazo Sa Review* Fall 2005). He writes: "The American Indian Studies Program at Iowa State University adopted a blended teaching methodology that draws on established pedagogical methods found in the academy and American Indian ways of knowing. . .in adopting this method I have chosen to emphasize teaching American Indian studies as a means of interrupting genocide, in addition to introducing and legitimating American Indian ways of knowing and being in the academy" (121). As I am always seeking ways to introduce students to American

Indian writers and scholars, this sentence immediately raised two questions for me: 1) Why should this method, approach, and goal be limited to American Indian studies courses? And 2) Why not use this idea in a core composition class, alongside the traditional rhetorical objectives, with a student population that did not self-select into the course, and see if I can facilitate a new story(ality) about indigenous peoples for my students, as well as improving their storytelling and writing skills? These may seem, at first blush, to be incompatible objectives. Quite honestly, my instincts told me the idea would work, but I had nothing stronger than my hunch, this article, and my burgeoning understanding of contact zones to go on. Fortunately, the Auburn University English Department was amenable to my experimentation and innovation as an instructor, particularly since my ideas did ultimately achieve the curricular objectives set forth by the department.

The first class day of any college course sets the tone and expectation for the entire semester and I knew Fall 2008 would be even more challenging than usual for myself and the students given the theoretical underpinnings, so in addition to the written syllabus (which contained the above course philosophy and a brief statement about rhetorical sovereignty – see Appendix A:1), I deployed my usual first day interview in-class assignment with a twist (Appendix A:2 Short assignment #1).

### **Who am I?**

From the first day of class, my students worked with idea of rhetorical sovereignty without using the term or reading an excerpt of Scott Lyons' essay until several weeks into the semester. It was the *idea* that I wanted them to slowly engage with and very often when we, as teachers, label and define good ideas with unfamiliar terms, students tune out, become bored or disinterested, or lack enthusiasm because the terms overwhelm and confuse. As a result, I'm a

big fan of getting students to work with an idea without labeling or defining it first. My statement on the first page of the syllabus that “the framework for considering storytelling in a critical way” would be “rhetorical sovereignty, a term from the field of Native American rhetoric meaning ‘a people’s control of its own meaning’” was all my students needed that first day. It was enough for them to know that a new term would be introduced at some point. This tactic allowed me room to dive into the real work from day one – how does one define oneself or one’s group and control that meaning?

My intention in these classes was to adapt Scott Lyons’ theory of rhetorical sovereignty to be useful and relevant to basic composition students as they learn to write about themselves, their families, communities and experiences in richer and more concrete ways. Specifically, this theory is useful in helping students to see and understand the interconnectivity and interdependence of their individual identities with the identities of these various groups in which they participate. Rhetorical sovereignty sets up the idea of self- and group-identification, but it is important to note that rhetorical sovereignty means something different to Native peoples than what it means to a non-Native group of university students in a writing class. It could never mean the same thing to these two very different groups because their material realities and histories are so different. However, this theory has value because it can be usefully adapted to help students review and write about their experiences in new and more productive ways, thus increasing their awareness of how their experiences and identities are inextricably linked as they move from self to family to community and back again.

A series of three short assignments introduced students to this idea by first asking them to tell their own stories, witness what another student (a complete stranger that early in the semester) would do with their story, then reflect on the experience of having someone take,



interpret, and re-tell their stories in words that were not the original storyteller's own. During class discussion, most students reported being pleased by the stories their peers told because all of the information they had shared with each other was safe and surface. Some students shared fears and memories with a bit of depth and accompanying stories. However, most remained on common ground with details such as where they grew up, what majors they were considering, what their families were like, and names of pets and siblings. This public response to the first short assignment reflected students' desire to remain in unchallenged territory, not wanting to become vulnerable by exposing too many of their personal details to unknown peers. This was to be expected for freshman in their first week of college; in fact, I would surmise that this response would occur even if the students were juniors and seniors. On the first day of class, everyone is sizing up the situation and usually acts with restraint and decorum. However, their written reflections on the process of being represented by someone else's words complicated their in-class shared reactions. Many students indicated that although they were satisfied with how their peers represented their stories, they acknowledged that those were not the stories they would tell about themselves. In the meantime, this assignment established concise and creative storytelling as a primary component for the semester, as well as the expectation that all students would be expected to talk in class, reflect on their own writing, and think beyond the surface details.

The second short assignment (Appendix A:3) leaps into more typical territory, asking students to read two essays that "grapple with identity, perception, and representation issues" written by Native American authors. Far from being secretive about the purpose of this assignment, I chose to be as clear as possible: "The goal is to ease you slowly into the ability to see through someone else's lens of experience and be able to not just react emotionally, but also be able to analyze your own reactions to unknown issues and ideas AND relate on some level

(empathy).” Being direct, upfront and honest with students has always garnered fairly positive outcomes in my experience, so I knew that this approach must be used in this situation where increasingly contentious writings would be introduced. This time, instead of telling a story of someone else’s experience, students read about two Native authors’ experiences and analyzed them using my prompt questions. In the first part, key questions included what the author chooses to share and which information seems to be privileged, as well as what differences exist between the author’s experience and the student. The issue of whether an individual has a right to identify himself or herself in a particular way was also an important question that continued coming up all semester – who has the right to tell someone’s story and to define that person? What seems like a simple answer (each individual has the right to define themselves in whatever terms and with whatever stories they choose) was thoroughly complicated throughout the semester. One frequent question involved the idea of community and what the individual’s responsibility to that community might be, and what happens when the individual and community definitions are different? Also, whose community has precedence? Which individuals get to decide on the stories that will represent the whole group? For being the second week of class, the theme was working well. Then students brought their responses to Gansworth and Francis back to class and their reactions prompted me to introduce rhetorical sovereignty in a more concrete fashion.

In “Identification Pleas,” Eric Gansworth (Onondaga) writes about his “identity crisis” trying to walk across the border from Mexico back into the United States after leaving his driver’s license on the Texas side in his friend’s truck.<sup>98</sup> The story he tells runs the gamut from the arrogant assumptions of the border guard and the politics of hair in the “Indian academic

---

<sup>98</sup> This essay appears in *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing* edited by MariJo Moore (2003). The Lee Francis essay for this assignment, “We the People: Young American Indians Reclaiming Their Identity,” also appears in this collection.

community” to the problem he faced when neither his tribal identification card nor his university ID were adequate to prove that he belonged in the United States. Gansworth writes about being considered “ethnically ambiguous in appearance,” which has caused much confusion in others: “Over the years the odd looks, vague frowns, and unasked questions have become the routine. It has been kind of interesting, existing as a walking, breathing Rorschach text for others’ perceptions and stereotype templates. I have been mistaken for Italian, Armenian, Middle Eastern, Hawaiian, Russian, Polish, German, Portuguese, and Jewish, but I am often wrongly assumed to be Latino” (273). This rather bewildering assortment of misidentifications is actually mirrored by many of the Native American stand-up comics. One in particular, Larry Omaha, talks in his “Goin’ Native American Indian Comedy Slam”<sup>99</sup> set about his father exclaiming at his birth, “My god, we had a Korean!” Making these connections across the borders of academe and comedy for my students as they struggled with the idea that anyone could be mistaken for so many different ethnicities was both challenging and rewarding, despite the frequent defensive flare-ups in class. I chose the Gansworth essay because of the ambiguity shrouding the writer’s identity within the context of his story – Gansworth is clearly annoyed, but handles the story calmly, assertively, and with humor, which I believed made it accessible for newcomers to Native issues. Students did not react defensively to this text, merely with curiosity and a slight hesitancy as their lack of knowledge and understanding about modern Native peoples became apparent. Constant encouragement seemed useful for students to embrace the exploration of these new issues as they learned to write and reflect about new ideas.

The Francis piece garnered quite a different response. First of all, Lee Francis (Laguna Pueblo) refers to indigenous populations as “the People,” with the “P” capitalized. My students noticed this right away and wanted to talk about why he would do such a thing. They were used

---

<sup>99</sup> Showtime special (2010)

to proper names and nouns being capitalized, so this privileging of Native peoples in writing disturbed many of them and put them on guard. The power and politics of language and its use is unavoidable, perhaps especially in the contact zone of a composition classroom when discussing contemporary Native writers' nonfiction narratives. And his very first paragraph helped to reinforce the point of my theme:

For the People, whether urban- or reservation-born, it's really about story. The ancients among the People understood that all of creation—seen and unseen—tells story. In the long-ago time, from birth to earth, the People learned about their harmonious place in the order of all creation by listening to and telling story. Their identity was inextricably interwoven in the stories they were told. For Native People, story was and continues to be essential to an individual's identity construction and development. (77)

Francis connects identity to story for Native peoples, especially American Indian youth, in such a direct, persuasive and eloquent way, that I hoped this essay would initiate students' understanding of that connection. Their resistance to the privileging of Native peoples over non-Native by the not-so-subtle use of the capital "P" four times in the first paragraph was something I had not anticipated or foreseen because of my familiarity with seeing such usage in the Native-written texts that I study. The rhetorical move by Francis to establish a sort of prevalence of perception or dominance of Native presence over Euramerican presence was much stronger than I had originally considered. Voices were raised the day we discussed these essays and the students concentrated primarily on Francis's essay as offensive and divisive, whereas Gansworth's garnered sympathy and chuckles. Other terms Francis uses such as "massacre," "disease," "harmony," "balance," "smallpox," "rape," "murder," "abducted," "indoctrinate," "brainwash," "selfishness," "isolation," and "tragedies" captured my students' attention and

brought language use squarely to the forefront of our conversations. This was not my intention in my zeal to open my students' minds to others' experiences. Ironically, my students' attentiveness to the impact of language mirrors Scott Lyons' attentiveness to the "duplicitous interrelationships between writing, violence, and colonization developed during the nineteenth century. . .[that] would set into motion a persistent distrust of the written word in English" (*CCC* 51:3 449).

Granted, my students were not picking up on the same implications that Lyons discusses, but the fact that Francis wrote in English and used terms that call violence to mind, thus drawing the reader's attention to that connection, and the fact that students found those written words disconcerting gave me another pathway to helping them understand Lyons' theory. Clearly, my choices had been more challenging and complex than I had anticipated, so I found myself in layered in-class conversations discussing such writing issues as the importance and impact of word choice on the reader, the author's perception of reality versus the reader's perception, the impact that the first paragraph of an essay can make, and why Indians were still so angry because this was all in the past after all, right? Sadly, as a result of these surface detail conflicts, we never discussed in-depth the more interesting (to me) story/identity connection that Francis makes in relation to Indian youth of today and his argument, "It is in the stories, old and new, where urban Native youth will be able to reclaim their Native identity" (79). It was an eye-opening lesson for me to be less cavalier about the opening texts I choose and also prompted me to introduce Scott Lyons and an excerpt from his essay defining rhetorical sovereignty.

To say that students struggled with Lyons' essay would be an understatement, primarily because their active resistance to the subject matter had flared up thanks to the Francis essay and they were wary. I worked for days to break down their resistance by explaining rhetorical sovereignty as many different ways and using as many different examples as possible to make it

clear. What became clear, however, was that many students refused to accept the new information; active resistance to education. Respectfully breaking down students' resistance is essential to helping them learn how to empower themselves to learn about their own stories of experience. This idea of self-empowerment in the composition classroom through using personal experience and the recognition of the individual and communal self is an ongoing conversation in composition studies. In fact, John Rouse and Edward Katz write about these intersections of power and self in the writing classroom in *Unexpected Voices: Theory, Practice, and Identity in the Writing Classroom* (2003).<sup>100</sup> In chapter three, "Everyone's Secret is the Same," Rouse and Katz debate via their letters about the virtues and difficulties inherent in having students talk and write about their personal experiences as they read unfamiliar texts that both challenge and reinforce certain cultural values, how to respond when students reveal extremely personal details and the challenges of negotiating student in-class interactions when two individuals "actively preach their conflicting views of life at each other" because "they're not making it any easier to build the loving classroom" (53). Katz is the writer of this last quote and he was writing at a time when his South African school, University of the Western Cape, was experiencing a fairly violent ongoing student boycott of classes in protest of the university withholding food credits from students who hadn't paid their fees. This material reality heightened the tension and conflict in his classroom as students discussed and explored their experiences in conversation and in writing, but also represented a fundamental truth that Katz puts forward for Rouse's

---

<sup>100</sup> This book considers how teaching is a performance and how schooling worldwide "directs people to their individual improvement rather than that of the group," as well as broader issues in composition studies such as academic literacy, expressive and cognitive approaches to the teaching of writing (x). The method is an exchange of letters through which a scholarly conversation occurs across vast physical distance as the authors share their classroom experiences with each other, ask questions, and respond to each other. The two writers hail from very different backgrounds: South African and American, and their personal teaching experiences and interactions with students in the composition classroom are used as examples to ground their claims. Essentially, Rouse and Katz propose that value of narrative pedagogy "as students find a direction or activity suggested by their own concerns and ongoing lives, so that afterward they have a story to tell of their experience together" (ix).

consideration. He writes, “In a sense, all reality is part of the human spirit. What do you think of that?” (55) Rouse responds by addressing the questions raised by Katz, requesting an update from that “unquiet place,” and by reporting on the “rather ordinary, undramatic events” in his life and classroom (55). In particular, Rouse suggests that Katz “think of the classroom as a field of action where you create a situation in which all those present are involved in the making of new experience, and so are exposed along the way to the possibility of embarrassment or failure. There’s a risk involved, and why should anyone there be exempt or privileged?” (56) The ideas that these two professors are discussing relate to my use of rhetorical sovereignty in the composition classroom in the following ways: 1) helping students find their voices and learn how to productively express their experiences is a difficult and dangerous undertaking with only the potential for a positive result, and 2) this undertaking is worth the risk inherent in the process as students and teachers converse and conflict, but don’t run from the challenge of addressing difficult subjects in the composition classroom.

Simultaneously with my students’ expression of their own personal experiences, they were introduced to additional texts from an unfamiliar perspective, which challenged them and threw the stark light of self-reflection on those personal experiences. Specifically, some students were responding to the introduction of “unsolicited oppositional discourse” in the context of a classroom contact zone, judging the information to be irrelevant, and deciding to resist understanding. In hindsight, I attribute this to not only my selection of the Francis essay, but also to my introducing it too early. Had I chosen an essay by Thomas King or N. Scott Momaday or Leslie Silko<sup>101</sup> to companion with the Gansworth piece instead, I truly believe our discussion of rhetorical sovereignty, its origins, its purpose, and its necessity would not have been as uncomfortable for any of us. To create a new story(ality), the participants must voluntarily enter

---

<sup>101</sup> These writers were introduced after short assignment #2, but before our discussion of Lyons’ article and theory.

the storytelling dialectic with the author and my facilitation of this objective was hindered by the fact that students were in a core class and not there by choice, and also by my selection and assignment of the Francis text without warning my students what they should anticipate finding there. It is important to note that most basic composition classes are core requirements of a university education, therefore, this classroom is uniquely situated as a contact zone because of this power differential – students generally do not choose to be there; the university requires them to be there, setting the students immediately at odds with the teacher before any discussion or writing is accomplished. *Professing in the Contact Zone*, the collection that I have cited frequently throughout this chapter, is one of many excellent scholarly texts that presents varying perspectives and scholarly practices within the contact zone of the basic composition classroom.<sup>102</sup> I argue that story(ality) can be achieved even within this type of contact zone where students are not there voluntarily because the grappling and clashing of ideas that occurs in the composition classroom set the stage for students to learn and understand a new sense of reality as it relates to themselves, their families, and their communities.

By asking students to make connections between rhetorical sovereignty and owning their own meaning within their lives and experiences, I encourage them to learn about themselves through a theoretical lens that is grounded in experience. Thus, I discovered my greatest diffusion tool – anytime the conversation started getting a little too political or heated for the rest of the semester, I would guide the conversation (sometimes abruptly) back to the students' own lived experiences. In addition to circling around the idea of rhetorical sovereignty, I also spent several class days working on basic storytelling strategies and tactics. Not only did students

---

<sup>102</sup> See works by Patricia Bizzell, Min Zhan Lu, Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks, Peter Elbow, Fan Shen, Keith Gilyard, Mike Rose, and Victor Villanueva, to name a few.



watch and respond to an Ira Glass Youtube video<sup>103</sup> in which he explains the two key components to storytelling (anecdote and a point of reflection), they also considered the similarities and differences of the indigenous authors they had encountered so far to their own experiences. By September 16, 2008, the day we discussed Scott Lyons and his article on rhetorical sovereignty, students had read and responded to selections by Eric Gansworth (Onondaga), Lee Francis (Laguna Pueblo), Thomas King (Cherokee/Greek), and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo). This is how we entered the first two major projects of the semester, each worth 15% of their grade: Who Am I? (Dialogue with others) and Who Are You? (Family observation/interview).

The major projects are scaffolded to change students' perspectives and perceptions slowly over the course of the semester by introducing a new layer of information with each assignment. Project One asks students to examine themselves through others' eyes, which achieves the objective of maintaining a positive self-identity through story; Project Two asks students to immerse themselves in their families' stories and histories by interviewing their oldest lucid relative, which achieves the objective of understanding the oral tradition and stories of their own families; Project Three asks students to enlarge their view to consider one of their non-family communities and their role in it, which achieves the objective of learning collective meaning as a member of a group; and finally, Project Four takes all of the analysis done on self, family, and community and asks students to apply what they've learned to analyzing a Gloria Anzaldúa reading and then analyzing their own analyses to help students see how differently they read and assess texts when they are required to look more than once. This last project brings

---

<sup>103</sup> Ira Glass produces "This American Life," a weekly public radio show focused on "mostly true stories of everyday people, though not always" for PBS ([thisamericanlife.org](http://thisamericanlife.org)). Glass's storytelling lecture was extremely useful for my students because he is such a friendly and honest journalistic storyteller: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7KQ4vkiNUk>)

all of the “American Indian ways of knowing” together with rhetorical sovereignty as the underlying theory in order to create a new story(ality) for students about themselves and about Native peoples. At the end of the semester, more students walked away as allies of Native American peoples because of the changes in perception they experienced.

For instance, Project One asks students to “enter a dialogue with others and then re-envision that dialogue in writing.” The most challenging element was not the three interviews students conducted, but obtaining the criticism about themselves from their families and friends, as directed by the assignment. Many students chafed at the idea and some of the individuals they chose to interview also resisted, not wanting to criticize the student in such a public forum as an English assignment. But receiving honest criticism gave the students something substantive to write back against, giving them a tiny bit of experience with that sort of intellectual tug-of-war that is so familiar to those of us in the academy, and especially to Native American writers who constantly write back against how non-Natives perceive them. Lyons writes, “Discourses of resistance and renewal have never ceased in Indian country, and these marginalized narratives of the continuing struggle for Indian sovereignty are making themselves more and more visible in public representations and talk. It’s worthwhile to note how to much of this struggle. . .has taken place at what we might call the colonized scene of writing: a site of contact-zone rhetoric at its fullest” (453). In order to fully grasp what rhetorical sovereignty means to Native scholars, students who are completely unfamiliar with contemporary and historical Native American issues must be gently lowered into the maelstrom. If I was to drop them unprepared into Gloria Anzuldúa or Vine Deloria, Jr., students would likely be unresponsive and shut down faster because these two writers are bold, confrontational, and directly challenging to a knowledgeable reader. My tactic of making these experiential and writing comparisons are meant to integrate

new knowledge and perspectives with students' existing knowledge in an effort to grow and improve the baseline. In this way, Anzuldúa and Deloria are not nearly as intimidating or discomfiting, as I discovered when we reached those writers.

In addition to having the chance to write back against and consider criticism, students also flexed their latent creative storytelling skills during Project One. The finished forms of the dialogues included a play, a Dr. Phil script, a Jerry Springer show, a “Jiminy Cricket” subconscious narration, a family Facebook message exchange, and an episode of the Crocodile Hunter, just to name a few of the imaginative approaches taken. Although some might assume that with all of these creative juices flowing, the main critical assignment objective would become lost, the opposite was true. Because students had a bit more creative license, they also took their thoughts and analysis further than they would have in a traditional academic essay. For example, student 4 wrote in the reflective portion of Project One:

I was sitting alone at the library at Auburn when I realized that I'm almost an adult. I'm to the point where I am going to have to make all my decisions about my life on my own. I thought this point was either going to feel triumphant or terrifying; but it is regrettably neither. All it means is that I am alone, for the first time in my life I have no one who truly knows everything about me here.

And now I can be who I want to be. But, who exactly do I want to be? I want to be happy and successful. I want to be the person my grandmother was. I am not sure how to be more like her; but I'm going to figure it out if it's the last thing I do.

Self-identity was the primary issue in Project One and students like this one came away with surprising discoveries that helped further self-awareness. Some, like Student 5, had a very introspective and poetic response to this assignment:

I am not the best at anything, although I wish I could be. I am a people pleaser that cannot make decisions. The simple beauties of the earth are how I remember who I want to become. And most importantly, I love to love.

“This is me,” I tell Nature. She always accepts me for the person I am. Without questions, she chooses to look past my many faults. I look up to the sky and give a slight smile. I see my identity is painted with the clouds.

Conversely, Student 1 experienced a particularly brutal awakening that he wrote about in his reflection:

This assignment presented a rare opportunity to ask people close to us important questions that might otherwise go unasked and forever unknown. For example I had always thought I was a fairly diplomatic person when in fact I was the opposite. I thought just because I can argue well and speak somewhat elegantly that meant I was diplomatic, when in reality I was abrasive, aggressive and rash in attempting to get people to see it my way. But through my talks with my [family] I came to realize that was a real weak spot in the way I deal with people.

It's a two sided sword because I judge people's intentions quickly and can usually tell what they are trying to say or get done. But my impatience leads me to not seek the subtle diplomatic way of persuasion but the overt and offensive means; which ends up worse than if I had just kept my mouth shut. I'm really glad to have gained this perspective on my identity and how I deal with people, and can now start becoming a better, less offensive, colleague, friend, or opponent.

As students' self-awareness grew, their eyes started opening and seeing others around them in new ways. I only know of two students out of fifty that semester who were actively resistant

from beginning to end – the other 48 opened their minds and hearts to these difficult explorations and gained exponentially more important knowledge about themselves, their families, communities than an average basic composition course would normally provide. The way the students achieved this expanded understanding was by interacting with rhetorical sovereignty as a guiding principle and by considering the first-person stories of experience from the Native American perspective. Seeing their own experiences through this uniquely Native American lens helped students see the intricate interconnectedness of their own lives in a clearer and more complicated way. Further, students’ willingness to speak up and write about the difficulties they experienced in tackling these major projects suggests that freshmen can be trusted with controversial and challenging ideas. Raise the bar as a teacher and students will follow, especially as they see results like the ones above.

### **Who are we?**

After surviving Project One, students then delved into their own families and discovered previously unknown and surprising details. One student wrote about finding out that her grandfather was in the Klan, a fact previously hidden from her. Two students discovered they had Cherokee heritage and three found out that their families had been slave-owners in the 1800s. Amazingly, one discovered a rather sordid past involving a relative who was hung for murder. All the students wrote openly and honestly about their family stories and their own reactions to them. From the self-identity discovery of Project One we come now to Project Three, which asks students to learn more about one of their communities.

The non-family communities students explored included, but were not limited to volunteers, beauty pageant girls, cheerleaders, Southern Baptists, the Greek system, home towns, learning communities at Auburn, private high schools, hikers, and libertarians. To understand

their communities better, students were required to research their chosen community and its stereotypes and then interview a variety of members to find out how they define the community compared to how the student defined the community based on his or her experience. Once again, results and discoveries varied, but in all circumstances, students came away with a renewed sense of belonging and pride in their chosen community and a new awareness of the persistence and potential damage of stereotypes in general. When dealing with something as uncomfortable as stereotypes, Min Zhan Lu offers a foundational perspective on the positive use of conflict and struggle in the composition classroom in her 1992 *College English* article, "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" She opens her article with a review of Gloria Anzaldúa's work in *Borderlands*, the text that my own students would read excerpts from for Project Four. Lu responds to Anzaldúa's terms and ideas, writing,

The resource of life on the borderlands: a 'continual creative motion' which breaks entrenched habits and patterns of behavior. The residents of the borderlands act on rather than react to the 'borders' cutting across society and their psyches, 'borders' which become visible as they encounter conflicting ideas and actions. . . Rather, they use these 'borders' to identify the unitary aspects of 'official' paradigms which 'set' and 'separate' cultures and which they can then work to break down. . . For the mestizas, 'borders' serve to delineate aspects of their psyches and the world requiring change. (89-90)

Although my students did not encounter this idea of borders in any official way as they worked on Project Three, they did begin to grasp the effects of conflicting ideas and stereotypes that separate individuals and groups and also how to process their initial reactions to those stereotypes in productive ways. My students were not necessarily living in cultural and psychological borderlands as Anzaldúa describes them, but they did start to understand that as

they embody different identities, their perceptions of themselves changed. In addition, they realized that others' perceptions of them as self-identified members of a given group could be productive for self-reflection or afford an opportunity to write back against perceived injustice because of an unfair stereotype. As with the introduction of Lyons and rhetorical sovereignty, I wanted to ease students into the surface idea of borderlands before naming it and this test of these waters did produce quality results.

For example, Student 1 discovered that the stereotype of libertarians as “extreme elitists” was unjust to the majority of this diverse group as his experience suggested, however, he failed to produce an essay responding to this discovery because he chose not to read the assignment sheet, which is something that happens in every composition class by at least a few students. In this situation, Student 1's advancement toward story(ality) was disrupted by his diminished concentration on the task at hand. Students who carefully considered and followed the assignment instructions were able to develop more complete connections as they advanced toward a new understanding of themselves and of Native experiences. For instance, Student 6 dove into her Southern Baptist community and found out the following:

There are a lot of Baptists that get so caught up in trying to live their lives so perfectly by doing good deeds and following all of the rules, that they actually miss the entire point of having a relationship with Christ. They spend way too much time focusing on the present rather than the entire picture as a whole. The different ways that Baptists witness causes the entire community to be viewed as pushy, rather than just the small group of Baptists that actually are.

Taking her investigation one step further, this student interviewed a 52 year old woman of the Baptist faith who the student claimed is guilty of being “pushy.” She confronted the woman

about how her extreme witnessing behaviors contributed to a stereotype about the whole group and did not like the response the woman gave:

I felt like what she said was so selfish and she never even considered the way that I or others feel and how her poor decisions are causing everyone inside the community to be blamed. This is where I feel that it is my responsibility to take a stand to change the way that southern Baptists are viewed. We are not pushy, although we do believe in witnessing and some may do it more so than others, and overall we do not think that we are the best denomination. I think that if you are a Christian, then you are a Christian. Mathew 7:1 says, “Judge not, that you be not judged.”

...

The way that certain people behave in the Baptists denomination determines the way that the community is viewed as a whole. As with any community, there will always be groups of people within the community that behave differently than the entire group. It is the people that disagree with the negative stereotypes that are formed against their group to stand up and voice their opinions and make a difference. That is the only solution to this problem. These negative stereotypes about southern Baptists can only be changed if Baptists that do not follow them speak against the stereotypes.

As Student 6 discovered during the process of Project Three, using one’s voice to speak out about identity, perceptions of truth and community, are important goals for any individual member of a group. This type of discovery lends itself well to the goals of rhetorical sovereignty and a people controlling their own meaning. Student 6 was beginning to get a taste of the conflict, struggle, challenges and potential responses that can arise when learning to control meaning and define oneself or one’s group.



Passion is another happy outcome of this assignment. Students' passions flared and their writing had more energy, clarity, and strength than usual. Consider Student 7's passionate defense of cheerleaders and especially their intelligence:

Cheerleaders have tons of stereotypes to their name. Dozens of movies have been made about them, helping even more to enforce these false ideas and opinions. Cheerleaders are not rich, bratty, dumb blondes, non-athletic girls who only care about their popularity. The girls on my squad became my best friends and girls who truly loved me for me. I would not trade that experience for the world and I think it is wrong that people judge us by how short our skirts and blonde our hair is.

...

Sometimes these girls seem to get the brunt of every joke. People think that cheerleaders are dumb or "dumb blondes". This is completely untrue. On my cheerleading squad at school every girl except for one was in National Honor Society, and the girl that was not in NHS was a member of Beta Club and SGA. All three of these organizations are based on the student's grade point average. When I asked [a fellow cheerleader] what she thought of this opinion of cheerleaders she replied, "I completely disagree with that statement. The girls on my squad were not dumb at all. Some made straight A's and no one ever failed anything."

So it seems that including "unsolicited oppositional discourse" with heavy doses of conflict and challenging ideas helps students rise to their best efforts and not only become more passionate and driven writers, but more thoughtful members of their families and communities. This, too, is a new and legitimate story(ality) that results from introducing rhetorical sovereignty and "American Indian ways of knowing" into a standard basic composition classroom. Improved

writing skills, new knowledge, and a new respect for themselves and their communities translates to these students having an open mind to then delve into the most difficult and challenging texts of the semester.

#### **Project 4**

On November 11, 2008, we entered the final phase of the semester during which students grappled with chapters and poems from the third edition of Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Beginning with the preface to the first edition, students then proceeded through "We Call Them Greasers," Chapter Two, "El Sonavabitch," "To live in the borderlands," and Chapter Seven. The three poems were read in class and immediately discussed, whereas the chapters were assigned as homework and then discussed in the next class meeting. Project Four asked students to take their analytic abilities with self, family, and community combined with the idea of rhetorical sovereignty to critically analyze one of these selections in a formal academic essay. The second part of the assignment was to analyze students' own analysis in the Project Four part one essay in order to find out why they chose certain elements to focus on, why they reacted the way they described, and to figure out if, upon a second reading of the chosen text, they had a different response. This multilayered assignment with concrete and abstract intellectual goals intimidated students, but they asked questions and received help from me. The results were so rich that I intend to use this overall approach again. As student 12 learned after reflecting on Anzaldúa's stories of experience,

I understand that there is a world of difference between the American culture and Anzaldúa's culture, but the beautiful thing about being a part of a community or culture is the accepting nature of all those around you. Every community is comprised of so many people who share many of the same ideas, but every community is like a puzzle. All of

the pieces of a puzzle work together to make a beautiful picture, but every piece is so different. A community, whether they realize it or not, is more different behind closed doors. If your own community is not accepting of you, then who will be?

Discoveries like this transcend the composition classroom and change how students think about themselves, their families, their communities, as well as communities and individuals with very different life experiences. Cross-cultural and cross-experience understanding has a chance to develop in this circumstance, and facilitating such moments is a goal that I am committed to as a teacher. Improving cross-cultural understanding while teaching basic writing skill sets and helping students see and understand their own experiences as less simplistic and more complicated than they had previously considered them to be has value because education is not a one-sided or one-storied experience and it is important to introduce students to as many different perspectives as possible in college so they are not blindsided by those different perspectives after they graduate. Essentially, when students understand that *both/and* is the driving idea instead of *either/or*, they start to appreciate the complexity and depth of their shared experiences with authors who initially seem so culturally different. However, not all discoveries are positive and student responses are not always what we wish them to be. Student 9 admired Anzaldúa's precise logic and deep emotional appeals to her readers in Chapter Two, but his reflection reveals the depth of his personal judgment:

Anzaldua was one of the biggest man haters and she was a little crazy and irrational at times. I think I came to the conclusion of this because I realized a lot of the stuff that she was doing was just complaining about how things are not perfect for her and how everyone has it better, she never sat back and really looked at what good there was in her life.

As imperfect as the writing may be, this student's response is legitimate. First, not every student who goes through a composition course under these circumstances is going to leave the experience with an entirely different attitude or perception of reality related to self or others. All I expect my students to do is consider the subject matter, consider the perspectives, and attempt to honestly respond to them. Responses like this one may not validate what some might consider to be an "enlightened" perspective, but it is honest. Students who fully completed the tasks as assigned wrote complex, but equally honest and complicated, responses. However, that is one of the greatest challenges for any teacher – how to get the students to fully engage with an assignment? One added obstacle in this case was subject matter that many students deemed irrelevant to their lives. We had conversations in many class periods about how and why this subject matter was relevant to their lives – from their lack of knowledge of an entire group of people still existing in this land to the fact that they can relate to the stories about family and community told by these authors who at first seem so different – in the end, the students did learn and many did understand that many of the stories they read connected to them personally on some level, but it was a struggle all semester long to help them understand why knowing about Native American contemporary experiences are relevant to them. These stories were not initially familiar or comfortable for students to read and hear – the stories took students way outside their comfort zone, which is always a goal of mine in the classroom, no matter what my theme is, because it assists students' self-empowerment.

Pedagogically, my teaching style borrows many tactics from critical pedagogy, which owes its theoretical underpinnings to Paulo Freire, whose radical ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) started the critical pedagogy movement. Freire argued that there is no such thing as a neutral education process and Freire's conviction that every human being, no matter

how “ignorant” or submerged in the “culture of silence” he may be, is capable of looking critically at his world in a dialogical encounter with others...[he or she] just needs the right tools. (12-13) In 1992, Ira Shor develops and explores critical pedagogy in practical classroom situations in *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*, in which he explores education as a political system, the different types of themes that lead to critical thought, and resistance and empowerment in the classroom. He argues that “students need a challenging education of high quality that empowers them as thinkers, communicators, and citizens” (10). Further, the “teacher is the person who mediates the relationship between outside authorities, formal knowledge, and individual students in the classroom. Through day-to-day lessons, teaching links the students’ development to the values, powers, and debates in society” (13). And the methods for introducing these debates and materials are only three, according to Shor: “Teachers can present knowledge in several ways, as a celebration of the existing society, as a falsely neutral avoidance of problems rooted in the system, or as a critical inquiry into power and knowledge as they relate to student experience” (14). Critical pedagogy, therefore, informs my teaching style and textual choices when designing a composition class with such a perspective as rhetorical sovereignty, storytelling, and “American Indian ways of knowing,” especially when those selected texts show experiences that are so vastly different from students’ own knowledge and understanding of the world.

For instance, consider how Student 1, who was in the same class as Student 9, came away from Anzaldúa. In his first analysis essay (part one of Project Four), titled “Cultural Labyrinth,” Student 1 opened with the following assessment:

“Towards a New Consciousness” is the result of Gloria Anzaldua’s lifetime of strife and marginalized identity. In the concluding chapter of *Borderlands La Frontera*, she

expands on an innovative approach to how we define ourselves, others, and reality that she calls “a mestiza consciousness.” In hopes of “healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives,” the mestiza consciousness sets out to change the inherited paradigms that cultures subtly impose by explaining the world in a different way. This final part of the book resonated with me more than the rest of her writings because the ideas are more universal, applying to many different people across countless borders. Everyone struggles with defining their identity, and it becomes even harder to know other people or a foreign culture when we can’t come to grips with who we are at an elemental level.

He goes on to note that Anzaldúa’s “rhetoric parallels her topic, a mestiza consciousness; her persuasive style is synthesized in that the emotions of the reader and the significance of her message are effectively and inextricably bound to the credibility of the author.” Student 1’s grasp of Anzaldúa’s purpose and value is extraordinary as he remarks, “This chapter appealed to me more than the others because she spends more time dealing with big picture ideas and lofty social goals.” And his reflection, titled “Burn no camouflage,” is no less thoughtful and even more powerful:

I had no idea what to expect from Anzaldua. When I sat down and really immersed myself in the text I even surprised myself how easy it was for me to accept her fervent criticism of white society and men in particular. I didn’t even ponder an answer for this until I sat down yesterday to write this part of the assignment. Reluctantly, it has become clear to me that I don’t contend her assumptions on Caucasian culture and more specifically men because I now see in my past, my own guilt. Around the middle of high school something changed in me, my life; I became a borderland.

My cognitive dissonance deriving from the desire of social power (it seems so silly now) fighting for territory in my conscience with a more caring perspective, caused me to lose my rhetorical sovereignty. It is clear that some had to do with all those hormones that fly around always disturbing perception by emotional volatility, but this was also the time when it became evident to me that life wasn't going to be all I had once dreamed. This resulted in a gradual erosion of my intense passion for life, and faith the people in whom my reality was built from. Being replaced by the preeminence of scorn for those around me, I didn't ever beat women, or any other overt violations of humanity but I operated within a paradigm that saw some people (men included) as inferior to me. I was never open with this point of view, but it ate at my soul until I was wholly rotten from a moral perspective.

...

The power in Anzaldua's writing lies in awakening the dormant parts of our identity that act as cancer on our lives. She uses words to transfer the harmony she felt by being in control of defining herself. I was seduced by her message, acting as a tractor beam my hunger for rhetorical sovereignty colored my analyses; I see how others wouldn't be as hungry for this message, but I won't ever forget how that felt.

Student 1 was an interesting case because he was one of my most resistant students for the first half of the semester. Initially, he did not understand why I chose "My Story/Our Story" and rhetorical sovereignty as the guiding themes for the course, and did not agree with using solely Native American texts. We had frequent discussions about my choices because he was a bold and expressive student who was unafraid to challenge his teacher. I truly admired him for that during that semester and I admire that kind of assertiveness in my students today as they try

to define and defend themselves and their ideas. Student 1 was smart, engaged, thoughtful, and precise in his criticisms, questions, and responses to most assignments. However, his success in this course went beyond any conversation we had or assignment we worked on – it was his ability to break down his own walls of resistance and start looking deeper within himself that allowed him to get the most out of this layered composition class. Fortunately, he did start permitting the texts to speak to him and he started listening closer. He is definitely one of my class success stories.

### **Final perceptions, lessons learned, and implications**

Each assignment during Fall 2008 was an anecdote with a point of reflection as students learned the foreign concepts of rhetorical sovereignty, “American Indian ways of knowing,” grappling with identity on four levels: self, family, familiar community, and unfamiliar community. Looking in and looking out, acting, speaking, writing and reflecting, students layered new knowledge atop old, changed their perceptions and perspectives, and came away from the semester with a more vibrant attitude about writing and the potential of stories to abolish misconceptions and stereotypes, as well as experiencing a new story(ality) about Native peoples in this land. Their perception of reality changed because they responded to the challenging and controversial content that I required them to explore. They had no escape and no safety net and yet responded to the challenge day after day. The overall success of this approach to basic composition suggests that it should be employed more often and in more composition classrooms.

Resistance is to be expected at the most progressive of schools, so the resistance level at Auburn, which is a fairly conservative educational environment, was considerable. In fact, despite students’ overwhelmingly positive and detailed written reflections at semester’s end, my



overall student evaluation average decreased by a full point because of students' opinions that the subject matter wasn't relevant to their lives, the difficulty of the work was too great, and my grading was too hard. In some circles, this is a compliment. But in any program where student evaluations are included in your professional evaluation as an effective instructor, these numbers and reactions can be perceived negatively by administrators, which raises the question – What is our responsibility? To challenge students with new ideas and information and to get them to think in new ways about difficult and challenging issues while improving writing skills?

Despite the difficulties I encountered with this subject matter and underlying theoretical approach, Mary Louise Pratt reminds us that contact zones are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” Furthermore, Min Zhan Lu suggests that conflict and struggle are not necessarily the enemy of Basic Writing (*College English* 1992), but rather, education is a process of repositioning. And I saw this repositioning in my students as they grappled and clashed with ideas and cultures that were so completely foreign to their experiences. Consider some of their written remarks about what they learned as a result of this composition contact zone:

Student 2: This class has helped me discover a side of me that I did not know of and has opened me up more as a person. Stories are what make up our lives. They are what help shape us into who we are now. They are how others learn about us and our identity. It is how I learned so much about my grandmother and Gloria Anzuldúa. Stories, I have learned, are the things that have given me my identity.

Student 3: The three main things I have taken in this semester are, go deeper into everything, prepare and do your research, and finally don't be afraid to express your own rhetorical sovereignty and find your own voice. I will take these along with me to other English classes, but more greatly to everyday life. I don't think these are just for papers and stories. This could mean in a job I get right out of college, or maybe a project I do for my band. These three things will make me successful in whatever I do.

Student 8: This course forced me to look deeper than I had ever bothered to look before at my family, my community, and myself. By looking closer, I found out things that I had not known before. My view on Native Americans also changed. Even though I am part Native American (Cherokee, represent!), the most I had learned about my roots was in Indian Education, which was more like Native American arts and crafts time than an educational class. I knew of the harsh ways Native Americans were treated and I knew some of their stories, but the readings showed me Native Americans from a Native American point of view, instead of the Americanized versions of them. My perception changed because I had never really had my own perception of these things.

Student 6: I have learned about the art of telling stories. I have come to see that rhetorical sovereignty is what makes a person's story unique and individually theirs. It allows the writer to say anything that they are thinking. It is the act of making a conscious decision about what they are going to say and the tone in which they are going to say it. I have learned that someday, I will be remembered by my grandchildren. I want to give them something important to remember.

Student 1: I am in awe of the way you laid out this class. It feels like I was just annihilated by a surgical chess-master. Moving inconspicuously in the opening moves of the game (first couple months in class) then stunning me when my ambivalence had disarmed me, showing the systematic weakness in my strategy (English skills). I didn't even see the check mate coming, and then my opponent (you) moved to a place I was blind to. Saying under her breath "check-mate" then nonchalantly walked away. The check mate was the epiphany I reached when writing this paper. It became clear to me, a panoramic image flashed through my head where the short assignments, storytelling with items, rhetorical sovereignty, the three projects focused on identity in different roles, and the expectation to go beyond one's natural ability to think and rhetorically analyze a ¾ English social theory, and finally a meta-cognitive exercise that analyzed our own analysis (which itself pushed me further than I had ever gone) until here. Although I did terribly in terms of grades, I did really learn a lot and grew as a reader, writer, and thinker because you were critical of me, that's the only way we grow so THANK YOU SO MUCH and here we are and as usual.... way over the word limit.

In final summation, as my students discovered, intersections of experience cross cultural, social, economic, and political divides and can be bridged within the context of a basic composition classroom contact zone, as long as the students and teacher become willing participants in the pursuit of this goal. Students started off as unwilling and resistant participants because the Auburn University composition course is mandatory, thus stripping students of a choice. However, as the course progressed and the ideas of rhetorical sovereignty, the practice of first-person nonfiction storytelling about lived experiences, and new knowledge about Native American perspectives converged, students came away with a new respect for themselves, their families and communities, and the fundamental importance of knowing how to define

themselves in each of these groups. Ultimately, this can be an achievable goal in any composition classroom whether students are there by institutional requirement or by choice: Story(ality) thrives when students begin to understand, share, narrate, and write the truths available to them as they consider, test, and use alternative perspectives and unfamiliar stories.

All of these lines across my face tell you the story of who I am, so many stories of where I've been and now I got to where I am. But these stories don't mean anything when you've got no one to tell them to.

--Brandi Carlile "The Story"

## Works Cited

- Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience 1875-1928*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1995. Print.
- Agnew, Lois. "“The Day Belongs to the Students’: Expanding Epideictic’s Civic Function.” *Rhetoric Review* 27.2 (2008): 147-164. Print.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. "Where I Come From is Like This." *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986. Print.
- ed. "Introduction." *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*. New York: Random House, 1989.
- Aristotle. "Rhetoric." *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg eds. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. 169-242. Print.
- Bell, Nancy D. "Humor comprehension: Lessons learned from cross-cultural communication." *International Journal of Humor Research* 20.4 (2007): 367-387. Print.
- Borns, Betsy, ed. *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-Up Comedy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. Print.
- Burgess, Marianna. *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home*. Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1891. Print.
- Burns, Louis. *Symbolic and Decorative Art of the Osage People*. Fallbrook, CA: Ciga Press, 1994. Print.
- Burnstick, Don. "Don Burnstick (Native Comedian)." Youtube.com. koe81984. 22 Oct 2007. 4

- June 2009.
- Cheshewalla, Cherokee. Personal interview. 12 May 2010.
- Courlander, Harold, ed. "Big Falling Snow." *Native American Autobiography*. Ed. Krupat, Arnold. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. 469-90. Print.
- Christensen, Neil Blair. *Inuit in Cyberspace: Embedding Offline Identities Online*. Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003. Print.
- Deloria, Vine Jr. *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.
- Eubanks, Phillip. "Poetics and Narrativity: How Texts Tell Stories." *What Writing Does and How It Does It: An Introduction to Analyzing Texts and Textual Practices*. Charles Bazerman and Paul Prior eds. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004. Print.
- Everett, Anna, ed. *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. Print.
- Fear-Segal, Jacqueline. "Eyes in the Text: Marianna Burgess and The Indian Helper." *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands: Women Editing Periodicals, 1830-1910*. Eds. Sharon M. Harris and Ellen Gruber Garvey. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2004. Print.
- Feenberg, Andrew. *A Critical Theory of Technology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1970. Print.
- Garrison, Jim. "Prophetic Epideictic Rhetoric: Poetic Education Beyond Good and Evil." *Educational Theory* 53.2 (2003): 221. [Academic Search Premier](#). Web. 11 Apr. 2009

- Gilbert, Joanne R. *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004. Print.
- Glass, Ira. "Ira Glass on Storytelling #1." Youtube.com. kentj1. 13 Aug 2006. 9 April 2009.
- Gould, Janice. "Telling Stories to the Seventh Generation: Resisting the Assimilationist Narrative of *Stiya*." *Reading Native American Women: Critical/Creative Representations*. Ed. Inés Hernández-Avila. Lanham, MD: Altamira Press 2005. Print.
- Greene, Graham. "Charlie Hill (Native Comedian)." Youtube.com. koe81984. 7 Nov 2007. 11 June 2009.
- Gross, Lawrence. "Teaching American Indian Studies to Reflect American Indian Ways of Knowing and to Interrupt Cycles of Genocide." *Wicazo Sa Review* 20.2 (2005): 125-45. Print.
- Hogan, Linda. *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001.
- Jenkins, Ben. Personal interview. 24 May 2010.
- King, Thomas. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Print.
- Kohnle, Rhonda. Personal interview. 21 May 2010.
- Limon, John. *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. Print.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" *College English* 54.8 (1992): 887-910. Print.
- Lyons, Scott. *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*. Minneapolis, MN: 2010. Print.
- "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?"

- College Composition and Communication* 51.3 (2000): 447-468. Print.
- Miller, Howie. "Howie Miller (Native Comedian)." Youtube.com. koe81984. 22 Oct 2007. 26 April 2009.
- Moore, MariJo, ed. *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. Print.
- Oakley, Ann. *Woman's Work: The Housewife Past and Present*. New York: Random House, 1976. Print.
- Osage Nation. 2006. Web. 14 December 2009 – 24 May 2010.
- Our Spirits Don't Speak English: Indian Boarding School*. Dir. Chip Richie. Rich-Heape Films, Inc., 2008. DVD.
- Plato. *Plato on Rhetoric and Language: Four Key Dialogues*. Jean Nienkamp, ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1999. Print.
- Powell, Malea. "Listening to Ghosts: An Alternative (Non)Argument." *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. Schroeder, Christopher, Helen Fox, Patricia Bizzell, eds. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook; Heinemann; 2002. Print.
- "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 53.3 (2002): 396-434. Print.
- Powwow Comedy Jam. Marc Yaffee, Jim Ruel, Vaughn Eaglebear, JR Redwater. Personal interview and email. February 2009 – May 2010.
- Joke Signals*. Dir. Barbara Holliday. Perf. Marc Yaffee, Vaughn Eaglebear, Jim Ruel, and JR Redwater. H2F Comedy Productions, Inc., 2005. DVD.
- Price, Darby Li Po. "Laughing without Reservation: Indian Standup Comedians." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 22 (4). 1998. 255-71. Print.



- Proctor, Billy. Personal interview. 21 May 2010 and 11 June 2010.
- Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004. Print.
- Rouse, John and Edward Katz. *Unexpected Voices: Theory, Practice, and Identity in the Writing Classroom*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003. Print.
- Sarris, Greg. *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993. Print.
- Selfe, Cynthia L. and Richard J. Selfe. "The Politics of the Interface: Power and Its Exercise in Electronic Contact Zones." *College Composition and Communication* 45.4. 1994. 480-504. Print.
- Shor, Ira. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Storyteller*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1981. Print.
- Simonsen, Jane E. *Making Home Work: Domesticity & Native American Assimilation in the American West 1860-1919*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of NC Press, 2006. Print.
- Slack, Jennifer Daryl and J. Macgregor Wise. *Culture + Technology: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005. Print.
- Stabler, Paula. Personal interview. 13 February 2010.
- Stromberg, Ernest. "Resistance and Mediation: The Rhetoric of Irony in Indian Boarding School Narratives by Francis La Flesche and Zitkala-sa." *American Indian Rhetorics of Survivance: Word Medicine, Word Magic*. Stromberg, Ernest, ed. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. Print.

- Sullivan, Patricia and James Porter. *Opening Spaces: Writing Technologies and Critical Research*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing, 1997. Print.
- Taylor, Drew Hayden. *Me Funny*. Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005. Print.
- Trafzer, Cliff E., Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, eds. *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. Print.
- Warschauer, Mark. "Language, Identity, and the Internet." *Race in Cyberspace*. Kolko, Beth E., Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman eds. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Wells, Pam. "From Politics to Comedy: A Comparative Analysis of Affiliative Audience Responses." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 26.4 (2007): 321-42. Print.
- Wertsch, James. *Mind as Action*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.  
Print.
- Williams, Robin and John Tollett. *The Non-Designer's Web Book*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press, 2006. Print.
- Wolffe, Janice M., ed. *Professing in the Contact Zone: Bringing Theory and Practice Together*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2002. Print.
- Zoglin, Richard. *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-Up in the 1970s Changed America*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2008. Print.

APPENDIX A. Auburn University Engl 1100 Fall 2008 Course Documents for Amanda Morris

1. Syllabus front page
2. Short assignment #1 (Part A): Partner's story
3. Short assignment #2 (in two parts): Response to readings; Response to your response
4. Short assignment #3: Reflection on Storytelling with Objects
5. Project #1: Who Am I?
6. Project #2: Who are You?
7. Project #3: Who are We?
8. Project #4: Who are You (x2)?
9. Final Presentation & Reflective Essay

# ENGL 1100: Composition I

Fall 2008

**When/Where:**

T-Th 11a-12:15p  
HC 2462

**Final Exam:**

Mon. 12/15  
12n-2:30p

**Instructors:**

**Amanda Morris**

Office & Phone: 8088  
Haley Center/  
412-327-0472

Email:  
morrial@auburn.edu

Office Hours:  
tbd

*And by appointment*

**Kirsten Iden**

Office & Phone: 2104  
Haley Center/844-5728

Email:  
kti0001@auburn.edu

Office Hours:  
tbd

*And by appointment*

Mailbox Locations:  
**HC 9030** (Main English  
Office, 9th Floor)

“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”  
—Thomas King

“The story ends there. . .There are no explanations.”  
—Leslie Marmon Silko

## Course Philosophy

The purpose of English 1100 is to develop your proficiency with key elements of academic discourse, develop your ability to critically engage with texts and to create a focused thesis statement supported by a variety of primary sources.

**The theme of this particular section of 1100 is My Story/Our Story.** The framework we will use for considering storytelling in a critical way is “rhetorical sovereignty,” a term from the field of Native American Rhetoric that means “a people’s control of its own meaning.” More on this later.

Short assignments and major papers will emphasize awareness and reflection about representations of self, family, community, and place. Readings will come solely from Native American writers and will increase in difficulty and controversy as the semester progresses.

Issues surrounding “American Indian ways of knowing” are not the sole domain of Native American people, but do offer some productive and interesting opportunities for students to examine and explore their own lives, family and community stories, and learn how to layer information imaginatively to gradually develop meaning for an outside reader.

Specifically, the “American Indian ways of knowing” we will use this semester are: Storytelling to maintain a positive self-identity, to unite the past and present to create a more positive future, and Using Imagination and Accretive Thinking (layering/building information to create meaning—not necessarily linear a+b+c structure)

Critical thinking equals good writing, therefore, we will attempt to improve both. Please remember that this class is a forum for the generation and respectful communication of ideas. As a community of scholars, we will approach all readings and subjects, no matter how controversial, with an open mind and inquiring attitude. We should strive for an atmosphere of respect in which everyone can and should feel comfortable expressing thoughts, opinions, and ideas. Most likely, you will encounter readings and assignments in this class that challenge you and your perceptions of others or particular situations. Effectively responding to those challenges will help you grow as citizens and as writers, so I hope that you embrace the opportunity.

For departmental goals and objectives, please see the Engl 1100 Guidelines online.

## Required text & materials

- *World is a Text* Additional readings provided as hand-outs.
- Access to a computer with internet access
- A good college dictionary
- Flashdrive (save early, save often!)
- Pocket folders (one for each major essay and one for final)
- Pens/paper/stapler



## 2. Short assignment #1 (Part A): Partner's story

**What to do:** Interview your partner and discover what makes her tick – who is she? Ask open-ended questions (who, what, when, where, why, how) and learn as much as you can about your partner's past and present experiences, memories, thoughts, beliefs, etc. Dig beneath the surface – once you know her favorite pet/color/subject...ask about her happiest childhood memory, or her worst fear...etc. Have fun and take risks!

You will spend the class period conversing with your partner, but to do this assignment section well, you will need to spend additional time with this person outside of class – for instance, go to dinner tonight, or grab a coffee at Cambridge after class to continue discovery!

**Due next class:** Write your partner's story telling us who she is from your perspective. (No need to write "I think that" and similar constructions – just say it – we know you are the author!)

**Length:** 350 words, single-spaced, one page (please do NOT go beyond one page – there is a reason, which will be revealed later! If you write long and really insist that information be included, fiddle with the margins to force the text to fit on one page.)

**ADVICE - Note on length:** 350 words is not a lot. In fact, that is quite a challenging length, which will require you to be selective about the most vital pieces of information that define your partner's identity. This short length means you must have no useless words or phrases – no fluff. Cut right to the point and stay on task – make every word count!

**REMEMBER:** This is Public writing, so keep this in mind when you reveal information to your partner. That doesn't mean there are taboo subjects in this class – I don't care what you talk about or choose to reveal, as long as YOU are comfortable with revealing and exploring that information and having it be a possible subject for discussion.

**Format:** See below

Your name

Engl 1100

Date

Partner's Name (centered as title)

### **3. Short assignment #2 (in two parts): Response to readings; Response to your response**

**What to do:** Short assignment #1 asked you to reflect on the experience of having someone else represent your identity versus having the opportunity to tell part of your own story in your own voice. Now you have the opportunity to read two Native American writers as they grapple with identity, perception, and representation issues. The goal is to ease you slowly into the ability to see through someone else's lens of experience and be able to not just react emotionally, but also be able to analyze your own reactions to unknown issues and ideas AND relate on some level (empathy).

**Assigned readings:** Eric Gansworth "Identification Pleas" and Lee Francis "We the People" (both on Blackboard in Readings folder)

#### **Part One: Questions to address in this initial response (address all):**

What do you see happening in these texts?  
What does author choose to share? What information or ideas are privileged?  
What are the differences you immediately notice between their experiences and yours?  
Does he or she have the right to identify him/herself as such? Why?  
What reaction did you have on the first reading? What emotions or feelings bubbled to the surface? (Be honest and be clear – this will help with part two)

#### **Part Two: Read the stories again and then respond to your own initial response as follows (address all):**

Who is the audience for each of these authors? Who are they writing to? How do you know?  
Was your initial reaction accurate? Misguided? Something else? WHY? (Reflect on WHY you reacted the way you did – if you reacted with sympathy, why? If with joy, why? If with anger, why? Etc, etc.)  
Relate something in writers' representations of their experiences to your experience: What are the similarities? What do you have in common with these writers?

#### **Response(s) due by Tuesday 9/9 (the next time we meet)**

**Length:** 500 words minimum (and no more than two full pages), single-spaced, one-two pages (please do NOT go beyond two pages)

**Important component: Title** (see back of Short assignment part C for reference)

#### **4. Short assignment #3: Reflection on Storytelling with Objects**

**What to do:** Reflect on the experience of using an object to tell a personal story.

**Questions to address in this reflection** (be specific, go in-depth with your explanations, provide examples, and don't fear expressing yourself strongly – just back up what you think with evidence from the in-class experience!):

1. What types of stories did your classmates tell? What were the similarities – any common threads? What were the differences? If any story, other than your own, stood out and resonated with you, which one was it and why do you think it affected you?
2. How did you decide on the object (and hence, the story) to use for this experience? (Please go beyond “because it was there” and really think about why you selected that object to use as a vehicle to publicly share a personal story about your identity development.)
3. What made storytelling with objects so different from our other storytelling experiences thus far? Of course, the obvious difference is the selection and presence of an object – but what about that process and use made the storytelling experience and audience reception of the story so different? Think about this and dig deep – draw some broader connections and conclusions to the class, to your communities, to your other life experiences, or perhaps to the abstract ideas of truth, identity, perception, representation, voice, etc.

**Reflection due Thursday 9/25 at the start of class.**

**Length:** 350-500 words, single-spaced, one page (Please don't go beyond two pages)

**Important new component:** No grammatical/spelling/punctuation mistakes

Careful proofreading will help (ie, not relying on your computer's spellcheck) by reading your reflection aloud once you complete it. This time, strive for technical perfection in the delivery of your writing – use the English Center (Haley 3183) if you need help with this, or visit OWL at Purdue (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>) and click on the Grammar and Mechanics link to review the rules and apply them. (Note: Just because I'm not a grammar nazi doesn't mean I don't want you to have the best, most polished, and most clear writing possible – and a big part of achieving this is understanding and executing proper mechanics. (And if you work on this here, your life in 1120 and World Lit will be infinitely easier, trust me.)

**(Reminder:** Don't forget your title!)



## Project #1: Who Am I? (Dialogue with others)

Due: Tuesday Oct. 2, 2008

Continuing our exploration of identity through stories, this first major assignment asks you to enter a dialogue with others and then re-envision that dialogue in writing.

**1. Ask one—three friends and one parent to define you** – to tell you who they think you are and to tell a story from your past that defines your current identity. (Similar exercise to first short assignment, but now by people who know you and results are more in-depth.)

**2. Important component—criticism.** As painful as this may be, you need to ask your interviewees to be honestly critical of you (without responding directly to that criticism)—for instance, encourage your dad to express who he thinks you SHOULD be and where you are falling

short...without this criticism component, the dialogue will fall flat. You need to have something to write back against; this is your opportunity to enact rhetorical sovereignty in a small way.

**2. Respond to those definitions of yourself in a written dialogue with those people** – how you format the dialogue is up to you.

Could be:

Mom: blah blah blah (one sentence or two)

Me: (response – agree, disagree, question why she thinks that, defend yourself, argue, apologize, etc. Use evidence from your life and experiences to bolster your defense.)

OR...consider some of the storytelling techniques you've seen and read so far—feel free to incorporate any of those techniques.

**What I don't want to see:**

A standard, academic essay with a five-paragraph format. (Boring and ineffective for an assignment of this nature.)

Use your imagination.

Be creative.

Take risks.

**3. Include a short reflection** (again, format is up to you) on your initial thoughts versus hindsight about this assignment—what have you learned about yourself, about your interviewees? What surprised you? Etc.

**Don't forget a title and pay attention to grammar and mechanics to increase clarity, readability, and understanding.**

### Dialogue:

A written genre, depicting oral discourse; Oral dialogue between congenial souls is far superior to writing because it can lead to truth.

–Plato  
(paraphrased in *Rhetorical Tradition*)

### Important Info

- **Length:** 1000-1200 words
- **Worth:** 15% of total grade
- Email the finished project AND provide one hard copy by the start of class on Tues. Oct. 2.





After experiencing a creative re-creation of a dialogue with others to gain a greater truth about some aspect of yourself, now you will have the opportunity to combine oral tradition and storytelling in a conversation with an older family member that will immerse you in your family's stories. The goal is to acknowledge and understand the past in order to imagine and create a better future to work toward in the present.

**What does this mean?** For example, a more positive future might include developing forgiveness (if, say, the family member talks about a long-standing feud), recognizing the complex nature of truth, respecting others' cultures, becoming more tolerant of something, maintaining a commitment to lived experiences as opposed to superstition, etc. Really, these imaginings for your family's positive future could be anything—it all depends on what stories are told and how you receive them.

**1. Interview one of your oldest and most lucid living relatives** (ie, can't be someone with Alzheimer's—must be someone you can converse extensively with). Goal is to get lots of stories about who and what your family is, where they came from, what defines your family. Also important: Go in-depth about this person's personal history, sto-

ries, experiences and memories. (Stick with open-ended questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how)

**2. Craft essay that tells us who your family is,** based on that one family member's stories, memories, and information. Use the Native authors we've read so far to get ideas about how you can creatively construct this true, nonfiction story.

**3. Include section at end that reflects** on how and why this new information about your family (however much IS new to you) changes what you think about your family or reinforces existing ideas.

**Format:**

Entirely up to you. Standard academic essay is an option, as are all of the other creative ideas you may have. Make sure your language use and grammar fits the framework you choose—make conscious choices.

## Project #2: Who Are You? (Interview family member)

Due: Tuesday Oct. 21,  
2008

Use your imagination.

Be creative.

Take risks.

Don't forget a title and pay attention to clarity, readability, and reader understanding.

### Important Info

- **Length:** 1500-1700 words
- **Worth:** 15% of total grade
- Email the finished project AND provide one hard copy by the start of class on Tues. Oct. 21.

### My Father's Song

Wanting to say things,  
I miss my father tonight  
His voice, the slight catch,  
the depth from his thin chest,  
the tremble of emotion  
in something he has just said  
to his son, his song;

We planted corn one spring at  
Acu—  
we planted several times  
but this one particular time  
I remember the soft damp  
sand  
in my hand.

My father had stopped at one  
point  
to show me an overturned  
furrow,  
the plowshare had unearthed  
the burrow nest of a mouse  
in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny  
pink animals  
into the palm of his hand  
and told me to touch them.  
we took them to the edge  
of the field and put them in the  
shade  
of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness  
of cool and warm sand and  
tiny alive mice  
and my father saying things.

—Simon Ortiz

7.



## Project #3: Who are we?

### Due date:

Tuesday, November 11

In project #1, you wrote about yourself, in project #2, an older family member. For this paper, you will enlarge your view further and look at yourself as a member of a community.

### Which community can you choose?

Obviously, an individual belongs to a variety of communities. For this project, however, you are to choose just **one** community to write about. Which community you choose to focus on is up to you: the town you grew up in, your high school friends, your sorority/fraternity, a group or church, etc.

**1. Research your community.** Examine what stereotypes exist about your chosen community. You can do this through research online, surveying people you know outside this community, via print article or TV show- just to name a few. Develop a list of stereotyped qualities outsiders typically associate with your community.

**2. Interview community members to find out how they define the community** (*how many people you interview is up to you – enough to get some good data*). Using this interview, along with the research you conducted in #1, proceed to #3:

**3. Write your own definition of your chosen community based on your experience and interaction with the group.**

**4. Write your essay.** The purpose of this paper is not only to define your community, but also *tell stories that help outsiders understand the group*. In addition, your essay should concretely and directly address/refute/challenge stereotypes.

### And now, the twist!

In the previous papers, the format of your work has been entirely up to you- poem, play, television show, blog, etc. As a way to prepare you for the final paper, this essay will require you to write (gasp!) a standard academic essay.

**(Turn over for more exciting details)**

### **What a standard academic essay is:**

When writing an academic essay, **you need to have a thesis**. A thesis is simply your argument: in this case, an argument about your community. If I can't disagree with you, it's not a thesis. Here are some questions to get you thinking: Does the media portray your community in a negative light? (How do the media portray your community?) Do people outside your community misunderstand your purpose? **Why** do you think this is so? We will work on writing an effective thesis together in class.

An academic essay **has a thought-provoking conclusion**. Sorry, in college essays, simply restating your thesis just won't cut it anymore. In a conclusion, you want to take your ideas and push them one step further (vague, I know). In this particular paper, you have a topic for your conclusion: **reflect on how you think your community can change those stereotypes, if at all**. Again, we'll work on crafting conclusions in class.

### **What a standard academic essay *isn't*:**

Gone are the days of the 5-paragraph essay! An academic essay should be in paragraph form (with an introduction in the beginning and a conclusion at the end), but you are not limited to five paragraphs.

Contrary to popular belief, academic essays do not have to be boring; in fact, your essay will be better if you let your personality shine through. For an example, look at this assignment sheet. I've used standard English and grammar, but I haven't sacrificed my chosen rhetorical style (slightly less formal than previous assignment sheets). And forget what your high school teacher told you: there are situations where it is ok to use "I" in a paper. As I always say, "Be creative! Take risks!" Don't lose your own voice!

### **Other information:**

This essay should be between **1500-1700 words**, and is worth **15% of your total grade**. Email the finished product and bring one hard copy to class on Tuesday, November 11.



## Project #4: Who Are You? (Critical Analysis of a Text x 2)

Due: Thurs. Dec. 4, 2008

**Goal:** We now take all of the analysis you've been doing of self, family, and community and turn it outward into the wider world—specifically, a world and a realm of experience you are unfamiliar with. Do not fear this exercise, for much knowledge and intellectual growth will result if you attend to the analysis and reflection honestly and thoughtfully. Emphasis here is on critical thinking.

**Assignment:** Critical analysis of a text – this will involve several layers of reading, thinking, and analysis, concluding with you analyzing your own analysis – the first read-through results in one analysis and noticing certain things, the second read-through coupled with analyzing your own analysis of the reading should result in a more thoughtful approach and deeper insight, not only into the text, but also how you see and interpret others through their words.

1. **Follow the syllabus schedule**, read the readings on time (all on Blackboard in Readings folder), conduct the in-class writings and discussions as they arise, and take copious notes. Keep said notes and all writings for use in crafting these essays.

2. **Print out and refer frequently to the Rhetorical Triangle** (also in Blackboard under General Writing folder), for this handout will be your guide and friend throughout this assignment.

3. **First essay (1500-1700 words):** Construct an academic essay that argues for an analysis of one or two of the Anzaldúa readings. The introduction should include your initial gut reaction to the reading, so be sure to make notes in the margins as you read each handout. (ie, does it make you angry? Sad? Guilty? Etc? You will explore WHY you reacted this way later)

**Your thesis statement must be strong, clear, and debatable and focused your objective rhetorical analysis of the reading(s).**

**Second essay:** Reflective response essay. This can be more free-form, but you must re-read any selections you analyzed for the first formal essay, as well as re-read and ANALYZE your initial gut reactions to the works. **In 750-1000 words**, analyze your analysis—this will give you an opportunity to **be self-reflective**. Some questions to get you started (but you are not limited to these and more am-

bitious and thoughtful students will develop and answer additional probing questions): Why did you react the way that you did upon first reading your chosen selections? Why did you focus on whatever elements you chose to focus on for the objective rhetorical analysis? After reading the selections again after having reacted to and analyzed them, how different is your response now—and why do you think you are having that response? The more truthful and more detailed you can be in answering these questions and the deeper beneath the surface you can go, the better this essay will be. *Staying on the surface will guarantee you zero points on this portion of the project, so please ask if you need help!*

**Use your imagination.**

**Be creative.**

**Take risks.**

**Don't forget a title (one per essay) and pay attention to grammar and mechanics to increase clarity, readability, and understanding.**

Analysis/  
Reflection/  
Analysis:

“Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people..Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.”

—Gloria Anzaldúa,  
*Borderlands*

### Important Info

- **Length:** (1<sup>st</sup> essay = 1500-1700 words, 2<sup>nd</sup> response essay = 750 - 1000 words)
- **Worth:** 20% of total grade
- Email the finished project AND provide one hard copy by the start of class on Thurs. Dec. 4 (last class day)

## 9. ENGL 1100 Fall 2008: Final Presentation & Reflective Essay

**Presentation Due:** Thursday, Dec. 4

**Presentation Format:** Visual and Verbal. No PowerPoint.

**Length:** 5:00 minutes

**Presentation Component:** Use oral and visual storytelling, experience, and information to tell a story – about yourself, about a friend, a family, a place, a community. Who or what you focus on is up to you – now that you have the storytelling skills and ability to discover information, go for it! Be as creative as possible. Keep it personal – no “story of America” (for example), unless you are going to tell us the story of your great-great-grandfather who sailed to America from Ireland in the cargo hold of a whaling ship – which keeps it personally connected to YOU. Use your imagination. Take risks. Trust yourself. Trust the story. And show us what rhetorical sovereignty means to you.

**Final Reflective Essay Due:** Monday, Dec. 8

**Write a comprehensive reflective essay answering the following questions:**

What have you learned about storytelling, the idea of rhetorical sovereignty, and language this semester? How will you incorporate this new knowledge into your life?

How has *your perception* of self, family, community, and Native Americans changed (or not)?

WHY did your perception change (or not)?

What was your favorite reading? WHY?

What have you learned about writing this semester?

What are the three most important ideas *overall* that will stay with you? WHY?

(500 – 750 words minimum, single-spaced, one-two pages)

**Remember** that the reflective essay will give you the opportunity to reflect and comment on what you have read, discussed, written, and learned over the semester. This short essay should **address YOUR development** as a writer and thinker, with particular focus on your writing and research.

## APPENDIX B. Research Participant Consent Form

### INFORMED CONSENT for a Research Study entitled “Conversations in Story(ality)”

You are invited to participate in a research study to contribute significant new knowledge to the fields of Native American Studies and Composition and Rhetoric Studies. In my dissertation I intend to argue that unconventional, non-academic Native American intellectuals are worth considering in a scholarly way – that they have something to offer the academy because of how and why they use language to create particular story(alities) that affect real tribal people living in real time and real places outside academe. The study is being conducted by Amanda Lynch Morris, PhD Candidate, under the direction of Dr. Hilary Wyss, Hargis Professor, in the Auburn University Department of English. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a Native American stand-up comedian or tribal web site designer and are age 19 or older.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to answer some questions about storytelling and rhetorical choices in your work. Your total time commitment will be approximately 30 minutes to one hour.

Are there any risks or discomforts? The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal to none and related to your privacy. If you agree to allow your full name to be used, please indicate this acceptance by checking the box below. To minimize these risks, I will permit you to remain anonymous. Please check the appropriate box below.

- I agree to allow Amanda Lynch Morris to use my full name when quoting me in this project.
- I prefer to remain anonymous and do not give Amanda Lynch Morris permission to use my full name in the project.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? If you participate in this study, you can expect to have the opportunity to say what you think in your own words and to have those words appear in a scholarly publication. If I am fortunate enough to have it published, your voice will be heard by an audience (scholars) who typically dismiss non-academic voices as illegitimate in the academy. Knowledge and new information about how Native intellectuals outside the academy use language to tell stories of their experiences will not only increase scholars’ knowledge and awareness of these populations, but will also benefit Native populations by reducing racism and increasing knowledge about their existence and skill with language. I cannot promise you that you will receive any or all of the benefits described.

Will you receive compensation for participating? To thank you for your time you will be offered the opportunity to review the project in its entirety prior to publication and to be listed in the acknowledgments as a participant.

Are there any costs? If you decide to participate, your cost will be the time you expend answering my questions, but there is no financial cost related to your participation.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University or the Department of English.

Participant’s initials \_\_\_\_\_

Your privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous (or confidential) unless you have indicated that your full name may be used. Information obtained through your participation may be used to fulfill the dissertation requirement for the PhD in English, be published in a professional journal, presented at a professional meeting, and/or be published in book form.

If you have questions about this study, please ask them now or contact Amanda Lynch Morris at 412-327-0472 or [morrial@auburn.edu](mailto:morrial@auburn.edu). Please keep a copy of this document for your records.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at [subjec@auburn.edu](mailto:subjec@auburn.edu) or [IRBChair@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBChair@auburn.edu).

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

_____ Participant's signature	_____ Date	_____ Investigator obtaining consent	_____ Date
_____ Printed Name		_____ Printed Name	