UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Storytelling: The Heart of American Indian Scholarship

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0qg114c0

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(1)

ISSN
0161-6463

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Publication Date
2007

DOI
10.17953

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AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL 30:4 (2006) 109–119

COMMENTARY

Storytelling: The Heart of American Indian Scholarship

FRANCES WASHBURN

Recently some writers and scholars have complained that the academy, particularly American Indian Studies (AIS) programs, gives too much attention to American Indian literature while ignoring scholarly works that focus on the pressing needs of American Indian communities in the areas of economic development, social justice, and sovereignty, among others. For example, in the preface to *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*, Devon Abbott Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson write: "Awards are seemingly presented to . . . poets and novelists. . . . Not enough is being written about tribal needs and concerns, but an inordinate amount of attention is focused on fiction."[1] Almost every person teaching in AIS programs probably would agree that attention needs to be focused on tribal needs and concerns. However, as a professor of American Indian literature, I must respectfully disagree with Mihesuah and Wilson's assertion that too much attention is focused on fiction. It seems that quite the opposite is true.

Intelligent people of good faith will disagree on this issue, but one way of testing the validity of the claim that too much attention is given to American Indian literature to the detriment of writing that emphasizes tribal needs and concerns is to examine the situation through three different lenses:

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1. coursework offerings in AIS programs and departments and course concentrations chosen by students in AIS programs
2. the representation of literature and writing about literature versus scholarly writing in the main peer-reviewed journals that publish American Indian articles
3. awards given for literature and nonfiction scholarly writing

I define *literature* as oral and written stories that include poetry, creative nonfiction, novels, short stories, tales about real people that have achieved mythic proportions, and some historical information such as the speeches of famous American Indian leaders and the essays of historical figures such as William Apes.

I believe that American Indian literature is underrepresented in the academy and that American Indian literature has a greater worth than "just" the aesthetic value of the work. American Indian literature can and should provide pleasurable reading experiences and offer a gateway for Native and non-Native people to understanding the very issues that need to be exposed to wider public view, discussed, and resolved if American Indians are to have equal opportunities for success in this country that once belonged entirely to them.

LITERATURE IN AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES PROGRAMS

The AIS program at the University of Arizona employs eleven core faculty members. Thirty-three professors from other departments are affiliate faculty in the program, but only two professors currently teach American Indian literature, although other affiliate faculty members occasionally teach related courses. This means that a little more than 6 percent of faculty members are teaching literature, or, viewed conversely, 94 percent of the professors at the University of Arizona are not teaching literature but are teaching in other areas that certainly may be viewed as contributing to the discussion of challenges facing American Indian communities.[2]

Fourteen courses were offered for the fall 2006 semester and only three, approximately 21 percent, were literature. The spring semester of 2007 has a slightly higher percentage—fourteen course offerings of which four, or approximately 29 percent, are literature. The fewer course offerings in literature at the University of Arizona reflect the student interest level. Students can choose from one of four course concentrations: American Indian literature, American Indian law and policy, societies and cultures, or American Indian education. Most students in the program are interested in gaining a practical education, one that enables them to go back to their home reservations (in the case of Native students) and contribute to the betterment of their communities. Of the fifty-one students enrolled in doctoral, master of arts, or master of arts/juris doctor programs, only five students, approximately 10 percent, are choosing a literature concentration, and two of those are non-Native.[3] The non-Native students, of course, do not have a home reservation or tribal affiliation, and that may be partly why they chose a literature concentration rather than one that might have more direct possibilities for work within an Indian community.[4] However, other non-Native students are choosing course concentrations such as American Indian law and policy, and these students, although non-Native, also hope to contribute something of practical value to Indian communities.

Considering the low level of interest in literature from AIS students, it may seem strange that literature courses are offered at all; however, all students enrolled in AIS degree programs are required to take at least one course (three units) in each of the four concentrations as part of a well-rounded education. Furthermore, these literature courses are cross-listed in the English Department, in which there are English majors interested in an American Indian literature concentration, comparative literature, or ethnic literatures in general. Although AIS at the University of Arizona confers only graduate degrees, it does offer a minor for the baccalaureate degree; therefore, some of the literature offerings are undergraduate level or mixed undergraduate/graduate. It is these undergraduate entry-level courses that draw students from throughout the disciplines. In particular, the undergraduate AIS 477 American Indian literature course with an enrollment cap of forty is usually full, but in the 477 courses I have taught, the enrolled students are primarily English majors with a sprinkling of students with majors in other departments including everything from journalism to biology. The main interest in American Indian literature at the University of Arizona is not coming from AIS students but from non-Native students in other disciplines, particularly English.

Although it is gratifying to most educators and scholars that more American Indian students are interested in a practical education with the goal of going home to work within their communities, it is also of deep concern that so few are interested in literature. Not everyone is a natural storyteller, but those who have the ability may also have a responsibility. Traditionally, storytellers were the repositories of information, the living libraries for their nations, and respected members of their communities. That information now can be stored in written form does not lessen the responsibility of storytellers or writers and does not mean that these people are less deserving of respect. If Native people do not write and tell their stories, and/or interpret their stories and the stories of others for all people, then non-Native people—anthropologists, ethnologists, historians, novelists, and poets—will write stories about American Indians and interpret Indian-authored literature. Some of these scholars are talented and ethical individuals who do their best to offer accurate and valid information, but they do not have the experience of lived culture. For Native people to abdicate literature almost entirely to non-Native people may have far-reaching and unforeseen consequences for the future. Some consequences may already be apparent.

Wilson writes compellingly of her experiences with literature written by non-Native people about Native people or that includes references to American Indian people. In her essay published in *Unlearning the Language of Conquest,* Wilson describes the distress of her daughter, Autumn, when Autumn's teacher was reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* to Autumn's class.[5] Among other anti-Indian messages, one of the characters in the Wilder book states that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian."[6] Wilson reacted promptly and responsibly. With the cooperation of her daughter's teacher, Wilson spoke to the class about the problems she saw in the Wilder book. She also wrote a critique of the book, which she presented to the local school board. To its credit, the board agreed to remove the book temporarily from the curriculum until a committee could decide on the issue. In the meantime, however, the story of Wilson's complaint was printed in the local newspaper. The Minnesota Teachers' Union then notified the American Civil Liberties Union. That agency threatened the school board with legal action if the book was not immediately reinstated into the curriculum, and the school board caved in. According to Wilson, "The teacher had won and six books in the Little House series would continue to be taught in the Yellow Medicine East School District, two books per year in the third through fifth grades."[7]

That decision is an outrage. Children do not have well-developed critical-thinking skills. When racist information is presented to them at a very young age, particularly when it is introduced in books that seem to be acceptable and interesting in other ways, that information becomes internalized. Racist messages are hitchhikers on the innocuous and pleasurable parts of the stories and become part of children's psyches.

Wilson's article is an outstanding argument for the writing and promotion of American Indian literature at all levels from K-12 through adult but perhaps even more importantly for young children. An old aphorism states that "as the twig is bent, so the tree will grow." When these "twigs" become young saplings and enter higher education, they need to continue to be exposed to American Indian literature that documents the American Indian experience from the American Indian point of view. Unfortunately, it seems that the trend is toward less literature at the college level.

The preceding information that documents course offerings at the University of Arizona seems to be typical of other institutions across the United States and Canada that offer some form of the master of arts or doctorate. A Web site maintained by Robert M. Nelson offers a listing of Native American Studies programs and departments across the United States and Canada with links to each institution's Web site.[8] Twenty of these institutions offer some form of the master of arts or doctorate, and thirty-six of them offer either a bachelor of science or a bachelor of arts in AIS. Information about student choices for area concentrations is not on the Web sites of individual institutions, but it seems that they must be similar to those students' choices at the University of Arizona, that is, that most students are not choosing a literature concentration.[9] This conclusion is warranted based on the assumption that if students were choosing a literature concentration in high numbers, then the course offerings would reflect that high demand.

The catalog of course titles and descriptions for the bachelor's degree and graduate degrees at the University of California (UC), Berkeley, does not list a single course that is specifically about literature. It appears that literature may be included as a part of the course requirements in some classes, but it is not the main focus. The statement of purpose on the UC Berkeley Web site specifically addresses the interests and concerns of tribal communities:

> The Native American Studies Program exists to broaden the understanding of students interested in the history, culture, and contemporary situations of Native Americans in the United States. The curriculum has been structured to provide courses that deal with both historical and contemporary legal and social institutions that affect Native American life. The program not only stresses sound academic preparation in the classroom but also allows students the flexibility to take part in community-oriented educations through fieldwork or studies directed towards community situations and problems.[10]

From this information, it seems obvious that academic institutions are not focusing an "inordinate amount of attention" on fiction. Admittedly, the information given herein does not include an examination of possible American Indian literature courses offered through English departments at colleges and universities that do not have a separate AIS program.

AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES JOURNALS

Five peer-reviewed journals publish articles relating to AIS. They are the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* (*AICRJ*), *American Indian Quarterly* (*AIQ*), *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal* (*INSJ*), *Studies in American Indian Literature* (*SAIL*), and *Wicazo Sa*. Of these, only one, *SAIL*, is dedicated entirely to American Indian literature, and this journal rarely publishes fiction or poetry but publishes mostly scholarly examinations of literature, which often address American Indian needs and concerns that are embedded within the literature. An examination of past issues demonstrates that *AIQ*, *INSJ*, and *Wicazo Sa* publish mostly articles of social, political, and historical interest about American Indians.

AICRJ publishes a mix of scholarly articles, commentaries, book reviews, some original creative works, mostly poetry, and, rarely, a short story. However, of the past six journal issues published, none contain any original creative works of poetry or fiction. Of the thirty articles published in these last six issues, only three, or 10 percent, are on the topic of literature. An examination of the past ten years of *AICRJ* issues shows that this journal published 246 articles, but only seventeen of those, approximately 6.9 percent, are on literature topics, although one entire issue (28:1, 2004) was devoted entirely to the pedagogy of Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*.[11] Because *SAIL* focuses entirely on American Indian literature, perhaps the editors of the other four journals feel that they should focus on other areas of interest to American Indian scholars and communities. With only one journal dedicated to publishing scholarly articles on literature and the other four journals publishing such a small percentage of literature and literature-related articles, it seems that there is an underemphasis on fiction and poetry.

AWARDS

In the preface to *Indigenizing the Academy*, Mihesuah and Wilson offer no statistical information about their claim that awards go mostly to writers of poetry and fiction. They may well be right, but it is impossible to tell because they cite no sources to back up this claim. Perhaps that is why they prefaced their statement with the word *seemingly*. It is also unclear what the term *awards* means, but it seems that they mean awards for published works and, specifically, book awards such as the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics' Circle Award along with other less well-known awards such as the Western States Literature Award. To this writer's knowledge, only three awards are specifically for texts written by or about Native Americans, although there could be more, probably some small, less-publicized ones given by state, local, or community agencies.

The Wordcraft Circle Awards are given annually by members of this organization of writers—mostly Native, but with a few non-Native members as well, in several categories of writing.[12] The Tulsa Library Trust gives the American Indian Festival of Words Award, initiated in 2001, biannually.[13] The Native Writers' Circle of the Americas offers awards in three areas: Lifetime Achievement Award, First Book Award in Poetry, and First Book Award in Prose.[14] Although it is not clear if the prose category includes fiction and nonfiction scholarly works, it appears that the winners listed on its Web site are all fiction writers.

The big mainstream awards for fiction and nonfiction writing are for writers of all races and ethnicities not just for works written by or about American Indians. Therefore, scholarly articles about American Indian challenges and concerns must compete with all the other writing about all the other topics of interest and concern to the broader reading public in the United States. In the case of some grand prizes such as the Nobel Prize, the honorees are drawn from the entire world writing pool. On the larger scale of international events, it seems that award-granting agencies and committees generally consider the concerns of the American Indian population to be of less interest and worth, if they think of these issues at all, than the concerns of the larger mainstream world population that reads mostly in English. Is it a willful lack of concern that dictates this outcome? More likely, it is simple demographics.

American Indians make up less than 1 percent of the population of the United States and are only a drop in the sea of the larger world population, so it is not surprising that nonfiction works about American Indians are not winning awards, at least not those written by American Indians who reside in the United States. American Indian Rigoberto Menchú, a Quiche Mayan woman from Guatemala who is a social activist on behalf of indigenous rights, won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992.[15] Her situation is unusual, an anomaly that came about because her writing and her activism within her own Quiche Mayan Nation and Guatemala were part of the larger, far more visible conflict in El Salvador and Guatemala in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For better or worse, such visibility is unlikely to happen for American Indian nonfiction writers in the United States. Therefore, it is up to American Indians to make themselves more visible in the larger national and global communities and win awards for their writing, but winning awards should not be the goal of writing and publishing.

It is doubtful that fiction writers or poets deliberately choose to write what they do simply because they perceive that there might be more awards offered for literature than for nonfiction writing. Furthermore, it seems to benefit all American Indians when a poet, fiction writer, or playwright of American Indian ancestry wins an award. It reminds mainstream America that Indians have not vanished but are alive and producing exemplary writing. It bears mentioning that the most famous American Indian nonfiction writer of all, Vine Deloria Jr., won awards for his writing.[16]

THE TRADITIONAL VALUE OF STORYTELLING

It is important to remember that prior to colonial contact the bulk of information in American Indian cultures was communicated through stories told orally, remembered, and passed on, and that the written form of communication is a relatively recent development for most Native nations. Certainly, American Indians should take advantage of both forms of transmitting information, but the usefulness of stories, oral and written, as opposed to nonfiction factual writing to convey that information should not be discounted.

Leslie Marmon Silko expressed the value of stories most eloquently when she wrote:

> I will tell you something about stories,
> [he said]
> They aren't just entertainment.
> Don't be fooled.
> They are all we have, you see,
> All we have to fight off
> illness and death.
> You don't have anything,
> if you don't have the stories.[17]

It might be said that the preceding quote is self-serving or self-referential because it is a quote from literature (or stories) in support of literature. Even so, it is, in this writer's opinion, an accurate statement about how stories are valued in American Indian communities.

Another Native writer, Thomas King, also eloquently defends and promotes American Indian storytelling in *The Truth about Stories*.[18] This is not a scholarly work or fiction, but it is creative nonfiction that weaves stories from oral tradition together with his personal narrative and informational anecdotes about the myriad of problems facing American Indian communities in the past, present, and future. His writing style is conversational, comfortable, and accessible for everyone, but the content is disconcerting and far from comfortable. He pulls readers in with his "we're just chatting in the living room over coffee" style, and then he tells stories of real people who were horribly, tragically affected by such events as the House Concurrent Resolution 108, commonly known as the termination act. People who probably would never read a scholarly article on the effects of the termination act are gently (or perhaps, not so gently, depending on the reader response to King's narrative) informed of the facts and their repercussions through storytelling. King's writing introduces readers to information that they may not have known but does not absolve the reader from responsibility for taking action on that information. Every chapter ends with something like this:

> Take Louis' story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But 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.[19]

AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE AS A SUBVERSIVE ACT

There may be some validity to the idea that non-Natives are interested in American Indian literature simply out of curiosity, that their interest is a form of cultural voyeurism, similar to the trendy Southwest home-decorating trend in which upper-middle-class people sprinkle their homes with bandana-draped howling coyotes and Kat'sina dolls without knowing or caring about the cultural origins of such items. Other non-Native literature students take a class and find that reading the literature has piqued their interest into the concerns of American Indians in the twenty-first century. In the future, these students may contribute to the betterment of Indian communities by taking a social service job that serves Indian people, volunteering at service agencies on reservations, or working in any of a myriad of other positions in business or government that benefit American Indians directly or indirectly. Furthermore, a literature professor has no way of knowing the future of any student in his/her classroom. It is possible that one or more of these students may rise to a position of power in government or business, and, if they had a positive, objective learning experience in a literature class in which they learned about the contemporary situations of American Indians and the historical conditions from which these situations arise, they might be more likely to look favorably on Indian issues that come before them in the course of their careers. As long as the demographic of American Indians in the United States remains as small as it is in comparison to the mainstream population, then Indian people need to make allies.

Teachers of American Indian literature have an opportunity to make future allies within the mainstream population. Although we should teach American Indian literature for its aesthetic value, in order for non-Native students to understand and appreciate contemporary Indian situations, the literature must also be taught in context with the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic realities of American Indians. For example, all students gain a deeper understanding of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* if they are also introduced to the facts about the Dawes Act of 1887 because land allotment and its consequences form the backbone of this novel.[20] Using nonfiction texts alongside the literature also helps promote understanding of the literature and of contemporary issues for American Indians. Thomas King's *The Truth about Stories* is an excellent companion text as is M. Annette Jaimes edited volume, *The State of Native America*.[21]

Teaching American Indian literature with the appropriate contexts can also provide some insulation, some comfort if you will, for young Native students who are forced to read in school such racist material as is included in some of the Laura Ingalls Wilder books. Knowing and reading our stories, told by our own people, offers a source of cultural pride and a means to survival in a world that, in the words of Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, "cannot recognize it [anti-Indian educational and cultural hegemony] even when it appears right before their eyes."[22]

CONCLUSION

American Indian literature must continue to be written, read, and emphasized in families, communities, and throughout the formal educational system. It should be written for American Indians first, as instructional stories, just as our traditional stories have always been, but literature also must be used as instructional stories for the non-Native audience.

Writers of scholarly articles about the needs and concerns of American Indian communities should also consider publishing those essays in more general journals, such as those in the fields of anthropology, ethnology, history, law, and political science. If scholarly writers publish only in AIS journals, then they are doing the equivalent of preaching to the choir. If we are to make allies among the larger demographic, then our messages must be published for wider audiences. Perhaps scholarly and literary writers could do as novelist Louise Erdrich has done and consider writing articles for publications in mainstream popular magazines. A recent issue of *Smithsonian* contains an article by Erdrich about the town of Wahpeton, North Dakota, where she grew up.[23] It is a gentle story, full of reminiscences about the history of the area, the buildings, and the people, Native and non-Native. Erdrich details her own family history and the ways in which the Ojibway people contributed to the building and continuance of this town. It is a way to remind mainstream readers that American Indians are alive, if not always well, and contributing to broader communities.

There should be more awards for scholarly writing. University presses send out author information sheets that request that writers list possible awards for which they might qualify. University presses are often underfunded and understaffed with little time to think about possible awards for any particular book. It would behoove all writers, literary or scholarly, to research what awards are available and list on their author information sheets every one that could possibly apply to their work. Finally, we should all consider asking our communities, nations, and educational institutions to create new awards for scholarly writing in AIS.

Raise your voices. Tell your stories. They must all be heard.

NOTES

1. Devon Abbott Mihesuah and Angela Cavender Wilson, *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 2–3.

2. The two professors teaching literature are Professor Luci Tapahonso, who has a joint appointment in English and the AIS program and Dr. Franci Washburn who also holds a joint appointment in English and the AIS program. Dr. Larry Evers, Chair of the English Department, teaches a rare, occasional course in American Indian literature. Dr. Barbara Babcock teaches folklore classes that usually have an American Indian focus or component. Usually, AIS graduate students teach summer courses in literature and film.

3. The AIS program at the University of Arizona confers only graduate degrees.

4. Statistics on the number of students and their course concentrations provided by Shelly Lowe, graduate adviser, AIS program at the University of Arizona (e-mail, July 2006).

5. Waziyatawin Angela Cavender Wilson, "Burning Down the House: Laura Ingalls Wilder and American Colonialism," in *Unlearning the Language of Conquest: Anti-Indianism in American,* ed. Four Arrows (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 66–80.

6. Ibid., 68.

7. Ibid., 69.

8. Robert M. Nelson, ed., "A Guide to Native American Studies Programs in the United States and Canada," http://oncampus.richmond.edu/faculty/ASAIL/guide/guide.html (accessed 17 July 2006).

9. Telephone calls were made to several institutions inquiring about literature offerings in their programs, but the answers were not satisfactory. Invariably, the author was directed to "see the Web site."

10. See the UC Berkeley Web site at ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/nas/.

11. See the *AICRJ* Web site (http://www.books.aisc.ucla.edu/ [accessed 26 January 2007]) for table of contents listings for all issues. I have tried carefully and accurately to count the total number of articles published for the past ten years and to decide, based on the article titles, which ones have a literature focus and which ones do not. I counted as articles only those that *AICRJ* lists as articles and not those publications listed as commentaries. I accept full responsibility for any mathematical errors or errors in judging the focus of the articles based on the titles. However, I believe that my figures and my judgments on article content bear out my assertions.

12. Wordcraft Circle is an international organization of indigenous writers founded in 1992 with Lee Francis III serving as national director until his death in 2004. His son, Lee Francis IV, is currently national director.

13. The past three winners are Joy Harjo for 2001, Vine Deloria Jr. for 2003, and Leslie Marmon Silko for 2005, according to Teresa Runnells, American Indian Resource Center Coordinator, 400 Civic Center, Tulsa, OK, 74103-3850.

14. These awards are sponsored by the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oklahoma.

15. Rigoberto Menchú and Elizabeth Burgos Debray, eds., *I, Rigoberto Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (New York and London: Versos, 1984).

16. These awards include the 1999 Wordcraft Circle Writer of the Year Award, the 2002 Wallace Stegner Award from the Center of the American West, and the 2003 Author Award from the American Indian Festival of Words.

17. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 2.

18. Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: Dead Dog Café Productions and the Canadian Broadcasting System, 2003).

19. Ibid., 136–38.

20. Louise Erdrich, *Tracks* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1988).

21. M. Annette Jaimes, *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

22. Wilson, "Burning Down the House," 68.

23. Louise Erdrich, "A Writer's Beginnings, My Kind of Town: Wahpeton, North Dakota," *Smithsonian* (August 2006), 99–103.