

YOUR WORST NIGHTMARE--AN INDIAN WITH A BOOK:
LITERARY EMPOWERMENT FOR NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS IN THE
EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

By

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ABSTRACT

Native American rates of graduation are extremely low in comparison to the rest of the United States public and the classes which are considered “assimilative” classes have among the worst success rates for Native American students. Among these assimilative classes is the field of literature. This thesis explores how literature is assimilative and progresses through how it can be empowering for students. The thesis discusses the importance of incorporating Native American worldviews into the literary classroom and provides specific suggestions for teaching literature to Native Americans to enable it to be empowering rather than assimilative. These new methods of teaching will lead to better success rates among Native American students as well as increased self-esteem and pride in culture.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Not long ago, while discussing future career options with a colleague of mine, there was brief mention of the need for teachers on the Native American¹ reservations, something that I have heard quite frequently; however, I was struck when my colleague continued by detailing that the most needed teachers were those in the more “assimilated” fields, including English Literature and Writing. I had never stopped to consider literature or writing as being an assimilative discipline, which would entail that it is a discipline aimed at converting or absorbing individuals from various cultures to fit the ideals and culture of the dominant society. This had not crossed my mind in regards to literature especially in times where the subject has grown so large that it has branched into its own unique sub-fields such as Black Literature, Women’s Literature, and Chicano Literature, not to mention Native American Literature. Having used literature in the past as a tool for assimilating Native American peoples, it became apparent that perhaps it still unintentionally carries with it the assimilative ideology and rhetoric. If that was not eye-opening enough for me, my colleague then briefly mentioned that the success rates of Native American students in these assimilative classes is among the lowest.

Studies have shown that graduation rates of Native American students are

¹ The terms Native American, American Indian and Indian will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. When appropriate, specific tribal affiliations will be referenced instead. When appropriate, specific tribal affiliations will be utilized.

extraordinarily low in comparison to the rest of the United States student population. According to a study by the Manhattan Institute conducted from 1996 to 2000, the average graduation rate for Native American students was a national average of a mere 57%, a drastic difference when compared to the Euro-American national average of 76%. The study showed no differences between those students in rural settings, reservation schools, or urban environments; however, the graduation rates remained consistently low. Nebraska ranked lowest in graduation rates for Native American students, graduating only 40% in comparison to a 53% African-American average and an 88% graduation rate for Euro-American students (Greene and Winters 2002). The Office of Public Instruction (OPI) in Montana conducted a similar report in 2003. According to the OPI, Montana has a three-year completion average for Native American students of 60.6%, in comparison to the Euro-American students who had an average of 86.4% (McCulloch 2004).

The statistics from both the Manhattan Institute and Montana's OPI are disturbing; however, neither of them takes into consideration the student dropout averages of Native students who never make it to the high school setting. Most Native students who dropout of school, do so in the 7th and 8th grades, therefore, were not a part of the surveys conducted. Greg Sarris, a Pomo/Miwok scholar, takes these younger students into consideration in observing the dropout rates for California Native students. In California alone an estimated 80%-of the Native American students "drop out by ninth grade. Even more troubling, is that less than eight percent graduate from high school" (Sarris 1993: 173). All of these statistics put together become quite disheartening to

those of use in the educational fields.

After knowing these statistics I could not seem to move past what I had heard in that conversation, a conversation now that my colleague has little recollection of, and I felt as though this was a topic that was well worth exploring further. I began questioning why the so-called success rate was so low, and what exactly needed to be changed in the classroom setting to make literature more accessible and desirable for Native American students, without it being considered an assimilative discipline.

The thesis that follows is an exploration of possible solutions to teaching literature to Native students in order to make it more accessible and less assimilative. I will begin this thesis by considering the importance of teaching literature. What purpose does literature serve in the lives of Native American students? How has literature become an “assimilative” discipline as my colleague had suggested, which aims to absorb Native students into the dominant Euro-American society? Is it possible to maintain the significance of literature while removing its assimilative aspects? I will suggest that literature can and should remain an important discipline for Native American students and that it is possible to remove the assimilative aspects from its classroom teachings; however, it must be taught in a new and even revolutionary way in order for Native American students’ success rates to increase within the discipline. I will do this through exploring possible methods of teaching literature to Native American students.

The proposed models will all be based upon the idea of worldview, the distinct, unique and inherent way of viewing the world and understanding it in terms of one’s own culture and life experiences. Therefore, a portion of this thesis will focus on Native

American worldviews, exploring some of the contradictions and dichotomies between Western worldview, or that of the dominant culture that is typically taught in schools, and that of Native American cultures. Understanding the differences in worldviews will open the doors to new interpretations of literary texts that will allow for the Native American student to decipher the text from within the context of their own worldviews.

From this point I will be able to suggest specific methods or models for teaching these texts to Native Americans in a manner that is not assimilative yet will enable them to receive the benefits of the literary discipline. Ultimately, these methods should lead to higher success rates for Native American students both on and off the reservation and eliminate the notion that literature is an assimilative discipline.

PART ONE:
WHAT IS LITERATURE?

CHAPTER 2: WHAT IS LITERATURE?

One of the beautiful aspects of literature is that it is the voice of the people, all of whom are expressing their own personal experiences and commenting upon their own histories and political situations. Native American peoples are a diverse group. Each specific culture possesses their own unique histories, triumphs and obstacles; however, they all share a history of oppression at the hands of their Euro-American colonizers. There exist in the United States, and around the world, a multitude of peoples who share similar experiences of life under oppression. Many of these groups have also developed their own genres of literature as well as theories as to how literature can and ought to be utilized. Because of their shared experiences of oppression, or attempted assimilation by the dominant society, each theory of literature from these various groups is applicable as well to the study of literature and its importance in the lives of Native Americans.

Literature and literary theories have encompassed several different outlets through their historical existence. At one time, according to Morris Dickstein, “literature and history were denied their power to convey truth or depict the world. Instead they were seen as ideological formations and discursive constructions” (Dickstein 2003). Dickstein focuses on reviving the historical contexts and commentaries of literatures as a valid method studying, as well as teaching, literature. Dickstein’s perspective notes that there is a balance between social, political and historical contexts and literature. This balance provides literature with the power of “language, voice and formal expression” to reveal social or political situations (Dickstein 2003). Dickstein argues that not only can

literature serve to “convey the truth and depict the world” but that it *should* do so.

Literature can and should serve as a witness to the social and cultural conditions of society. Under Dickstein’s theories literature is more about minute details of ideological formations and less about interpreting literary constructions. As an example, Dickstein would argue that it is more important to read Shakespeare’s plays in terms of their social and historical contexts rather than in terms of their poetic composition. Dickstein’s focus is upon finding the historical presence found in literature, which cannot be done without also understanding the culture(s) of the time periods presented within a body of literature.

Literature is the expression of culture through the means of sharing stories. Sarris recognizes that storytelling is a foundational characteristic of culture and that stories can therefore serve to provide what he calls a “cultural index” for appropriate ways that people should act within their own cultural contexts (Sarris 1993: 4). Literature, as a form of storytelling, can oppress or liberate, educate or keep individuals in ignorance depending upon the ways in which literature is written, read and taught. If it is taught solely from the colonizer’s mindset and if only the colonizer’s experiences are read about then literature serves to oppress those who are not a part of the colonizer’s culture. Oppression occurs as a result of the overwhelming portrayal of the colonizer’s lifestyle as the accepted norm of life as well as through the inherent forced ideology of how to write, speak or react. Each aspect of repeatedly and solely reading the colonizer’s life experiences can become quite suffocating to the students of the colonized cultures. If literature is written by the oppressed, however, revealing within it the truths of their world, and taught through the ways in which the oppressed view and understand the

world then literature can be very enlightening and liberating.

Literature has the power to raise questions, reveal the truths of the world and educate the public about different cultures and lifestyles. Most, if not all, stories whether written or spoken contain within them morals, political commentaries or social critiques that address the lifestyles of those who are telling them as well as those who are receiving them. Stories within literature serve as guidelines for how to act in the world through the sharing specific cultural morals and commentaries. Elaine Showalter, a feminist scholar of literature and culture, agrees with the educational and liberating aspects of literature and storytelling. She rhetorically asks “why isn’t literature, rather than theory, the best place to go for help about morality, love, evil, death, suffering, and truth, among other things?” (Showalter 2004: B9). Showalter’s focus is on empowering feminists within literature; however, similar morals can be used by and for Native Americans in terms of their own literary empowerment. Literature, therefore, should be one of the main disciplines for not only learning about the world but also for learning about oneself and one’s own individual culture. Literature can be the means through which life lessons, morals and truth can be learned and practiced.

In short, literature is the personification of worldviews, ways of making sense of and understanding the world around us all. Literature is a means through which a dialogue can be developed that explores worldviews, political situations and lessons of morality and values. Literature is formed through language and because of this use of language literature is “not just a *representation* of interaction but also the *occasion* for interaction” (italics in original) (Sarris 1993: 5). It is the occasion of interaction that

leads to liberation and it is also what imperatively needs to be present in any classroom. When a teacher stands at the front of the classroom and dictates to the students how to read any piece of literature or tells the students how they should react, interpret and understand a work of literature, the teacher and the classroom all become highly oppressive. For example, teachers that take students line by line through a poem and tell them exactly what each metaphor means rather than letting the student interpret the metaphors on their own becomes a dictator of thought. A teacher who does such is not teaching a poem or a piece of literature as much as they are teaching an ideology, a specific way of thinking. The literature becomes an agent for oppressing the individuals and repressing the students' own individual and unique thoughts. The result is therefore the corruption of the liberating aspects of literature as a discipline and deforming of it into a tool for assimilation and suppression. Greg Sarris explains that "one teacher who converses with a student only to convince the student that a certain method of definition is absolute or correct" is ignoring the potential for dialogue and interaction (Sarris 1993: 5). Similarly, students who find themselves in such an environment are likely to silence the many voices and dialogues that one piece of literature is able to present and therefore ultimately assimilates the student into the teacher's mindset.

Depending on how it is utilized, literature has many benevolent aspects that are encompassed within it. It provides a voice to the writer to express culture, politics and societal conflicts; however if it is not taught properly it can serve to silence not only the writers, but also the readers. Literature can be a tool of oppression or a means of liberation.

CHAPTER 3:

LITERATURE AS AN AGENT FOR ASSIMIATION

Colonizers, those who are in control, find many ways to oppress the colonized while simultaneously attempting to assimilate them into the colonizer's lifestyle and society. The colonizers of United States, under the guise of the federal government, have found many ways to oppress the Native peoples of this land while experimenting with various methods of assimilating them into the dominant society. Unfortunately for the colonizers there have been no successful policies made and unfortunately for the colonized there continues to be many attempts still, though in contemporary times these methods are becoming more and more covert.

Previously, assimilation methods included dividing Indian land and parceling it out for farming while intermingling the Natives with the Euro-American populations, such as with the 1887 Dawes, or General Allotment Act. When the government saw that dividing the lands was not enough, they began to divide the people and the families by taking away the children and sending them away to boarding schools. In these schools the children were prohibited from speaking their language or performing their rituals and ceremonies. Laura Donaldson, professor of English at Cornell University and expert on American Indian literature and culture, describes the methods of assimilating the students in boarding schools as "the coercive inculcation of a Westernized habitus, i.e., a set of structured and durable dispositions that incline agents to act and react in certain

Eurocentric ways” (Donaldson 1998). Native American boarding schools were governmentally funded institutions of assimilation.

The assimilation of the Native children occurred through the policies of fear and punishment. The schools “stripped students of their culturally distinct identities, thereby rearing the way for a new Europeanized sense of self. The curriculum of teaching the English alphabet served a similar purpose” (Donaldson 1998). Boarding schools forced Native students to learn the English alphabet, and therefore the English language. When the children finally were allowed to return home to their parents, many could not speak the same language and were at a loss for how to communicate with their own relatives. The English language, forcibly implemented into the students’ lives, therefore became another tactic in assimilating the Natives into the dominate culture. English divided the students from their families back on the reservations, disconnected them from their own languages and forced the students to read, write and think in the Western mindset. The reading classes were, for many Native youths, the most difficult and feared of the boarding school curriculum.

Isabelle Knockwood recalls her experience as a Mi’kmaw student at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Canada as one of fear and isolation. As for her required reading classes she remembers the “dread students felt when the Sister said ‘take out our readers’ ” (qtd. in Donaldson 1998). Students worried each time they were chosen to read aloud, fearing the repercussion if they were to pronounce a word incorrectly or not understand what was being read. Literary studies therefore for many Native students was once marked with great fear and associated with “malevolent

history” of boarding schools and their direct attempts at assimilation into the dominant society’s cultures and ideals (Donaldson 1998). It seems likely then that perhaps there are still remaining fears for Native students studying literature. Because of the experiences of their parents and grandparents due to the government’s policy of forced assimilation there continues to be an ill affect on Native students and distrust of the educational system, which includes studying literature in contemporary times.

It was not until the 1928 Merriam report was publish that the government realized that once again their attempts at assimilating the Native people was not working, because, while the Native students were learning the Westernized ways and language, they were still maintaining their Native American identities. The report was commissioned by the Secretary of the Interior, Hubert Work, who requested that the Institute for Government Research take a detailed look at the economic and social conditions of the Indian peoples. The Merriam report revealed the dire conditions both on the reservations and within the Indian boarding schools and called for drastic changes. Policies that followed included the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, an act that encouraged the establishment of tribal governments and ceased the allotment of lands into individualized parcels. The Reorganization Act was quickly followed by the 1950s Termination Act, another act that attempted to force Natives into assimilating into the dominant Euro- American culture. This time assimilation was meant to occur by taking away the governmental assistance and status of certain tribes and removing them, once again, but this time to urban settings rather than to remote reservation locations. Since the 1950s however, governmental policies towards the assimilation of Native Americans have become more covert.

Currently, governmental policies do not specifically mention the assimilation of Native peoples; however, due to the ever present domination of Euro-American ideologies within many institutions such as the educational system there remains an inherent ideological attempt at assimilation. Joseph Dandurand, a Kwantlen Indian from British Columbia, characterizes the contemporary policies towards Native Americans as being a “quiet revolution of the not-talked-about assimilation of Natives” (Dandurand 2003: 121). Many Native peoples are still feeling the pressures of assimilation in the twenty-first century.

Historically, the written word has been used as a vehicle for the assimilation of Native peoples. Beginning with the missionaries who came over to convert the Natives and progressing through the colonizers who made many treaties with the Natives, the written word was at one point solely based upon the European belief systems as well as the European understanding of the use of language. Donaldson observes that after learning the English alphabet and language, “writing worked alongside these more overt weapons of conquest to re-configure aboriginal cultures and bodies in ways functional for Euramerican imperialism” (Donaldson 1998). Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Wacquant, French sociologists, emphasize the same connection between imperialism and the oppression of a Native peoples by commenting that “Cultural imperialism is a form of symbolic violence that relies on a relationship of constrained communication to extort submission” (qtd. in Smith 2004: 62). The United States government exercised its imperialistic nature in attempting to force the Native peoples into assimilated submission in many ways, one of which was to force the Christian belief system and Euro-American

worldviews onto each Native culture.

Whereas the General Allotment Act attempted to force assimilation through action and physical work, the boarding school systems attempted for force assimilation through altering the Native mindset. Daniel Heath Justice, a Cherokee scholar of Native American literatures, writes that the United State government has used the educational systems to “conform critique and scholarly integrity to the goals and structure of the academy- which remains largely white, largely male, largely straight, and largely dominated by Euro-American ideals of individualism, capitalism, conformity, and knowledge as property” (Justice 2001: 256). The educational systems of the United States inherently suffocate Native American students with Euro-American ideals and thoughts. The system forces the Native students to read from the Western Canon of literature and study the culture and ways of the Euro-American worldview, assuming that it will lead to Euro-American ways of thinking and replace the old Native ways of knowing. Teaching literature written from the Westernized mindset and exploring a Westernized way of living covertly forces the students into a similar mindset, becoming a modernized and clandestine method of assimilation. Such hidden methods of assimilating individuals, though less overtly oppressive, are just as repressive as other more blatant models.

Louis Althusser, a neo-Marxist theorist, emphasizes the struggle for power that occurs between the ruling and working classes, or in relation to Native American studies, between the colonized and the colonizer. Althusser explores the differences between Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).

Repressive State Apparatuses include institutions such as the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts, and the prisons, each of which control the general public through the threat of violence or through the function of direct violence. In opposition to the Repressive State Apparatuses are the Ideological State Apparatuses, those institutions that “present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (Althusser 1998: 153). These are the institutions such as the religious ISAs (including all the different types of religious institutions); the family ISA; the legal ISA; the political ISA (including all types of political parties); the educational ISA (including both the public and private schools); and the cultural ISA (literature, arts, sports) (Althusser 1998: 135-154). In short, each of these ISA institutions functions through the premise of controlling the mindset and ways of thought through intended or unintended consent of the general public. Students generally give their unintended consent in the classroom, accepting what is taught by the teacher’s direction education, i.e. telling each individual how and what to think. These institutions do not rely on the physical threat of violence because they covertly attempt to control the individuals’ minds through submissively guiding their thought processes. It is in the mention of the last two ISAs listed that the idea of literature as an assimilative agent occurs. The thought processes as dictated through these ISAs are “*beneath the ruling ideology*, which is the ideology of the ‘ruling class’” (emphasis in original. Althusser 1998: 155). The ruling class of the United States is that of the Euro-American, Westernized mindset, tending to be men of a Christian, upper-class, privileged society. It is this ruling class who controls the church systems, the educational systems and the

cultural systems. The Native American students then become those who are directly affected by the ISAs.

Because literature and the arts are taught within the formal educational systems, the United States Government found a way of combining two ISAs to make for a more powerful attempt at controlling the thoughts and actions of the Native American communities. Althusser explains that,

There is therefore a cause for the imaginary transposition of the real conditions of existence: that cause is the existence of a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the ‘people’ on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by domination their imaginations (Althusser 1998: 156).

Native Americans are the “people” and the falsified representations of the world are those taught to the Native American students through Westernized literature, which serves as a Westernized imagination or explanation of the world. Thus, literature can become a dangerous tool of assimilation or method of enslavement, when taught through the oppressor’s mindset and from the oppressor’s agenda.

Brian Gallagher, a scholar of Native American studies, emphasizes the assimilative nature of education in the Native American communities. He explains that, “the purging of tribal cultures, traditional knowledge and language, once actively undertaken by the government, is now much more effectively conducted passively, by a combination of television consumerism, socioeconomic and the *educational system*” (italics added for emphasis) (Gallagher 2000). Literature, as it is taught in the educational systems, however does not have to be maintained as a tool for assimilative change, nor does it only have to represent the realities or views of the dominant or ruling

class. Gallagher goes one to explain that, “in many instances schools have become the primary place where Indian children may learn about their own culture-- or maybe not, which is more often the case” (Gallagher 2000). Each piece of literature, on its own, is not inherently a tool for assimilation, it depends on what is read and how it is presented by the teacher.

The assimilative aspects of literature do not occur for example after reading F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* as long as it is not taught through the restrictive lens of the Western experience at the expense of other cultural experiences. If the literature that is taught in class only represents the world experiences and thought processes of the Euro-American then the Native student will be suffocated by the overwhelming presentation of the Euro-American experience. Literature by non Euro- Americans, however, can also be used as a tool of assimilation. If Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is analyzed only for its ethnographic or dialectic qualities, it too can be assimilative in nature when presented in the classroom. One piece of literature by itself therefore is not necessarily assimilative unless it is accompanied by a swarm of other similar literatures or taught only through the Western views of how to explore literature. Literature contains within it the ability to go either way, to either reinforce the students’ cultures, or to obscure them but if it is able to move in the direction of supporting Native cultural knowledge then it becomes a discipline that is able to resist its assimilative aspects.

CHAPTER 4:

LITERATURE AS AN AGENT TO RESIST ASSIMILATION

Literature was once used to as tool for assimilating the Native peoples; however, many Native writers have taken literature back as a form of resisting assimilation and confirming a native identity. Maureen Konkle, specialist in Native American literature and professor of English at the University of Missouri-Columbia, writes that Native literary works should not be recognized “merely as sources of ethnographic or autobiographical information but as individual intellectual works that variously engage the historical, political, and aesthetic inheritance of Native writing in a colonial language” (Konkle 1997: 460). Native American writers have therefore taken the colonizer’s methods of assimilation and the colonizer’s language to reassert their Native identities and resist any further assimilation. These are the same methods and the same language that were at one time forced upon them, and now serve as means of empowerment for the Native peoples.

Opinions such as Captain Richard Henry Pratt’s “Kill the Indian and Save the Man,” served as the guiding principle for the boarding school experiences that attempted to take away Native identities and replace them with those of the dominant, Euro-American society (Fleming 2003: 194). The English language and alphabet was once forced upon Native students in efforts to rid them of their Native languages in the hopes

that once language was gone so was their culture. “Contemporary Native people have appropriated this writing for their own purposes and within their own thought systems” and now, as Donaldson writes, there is an advantage in the “disciplines of writing” and reading (Donaldson 1998). Native peoples have taken back the discipline of reading and writing and have begun to use it for their own benefits. They write to make the world aware that Native peoples have not vanished and are still living and thriving in this modern world. More so than that however, Native authors are using literature to reassert their presence and their cultural pride. As Simon Ortiz, an Acoma Pueblo writer, said, “literature is expression of culture” and he and other Native writers are expressing their culture for the world to read and explore (Ortiz 2005). The writings of each Native author, and their inherent expressions of culture, force the world to recognize their continued existence and survival as a people. In essence these writers have learned the colonizer’s game and are now fighting for their own causes using the same methods that once were used to oppress them.

A member of the Crow Creek Sioux tribe and Native critic, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has expressed her reasoning for beginning to write by explaining that,

Anger is what started me writing. Writing, for me, then, is an act of defiance born of the need to survive. I am me. I exist. I am a Dakotah. I write. It is the quintessential act of optimism born of frustration. It is an act of courage, I think. And, in the end, as Simon Ortiz says, it is an act that defies oppression (qtd. in Witalec 1995: 111).

Writing serves as Cook-Lynn’s personal method of resisting assimilation and oppression because it gives her a voice through which to express her concerns, her anger and her hopes for the future. Linda Hogan, a Chickasaw poet, explains how for her, poetry is a

“spiritual undertaking” that allows her to resist and “to be a person who has not cooperated in giving up the Self or in joining up with the world that has denied us our full lives and rights” (qtd. in Witalec 1995: 349). Literature and poetry act in direct defiance and opposition to the powers of assimilation. Literature has always possessed the ability to be a forum for social protest as well as cultural awareness and now these aspects have become more pronounced therefore replacing its assimilative aspects with its culturally assertive and revolutionary possibilities.

CHAPTER 5:

LITERATURE AS REVOLUTION

Literature, as the written word and expression of stories, serves many purposes. It has served, perhaps in its most generic sense, as a creative outlet. It turns the blank page into a canvas for painting with words; it is therefore a form of art. Literature, however, can also be a resounding voice in a silent room that enables the writer to speak and express freely and without inhibition. Simultaneously literature engages in a discourse and dialogue with its reader. Literature does so much more than to solely express the mind of the author because when it reaches the ears and the minds of the readers anything can happen. It can therefore be revolutionary, when read, or taught in appropriate contexts.

Over time literature has also become a visual representation and expression of language and therefore it is the language embodied within the works of literature that make literature significant. Simon J. Ortiz expresses that “one has to recognize that language is more than just a group of words and more than just the technical relationship between sounds and words. Language is more than a functional mechanism. It is a spiritual energy that is available to all” (Ortiz 2003: 111). It is the energy that language possesses that gives literature its powerful ability to create change, resist oppression and become revolutionary.

For those who embrace the possibilities of literature a new world opens its doors. Aijaz Ahmad, a South Asian Marxist critic, once observed that “under the hegemonic spell of late capitalism, “activist culture” as now been replaced by “textualist culture” in the metropolitan academy” (qtd. in Hussain, 33). He is elaborating on the idea that physical protest, “activist culture”, was once practiced through marches and boycotts. “Textualist culture” has taken the form of written editorials, political poetry, critical essays, and literature as well. There is little doubt that the United States is one such hegemonic power that is utterly subdued in capitalism and as such the voice of the people must be expressed in a different way than others once voiced theirs. Literature is one such outlet for the expressive voice of a people. Following in the footsteps of prominent Native American writers such as D’Arcy McNickle, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and more recently Sherman Alexie, many more Native Americans are, in the colloquial sense, beginning to pick up the pen and putting their voice onto the blank page. In a country where Native people have been continuously silenced, literature is giving new voice to the conditions and causes of the Native American people.

Native Americans make up a mere 2.1 million people in the United States. Though their circumstances may be dire, the awareness of those causes is often overshadowed by the rest of the United State population whose voices are of the louder majority. In order to get their voices heard Native American have turned to various methods of expression. Dean Rader, professor of American Literature and American Indian Studies, writes that, “American Indian writers use the lyric poem as a mode of resistance...Like the Ghost Dance and other power songs, the American Indian lyric

poem functions as a weapon of contention, revolution and continuation” (Rader 1002: 149). Native American literature can and does function in a similar way. Native Americans once fought their battle on the battlefield, but as times have changed so have their methods of resistance. Native Americans have recognized that “when physical resistance is implausible, linguistic resistance becomes necessary” (Rader 2002: 138). Literature allows Native Americans to critique various forms of Native American daily life, including governmental policies that have affected them, continued racism, and the struggle to live simultaneously within two worlds. It also provides direct opposition to the ideologies that are forced upon the public, or students, through Althusser’s idea of unintentional, or intentional consent. For these reasons Native American literature often echoes with a political voice in its struggle for awareness and change.

Simon Ortiz writes that, “to a great extent my writing has a natural cultural-political bent simply because I was nurtured intellectually and emotionally within an atmosphere of Indian resistance” (Ortiz 1993: 36). There has, since the coming of Columbus, been a continued atmosphere of Indian resistance in terms of preserving culture and maintaining autonomy. Because of this consistent resistance to policies of assimilation, or in some cases termination, many Native writers are adamantly aware of their inherent political commentaries within their writings. The Nez Perce and Chicano writer Ines Hernandez-Avila also stresses the inherent nature of politics within writing in stating that, “issues of how we [Native American female writers] write as well as what we write have become critical ones as writers, literary critics, and scholars in other disciplines acknowledge the politics that have always been at the center of our enterprise”

(Hernandez-Avila 1995: 492). Perhaps her view is limited to only Native women, but it seems quite applicable to the statement of Ortiz as well to the writings of many other Native Americans. Works such as *Pushing the Bear* by Diane Glancey about the Cherokee Trail of Tears, or N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, which discusses Indian relocation and urbanization, or Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer*, which comments on the policies of adopting Indian children to white families, all express inherent political commentaries that would otherwise be excluded if literature were merely a form of entertainment.

Robert Allen Warrior, an Osage author, suggests that, "Native American writers have clearly been for at least a century and a half important representatives of Native American realities to nonnative society" (Warrior 1998: 122). Literature has become a resounding voice that gives way to awareness, connectedness and revolution. In an ironic twist of fate, the very language that Native Americans were once forced to learn is now the same language that is enabling their cultural and political action. The role of the oral narrative and oral tradition has always been an important aspect of Native societies, and now Native authors are re-drawing upon the power of words, but this time they are being written as well. It is these power-filled words that Native American writers are utilizing that is the present means through which Native people are taking back their voice. The Native American writers are calling to action their communities and making the conditions and adversities that they face aware to the public.

CHAPTER 6:
LITERATURE AS SURVIVAL

Native Americans are conscious of the oppression that they continue to experience. Historically the battles were fought with weapons, then in the mid twentieth century the American Indian movement fought back with actions, and now it is the Native American writers that are fighting oppression through the power of the written word. Ortiz acknowledges that, “in spite of the fact that there is to some extent the same repression today, we persist and insist on living, believing, hoping, loving, speaking, and writing as Indians” (Ortiz 1993, 38). Ortiz is referring to the fact that even though there is continued repression in the form of stereotypes and federal policies that continue to threaten Native peoples, there is still a Native pride in their cultures and heritage and that is what makes Native American writing unique, beautiful and necessary for their continued survival of as a people.

Some scholars such as John Bierhorst, a translator and scholar of Native oral traditions, as well as many Native peoples, such as the Navajo, believe that words have the power to create. Literature is the expression of language, and therefore literature also has the power to create and form new realities. Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna/Sioux/Lebanese writer and critic, quotes the folklorist Barre Toelken in observing that, “The Navajos believe that language does not merely describe reality, it

creates it” (qtd. in Allen, 58). It is the creation of literatures, ultimately the creation of stories that leads to the survival of a people. The Mexican Nobel Prize winner for Literature, Octavio Paz, once stated, “The preservation of the collective memory by a group, even a small one, is a true tablet of salvation for the entire community. It is by means of such tablets that traditions and cultures cross the seas of time” (qtd. in Moore 2003: xv). Paz highlights the importance of stories (collective memories, or tablets) in the preservation of cultures by saying that it is the stories that unite communities and enables them to withstand the changes of time. There must be something within each community, tribe or culture that joins the people together and helps them to know who they are. It is the story that serves just such a purpose, be it through the oral narrative or oral tradition or through the written word. Moore agrees with Paz claims that, “These stories were not just our oral history. They were, rather, a way of establishing a connectedness between the universe and ourselves” (Moore 2003: 9). All cultures have stories that explain how things came to be and can be a reference point for individuals to understand their own identity.

Moore writes, “Those of us who are Indian understand that it is the telling of stories, our very breath that brings forth tribal identity and defines purpose (Moore 2003: 8). It is the stories therefore that aid in the formulation and foundation of individual identities as well as collective group identities. The stories reinforce cultural connections that are maintained throughout the generations. Stories are comprised of language and Ortiz writes that, “language allows me vision to see with and by which to know myself” (Ortiz 2003: 118). As long as an individual is confident in their identity then there will

be confidence in the culture and vice versa. Stories provide an important connection then between identity and culture.

Can an individual survive without a confident sense of identity? Perhaps, but not happily. Can an entire culture survive without a sturdy and stable identity? Not likely. Therefore it is the stories that not only unite the communities and provide the individuals with identity but it is the persistence of the stories that ensures the survival as a culture. When all of the stories die, what is left of a culture? There would be nothing more to explain the reasoning for things or how the world came to be or to help guide individuals in the proper ways of behaving and relating to the rest of the world. Stories can be told in many ways however, and literature is just one of those methods. Ortiz says that “literature is affirmation of our own culture” (Ortiz 2005). As identity is found through the telling of stories and culture is reaffirmed through them, the great power of stories and literature becomes more apparent as a mechanism for survival.

Stories are not only meant to be retold however, they are meant to be created as well. Literature is, in its simplest form, the telling of stories. Literature uses the art of language to create imagery through words that tell a specific story. The language employed in the stories that literature tells therefore creates new realities. Stories are a living entity and they create a new reality and a new understanding of the world for those who hear the stories as well as those who tell the stories. Writing of stories thus continues the cycle of creation of stories and realities leading to the survival of cultures and peoples.

CHAPTER 7:

TEACHING LITERATURE TO NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS

It is quite apparent that literature can serve a very significantly powerful purpose for Native American people; however, what may not be as obvious is why it is so important for it to be taught to Native American students. Native students face several hardships and challenges in their daily lives, whether they live on or off the reservation. There are many organizations and scholarships that encourage students to pursue careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics with end goals of returning these students back to their homes to make a difference in their communities. There are far fewer such opportunities for native students studying literature, when literature can be a powerful mechanism for creating awareness and encouraging change. Revolutionist Che Guevara once said, “it is an illusion to think that the matter cannot be resolved through words” (qtd. in Hussain, 32). Whatever the matter may be that a Native student finds fault in, it can be addressed through the written language and can inspire communities to take action.

The importance of community in Native cultures is yet another reason why literature should be viewed as a subject worthy of study within the education system. Literature can be the entity that brings together existing communities and creates new ones by uniting people under similar causes. This can be done through book clubs or a

brief interaction on the street to discuss something that has been read. Ortiz writes that, “Language is perception of experience as well as expression” (Ortiz 2003: 107). Ortiz continues by providing an example of this perception and expression using song by saying, “Indeed, the song was the road from outside himself to inside- which is perception- and from inside himself to outside- which is expression. That’s the process and the product of the song, the experience and the vision that a song gives you (Ortiz 2003, 118). Ortiz is describing the process by which a poet, or songwriter, perceives the experience of something and sets it to words as a form of expression, not vastly different from what a writer does when creating literature. The reader, or the audience, then takes that expression, forms their own perceptions and thusly has their own experience. While the experiences vary they still provide a point of contact between author and reader. In this way there is a tremendous and significant interaction between the two in forming a connection and dialogue. A community is thusly created between the reader and the text that spreads outside of the literature itself. Just as literature is able to create dialogue between writer and reader, so too is it able to carry that dialogue into the community, creating in essence a triangular communication and connection between author, reader and community.

Teaching literature helps to guide this dialogue, and if taught properly can spark the interests of the students in creating literature of their own. Reading inspires thought and dialogue, both of which often inspires action, be it through writing literature, poetry, or essays and therefore teaching literature properly to Native students serves as the foundation and the first step in encouraging Native students to find their own literary and

cultural voice, while allowing them to simultaneously connect with their communities.

Going beyond the Native communities, literature also has the ability to reach into other communities. Warrior notes how “other than the film actors Russell Means, Graham Green, and Wes Studi, Native American writers are perhaps the most famous Indians in our celebrity-centric contemporary world” (Warrior 1998: 122). Not only are Native American writers given the opportunity to voice their concerns, but because of their celebrity status they are the ones most likely to be heard. Because the voices of these Native Americans are the most likely to be heard by the general public, it follows that Native American students should be encouraged to develop and put to use their powerful literary voices. If Native American students are turned off to the study of literature within the school systems then they will be missing out on all of the opportunities that literature provides them. These opportunities include a political and cultural voice that can be heard by various cultures, a connection to their own cultural community and the global literary communities, and the ability to serve as a catalyst for change.

PART TWO:
WORLDVIEWS IN LITEARTURE

CHAPTER 8:

ACKNOWLEDGING WORLDVIEW

Those in academia often hear talk of “The Box,” or the paradigm that regulates the thought process. Often times we hear the expression, “Try to think outside of the box”, outside of what is considered the norm. This box most often represents the Westernized way of thinking and assumes it to be the one true and inherent way of thought for all groups of people. Why is there only one box, one paradigm from which to describe things? Academia within the United States has, for much too long, focused solely on that of the Western paradigm, the paradigm of the colonizers, the capitalists and the majority population. As such many other paradigms, or methods of thought have been ignored, denied or simply disregarded as inferior. While it has become more popular, or maybe even trendier, in the twenty-first century to focus on multiculturalism, be it through literature, dance, or art, there has been a lack of presence of multicultural paradigms. I write “paradigms” in the plural to allow for any possible variance among and between various cultures and their respective worldviews, which are the ways paradigms manifest themselves. Just as all cultures are distinct in their histories, religions, politics and life ways so are they unique in the ways of making sense of the world, which is precisely the function that a paradigm serves. Worldviews and paradigms are synonymous in that both provide ways of thinking from within one’s own

culture.

Literature is an excellent source for exploring worldviews and better understanding various cultures; it is also one that interestingly enough has rarely been explored from other paradigms outside of that of the dominant culture. Many times literature, be it Asian Literature, Black Literature, Native American Literature, historical fiction or otherwise, has been interpreted and analyzed from the Western paradigm because that is the paradigm of the ruling class and dominant society who controls academia. Similarly, these types of literature have historically been taught through the same Western paradigms regardless of what worldviews the readers come from.

The educational systems and academia have been operating so long on the notion that Western paradigms are applicable to all aspects of life. If Western paradigms can be applied to multiple cultures, it can be assumed that Native American paradigms so too can also be applied cross-culturally. For instance, Native literary works such as *Ceremony* and *House Made of Dawn* have been studied and taught through the Western worldviews, therefore literary works such as *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Wuthering Heights* should also be able to be analyzed from Native worldviews. If literature can successfully teach, interpret and analyze all types of literature from within the Native American worldviews, will this make the literature more accessible, more interesting or more valid to Native American students? It seems quite logical that it is one way of making academia work for and with Native students rather than against them like it has historically done.

It is important to recognize that not all Native peoples have the same paradigms of thought, or worldviews, even within certain cultures. There are always variations of

thought between and among specific Native American cultures and there are also disparities of assimilation among Native peoples. Wherever a student may lay on the grand spectrum of tradition to assimilation, every student has their own, inherent way of thinking and of viewing the world. For most Native students they have been learning from foreign paradigms, those only of the accepted Western norm, and it is time for them to be able to learn from their own worldviews, regardless of how assimilated or traditional they may be. It is time for teachers to finally acknowledge the use and legitimacy of culturally derived worldviews and paradigms and place them into the classroom setting. It is this acknowledgement that will serve as the fundamental tool in removing literature of its assimilative characteristics and make literature more accessible for Native students.

CHAPTER 9:

NATIVE WORLDVIEW VERSUS WESTERN WORLDVIEW

A. Oscar Kawagley, a Yupiaq scholar and educator, focuses on his own Yupiaq worldview in comparison and contrast to that of the Western worldview(s). He defines worldview as what “enables its possessors to make sense of the world around them, make artifacts to fit their world, generate behavior, and interpret their experiences” (Kawagley 1995: 8). Perhaps if he were to devise a definition of the role of education it would say something such as, “the *system* through which people make sense of the world around them, make artifacts to fit the world, generate behavior and understand experiences” (emphasis added). It is then easy to understand why Kawagley would emphasize the role that worldview should, and could, play in the educational system.

Worldview attempts to answer questions as to how the world works, how it came to be how it is and how things should be done within the world. It asks the questions, “What is real? What can we understand? How should we behave? What is beautiful? What are the patterns we can rely upon?” as well as “Why are we? Is there something greater than the human?” (Kawagley 1995: 7). In short these questions all serve to enable each of the different cultures to make sense of their own worlds and where they fit in those worlds and it allows for groups of people who share similar worldviews to distinguish themselves as distinct identities and cultures. Because not all groups of

people come from the same geographical location or experiences the same ways of surviving, not all groups of people share the same worldviews. Thus there are many worldviews all of which are legitimate ways of viewing and understanding the world.

Typically in the United States educational systems are taught through the Western worldview, that of the dominant, Euro-American culture. Though each Euro-American comes from a distinct background there are certain characteristics that distinguish a Western worldview. While there are several hundred Native American cultures, each with their own worldview, there are also basic similarities that can characterize the traditional Native worldview. Among these differences in Western worldview and Native worldview are concepts of wealth, ideas of time, perceptions of relationships and appropriate ways of social interaction. What I will provide are the generalities for each of the worldviews, acknowledging that not all individuals adhere specifically to these examples of worldviews but that there are multiple exceptions or variations.

Ideas of Wealth

The ideas of what determines wealth seem to be very different from Native worldviews as opposed to Western worldviews. For many Native groups, specifically those in what is considered the Northwest Coast culture areas, wealth is perceived as the ability to give. The more an individual can give away and be without then the wealthier that individual is considered to be. The underlying thought that guides this worldview is that “the more one gave, the happier one would be, and the more likely one would lead a long and satisfied life” (Kawagley 1995: 10). This is in direct contrast to Western views

that in order to lead a happy and long life one must gain as many things as possible. The richest Yupiaq for example is the person in the village with the least food, the oldest clothing and the most modest home. Contrarily, for Euro-Americans the richest individual is that with the largest house, the most cars and the most expensive food. The Natives give freely to achieve wealth and respect within the communities, whereas Westernized Americans give for the benefit of tax deductions, which ultimately come back to benefit them again and provide them more money. This is a generalized view of the concept of wealth, but one which arises from traditional lifestyles, for the Natives life before Columbus and for the Euro-Americans a time when life was dominated by kings and queens living in their large castles.

Concepts of Time

Native views of time also contrast quite a bit from those of the Western worldview. According to traditional Native perceptions of time things are to be done when it feels right, and according to the natural cycles of life. The Western worldview is dictated by the clock, and everything is done as determined by that clock. A simplified version of Western views toward time would be the idea of setting an alarm clock to wake up at seven in the morning so that the individual can have breakfast at eight, get to work by nine and return home by six in time for dinner at seven in the evening. Western worldview is therefore very rigid and inflexible in its most generalized sense. Native worldview operates differently in that an individual wakes up when their body wakes them up, they eat their meals when they are hungry and work lasts as long as it needs to

get the project at hand done.

According to Joseph Brown, scholar of Religious Studies and Native American traditions, the concepts of how time is viewed have substantial effects on culture. Brown stresses that, “Western culture, for instance, often perceives time as a linear progression that advances from past to present to future in a straight line” (Brown 2001: 9). Western worldview, and culture therefore, emphasizes the notion of making “progress;” it moves forward, rarely looking backward and assuming that everything in the future will be better than the past or the present. There is therefore little focus on the present because the goal is to reach a more progressive future.

To contrast the linear notion of time is the Native views which “observe the rhythmic, rather than linear and progress oriented” (Brown 2001: 9). This idea of time manifests itself through many Native American languages that do not have a past or future tense but maintain their position in the present. Native worldviews draw upon the importance of existing in the present, because those who are too inclined to orient themselves in the linear notion of time, always progressing from the past to reach a new future, become “distracted from the human and spiritual possibilities inherent in the *now*” (italics in original) (Brown 2001: 12). Because Native time is more cyclical, depending upon the seasons and the cycles of the moon and nature, time always ends up coming full circle. This coming full circle leads to the concepts that time “loops around and starts again” (Brown 2001: 12). Therefore it is possible to flow from the past into the present and ahead to the future while still being firmly established in the *now* that Brown describes.

This idea of time manifests itself though many Native American works of literature and storytelling. The Spokane/Cour D'Alene writer Sherman Alexie and Chippewa novelist Louise Erdrich both exhibit Native concepts of time in their writings. Alexie's novel *Indian Killer* is a terrific example of this idea of flowing through the past, present and future because it is not restricted only to chronological time in order to tell the story. Alexie is so well rooted in this idea of Native time that his novel reads just as well backwards as it does forwards because each chapter is not in chronological order. Time is presented in fragments without any time connection between chapters, but by the end of the novel the entire story is understood without any question as to the ordering of events or time. *Love Medicine* works in a similar fashion, presenting stories from different moments in history and in the present to ultimately give the reader a complete sense of the story in its entirety. This concept of time works through the oral traditions as well. Greg Sarris also recalls listening to stories told to him by a traditional healer and storyteller named Maybel McKay. He recalls how Maybel McKay's stories, though they always served a particular purpose for being told, were rarely told in a sequential manner. Sarris notes how "her stories moved in and out of different time frames" but how in the end the story was always understood in its full context (Sarris 1993: 1). Both Alexie's ability to write a complete novel that can be read backwards, forwards or from the middle out and Maybel McKay's method of telling a story like a jigsaw puzzle that ultimately comes together as one story in the end prove that multiple concepts of time can exist in one moment and within one story.

Perceptions of Relationships and Appropriate Social Interactions

Every culture possesses within it certain rules or guidelines that delineate appropriate behavior and social interactions. While not all of these guidelines are etched in stone, and many allow for moderate changes to accommodate changing times, there are a large number of these rules that are still present in many Native American societies. These rules dictate what is considered to be acceptable actions on the part of every distinct culture's members and like many other things are passed along from generation to generation through worldview as described in stories.

There are several differences in how Native Americans act in comparison to how those of the Western worldview are taught to act, and react in certain situations. Upon greeting someone for example, those to ascribe to Native worldviews will typically avoid eye contact. If the individuals shake hands the grips will be fairly light without much pressure applied to the other person's hands. Both of these actions are the complete opposite according to behavioral regulations within Western worldview. According to Western traditions eye contact is a sign that signals that one individual is paying close attention to what the other is saying and a firm grip is a sign of confidence. For many Native peoples however, direct eye contact, especially with an elder, is a sign of disrespect and a firm grip is a sign of aggression.

In terms of social interactions there are many cultures that have taboos upon speaking to other certain members of the culture. The Crows, Northern Cheyennes and Crees, for example, practice a system in which husbands are not allowed to talk or be in the same room with their mother-in-laws and wives cannot do the same with their father-

in-laws. Pretty-shield makes reference to this practice in her autobiography; however, it is an aspect of Native worldview that is still in practice in the twenty-first century for many Crow, Northern Cheyenne and Cree people.

The differences between Native and Western worldviews are wide-ranging. Though not all Natives and not all Euro-Americans subscribe to their culture's worldviews, many are still inherently aware of their existence. Because of this awareness, or because of the continued practice of these distinct worldviews it is difficult to separate the way a student was taught to think from the ways they are being taught in the classroom. Literature is one discipline that cannot only incorporate the exploration of worldviews into the curriculum, but it can also encourage it in several ways.

CHAPTER 10:

APPLICATION OF WORLDVIEW IN LITERARY STUDIES

All cultures make sense of the world around them through their worldviews and in turn each of these worldviews are expressed through the telling of stories. The Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor acknowledges just how important stories are in understanding culture and worldview by writing that, “you can’t understand the world without telling a story” (qtd. in Witalec 1995: 418). Stories serve as both the inherent and implied means of interpreting life, morals and events, it is therefore one of the main tools through which worldview can be evaluated and explored.

Literature is the expression of stories and each story is written from a particular worldview and read or interpreted from many other ones. In reading and analyzing any work of literature it is beneficial to allow for the reader to interpret the work from within the reader’s own worldviews. Not only acknowledging that there are multiple worldviews, but allowing and enabling students to analyze a work of literature from within their own worldview opens the doors for a more in-depth reading and a deeper understanding. This can be done through many ways which will be explored in the following section but the important thing to remember is that literature is about interpretation, interaction and dialogue. Just as there is not only one way to write a poem, there is not only way in which to read that same poem.

Because literature is a story and innate within every story is a worldview, there is no way to read without exploring worldview. All aspects of worldview can be explored within literature and evaluated in comparison or in contrast to the worldview of the reader(s). All literature encompasses within it some aspect of time; therefore there is one foundational aspect that can always be explored. Similarly, all literature has within it some sort of interactions among and between its characters, therefore this too can be evaluated in terms of the reader's cultural worldview. Other aspects which may be less inherent in all literature are the significances of certain objects or situations. For example, dreams are highly powerful and significant within Native worldviews; therefore if there is a dream sequence within the novel then students can be encouraged to interpret that dream as their culture would. Other things that hold symbolic meaning that can find themselves manifested through various pieces of literature are the present of "trickster" characters, like that of Coyote or Iktomi, the spider, both prominent characters in Native worldview and mythology. Similarly many Native cultures have special relationships with birds, an eagle is a benevolent symbol whereas the owl is malevolent. If any of these animals are mentioned in a piece of literature they provide an excellent starting point in addressing the Native American students' worldviews in comparison or contrast to the worldviews of the characters in the literature.

This acknowledgement and exploration of the legitimacy of the students' traditional and cultural worldviews can have very profound effects upon the students. Because their way of thinking is finally being validated rather than oppressed through the enforcement of the dominant society's worldview, students can gain not only a better

understanding of their own culture's worldviews but have an increased pride in their worldview. Ultimately, the student who is able to and encouraged to incorporate and validate their own culture and their own understanding of the world will begin to feel an increased sense of self-esteem because for once they are being told that the way they think is acceptable and does not need to be assimilated into the mainstream culture. This creates a domino effect in that the more the student is encouraged to incorporate their own methods of understanding and ways of thinking, the more the student will feel secure within the classroom, the more they will begin to enjoy the class and the better they will perform in that class.

Literature classes, once thought to be one of the more highly assimilative disciplines, can now begin the trend of becoming one of the more culturally validating classes because literature is story and story is the manifestation of worldview. All authors who write stories and all readers who interpret it do so from their own cultural ways of thinking, from their own worldviews. Stories within literature can be read from many worldviews and as such the stories allow for an open dialogue that gives the student the ability to question, challenge or embrace the text in ways that other disciplines are not able.

PART THREE:
METHODS FOR TEACHING LITERATURE

CHAPTER 11:

CULTURALLY SENSITIVE METHODS OF TEACHING LITERATURE

Terry Dean, professor of English, writes that, “the further a child’s culture is from the culture of the school, the less chance for success. Classroom environments that do not value the home culture of the students lead to decreased motivation and poor academic performance” (Dean 1989: 24-25). He goes on to say “because of difference in the early socialization process of Native American children (especially in face-to-face interaction), they feel alienated in the classroom and withdraw from class activities” (Dean 1989: 24-25). The Western educational systems have had the monopoly over all types of learning, no matter the cultural background of the students. Many scholars have recognized the hazardous effects that Western-based model of education can play in the lives of non-Western peoples. These same scholars are striving for culture-based education models that suit the needs and learning styles for the rest of the educational community.

Native peoples around the world have been putting significant effort into creating Native-based education models; however, “it has become something of a truism to state that academia is a problematic space for Native peoples” (Justice 2001: 256). As literature once served, and still has the potential to serve, as a tool for assimilating the Native peoples to the Euro-American, westernized lifestyle and ways of living, it can be

even more problematic to try to establish ways of teaching Native American students without being “fraught with conflict over the intellectual justifications of imperialism as well as intellectual resistance to those same justifications” (Justice 2001: 256). Students need to be able to engage themselves with a text without the fear that it is yet another attempt on their own cultural identity and in order to do so there needs to exist models of teaching that are both culturally sensitive and culturally significant.

There are several steps that need to be taken in establishing a literary curriculum that will remove assimilative aspects and simultaneously pull students into the potentially empowering aspects of literary studies, thus increasing their success rates within the literary discipline. Culturally sensitive curriculum should strive to not only welcome in the students’ cultural worldviews but it should also work to provide the students with the power to interpret, challenge and interact with the text from their own life experiences. It is acceptable therefore for students to express their reactions, and emotions towards the text. Culturally sensitive teaching will allow for the students to become angry, or sad, or confused and should encourage the students to explore these emotions rather than bottling them up and having the teacher dictate to them how they should react.

Three examples of culturally sensitive methods of teaching are explored in the following chapters. They are methods of switching the notion of “other,” creating dialogue, and exercising literary liberation.

CHAPTER 12:

SWITCHING THE NOTION OF “OTHER”

The concept of “White Privilege” is something that is apparent in most people’s daily lives, although not always recognized or talked about. It is the idea that Euro-Americans experience certain benefits, or privileges, simply due to their skin color and to the fact that they are the dominant society within the United States. High school literature classes almost always survey works written by white authors, about white culture or lifestyle, and employ “white” worldview, academically known as The Canon. For a Native American reading these works, it is likely that they will begin to feel isolated in their own experiences and start to feel as though they are an outsider looking in on a different society. This will detach the students from any further interest in the work being studied because it places them as an “other” in contrast to the white, dominant, society that is being portrayed. Justice explains,

as long as “whiteness” the unspoken standard against which all other peoples and communities are compared, the necessary work of dismantling corrosive stereotypes about Indian people will fall short, as all these indigenous communities and immigrants of color will continue to be seen through the lens of “Other” (Justice 2001).

One reason that literature is one of the least successful disciplines for Native American students is because the Native Americans students are consistently studying the world of

the Euro-American and being placed within that world as the “other”, or as a group separate and different from the dominant society. What would happen though if Native American students could instead interpret and understand the Euro-American literary experience itself as the “other”? That is to say, if the Native American students, rather than judging their experiences and understanding against those of the Euro-American, were to judge the experiences of Euro-America against themselves. The Native students therefore are no longer the “other” and their white counterparts in the stories become the “other,” it is the white characters that become the ones who are different and separate because they are being compared against that which is familiar to the students.

The anthropologist Robin Ridington asks a similar question of, “What would happen if an Indian author read the canon of White history through the narrative conventions of Indian history?” (Ridington 1998). The question challenges the notion of who is to be considered the “other” or the outsider and whose views are to be considered the correct or dominant view. There may not seem to be much of a difference between the two, however, the difference can be one of self-affirmation versus lack of self-esteem. When Native American students compare their lives against that of the Euro-American, or European characters studied in the literature classes, the Native American students are placed as the “other.” The students will begin to feel separated from the story and as though they are outsiders looking in on a world in which they do not belong. The feelings of isolation and difference are likely to have a negative affect on students. If the Westernized story and the Westernized characters are supposed to be the norm and the Native American student feels different from that norm there is going to be a decrease in

that student's self-esteem.

Gabriele Schwab theorizes that “only when the colonizer's own native culture has been relegated to the political unconscious and becomes internalized as Other, only then is the process of colonization successfully completed” (qtd. in Sarris 1993: 189). Sarris goes on to explain that, “reading can encourage readers, particularly those from backgrounds different from the dominant society, to internalize life experience as “Other” (Sarris 1993: 189). Both Sarris and Schwab are referring to the displacement of Native students as “other” in reading the literary works of the dominant society, or of any society that is different from their own. The affects of this are as detrimental to the students as any other practice of the colonizer to successfully colonize the Native peoples, and it is one of the more veiled practices of assimilation and oppression. If the student is constantly feeling as the “other” that same student will begin to feel detached from the story and the characters within the story. When novels can make the Native American student feel so badly it is understandable that they would not pursue literary studies or its benefits. Differences in worldview will prohibit the student, sometimes, from understanding the scenarios and what the characters are experiencing. If however, the Native students can turn the scenarios around and compare the Euro-Americans characters against their lifestyles, as students from distinct cultures, that they know then something remarkable begins to happen, literature begins to be “confirmation as to our own (Native) identity” (Ortiz 2005)

If the student is able to view the white characters' experiences from their own Native perspectives rather than from a foreign Westernized perspective the students will

begin to understand their own culture better and as a result there will be increased self-esteem among the Native students. Because the students are no longer the “other”, or feeling as though they are the ones who are somehow wrong because they are the ones who are different, they can begin to reaffirm who they are and the ways of their own culture as what is right and compare the stories against their own culturally affirmed perspective.

The switching of the “other” can be accomplished through a variety of ways. The least complicated way of doing this is to simply allow and encourage students to translate the literature into their own worldviews. For instance, is there a character in the novel that could be viewed as a trickster figure? Are there dreams within the novel, how might they be interpreted as according to the students’ Native worldviews and cultural understandings? Are the relationships of the characters within a novel appropriate interactions in the students’ cultures? Asking these questions as well as encouraging the students to answer them pulls the characters out of their world and places them into the world of the students and into a context in which they are enabled to better understand the characters while simultaneously reasserting their own cultural understanding. This practice allows the students to feel comfortable within their own understanding of the world and breaks down the barrier they may feel when they are reading as a voyeur rather than as a unique culturally identified individual. Ergo, the end result is, hopefully, a stronger sense of self-confidence and a better understanding of the students’ sense of identity.

Greg Sarris remembers his school days in which,

objectivism and text positivism, which influence pedagogical practices at the time, hardly encouraged readers to think of people and places outside the actual text. I was not encouraged to engage my personal experiences as I was at home when hearing stories. The text was supposedly complete, self-contained, a thing to dissect rather than to have a relationship with (Sarris 1993: 186).

The implication of this statement is that Sarris would have been able to pull much more from texts and from his educational experience if he had been enabled to pull the text outside of itself, place the characters into his world and challenge the text rather than dissecting it as a whole and complete entity. It is an exercise in self-empowerment therefore for students to be able to challenge a text and apply it outside of itself. This encourages the students to think, to question and to offer answers and solutions to their own questions. By switching the notion of the “other” the students become empowered to embrace their own experiences and their own understandings of the world as legitimate expressions and thoughts. They are no longer the ones who are different but the ones who can stand firmly within their own cultural understandings and evaluate the ways of the “other” cultures.

CHAPTER 13:

CREATING A DIAOLOGUE

Ridington explores how “Native American theorizing might look different from theorizing by non-Native Americanist scholars” (Ridington 1998: 343). Ridington’s main emphasis is about the notions of dialogue versus monologue. Native theorists view literature as a connection between the reader, the writer and the text itself, and as such it is “fundamentally dialogic” (Ridington 1998). There is an implied connection and community between the three that must be taken into consideration whenever reviewing or analyzing a text and because of this there also exists a “shared authority” (Ridington 1998). The ideas of dialogue and shared authority are central to the possibilities of teaching literature to Native students.

Literature should not be something inaccessible to students merely because the text is to be viewed as an authority’s source meant to teach or enlighten the reader. Literature is not meant to be read as a textbook that delineates what the reader should think, learn and understand in a chapter by chapter format with a review and test to be taken at the completion of the textbook. Literature is meant to be read and reread, allowing for a different understanding of it after each completion, as such literature becomes a living entity to be engaged with not just studied like an object in a glass case. The students as well should not be treated as if they are mindless minions being told how

to think and what to think, rather they should be able to find their own answers to their own questions pertaining to the literature. Sarris notes that, “a text is not just a representation of interaction but also an occasion for interaction” (Sarris 1993: 185). It is because of this opportunity to create interaction that literature is dialogic in nature and should be studied as such as well.

According to the Freirian approach, developed by Paulo Freire, it is through the “subjugation [that] students become *objects* acted upon by the authoritarian school system and society” (italics in original) (Peterson 2003: 372). Paulo Freire, an educational theorist, “argues, instead, for a pedagogical process of dialogue, reflection, dramatization, and interaction, whereby students move towards being subjects capable of understanding the world and their social context, and ultimately engaging in active based on this new understanding” (Peterson 2003: 372). This approach creates the “shared authority” that Ridington found so important in studying Native views of reading and analyzing literature.

Shared authority can be guided by teachers who rely “on the experiences of the students” which “implies a respects and use of the students’ culture, language and dialect. It values dialogue and reflection over lecture and repetition” (Peterson 2003: 366). It is teaching through lecture and repetition that leads to the authoritative learning and subjugation of students that is not useful in studying literature because it eliminates the importance of culture, language and experiences that should and can be used in reading, teaching, studying and analyzing literature.

Analyzing literature is about interpretation and each individual interpretation is

based upon that individual's experiences, therefore these experiences should be pulled into the classroom settings rather than kept separate from the learning environment.

Peterson suggests that students' "learning should be centered in their own experiences, language and culture" (Peterson 2003: 368). This can be accomplished through creating a dialogue between the students and the text. Dialogue, defined by Freire, is "not just permissive talk, but *conversation with a focus and a purpose*" (italics in original) and should encourage the shared authority of student, teacher and text (Peterson 2003: 375).

This can be done in several ways,

A student could: Write or tell about what would happen if she were to take the main character home for dinner; write a letter to the main character comparing the student's life to that of the main characters; or write a version of the story that draws on some comparable situation in their school community (Peterson 2003: 369).

These suggested models allow for students to make a direct connection with the text and establish a dialogue. This model requires the students to have a grounded understanding of the text and the characters within it in order for them to write to the characters or to place the characters in their own environments and cultures. It once again reemphasizes the switching of the "other" by pulling the character out of its text and replacing them in the context of the student's world.

Another way of creating a dialogue is to ask to try and apply the stories they are reading in their literary works to their cultures. Some stories seem to be universal, especially those that teach morals such as humility, respect, and generosity. One possible way of creating a dialogue with the text would be to question whether or not the story

presented in the literature could be successfully transplanted into the Native student's society. When appropriate, teachers may also ask students to return home and talk to their parents, grandparents and elders in the community and ask them whether or not there are any stories within their specific cultures that are similar in nature to those being read in the classroom. This would have multiple benefits for the students. First, it would require a foundational understanding of the literature in order for them to be able to explain the story to someone who has not read it. Second, it would enable the students to incorporate their communities into their learning experiences, thusly expanding the dialogues and connections between the multiple communities in which the student is a member of. Lastly, it encourages and supports the students in furthering their understanding of their own culture, resulting in a deeper sense of tradition and cultural pride.

Creating a dialogue between the student and the text, and in some cases the community, is a yet another way of empowering the students. It enables the student to question the text and form their own analysis regarding the writing rather than being told how to interpret it in an authoritative manner. The dialogue created between student, author, teacher and text is one which helps "to draw connections between their own lives, communities and environments" (Peterson 2003: 377). Dialogue therefore reemphasizes the roles and importance of community and culture because it allows the student to continue to interpret the text through their own values and life experiences as presented to them through their distinct cultures and community environments.

CHAPTER 14:

LITERARY LIBERATION

Literary Liberation comes from the infusion of switching the notion of “other” and the creation of a dialogue. Both of these models lead to the empowerment of the students through their ability to interact with and challenge the text from within their own worldviews. Too often in the classroom the students’

reading does not enable or encourage them to question and contextualize what they read, it reinforces the silence and indeed becomes a mechanism for maintaining silence about the fear, frustration, anger, and confusion experienced by a people splintering in the face of cultural flux, rather than creatively reorganizing them in a community determined manner. Reading has perhaps never been more useful as a colonizing tool (Sarris 1993: 2002).

The liberation of literature occurs when its colonizing characteristics are removed and replaced with those of the colonized’s worldviews and critiques.

Just as literature can serve both as a form of assimilation or as a form of resistance so too can the ways in which it is taught accomplish the same feats, it all depends however on the teaching methods used. In the past literature classes were affective tools for assimilation and oppression because the classroom was separated from the home, community and the family life, sometimes violently. In order for literature to be a means of liberation there needs to be the formulation and strengthening of the community. The community and home environment need not and should not remain mutually exclusive from the classroom environment.

Greg Sarris lists three ways in which students can become empowered in their school and literature classes. First, he designates that, “reading must engage the students in a way that encourages them to feel they have power equal to that of the text they are reading and to that of the teacher who has given them the text to read” (Sarris 1993: 196). This empowerment comes from the idea of shared authority discussed previously. Sarris continues by asserting that,

reading, like all classroom activity, must be seen and promoted as something that continues and recreates culture both in the ways its practices alter and maintain previous methods for continuing and recreating culture and in the ways it helps individuals negotiate personhood “in a world of multiple and conflicting demands”. Reciprocally, reading should evoke responses from the students that in given ways will inform, continue, and recreate its practice, classroom pedagogy, and the teacher’s notions of logic, critical thought, and so forth. Finally, the practice of reading must work to engage the parents and the entire community (Sarris 1993: 196-197).

Successful literary liberation therefore extends outside of the classroom and into the community. It creates a dialogue, as well as a connection for community and family to come together and interact with their school aged children. Shared authority evens the playing fields between not only reader and author, student and teacher but also between parent and child and community.

CHAPTER 15

CONCLUSION

Gallagher writes that, “Many believe the loss of traditional native knowledge and language is intimately related to the problems of high dropout rates and poor academic achievement” (Gallagher 2000: 36). Tradition and Native worldview have been removed from the Native American classroom and some disciplines such as literature have been historically imbedded in the Westernized worldview. Native students have been placed as the “other” in a world of predominantly Euro-American values and thought processes. It is not so astonishing therefore that Native students find the educational system less than appealing. Though times have changed there is still a historical presence of assimilative efforts that are embodied within the educational systems.

The boarding schools, under the philosophy of “Kill the Indian, Save the man” were blatantly detrimental to Native American students and their educational experience. The United States, through the thought process of the predominantly Euro-American capitalistic society, forced upon the Native students their ideologies that were meant to encourage “ways of knowing that are potentially destructive to traditional aboriginal pedagogical systems” (Donaldson 1998). The United States has, intentionally or unintentionally, entered into a new era of diversity; however, the educational system still functions through the workings of the Ideological State Apparatus, suppressing the

ideologies of those who are not a part of the ruling class. Literature does not have to remain an assimilative tool for the benefit of the majority population; rather it can be taken back by the Native American peoples as a source of liberation, empowerment and cultural reassertion. This process can and should begin with the students. The Native student has suffered through an underserved oppression from within the educational system for over a century. They have been dehumanized through federal policies of assimilation and oppressed through the limited educational perspectives that they are provided in school.

Justice writes that, “academic freedom is an important philosophy that deserves protection and acknowledgement, but it cannot- it should not- be used as a club by scholarly poacher to further exploit and dehumanize Indian peoples” (Justice 1998). It is time to enter into a new era of academic freedom, one in which the Native American peoples are able to be taught and learn from their own unique cultural perspectives and worldviews for their own liberation as a people. The United States has been for too long trying to force Native American students into a Westernized way of thinking, acting and reacting, it is time to acknowledge the differences in thought and worldview and allow the Native peoples to apply their own thoughts into their own daily lives so that they can act in the ways that suit them best. Richard St. Germaine, a professor of History, recognizes that there is a clash between Native and Western cultures experienced within the classroom settings. He stresses that, “If the resulting clash of cultures continues, the minority child may feel forced to choose one culture at the expense of the other. A tragic paradox emerges: Success (in school) becomes a failure (in the community), and failure

becomes success” (St. Germaine 1996). The clash of cultures needs to be removed from the classroom so that success within the classroom setting can also be a success for the community. This can only be done with the students’ unique cultures and worldviews are invited into the classroom and legitimized.

If a student is finally able to look at a work of literature without feeling as though they are the “other,” the wrong culture or less than intelligent for not understanding the lives of Euro-American and European characters, then perhaps they will feel more inclined to continue their studies of literature. Once they are able to view literature from their own worldview they will realize they are also able to write literature from that same worldview. As many scholars, both Native and non-Native alike, have expressed, literature is a political tool and a reaffirmation of culture. Native American literature has gone further than the Native American literary renaissance credited to writers such as N. Scott Momaday and his contemporaries. Literature possesses within it the ability for a Native American literary revolution based upon its expressions of culture, commentaries regarding politics and assertion of a continued Native American presence.

This revolution will make the causes and concerns of the Native American people known to the general public, it will provide jobs for those who wish to stay on their home reservations and it will, perhaps most importantly, create a resurgence of cultural and Native pride for Native American students who choose to pick up the book to read, or pick up the pen to write. Writing will ensure the survival of a culture as long as it is written through their Native worldview or concerns their Native culture and concerns. Writing literature will become the new voice of resistance and revolution that will reach

the ears of the generations to come. As Betty Louise Bell affirmed in “Faces in the Moon”, “I am your worst nightmare: I am an Indian with a pen” (qtd. in Donaldson 1998). Perhaps after carefully reexamining the educational experience of Native American students, one day a Native American student will say, “I am your worst nightmare-- I am an Indian with a book”.

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