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## FOUR DIRECTIONS: SOME THOUGHTS ON TEACHING NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Joseph Bruchac

My own first experiences in teaching American Indian literature came after three years in West Africa. I returned to the United States in 1969 and found myself at Skidmore College near my home town of Greenfield Center, New York, an instructor with little chance of tenure who had been given a job because there was a last-minute opening at the school. That was okay with me. My main objective had been to come home to my Abenaki grandfather in whose house I'd been raised. He lived only three miles east from the college, an easy ride on a bicycle through the hills and back-roads at the edge of the Kaydeross Range. As I rode from the dawn towards the west I passed fields which had been filled with Mohawk corn, and within my line of sight to the north were the mountains and the old, still hidden burial places of some of my own ancestors. The road passed a stone's throw from samp mortars worn deep into bedrock where corn and acorns had been ground into flour for thousands of years. Just south of that road were streams where my grandfather and I caught trout and said words of thanks to the fish spirits. Somehow, being home made it easier to be a "low man on the academic totem pole"—one of *their* favorite images, no irony intended—teaching freshman composition and little else. It was in 1970 that the first Native American literature course was taught at Skidmore, during their one-month winter term. I wasn't allowed to teach it, though by then I was being allowed to teach a single course in Black Literature. "Topics in American Indian Literature" was taught by a senior faculty member who used a lot of work from anthropologists and a little contemporary Indian writing. He used Kroeber's *The Inland Whale*, some creation stories, threw in a few poems by poets who were Indian. He tried his best and he consulted with me—with apologies.

"You ought to be teaching this, Joseph, but you know how it is."

"Totem pole?" I said.

He nodded, without irony. "You understand."

Along the way he set up a reading. One of those who spoke was Harry W. Paige, whose book, *Songs of the Teton Sioux*, had been his Ph.D. thesis at the State University of New York at Albany for his doctorate in English—the first doctorate in English from SUNY/Albany. Harry's book wasn't bad, and it was a result of a lot of time spent among the Teton Sioux. He gave his talk, followed by Duane McGinnis (not yet Niatum) and myself. Duane had been invited to campus to talk to that special one-time-only Native American literature course and I was, after all, of Indian descent and had published a few things here and there. In the audience that night was William Fenton, whose lifetime of study of the Iroquois was evidenced by many books and articles and the emeritus chair of anthro-

pology at the same SUNY/Albany that gave Paige his degree. In fact, I'm pretty sure Bill Fenton was there for Paige—not Duane and myself. After the readings and talk, the question and answer session got around to such things as vocables in traditional songs—"non-sense words," as Fenton put it—and storytelling traditions. "There are," Fenton said, "no more traditional Iroquois storytellers. I knew the last one and he died some years ago." There was some disagreement that night, and I leave it to your imagination as to which two people were the most vocal in their disagreeing.

I begin at Skidmore and with those details because I feel it sets the scene for my own directions as a writer of Native American literature and a teacher of the literature of Native Americans. Those details also lend themselves well to some points I'd like to make about teaching Native American literature. First, however, another story.

Not long ago, I was invited to do a storytelling program at a college in Vermont. While there, I had dinner with several people who have been teaching Native American literature in college. Our conversation was an illuminating one for me, because it pointed out how widespread the teaching of Native American literature is becoming and just how needed are some directions in HOW and WHAT to teach in such courses. One of the people said that he was having a hard time finding texts. Another said that he was using Frederick Turner's 1973 volume *The Portable Native American Reader* and beginning with Creation myths, but that he had some misgivings about the accuracy of the translations, though he didn't know enough to know for sure how good they were. The third teacher of Native American literature mentioned taking a course in how to teach Native American literature from a certain professor. Someone else at the table knew that professor and mentioned that when she taught Native American literature as a visiting professor at their school the few Native American students on campus had signed up for the course but all dropped it because they found something objectionable about it. No one knew what.

I do a lot of listening in such conversations. Partly because I was raised to listen and partly because when academic conversations start it isn't that easy to break into them. Even when people ask you a direct question they often try to answer it themselves before you can open your mouth. So I waited. These people I was having dinner with were good folks and their interest and their concern were very real. *When you're ready to listen*, I thought. *When it is quiet enough*. And when it was quiet enough, I began to say a few words about how I have approached the teaching of Native American literature. And unless you've lost patience by now with my slow developing style, you're about to read some of those words.

When we speak about Native American literature today it is, in many ways, like speaking of African literature. More accurately, it is how speaking about African literature would be if we were living

in an Africa which had lost 90% of its population in the last 500 years and was being run as a single united continent by European colonials. As is the case with Africa, when we speak of "Native American Literature," of "American Indian Literature" or (as they say in Canada) "Native Literature," we are speaking of many literatures, especially when we refer to that work which comes from what might loosely be called (though there were, in fact, a number of writing and mnemonic recording systems in North America) "Oral Tradition." Just as Zulu oral poetry from southern Africa is very different from the traditions of the griots of Mali in the northwest of Africa, the Haudenosaunee (as the "Iroquois" call themselves) epic of the founding of their Great League of Peace is not at all like the deer songs of the Yaqui.

When you approach the totality of "Native American Literature," you are confronted by an incredibly vast body of work. It comes out of (in just the area now called the continental United States) more than 400 different languages and distinct cultures. It is thousands of years old. Yet, without any special preparation, without any real grounding in the cultures which produced those many literatures, without any familiarity with the languages from which they were translated (seldom by native speakers and all-too-often translated in very slipshod and inappropriate ways) teachers on the university (and even high school) level are expected to teach this "Native American Literature." Not only that, most of those teachers have never visited a Native American community or spoken with a single Native American. It is, to say the least, daunting. To put it another way, as one of my friends and teachers, a Pueblo elder known to the world as "Swift Eagle," said, "It's dumb!"

The first full-fledged Native American literature course I taught was in a maximum security prison. I was, by then, no longer in Skidmore's English Department. My terminal contract had been terminated. Other job opportunities in other parts of America had been possible, but I wasn't about to leave my native soil again. Eventually, I'd been rehired by Skidmore's external degree program to develop and direct a college program at Great Meadow Correctional Facility. I stayed with that job for eight years. In addition to being an administrator, I taught a course now and then. African Literature, Black Literature, and finally, in 1975, Introduction to Native American Literature.

If I'd had my druthers, I would have begun any Native American Literature course not in the classroom, but in the woods. (That would have been *just fine* insofar as the men in my class at Great Meadow went. They understood what I meant, but that got almost as big a laugh from them as the proposed course in Astronomy at the prison which was nixed by the Deputy Superintendent in charge of Security when the professor said that field trips outside at night would be necessary.) It was important, I told that class, to have a sense of the American earth, of the land and the people as one. I

divided the syllabus into four directions and focussed on the literary traditions of one particular Native nation from each corner of the continent. To the east we looked at the People of the Long House, the Haudenosaunee. We began with poems written in English by Maurice Kenny and Peter Blue Cloud before turning to the epic story of the Founding of the Great League, listening to recordings of Mohawk social dance songs as we did so. To the south, we began with poems by Leslie Silko and Simon Ortiz and we read Silko's *Ceremony* and Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in the context of the healing traditions of Navajo and Pueblo cultures. To the North we looked at James Welch's novel *Winter in the Blood*. To the west we focussed on translations of Lakota and Cheyenne traditional songs while we read Lance Henson's poetry. Again, as with the Iroquois material, we listened to the music of the people, including not just grass dance songs, but also Floyd Westerman singing "Custer Died for Your Sins." We looked at maps of America (and allowing any maps into the prison was a major struggle), and we talked about history, from east to west, from north to south. It was one of the best classes I'd ever taught, and I still have some of the papers written by those men.

Although there have been other courses in Native American literature that I have taught since then—in seminar courses for senior citizens, at Hamilton College and at the State University of New York at Albany—and a great deal of new Native American work and work about Native American literature has come into print, I have not really changed my approach to teaching Native American literature. There are four simple directions that I follow (in addition to those cardinal ones) and I would suggest them as applicable for others who wish to teach Native American literature.

**1. Clearly define what you mean by "Native American Literature."** Remember the breadth and diversity of what we call "American Indian." Remember that we are referring, in fact, to many nations within this nation; to many literatures, literatures which each come from a national identity and a strong sense of place. You might make a good case that contemporary Native American writing in English is one continuous literary body, but when you look at the influence of the old traditions and then look at those traditions themselves, you recognize that you're seeing just the tip of the iceberg.

To my mind, it is best to teach introductory courses focussing on the work written in English, to think of these courses as only the beginning and to hope for both the knowledgeable instructors and the opportunity for schools to offer more advanced studies—a course in Haudenosaunee Literature 301 or Momaday 405—just as we offer introductory courses in British Literature and then give our advanced students a chance to study the Victorians or Shakespeare.

**2. Teach the work in context.** The Native American view of life as reflected in literature (whether in English or originally in an earlier native language) is holistic. Remember that, if you are teaching Native American literature well you are not just teaching literature, you are also teaching culture. To understand the work—or to begin to understand it—it must be seen as it was *used*. The word is regarded as alive, not just syllables and symbols. An understanding, for example, of the traditional Navajo Night Chant is impossible without knowing the place of the Night Chant in the practices of healing, without recognizing that it is only one part of an event which involves the participation of dozens or even hundreds of individuals, that it is meant to be sung in a certain place at a certain time and that the making of a sand painting depicting a particular event in Navajo mythology is intimately connected to it. Similarly, it is difficult to teach a modern work such as Silko's *Ceremony* without some awareness of the place and purpose of similar healing and storytelling traditions among the Pueblo people.

**3. Pay attention to continuance.** Be aware of the strong connections in all Native American writing between what the western world calls "past" and "present." I am not just talking about the awareness of literary tradition—though that works at least in part as an analogy—but of something more than that. Many of the native languages deal with "time" in a very different way than does English. Similarly, the time sense of many contemporary Native American novels can seem strange, circuitous, even circular. Continuance is an important word for me in dealing with Native American writing. I stress this continuance by constantly linking contemporary Native writers to their roots, to their people and their places, their traditions.

**4. Be wary of work in translation.** My own approach is, for introductory courses at least, to place the strongest emphasis on contemporary work written in English and to use a few *carefully* selected translations from the old traditions in direct relation to those newer writings. A great many stories, songs, ceremonies and the like which can be found in books are flawed in many ways. In some cases, the translations are bowdlerized or inaccurate. Imagine what it would be like if Shakespeare's plays had been written in Lakota and we only knew his work in English through a single translation of *Othello* done by an 18th century puritanical and racist Baptist missionary with a tin ear who transcribed the play from a verbal recounting of it by a slightly senile octogenarian who never liked the theatre that much. From my own knowledge of certain Native American languages and some of the translations that have been foisted off as legitimate, I can assure you that I am not exaggerating the injustices that have been done. In some cases, in fact, rather than translations, the so-called myths and legends that we find in

any number of places are sometimes made up from the whole cloth—oft involving a tragic love between a boy from one tribe and a girl from another and either a lover's leap or a canoe going over whatever high waterfall is handy to the translator's fevered imagination.

Another point about work in translation to keep in mind is that some things which have been recorded or translated have been recorded or translated without the permission of the native people who own that work. Much of Native America's traditional culture is *living* in the strongest sense of that word. Revealing that culture to the uninitiated is sacrilegious. A good teacher of Native American literature needs to know enough to be able to know which works need to be shown special respect. I cannot emphasize that word *respect* strongly enough. In some cases it may even mean NOT discussing something. That is a hard direction for people with the western mindset to follow, that western mindset which says "tell it all, show it all, explain it all." I feel that those with that mindset would be better off avoiding the teaching of Native American literature.

When using Native American literature in translation, it is safest to use work which has been translated by Native scholars themselves. Alfonso Ortiz and J. N. B. Hewitt are two examples. There are also a number of ethnologists whose reputations and whose relations with the people whose work they translated are quite reputable. Dennis Tedlock and Frances Densmore represent some of the best in contemporary and early 20th century work. I also like to have access to both the English translation and the original language. Then, even a non-native speaker can have some sense of the sound and rhythms as they were meant to be. But, again, show respect. Walk slowly. *Listen* to Native people.

Native American literature, as we now have the chance to offer it, is more than just an extra area, more than just a little diversity for the curriculum. It is the literature of a continent (of two continents, in fact, but I'll confine myself to the area north of Mexico for now), and it is a literature continually growing, being created and rediscovered. It is said that when Columbus touched onto the island of Hispaniola he didn't know where he really was. He didn't have, you might say, a good sense of direction. I certainly hope that future teachers of Native American literature will at least avoid that mistake of a European coming into contact with something new. I hope they will see where they are, see which way is south, which way is west, which way is north and which way to look if they want to see the light of dawn.

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