

EXILED ON THEIR OWN LAND: AMERICAN INDIAN HISTORY IN LITERATURE

compiled for conference
*Revisiting Indian Nations. Transatlantic and
Transcultural Perspectives in Native American History.*
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Structure

Abstract:

What can Native American literature contribute to the study of history? We will look at authors like Sherman Alexie, Janet Campbell Hale, Simon Ortiz, James Welch and Gerald Vizenor.

Contents:

1. History in Literature
2. Storying and Survivance
3. Common Themes and Examples
 - 3.1. Remembrance/Recovery
 - 3.2. (Re)definition
 - 3.3. Reorientation
4. Outlook

1. History in Literature



Wounded Knee Memorial,
Pine Ridge IR

1. History in Literature

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- Why tell history?
 - Social function: narrating the nation
 - History as tradition, explanation for the now
 - Creating a common story / imagining community
 - Creating a sense of belonging and a common identity
 - Scope of History:
 - National history
 - Minority history as it relates to national history
 - Tribal history – intertribal history – American history

- history can be told in various ways

1. History in Literature

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- How to tell history?
 - Mythologizing
 - “Classical” approach before Thucydides
 - History as a just-so-story with problematic reliability
 - Oral History
 - Performative aspect: presence of the past through stories
 - History through artifacts
 - Remembrance through fixed items; fetishized history (ruins)
 - Historiography
 - Objective approach -- yet: Hayden White: narrativity
 - Whose story? (Subaltern Studies / Postcolonial studies)
 - Historiography as literature (Mommsen: nobel prize)

1. History in Literature

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□ Historical Literature

□ Drawbacks

- Less reliable on obvious levels through fictional content
- Needs further analysis for knowledge gain
- Concerns about what constitutes TRUTH in historical research

□ Benefits

- More similar to the “classical” approach
 - More relatable by telling a “human story”
 - Less strict; allowing for counterfactuals
 - “Feeling history”
- E.g. Walter Scott, Alexandre Dumas, E.L. Doctorow, Liselotte Welskopf-Henrich, Karl May

1. History in Literature

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- What is specific about the telling of history in Native American literature?
 - notion of exile and home
 - notion of memory / remembering
 - translating not just of events, but also language and meaning across borders of time and place
 - notions of sovereignty of the self

1. History in Literature

- ▣ simulation of the “real Indian”
- ▣ utilizing tradition and humor of the trickster
 - assisting Native people in overcoming their tragic/comic history
 - or as a means of creating a profane persona that again tricks non-Indians into a relationship of presence and not-absence of the true aboriginal
 - (e.g., Vizenor’s *Mayan Columbus*, Nanapush in Erdrich’s stories, Buffalo Bill in *Charging Elk*, Justice in Alexie’s *Flight* etc.)
 - this is done with full acknowledgment of these roles

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2. Storying and Survivance



Crazy Horse Memorial,
Paha Sapa / Black Hills

2. Storying and Survivance

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□ survivance:

“ For instance, survivance in the sense of native survivance, is more than survival, more than **endurance** or mere response; the stories of survivance are an **active presence**.

(Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 15)

■ ties in to principles of oral literature:
continuous retelling, performativity

2. Storying and Survivance

- Storying is survivance
 - final refuge of survival and resistance
 - naming and remembering, claiming and renaming
 - transforming and indigenizing
 - speaks to the continuation of a people, of their evolving culture, of some normative sense of self

- for Native people it is their absence in the simulation that privileges their (non)presence.

- from this absence Native writers (Welch, Ortiz and Alexie) articulate an American Indian literary historiography

2. Storying and Survivance

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□ lived experience vs. conventional stance:

“ Only an Indian knows who he is [..] **an individual who just happens to be an Indian** – and if he has grown up on a reservation he will naturally write about what he knows. And hopefully he will have the toughness and fairness to present his material in a way that is **not manufactured by conventional stance....** What I mean is – **whites have to adopt a stance; Indians already have one.**

(James Welch, quoted in Lincoln, “Back-Tracking James Welch,” 24)

□ white not seen as privileged position (as otherwise usual)

3. Common Themes and Examples



3. Common Themes

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- 3.1. Remembrance/Recovery
- 3.2. (Re)Definition
- 3.3. Reorientation

Pointing to what is lost
by confronting past and present

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3.1. Remembrance/Recovery



Toppenish,
Yakama IR

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

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□ Memory as self-definition:

“ Memory has most often been operative as a *presence*, located in material and immaterial ways [..]. Memory speaks of and from a *home* and the *cultural practices which we call “ours.”*”

(Rüdiger Kunow, Wilfried Raussert,
Cultural Memory and Multiple Identities, 9)

- active presence
- action
- responsibility

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

□ History as disenchantment, vs. Memory:

“ Memory is **inherently contentious and partisan**: one man’s acknowledgement is another’s omission. [..]

Unlike memory, which confirms and reinforces itself, **history contributes to the disenchantment of the world**. Most of what it has to offer is discomfoting, even disruptive – which is why it is not always politically prudent to wield the past as a morel cudgel with which to beat and berate a people for its sins. But **history does need to be learned – and periodically re-learned**.

(Tony Judt, *Postwar*, 829f)

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

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□ Exile:

“ Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and **a real bond with one’s native place**; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an **unexpected, unwelcome loss**.

(Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 407)

- occasionally though , exile may be voluntary (Errand into the Wilderness)
- or be embraced (James Welch, *Heartsong*, *Winter in the Blood*)
- exile as internal detachment (James Welch, *Death of Jim Loney*)
- “Exiled on their own Land”:
relationship between soul and psyche disrupted

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

□ **Sherman Alexie, “Migration, 1902” (2000):**

“ The salmon swim
so thick in this river

that Grandmother walks
across the water

on the bridge
of their spines.

(from *One Stick Song*, 55)



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3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

Colville Museum,
Colville Indian Reservation

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

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- **Janet Campbell Hale, “Claire” (1999)**
 - story of Claire, who as an old woman flees from a nursing home back to the Coeur d’Alene Reservations
 - equating of nursing home with boarding school
 - use of word “**Tupiya**”, meaning both “grandmother” and “grandson”, to tie together past and present, linguistic connection becomes a historical tie
 - question of exile --- and of going home
 - specificity of Place, of familiar surroundings, landscape, people

(from *Women on the Run*)

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

- **James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):**
 - “ They had never spoken of leaving the Stronghold. It was true that Charging Elk himself had had these very thoughts, but when he visited his parents and saw the way the people lived on the reservation, he quickly put them away. “and if we go, and if we come back, how will we live? What will be here for us?” (33)

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

□ James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):

“ [...] Bird Tail told them that he had had a dream in which a buffalo wandered through the forests of **Paha Sapa** and came upon a **cave** carved into a scarred rockface. The buffalo turned around four times, as a dog does before it lies down, each time looking back at the world. It seemed to be looking at everything, as though it wanted to remember all that was there. It looked for a long time, through the many winters of its ancestors, over the plains and rivers and mountains they had crossed; it looked at times of good grass and times of hunger; it looked at times of trouble and times of peace. Finally, it looked up into the sky at the sun and its eyes turned as white and hard as polished stone. Then it whirled and **entered the cave**. (127)

3.1. Remembrance/Recovery

□ **Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek* (1981):**

“ **Repression** works like a shadow, clouding memory and sometimes even to blind, and when it is on a **national scale**, it is just not good.

In 1969

XXXX Coloradoans were killed in Vietnam.

In 1978

XXXX Coloradoans were killed on the highways.

In 1864,
there were no Indians killed.

Remember **My Lai**.

In fifty years,
nobody knew
what happened.

It wasn't only the Senators.

Remember Sand Creek. (14f)

Redefining Indian History and Identity
by providing a counter-narrative
and (re)claiming agency

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3.2. (Re)Definition



Museum of the Cherokee,
Eastern Cherokee IR

3.2. (Re)definition

- recovering memory as first step towards redefining an identity that has too frequently been defined from the outside
- reframing issues in Indian terms
- using Indian names (“Battle of the Greasy Grass” instead of “Battle of the Little Bighorn”) and terms in Indian languages (Napikwans, wasichus, ...)
- putting an Indian perspective on things
- recovering Native agency (and complicity)

- Indian authors writing for Indian **and** Non-Indian audiences, recentering the white audience (cf. Joseph L. Coulombe, “Writing for Connection,” 2008)

3.2. (Re)definition

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□ cultural survival and bidirectional change:

“ When cultural contact between Native Americans and Europeans has occurred throughout history, I am assuming that it is **just as likely** that **things European are Indianized** rather than the anthropological assumption that things Indian are always swallowed up by European culture. I reject, in other words, the **supremacist notion that assimilation can only go in one direction**, that white culture always overpowers Indian culture, **that white is inherently more powerful than red**, that Indian resistance has never occurred in such a fashion that things European have been **radically subverted by Indians**.

(Craig Womack, *Red on Red*, 12)

3.2. (Re)definition

□ James Welch, *Fools Crow* (1986):

“ [Yellow Kidney] remembered how the people were happy because the **Napikwans** promised them many goods in exchange for their land. When their wagons came filled with crates, the people gathered around and the Indian agent began to hand out small things. Cut beads, iron kettles, knives, bells, **the ice-that-looks-back**, carrot and twist tobacco, a few blankets. All the chiefs got Napikwan saddles to go with their medaillons. Then the **Napikwans** gave the people some of their strange food: **the white sand that makes things sweet, the white powder, the bitter black drink**. The people were **happy**, for they knew these white men would come often to hand out their goods. Even Yellow Kidney had been happy. Along with the others, he agreed with **the white big chief** that the **Pikunis** should raise the puny **whitehorns** and dig and plant seeds in the breast of Mother Earth. →

3.2. (Re)definition

□ James Welch, *Fools Crow* (1986):

“ ← Along with the others, he knew that the Pikunis would go away and hunt the **blackhorns** as they always had. But their agreement had made the white chiefs happy, for now the Napikwans could move onto the Pikuni lands. **Everyone was happy.**

[..] He had been hearing around the camps of the Pikunis that Owl Child and his gang had been causing trouble with the Napikwans, driving away horses and cattle, and had recently killed a party of woodcutters near **Many Houses fort**. It would be only a matter of time before the Napikwans sent their **seizers** to make war on the Pikunis. Their people would **suffer greatly**. (16)

(naming, complexifying history, same in next quote)

3.2. (Re)definition

□ James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):

“ It was early in the **Moon of the Shedding Ponies**, less than a year after the fight with the longknives on the **Greasy Grass** [..]. He understood that these **wasichus** had made his sister and brother and his mother cry. He understood that his father and the other men would not fight anymore. He understood that his people would not be allowed to go back to the buffalo ranges. They were **prisoners**. [..]

He looked down at the fort, at the log buildings, at the **red and white and blue flag of America** that hung listlessly from a pole, at the row of soldiers with their **rifles with steel knives** tight against their shoulders, at the thousands of Indians who ringed the open field, and he wasn't afraid anymore. The Indians who awaited them were alive – and they were singing. The whole valley was alive with the **peace song**. (1-4)

3.2. (Re)definition

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- **James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):**
 - “ [H]e wondered if there were any buffalo left. He thought of Bird Tail’s dream of the buffalo entering the cave in **Paha Sapa**. He had never heard of the buffalo returning. All he ever heard about America – well, he heard almost nothing. Because he couldn’t read, he didn’t know what the journals said about his homeland. Sometimes he unloaded ships from America. Sometimes he heard his fellow workers curse America for being greedy and arrogant. **President Roosevelt had attacked the small country of Cuba for no reason. Now they were in the Philippines. The rabblers among the dockworkers often talked about refusing to unload American goods.** Charging Elk didn’t understand their anger and didn’t know enough about American to come to its defense – even if he wanted to. (420)
- “othering” America through a Lakota and French perspective
- window into imperial America

3.2. (Re)definition

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- **James Welch, *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000):**
 - can be read as counterstory to the life of Black Elk, who travels with Buffalo Bill, but returns to America after being lost in England briefly
 - Charging Elk, by force of circumstance, remains and *takes charge* of his life – *in exile*

3.2. (Re)definition

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- also: extreme versions of Redefinition in counterfactual history
- **Gerald Vizenor, *The Heirs of Columbus*:**
 - Columbus as a Mayan
- “decentering” a Hegelian vision of History by changing the turn of events
- literary reversal of history indicating contingency: conquest is not divine fate; not due to inherent superiority of Europeans; history might have happened differently

Overcoming essentialized identities and stressing hybridity

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3.3. (Re)orientation



Neah Bay,
Mahah IR

3.3. (Re)orientation

- talking back to America and Europe
- inscribing a Native voice into the contemporary discourse, not just into the historical one
- recognition of hybridity in Indian identity and heritage
- opposition to mainstream essentializing of the “real” Indian
- Indian perspective providing a counterpoint of equal validity to the **national narrative**

3.3. (Re)orientation

□ Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek* (1981):

“ *Who stole the hearts and minds of the humble hard-working folk until they too became moralistic and self-righteous: senators, bishops, presidents, missionaries, corporation presidents?* ”

They were **simple enough**. / Swedes, Germans, / Mennonites, Dutch, / Irish, escaping / Europe. / Running.

They **shouldn't have stopped / and listened to Puritans**. / And learned that mountains were chains / to be crossed like **breaking / something**.

[..]

They shouldn't have listened / to those **strange preachers**. / The Congress. / **Cotton Mather**. / On their way west.

They shouldn't have understood / those Biblical words **that way** / and become simple as death. / And, finally, **complex liars. / And thieves**. (50f)

3.3. (Re)orientation

- **Sherman Alexie, *Flight* (2007):**
 - youth language
 - short novel – suitable for High School

 - Young estranged Indian orphan tries to shoot people in a bank, but instead he experiences an Odyssey through several characters, both Indian and non-Indian
 - reference to *Moby Dick* (“Call me Zits”)
 - structural reference to *Quantum Leap*

3.3. (Re)orientation

□ Sherman Alexie, *Flight* (2007):

“ I am standing in the middle of a **real Indian** camp, complete with thousands of real Indian tepees and tens of thousands of real old-time Indians. [...] Yep, a bunch of **real old-time Indians**. I’m not exactly sure what year it is. It’s tough to tell the difference between seventeenth- and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Indians. These are how Indians used to be, **how Indians are supposed to be**. [...] These old-time Indians have dark skin. There aren’t any half-breed pale-beige green-eyed Indians here. Nope, unlike me, **these Indians are the real deal**. I don’t hear any of them speaking English. [...] Even the dogs seem to be barking in Indian. (60)

3.3. (Re)orientation

□ Sherman Alexie, *Flight* (2007):

“ Crazy Horse is here. And that older Indian **dude** standing over there by the horses? **He sure looks like Sitting Bull does in the history-book pictorials.**

I realize this skinny river is the Little Bighorn, and I have been transported back to June 1876. [..]

Custer is marching towards his slaughter.

Custer is a crazy egomaniac who thinks he is going to be President of the United States. Custer is one of the top two or three dumb asses in American history. [..]

Thousands of hot and angry Indian dudes ride out to meet Custer and his doomed soldiers. (68f)

3.3. (Re)orientation

□ Sherman Alexie, *Flight* (2007):

“ They named the battle all wrong.

They shouldn't have called it Custer's Last Stand. Oh, it was his last stand. He died there. Here, I mean. But Custer wasn't important. He was easily replaced. There were plenty of other soldiers who were smarter and better at killing Indians.

Little Bighorn was the last real battle of the Indian wars. After that, the Indians gave up. So Custer's Last Stand was really **the Indians' last stand**.
[..]

I can't see anything, but I know what's happening. **I read about this fight. I watched a TV show about it on the History Channel.** (70f)

3.3. (Re)orientation

- not just speaking from Indian perspective, but “mixed-blood”, Americanized, contemporary view (History channel, pictorials, ...)
- redefining issues in youth language: stressing contemporaneity, modernity of Indians --- Indians have not vanished
- issues of representation are critical
- complexity of complicity
- representation of absence and presence
- Indians not as passive objects, but as having agency
- already building upon a shifted perspective on history (e.g. changed image of Custer)



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3.3. (Re)orientation

Little Big Horn Battlefield,
Crow Indian Reservation

IN REMEMBRANCE OF OUR FALLEN AT THE BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN, JUNE 25-26, 1876

LAKOTA SIOUX

War Leader Chief Black Moon	Flying Charge	Dog's Backbone	Black Wasichu	Chief Elk Standing High	Chased By Owls
War Leader Young Black Moon	Hawk Man	Bear With Horns	Elk Stands On Top	Deed	Young Bear
Chief High Eagle	Red Face	High Horse	High Eagle	Eagle Hat	Long Dog
Bear With Horns	White Buffalo Bull	Swift Bear	Plenty Lice	Elk Bear	Long Road
Guts	White Bull	Three Bears	White Eagle	Kills Him	Two Bear
	Dog With Horns	Bad Light Hair	Cloud Man		Young Skunk

We also honor those unknown Sioux men, women, and children who died in the battle.



3.3. (Re)orientation

Little Big Horn Battlefield, Indian Memorial
Crow Indian Reservation



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3.3. (Re)orientation

Little Big Horn Battlefield,
Crow Indian Reservation



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3.3. (Re)orientation

Little Big Horn Battlefield,
Crow Indian Reservation

4. Outlook



Noahvose / Mato Paha /
Bear Butte SP

4. Outlook

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- tribal literature as national literature
- cultural sovereignty
- canon:
 - “ [T]ribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the *tree*, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. *We are the canon.* [...] For much of this time period [i.e. American history], we have had literatures. Without Native American literature, *there is no American Canon.*
 - (Craig Womack, *Red on Red*, 6f)
- then opening up possible

4. Outlook

□ **Simon Ortiz, *From Sand Creek* (1981):**

“ That dream
shall have a name
after all,
and it will not be vengeful
but wealthy with love
and compassion
and knowledge.
And it will rise
in this heart
which is our America. (95)

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- for a selection of pictures from Indian Reservations, visit www.philjohn.com/ndn



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Thank You