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Native American Mythology and Literature

美国印第安神话与文学

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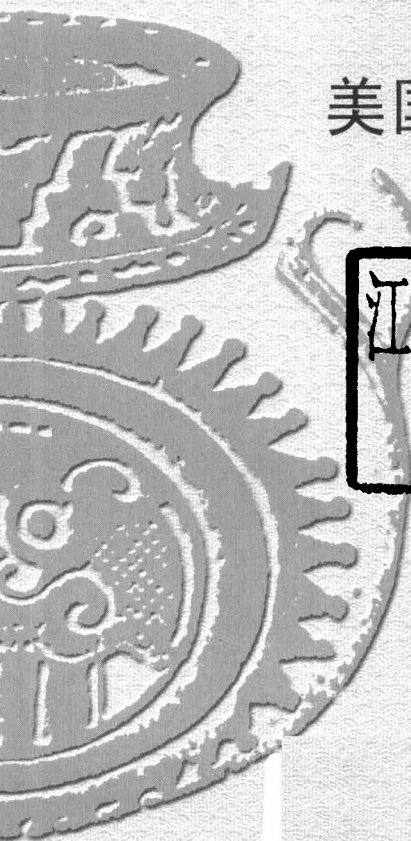
Native American Mythology and Literature

Dr. Jian Shi

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FOREWORD

by Peter G. Beidler, Lehigh University

Ever since American Indians were invaded by European military men, traders, explorers, exploiters, and settlers, they have been in pain, and in need of healing. That healing has been slow in coming and will never quite arrive because the loss has been so great and so permanent. The healing has taken several forms: treaties, education, negotiation, intermarriage, and removal to new territories, medical improvements, alcohol, government welfare, and even moneymaking casinos. Some of these "cures" have helped a little; others have done more harms than good. But the pain is still there. The healing is still elusive.

The most important form of healing has too often been overlooked. It is not something that comes to Native Americans from other Americans, but is indigenous to the Indian

people themselves. It is their stories, their connection through words to their own past and their own traditions. Storytelling is one of the oldest Native American arts. Traditionally performed by men or women who took it as part of their function within a family, a clan, or a tribe to keep the old lessons alive through their words, the story was all that some tribes had as history, as connection to the lessons of their ancestors. In a real sense, the storyteller was the tribal healer, the one who taught others the wisdom of the tribe, kept it together, kept it healthy.

Through the recent emergence of contemporary Native American fiction we are beginning to see an important rebirth of the tradition of storytelling as healing. A new generation of writers is discovering the power of words to heal themselves and their peoples. This new Generation is college-educated, sophisticated about the fictional techniques of the best writers of other cultures, and knowledgeable about the practical realities of publishing. They are discovering also that to write most authentically they have to be in touch with the oral traditions of their own tribe, their own families, and their own Indian selves. Taken together, these writers of contemporary Native American fiction are engaging in what Jian Shi calls a “discourse on healing.”

Four of these writers, N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Paula Gunn Allen, form the nucle-

us of Mr. Shi's book. He shows how each writer contributes to the discourse. Some of them look back to earlier roots, some look forward to a new world ahead of them, but all of them deal with the importance of storytelling as a healing device. Storytelling is no cure-all, no panacea, no inoculation against future pain, but it helps Native Americans and it can help us all.

Dr. Shi is ideally positioned to write on healing in Native American Fiction. He earned his doctorate in an American university, where he studied modern American literature, with a specialty in Native American fiction. As a Chinese national he has a direct connection to the ancient literary traditions that many of America's tribal peoples inherited from their own Asian ancestors. As a teacher and administrator in a prestigious Chinese university he has a platform from which to speak and a voice that cries out to be heard. As a teacher and a man who cares about healing, he is ideally positioned in this important book to join in the discourse on healing himself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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light amidst my confusion and setbacks.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years Native American fiction has earned a secure place in American literary studies. Critical attention is now being paid to contemporary Native American writers who write for their own people and for non-Native American readers as well. Not all non-Native American readers, however, can appreciate Indian fiction. One difficulty that prevents our appreciation of Native American fiction is that traditional Indian stories and storytelling play an important function in plot, theme, and character development. The Native American stories and storytelling motif are unique in their own cultural characteristics.

Critics and scholars of Native American literature have covered various aspects of Native American writing. Recent criticism and studies have given a special attention to contemporary Native American fiction. Native American traditional stories, storytelling, healing, land, vision, language, and ability to hear have been frequent, but distinct, topics in the

study of contemporary Native American fiction. Up to now, however, no critical study has been devoted to discovering how land, vision, language, and ability to hear work together in healing; how vision, language, and ability to hear are related to land in Native American perspective; how native land generates Native American traditional stories; and how storytelling plays a controlling role in the healing process and in the structure of some Native American novels. Up to now, no study has been devoted to discovering how healing through Native American traditional stories and storytelling work as a consistent theme in the writings of major Native American writers such as N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Paula Gunn Allen.

In this study of the function of traditional stories and storytelling in contemporary Native American fiction, I focus particularly on major works of Momaday, Welch, Silko, and Allen, four well-established Native American writers. These four writers come from different Indian cultural backgrounds, but they share in their fiction an interest in healing through storytelling. My study explains the variety of ways these four writers use storytelling to lend depth and meaning to their fiction. Through a study of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1966), Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* (1983), I will show how traditional stories and storytelling contribute to the healing of the characters in these novels.

Contemporary Native American fiction traces its origins to traditional oral narratives, many of which are now lost to us. In order to understand the nature of the Native American oral tradition and its place in Native American literature, one must understand that traditional Indian stories are told and retold not merely to entertain or to instruct but also to heal. Thus, traditional Indian stories are often about the land — about gods, nature, animals, people, and order on the land. For many Indian peoples, to be healthy is to be in proper relationship with the land. Contemporary Native American novelists such as the four writers in my study are remarkably consistent in their suggestion that if young American Indians are to be healed of the various sicknesses that plague them in a modern America, they must realign themselves with the help of land. To realign themselves with the land, they must refocus their vision, must relearn the ability to hear — that is, actively listen to — the traditional stories of their own peoples, and must regain their use of language and tell their own stories. To stay healthy, they must, in other words, maintain a connection to, and finally participate in, storytelling.

From the Native Americans' point of view, the world is fashioned from the chaos of nature — from nothingness, confusion, imbalance, and disarray. Traditional Indian stories dramatize the movement from chaos to harmony, and in which, land plays an important role in establishing order. Land is thus closely related to their lives, and harmonious order and balance can be maintained only when one is close to

the land, where the peoples, animals, and plants are related to each other. Harmonious order usually indicates both the order of the natural world and the order of the inner world of a person on the land.

In traditional Indian stories the vision quest is important. Related to balance and closeness to native land is a person's vision, a person's ability to see with both physical eye and mind's eye. The sickness and alienation of the Indian characters in the four fictional works of this study are shown by their initial inability to focus their vision because of their estrangement from their native land. With the healing power of traditional stories, these characters eventually succeed in refocusing their vision.

The ability to hear, to actively listen to the traditional stories of their own peoples, bears the same importance as the ability to see in the healing process for alienated characters. The four Indian characters' experiences illustrate that the ability to hear offers Native Americans a passage from a lack of awareness of their heritage to a full awareness, a passage connecting them with their people, and a passage into a world where people, animals, and plants live in harmony.

Native American storytelling makes it possible for native heritage and traditions to be passed down to younger generations, with traditional stories functioning both as vehicles to bridge the gap between generations and as medicinal power to heal the sick. As Scott Momaday points out, a Native American is a "man made of words."¹ Articulation of words and

sentences gives Native Americans the power to carry on their traditions and to convey their vision of the world.

Each of the four fictional works in this research features a Native American protagonist who is a fullblood, a half-breed, or a mixed-blood. These characters are in one way or another alienated from their land and traditions. They go through a healing process in which they are reintegrated with their people and the land. The healing process in each of these four novels is accomplished through traditional storytelling. The protagonists eventually, through traditional stories, learn to realign themselves with their native land, succeed in refocusing their vision, and regain their ability both to hear and to tell stories.

This study is designed to demonstrate the various ways these four Native American writers explore their traditional stories and storytelling in the healing of their protagonists. It is worth reiterating here that the Indian traditional stories and storytelling involve largely the Indian oral narrative tradition. As Leslie Silko, in "Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," points out:

Where I come from, the words that are most highly valued are those which are spoken from the heart, unpremeditated and unrehearsed. Among the Pueblo people, a written speech or statement is highly suspect because the true feelings of the speaker remain hidden as he reads words that are detached from the occasion and the audience. . . . The structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web — with many little threads radiating

from a center, crises-crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made. (Silko, "Language" 54)

Although these four writers come from distinct cultural backgrounds and their works are in written form, they share the common Indian oral narrative tradition, and, at the same time, they preserve the oral narrative patterns in their written works. Readers who are not Native Americans often find it difficult to appreciate and understand Indian fiction because they do not understand how the traditional stories and storytelling function in that fiction. Through this book I explore how these four Indian writers' protagonists act in the novels both as the audience and the storytellers, and how their actions bring the reader close into the web structure of the stories, a structure, as Silko says, that is typical of Native American traditional storytelling.

Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, the unnamed protagonist in Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony*, and Ephanie in Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* all grew up listening to their grandparents' stories. These stories about the Indian perspectives on the creation of the world, about land, animals, plants, and people in the world, and about the harmony of the world, have come down through generations. In one way or another these characters' alienation and estrangement were caused by the modern world, which disconnected them from their traditions and

people. In their healing process all the fragments of the traditional stories eventually come together when the protagonists regain their ability to hear. Traditional Indian stories come from the heart and soul of the native people. These stories have been told, reshaped, and refitted to meet their audience's changing needs and changing situations. Native American fiction has developed steadily in the last thirty years. Most of the central characters in contemporary Native American fiction, like the protagonists depicted in these four novels, are sick, are divorced from their traditions and their land, and have lost their vision, their ability to hear, and their ability to speak. By the conclusion of the novels, however, thanks to the power and the example of mythical characters in traditional stories, they become psychologically and physically improved by attuning themselves to their traditions and the land. Their wellness is proved by their ability to speak, to tell their own stories.

The protagonists of these four novels, especially the narrator in *Winter in the Blood*, Tayo in *Ceremony*, and Ephanie in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*, untangle themselves from the chaos and regain their ability to tell their own stories. Talking and storytelling become for them a proof of healing. At the end of the healing process, Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* begins to sing the traditional song of his people, Welch's protagonist in *Winter in the Blood* tells his future life plans and writes his story, Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony* tells his stories for personal as well as communal healing, and Ephanie in *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* passes