

Honoring the

*the telling of stories, the recitation of epic poems,
the singing of songs, the making of prayers,
the chanting of magic and mystery, the extension
of the human voice with the spoken word.*



CULTURAL, HISTORICAL AND LINGUISTIC PRESERVATION.

In the top photo, Gros Ventre tribal elder Elmer Main reviews his interview recorded for the Native Studies classes at Fort Belknap College. In the bottom photo, a Fort Belknap College student intern edits footage of interviews conducted with other tribal elders. Photos by Sean Chandler.

*the spoken word...
of the people, by the people, and for the people*

WORD

Classroom instructors find that students respond best to oral tradition

By Michael Thompson

“Sherman,” asks the critic, “how does your work apply to the oral tradition?” “Well,” I say, as I hold my latest book close to me, “it doesn’t really apply at all because I type this. And I’m really, really quiet when I’m typing it.”

– from “The Unauthorized Autobiography of Me” by Sherman Alexie

Thirty years ago this fall, I arrived at Haskell Indian Junior College, now Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU, Lawrence, KS), as a young humanities instructor fresh out of grad school, mistakenly optimistic that the way I had been taught to teach composition and literature would resonate with my Native students.

Specifically, my indoctrination in the Western literary canon at the state college I attended had emphasized that the highest form of artistic, literary expression was one of individual imagination – Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Joyce, and the like. I am sure I carried that perspective into the classroom with me and that it shaped my first clumsy attempts to teach writing and literature to Native students.

A lot has changed in 30 years. I now believe that there is a uniquely Indigenous world view that frequently frames learning. Consequently, my teaching has certainly changed.

It took me years to understand that the oral tradition could be fundamentally superior to written literature or that texts

that privilege the Indigenous voice might speak more powerfully to Native students than literary masterpieces.

But in numerous ways it has become evident to me that Native communities generally value “the word” itself above the art of writing and that there are, in fact, powerful and compelling reasons why this is so. In recent interviews for this article, I have found this opinion to be widely shared among tribal educators.

Let me express these contrasting views as I have come to understand them. The Western view: A gifted individual, such as a Shakespeare, out of his own imagination uses the many complex techniques of rhetoric and composition to create a work of art, which we lesser mortals struggle to fully appreciate through a complicated process we call literary analysis.

The Indigenous view: The oral tradition represents “the other side of the miracle of language” as described by N. Scott Momaday in *The Man Made of Words*: “the telling of stories, the recitation of epic poems, the singing of songs, the making of prayers, the chanting of magic and mystery, the exertion of the human voice upon the unknown – in short, the spoken word.” To paraphrase a familiar document, this sounds to me very much like a literature “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

The basic difference here can be simply stated as the Tribe vs. the Individual. As place-based, earth-based, community-based cultures, tribal people honor the story of the group, its history and values and beauty, above the imagination of the solitary artist.

Recently, I explored how the oral tradition is currently “voiced” in tribal college and university classrooms. I asked a number of instructors how they approach literature and writing – particularly if the texts that they assign represent the value

that Native people have historically given to traditional stories, teachings, speeches, tribal journeys, and accomplishments. I wondered, for example, what significant texts are being used that represent individual or tribal oral histories or traditions.

Importance of Cultural Activism

Mary Henson Saunders, an English instructor at Sinte Gleska University (SGU, Mission, SD) says outright that her colleagues do not believe in “privileging the written.”

The books she uses in freshman comp and lit classes reflect her conscious attempt to honor the oral tradition, including a number of Lakota memoirs: *With My Own Eyes: A Lakota Woman Tells Her People’s Story* by Susan Bordeaux Bettelyoun and Josephine Waggoner, *Lakota Woman* by Mary Crow Dog, *Salt Camp: Her Story* by Ollie Napesni, *Bead on an Anthill* and *Turtle Lung Woman’s Grandmother* by Delphine Red Shirt.

“I use various sections to talk about the importance of political activism regarding language and culture...and to show the value of collecting personal narratives told by their elders,” says Henson Saunders. She and her colleagues have invited tribal writers such as Red Shirt to share with their classes, as well as poet Roberta Hill Whiteman, author of the collection *Star Quilt*.

In addition to the anthology of women’s voices, *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, edited by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, she has also taught *Water Lily* by Ella Deloria.

She uses numerous works by Lakota author Joseph Marshall, III in both introductory classes and Sicangu Writing

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and Action Project seminars. “I just completed an English 102 course using *Walking with Grandfather: The Wisdom of Lakota Elders* as my only text,” she says, and she used his *The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History* to “incorporate oral traditions with knowledge of the landscape.”



POETRY UNDER THE PINES AT BADLANDS RANCH. Pictured is Roberta Hill Whiteman (in hat), Oneida author of *Star Quilt*, discussing her work with students in a Sinte Gleska University class. Top, from L: Jackie White Bird, Roberta, Jacob Whiteman Bottom, from L: Donna Hollow Horn Bear, Bud Poor Bear, Anna Pickett, Robin Kills the Enemy. Photo by Mary Henson Saunders.

She sees the value that her Native and non-Native students place on narrative as a significant factor in their learning style. “Most of my students are happier reading a straightforward narrative,” she notes, as opposed to a text filled with literary pyrotechnics. “They just want to read the story.”

While Henson Saunders seems to favor memoir, Haskell professor Lorene Williams has discovered that, for her Native students, reading the novels of Louise Erdrich can in some ways “replicate the oral story-telling experience.” She has taught Erdrich’s work for 14 years and currently uses *Love Medicine* in Composition 101 and *The Bingo Palace* in English 102.

“Erdrich’s work represents a slice of life reality that is easily recognizable to my students,” says Williams. “Her characters represent people to whom they can relate.” Erdrich’s structural style, which Williams tells her students is “circular” or “spiral” in nature, replicates in many ways oral storytelling. “She jumps into the middle of things with the juicy parts then backtracks in ever widening circles to color in the details.” In Williams’s opinion, Erdrich also teaches “the best story of all: Love has neither beginning nor end.”

Mainstream Society “Text Centric”

Sean Chandler (Gros Ventre), director of Native Studies at Fort Belknap College (FBC, Harlem, MT), readily acknowl-



LAKOTA LIVING TREASURE. Ollie Napesni (Lakota), author of *Salt Camp* tells her story as Gina One Star (with daughter, Kashina) listens. Photo by Mary Henson Saunders.

edges that his students respect “the oral-traditional” over the literary. He agrees that Native people as a whole do not privilege writing as mainstream society does. He utilizes a variety of resources to bring the oral dimension into the classroom besides the first person accounts found in the standard anthology of his American Indian Studies class: *Visions of an Enduring People: A Reader in Native American Studies* edited by Walter C. Fleming and John G. Watts.

Elders are regularly invited to present in person, and he uses documentary films and recordings of Native speakers. In fact, FBC has made a concerted effort recently to digitize recordings from the early 20th century as well as to create new recordings of elders singing, telling stories, or simply talking. They are also archiving historical films and photographs.

One text that Chandler holds in high regard is *The Seven Visions of Bull Lodge: as told by his daughter, Garter Snake*. Edited by George Horse Capture, the book is a 19th century account of Gros Ventre life originally gathered by tribal member Fred P. Gone, Sr., as part of a Work Projects

Administration (WPA) ethnography project in the 1930s. “I tell students I consider Fred Gone, Sr., to be the first Gros Ventre scholar,” he says. He also uses another WPA text, *Land of Nakota*, now out of print.

Chandler addressed a common theme among the instructors I spoke with – the Western bias against the oral transmission of history. “There is a mainstream misconception that oral histories are inaccurate,” he says, “but they should remember that the persons who told the stories, they were experts. They trained intensely for their role.”

Ruth YellowHawk (Huron-Wyandot) with the non-profit Indigenous Issues Forum (IIF) gave a presentation at the 2007 American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) conference. She says mainstream society is indeed “text-centric.”

IIF, which is currently working on Indigenous approaches to peacemaking, honors the oral tradition by utilizing a talking circle model, Circle of One, to facilitate open dialogue within communities. “We really focus on the value of listening,” says YellowHawk, “and the elders we know recognize that one needs trust to listen well.”

Grass-roots and relation-based, the Circle of One Book Forum promotes an Indigenous seasonal approach to reading and community dialogue beyond the bounds of the tribal college. YellowHawk along with Lily Mendoza y Ducheneaux (Lakota) and Harley Eagle (Dakota) are working “to recall and reclaim Indigenous understandings and lifeways that can allow people to walk in balance today.” Their principal goal is to share effective strategies for facilitating safe and respectful dialogue on tough issues.

“We have convened elders with youth and filmed it,” YellowHawk says. “It’s phenomenal to see what happens between generations when trust exists in a respectful way.”

Creating Tribe-Specific Curriculum

Craig Howe (Lakota) of Oglala Lakota College (OLC, Kyle, SD) teaches core courses in the graduate studies department. He uses another anthropological work compiled in the early 20th century: *Lakota Society* by James R. Walker and Raymond J. Demallie. He notes that the nature of these classes requires that most of the instruction be “tribe specific.”

This sometimes creates a dilemma for instructors, he points out. If one is teaching specifically to one tribal history or culture, it might become necessary to seek out many anthologies and other compilations to find “tribe-specific” articles and then compile them into a course-specific course pack.

Alyce Spotted Bear (Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara) is an instructor at Fort Berthold Community College (FBCC,



DISCUSSING ORAL HISTORY AND TRADITIONS. Pictured on the right, Instructor Alyce Spotted Bear (Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara) leads active discussion on stories from Native American Literature in her Fort Berthold Community College class. The students are, from left: Elaine Bolman, Eliot Windy Boy, Vel Marie Yellow Wolf, and Vernita Finley. Photo courtesy of Alyce Spotted Bear.

New Town, ND). Like Chandler, she honors those scholars, Native and non-Native alike, who recorded tribal stories and wisdom in earlier times. “I am so appreciative of the individuals who came to our reservation and wrote down our stories,” she says. And she notes that if one compares a recorded story to a story that elders are still telling today, “You can see, they’re still the same story.”

Spotted Bear teaches Native Literature and finds the comprehensive anthology *Native American Literature*, edited by Lawanna Trout, “replete with individual and tribal oral histories and traditions.” She also admires the novel *Fools Crow* by James Welch, “a rich depiction of the history and traditions of the Blackfeet,” and *Water Lily* by Ella Deloria, which she sees as a powerful representation of the female perspective on 19th century Dakota life.

Her other favorite Native authors who honor the oral tradition and also speak in a familiar voice are Joy Harjo, Adrian Louis, Susan Power, and especially Ray Young Bear. “I love his books,” she exclaims. “He is so rez, in the very best sense. He really writes from a tribal perspective.”

In the speech classes that she sometimes teaches, Spotted Bear asks students to utilize modern media to extend the idea of the oral tradition by conducting research on contemporary Native issues at websites such as *Indianz.com*, *Indiancountry.com*, and *Nativeweb.org*. Students then incorporate their findings into their classroom speeches. “They speak about what they *know*,” she says.

For herself, as a Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara woman, she gains knowledge from her elders but also from listening to younger people, even children. “Their perceptions are important,” she says, “because we see how they are coming to know the world.” This evidence of “epistemological development” is so significant, she says, because “I want them to know who they are and where they come from... That is why our oral history/literature is so important. It contains representations of who we are.”

I hear such enthusiasm to reclaim and honor the oral tradition in the voices of Spotted Bear and others that I am immensely hopeful for Native students who are now pursuing higher education, especially in our tribal colleges.

For myself, I am grateful that my own education continues to evolve long after I earned a college degree – in ceremony, in song, in teachings handed down to me by elders and relatives in a hundred different ways. After all, learning our own story as it is told in our own voices may well be the most fundamental guarantee of our survival as Native people.

Michael Thompson (Muskoke Creek) has been a teacher, writer, and occasional community activist in Georgia, Kansas, and California. The English chair at Bloomfield High School in New Mexico for the past nine years, he has also conducted presentations on contemporary Native literature at a number of state and national conferences. [TC]