

HISTORICAL MEMORY OR LONGING FOR IT: REFLECTION OF HISTORY IN NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

У статті розглядається роль американсько-індіанської літератури у створенні історії, особливо коли вона є єдиним засобом відображення історії суспільства, що знаходиться під колоніальним тягарем, з його власної точки зору. Обговорюються деякі з факторів, що впливають на формування характеру літератури, а також визначається, що Американсько-індіанська література є літературою опору. Піднімається питання, чи сучасна література тубільного населення США відображає процес відбудови ідентичності та конструювання історії чи прагнення до них.

Ключові слова: Американсько-індіанська література, колоніалізм, історична пам'ять, ідентичність, прагнення до ідентичності, усна традиція, література опору.

В статье рассматривается роль американско-индейской литературы в создании истории, особенно когда она является единственным средством отображения истории общества, которое находится под колониальным гнетом, с его собственной точки зрения. Обсуждаются некоторые из факторов, которые влияют на формирование характера литературы, а также определяется, что американско-индейская литература является литературой сопротивления. Затрагивается вопрос, отображает ли современная литература коренного населения США процесс восстановления идентичности и конструирования истории или стремления к ним.

Ключевые слова: Американско-индейская литература, колониализм, историческая память, идентичность, стремление к идентичности, устная традиция, литература противостояния.

The article considers the role of Native American literature in making of the history, especially when it is the only means of recording history of a community, which is repressed under colonization, from its own point of view. Some of the factors that determine the character of literature are also discussed. It is determined that Native American literature is literature of opposition and resilience. Also, the question whether modern literature of the indigenous population of the US depicts the process of restoration of identity and history or longing for it, is raised.

Key words: American Indian literature, colonialism, historical memory, identity, desire/longing for identity, oral tradition, literature of resistance.

Literature is one of the most representational facets of a culture. It's a reflection of a society and all the movements within it. Literature is by no means a-political or a-social. Therefore, it is vital to understand the environment, as well as history that influences creation of literary texts. Thus, the topics and themes of literature are to a great extent predetermined by the social and historical processes taking place within the group which produces literary works. At the same time, it is also the reflection of the group's identity and the changes that it undergoes due to the historical

process. This is interesting to observe in the minority literatures whose identity and culture have been previously suppressed. When independence, or a certain degree of sovereignty, is gained, literature serves as a means of remembering, therefore, reconstructing identity on the basis of historical memory. However, is this reconstructed identity real or is it just a longing for something that has long been lost? This debate is one of the moving forces in Native American literary studies.

The argument on what Native American literature is and how to treat American Indian literatures is fundamental and drives the discourse of Native American literary studies. Native American literature, although stereotypically considered the youngest one in the United States, is as a matter of fact the oldest on the continent. It has its own story to tell as it has developed under particular circumstances separate from any other minority literature present in North America. The way Native American literature continues to thrive and the direction it takes is predetermined to a great extent by oral tradition, which at the same time constitutes a rather big part of indigenous literatures' character and identity. The history of Euro-American/Indian relationships has also been of tremendous influence on the course of Native American literature and shaped its goals as well, among which is the establishment of Native American literary canon and criticism, Native American national literature, and fight for intellectual sovereignty. Since fight for self-determination and sovereignty is the most urgent one in Indian Country today, it is represented in Native American literatures, which support and promote it and join in the struggle for independence. Therefore, connectedness of Native literatures to tribal sovereignty is vital and without doubt. The majority of the techniques used by Native American writers are tribally derived. It is Native consciousness that speaks in Native literatures, not the current literary trends.

Due to five hundred years of colonization, there is a clear necessity to recover and tell the stories of the past as well as find and reconnect with indigenous histories and identities. Unfortunately, the information provided about indigenous peoples for far too long was considered credible only if it was offered by a white scholar recognized by the academia [2, p. 35]. This was the case with literature and cultural studies as well. Many American Indian scholars point out that somehow non-Native scholars believe they know more about the cultures they do not belong to. Arnold Krupat points out that «historically specifiable acts of translative violence marked the European colonization of the Americas from Columbus to the present» [4, p. 74]. He supports Brian Swann's argument that the indigenous peoples were not considered to have any mental abilities and their languages were looked down upon, since they were so complicated and, therefore, considered to be underdeveloped. Therefore, the newly discovered people were not perceived as capable of any kind of literature. Thus, the «idea of a [Native American] literature was inherently ludicrous» since Indian «languages themselves were primitive» [4, p. 74]. As Krupat states, the Natives were expected to «learn to speak» (in this case to speak English) first in order to have literature [4, p. 74]. Krupat also criticizes the opinion of the 19th century scholars, such as Daniel Brinton, who were persuaded that Indians were inferior by nature and «fatally handicapped in the race for the highest life» [4, p. 74]. The winners of this race, as it was believed at that time, were the ones with the «highest» language, which is the focal point of literature. Therefore, Indians, as the ones possess-

ing primitive languages from the point of view of the colonizers (since it was extremely hard for the Europeans to succeed in learning indigenous languages and they, therefore, considered them to be cumbersome), were denied any chance of literary achievement. This belief of inferiority of Indians and their so-called incapability to produce any kind of literary art persisted for centuries. Cultural discrimination seems to go well in hand with the political one (Native Americans, although being the first inhabitants of the Americas, were the last peoples to become citizens of the United States in 1924). Oral tradition of storytelling was also refuted by such reasoning that literature, «littera-ture», of course, meant precisely the culture of letters» [4, p. 97], and thus could not be oral.

Although the mainstream believes today to be the age of post-colonialism, which allows new perspectives on ethnic minorities as well as introduces the voices of these minorities into current discourse, that is hardly the case with Native Americans. European colonization did not take place only over Native lands, but over Native cultures and literatures as well. According to Vizenor, literature is exactly where Native American cultures survive; it is the expression of sovereignty. Vizenor, though, as well as some other scholars, claims that using the European legal notions and terms is perpetuating colonialism. He tries to do away with them, by substituting them with the terms he coined himself, those of sovenance, survivance, and transmotion. He explains these notions through indigenous motion in any sphere of life, of action through imagination. He claims that these notions determine the survival of national sovereignty through stories [11, p. 184]. It is through literature that Native Americans practice their sovereignty, just by choosing to tell one story over another, one form of telling it over a different one [5, p. 6]. Oral tradition, which is continued and incorporated into the written word, is in itself documentation of tribal sovereignty and contains accounts of American Indians' presence on this continent. In addition, literature is tightly connected to tribal realities and communities. Cook-Lynn claims that literature is a powerful tool in the politics of possession and dispossession. Simon Ortiz also argues for development of national literature and points out that sovereignty survives in the ways that tribes adjust to the challenges and changes of the environment and how they incorporate them into their own ways, thus still maintaining who they are.

Literature is definitely a kind of activism. For instance, during the American Indian Civil rights movement, scholars and writers made their contribution by writing about social realities and histories of the communities. Bauerkemper draws attention to narrative, stating that through stories there is narration of nationhood [1, p. 28].

Literature is one of the means of telling the truth about the past and history, especially when other means are cut off, as was the case with Native American communities. Kelly Morgan, Standing Rock Lakota, argues that «imaginative literature – fiction and poetry – is a more accurate gauge of cultural realities

than the ethnographic, anthropological, and historical record» [13, p. 15]. She goes on to say that literature is an important factor in cultural survival of nations because it preserves and extends cultural knowledge and practices to younger generations. Literature, unlike «scientific» representations of Native Americans, is never fixed, and definitely more flexible, always growing and changing under the influence of diverse members of Native American communities, and what is even more important, it is influenced and molded by these communities. Morgan, supported by many other scholars, believes the written word to be a continuation and a means of carrying on the oral traditions, and by no means either inferior or separate from the oral stories of the tribes.

Native American literary accomplishments were mostly suppressed unless they fit the interpretations the mainstream society wanted to hear and accommodated Euro-Americans in some way strengthening their claims of authority. In contrast to that, Native American literatures have expressed a different experience of history, as well as a different understanding of the past. Many scholars agree, in particular Simon Ortiz and Joy Porter, that Indian literature is an important component of Native resilience, as well as its power and strength.

Today, at last, the scholastic world finally comes to admit that the history of American literature did not start when Columbus «discovered» America, but long before that; that the origins of it go back to the oral literatures of the indigenous people of North America. Indian oral literatures, due to the historical consequences, especially the last five hundred years of colonization, have undergone birth and rebirth numerous times on the American continent, but even then still serve as the basis of Native American heritage and the starting point for contemporary Native American literatures.

During the five hundred years, Indian literatures performed the function of an honest journalist who has been recording the struggles of Indian nations through the wars with the European powers, the signing of the treaties, the broken trust, the civilization policies, which included forced Christianization, land loss, and the boarding schools, termination and relocation, and now is finally witnessing the new era for Native nations as well as its literatures. All the histories of Native American survivals and continuity were well documented by writers of the age: the alcoholism, brought about by the fur trade, the alienation introduced by relocation programs and boarding schools, the grief of the loss of sacred sites and ceremonies caused by allotment and other land policies as well as prohibition of practice of traditional religions – all of that is the bulk of literature created by Native American writers, as well as the perseverance of tribal oral traditions.

For many centuries Indigenous communities have been voicing their resistance to policies of colonialism aimed at the destruction of their cultures by means of literature. In most cases the indigenous writers have been using conventional language as well as com-

monly accepted forms to voice this resistance, i.e. the English language in the case of North America and such literary forms as novels, autobiographies, short stories, essays, histories and so on, i.e. both fiction and non-fiction forms. It does not mean, however, that these forms were «discovered» by Native Americans only when contact took place and then later on adopted by them through the civilization policies (with the exception of the novel, although one has to keep in mind that some kind of narrative was definitely in use of Native American tribes in pre-contact period). According to Womack, Native American literature is often looked upon as a hybrid discourse that draws its influence from the European literary forms. Most approaches to the «Native American Literary Renaissance» have proceeded as if the Indian discovered the novel, the short story, and the poem only yesterday [13, p. 3]. According to this viewpoint, Native American writers are not the creators or originators, as Womack points out, but «adaptors» and «adapters» (adopting from the mainstream and adapting it to their purposes), who incorporate indigenous or tribally specific worldview into the literary forms borrowed from the mainstream Euro-American culture. Such literary works, accordingly, in the opinion of theorists, perform mainly one function: they are the mediator between the two worlds that Native Americans are supposedly stuck in, the indigenous one and the white world. Concerning the authors of these works, the characteristic that is emphasized the most is their mixed blood and, therefore, their positionality between cultures [13, p. 137]. This approach to the perception of Native American literature, however, appears to be quite limited and tends to place emphasis on the «torn between two worlds» [13, p. 137] concept instead of focusing on the histories of Native tribes, their oral tradition, and current fight for nationality.

However, the fact that Indian writers use some of the western forms does not speak for their inability to be authentic. Why not dismantle the master's house with his own tools? Why should not this approach work? And who said that using those tools automatically classifies one's works as inauthentic? Is there something in the Western form that makes the indigenous content insignificant? This is a rather controversial matter, because on the one hand, using conventional forms attracts more attention and understanding, but on the other hand, poses the dangers of not supporting the message the writers are trying to convey. Michael Wilson gives a perfect example that proves this theory: «indigenous writers George Copway, William Whipple Warren, and Chief Elias Johnson, among others, offer historical narratives quite different from the American vision of heroic triumph over the forces of pagan savagism, yet they write within the linear tradition of European historiography» [12, p. ix]. Another good example is Charles Eastman who exposes Christian hypocrisy toward Native Americans through a typical European literary form, autobiography. As Wilson points out, there is a good reason why Native American writers challenge the Euro-American ideology of erasing Indians from the American land-

scape but not necessarily the language and form (although it is also important to mention that more Indian writers are undertaking writing in their indigenous languages in order to preserve them and as a better means of supporting their communities and cultural heritage). A larger audience is more likely to respond to the issues laid out in conventional form than in experimental ones that are hard to grasp.

However, although the usage of conventional forms to express resistance could be useful and fruitful, caution is necessary because these Western literary forms are by no means neutral and transparent as it might seem at first sight. They rather often reflect the philosophies and relationships of power of the dominant society that are not necessarily in the best interest of Native American nations. For instance, novel and short story are likely to be the most conventional of all the literary forms, but they are not of indigenous origin, and, therefore, might not always reflect indigenous worldviews, even though they might be filled with Native American content, i.e. elements of oral traditions, histories, and tribal beliefs. As Wilson remarks, these literary forms are based on conflict and resolution: «humanity against humanity; humanity against nature; the individual against culture; against a particular ideology, or against the forces of history» [12, p. x]. Many Native American writers mastered these techniques to represent the conflict between the ideology and politics of colonialism and indigenous communities. However, in many Native societies the whole idea of opposition and conflict as cultural basis might be regarded as antithetical to the communal perception of the world in which everything is related.

In this case, Native American protagonists are represented through the idea of being caught between two worlds. The whole notion of being caught between two worlds is often perceived by Native scholars as introduced by the mainstream society because that is how the general public envisions Native Americans. Nevertheless, as James Ruppert points out, this perception of both who the writers and the protagonists are is not the most favorable for Native Americans. Therefore, a better and more appropriate way to look at them is «not as between two cultures (a romantic and victimist perspective), but as participants in two rich cultural traditions» [8, p. 7].

Another issue that needs addressing is the oral tradition. Indigenous oral traditions are not obsolete by any means. The stories speak not only to the past and history but also to the consciousness that is ongoing [7, p. 42]. Porter remarks that «Indian oral traditions are not fragile: in spite tremendous adversity they survive and continue to grow, reflecting change and diversity within the cultures that produce them and those cultures' relationships over time both with other Indians and non-Indians» [7, p. 42]. Womack urges that Native American literature, with its centuries long history of oral tradition, stories, and commentaries, both oral and written, is separate from Euro-American literature or any other minority literature, and, therefore, should be treated as such, and exactly the indigenous commentaries should be the ones to provide

models for interpretations of indigenous literatures and form the basics of literary aesthetics.

By examining oral traditions of various indigenous cultures, scholars might make a discovery that whatever technique is currently considered to be a borrowing from, for instance, the mainstream literary tradition might appear in reality to be a typical characteristic of a Native American oral tradition that has been practiced since time immemorial. For example, Womack determines through thorough examination of the Turtle story of the Creek nation that the technique of persona writing is traditionally Creek, and the fact that it is utilized by so many Creek writers is not a coincidence because this technique is deeply rooted in the oral tradition of the nation [13, p. 77].

However, some scholars, including David Treuer, in cases when oral tradition is used in written literature, question the ethics and authenticity of Native American literature. Treuer states that when oral tradition is widely used it eventually becomes mere props, which are present on the stage, but at the same time do not constitute the play, therefore, creating only an illusion of authenticity [10, p. 60]. In such cases, things representative of tribal oral traditions are transformed into signs of Indianness that are often copied and reproduced by those who possess no knowledge of tribes, both by Native and non-Native writers. Nevertheless, Wilson emphasizes that the situation described above is not allpervading. He does agree that there are writers who use oral tradition as means of creating props within the context of conventional literary forms, but at the same time there are writers who base the entire trajectory of their texts «either on specific oral stories or on narratives derived from concepts of orality» (often rewriting traditional oral stories), therefore, making the oral tradition both into props and stage and providing alternative forms of narrative resistant to generic expectations [12, p. xiii].

It seems more significant to stress the importance of representation in literature of a Native belief and perspective of their own identity on their own terms. It can serve as one of the means of authenticity (if the binary opposition of authentic-inauthentic has to be considered, which is often the case because of the misleading representations of Native Americans by the New Age literature), therefore, creating literature of resistance and avoiding turning tribal beliefs into mere signs and props that create only the illusion of Native American literature instead of pursuing the goal of establishing Native national literature.

On the other hand, Native American writers also have an ability to convert such forms in ways to make them serve Native goals and represent Native perspective, thus creating indigenous literature of resistance by means of the mainstream society, and therefore, like Simon Ortiz mentions, adjusting the borrowings from other cultures in such a manner as to make them indigenous. That constitutes one of the most vital characteristics and abilities of Native American literature which define its very nature.

Despite all the positive functions that Native American literature seems to perform for indigenous

communities, there is also a different opinion on what it does. David Treuer argues the opposite. He states that Native American literature is just a fiction, a longing for something that does not exist, at least not any more.

Treuer in his last work *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* has provoked a lot of debates and has often been criticized for deconstructing the notion of Native American literature. Nevertheless, the discussion Treuer generates is rather important since it essentially deals with the same issues of sovereignty and equality. Treuer deals with the issue of Native American literature being treated as an artifact instead of art on the same level as Euro-American literature. He argues for Native American literature to be recognized as literary culture and not necessarily as Native American culture in itself [10, p. 199]. Treuer distinguishes between culture of literature and literature seen as culture, advocating for the recognition of the first. He states that because the two have been fused together, it led to a stop in the development of American Indian literature. Although it seems quite reasonable to argue for the acceptance of literature as an artistic form of expression and to stress the importance of having a critical approach towards Native American literature, Treuer's idea to completely separate the literary tradition from community and culture does not sound realistic since literature in every respect is a vital facet of culture and, therefore, can not be a-cultural and a-political as mentioned above. Treuer argues for the acceptance of Native American literature as an equal to Western literature, but at the same time, as many critics argue, he deconstructs the notion of «Native American Literature»: «Native American literature, if there is such a thing, does not constitute culture. It constitutes desire with seemingly culturally derived forms. (...) it is LITERATURE that creates the fantasy of the «NATIVE AMERICAN» – not the other way around» [10, p. 199]. The question one might ask in this case is what the latter statement achieves. Does it perpetuate colonialism and inferiority of Native Americans, i.e. their inability of possessing culturally valid literature? Does it mean that Native American literature does not reflect indigenous histories and reconstructs native identities but merely expresses the desire for them of the people «lost between two worlds»?

It seems that Treuer's literary analysis of certain works by Native American writers in his *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* tends to be especially harsh. Therefore, while attempting to prove that Native American literature is not a cultural artifact but a masterpiece in itself, he pays too much attention to how non-Native the writing of most American Indian authors is, thus deconstructing Native viewpoints. He draws attention to the language and literary techniques, but is it possible to alienate literature from cultural and social context? Should it be alienated? As Shanley in «Writing Indian: American Indian Literature and the Future of Native American Studies» states, any given literary work, just like an ecosystem, consists of jokes, anecdotes, myths, gossip, songs, and

memories of a certain community [9, p. 141]. Thus, understanding a literary piece requires a full perspective. Although Shanley does agree with Blaeser that «a suitable way of analyzing texts is always already contained within them in their circularity of form – the distinctively indigenous view of time as cyclical,» suggesting that there is no need of searching for interpretation methods anywhere else but within Native American literature, she at the same time offers that literature, one of Coyote's frequent haunts, can be a place of «free play» in the postmodern sense as well as means of bringing history to life. Literature can thwart the comfort of an imperialist nostalgic perspective by disrupting expectations in several ways: by presenting the voices and perspectives of Indians to contradict or counter stereotypes; by adding validity and emphasis to the points made by historical facts; and, most of all by rendering Indians as multidimensional and fully sentient human beings [9, pp. 141, 147]. Therefore, even if large parts of cultures and many stories were lost in the process of colonization and forced assimilation, is it appropriate to state that indigenous literature are invalid?

Kalb, as well as many other Native scholars, also does not support Treuer's claim that the entire canon of Native American literature is an illusion and that works of great Native American writers, such as Erdrich, Welch, and Silko, are not authentic. Kalb points to some of Treuer's errors and misreadings. For instance, Kalb draws the reader's attention to the fact that *Fools Crow* by Welch, one of the works analyzed by Treuer, has great historical significance, and it is a historical novel, written from the viewpoint of an insider, not an outsider, as Treuer claims. Kalb remarks that in this case «Treuer reduces the historical novel to a quaint descendant of the 19th century literary imagination» [3, p. 115]. In the case of *Ceremony* by Silko, Kalb declares that Treuer reduces the metaphorical meaning combined with time-immemorial stories and web of creation and Tayo's present ceremony and flashbacks to simply a piece of Freudian talk [3, p. 116]. Although one has to ask here how Treuer's ideas contribute to the development of independent Native American literature and the creation of a national literature, as pointed out by Simon Ortiz, one still has to admit to Treuer's arguments that Native American writers as well as their literature are labeled and limited by stereotypical expectations of the audience and critics. According to Treuer, ideas about Native American literature are damaged by the preconceived notions of non-Indian readers. However, does Treuer support the viewpoint of colonialism since he denies the existence of Native American literature? And does that mean that the process of telling the history true to Native Americans, passing on of the tradition, and reconstructing identity are all fake?

Thus, the question narrows down to how to treat the effects of colonization on native cultures and their resistance to assimilation as it is what historical memory consists of. How is the modern identity reflected in literature formed? What are its components? Is it the «remembered» identity of the past, pre-colonial

times? Is that identity up-to-date and can it even exist? Or does modern American Indian identity consist of longing for what has been lost? One can not discard the historical events that changed the course of native cultures completely. Therefore, may be it is not quite

the longing for the past, but more a longing to preserve and nurture what is still there. After all, literature is an imaginative space, action through imagination.

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