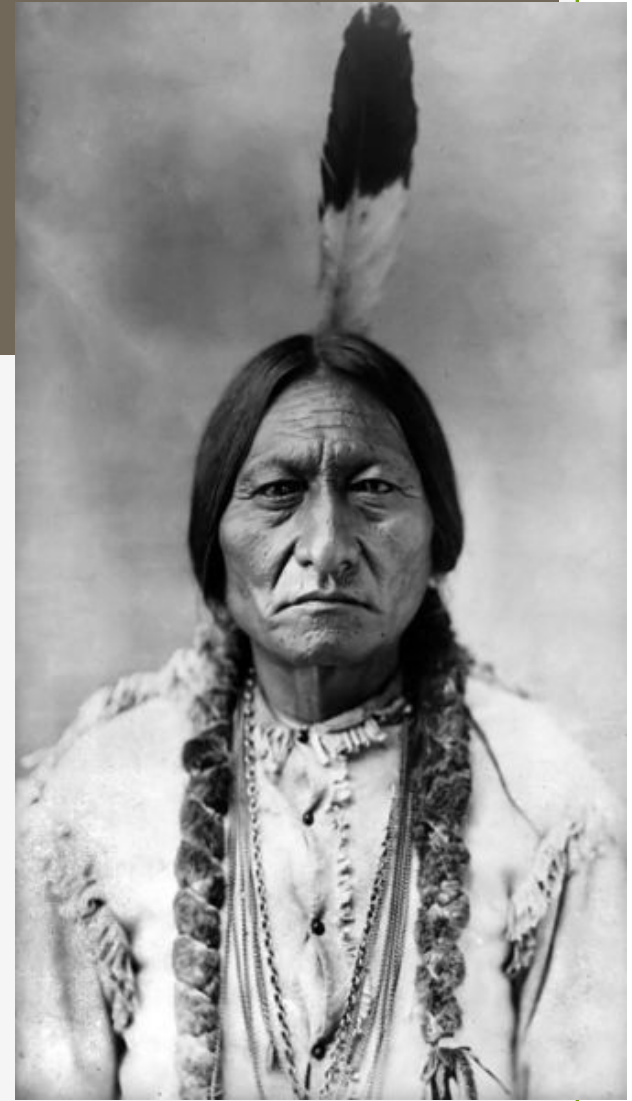


Native American Literature



Native American Literature

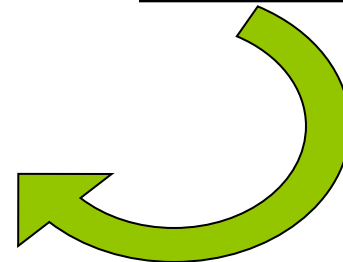
The most striking fact about N.A. literature is the cultural diversity that it represents.

At the time of Columbus – 350 distinct languages existed in the U.S.

Thousands of distinct cultural groups existed as well.

SO

Given all of the various tribes, cultures, languages that existed and still do exist, we cannot define a single Native American culture or literature due to its complexity.



Native American Tribes

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NORTHWEST
This area includes the tribes of the Pacific Northwest and the Great Basin. These tribes were traditionally hunters and gatherers, and some were nomadic. They lived in a region with a diverse climate, ranging from temperate rainforests to high mountains. The tribes in this region were often in contact with the tribes of the Southwest and the Plains.

SOUTHWEST
This area includes the tribes of the Southwest, including the Navajo and Hopi. These tribes were traditionally farmers and hunters, and they lived in a region with a dry climate. The tribes in this region were often in contact with the tribes of the Plains and the Southeast.

PLAINS
This area includes the tribes of the Great Plains, including the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Comanche. These tribes were traditionally hunters and gatherers, and they lived in a region with a dry climate. The tribes in this region were often in contact with the tribes of the Northwest, Southwest, and Southeast.

NORTHEAST
This area includes the tribes of the Northeast, including the Iroquois and Algonquin. These tribes were traditionally farmers and hunters, and they lived in a region with a temperate climate. The tribes in this region were often in contact with the tribes of the Plains and the Southeast.

SOUTHEAST
This area includes the tribes of the Southeast, including the Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole. These tribes were traditionally farmers and hunters, and they lived in a region with a humid climate. The tribes in this region were often in contact with the tribes of the Plains and the Northeast.

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Native Americans have come to be isolated both geographically and culturally. (Ghetto-ized)

Geographically through reservations on some of the most remote and least productive land in the country.

So

They have very few opportunities to demonstrate the various and unique cultural aspects of their culture.



If this is true, how did Native American Literature become known?

1856 – First widely known written Native American literature by John Rollin Ridge, who was Cherokee and encompassed the Far West in his writing.

In the late 19th century many anthropologists began to write down stories and languages they were hearing while they were examining Native American culture. Because of this, many stories are now available to read and appreciate.

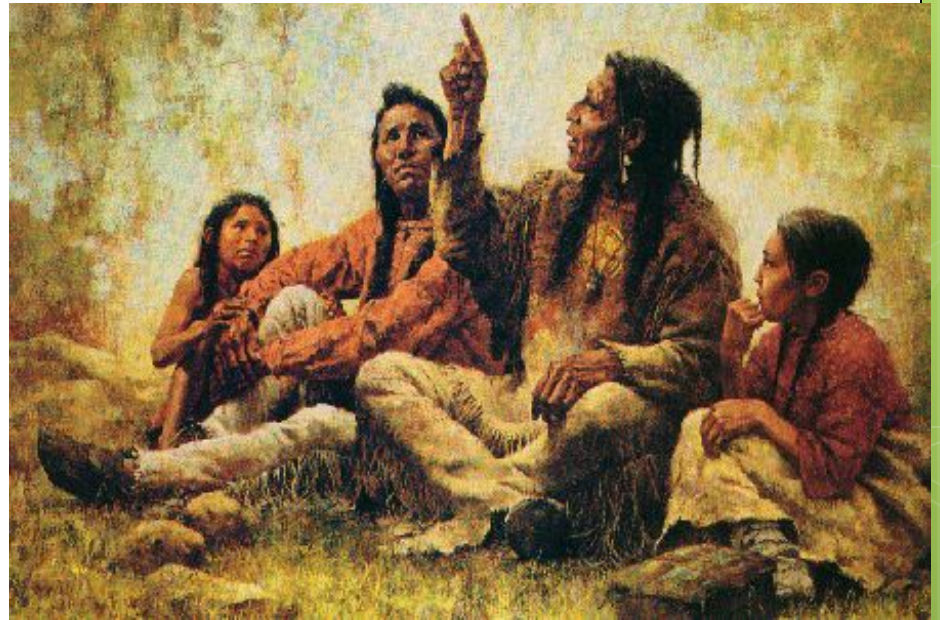
Native American Literature was not considered “valid” literature before this time due to our western notion of what literature is.

In the early American colony, the skirmishes between Native Americans and Europeans were most often described by Europeans and judged by European sensibilities. Thus the literary value of Native American stories and culture was not valued because it was not what the settlers recognized as “good”. If it wasn’t a book, it wasn’t literature.

It wasn’t until the 1960s-70s that Native American literature was given a place in our literary canon.

So what are the characteristics of Native American Literature while still remembering it is difficult to generalize the diverse cultures the term embraces?

First and foremost, traditional N.A. literature has an oral history. Being a good speaker was valued in many tribes because of the tradition many tribes had of participatory democracy. Stories were handed down through the oral tradition. This is how cultures kept their stories alive.



Lost in Translation

- **European invasion brought linguistic tools for written records; however, much of the meaning of stories, poems, chants was lost in translation:**
 - **Literally no English words for the native terms**
 - **Especially poetry was so dependant on rhythm and repetition of sound that the translated poems are completely new**
 - **The uninitiated Caucasians rarely were given full tales and/or they may have shaped their translations to fit their audiences' prejudices**

Characteristics of Native American Literature

Oral Tradition

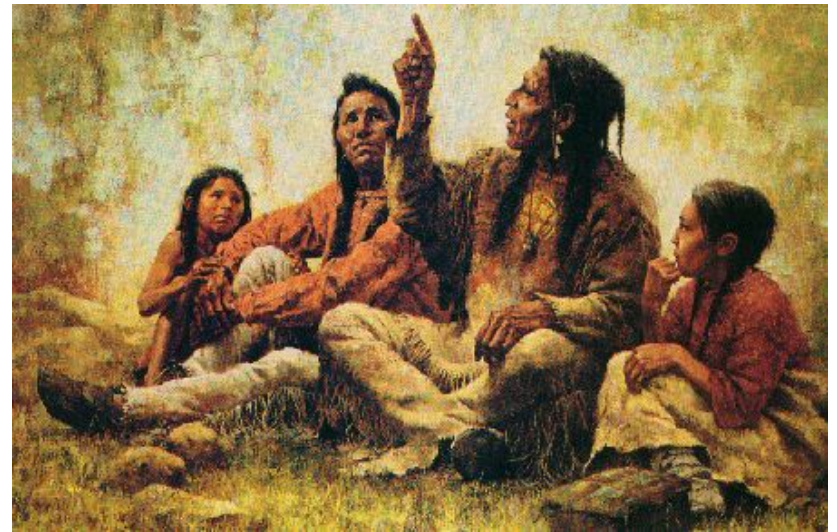
Story telling was the primary means of communicating and teaching about the physical world, social order, appropriate behavior, and human nature, and the problem of good vs. evil.

Repetition is a common characteristic

Ritual beginnings and endings

Use of archaic language

Terse writing style



Characteristics of Native American Myths

- Explains beliefs about the nature of the physical world.
Example – how did the world come to be? Or, how did the sun come to be?
- Takes place in primal world or pre-civilization.
- Beings are animal spirits in more or less human form: monsters, confusions of nature, etc.
- Mythic age flows into age of transformation (legends).

Characteristics of Legends

- *Hero orders the world.**
- *Hero turns animal people into animals.**
- *Other beings become landmarks**
- *Flows into historical time (which are “real” heroes)**

Cultural Heroes

Trickster and creation mythology

- *They dramatize prototypical events and behaviors.**
- *Show how to do what is right and how we become the people we are.**
- *Shape the world and gives it its character by theft of sun, fire, or water.**
- *Often of divine birth.**
- *Myths are not concerned with original owners, only with culture hero's acquisition of them.**

Trickster heroes provide for disorder and change, enable us to see the seamy underside of life, remind us that culture is finally artificial, provide for possibility for change and redemption, may get their comeuppance!

Themes in native American mythology

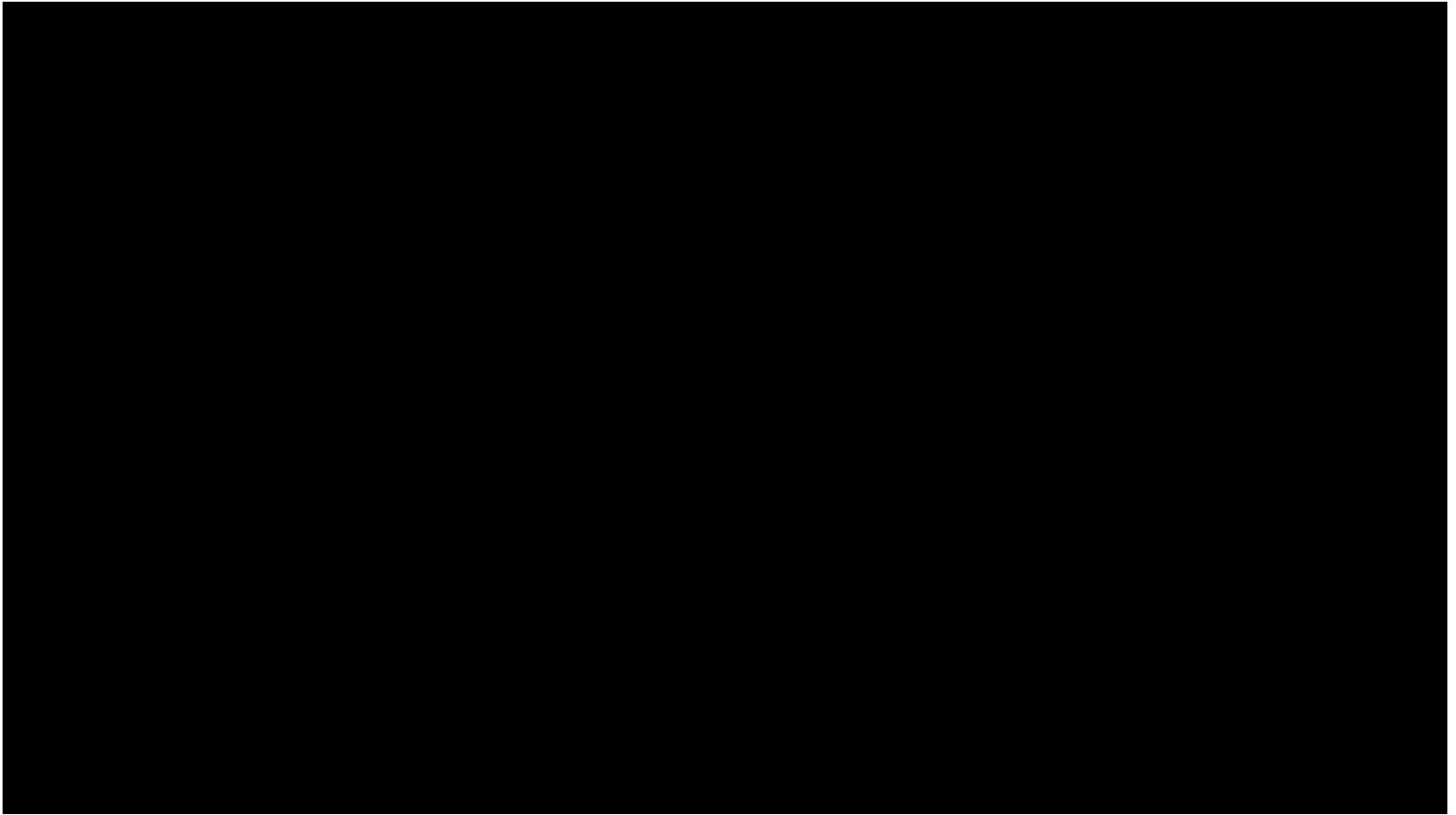
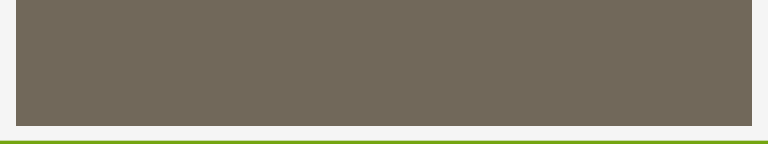
- Formation of the world through struggle.
- Movements from a sky world to a water world by means of a fall (creation stories)
- Earth-diver myth:
 - *flood that occurred after the creation of the universe.
 - *creation of the present world out of mud brought up from under the water by the earth-diver (muskrat or turtle).
- Emergence myths:
 - *ascent of beings from under the surface of the earth to its surface
 - *ascent from a series of underworlds.

Listen, and take notes :

What is the story about? (plot)

What is the theme?

What is different about listening, rather than reading?



Today



Photo: G BALLARD

A few Native American authors

Louise Erdrich is likely the most well-known Native American author. She is from Minnesota and has a Native American bookstore on Loring Park.

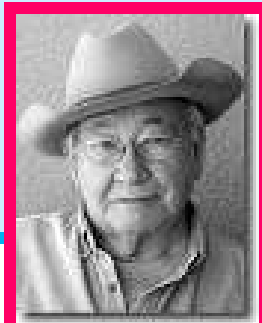


Sherman Alexie – Much of his writing stems from his experience as a Native American



Paula Gunn Allen is a contemporary Native American author who also writes through a Feminist lens.

N.Scott Momaday – Contemporary Native American author. *The House Made of Dawn* is an American classic.



“The Red Convertible”

- What’s the role of Native Americans in modern society?
- Marginalization (to place in lower value, influence, power)
- Paternalism (govern suggesting father-child relationship with voiceless child)
- Discrimination
- Rite of Passage? Coming of Age?
- Options: assimilation, annihilation, or...
- How could this story motivate Native American readers?
- Celebration of native values?
 - Shared ownership
 - Inclusive family
 - Nature

Convertible
Television
Photograph
Henry himself
Red
Red Tomahawk
Dancing...and more



Sources:

Campbell. Early Native American Literature: Brief Outline Guide. 8/30/06.