

EARLY NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN COLONIZATION

LOS COMIENZOS DE LA LITERATURA NATIVO-AMERICANA Y EL IMPACTO DE LA COLONIZACIÓN EUROPEA



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ABSTRACT

Only some decades ago Early Native American literature became an interesting subject to study and research. The main aim of this project is the comparison of Early Native American literature in two different periods of time, before and after European colonization. The principal goal of this method is to expose the similarities but mainly the differences in these two significant periods, a kind of research which has not been sufficiently carried out before from a comparative perspective. By means of this analysis I intend to show the cruel consequences of colonization through literature, since these are clearly reflected in the literary legacy of early Native American people. After having studied some early Native American works, such as biographies, poems or tales, the conclusions reveal that the colonization left a great impact on Native Americans, who wrote drastically dark and sad literary works, in contrast to the pleasant and delighted literature that we find before colonization.

-Key words: Native Americans, early literature, Europe, colonization.

RESUMEN

Hace tan solo unas décadas que la literatura nativo-americana en sus comienzos se convirtió en un tema interesante en cuanto al estudio e investigación se refiere. El objetivo principal de este proyecto es la comparación y contraste de esta antigua literatura en dos períodos completamente diferentes en el tiempo, antes y después de la colonización europea del continente americano. El objetivo principal de este método es la exposición de semejanzas, pero principalmente de las diferencias presentes en los textos de estos dos períodos de tiempo, proyecto, que desde un punto de vista comparativo, no se ha llevado a cabo con anterioridad. Mediante este análisis trato de mostrar las crueles consecuencias de la colonización a través de la literatura, ya que estas aparecen claramente reflejadas en el legado literario de los primeros pueblos nativo-americanos. Una vez estudiadas algunas de las obras nativo americanas, las conclusiones revelan que la colonización supuso un gran impacto sobre los y las habitantes de aquellas tierras, quienes dejaron un legado literario absolutamente sumido en la oscuridad y tristeza, completamente opuesto a las obras tan alegres y llenas de vida que encontramos en el período previo a la colonización.

-Palabras clave: Nativos americanos, literatura temprana, Europa, colonización.

THESIS

The main aim of this project is the analysis of early Native American literature before and after the European colonization of America. The topic chosen for the project deals with the different views portrayed in Native American literary works in two entirely different periods. On the one hand, a pleasant period full of delightful works about life, nature and happiness before colonization. On the other hand, the impact of colonization reflected on Native American literature, which left an inheritance of depressing stories full of pain and sorrow. This research basically tries to explain the main conflicts between European and Native American worldviews by means of the texts which were written by native authors. The principal goal of this method is to expose the similarities but mainly the striking differences in these two significant periods. Finally, through this study I would like to denounce the consequences of European colonization which are shown in Native American works.

INTRODUCTION

Firstly, we must take into consideration that within Native American literature we can clearly differentiate two clearly opposite periods which absolutely reflect the impact on natives' lives and cultures, before and after the so-called European colonization. Besides, we must take into account an important statement about Native American literature by Porter and Roemer in their work *The Cambridge Companion to Native American Literature* which says that academics specialized in Native literatures were almost non-existing until 1969, due to the fact that this field was mainly controlled by anthropologists. However, we must highlight that since that time, the study of American Indian literature has grown exponentially because of the visibility of American Indian authors as for example: Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen, Michael Dorris, Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, etc (1-2). Nevertheless, we should also consider that what we can interpret today as early Native American literature is not actually Indian literature, but in some cases translations which try to project a close literal meaning, but devoid of the original context, form or performance (Porter and Roemer 70). This quote tries to explain that to appreciate the literature that we treasure today as early Native American, we need an adequate background and context. Porter and Roemer also explicate that "literature is part of the web of cultural strength that has allowed Indian peoples to demonstrate remarkable resilience over time" (40). In other words, Native American literature has been a crucial tool which allowed Native Americans to demonstrate the suffering they had to face due to European colonization and its aftermath.

Nowadays, a lot of data about early Native American peoples has already been compiled, as for instance poetry, chants, songs, essays and autobiographies written by Native Americans. This allows us to have more accurate information about early Indians. According to Philip Jenkins, the exact size of the pre-Columbian population is difficult to determine, although it can be inferred that Native Americans existed on the American continent since the Paleolithic period. His study was carried out by means of the stone-tools Native American used, or their ways of life or diet (2). However, he also adds that it is not very clear where Native Americans come from. Researchers do not really know if they were descendants of a lost wave of earlier settlers, as for example Egyptians, Hebrews, or even Welsh. According to Jenkins, this idea comes from some discoveries which were made in the nineteenth century, proving that those societies were really sophisticated for that time (2). On the contrary, William Meyer, a Native American researcher, discusses this notion in his work *Native Americans: The New Indian Resistance*, wondering why it is not possible that Indians had their roots in the American continent (13). He defends this theory saying that “[a]mong Indian people there are stories of continental origins, as well as stories about Oriental migrants who were assimilated into Indian society” (13). This Indian author supports the possibility that the first Native Americans have their origins in the American continent. But apart from the scientific discoveries and theories just mentioned, literature is another important source to delineate the past. Porter and Roemer affirm that “literature tells truths about the past that history cannot articulate” (39). This statement basically tries to expound that nowadays we would not know about the Native American world as much as we do, unless we had all the Native American literary works that are so valuable. This statement has particular resonance in the Native American context because until late 1960s and early 1970s “Indians were either ignored or grossly misrepresented by conventional histories” (Porter and Roemer 39).

In the contemporary world, people around the world have many different opinions about early Native Americans. They depict them in very different ways, depending on the culture they have originated from. But it is very interesting to analyze how the first wave of Europeans depicted Native Americans when they arrived in the American continent. We can read the first account of America in English which is dated in 1511, and which we can find in *The English Literatures of America. 1500-1800*, by Jehlen and Warner:

[...] There we saw many wonders, of beast and fowles that we have never seen before. The people of this land have no king, nor lord, nor their god. All things are shared in common. [...] These folks live like beasts without any reason. And they also eat one another [...]. (43)

Still today, there are many people who describe early Native Americans similarly, as a group of uncivilized people and cannibals, who lived almost naked on the mountains hunting and planting. However, this view is entirely wrong. Jenkins states that this vision is a cliché, a European stereotype of the Indians, which usually regard the “horse-riding and buffalo-hunting cultures of the Great Plains region” (5). In this quote we can perceive popular beliefs about early Native Americans. As Rayna Green states in her work *Women in American Indian Society*, this is just a mere physical description that can be seen in any film or television program about Indians (8). This view of Native Americans shaped in the past the dichotomic image of the “noble savage” and “wild Indian” (Green 8). For McGregor Gaile, the term “noble savagery” can be traced back to the seventeenth century, and it is “used to designate collectively the philosophy, attitudes, and assumptions from which the species emerges” (12). Many have used these different kinds of Indian images, as for example the Spanish professor Silvia Martínez Falquina, who states that Native Americans were attributed positive and negative characteristics depending on different historical moments. Martínez Falquina assigns two different terms “the cruel Indian” and “the noble Indian.” Apart from this, she also composes a table in which we can see the attributions given along the history to Native American people. In this table she attributes good qualities to the “noble Indian,” as for example: “spiritualism, honesty, equality, natural, community, harmony and pacifism.” On the contrary, the qualities assigned to the “cruel Indian” are completely the opposite: “chaos, inhuman, irrational, superstition, demon, deficient and damned” (71). Thanks to this study we can see how Native Americans were classified as less than human beings, as something bad and good, depending on the view colonizers had on them.

But if we read *The Elements of Native American Traditions* by Arthur Versluis, we come to the conclusion that they actually were absolutely clever, hard-working and courageous (1997). Native Americans lived in very traditional tribes, they followed ancient tribal shamanic rituals, practices and dancing ceremonies. They were a very religious society, similar to Europeans, but they followed completely different practices. According to Joseph Epes Brown in *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian*, religion “is a fundamental and universal characteristic of Native American cultures” (x). But he also states that religion cannot be separated from culture or society, because Indian societies were characterized by unity, where culture, religion and social structure go together as a unit, just as one way of life (x). Besides, Brown adds that there are so many different kinds of Indian religions, which makes impossible to define Native American religions in general terms (1). Native American peoples were polytheistic, as they worshiped more than one god. Nature was the most important concept in their lives, everything evolved around Nature, the mother and provider of everything. For Versluis, Native American peoples believed in Hierophanic Nature, in

other words, the spiritual revelation of Nature, which means that “all the Native American traditions share a common recognition of nature as being informed by spiritual significance” (29). This is a very important point in Native American tradition as every natural being had a soul, a belief entirely opposed to European monotheistic religions. Moreover, within Hierophanic Nature there were also some creatures and landforms which possessed high significance for tribal peoples: the eagle, the deer, the crow, the owl, the hawk, the otter, the buffalo, the rocks, the mountains, the rivers, etc., all have spiritual significance (Versluis 29).

Native Americans’ beliefs could not be accepted by the Christian faith, because according to the colonizers, Christianity was considered the only “true” religion. Consequently, Europeans forced Indians to convert to Christianity, which led to many diverse Indian reactions. Indeed, Europeans believed that they were doing them a mercy. Most tribes initially welcomed the missionaries, although reactions were mixed among members of the same tribe. At the beginning, Native Americans were willing to hear what the missionaries had to offer. Some became practicing Indian converts, while others were completely opposed to any white influence. Some thought that they could combine some Christian elements with their religions, but they still wonder about the insistence on only one truthful religion. We can read this by Red Jacket (Seneca) from *Lectures a Missionary, 1828*: “Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it?” (Cited in L. Hurtado and Inverson 94). Indian people could not understand why for Europeans the existence of more than one religion was not possible, they just wanted to practice their religions as they had always done, but what is more, they did not want to interfere in the European faith. They thought they could live in harmony with the Europeans.

In Native American culture it is also important to highlight the concepts of totemism and shamanism. Native Americans believed in the “guardian spirit,” a creature which protected the tribe; each tribe had a different guardian spirit. This guardian spirit was closely linked to shamanism and religion, because they followed some rituals in order to please their totem or guardian spirit, in the same way that Europeans tried to please their God. We must also say that they had special places for enacting those rituals or prayers. While Europeans used churches or cathedrals, Native Americans used the landscape. As we can notice, Native American religions are not so different from Christian religions: they both have places for praying, divine entities or creatures to whom they pray, and “the guardian spirit can be compared to the Christian guardian angel” (Versluis 63). Every feature just mentioned about Native American culture is clearly reflected on their literature.

Their culture was their way of life; therefore, Native American literature was inspired by their experience, reflecting every social hardship they lived and suffered.

Versluis agrees with Porter and Roemer and affirms that “only in the last few decades of the twentieth century has European American scholarship really begun to take a more open view of American Indian traditions” (1). This reflection means that the historical view of Native Americans was not accurate. The Indians were considered as the “Others,” a Eurocentric concept created to designate anything out of the dominant canon. This “canon” was determined by whites, which basically meant the exclusion of nonwhites. But this concept does not only relate to skin color, but also to other societies, cultures, religions or politics. In the case of Native Americans, they were completely the opposite to European culture, even they were not considered human beings. According to Michel Foucault, “othering” is strongly connected with power and knowledge. He illustrates that idea saying:

When we “other” another group, we point out their perceived weaknesses to make ourselves look stronger or better. It implies a hierarchy, and it serves to keep power where it already lies. Colonialism is one such example of the powers of othering. (“The Other and Othering”)

But there are many more authors who also write about this concept of “othering.” Especially relevant is Homi Bhabha’s contribution about “otherness.” He does not write directly about the concept in Native American societies, but he speaks in general terms. He bases his study on a Mexican film, but the concept is applicable to every colonized people. In order to account for the concept, he speaks about colonial discourse, and relates it to the concept of “fixity,” which is “the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism” (Padmini Mongia 37). He makes a constant difference between opposites, such as positive and negative images, power and resistance, domination and dependence; all of them referring to the colonizer and the colonized. But he also uses words such as stereotype, image, identity, impurity, differentiation, foreignness, discrimination and hierarchisation to describe “otherness.” Moreover, he highlights the “process of subjectification” (37). He states that: “The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual [...] domination and power” (37). Basically, this quotation means that in order to “exercise colonial power,” there must be a difference between the peoples involved in the colonization, a strong leading Empire, and a weak one. The people and cultures that feel superior will try to colonize the other ones. The reason to justify this fact is mainly difference: racial, sexual,

religious, cultural... Bhabha states that “‘otherness’ [...] is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity” (38). In conclusion, we can say that every minority which is not the dominant one becomes the “other.” Native Americans were considered uncivilized people, the “others,” just because they followed different ways of life from Europeans. The Indians did not possess anything, nor lands, while in the European culture one of the crucial points was material possession. This is the main reason why Europeans went to America, in order to take control over those lands and increase their power.

EUROPEAN COLONIZATION: A BRIEF HISTORY

It is well known that in 1492 Cristopher Columbus “discovered” the New World, what is South America today. However, it is believed that Amerigo Vespucci, a fellow-Italian, was the one who actually “discovered” America, and gave that name to the land in honor of his own name “Amerigo” (Jenkins 1). Notwithstanding, not many people know that the first European presence in North America was also Spanish, when Juan Ponce de León sighted Florida in 1513. Although we must say that the first European permanent settlement in North America did not take place until 1565, in St. Augustine (Florida), also by Spanish colonizers (Jenkins 6-7).

It is relevant to emphasize that the American colonization continues to be a very controversial theme. It has been a highly debated fact by experts throughout history. Nowadays, there are people who still think it was a great event for Europe, but on the other hand, many think it was a massacre for the inhabitants of those lands. At the beginning, Christopher Columbus claimed the islands of San Salvador for Spain, but he called the inhabitants “Indians” because he thought that he had reached the East Indies in Asia, a huge geographical error (L.Hurtado and Inverson 44). There is still a great debate among scholars about the impact of that European conquest. Nowadays, Native Americans as well as many people in the rest of the world argue that it was a fatal genocide. According to Rayna Green, the “discovery of the New World” led to a drastic reduction in the Indian population due to many factors, as for instance, murders or epidemic diseases that Indians had not been exposed to before (31-32). Moreover, as we commented before, for centuries, Europeans saw Native Americans as inferior beings. Versluis says that “for centuries, Europeans viewed the American Indian peoples with a combination of condescension, fascination, and, all too often, contempt and incomprehension” (1). Besides this, we can read in Porter and Roemer’s work that at the beginning, Christopher Columbus’ sense of superiority was caused because the Indians did not speak his own language, so he told the Spanish monarchs that “Indians had to learn to speak” (44). According to Stephen Greenblatt in Meyer’s work, this is the reason why Christopher Columbus took some Indians by force in order to teach them Spanish to become their interpreters

(6). Meyer also adds that there is also another quote by Christopher Columbus which exemplifies the European sense of superiority which says “[i]t appears to me that the people are ingenious and would be good servants” (13). These quotes demonstrate a clear racist view of superiority, and what is more, they reveal the thoughts of Europeans when they arrived in American lands, thinking those peoples were weaker than them.

On the other hand, the author of *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen, gives another reason for the European colonization of the American continent. She states that the Indian society was a “woman-focused world” (2). In other words, Native American society was not a patriarchal society as the Europeans were used to. Allen literally says that Europeans “could not tolerate peoples who allowed women to occupy prominent positions and decision-making capacity at every level of society” (3). According to this author, the European colonizers tried to remove Indian women from “every position of authority” (3). This happened in order to keep the Indian peoples weaker and without their leaders, to control them. Hurtado and Inverson write about another point which made it easier to seize Indian lands: by using Indians’ beliefs against themselves. They contend that “[t]he Spanish who explored the settled in the Caribbean islands in the late fifteenth century were convinced that native beliefs in their divinity were a source of power that they could use to control these people” (56) [*sic.*]. One example is when Indians saw the first European ships reaching the shore; they thought those ships came from the sky (Hurtado and Inverson 56). This belief made Europeans think that those peoples were completely ignorant and primitive, and that led to Europeans’ attempt to take control over them.

We can find some data which reinforces what we have just mentioned above. There is a document, originally written in Spanish, by Bartolomé de las Casas, a sixteenth Century Spanish friar and reformer, considered as Protector of the Indians, and who went to “The New World” and wrote about what he saw there to the Spanish King of that time, Carlos V. In his writing *Breve historia de la destrucción de las Indias (A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies)*, he describes American lands and its native inhabitants, but also condemns their mistreatment at the hands of Spanish colonizers. In this document we can read how he describes Indians from a positive view, depicting them as “simple, with no malice, and very obedient and loyal to their natural gods and Christian people they served, as well as modest, patient, pacific, and quiet...” (3). De las Casas also depicts them as very poor people who did not possess anything and did not want to. But he also shows how they were treated by the Spaniards: raped and murdered; and he textually defines the Spanish colonizers as “hungry wolves, tigers and lions” (3).

Native Americans were subjected to European Empires for a long time, and that was because they were completely dissimilar from Europeans, because they had different views of life and the world. This is the main reason why Europeans thought Native Americans were inferior, just because they were different, which made them massacre Indian peoples and take control over their lands. There are many articles and books which prove this point, as for example *Tracks*, by Louise Erdrich, where we can see how Indians were mistreated and defeated by Europeans:

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die. For those who survived the spotted sickness from the south, our long fight west to Nadoussioux land where we signed the treaty, and then wind from the east, bringing exile in a storm of government papers, what descended from the north in 1912 seemed impossible. (1)

This quotation basically explains how Native Americans were defeated by Europeans. Europeans, and also Spaniards, tricked Indians away from their lands and used them with the goal of empowering European Empires. According to Meyer, one of the most important forms of colonialism was “the attempt by the Christian missionaries to take possession of the Indian soul” (7). This would allow the Spaniards to change Indian minds and bring them closer to European mentality. At the beginning, the Spanish forces wanted Indians to convert to Christianity, imposing their religion by force, in order to benefit economically from them. The Spanish economy increased thanks to many Indian products as for instance tobacco, potatoes or corn, but the most important ones were gold and silver. Two metals which made Spaniards lose their minds. According to John G. Neihardt in *Black Elk Speaks*:

Up on the Madison Fork the Wasichus¹ had found much of the yellow metal that they worship and that makes them crazy, and they wanted to have a road up through our country to the place where the yellow metal was; but my people did not want the road. It would scare the bison and make them go away, and also it would let the other Wasichus come in like a river. (7)

Nevertheless, apart from the Spanish Empire, early Native American peoples also received many waves of other European Empires, as for example English or French. Meyer states that colonialism

¹ According to John G. Neihardt, it is “a term used to designate the white man, but having no reference to the color of his skin” (1959: 7).

took different forms depending on the countries involved: “the Spanish mission system, the French trade, system and the British settlement system” (7). They disputed a lot of wars in Indian lands in order to take control of their territory with the main goal of expanding their possessions in the New World, which created a terrible situation for the Indians who died fighting for their lands. What is more, “a system of ‘legal’ Indian enslavement” was established by the leading European Empires in order to raise their benefits (Porter and Roemer 46). Every European Empire “[...] competed to raise national and personal prestige through colonization, to maximize public and private wealth through trade, and to spread their version of the Christian faith to conversion” (Porter and Roemer 46). This quotation perfectly clarifies Europeans’ goals. It summarizes an important part of European history. European Empires competed among them in order to demonstrate who was the most influential European country. However, as they did not want to start new wars at home, they decided to spread their powers over new lands to demonstrate which Empire was the one who seized more lands, in other words, the strongest one. This would allow spreading their power and their territories, in other terms wealth and recognition. Consequently, this situation made Indian tribes their allies. But this European strategy was only a military strategy for seizing the land. We can read an example of this strategy by an Indian, Red Jacket, in his *Lectures a Missionary, 1828*:

We took them to be friends. They called us brothers. We believed them, and gave them a larger seat. At length their numbers had greatly increased. They wanted more land. They wanted our country. Our eyes were opened, and our minds became uneasy. Wars took place. Indians were hired to fight against Indians, and many of our people were destroyed. (Cited in Hurtado and Inverson 94)

According to what is said in Porter and Roemer’s work, it was Spain which initially had the control over the entire Western hemisphere and remained the dominant imperial power for most of the colonial period. However, France was its main serious rival, which defeated the Spanish troops thanks to their relations with the Indians due to the fur trade they developed. But finally, it was England which defeated the French in 1763 (46-47). All this can be linked to an immense quantity of suffering for Indian tribes.

NATIVE AMERICAN OUTLOOK: EARLY LITERATURE

Nowadays, most of the information we possess about early Native Americans still comes from white hands, although we can also find a lot of information from Native Americans as well as from mixed-heritage people. However, as John Bierhost states in his work *Four Master Works of*

American Indian Literature, some of the most important Indian works have been hidden, untranslated or badly translated or maybe they have just remained to tell them orally (xi). Moreover, according to Myra Jehlen and Michael Warner, we hardly know anything about Native Americans before “Columbus’ discovery,” and this can be explained. According to these two editors, this could happen because at the beginning Native Americans did not have any writing system in order to leave their legacy, because they transmitted their culture orally (5). That is, they had stories passed down from generation to generation through spoken language, which according to Porter and Roemer, are categorized into “four genre groupings”: ritual dramas, including chants, ceremonies and rituals; songs, narratives and oratory. These could be sacred and non-sacred stories, and they could be about Indian understanding of the fundamental truths of creation as well as about the origin of human beings and their relationship with the world they lived in (42). Most documents from the American colonization period that we have today were translated in the nineteenth century by some white specialists. Many poems, speeches, stories, autobiographies and songs reflect their culture, religions and ways of life, and the most important of all, how difficult their lives were after the European presence in their lands. At this point we can clearly differentiate two radically opposite kinds of early Native American literature: the harmonious, pacifist and joyful literature before colonization, and the dark, painful and deeply sad literature after European colonization.

Having reached this point of the project, we must focus now on the similitudes and differences in Native American literary works before and after the American colonization. Firstly, there are the most typical Indian works: the stories about the creation of the world and the trickster tales. These two different types of stories are really playful stories which deal with daily Native American life, values, and the resolution of problems. But from the European point of view, they are also a little bit “fantastic” because of the “magical” facts and characters which appear in them, although for Native Americans it was just part of their daily life and religions. As we have mentioned above, Native American tribes were very religious. For Indian peoples, every unusual fact happened for a magical or divine reason and had an explanation. These kinds of stories were very popular among tribes.

In *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, the first writings by Native Americans were stories about the beginning of the world. These stories “tell people who they are by telling them where they come from” (19). These stories were not written down until the nineteenth century, and they were considered sacred by native cultures as much as the book of Genesis is by the Christian world (19, 20). If we focus our attention on this explanation, we can notice how similar and, at the same time, how different native and European religions are. The stories about the

beginning of the world narrate the same story as in the Bible: “perspectives on what life is and how to understand it” (20). The first person who translated an Iroquois² cosmogonic myth was David Cusick, a Tuscarora.³ He was the first Native American to record the myths of his own people (20). These stories, as well as all the early native literature before the European colonization, feature happiness because of the creation of life and the world, a celebration of nature and life. They were happy-ending stories where the good overcame the evil, and they were told orally in front of the people in order to instruct everybody about their roots. One example is *The Iroquois Creation Story “A Tale of the Foundation of the Great Island, Now North America; the Two Infants Born, and the Creation of the Universe”* (21).⁴ From the Eurocentric point of view, we can see this is a “fantastic” and “superstitious” story, but it actually reflects Native American beliefs, their religions. But we have that thought because it is difficult for us and not accepted by the Christian faith. We are surprised when we hear about monsters, different worlds and floating islands that this story narrates about. But if we stop to think, we can come to the conclusion that it is very similar to what appears in our Bible: angels, demons, heaven and hell, but told with different words.

In addition to these stories about the creation of the world, we also find in native culture the Trickster Tales or Trickster Cycles. Daniel G. Brinton was the first man who used the term “trickster” in the nineteenth century. He describes the term as “a mythic character which appears in the oral tales of the peoples of native America. A wandering, excessive, bawdy, gluttonous, and obscene figure” (120). Apart from being obscene figures, these were also culture heroes. Besides, *The Norton Anthology* also states that “Trickster tales are among the most ancient elements of Native American cultures” (121), and they are stories which “make the listener exercise his mind to think” (121). These are cycles of simple stories which teach valuable lessons about nature, the world and life. These stories are “broadly comic or bawdy, but also have the power associated with the sacred” (121). According to Brinton, the term trickster “has no equivalent in any native language. Rather the Trickster figure is differently called depending on the land they belong to, as for example: Coyote, Rabbit, Spider, Raven and Jay or Wolverine” (121). These stories are really funny, but they also carry a serious message. One of the most famous examples is the Winnebago Trickster Tales. This is a series of stories divided in some shorter stories creating different trickster tales and teaching different values. The Winnebago Trickster Tales are really obscene and weird

² According to *The Norton Anthology*, it was the name that the French gave to the people “[...] made up of the Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga and Cayuga nations. Joined in the early eighteenth century by the Tuscarora of North Carolina, the Five Nations became the Six Nations” (2003: 19).

³ It was the name of the people from North Carolina (Bayn, 2003: 19).

⁴ See annex 1.

stories, but they actually deliver an important message. In particular, the Tale Twenty Three⁵ deals with the importance of listening to those who warn you about dangers and try to protect you. In this tale we can perceive a natural environment, a forest, and natural beings which have human skills, as for instance speaking, in this case, a kind of tubercle singing a warning song. In this funny and indecent tale many ridiculous things happen, but it is a crucial story. This is a clear example of Native American literature before European colonization, a happy period for Indians, which made easier to write comic stories. In brief, it is important to highlight that early Native American literature before the colonization by Europeans is about their main values: roots, tribe, inheritance, nature and the physical world, the social order and appropriate behavior, human nature and the problem of good and evil.

On the contrary, after the European colonization we find a drastically different literature to the one commented above. That was a dark period full of war and pain for natives. According to Porter and Roemer, these literary works deal with “the apocalyptic sense of loss and survival” (18). There are greater amounts of Native American documents which belong to that period, as for example poems, stories and novels, but above all autobiographies. On the one hand, we find the most typical stories and autobiographies, as for instance *A Son of the Forest* by William Apess; *My People, the Sioux* by Luther Standing Bear, *Return to White Earth* by John Rogers or *The School Days of an Indian Girl* from *American Indian Stories* by Zitkala-Sa. All these works tell histories of how Indian children are taken to Christian schools to be educated in European beliefs and values, in other words, to “civilize” them. In *Native American Literature, A Brief Introduction and Anthology* by Gerald Vizenor we can read an extract from *Return to White Earth* by John Rogers:

Way quah Gishing was six years old when my two sisters, Bishiu and Min di, accompanied me to Flanreau, South Dakota, to attend an Indian boarding school. It was very difficult for me at first, for students at the school were not allowed to speak the language of the Indians. At that time I understood nothing else. (46)

Many autobiographies of that period deal with the concept of the “process of acculturation,” which is an absolutely important concept for understanding Native American literature after European colonization. As it has been explained, this basically means the imposition of the powerful value system over the weak one (“the other”). In other terms, a process of mental colonization, which means that by educating them, they were colonizing their minds. Native

⁵ See annex 2.

American people suffered tremendously at European hands, as a consequence of their greed, power and money. These are stories which accurately reflect the impact of colonization, which explain how Native Americans were expelled from their lands, or how they were forced to abandon their religion for Christianity. Reading different documents as for example the one just mentioned, we can clearly see that early Native American literature after the colonization deals mainly with a critique against Europeans, drastically opposed to the joyful literature written before. Indians claim for their lands and rights, and condemn the European colonizing system and the massacre by European hands. This second kind of literature was not written until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That was the time when Native Americans got the courage to express themselves in order to condemn the European society and claim their rights. In *Black Elk Speaks* by John G. Neihardt we can read “[F]or the last forty years it has been a purpose to bring Black Elk’s message to the white world as he wished me to do” (xii). In this citation we can appreciate a clear example of how Native Americans wanted to have a voice within the dominant white society in order to be heard and comprehended, and literature was the main vehicle to rebel against the facts which happened in the past.

On the other hand, we can find a lot of poems written by Native Americans and translated into English which narrate Indian suffering with lots of details because of the war and colonization. Some of these poems appear in *American Poetry Vol. 2*, and are: *The Song of the Lenape Warriors Going against the Enemy*, *The Eagle Dance* or *Song for a Fallen Warrior*.⁶ These three poems have the same central theme: the war. They are poems of prayer, for being saved in the war; they are also laments and supplications to the “Great Spirit,” and they are also very patriotic. These poems deal with honor, duty and nation, and have an elegiac tone. We can see fear reflected in these poems, but also pain and suffering because of the great loss of Native American peoples and lands. In the first poem I have mentioned, we can easily appreciate the fear and pain I have commented before: “O poor me/ who am going out to fight the enemy, /and know no whether I shall return again, /to enjoy the embraces of my children/ and my wife [...]” (661). This particular poem tells in first person the fears of an Indian man who must go to the war “to fight the enemy,” and he also wonders whether he will return home with his family. Reading the next stanzas, we can see that this poem is also a prayer to “the Great Spirit” to ask for help for him and his family, when the Indian man says: “O! Thou Great Spirit above! /Take pity on my children / And on my wife/ [...] Grant that I may be successful in this attempt / [...] O! Take pity on me! [...]” (661). This poem contains many repetitions and exclamations, which transmit feelings and emotions to the reader, as for

⁶ See annex 3

example passion, excitement and fear, what the Indian man felt at the moment of preparing for the war. It is also written using the imperative voice, which transmits despair, the feeling that every Indian person experienced during the European arrivals. Reading this poem, we can also notice what the most important thing was for the Indians: their families and friends. Indian peoples had a strong sense of family and society, where they lived together trying to help each other to improve their lives. If we compare this poem to the others I have mentioned, we come to the conclusion that they transmit the same message. For instance, if we read *Song for a Fallen Warrior*, we also find a lament, full of praises and supplications. In this poem we can read: “O my son, farewell! /You have gone beyond the great river/ [...] / I will not see you for a hundred winters / [...]” (680). This poem can be categorized as an elegy, because it is a lament for the death of a son. The father cries for his son who died in the war and bids farewell to him saying they would be together when he dies.

Seeing these two kinds of literature, before and after European colonization, we can clearly differentiate two completely opposite periods in every aspect: a pleasant period and a depressing period. This can make us think about the cruelty of colonization, because it did not just change Native American economy or society, colonization also changed their whole lives and outlook.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we must remember that Indian tribes were pacific peoples which lived in the American continent, supposedly in complete harmony and peace before European arrivals. They were very religious peoples which had many gods to whom they prayed, which was completely opposed to the Christian faith. Unfortunately, when Europeans started arriving in American lands in the fifteenth century, every aspect of native people’s lives changed forever. They were murdered, raped, enslaved, deceived, and suffered many terrible experiences, because Europeans thought they were superior to them. This allowed Europeans to take control over Indian lands and peoples to enrich their Empires, which ruined Native American lives forever.

On the other hand, it is also important to highlight how every fact that Indians lived had an effect on early Native American literature. We have made a difference between Native American literature before and after colonization, and after analyzing some Native American works, we have come to the conclusion that the literature of each period clearly reflects Indians’ lives and suffering. To be more precise, literature before European colonization was mostly happy and lively, and it was composed of chants, songs, rituals, trickster tales and stories about the beginning of the world.

These were pieces of work which celebrated life and nature, and which had moral endings in order to teach the tribal members. But these works were transmitted orally, they were not written down until the nineteenth century. On the contrary, Native American literature after the European colonization was entirely opposed to the one before. It reflected all the suffering and pain of the Indian tribes at European hands. This literature was composed mainly by autobiographies and poems. They were written stories which tried to condemn the European Empires, critiques against the European world which massacred the Native peoples of America. What is more, those writings were the tools that Native Americans used to raise their voices and ask for their rights, the only way to be heard.

Finally, I would like to underline the importance of literature. It is not only useful for reading and entertaining, or just for getting knowledge about a concrete topic. Literature goes further. It gives us the keys to understand the past. What is more, to understand ancient civilizations, peoples, cultures and religions. Literature is a very wide field not just useful for philologists, but also for historians, anthropologists, researchers, or just for those readers who only want to know a little more about the past. Thanks to all those literary Indian works we treasure today, we can understand what the world was like many years ago, what Native American people were like, and how they lived. But the most important of all, we can learn from the mistakes of the past in order not to repeat them in the present or future.

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ANNEXES

-ANNEX 1 (IROQUOIS COSMOGONIC MYTH)

The Iroquois Creation Story

As told by David Cusick in 1827, in *Sketches of the Ancient History of the Six Nations*

*A Tale of the Foundation of the Great Island, Now North America;—the Two Infants
Born, and the Creation of the Universe*

Among the ancients there were two worlds in existence. The lower world was in great darkness—the possession of the great monster; but the upper world was inhabited by mankind; and there was a woman conceived and would have the twin born. When her travail drew near, and her situation seemed to produce a great distress on her mind, and she was induced by some of her relations to lay herself on a mattress which was prepared, so as to gain refreshments to her wearied body; but while she was asleep the very place sunk down towards the dark world. The monsters of the great water were alarmed at her appearance of descending to the lower world; in consequence all the species of the creatures were immediately collected into where it was expected she would fall. When the monsters were assembled, and they made consultation, one of them was appointed in haste to search the great deep, in order to procure some earth, if it could be obtained; accordingly the monster descends, which succeeds, and returns to the place. Another requisition was presented, who would be capable to secure the woman from the terrors of the great water, but none was able to comply except a large turtle came forward and made proposal to them to endure her lasting weight, which was accepted. The woman was yet descending from a great distance. The turtle executes upon the spot, and a small quantity of earth was varnished on the back part of the turtle. The woman alights on the seat prepared, and she receives a satisfaction. While holding her, the turtle increased every moment and became a considerable island of earth, and apparently covered with small bushes. The woman remained in a state of unlimited darkness, and she was overtaken by her travail to which she was subject. While she was in the limits of distress one of the infants in her womb was moved by an evil opinion

and he was determined to pass out under the side of the parent's arm, and the other infant in vain endeavoured to prevent his design. The woman was in a painful condition during the time of their disputes, and the infants entered the dark world by compulsion, and their parent expired in a few moments. They had the power of sustenance without a nurse, and remained in the dark regions. After a time the turtle increased to a great Island and the infants were grown up, and one of them possessed with a gentle disposition, and named Enigorio, i.e. the good mind. The other youth possessed an insolence of character, and was named Enigonhahetgea, i.e. the bad mind. The good mind was not contented to remain in a dark situation, and he was anxious to create a great light in the dark world; but the bad mind was desirous that the world should remain in a natural state. The good mind determines to prosecute his designs, and therefore commences the work of creation. At first he took the parent's head, (the deceased) of which he created an orb, and established it in the centre of the firmament, and it became of a very superior nature to bestow light to the new world, (now the sun) and again he took the remnant of the body and formed another orb, which was inferior to the light (now moon). In the orb a cloud of legs appeared to prove it was the body of the good mind, (parent). The former was to give light to the day and the latter to the night; and he also created numerous spots of light, (now stars): these were to regulate the days, nights, seasons, years, etc. Whenever the light extended to the dark world the monsters were displeased and immediately concealed themselves in the deep places, lest they should be discovered by some human beings. The good mind continued the works of creation, and he formed numerous creeks and rivers on the Great Island, and then created numerous species of animals of the smallest and the greatest, to inhabit the forests, and fishes of all kinds to inhabit the waters. When he had made the universe he was in doubt respecting some being to possess the Great Island; and he formed two images of the dust of the ground in his own likeness, male and female, and by his breathing into their nostrils he gave them the living souls, and named them Ea-Gwe-Howe, i.e. a real people; and he gave the Great Island all the animals for game for their maintenance and he appointed thunder to water the earth by frequent rains, agreeable of the nature of the system; after this the Island became fruitful and vegetation afforded the animals subsistence. The bad mind, while his brother was making the universe, went throughout the Island and made numerous high mountains and falls of water, and great steeps, and also creates various reptiles which would be injurious to mankind; but the good mind restored the Island to its former condition. The bad mind proceeded further

in his motives and he made two images of clay in the form of mankind; but while he was giving them existence they became apes; and when he had not the power to create mankind he was envious against his brother; and again he made two of clay. The good mind discovered his brothers contrivances, and aided in giving them living souls, (it is said these had the most knowledge of good and evil). The good mind now accomplishes the works of creation, notwithstanding the imaginations of the bad mind were continually evil; and he attempted to enclose all the animals of game in the earth, so as to deprive them from mankind; but the good mind released them from confinement, (the animals were dispersed, and traces of them were made on the rocks near the cave where it was closed). The good mind experiences that his brother was at variance with the works of creation, and feels not disposed to favour any of his proceedings, but gives admonitions of his future state. Afterwards the good mind requested his brother to accompany him, as he was proposed to inspect the game, etc., but when a short distance from their moninal [sic] residence the bad mind became so unmanly that he could not conduct his brother any more. The bad mind offered a challenge to his brother and resolved that he who gains the victory should govern the universe; and appointed a day to meet the contest. The good mind was willing to submit to the offer, and he enters the reconciliation with his brother; which he falsely mentions that by whipping with flags would destroy his temporal life; and he earnestly solicits his brother also to notice the instrument of death, which he manifestly relates by the use of deer horns, beating his body he would expire. On the day appointed the engagement commenced, which lasted for two days: after pulling up the trees and mountains as the track of a terrible whirlwind, at last the good mind gained the victory by using the horns, as mentioned the instrument of death, which he succeeded in deceiving his brother and he crushed him in the earth; and the last words uttered from the bad mind were, that he would have equal power over the souls of mankind after death; and he sinks down to eternal doom, and became the Evil Spirit. After this tumult the good mind repaired to the battle ground, and then visited the people and retires from the earth.

Baym, Nina et al, eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 6th ed. New York: Norton, 2003.

-ANNEX 2 (WINNEBAGO TRICKSTER TALES 23)

Trickster Eats the Laxative Bulb

As Trickster was walking along aimlessly, he heard what sounded like a voice. He listened very carefully and he could hear it sing,

If you eat me you will defecate;
You will defecate.

Trickster wondered, "Why is this person saying such things?" So Trickster went in the direction of the sound, until he heard quite distinctly someone singing,

If you eat me you will defecate;
You will defecate.

"I wonder whose saying such things," said Trickster, "as I know if I eat it I'm not going to defecate." Now he carefully followed the sound of the voice, and there, unexpectedly, he found that it came from a bulb or tubercle that was growing on a weed. So he broke it off and ate the whole thing, then went merrily on his way.

As Trickster walked along, he said out loud, laughing, "I wonder what happened to that bulb with the big mouth that said I would defecate? I'll defecate when I feel like it, and surely no plant can ever make me defecate when I don't want to." Thus he spoke, but no sooner were the words out of his mouth than he broke wind. "Well," said Trickster, "I guess this is what it must have meant; but still I am not defecating. Even a great one like myself will expel a bit of gas every now and then." But before he could even finish speaking, he again broke wind, and the sound of it echoed off the hills. "I wonder if this is why I am called 'foolish,' and 'Trickster'?" he said. Then he began to break wind over and over again. "Well," he said, "this must be why the bulb said what it did." Then he broke wind so hard that his rectum was nearly ripped. Trickster said with some pride, "That surely was a great one." Then he broke wind again, and the force of the expulsion drove him forward. He said to himself, "Well, well, I guess I could push a little, but I definitely will not defecate." Just then he broke wind with such force that his ass was launched off the ground, and he landed on his hands and knees. "Go ahead, do it again. See if I care!" he said angrily; and no sooner had he said it, than he broke wind with such power that he flew through the air and landed on his stomach. This time he was determined to stabilize himself, so he grabbed hold of a log, but when he broke wind both he and the log were launched into the air, and when he came down the log landed on top of him. He was nearly killed. So this time he ran over to a poplar tree and wrapped his arms around it; even so, when he broke wind his feet left the ground and the tree arched with the impact. This time he held the poplar with all his strength, but with a loud noise, he flipped upside down and pulled the tree out by its roots. This time he had to find a tree worthy of his problem. He finally came to an oak which he embraced with both arms. When he broke wind he was able to hold on, but he was knocked upside down so that his toes struck the tree.

Then trickster ran down to a small village and shouted, "Enemies! A large warparty is coming this way — quick, take down your lodges and let's get out of here!"

So they disassembled their lodges and piled the twigs on top of Trickster. Then they gathered together their dogs and put them on top of the mountain of twigs. Then Trickster broke wind so hard that everything and everyone was scattered far and wide — the twigs and the dogs seemed to rain from heaven. People began to call out to one another, so far apart they had been scattered; and the dogs howled to one another. This trick made Trickster laugh until his sides hurt.

After that, he went on his way and felt pretty good. It seemed like his problems were over. "Well, that tubercle was a big talker," he said, "but I see that I have yet to defecate." Just the same, he felt a little like he could defecate. "Well, I guess that's what it meant when it said that," he said. Then he couldn't help himself, but had to defecate. "It seems that this is what it meant, but it sure was bragging considering." No sooner had he said that, than he really began to defecate. As he squatted, the pile of excrement got so high that it touched his body, so he climbed on top of a log to get some clearance. Soon the dung piled so high that he moved to a log that was leaning against a tree, but even there the pile of excrement touched his body. He could not stop defecating, and had to climb higher and higher. Soon he reached the top of the little tree, but even there the pile of dung mounted up until it reached him. Soon the limb that he was sitting on had become thoroughly manured, and when he tried to shift positions, he slipped and fell into his own hill of excrement. He disappeared in to the pile and it took quite some time for him to work his way out of it. When he finally escaped, he was covered with filth, and dragged excrement after him. His back pack and the box in which he kept his penis were both covered with dung, so he emptied the box and placed it again on his back. However, even his eyes were caked with filth and as he stumbled about, he ran right into a tree. He sang to it:

Tree, what kind are you?
Tell me about yourself.

"What kind of tree do you think I am?" it answered. "I am a forked oak tree, the one that used to be in the middle of the valley — that's who I am," said the tree. Trickster replied, "Can you tell me where the nearest water is?" "Go straight ahead," it said. Then Trickster stumbled about some more until he hit a tree so hard that he was knocked over backwards. He sang,

Tree, what kind are you?
Tell me about yourself.

"What kind of tree do you think I am?" it answered. "I am the red oak that used to stand at the edge of the valley. That's who I am." "Is it possible," said Trickster urgently, "that there is some water around here?" The tree replied, "It's straight ahead." He ran straight forward, but soon knocked against another tree. So he sang again,

Tree, what kind are you?
Tell me about yourself.

"What kind of tree do you think I am?" it answered. "I am the slippery elm that used to be in the middle of the forest. That's who I am." "Just go straight forward as you have been," advised the tree, but when he did, he collided with another tree. He put his hands on it and sang,

Tree, what kind are you?
Tell me about yourself.

"What kind of tree do you think I am?" it answered. "I am the basswood tree that used to stand at the edge of the water. That's who I am." "It is good!" exclaimed Trickster, and jumped straight forward into the water. He washed himself thoroughly. It was very difficult, for the dung had been on him so long that it had dried. Had not the trees helped him, he would surely have died. After he washed himself off, he washed his raccoon skin blanket and his penis box.

Baym, Nina et al, eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th
ed. New York: Norton, 2003.

-ANNEX 3 (NATIVE AMERICAN POEMS)

3.1. The Song of the Lenape Warriors Going Against the Enemy

O poor me!
Who am going out to fight the enemy,
And know not whether I shall return again,
To enjoy the embraces of my children
And my wife.
O poor creature!
Whose life is not in his own hands,
Who has no power over his own body,
But tries to do his duty
For the welfare of his nation.
O! thou Great Spirit above!
Take pity on my children
And on my wife!
Prevent their mourning on my account!
Grant that I may be successful in this attempt—
That I may slay my enemy,

And bring home the trophies of war
To my dear family and friends,
That we may rejoice together.
O! take pity on me!
Give me strength and courage to meet my enemy,
Suffer me to return again to my children,
To my wife
And to my relations!
Take pity on me and preserve my life
And I will make to thee a sacrifice.

Hollander, John. ed. *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*. Vol 2. New York: Library of America, 1993.

3.2. The Eagle Dance

It's me – I am a War Eagle!
The wind is strong, but I am an Eagle!
I am not ashamed – no, I am no,
The twisting Eagle's quill is on my head,
I see the enemy below me!
I am an Eagle, a War Eagle!

Hollander, John. ed. *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*. Vol 2. New York: Library of America, 1993.

3.3. Song for a Fallen Warrior

O my son, farewell!

You have gone beyond the great river,

Your spirit is on the other side of the Sand Buttes;

I will not see you for a hundred winters;

You will scalp the enemy in the green prairie,

Beyond the great river.

When the warriors of the Blackfeet meet,

When they smoke the medicine-pipe and dance the

War dance,

They will ask, "Where is Isthumaka?-

Where is the bravest of the Mannikappi?"

He fell on the war-path.

Mai-ram-bo, mai-ram-bo.

Many scalps will be taken for your death;

The Crows will lose many horses;

Their women will weep for their braves,

They will curse the spirit of Isthumaka.

O my son! I will come to you

And make moccasins for the war-path,

As I did when you struck the lodge

Of the "Horse-Guard" with the tomahawk.

Farewell, my son! I will see you

Beyond the broad river.

Mai-ram-bo, mai-ram-bo.

Hollander, John. ed. *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*.
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