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Deep Waters

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Deep Waters

The Textual Continuum in
American Indian Literature

CHRISTOPHER B. TEUTON

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Quadraat & Quadraat Sans
Designed by Ray Boeche

For schemes and dreams,
And my band on the run.

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Introduction

Diving into Deep Waters

My elders say this is how our world was created. Before there was this solid earth on which we live, the place we call Elohi, there was only Galunlati, the Sky World, which exists high above the arch of the Sky-Vault. A long time ago, before humans, the ancient animals grew crowded in there; they needed more space to live and grow. These animals were similar to those we know today. There was Rabbit, Bear, Possum, Bat, and all the others. But the animals were larger than they are now, and they could talk. In the ancient time they were still changing; this was before their forms were finally shaped by their thoughts and actions.

In council all the animals discussed what should be done about their collective problem, and they all had a voice in the process. Many spoke, but in the end they decided together to explore the vast world of water far below the Sky-Vault.

Many strong and swift ones volunteered to search the waters, but one by one they came back to Galunlati, exhausted and without news of a place they could live. Finally little Dayunisi, Beaver's grandchild, also known as the water beetle, volunteered to search the waters. She was small and weak in comparison to the other animals, but Dayunisi bravely set off from Galunlati and dutifully explored the surface of the waters. She searched all over but found no land. So she dove underneath the surface, down into the dark blue depths. The other animals watched from above. She was gone a long time, and the animals began to worry. Finally, they gave up on her, thinking there was no way such a little creature could hold her breath so long. They began to mourn her passing, but as they praised her courage here comes Dayunisi with a handful of mud in her hand. She places that dark mud on the surface of the dark blue water, and with the help of others it begins to spread out in all directions, growing and drying. And it becomes the world on which we now stand, the world that is in between the Sky World and the Under World, our beloved Elohi.

This story, the Cherokee creation story, reminds me what stories do: enable us to create our worlds. I have heard this story, and I have told it. I have read this story, read about it, and found it referenced in dozens of works, including those by James Mooney, Charles Hudson, Theda Perdue, Robert J. Conley, and Thomas King. I have written it. I have seen it in the form of an animated cartoon by Joseph Erb, and I have seen it depicted by a Hollywood actor. I have a painting of it in my home. I have talked about it with family and friends. I tell it to my children. I think about it. And I feel it, as I once did when I lay in the middle of a creek deep in the Smoky

Mountains and watched out of the corners of my eyes Dayunisi skitter across and dive into the water all around me. This story shapes me. I never tire of its beauty and its meanings; it is both a story and a constant source of reflection on the responsibilities of being. These two aspects of its reality are inextricable.

The Cherokee creation story is richly theoretical, with evocative metaphors and symbolism that invite interpretation. The world does not begin with humans at the center of existence, but with animals, our teachers and sources of sustenance, who through their complex relations afford us mirrors by which we may understand ourselves and our world. The creation of Elohi is made possible by the values that arise when creatures recognize their shared stake in survival. Communal solidarity, egalitarian discussion and consensus, and individual self-sacrifice for the welfare of the whole are necessary conditions for finding and developing that new space on which the community may grow. Most important, these values are acted on individually, but within a social context, for all persons, no matter their gifts or abilities, are integral to the welfare of the group, and some of the most unlikely of us may become heroes.

Among its meanings the creation story is an allegory about the creation of new knowledge on which a community may stand, grow, and live. The Upper World in Cherokee thought is the place of order and stability, but also the place of static forms. As the animals found out, there is not much room for growth there. The Under World is the place of chaos and mystery, but also a source of powerful energy and change. We may visit this place, but it is not hospitable to human society. The middle place, Elohi, is where we humans seek a dynamic

balance between these opposing forces of order and chaos through our application of knowledge that may draw the best qualities from each. The mud that Dayunisi brings to the surface represents not only land, but raw, experiential knowledge and energy that must be accounted for and shaped in order for the world to spread and grow.

As a Cherokee literary scholar I like to conceptualize the critical process as modeled by Dayunisi's journey. Like Dayunisi, the critic leaves the ordered world of stable, static knowledge. She leaves behind theories and methods that, though having their place, have begun to inhibit the individual's movement and the growth of the community's world. She takes a risk diving down into the Under World; she could drown in those deep waters where chaos lives. But the process of change demands that the depths be plumbed for new forms, new methods, and new theories drawn from new interpretations of experience. The act of returning with this fertile mud offers the hope that with the help of the whole community, our collective possibilities may grow. Like Dayunisi, each of us brings his or her own viewpoint, experience, and unique skills to the task of creating this knowledge. We depend on each other to help articulate and extend what we've found and brought to the surface, for if we do not, we are left simply with a handful of mud, and our new world remains unlivable.

Deep Waters: The Textual Continuum in American Indian Literature brings to the surface and introduces a theory of Native American signification organized around three interrelated theoretical concepts: the *oral impulse*, the *graphic impulse*, and the *critical impulse*. This book demonstrates how crucial twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary texts develop a sustained and illuminating critique of the relationship between tradition

and modernity through their conceptual and thematic explorations of Indigenous traditions of oral and graphic forms of communication. Native American literature, I argue, continues a sophisticated Indigenous critical practice that explores the roles of the individual and the community in the context of survivance, balance, harmony, and peace, among other tribally specific values.¹ The center of the book consists of extended readings of four texts that embody this critical and cultural project in different ways. Two of the writers I consider, N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) and Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), are well known to students of Native literature, while Ray A. Young Bear (Meskwaki) and Robert J. Conley (Cherokee) have received relatively little critical attention.

The critical vocabulary of my study critiques and decenters the standard definitions of *orality* and *literacy* that provide a structuring binary common to Native American literary studies. After exposing the ideological nature of oral-literate theoretical definitions of orality and literacy, I draw on the work of Jacques Derrida to critique the way writing as recorded speech has been valued as the most technologically advanced, clearest, most efficient mode of signifying. As Derrida argues convincingly, no form of communication is inherently more clear, present, or “truthful” than another. The privileging of writing as recorded speech has led to the perception that context-dependent forms of signification, such as Native American oral and graphic traditions, are less culturally advanced. This privileging has contributed to the historical and political subjugation of Native communities by characterizing them as oral, nonliterate peoples. In doing so it has blinded scholars to the ways oral and graphic traditions function in interdependent ways in the expression of Indigenous knowledge.

Seen in this context it is not surprising that the writers I study view the theoretical issues surrounding orality and literacy as a central concern of their work.

As a starting point I explore the ways oral and graphic forms of communication functioned relationally in three Indigenous cultures. Examining Mesoamerican writings, Diné sandpainting, and Haudenosaunee wampum belts, I propose a theory of Indigenous signification that values both oral and graphic means of recording thought, but privileges neither. Building on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship, I argue that Native cultures and literature share three basic commitments: (1) to develop new knowledge in relation to a dynamically changing group experience; (2) to maintain necessary knowledge for posterity and to share that knowledge; and (3) to critique both the contents of and the process leading to that knowledge. As Native signification critiques the relationship between what I call the *oral impulse* and the *graphic impulse* (the terminology of the impulse is borrowed from the African American novelist Ralph Ellison's notion of a *blues impulse*), it draws on a sensibility, which I refer to as the *critical impulse*, which is not dependent on a particular form of expression (Ellison 1964, 78).

Deep Waters begins with an extended discussion of the origin and significance of the three impulses. The oral and graphic build on the premise that oral discourses are living forms of cultural knowledge, kept alive in the memory of members of a group; graphic discourses record tradition for posterity, to live beyond the lives of those who record them. The oral impulse emphasizes a relational and experiential engagement with the world through sound-based forms of communication. Although oral modes of communication are not inherently

more “present” than graphic forms, they offer the potential for a more direct social engagement, if only because a speaker and a listener must be within earshot of one another. The oral impulse is the impulse communities and individuals feel as the need to create and maintain knowledge in relatively direct response to one another and to a rapidly changing world. The graphic impulse, on the other hand, expresses a desire for the permanent recording of cultural knowledge in formats that will allow for recollection and study. In contrast to oral discourses, graphic discourses aspire to be expressed in lasting formats. Graphic discourses change in time, as do oral discourses, but they do so more slowly and in response to the oral discourses with which they engage.

At best the oral and graphic impulses complement one another, but when either discourse infringes upon the functions of the other the resulting imbalance can threaten the survival of the community. Without the counterbalancing effects of the graphic impulse to create a sense of cultural and epistemological continuity, oral traditions will codify as they attempt to do the discursive work of graphic discourses. Where once an oral tradition represented a group’s fluid intellectual engagement with the world, it now risks becoming mystical dogma disconnected from the contemporary lived experience of a community. Similarly, when cut off from the oral impulse the graphic impulse may overreach its cultural roles and become abstract, theoretical in the narrow sense, freezing community knowledge in objectifying, unchanging, authoritative forms.

Aware of both the insights and the blindness of the oral and the graphic impulses, the critical impulse is always balancing, but never creating a static balance. As within the

chronotopes of Rabbit, Monkey, Raven, Coyote, and Spider, the critical impulse is always undercutting, always making messes, always disrupting things when they seem to be functioning well enough. But it is precisely when things *seem* stable, *seem* natural, that they must be questioned by an infusion of knowledge from discourses that will undercut smug satisfaction. The critical impulse arises out of a context of community consciousness, and it responds to the oral and graphic communicative needs of a community for survivance. Aside from basic material needs, cultural survivance depends on a community's vibrant, active engagement with the worldview its members continually construct. The ultimate purpose of critical discourse is to question the assumptions and authority of dominant cultural discourses, wherever they may be on the textual continuum. They appear in every format: an authoritative oral story may be counteracted with another oral story or with a graphic text; a graphic text may be undercut by another graphic text or with an oral story. Regardless of how it manifests, the critical impulse disrupts textual authority by critiquing dominant texts in new contexts and forms that counteract the static tendencies to which both graphic and oral discourses are prone. When fluid stability is achieved the critical impulse is integrated within those textual events. Critical discourses are fluid and ever changing; that is the nature of their power and function. They are the life force of cultural production and survivance.

The dynamic balance between oral and graphic discourses on the textual continuum was ultimately disrupted by Euro-American colonialism and the privileging of alphabetic writing. However, oral, graphic, and critical discourses continue to be expressed in Indigenous communities, just

as wampum, sandpainting, and the Aztec calendar continue to serve their communities. Contemporary oral, graphic, and critical discourses may be expressed in any number of cultural forms, from the visual art of Norval Morriseau to James Luna's performance pieces, from Vine Deloria Jr.'s legal polemics and John Trudell's music to Sequoyah Guess's stories. Each of these artistic forms has discursive power. In the current postcolonial context, however, the critical impulse is expressed most strikingly in dominant discursive forms that are in greatest need of counterbalancing on the textual continuum. Because writing is unrivaled as the discursive mode with which Native Americans have faced colonialism, it is through this very medium that graphic dominance is most actively disrupted. Writing has been a tool of both colonialism and survivance. By incorporating the oral impulse within a historically graphic mode of communication, American Indian literature negotiates the tensions between the oral and the graphic, inviting readers and their communities to enliven their own critical impulses in the process.

The history of Native American literature shows a preoccupation with juxtaposing oral and graphic forms of expression. From William Apess's sermons revealing Christian hypocrisy to Charles Eastman's literary transcription of Santee Sioux oral discourse, Native American writers have been dialogically engaging oral discourse in their literary works as a means of challenging Euro-American colonialism and its imposition of values through writing. This tradition continues, for as Michael D. Wilson argues, "Indigenous writers of contemporary fiction are generally less concerned with assimilation than they are about the power of appropriating and revising nonindigenous forms to create a literature of resistance"

(2008, 3). Indigenous writers infuse graphic texts with oral forms, creating more dialogic, open texts that require readers to engage the social narratives that shape the identities of their characters (40–41). Contemporary fiction also incorporates oral themes, ideas, and motifs as structuring devices, such as reciprocity, balance, and the figure of twins. In subtle but important ways the relationship between the oral and the graphic is central to contemporary Native fiction.

In his discussion of Jana Sequoya Magdaleno's and David Treuer's claims that the oral tradition in Native American novels represents signs of cultural authenticity rather than expressions of a living cultural tradition, Michael D. Wilson argues that oral traditions may provide useful "patterns" for narratives of colonial resistance (2008, xiv). It is true that some may read Native novels as "authentic representations of indigenous culture" and encounter them "as a kind of literary tourism or readable anthropology" (xiii). However, cultural content is secondary to the formal aspects of oral discourse as a mode of interpreting experience that is socially located and dialogic. That is what empowers these postcolonial works. Some Native writers may use oral tradition as a "prop," but others, Wilson argues, develop "the entire trajectory of their novels either on specific oral stories or on narratives derived from concepts of orality, such as the use of multiple narrators that suggest subjectivity both in points of view and in the grain or nuance of the spoken voice" (xiii). Oral discourse in Native novels, then, may act as a critical intervention in a graphically dominated postcolonial context, offering models of how to engage and interpret the social narratives that affect characters and, by extension, readers.

Deep Waters demonstrates through critical readings of key

contemporary narratives that Native American writers have been identifying and exploring the effects of the legacy of imbalances between the oral, graphic, and critical impulses and their effects on Native American life. Embedding images of dialogue and storytelling (both key elements of the oral impulse) in their ostensibly graphic texts, the works of the writers I discuss explore the relationships between the oral and the graphic in ways that open spaces within which the critical impulse can flourish.

In chapter 1 I explain the textual continuum in depth and offer examples of how the oral and graphic impulses have functioned in Native American traditions of signification. In the remaining four chapters I address a diverse range of canonical and less well-known Native American writers and narrative texts, analyzing their self-conscious examination of the purposes and roles of oral and graphic traditions. In chapter 2 I present a reading of the classic *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), N. Scott Momaday's most philosophically and structurally complex work. I demonstrate how Momaday's narrator confronts the colonialism of literate-based epistemological frameworks by reclaiming his Kiowa self in an embrace of Kiowa oral traditional knowledge. In chapter 3 I offer a reading of another canonical work, Gerald Vizenor's controversial trickster novel, *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990). One of the most influential and least critically understood Native American texts, *Bearheart*, I argue, does not advocate the subversion of all values, but aims to invigorate the critical impulse as trickster discourse by undercutting graphically dominant value systems that evade the fluidity of oral epistemologies. In chapter 4 I offer in-depth readings of Ray A. Young Bear's *Black Eagle Child: The Facepaint Narratives* (1992) and *Remnants of*

the *First Earth* (1996), two of the most conceptually erudite and culturally rooted narrative works of Native American literature ever published. Universally admired but virtually ignored by critics for the structural, mythical, and social complexity of his writing, Young Bear's paired prose works portray the act of writing as a form of artistic mediation, a heuristic through which his protagonist, Edgar Bearchild, works out complicated sociocultural changes in a Native community. In chapter 5 I examine one of the most ambitious series of Native American novels, Robert J. Conley's *Real People* series, reprinted by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2000. Charting Cherokee life from pre-contact times through forced removal to Indian Territory in 1839, Conley's works of popular fiction foreground the tensions between oral traditions and Cherokee writing while re-creating historical narratives as a means of reclaiming tribal histories. I argue that these writers and their texts are redefining the concept of literary interpretation from within social, community-based concepts.

Through their exploration of the discursive relationships between oral and graphic forms, the history of Native textual expression as well as contemporary American Indian literature have been teaching listeners and readers about the role of interpretation in American Indian experience. Interpretation, these works have been telling us, is not strictly an individualistic affair, but is also a socially located and socially constructed process on the textual continuum. It is time we critics dive like Dayunisi into deep waters.