Native American Life Narratives: A Representation of Indigenous Culture and Worldview

Ammara Amin, Ali Usman Saleem

Abstract

In the wake of historical trauma of centuries, Native American literature has foregrounded a perspective of history, culture and life that is specific to Native American worldviews and challenges Eurocentric version of being an Indian. Prominent among these different genres are Native American life narratives which counter western concept of self and consciousness with a Native consciousness and worldview. This paper explores the three of the most powerful Native American life narratives *Black Elk Speaks, Rolling Thunder* and *Mad Bear* as the life tales and biography of medicine men which forms the foundation of Native American tribal culture and philosophy of life. Through an exploration of these life narratives, the papers attempts to establish that these texts serve as a representation of indigenous culture, tribal knowledge and epistemology. The paper aims to highlight that besides adding to the canon of Native American literature, these life narratives serve as an expression of native resistance and tribal survival.

Key words: indigenous culture, life narratives, Native American literature, native consciousness, worldviews.

Introduction

Like the multiple and complex realities that define Native American identity –full-blood, mixed-blood, reservation, urban, non-speakers and many more – there are multiple approaches to discuss and explore Native American literature(s). Telling "truths about past that history cannot articulate" (Porter 39) Native American literatures encompass a diversity and multigenerity that

complicates literary canonization or specificity of any kind. This Native American spectrum contains intellectuals and writers like Craig Womack (Creek- Cherokee) who assert that "we *are* the cannon" (Womack 7). Womack hails the Red Stick approach believing in the "aboriginal consciousness" as "a counter consciousness" (Adams 51). Along with Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna- Pueblo), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Dakota) and Robert Allen Warrior (Osage), Womack rejects "inclusionary arguments" (Womack 7) in favor of a native literature that affirms national identity by "subverting the literary status quo rather than being subverted *by* it" (12). Followed by centuries of colonization, genocide, displacement and broken promises, the Native Americans find themselves dealing with the question of reclaiming a speaking Native American subject, how such a subject can exist and what constitutes the identity of such a subject. Ever since the first encounters of colonial times, Native Americans and their image and identity, has been shaped, changed and concocted by the Europeans. Institutionalized by the white discourse, the figure of Native American has always been presented as a generalized figure of transcendent consistency that is an emblem of primitivism and cannibalism and serves the colonial agenda of their exploiters. "Put simply", Macdonald, Macdonald and Sheridan (2000) assert, "America cannot have its cowboys without Indians" (xii). Native American identity and peoples has therefore been stereotyped to contrast the civilized and liberal European and presented as an "absence" and "oblivion" (Vizenor 3), devoid of any agency or subjectivity.

Challenging this stereotyping, Native American writers have experimented with texts as frontiers. Vizenor asserts that today's Native American warriors are writers. The turn of the century has been usually credited with the flourishing of Native American literature(s), although the truth remains that Native Americans had authored books dating back to hundreds of years even before contact. The Mayan and Aztec civilizations were not only rich in oral traditions but

also in the mostly understudied, written traditions (Womack 3). Kennneth M. Roemer (2005), while describing Native American canon uses two adjectives; "immensity and diversity" (4). This diversity of literatures carries more than the regional and cultural diversity attributed by hundreds of languages, traditions, tribes and customs. Apart from adding to the genre diversity, which is quite different from the Euro American typologies in language, themes and structure, this multiplicity also adds to the diversity in the ways these literatures are experienced and expressed both by writers and readers. Native American literature, as an artistic expression of "the plurality of Native American cultures and the multiplicity of types of oral and written literature" (Lundquist 1) is deeply rooted in the tribal and indigenous culture. In a purely tribal centered and nativist approach of literary separatism Womack (1999) suggests a radical "Red Stick" theory (12) to focus upon and initiate from an exclusive native perspective which only theorizes a "link between thought and activism" (5). It is noteworthy that Vizenor, on the contrary, dismisses the approach that searches for a pure indigenous literature, calling it "Terminal creeds" (Vizenor 10) which marks the absence of a living continuum of literary voices and calls for a survivance that can balance the tension rather than dissolving it.

Literature Review

Even before the 'contact', Native American peoples had been speaking, drawing and performing, thus enacting and telling their life stories. Smith and Watson (2001) define life narrative as a non-canonic set of fluid self-referential practices that engage both past and present to constitute an identity. In the context of Native American literature, Smith argues that Native American autobiography is" verbal expressions, oral or written" (237) whereas O'Brien discusses the existence of Native "oral, dramatic and artistic expression" (O'brien 5) of one's life. While the autobiography is widely considered to be a Western literary form, Native American life stories

offer indigenous forms and modes of self-narration which range from the "preliterate" (Brumble 11) oral life stories and pictographs. Wong contends that Native American autobiographies can be categorized into three historical periods: the early period (from pre Columbian era to the nineteenth century), the nineteenth and early twentieth century period (called the transitional period and the contemporary period (beginning in the twentieth century and expanding in the Native American Renaissance[1]) (126).

These Native life narratives from the early pictographic self-narratives to the written autobiographies and the collaborative life narratives, appear in a chronological order and represent a communal self rather than a unified self. The collaborative life narratives that challenge traditional autobiographical writings by contextualizing ideas like literacy, colonialism and identity, which have been produced by the trained scholars, academicians, writers or journalist have contributed a lot to this genre. Although contemporary popular literature can be said to have assimilative tendencies, including Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and followed by mixed heritage writers like Silko, Erdrich, Owens, Sarris and Sherman Alexie, the Native American life narratives like the seminal *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), which is considered to be the classic of Native American life stories along with *Rolling Thunder* (1974) and *Mad Bear* (1994) can be termed as belonging to indigenous discourse which offers a representation, recovery and recuperation of indigenous culture from a purely native and tribal perspective and worldview (Pulitano 101).

[1] The term "Native American Renaissance", coined by Kenneth Lincoln in 1983, refers to a period (1960s onwards) of increased literary production by the Native American writers in USA. Contextualized in Native American oral traditions and mythology these writers (N. Scott Momaday, Louis Erdrich, Duane Niatum, James Welch) sought to revive Native American heritage and culture.

The medicine men have always been an integral part of Native American epistemological and ontological worldviews and constitute its indigenuity. In his groundbreaking culminating work, Vine Deloria Jr. (2006) reclaims the importance of medicine men and their connections to sacred ceremonies and spirits across multiple tribes and times which characterize the power of Native American culture. Celebrating these medicine men by combining oral history with autobiography, these life narratives not just chronicle the memories and experiences of the writers but also their embodiment, agency and identity as part and expression of indigenous life. It is the visibly dominant indigenous culture that forms the epistemological basis and composition of these texts and makes them the "vehicles for Indigenous resurgence, resistance and survival" (Kelsey 1). Writing from within and to the dominant discourse, these writings nonetheless subvert the hegemonic unidirectional European discourse while providing an answer to the crucial issue of Native American identity or subjectivity. With a dearth of study on these life narratives, the present work explores and discusses these three collaborative life narratives as a representation of Indigenous culture, traditions and spirituality through the lives, visions and spiritual journeys of medicine men. The paper attempts to bring out the role and power of these life narratives as a recuperation of Native American literary and cultural heritage and uniqueness. This study, thus, becomes significant in decolonizing the mainstream histories and perspectives, challenging the monolithic and unified discourse imposed by the Western canon.

Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux

Having achieved a canonical status in Native American life narratives, *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) is the product of interviews with Oglala Lakota healer Nicholas Black Elk (1863-1950) conducted by John G. Neihardt, an epic poet and university professor. Black Elk was "a kind of preacher, a *wichasha wakon* (holy man, priest) (Neihardt xv) as Neihardt mentions in the

preface, who was a beloved and highly esteemed leader of his people. Since Black Elk spoke little English, his son Ben translated his words for the interviewer while the interviewer's daughter Enid transcribed the interviews. So it was not just a simple transaction but a whole process during which important details and history regarding Black Elk's people and land was shared. This text has been considered as an amalgam of autobiography, ethnography, mythology and literature. Black Elk himself calls this book as not to be considered the tale of a "great hunter, or of a great warrior, or of a great traveler" (1) but "the story of a mighty vision" that black Elk believed "was true and mighty yet" (2).

Since *Black Elk Speaks* in *the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux,* it passes along to future generations the reality of indigenous Oglala life along with the power of visions that has marked the tribal life. The very reason and purpose which brought the interviewer and Black Elk together foretells the spiritual and symbolic significance of the outcome. While searching for the medicine man, active in the Messiah Movement for his *The Song of the Messiah,* Neihardt was introduced to Black Elk and the result was a text which dominates literature about indigenous cultures and religions to date. Black Elk had been active and relevant in "The Messiah Craze" as Euro Americans have called it, being related to the Messianic dream. This vision was a part of Native Americans' religion and was brutally sabotaged in the Wounded Knee massacre[2]. He was also the second cousin of the legendary Crazy Horse[3] and knew him first hand which again made him highly respectable in his tribe. His life story also becomes a source of commentary on the misfortunes, displacements, wars and genocides that the native people had to face. Black Elk

[2] The United States Army, on December 29, 1980, slaughtered 300 Lakota Indians in South Dakota near Wounded Knee Creek making it the last organized effort of resistance by the Native Americans.

[3] Crazy Horse was a famous leader in military of the Oglala Sioux who led in many famous battles like the battle of Little Bighorn. He was a symbol of resistance and revolt against the US attempts to restrict the Sioux on reservations and settlements on Native American territory. He surrendered in 1877 and finally met a violent death.

recalls that there were times when they were well fed and joyous and exclaims that “the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives and there was plenty for them and for us” (9). Everything changed with the arrival and colonization by the Whites. This was also predicted and prophesized by the Lakota holy man called Drinks Water, as Black Elk describes, and unfortunately it proved true.

Medicine men had always held a special place in Native American culture, with their spiritual powers of healing and visions believing that “sometimes dreams are wiser than waking” (10). These powers to heal mostly came through dreams and are considered a “gift presented to a human by a bird or animal” (Deloria 45). Also, the sacred knowledge is not supposed to be shared outside the tribe. In this regard, Black Elk himself exclaims in the opening of the text that he finds himself obligated to share this holy tale with the “four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one spirit” (1). Hence, he is sharing his story because he thinks it is the story of a mighty vision for an all-inclusive universe as it is believed by the Native Americans “to walk upon the earth, and whatever sickens there you shall make well” (28). In a true tribal spirit, he thus shares his story by first making an offering and sending a voice to the One spirit of the world. So, the whole interview experience begins through a tribal ritual of “the offering of the Pipe”. This offering is then followed by a tribal story related to the origin of the pipe as being a holy gift from Buffalo Calf Woman which guides that sacred is to be dealt with respect only.

In the introduction to the book, Vine Deloria Jr proclaims it as the “North American bible of all tribes”, providing spiritual, political, and sociological insight necessary for “affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life” (Xiii). The life narrative, ‘as told through’ Neihardt, presents and discusses almost all the facets of Native American culture from the importance and

power attributed to the medicine men to the nature of Plains Native American religion. Narrating the story and visions of Black Elk's life, the book begins with the spiritual rituals associated with the pipe ceremonies and foregrounds Black Elk's great vision with butterflies swarming over him, dust and thunder surrounding him (184), the Bison hunt, the killing of crazy horse, the horse dance, the dog vision, the Heyoka ceremony, the first cure, the powers of the Bison and the Elk and ends with the Wounded Knee and the end of the dream for Native Americans. Black Elk tells of the great vision with the great black stallion, four chieftains, four advisors, the six grandfathers and the grandmothers and the Voice that says, "Behold a good nation walking in a sacred manner in a good land!" (36). He talks of the "day-break-star-herb" (43) that flowered four blossoms on falling on earth creating light and understanding till the heavens. All of this visionary description with the indigenous figures, characters and numbers with an obvious emphasis on the number *four* at once imports reader to a deep insight of indigenous culture and religion. "Black Elk has wished", Vine Deloria asserts in *The World We Used to Live in*, that it was quite possible that everyone could share his experience, but "not everyone was destined to go beyond the physical world into the deep mysteries of the cosmos" (Deloria 13). It was the special gift of Native medicine men and they used it to heal and help others.

Although Arnold Krupat has criticized *Black Elk Speaks* as a "presumptive transcendental …religious romance", expressing doubts over Neihardt's possible literary interventions into Black Elks's thought process, Vine Deloria Jr, Paula Gunn Allen and Momaday believe this work to be a classic in representing Native American culture and religion in all its colors. Momaday (1984) hails it as an "extraordinarily human document-----the record of a profoundly spiritual journey. The pilgrimage of a people towards their historical fulfillment and culmination" (31). This uniqueness of both form and content, make it one of the greatest

contributions towards Native American canon. Exploring Native American consciousness through encounters and dialogues with one of the pillars of indigenous culture, namely medicine men, the texts bring out the power and reach of decentered and hitherto ignored epistemes.

Rolling Thunder: A Personal Exploration into the Secret Healing Powers of an American Indian Medicine Man

Rolling Thunder (1974) by Doug Boyd is another remarkable text that belongs to the genre of Native American life narratives. Boyd, who was a researcher and the founding director of Cross-Cultural Studies Program, was particularly interested in spiritual healers of different cultures and their powers. In *Rolling Thunder* he captures some important sections of the life of Shoshane medicine man Rolling Thunder (1916-1997), otherwise known as John Pope. The text provides an insight into the spiritual philosophy of Native American medicine men and consequently of the whole indigenous culture. Rolling Thunder tells Boyd that "No amount of money in the world can buy the medicine of the traditional Indian…there are some things in life that you cannot buy, and the American Indian live according to that standard" (Boyd 6). As a spiritual leader, philosopher and spokesperson of the Cherokee and Shoshane tribes, Rolling Thunder symbolizes the indigenous knowledge of secrets and healing powers that is an integral part of Native American tribal life. The text presents those mysterious powers of healings, making rains and causing thunderstorms, collecting medicinal herbs, transporting objects through air and communicating with other medicine men without the help of telephones. Boyd even witnesses a healing ceremony with other international scientists where Rolling Thunder heals a man's infected leg with his powers. The narrative attempts to present the spiritual side of the native culture to the world which suggests and believes in the One spirit – a horizontality and "interrelatedness" (Wong 125) among the humans, natural world and community. The One spirit

thus highlights "indigenous ideas of what kind of life is worth narrating" (125) which Wong asserts as the key feature of Native American life narratives.

The text accounts as both a record of Rolling Thunder's spiritual life as well as the injustices done to the Native Americans by the white men. One of the strongest elements of Indigenous culture is presented in the form the prophecies regarding natural disasters which resonate with the claims made by ecologists and scientists about an impending doomsday. Native Americans, who believe in the earth being a "living organism" (53) consider earth to be sick on account of disrespect and mistreatment. Boyd asserts that Rolling Thunder gives him the most valuable lesson of Native American teachings by emphasizing the "respect for the Great Spirit, and the Great Spirit is the life that is in all things—(which) have their own will and their own purpose; this is what is to be respected" (52). There is also a depiction of some of his fights with other Indian people who used a sorcerer to defeat Rolling Thunder and nearly succeeded. In doing so the book does justice to the realistic picture of the mysterious world of the Indian medicine men thus providing firsthand information of the native life. Capturing a man's journey to meet and get to know a medicine man, the narration contains some very vivid scenes of Rolling Thunder's experience with beetle and different animals, medicinal herbs and his fascination with tobacco and smoking as a sacred ritual. Providing an insight into the Native American connection to the spiritual and natural world which believes that they have choice in what to eat and what to say and such choices must be realized and practiced. (47), the book reflects on Native American philosophy of life through Rolling Thunder. In the true spirit of Native American spiritual leaders, he appears as a kind and enigmatic visionary man who healed native as well as non-native people at his non-profit, inter-racial and inter-tribal community in North Eastern Nevada called Meta Tantay (Chumash for *Walk in Peace*). Having the power to communicate with

paranormal substances and things from the other world, he is depicted as predicting and causing the things like rain to happen. This ability of medicine men to make rains and to change weather is, as Vine Deloria argues "one of the most frequently reported feats" (135). Rolling Thunder even caused a tornado to allow a young Shoshane boy, unlawfully sentenced to prison, to escape. "His tornado" (156), as Rolling Thunder called it, made rocks and sand flying through the air without hitting him or his friends and ripped off the gate. "We Indians", Rolling Thunder asserts, "are the keepers of the land. We don't claim that we own the land and nobody else does either" (260). This assertion withholds one of the strongest indigenous believes of keeping and sharing the land rather than owning it. Boyd skillfully uses his research skills and one to one experience with Rolling Thunder to bring out the miraculous powers of spiritual leaders of Native Americans as well as presenting a compelling picture of their plight where ranchers and industrialists destroyed the lands of the Shoshane.

Mad Bear: Spirit, Healing, and the Sacred in the Life of Native American Medicine Man

Mad Bear (1994) is yet another outstanding 'journey' presented as a book by Doug Boyd. As the subtitle suggest, this is a journey embarked into the indigenous sacred life of spirit and healing. In this personal and compelling tale, Boyd represents Mad Bear's rich cultural, spiritual and magical heritage. Mad Bear (1927-1985), one of the spiritual teachers of Rolling Thunder, was a member of the Bear Clan of the Tuscarora Nation of the Six-Nation Iroquois Confederacy of the United States and Canada. Being a medicine man and a Native American rights activist, he was considered a leader who had great influence on his people as well as across cultures. Boyd kept travelling and working with him for several years on a daily basis, and thus managed to recreate an account of the rich and inspirational knowledge and life of a holy Native American.

While the book shows common features that almost all medicine men shared, it is unique in showing their different personalities and distinct features as well. Mad Bear, with his Hawaiian-print shirt, over weight body, smiling face and cigar in his mouth appears to be a comic strip character in the first glance. He is always obsessed with food, eating or talking about it as well as consuming coffee from his little coffeepot all the time. The description of his culinary and other idiosyncrasies become a source of valuable information regarding Native American medicine men and help strip the stereotypical representation that they otherwise usually receive. Boyd mentions how Mad Bear had "no meal time rites….no offering made….no singing or chanting such as I had experienced with so many monks and swamis" (Boyd 20). Instead, he always said "Dig in" (20) like a modern man, whereas for prayers and rituals he always used ancient language. The book, therefore, captures how multilayered, unique and colorful Native American indigenous culture is, in contrast to the generalized and stereotypical representation by Euro Americans as being stagnant and primitive.

The very first line of the prologue begins with "The Story of False Face" which was "among the first of many tales and legends I heard from Mad Bear" (1). The narrative that follows abounds in a rich, colorful description of many stories, tales, miracles, and sacred objects that form the epistemology of Native culture. "There were medicine objects and other ceremonial paraphernalia related to his calling" (17). He had trade beads, old medals and sacred artifacts from his journey to other lands. Like Rolling Thunder and other medicine men, his appearance, life and home all represented the core of Native American beliefs. He asserts, "We do not ask of the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit asks of us" (21). He is always saying "*nyawe*" which is Tuscarora for thank you, thanking others specially after having food because he believes in "Everything acknowledging everything else. Even our struggles and our duties, we give thanks

for that" (21). He places emphasis on saying thanks to the Mother Earth on daily basis and "stop ripping off the Earth…or abusing the land" (61). Like Rolling Thunder and other medicine men, he propagates a conscious way of living as opposed to unconscious and self-indulging materialistic ways of white culture. Through his spiritual powers he could "pick up" Boyd's thoughts and read his mind well. The book describes the Peace-Pipe ceremony, various healings ceremonies - including Rolling Thunder's ears- and native views of nature as their "Mother Earth" (61). In the chapter *Rolling Thunder Hears* Rolling Thunder is quoted saying "people talk ecology on the one hand, …but yet on the other hand, they go on fighting against it-or at least ignoring it" (61). These medicine men express and Boyd records in their life narratives, the Native American knowledge and beliefs of the end of the world, the human spirit, the best of both worlds, the connections to the spiritual world and the transition and the survival of the world. Unlike what the White discourse has propagated about Native Americans, the width of topics highlights the scope and depth of spiritual and worldly knowledge that the Natives have always possessed. Mad Bear insists that "people should know what's going on in terms of the larger picture ... in a constructive way. This means waking up out of materialism and connecting up again with the spiritual world- learning to understand and cooperate with all the living forces of the nature" (34). Native knowledge and culture believe in transition, renewal and purification to counterfeit the destruction caused by the colonial powers.

The book foregrounds the Tuscarora and Iroquois dreaming practices which were used to fend for as well as to get help and feedback from the nature. These practices also suggested a commitment to living and working in togetherness with the spiritually aware people from around the world. The Native wisdom was expressed in the understanding that for the survival of the world, it was the need of the hour to relocate knowledge from the keepers to the wider audience

in order to neutralize and get rid of the forces of chaos and destruction. Mad Bear exclaims, "The point is to be neutral, really neutral—like we want to help out the whole picture without pushing our own agenda" (40). This spiritual and cultural enterprise is suggested through Native American threads of life and spirituality in the first half of the book, while the second half is more concerned with Boyd's own participation in inter-Indian dialogue. This life narrative thus highlights and brings out the larger picture that can be seen and acquired through Native American's culture of spirituality, inclusiveness and interrelatedness. Boyd describes the magic of Native medicine men as putting energy into people and atmosphere as something that is part of natural human potential which every man on earth need to bring out of him. "That's the medicine person", Boyd sums up, "the shaman, the rain-maker, the martial arts adept, the healer-whatever…. they focus and they move energy" (348). And they keep doing that till the body of medicine man leaves his body.

Conclusion

These life narratives analyzed here serve as enduring spiritual testaments of Native Americans which explore the spiritual and physical dynamics of indigenous Native American culture and through the life description of medicine men prove to be a journey into the depths of the indigenous way of life. Vine Deloria Jr believes that a study of medicine men's life narratives can convey to the modern secular world "the sense of humility, the reliance of the spirits and the immense powers" (Deloria xx) that were attributes of indigenous culture in the old days. Based on the indigenous epistemes and using a literary form not dominant in the mainstream academic or literary discourse, *Black Elk Speaks, Rolling Thunder and Mad Bear* represent Native American culture and its worldview. Grounded in the history, biography and specific spiritual culture, these works are connected to tribal metaphysics or mysticism even beyond the ritual.

These life narratives can therefore be read not just as a history of Native people and tales of tribal medicine men but as a counter discourse to the colonial image of the doomed or vanishing Native American also offering a canonization of Native American literature by expressing diversity on the level of genre as well as the issue of Native American consciousness, identity and presence.

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