

METHODS OF MEMORY: ON NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLING

Bruce Ballenger

I remember this:

In the summer of 1967 the alewives died, and they would gather in windrows on the beach, long lines of silver-sided fish corpses that thickened each day. I imagined that Lake Michigan spit them up from somewhere deep, as if in ecological distaste for a fish that didn't really belong, an invader that came from the sea up the St. Lawrence, a fish that New Englanders relished and Midwesterners scorned. Looking out at the water I could see their death march. Alewives slowly drifted in toward the beach side by side, their bodies bending with each passing wave, their blank eyeballs staring at the sky. The smell was awful, of course, but what was even more horrifying was the flies. They hovered in black clouds over the piles of stinking fish, and before long the piles began to move. The slow turning of the maggots wasn't detectable at first because the eye initially registered the silver-stiff dead fish. But if you didn't turn away in disgust, if you stared for just a few moments longer, you could see the whole fish pile was alive with movement.

And I remember this:

One March evening, on that same beach, but some years before the summer of the massive alewife die-off, my father and brother put on their wetsuits and waded out into the cold water with a net. I unsteadily held the Coleman lantern, and I recall how, in the glare of its hard light, my shadow danced wildly on the sand. Up and down the Lake Michigan shore I could see other lights and other shadows and sometimes the silhouette of a face. The newspaper reported that the smelt were running, though I remember the other fishermen's buckets were still empty as we passed them on the beach. As my father and brother swung toward shore, I could

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see that the bulging net held fish, pressed like scraps of glittering foil against the mesh. My drunken father, pulling the sodden net, staggered up on the beach.

“Look at all the smelt,” he said.

“Will you look at that!” he said, louder. And a few nearby fishermen wandered over into our circle of light as we proudly plucked the fish from the net. They shook their heads and walked away until they blended with the night again, but a voice stayed behind. “The bastard caught a net full of alewives.”

“Remember / to remember,” says the Creek poet Joy Harjo. She asks much of memory. In her poem “Remember,” she asks that it be an act of imagination which dissolves the boundaries between self and world: “Remember that you are this universe and that this / universe is you” and “Remember that you are all people and that all people / are you.” She suggests that memory can hold things we can’t seem to know: “Remember your birth, how your mother struggled / to give you form and breath. . . .” And Harjo believes that what we have seen and what we have heard we will always see and hear again, if we remember to remember:

Remember the moon, know who she is. I met her
in a bar once in Iowa City . . .
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the
origin of the universe. I heard her singing Kiowa war
dance songs at the corner of Fourth and Central once. (40)

In her poem “The Trick Is Consciousness,” Native American writer Paula Gunn Allen adds, “The key is in remembering, in what is chosen for the dream / In the silence of recovery we hold / the rituals of the dawn / now as then” (18). Allen, like Harjo, seems to suggest that the act of remembering erases temporal distinctions (“now as then”), but she goes further. Remembering, for Allen, involves a kind of receptivity to “what is chosen for the dream.” Who or what, I wonder as I read this poem, does this choosing? And whose dream is it? Whose dancing shadow is that on the sand, and who holds the light?

“Remembering is all,” writes Geary Hobson in his introduction to *The Remembered Earth*, an anthology of American Indian literature, and then he cites Anna Walters’s poem, “Come, My Sons,” in which she says,

It is in remembering that our power lies,
and our future comes
This is the Indian way. (Walters 24)

Here again is the conflation of time past and time present, and the mere act of remembering is invested with the power to see and perhaps shape the future.

It is this “Indian way” of remembering that struck me again and again as I read the work of Native American poets, novelists, storytellers. How strange it seemed to me. How different it seemed from my own acts of memory, yet how wonderful.

I am an essayist who writes often about the past. I'm not sure why, but I think it has something to do with sadness. It seems to me that most writers are restless and discontented, haunted by holes. "Where did this empty feeling come from?" I seem to be always asking myself. "What can I fill it with?" "Who's responsible?" It seems natural that these questions take me backwards into my own life, into memory's region, where I can, as Joan Didion put it, remember "how it felt to be me" (134). Writing about the smelt that turned out to be alewives, I remembered the embarrassment I felt at my drunken father's foolish pride. Watching the relentless drift of dead fish on Lake Michigan helps me recall both my revulsion and my awe at the Great Lake I grew up next to.

But still, these memories seem at some remove from me. I describe a version of myself that I know mostly through the feeling the memory invoked. I still feel that shame, but the boy I remember that night does not seem to have any more to teach. I remember the place—the beach, the smell of dead fish, the hissing of the stones as the waves pulled back—and I feel attachment to it, mostly because it reminds me of that awe and wonder I felt so often there. And, of course, it reminds me of other memories.

Though the writing brings it back, the past seems passed. Yes, I am haunted by it. I constantly sort through my memories, but sometimes they seem no more than deeply sentimental objects, which, like my mother's spindle chairs hand-made by my great-grandfather, I constantly move around the room seeking a satisfying arrangement. Unlike the remembering of Harjo and Allen and some other American Indian writers, the past does not seem strongly related to the present. My memories give me clues about why I feel the way I do today—where the shame and the anger come from, why I am both drawn to and fearful of water—but I'm not sure that they tell me how to live. Perhaps they tell me more about how *not* to live.

You should understand
the way it was
back then,
because it is the same
even now . . . (Silko, *Storyteller* 94)

Paul Gunn Allen observes that "nonliterate people have memories that are more finely developed than those of literate people" ("Sacred Hoop" 230). This richness of memory may, in one sense, have little to do with literacy but instead reflect the way the act of remembering in some Native American cultures is often tied to *occasion*: the storyteller experiences a particular event—say a vision or a hunt—that is suitable for telling at a particular moment. That meaningful events can so often be represented as a category of experience may provide a "schema" that makes memories easier to recall and retain, according to some theorists in "autobiographical memory."

While most contemporary American Indian writers are literate and Western-educated, many of them say that oral traditions—especially the act of remembering

and repeating heard stories—inform their literatures. Even that “sense of occasion” is preserved, says Cherokee writer Ralph Salisbury, by tying the creation of a written story to “the moment and situation of the telling,” of “speaking a certain way to certain people” (22). It is the writer’s voice, says Salisbury, that holds the memory of that moment in the way it “mingles” with his sense of the presence of those who were hearers.

In oral cultures, memory is, as anthropologist Robin Horton notes, a kind of “storage device.” Memory is a place where cultural materials get put, usually in the form of stories that tell people who they are and who they have always been. Remembering stories still seems to function that way in many contemporary Native American works. “Seems like I already heard these stories before,” says old Grandma at the end of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, a novel about the return of a World War II veteran to the Laguna Pueblo reservation. “. . . only thing is, the names sound different” (260). Robin Horton adds,

On the one hand, memory tends to remould the past in the image of the present, and hence to minimize the amount of change that has taken place down through the ages. On the other hand, memory tends, over the generations, to ascribe all innovations, whether sociocultural or intellectual, to an initial “time of beginnings.” Oral transmission, therefore, encourages a view of the past which sees the main outlines of one’s society as having been shaped long ago and as having undergone little change since then. (qtd. in Brumble 176)

This concern for continuity, however, does not mean that the stories people tell, and the memories embedded in them, don’t change. As Gerald Vizenor put it, “stories are not static; there are no scriptural versions of oral traditional stories” (164). Silko’s tellings and retellings of the Yellow Woman stories demonstrate the dynamic nature of Indian storytelling, and one of the key themes of her novel *Ceremony* is the idea that the ceremonies are always changing along with the changing world.

At the heart of “oral transmission”—and perhaps the writing that grows from oral traditions, as well—is the story and the memory of the story, but also the memories that change the story. I’m intrigued by the role of these memories, and in particular by the past experiences the storyteller brings to the telling. Writers commonly talk about the origins of their stories in the writing, in the words that tumble to the page. “How do I know what I think before I see what I say?” goes E. M. Forster’s familiar aphorism. This is my experience as a writer, too. It was my experience as I wrote the beginning of this essay, and as I write it now. I did not know what story I would tell about Lake Michigan, and alewives, and my unsteady father. Language, and the memories it evoked, helped me discover the story I wanted to tell.

But for some American Indian storytellers, memory is not generative in this way. Instead of providing the story, memory is seen *through* an already existing story, or

recognized as a familiar category of experience that is widely shared. “Originality” in oral cultures, writes Walter Ong, “consists not in the introduction of new materials but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation” (60). This seems an altogether different imaginative act than the one I described. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday calls this “whole memory,” or “that experience of the mind which is legendary as well as historical, personal as well as cultural” (4). *Rainy Mountain*, Momaday’s first autobiography, reflects this method of memory in the way each chapter contains three chunks of prose—the legendary, the historical, and the personal—which seem to drift separately on the page. While the fragments seem separate, what joins them is a subtle merging of memory that transcends time and the individual writer. Momaday’s personal memories are always seen through the glaze of tribal memory; they are always a part of a larger, often submerged story that drifts timelessly in the Kiowa imagination.

I think that the implications of this—that tribal memory and personal memory merge—are profound. Perhaps that’s why nobody wants to listen to the stories of Thomas Builds-the-Fire in Spokane/Coer d’Alène writer Sherman Alexie’s recent works, *Reservation Blues* and *Tonto and the Lone Ranger Fistfight in Heaven*. Thomas, whose stories came to him before he “had the words to speak” (*Reservation* 73), tells stories that many of the Indians on the Spokane reservation refuse to hear, “stealth stories” that work their way into dreams and into “clothes like sand, [that] gave you itches that could not be scratched” (15). I wonder if the antipathy to Thomas’s stories is really resistance to the hegemonic power of someone else’s story to structure and contain individual experience and memory. Is that why Victor and Junior, two Spokanes who are adrift, unable to find the symmetry between personal past, history, and legend that Momaday discovers in *Rainy Mountain*, “tried to beat those stories out of Thomas, tied him down and taped his mouth shut” (*Reservation* 15).

The merging of tribal and personal memory also means that the reach of the storyteller’s memory extends beyond his own lifetime, her own experience. This memory of a past never directly experienced can, in a sense, become lived experience. For example, Momaday tells the story of Ko-Sahn, an old Kiowa woman, who remembers the great meteor shower of 1833 in great detail. She remembers it not because she actually witnessed it—it occurred many years before she was born—but because it is a part of “racial memory,” a way of knowing that defies both time and individual consciousness. Momaday writes that for Ko-Sahn,

there was no distinction between the individual and the racial experience, even as there was none between the mythical and the historical. Both were realized for her in the one memory, and that was of the land. (166)

If the memory of the individual is often inextricably bound to tribal memory, then her perceptions—those memories in the making—will be, too. In Leslie Silko’s

Ceremony, for example, Tayo, the male protagonist, returns to Laguna Pueblo as a war veteran, disoriented and grieving his cousin's death, trying to sort out the "tangled" memories that confuse past with present (6). Tayo's recovery hinges on his participation in a ceremony which will help him live the story that will renew him and his tribe. As Tayo begins to understand this, he starts to see the world through myth, through story, through the familiar framework of tribal memory. One strand of memory Tayo is able to tease out of the tangle is a moment that occurred the summer before he left for war, when he sat quietly by a canyon pool and watched dragonflies.

They were all colors of blue—powdery sky blue, dark night blue, shimmering with almost black iridescent light, and mountain blue. There were stories about dragonflies too. Everywhere he looked, he saw a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. (95)

I imagine, too, that Leslie Silko sees a world made of stories—there's certainly evidence of that in her autobiography *Storyteller*—but I find myself wondering what it means for a writer to be haunted by stories in this way. Not only are her memories seen through myth and legend, but, as for Tayo, they guide perception too. Might not ways of remembering and ways of seeing for some American Indian writers be constrained by that, despite Silko's admission that memory always gets "mixed together with imagination" ("Interview" 51)? Might these writers want to tape the mouth of the tribal storyteller so they can try to get it straight for themselves? Or is this a peculiarly Western concern? Am I naïvely bound to the idea—the illusion, postmodernists might say—that as a writer I can discover my own way of seeing, and that this is the point of writing in the first place? And if it is an illusion, isn't it often a useful one for a writer, who must cultivate faith in the idea that while most everything has already been said it hasn't been said by *her*?

But perhaps I am not so different from Silko, from Momaday, from Harjo and Allen. Mythologists and psychologists would say that master narratives operate to some extent in all art, and maybe these are simply more explicit in some Native American literatures, more a part of the consciousness of the writer. But beyond this, don't all people filter their experience according to some basic understandings of themselves? Perhaps as I wrote about my father in the recollections that begin this essay I was not really as free as I believe to discover the story there because I had already decided what it must be: a story of the wronged son.

I suppose these are our own master narratives. They are probably more scripted for us than we would like to admit, but still, we claim them as our own. We fashion them over time, partly by finding the pattern in our experience, partly by listening to what we've been told about ourselves, and partly by remembering *with* people.

"Do you remember when we left Dad in a drunken stupor at the bottom of the basement stairs?" I ask my mother.

“Of course,” she says. “And he kept yelling, ‘I want some goddam peanuts. I want some goddam peanuts.’”

“Didn’t I laugh?” I say.

“Yes, it was either laugh or cry,” she says. “That time, you chose laughter.”

It is this *remembering with* that is so central to the method of memory among some Indian people. As Silko writes in *Storyteller*,

As with any generation
the oral tradition depends upon each person
listening and remembering a portion
and it is together—
all of us remembering what we have heard together—
that creates the whole story . . . (6–7)

As a writer of the personal essay—one who constantly returns in writing to my own small clan as I try to create the “whole story” of myself—I depend partly on the oral tradition of family. I listen, sometimes impatiently, to my mother’s stories about my father, who died more than twenty years ago. My brother reminds me that the air bladders on dead alewives swelled with air as the fish baked in the summer sun, and popped when you stepped on them. I ask him if he remembers the sound. He does.

This is not “racial memory.” It doesn’t have the historical reach, it’s not in the genes, it’s not legend. But it is a kind of limited tribal memory from which my own story arises, and, like most American Indian storytellers, I feel obligated to tell it well. But it is, after all, *my* story. It is always the “I”—not the “we”—that concerns me most. And this is the fundamental difference between the act of remembering for writers like me and some of my Native American counterparts. The purpose of telling my story, what motivates me, is self-expression, an idea that is “alien to native thought,” according to Paula Gunn Allen:

The tribes do not celebrate the individual’s ability to feel emotion, for it is assumed that all people are able to do so, making expression of this basic ability arrogant, presumptuous, gratuitous. Besides, one’s emotions are one’s own: to suggest that another should imitate them is an imposition on the personal integrity of others. The tribes seek, through song, ceremony, legend, sacred stories (myths), and tales to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality . . . (“Sacred Hoop” 222–23)

Other contemporary Native American writers disagree. Sioux poet Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, for example, writes that “[a]ttending to ceremonial matters as a writer does not mean, however, that I am not writing about myself. Quite the opposite is true. There is a self-absorption in my work which is inherent in my survival as a person, and my identity as a Dakotah. This self-absorption has always been part of

tradition, I think, for Dakotahs, in spite of the pervasive articulation in recent times of the idea that the Indian ‘self’ was somehow unimportant” (61).

But remembering for many native storytellers is an effort to see how what they know connects them to others, not how it sets them apart. They are trying not so much to tear the masks away to reveal a “true self” as to create what Hertha Wong calls “communal self” (14); these storytellers try to find themselves in their people, to discover this “shared reality.”

“Writers,” intones Joan Didion in the preface to *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, “are always selling somebody out” (xvi). It appears this is not true of all writers, and there seems to be ample evidence in the work of American Indian novelists that when characters sell out the tribe, and reject the cultivation of tribal memory for individualistic memory, they get into trouble. Only the discovery of “shared reality” offers redemption.

The no-name narrator in James Welch’s *Winter in the Blood*, for example, is a lost, drunken soul, wandering the streets of Havre, Montana, looking for a Cree girlfriend who stole his gun and razor. He is haunted by the death of his brother Mose, who died tragically in a car accident that he witnessed. In the room they shared, the surviving brother notices a shelf that “held the mementos of a childhood, two childhoods, two brothers, one now dead, the other servant to a memory of death” (38). The narrator’s personal guilt cripples him until he can find a place for that memory in a larger, tribal story, and that is supplied by Yellow Calf, an older Indian who lives alone by the river, only a few miles from the narrator’s home.

When he learns that the narrator’s grandmother has just died, Yellow Calf recalls her as a young widow scapegoated by her band for their terrible suffering one brutal winter; he points to the site of their camp at the bend in the river behind his house. The narrator learns that Yellow Calf kept the young widow from starving when she was abandoned by everyone else, and he understands for the first time that Yellow Calf is his own grandfather. He reflects:

And so we shared this secret in the presence of ghosts, in wind that called forth muttering tepees, the blowing snow, the white air of the horses’ nostrils. The cottonwoods behind us, their dead white branches angling to the threatening clouds, sheltered these ghosts as they had sheltered the camp that winter. But there were others, so many others. (159)

The dead brother Mose is one the “many others” now, a ghost whom the narrator now sees mingling with the others in tribal history. That is the most important revelation Yellow Calf shares with his grandson, and with it the narrator can inscribe the memory of his brother’s death among the losses of the tribe. Through Yellow Calf’s story, the narrator has finally found “shelter” for his ghost with all the others, and in knowing this he finds shelter among the living who know it, too.

What do I do with my ghosts? I summon them with prose, and in doing so I suspect that others will recognize, as the essayist Scott Sanders suggests, that my

experiences are not mine alone but “a door through which others might pass” (198). But I wonder if these “others” are really just a convenient abstraction for me, an idea that gives my story another excuse for the telling. My own story always has primacy. Welch’s narrator discovers, in the “presence of ghosts” who share it, that his story does not belong to him alone. These ghosts are not an abstraction. They are named, and they belong to a particular time and especially a particular place—a bend in the river—a shared geography of location and of memory. Conceived of this way, story is like a hide stretched over a new drum, with many circling hands pulling on the rawhide strings before it is fastened down. The beat of that drum calls back the story, and the hands that made it. But the drum also calls the storyteller back to the place where it was made, and to the memories of that place—to the bend in the river, or to Rainy Mountain—and it is against these remembered landscapes that writers often see themselves most clearly.

Memory can never be severed from place for me. I think that is true for most people. But the memories of where I grew up, a suburban community perched on the high bluffs of Lake Michigan’s shore north of Chicago, do not pull me back there. I never intended to live there again when I left at eighteen. When I have returned, my visits have been characterized by a powerful nostalgia. I look for a familiar wooden bridge over the ravine behind my house, and when I see it I am somehow relieved. If it were missing what would I have lost? Do visible signs of change—the closing of the old Fell’s clothing store, the tearing down of the brick junior high school, the disappearance of my favorite playground under the new school building—threaten me in some way? Like many Americans, I look at place possessively, and when my memories of it don’t match with my later experience of it, I feel betrayed.

This is a very personal betrayal. *I* have been wronged. How could *they* tear down that beautiful three-story junior high school where I was barely elected class president and first kissed Lori Jo Flink! How could *they* deny me the chance to gaze once more on its orange brick façade, and those cavernous windows from which I dreamily watched the gray winter sky? I am left with memory, and in the absence of the real thing, it seems that memory is not enough.

What was really at stake for me when that building came down was the feeling that a part of me came down with it that I could never recover. After reading Native American literatures I’m beginning to see how tenuous an attachment mine is to the place of my birth, and why as a writer I grip my memories of that place so tightly.

The critic William Bevis observes that Indian novels characteristically involve a “homing plot,” in which the (usually) male protagonist finds himself not by setting out away from his past and his home, but by returning to them: “In Native American novels, coming home, staying put, contracting, even what we call ‘regressing’ to

a place, a past where one has been before, is not only the primary story, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good" (582). What calls these characters home rather than out into the world when they're in trouble? Bevis concludes that it is the need for the Indian to abandon the individual search for the self, and find it instead in "a society, a past, and a place." He adds, "To be separated from that transpersonal time and space is to lose identity" (585).

I cannot think of the community I grew up in without thinking about ghosts: my brother, my best friend Chris Field, the crossing guard who spit on my hair. But these are not the ghosts of *Winter in the Blood* who stay by the bend in the river sheltered by the withered cottonwoods. They are not shared, I do not go home any more to see them, and I feel no obligation to their memory. Instead I use them whenever I need them to compose the story of myself. I suppose in a way I mine my home for memories, stripping away the surface of things to get at what I want underneath. The nostalgia I feel when I return home may be the sense that I might encounter something I missed, some seam of remembrance I left untouched. And when I discover the place has changed, that it is no longer exactly as I remember it, perhaps the betrayal I feel is the belief that the place is mined out.

This (colonial?) attitude toward home and the memories embedded there obviously seems to reflect an altogether different relationship to place and to remembering from that Bevis describes as characteristic of American Indian literatures. Home may be the "primary story" that informs my sense of myself, but it is my separation from that place and my removal of the stories from it that is characteristic of my work as a writer.

Tribal people tend to see the land as something with a presence—"a multitude of entities who possess intelligence and personality," say Patricia Smith and Paula Gunn Allen. "For them," write Smith and Allen, "the land is not just a collection of objects you do things *to*, nor is it merely a place you do things *in*, a stage-set for human action. . . . People and the land hold dialogue within the structure of ritual, in order to ensure balance and harmony" (118). One cannot have a ritualistic relationship with a landscape one avoids, obviously, and in my memory the landscape of the suburban community where I was born and raised is often simply a "stage-set" for my personal dramas of growing up. But I do remember with a kind of reverence the unpeopled places there, especially the lake—the one timeless geographic feature—and it is that vast body of freshwater that, for me, comes closest to possessing an intelligence. I have an inkling, then, of what Allen and Smith mean. I also begin to understand Momaday's call to surrender to the "remembered earth," and in doing so, see how landscape can live like a memory in my own blood.

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the

sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. (Momaday, *Way to Rainy Mountain* 83)

Mostly the winds blew from the southwest. They curled off the high bluffs and left a dark trail of cats' paws on the flat water. But when the wind would shift to the northeast, as it often did during summer storms, Lake Michigan's mood would turn. Within minutes, the waves would build unevenly, clawing at each other in a race to reach shore. The shallows would turn brown with the churning sand. Within an hour, towers of water would shoot skyward as the waves pounded the steel break-water and then the water was blown back away from the lake onto the road in front of the water treatment plant. Within six hours, if it continued to blow, the waves would have the entire length of the lake to travel, all the way from the Mackinac island at the tip of Michigan's mitten to Chicago's south shore.

The level of the lake would rise and drop mysteriously all the years I lived within a quarter mile of its shore, and it still does apparently, a phenomenon the Army Corp of Engineers, who regulate flow into and out of the lake, are hard-pressed to explain. When the lake levels were high, a howling northeaster would push the water against the bluffs, and old oak trees with thick bark hides would slowly have their roots exposed as the lake scraped away at the earth around them. Some of these trees, if they didn't tumble down the sandy bluff, seemed suspended in air, their exposed roots frozen in a naked tangle. I like to think now that those trees were reaching out toward the water, and toward the north, because that's where the wind came from. I like to think that their pose—trunks still straight like the backs of war veterans during taps, and roots stiff, trembling only slightly as the wind blew through them—is a gesture of defiance. Any tree that holds its leaves as long as an oak, well into the dark heart of winter, will walk on air awhile before it falls.

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