

Rhetorical Sovereignty in Ojibwe Publication

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Abstract

Publications concerning or involving Native Americans have typically been written from a Non-Native viewpoint, but in recent years a large increase in Native American publication and scholarship has allowed a Native American outlook to finally be understood and respected in academic discourse. This research analyzes the cultural, social, and political impacts of two highly-respected Ojibwe cultural and educational publications, *The Mishomis Book* by Edward Benton-Banai, and Anton Treuer's *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales and Oral Histories*. The analysis has primarily viewed the texts through the lens of Scott Richard Lyons' original concept of "Rhetorical Sovereignty," which he defines in "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want From Writing?" as, "the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs... to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449). Through this understanding of contemporary Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/Chippewa, Odawa/Ottawa, and Bodewatomi/Potawatomi) writing, the importance of cultural and linguistic revitalization is key in understanding the reasoning behind and necessity of such publications. Other respected Native American scholarly works, such as "Wampum as Hypertext" written by Angela Haas, "Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood's Story" by Malea Powell, and *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities* by Devon A. Mihesuah, "Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism" by James E. Murphy and Sharon M. Murphy, as well as *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* by Scott Richard Lyons further relate the necessity

of the cultural education to Natives and Non-Natives alike. This research has sought to understand how the oral tradition has influenced modern generations of Anishinaabe, and will continue to do so with the continuity and preservation of these traditional stories.

Introduction

It is obvious that there is not a university in this country that is not built on what was once native land. We should reflect on this over and over, and understand this fact as one fundamental point about the relationship of Indians to academia.

Janice Gould “The Problem of Being ‘Indian’: One Mixed-Blood’s Dilemma”

Native American cultures have mystified and captivated many rhetoricians, linguists, anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, social scientists, and many other academic professionals, and this interest has sparked a growth of publication and study regarding the “stoic” Indian, creating and perpetuating stereotypes and misinformation regarding Native Americans as a people, and Native American culture alike. As the writing often painted the picture of the Indian from an outside perspective, misunderstandings often filled the pages of these books, thereby perpetuating miscommunication between Native and Non-Native schools of thought. These discrepancies have developed in the ways American Indian stories and teachings are used, and how they have been presented by Non-Indians, which has allowed for the dominant society’s perception that Native Americans have effectively reached extinction. Such misperception has created difficulties for American Indians in the academy, who often feel as if they are not able to meet social or popular definitions and expectations of American Indians. Malea

Powell describes this kind of experience in “Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood’s Story”:

As an undergraduate, I took a course... during the section on “Native Americans,” in a journal entry to my instructor, I “confessed” that I was Indian. I did so because some of the ways that the other students had been talking about Native Americans made me uneasy... [My teacher] suggested that I tell the class. I declined. I knew there was no way that I would live up to my classmates’ vision of an authentic Indian-I wore no feathers or beads... My classmates spoke as if all the “real” Indians had disappeared long ago and all that was left of their culture was stockpiled in the Smithsonian. (1)

Many of the publications on Native Americans have been from the viewpoint of an outsider, which can result in marginalization of American Indians, especially when the materials are presented to a classroom full of Non-Native students. With the inclusion of Native American texts varying from historic accounts, to poetry, to biographies, in a contemporary educational setting and curricula, there is much to be understood about these key pieces of Native American literature and rhetoric. It is also important to discern which of the pieces are written by Natives or from Native accounts, versus a Non-Native interpretation and perspective on historical events. Many modern publications from any Tribe are vital, while many of the historic Euro-American perspectives

have been filled with inaccuracies, misinterpretation, and cultural appropriation.

Devon Mihesuah discusses misrepresentations in an academic context in *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities* “many accurate books about Indians have been written, yet misinformation abounds and inundates... Textbooks have been and continue to be inadequate, even today” (11). While the tragedies and atrocities of the past may be behind us, it’s important to educate and inform the public about *all* of American History. The very fact that Native American perspectives and historical accounts are not being utilized indicates the level of power and gravity that Native testimony has with regards to historical lessons.

Scott Richard Lyons explains the stereotypes of American Indians in “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want From Writing?” describing “the deeply ingrained stereotypes of Indians as 1) essentially oral creatures, and 2) existing only in an imagined savage past” (459). This exposes the basic stereotypes assumed about Native Americans, which can have far-reaching effects if immortalized in publications. Another component, working in tandem with stereotypes, is the issue of cultural appropriation in writing. Lyons describes cultural appropriation, and describes the facts that are often disregarded when thinking (or writing) about American Indians:

I’m thinking of my two young Ojibwe cousins who committed suicide in the same year...two deaths that might be attributed to a kind of self hatred experienced by many Indian youths who find

themselves trapped in colonial wreckage: poverty, violence, a racist dominant culture that hates and excludes them... a recent study on American Indian crime produced by the Justice Department which found that... “Native people endure the poorest quality of life in this country”.... Nobody ever wants to appropriate stuff like that. (461)

The lesson that Lyons’ is professing is one of the Native American experience in modern day. The Native Americans that have been romanticized and immortalized with savage fierceness are not all that the publication paint us to be. We are a living and thriving people, with issues not unlike any other group of human beings. With the so-called power of publication in the hands of outsiders, who are retelling old stories filled with stereotypes and misnomers, how can the academic world (Native and Non-Native alike) combat this issue? How can the voice of the American Indian become a facet of lessons that carry both passive and active tenses? With the steady increase of Native Americans entering the realm of academic discourse and rhetoric, the proliferation of Native Scholarship and publication are proving immensely important.

Stereotypes can be combated by “Rhetorical Sovereignty,” which Lyons defines as “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs... to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449, emphasis his). This specific consideration of sovereignty, which is a further specification of the inherent ability and right to govern a people through policy within a jurisdiction (which is a blanket

understanding of sovereignty), will aid in the analysis of contemporary publications of Native American scholarship, and provide insight into the true understanding of the Native perspective regarding the world, the academy, and the classroom. The understanding of Rhetorical Sovereignty as a group's right of self-governance not strictly through policy, but through literature and publication will allow a glance into our world, which is full of vitality and liveliness. This original concept from Lyons outlines the current and past increase of Native American, Alaskan Native, and Native Hawaiian writing regarding cultural and social explanations, in turn, dispelling age-old myths and stereotypes concerning rich cultural and social environments. This research utilizes the concept of Rhetorical Sovereignty to thoroughly understand the impacts and uses of ancient Anishinaabe (Ojibwe/Chippewa, Odawa/Ottawa, and Bodewatomi/Potawatomi) knowledge shared by Ojibwe scholars, and stresses how this literature can reinforce the necessity of continuing cultural education through publication, primarily using documents written *by* Native people, *for* Native people.

Texts for Analysis

The literature used in this analysis consists of several important pieces of Ojibwe composition written over the past few decades. The first primary text, Edward Benton-Banai's *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*, is a cultural teaching tool containing teachings from the Midewiwin Lodge, also known as the Grand Medicine Society, which is a formally organized cultural and spiritual congregation which maintains and shares traditional stories and teachings. *The Mishomis Book* is a cultural resource and teaching tool that can be read and comprehended by nearly all age levels. The application and use of this text has a large scope, being used at many levels from elementary education to higher education institutions. Although many brush off the cultural content and lessons presented by Benton-Banai, I see the richness and importance of such a publication as the culmination and continuity of the cultural revitalization movement from the 1960's until present day. The teachings and lessons shared by Benton-Banai are fundamental to understanding indigenous knowledge, philosophy, and history of the Anishinaabe people.

The second primary text, Anton Treuer's *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales and Oral Histories*, utilizes stories and perspectives from highly regarded Ojibwe elders in Minnesota and Wisconsin. *Living Our Language* is a Bilingual Anthology, presenting the stories first in Anishinaabemowin (Language of the Anishinaabe), followed by a translation in English. This serves as a primary source of knowledge and information, as many of the teachings and stories

presented contain very old information and knowledge. The age range is slightly more restrictive than Benton-Banai's work, simply because of the frequency and volume of Anishinaabemowin used, but can be utilized in intermediate and advanced levels of Anishinaabe language curricula.

Both Benton-Banai and Treuer's texts are viewed through the rhetorical lens provided by Lyons, and other perspectives from prominent Native American scholars were applied to support the reasoning of Rhetorical Sovereignty. This understanding of indigenous writing will serve as the main "lens" to view the Ojibwe texts. In addition, Malea Powell's "Blood and Scholarship: One Mixed-Blood's Story," are used because the article begins with an introspective account of a Native American student's journey through educational institutions, and recounts a course that studied Native American texts, which allowed for her marginalization and subjugation within the classroom – a place that should be a safe-haven for *all* students.

Another facet of this research utilizes "Wampum as Hypertext" by Angela M. Haas, comparing the traditional wampum of the Iroquois to the modern publications that tell complex stories of the Native American people of today. This portion of the analysis bridges the mediums of oral and written history, highlighting the significance of non-verbal and non-written (linguistic) history recording. The role of wampum in teaching aids is closely related to the role of the birchbark scrolls and petro glyphs as described in *The Mishomis Book*, which are traditional and cultural links between oral and written history. Both

wampum and birch bark scrolls represent the ability to accurately record history and stories while maintaining a rich oral linguistic system.

Utilizing the work of Devon A. Mihesuah, a critical academic analysis of American Indian marginalization in society, I specifically look into how Native Americans are marginalized and silenced in the classroom. Although Mihesuah examines Native American exclusion and ostracism in society, this can also be applied to an academic context. Academic institutions function as an educational outlet and means of spreading nationalism to the maturing citizenry, and if these institutions rely solely on singular perspectives and outdated materials or sources containing archaic stereotypes of American Indians, misinformation and misunderstanding are further perpetuated. Academic institutions should seek to include Native American curricula that are strongly inclusive of Native perspective and reflective of the many contributions that Native Americans have shared with the western world, such as traditional medicines inspiring modern advances in medicine, dietary understanding, and sustainability practices.

Each of the articles and books from various Native American scholars and academics were used to place *The Mishomis Book* and *Living Our Language* in an indigenous and academic context to be understood as vitally important teaching tools and cultural resources.

Methodology/Materials

Applying Lyons' "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want From Writing?" as the main lens to view Benton's *The Mishomis Book*, and Treuer's *Living Our Language*, I recognize the application of the concept of Rhetorical Sovereignty; a group's right of self-governance not strictly through policy, but through literature and publication, which identified the need and importance of these specific publications of prominent Ojibwe leaders and educators. Other articles and books provide supporting views in regards to Native Americans both in the academy and in the Native American community at large. Haas' work provided a unique look at Native American cultural aids that serve as traditional and cultural bridges between the written and spoken word. With the analysis and closer look at the role of the cultural aids, perhaps the current and future publications of Native American knowledge, philosophy, history, and perspective might become the modern-day wampum or birchbark scrolls – bridges between Native and Non-Native thinking and expression.

Through the understanding and application of the concepts and information presented in the articles, a deeper insight into the traditional stories that both Ojibwe cultural publications present will be achieved. *The Mishomis Book* contains a variety of stories told both in historic and modern Anishinaabe communities, starting with the Anishinaabe creation story, progressing through the Original Man's life (later identified as Waynaboozhoo) ending with the seven prophecies given to the Anishinaabe. Each story has a cultural and historic context, and is the written version of many generations of

oral history transmission. *Living Our Language* is a collection of traditional stories from well-known Ojibwe elders in Wisconsin and Minnesota, each sharing oral history and cultural teaching stories that are also the result from generations of oral history in practice. Both of these important cultural pieces are analyzed from Powell's article focusing on the 'Indian experience' while receiving western education, which often has a climate considering much of the traditional "real" Native American culture has been lost and tucked away as a relic of the distant past within museums and educational institutions. Other viewpoints, both personal and academic, are used ranging from argumentation of pan-Indian nationalism to personal accounts and opinions of the role of culture in life and education.

Results/Discussion

There are approximately 350 million Indigenous people situated in some 70 countries around the world. All of these people confront the daily realities of having their lands, cultures and governmental authorities simultaneously attacked, denied and reconstructed by colonial societies and states. (599)

Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel “Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism”

Alfred and Corntassel are highlighting, on a global scale, the relationship between Indigenous communities and the colonizing agents. That there is a tension between the two, which is often caused by the breakdown of communication because there is a vast difference between Native (or Indigenous) schools of thought and Non-Native schools of thought. It is in this misunderstanding and miscommunication that leads to cultural distortion and cultural appropriation.

As Mihesuah points out in *American Indians: Stereotypes & Realities*, “no other ethnic group in the United States has endured greater and more varied distortions of its cultural identity than American Indians” (9). This quotation, along with Janice Gould’s statement regarding American Universities sitting on historically Native land, encompasses the need for understanding the sovereign power of sharing the Native American perspective regarding our culture, language, beliefs, communities, and history. By seeking to understand the perspective and opinion of the Native community, it will open up the

communication pathways and allow for an open exchange of intellectual and philosophical capital.

Malea Powell discusses her personal experiences of marginalization and cultural appropriation in the classroom as an undergraduate, as well as her time spent more recently as a scholar and academic in Rhetoric. Her testimony is not an isolated incidence, as many Native American scholars experience the same feelings of marginalization within an academic context. Powell states:

Not only are Indians marginalized and “erased” as objects of study, the Indian scholar is often marginalized and overwritten by the rules of the Academy...it would seem that an Indian scholar is in an impossible bind. Limited by the master narratives constructing her, the stories she can tell *that will be heard* are limited. (5, 8)

While this statement may seem bold, Powell raises a very valid point: *he* (specific gender placement) who writes the history, controls the validity of all academic research and opinion concerning those who have been deemed inferior-academically, socially, psychologically, or cognitively. While it is an exercise of Rhetorical Sovereignty to simply write and assert a certain point of view or opinion, it’s an entirely different exercise of Rhetorical Sovereignty if it is actually read and accepted by fellow scholars.

These pieces functioned as an important piece of research, analyzing historic Anishinaabe traditions and cultural practices within contemporary academic publications. Although the two main books used within this

research are fairly new, both incorporate historic and contemporary cultural teachings used in Native American communities surrounding the Great Lakes region. The written rhetoric of the Anishinaabe is rather new, considering that Anishinaabemowin has only recently become a standardized written language. This research is also incorporating how the oral language and cultural storytelling aids have influenced modern generations of Anishinaabe, and will continue to do so with the continuity and revitalization of these traditional stories in a written format.

This research sought to understand the complex arena that is sovereignty. Although sovereignty can be defined in any number of ways, the true understanding and use of sovereignty is very salient, with comprehension and exercise fluidly varying depending on the context or example. Sovereignty has become a highly contested arena, especially in regards to the exercise and ability of self-governance within Indian Country. This research seeks to further understand Rhetorical Sovereignty, and the examples of its exercise in contemporary publication. The recent advent and understanding of this term is only a new lens viewing a form of governance that is ages old. Furthermore, utilizing Lyons' concepts, the ability to print and distribute articles, texts, and books, suggests a source of power and governance. With the analysis of *The Mishomis Book* and *Living Our Language*, and the application of Rhetorical Sovereignty ultimately has revealed the newest exercise of Tribal Sovereignty, *the ability to speak on our behalf, not being spoken to* about our history.

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