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Peter Nabokov
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A FOREST OF TIME

American Indian Ways of History

A Forest of Time introduces undergraduate and graduate students, Western and Indian history scholars and buffs, and general readers to the notion that American Indian societies transmitted and interpreted their own histories in their own ways for their own reasons. Through discussions of legends and oral histories, creation stories and folktales, it illustrates how various Indian peoples related and commented on their changing times. Drawing on his own research as well as recent scholarship from ethnohistory, anthropology, folklore, and Indian studies, Dr. Nabokov offers dramatic examples of how the American Indian historical imagination has put rituals and material culture, landscape, prophecies, and the English language to the urgent service of keeping the past alive and relevant. This book also supplies useful references as it demands that we engage with alternative chronicles of America's multicultural past.

Peter Nabokov is Professor of American Indian Studies and World Arts and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has lived and worked among the Navajo, Lakota, Crow, Penobscot, and Alabama–Coushatta Indian nations. His previous books include *Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior* (1967), *Indian Running* (1981), the prize-winning *Native American Architecture* (1989), which he coauthored with Robert Easton, and *Native American Testimony: From Prophecy to Present, 1492–2000* (2000).

"Among those who study Native American culture, Peter Nabokov is one of the most engaging and important writers. Everyone interested in the philosophy of history and how Native Americans have understood their own histories should savor this fresh and valuable book."

– Gary Nash

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For Ray Fogelson

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Preface

It is the generative premise of this book that different cultures relate and use their pasts in different ways and sometimes for different reasons. There is nothing original about the idea. Over the past quarter century, scholars from a number of disciplines have been learning many new things about the relationships between indigenous peoples in Africa, South America, and the South Pacific and their notions of history. In North America, however, which once reflected ethnohistory's cutting edge, the study and appreciation of American Indian views of history have lagged behind.

This book refocuses attention on motivations and practices through which American Indians have remembered their diverse pasts. It corrals the often scattered state of scholarship and writing, by non-Indians and Indians alike, on this subject. Rather than an update of writings about historical events from the non-Indian, academic perspective, the book is a preliminary inquiry into what has variously been called the "folk history," "historical consciousness," "Native historiography," or "historicity" of Native societies of North America. It is also an inventory of approaches and a guide to sources for others to carry these explorations further.

Thinking about history, especially about the historical discourses of non-Western societies, is too important to be left to historians alone. This overview draws freely upon the work of Native writers and scholars, folklorists, anthropologists, linguists, historians of religion, and generations of American Indian oral historians. Some may dismiss my efforts as

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little more than a glorified literature review. They may complain that I fail to interpaginate Indian cases with themes of concern to contemporary historians – issues of human agency, alternatives to Master Narratives, experiments with multivocality and narrativity, and older debates over Great Men storylines and how best to periodize the past. That's their job, but this tool kit may help. The ideas I have cribbed and cobbled together from more informed researchers, Native peoples, and scholars are topically arranged and footnoted to produce an introductory handbook for any students or ordinary readers who have wondered why and how Indians transmitted and made sense of their range of histories.

This is emphatically not a case for a unified Native American historical philosophy. Years ago, the Tewa Indian scholar Alfonso Ortiz stated, "There is simply no *the* Indian viewpoint in the writing of history."[1] But broadly similar strategies, generally common genres, and recurrent vested interests for recalling the past, which are shared by many tribal traditions, do organize my chapters. Inevitably, a survey like this walks the tightrope between provisional generalization and provocative exception. I am always on the lookout for commonalities in historical thought among cultural traditions, yet I also want to leave the diversity of still unplumbed Native historical concepts and practices as open as possible.

Hence the title of this book, adapted from Chippewa historian David Beaulieu's issue with the European model of history, which he analogized as "a [Euro-American] tree with many different branches, the idea of variations on a common theme." In its place, Beaulieu proposed a more egalitarian alternative that he, in turn, attributed to Navajo historian Ruth Roessel, "a forest of many different and varied trees," with its stand of independent tribal approaches to recollecting and using the past including a Euro-American trunk and branches as only one among many.[2] But this arboreal symbol for American Indian cultural diversity

[1] Quoted in "Commentary," in *Breaking Barriers: Perspectives on the Writing of Indian History*, edited by D. L. Beaulieu (Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1978), p. 33.

[2] "Papers on Indian Historiography," *Meeting Ground: Center for the History of the American Indian*, 2(1) (Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1975), p. 17. This sentiment is echoed in contemplations that novelist Thomas Berger creates for his protagonist, the Cheyenne adoptee Jack Crabb, in *The Return of Little Big Man*: "I came up with the

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may have a wider root system, serving in one instance to make a point about epistemological diversity or in another to supply a mnemonic metaphor for tracing the evolution of a given tribe's accounts about itself.[3]

In July 1844 an Ojibwa orator told a Jesuit, "My brother, you have come to teach us there is only one way, for all people, to know the Great Spirit.... My brother, there are many species of trees, and each tree has leaves that are not alike...."[4] The Hidatsa of North Dakota's Middle Missouri River likened their tribe's corpus of origin stories to "the branches of a tree" so that, explained the narrator Bears Arm to folklorist Martha Warren Beckwith, "if we related a branch, [we] can tell where it belongs in the tree and what comes before and after."[5] The Blackfeet of northern Montana told Clark Wissler that "The parts of this weed all branch from the stem.... So it is with the versions of a myth."[6] And Alanson Skinner heard from the Menomini of Wisconsin that "One ritual is an arm or branch of the lodge, and the myth accounting for its origin forks off from the main branch."[7] Even the Lakota author Luther Standing Bear, renowned for his two autobiographies, maintained in

idea that time belongs to everybody and everything and nothing can lay claim to any part of it exclusively, so if you talk about the past as though there was just one version of it that everybody agrees on, you might be seen as stealing the spirit of others, something which the Cheyenne always had a taboo against" (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1999), p. 75.

[3] Using trees and forests as mnemonic analogies for intellectual or cultural development, and for schematizing the hierarchical placement of cosmological domains or social or moral relationships, is a practice not limited to Native America; it is described for sixteenth-century France by Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 186–187.

[4] Denys Delage and Helen Hornbeck Tanner, "The Ojibwa–Jesuit Debate at Walpole Island, 1844," *Ethnohistory* 41(2) (Spring 1994), p. 319.

[5] Martha Warren Beckwith, collector, *Mandan–Hidatsa Myths and Ceremonies*, Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society XXXII (New York: The American Folklore Society, G. E. Stecherd & Co., 1938), p. 268.

[6] Clark Wissler and D. Duval, *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians*, American Museum of Natural History, Anthropological Papers, V. 2 (New York: The Trustees, 1908), p. 5.

[7] Alanson Skinner, *Medicine Ceremony of the Menomini, Iowa, and Wakpeton Dakota, with Notes on the Ceremony Among the Ponca, Bungi, and Potawatomi*. Museum of the American Indian Notes and Monographs, V. 1 (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1928), p. 102.

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1933 that written history was second best to oral tradition because "a people enrich their minds who keep their history on the leaves [is this his double entendre?] of memory."[8]

As for the "Ways" of my subtitle, I am evoking the nonjudgmental tack that Indians often take when commenting upon the inclinations of other peoples. Once I asked a Crow Indian friend why a Shoshone Sun Dance I had recently witnessed differed in certain respects from the Crow version. "Oh," was all he would speculate, "I guess that must be their way." I also welcome the hint of the Navajo suffix (*-ji*, commonly translated as "-Way") that connotes a ceremonial activity, a shading that suggests that for many Indian peoples their sense of history and its conduct are not just secular or abstract pursuits. For them, no less than for any modern or New historian, the "doing of history" can become a pathway to rediscoveries of identity, home, and inner purpose.

I must not be coy about this book's origins. Editor Frank Smith guided me through an essay I wrote for Cambridge's *History of the Native Peoples of the Americas – North America*, entitled "Native Views of History," and then encouraged me to expand it. While Frank stressed that this should be a short book, I added instances from my own experience when probing Indian ways of history was the only way I could make sense of things – the "stories about stories" about history that bring it all home.[9]

After Frank Smith, the Cambridge *History* editors Bruce Trigger and the late Wilcomb Washburn also stood behind my original essay and encouraged this expansion. Raymond D. Fogelson and William S. Simmons have been faithful mentors and contributors behind this book. To Frederick Hoxie I am thankful for collegiality during my predoctoral fellowship in 1981 at the D'Arcy McNickle Center for Indian History at Chicago's Newberry Library, for many discussions about Crow Indian culture history, and for hosting my documentary workshop on material

[8] Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933), p. 27.

[9] I lift this phrase from William Cronon, who urges environmental historians to write "stories about stories about nature" because "narratives remain our chief moral compass in the world" ("A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 178, n. 4 [March 1992]), p. 1375.

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culture and history on August 21–24, 1991, at the Newberry Library, on which Chapter 6 is based. The late Alfonso Ortiz was always a generous listener and friend, as well as a crusader for Native interpretations of Indian–white relations. Wendy Rose graciously gave me a copy of her typescript, "Native North American Types of Non-Oral Literature." Well before Vine Deloria Jr., wrote the preface for my anthology on Indian–white relations, his writings and correspondence were exemplars for doing the right thing. When Marilyn Kriney of Thomas Y. Crowell, Michael Millman of Viking-Penguin, and my agent Susan Bergholz helped to make that anthology a reality, they also laid a foundation for this deeper investigation. Sophisticated fieldwork and elegant writing by Frank Salomon on Native South American historicities have inspired me. Other social scientists who kindly commented on my essay or whose works spurred me include Ramond J. DeMallie, Jay Miller, Douglas R. Parks, Alan Roberts, Matthew Snipp, and Peter Whiteley. Historians who graciously provided reactions were Carter Blue Clark, William Cronon, Philip Deloria, Jan Vansina, and Richard White. From folklore and literature I am thankful for suggestions from Ken Lincoln, Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., Jarold Ramsey, Barre Toelken, Gerald Vizenor, and Andrew Wiget, and, as always, for the training and enthusiasm of Alan Dundes. Other friends who made contributions include Grant Bulltail, Kirsten Erickson, Bruce Feld, Bill Firman, Gary H. Gossen, Valerie Kack-Brice, Tim McCleary, and Wayne Olts. To Laurie Miller of *The Fine Line*, Cody, Wyoming, and Ken Wade, librarian at UCLA's American Indian Studies Program, I am especially grateful.

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