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## NATIVE VIEWS OF HISTORY

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On January 2, 1971, a fieldworker for the Doris Duke Oral History Project was collecting narratives in Tuba City, Arizona. To warm up one conversation the interviewer opened John McGregor's *Southwestern Archaeology* (second edition) to page 114 and through an interpreter asked an elderly Navajo man what he thought of a map of North America with swooping arrows indicating the routes supposedly walked by Paleo-Indian peoples after they crossed over the Beringia Land Bridge to populate the continent.

When he couldn't get a straight answer his translator begged for patience, "he's telling it little by little," then added, "it doesn't sound very little to me though." The interpreter and informant put their heads together. "He said that he would like to tell you," the translator explained, "but . . . he will be punished for it . . . I mean the medicine, he can't tell how it works . . . he said that if he told all his secrets like that he would fall to pieces. . . ."

As for the migration routes from Western Alaska down into North America, "He said, 'that maybe some other guys came over like that, but us Navajos came a different way'." At this the old man launched into what sounded like contradictory origin stories. One was a fragmentary narrative in which cicada-like insects "won this world for us, won this land here, the reservation" after crawling up through the earth's underlayers. The second account had white corn kernels, "actually the mother of the Navajo tribe," and the sun, "the father," talking together, with Navajos born from the corn kernel's underarms. With that the old man clammed up.

Trying another tack, the interviewer queried about a second illustration, on page 129, which charted a chronological sequence of stone projectile points originating from Arizona's Desert Culture. Again the interpreter and elder huddled together, and again the translator spoke, somewhat apologeti-

cally: “He says that . . . this isn’t true. Whoever wrote it, just thinks about it, just thinks about it . . . and just makes up a theory about it . . .” As for who actually chipped those Folsom and Clovis arrowheads? “The horny toads carved it, he said that he has never seen them make it, but some of these old men that he is telling about, they have seen it. . . .”

Finally the translator delved into the old man’s reticence. “He says there are too many people that might know secrets like that, [that] is why the young generation, they are kind of breaking up the tradition, breaking up like that. By keeping the secret for such a long time, that now . . . the Navajo nation is the biggest nation in the world, well not the world, but in the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

What can be gleaned from this intriguing round over views of the past? Navajo and Euro-American modes of communicating what is significant about distant origins appear to be genres passing in the night. The vested interests which underwrite any culture’s historical points of view or social memories stand, in this instance, at cross purposes. The archaeologist’s fetish for temporal chronology faces the Navajo’s diehard allegiance to his people’s religious, aesthetic, and moral symbols. But the stalemate extends to historians as well. “Several scholars actually boasted to me,” recalled ethnographer Ernest S. Burch, Jr., after researching Inupiat Eskimo history, “that they do not believe what Native Elders have told them . . . Ironically, but perhaps appropriately, many Natives do not believe archeological, historical, or ethnographic accounts of traditional life – when made by Euroamericans – unless they are corroborated by the oral testimony of elders.”<sup>2</sup>

So often the practices and products of written history and spoken myth are presented as irreconcilable – the latter only appropriate in face-to-face exchanges during socially or ritually approved circumstances, the former available to any strangers who can read them whenever they can find the time. The sorts of “power” embodied in the two discourses also appear incompatible. While both history and myth indoctrinate with their own “truth claims,” non-Indian history does so with the credibility of “two or more sources.”

<sup>1</sup> From transcript of Tape #761, pp. 1–10, interview conducted on January 2, 1971 for the Doris Duke Oral History Project, Special Collections, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest S. Burch, Jr., “From Skeptic to Believer: The Making of an Oral Historian,” *Alaska History* 6(1) (1991).

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Through the process which the old Navajo dismisses as “just” thinking, the late nineteenth-century Western ideal of a scientific history requires the systematic amassing and sequencing of facts in order to reconstruct a contingent account. It shuns hypothesis, and, as Peter Novick writes, it has been “scrupulously neutral on larger questions of end and meaning.”<sup>3</sup> Even though this fact-founded, value-free, and narrative-driven notion of history gave way in the twentieth century to a more analytical approach which searched for causal explanations and incorporated social history, quantitative history, and ecological context, its building blocks remained the culturally neutral facts which are discovered and verified according to canons founded on the scientific model.

Not so myth. In the formal understanding of most Indian traditions, its accountings bypassed factual verification and deflected critical analysis. Its stories were supernaturally determined and humanly unquestioned. However much generations of Indian storytellers might reformulate myths “behind the scenes,” as it were, their truths were represented as if inscribed in the stars, on a firmament above the fictions and nonfictions created by human agency.

Other defining characteristics are often added to discussions of Indian *ways of history*. Navajo storytelling probably shares with that of the plains-dwelling Arikaras – highlighted by scholar Douglas R. Parks – some of the following features: (1) a lessened concern with dates and historical periods, reflecting more what Parks calls “timelessness,” and the frequent “displacement” of narrative elements, which allows actors from historical anecdotes, for example, to merge with or be projected into more mythic or sacred narratives; (2) a related “nondevelopmental” organization of historical narratives (an informant once told Parks that the most appropriate typology of Arikara myths and legends was by the categories of animal-beings they featured); (3) a focus on the “interpersonal,” even when events of high moment are related; (4) a concern with narrative accuracy through careful attention to “oral repetition”; (5) and finally, the element of humor, which Indian narrators often see as adding critical performative spice to narratives about almost any time.<sup>4</sup>

Some of these contrasts in Native American and non-Indian scientific concepts of history also appear in Loretta Fowler’s comments on historical

<sup>3</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York and Cambridge, 1988), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas R. Parks, *Traditional Narratives of the Arikara Indians: Stories of Alfred Morsette: English Translations*, vol. 3, *Studies in the Anthropology of North American Indians* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1991).

consciousness among the Wind River Arapahos of Wyoming. She heard the Arapahos criticizing anthropological approaches to their history, which focused upon structural relationships and ecological variables, as missing the point. Her consultants argued that academics possessed no credentials for entering the ceremonial, social, and oratorical realms where their history found its form and motivation. To Fowler, “Arapahoes see their history as a mythological process, which operates as a conceptual framework for interpreting and shaping social action and which is not necessarily related to events as recorded by observers.”<sup>5</sup>

This reminder of the profoundly religious role of history-making and history-perpetuating in many Indian societies helps us better to understand the reluctance to talk by the old Navajo from Tuba City. For American Indian “mythistory”<sup>6</sup> is often cloaked with the protective sanction of sacred utterance. To speak it promiscuously or publicly can be perilous, since its stories remain imbued with the powerful forces that originally created the world, and that can still destroy it. Handling such power therefore entails following the rules, and in Navajo culture such “taboos” abound. For this increasingly uneasy Navajo traditionalist, internal sirens were warning that those powers will know if he dares to call up the mythic past, as through the words of a magical formula, without good reason. Our sense of the exclusive, esoteric nature of this kind of history, and its symbiotic relationship to Navajo land tenure, only sharpens as the Doris Duke interviewer trespasses on Navajo intellectual and spiritual space. Not by their Treaty of 1864, but rather by “keeping the secret for such a long time,” we are told, has the Navajo nation become the largest reservation in the United States. At the center of that “secret” are the narratives that bind together accounts of Navajo origins, ancient events, and eventual destiny.

As for Indian hesitation about sharing cultural information with Euro-Americans, perhaps “history” itself should be added to the list of scarce “limited goods” whose unequal distribution in face-to-face peasant societies, says anthropologist George Foster, produces cycles of envy and envy-deflecting practices – and in multi-cultural contexts, one might add, xenophobia and a craving for secrecy.<sup>7</sup> For some of today’s American Indian

<sup>5</sup> Loretta Fowler, *Arapahoe Politics, 1851–1978: Symbols in Crises of Authority* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1982), 236.

<sup>6</sup> William H. McNeill, *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> George Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of the Limited Good,” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965).

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cultural leaders, increasingly anxious over their people's shrinking intellectual heritage, the "history" which on its face seems social, political, and safe for public recounting often gets formally reglossed as "religious property" so as to safeguard it from appropriation by prying outsiders.

But if this old Navajo won't divulge his people's private mythic past, one might well ask, within the proper cultural setting which individuals can, and when? The assignment and training for the role of traditional Indian "historian" certainly varied by people and time period. However, it can be expected that in these societies, where everyone observed an individual's personality at close range, a child's propensity for remembering, recording, and narrating might be noticed and encouraged early. Pima Indians stayed alert to youngsters who demonstrated an aptitude for recollecting traditions. When they matured into recognized Native historians eligible to engage in the male-only "smoke talk" of history-recounting, wrote Frank Russell, "the boys are regularly sent [to them so] that they may listen for four nights to the narratives of how the world was made and peopled: whence the Pimas came and how they struggled with demons, monsters, and savage enemies."<sup>8</sup> There could also be self-selection for the role, as intellectually gifted or prophetically inclined individuals carved out "historian" roles for themselves, or fate might offer a blinded or crippled individual this outlet for his sedentary, marginalized condition.

In the case of the Navajos, designated ritual "singers" (*bataalii*) were expected to recite their sacred mythologies with scrupulous attention to memorized detail during ceremonial occasions, which did not prevent generations of other Navajo narrators either from modernizing folktales involving supernatural beings, or from offering historical recollections of more secular, reservation times. Among the Ojibwa (Anishinabe) Indians of the Great Lakes, the duties of ritual priest and of historian – the *kanawencikewinini*, meaning "preserve man," the individual who "read" the mnemonics scratched into sacred birchbark scrolls – were collapsed into a single role.<sup>9</sup>

As for "when" Indian history came to life, along with somber ritual occasions there were numerous semiformal opportunities for transmitting accountings of the past. Among the Arikaras one might hear historical narratives during family get-togethers, when the delegates of different

<sup>8</sup> Frank Russell, *The Pima Indians*, 26th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1904–1905 (Washington, D.C., 1908), 206.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Vennum, Jr., "Ojibwa Origin-Migration Songs of the *Mitewiwin*," *Journal of American Folklore* 91 (1978), 753.

peoples gathered to negotiate or reminisce, or when a youth was prompted by an elder (often a grandparent) to bring food to an uncle in exchange for personal instruction. Evenings were normally the preferred time for tale-telling, with winter (between first snowfall and first ice breakup) the appropriate season<sup>10</sup> (lest, in many Indian traditions, you lay yourself open to poisonous snakebite).

Along with chanting their mythic narratives of primordial history, Navajo medicine men also portrayed them, in sequences of stylized dry (sand) paintings during multiday curing ceremonies. Over a series of five or nine nights they sat patients in the very center of these multimedia, ritual settings so as to restore them to the sanctioned and secure sense of wholeness, health, and beauty, or *hozho*, that core concept which Navajos equate with the idealized, balanced cosmos.<sup>11</sup> Through these ceremonies Navajos drew upon the innate powers of that “secret” history which the old man from Tuba City was reluctant to share, but on these occasions it was for culturally sanctioned purposes of physical and psychological restabilization.

#### COMPARING CULTURAL VIEWS OF HISTORY

When outsiders contrast the historical orientations and world-views of preindustrial, oral cultures like those of Native Americans with post-traditional, modern societies, they frequently polarize them into ideal types. Not uncommonly this tendency is also an effective rhetorical device for assessing one’s own society; as social critic Richard Rodriguez has observed, “[American] Indian memory has become the measure against which America gauges corrupting history when it suits us.”<sup>12</sup>

Thus to religious historian Mircea Eliade, “traditional” society adhered to “cyclical time, periodically regenerating itself,” which stood in opposition to “the other modern [notion], that of finite time, a fragment.”<sup>13</sup> To cyclical time Eliade attached moral superiority, as it was “sacred” and “exemplary,” whereas finite time was profane and degenerative, with history itself practically tantamount to “suffering.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Parks, *Traditional Narratives of the Avikara Indians*, 113–116.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rodriguez, “Mixed Blood, Columbus’s Legacy: A World Made *Mestizo*,” *Harper’s Magazine* 283 (November 1991), 49.

<sup>13</sup> Mircea Eliade, “The Yearning for Paradise in Primitive Tradition,” in *Myth and Myth-making*, ed. H. A. Murray (New York, 1960), 112.

<sup>14</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return* (New York, 1954), footnote 97.

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Bringing this home to North America, his European colleague Åke Hultkrantz wrote, “in contrast to Western cultures, Native Americans conceive of time not in linear, but in cyclical form . . . an eternally recurring cycle of events and years.”<sup>15</sup> From a more economic perspective, the writer John Berger has viewed the operative dichotomy as between “mirror opposites,” by which he means the “cultures of progress,” which can envisage future expansion, and the “cultures of survival,” for whom the future remains “a sequence of repeated acts of survival.”<sup>16</sup> Nor have social scientists been able to resist this convenient reductionism: “history to them [‘primitive peoples’],” wrote Stanley Diamond, “is the recital of sacred meanings within a cyclic as opposed to linear perception of time. The merely pragmatic event, uninvolved with the sacred cycle, falls outside history, because it has no importance in maintaining or revitalizing the traditional forms of society.”<sup>17</sup> In anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s more sophisticated rendering of the dichotomy, his famous “cold” and “hot” societies, historical consciousness looms again as the defining factor:

The “cold” societies which we call “primitive” are not that way at all, but they wish to be. They view themselves as primitive, for their ideal would be to remain in the state in which the gods or ancestors created them at the origin of time. Of course this is an illusion, and they no more escape history than other societies. But this history, which they mistrust and dislike, is something they undergo. The hot societies — such as our own — have a radically different attitude toward history. Not only do we recognize the existence of history, we make a cult of it . . . We internalize our history and make it an element of our moral conscience.<sup>18</sup>

The popularizer of American Indian metaphysics Jamake Highwater unleashes a string of such dichotomies for distancing “primal” societies like Indians from “Western” ones like that of Anglo-Americans. For him, Indians are to Euro-Americans as holistic:linear; static:dynamic; atemporal:temporal; communal:individualistic; experiential:“formal, emotional, or decorative”; and of course, “spiritual”:profane.<sup>19</sup>

Would that human cultures could be compartmentalized and compared so efficiently. More likely such a spewing of binaries does disservice to both its cultural oppositions. For even within the theoretical positions of

<sup>15</sup> Åke Hultkrantz, *Native Religions of North America: The Power of Visions and Fertility* (San Francisco, 1987), 32.

<sup>16</sup> John Berger, *Pig Earth* (New York, 1979), 204–5.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive* (New Brunswick, 1974), 203.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago, 1991), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (New York, 1981).

non-Indian, Euro-American society one finds both extremes: strident religious fundamentalism, ascribing talismanic sanctity and historical incontrovertibility to sacred texts, seated across the debating table from radical relativists, like historian Hayden White, who eagerly undermine all their discipline's objectivist claims by exposing the culturally predetermined models of aesthetics and morality that underwrite Western historical chronicles.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, the rhetorical convenience of drawing philosophical lines in the sand remains irresistible, and the drive to dichotomize has even infiltrated American Indian public policy. When U.S. government consultants compared religious traditions in an explanatory report mandated by the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978,<sup>21</sup> "world" religions were labeled as "commemorative" because they presumably fixated on "sacred events" and historical individuals. "Tribal" peoples, on the contrary, practiced "continuing" religions, which were untraceable to a historical "event or founder." Unfortunately, as David White has noted, this sharp division would delegitimize many syncretized American Indian spiritual expressions which are documentably "historical" creations.<sup>22</sup>

It is ironic that despite abundant examples of religious syncretism within Navajo society since their pre-Spanish incorporation of Pueblo symbols, the old Navajo exegete in my opening vignette revealed himself just as split-minded as non-Indian intellectuals when it came to contrasting the historical consciousness of pre- and postliterate peoples. With his close association between human "thinking" and "writing" in the Anglo-American approach negatively compared with the absolutist seal of approval accorded his own sacred myths, we also detect an echo not only of Lévi-Strauss's "hot" and "cold" distinction, but also of the structuralist's famous aside that myths might autonomously do a culture's "thinking" on their own.

Nor was this Navajo man alone in his cultural critique. Again and again, Native Americans have weighed the relative merits of spoken and written traditions. "I am very glad to demonstrate to you that we also have books," explained Waihusiwa, the Zuni storyteller, to Frank Hamilton Cushing, "only they are not books with marks in them, but words in our

<sup>20</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973) and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> *American Indian Religious Freedom Report*, P. L. 95-34, Federal Agencies Task Force, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. (1979).

<sup>22</sup> David R. M. White, "Native American Religious Issues . . . Also Land Issues," *Wassaja, The Indian Historian* 13(3) (1980), 39-44.



hearts, which have been placed there by our ancients long ago, even so long ago as when the world was new and young, like unripe fruit.”<sup>23</sup> In describing an Acoma man’s conversion in a dream to Christianity, the anthropologist Leslie A. White says the man found himself standing before a God who was dressed like a “successful American Indian businessman.” The deity told him that while the Bible let Euro-Americans into heaven, the traditional “prayer stick” remained the Indian’s “key to paradise.”<sup>24</sup> Many Indian people continue to resent the fact that the narratives they feel to be their true, one-and-only “history,” Euro-American scholars with readier access to book publishers and school classrooms often demote as “folklore.” Ignoring his own commitment to the printed word, Lakota writer Luther Standing Bear foreshadowed their complaint:

stories were the libraries of our people. In each story, there was recorded some event of interest or importance, some happening that affected the lives of the people. There were calamities, discoveries, achievements, and victories to be kept. The seasons and the years were named for principal events that took place . . . a people enrich their minds who keep their history on the leaves of memory. Countless leaves in countless books have robbed a people of both history and memory.<sup>25</sup>

#### NARRATIVE GENRES AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Despite the tendency toward dichotomous thinking when scholars contrast other cultures from an academic distance, fieldworkers on the ground have grown aware that the spectrum of American Indian narratives, behaviors, and symbols which carry any information faintly deemed “historical” actually falls on any number of different points between the idealized poles of chronology (history) and cosmology (mythology). Comprehending the meanings of the past through Indian eyes and narratives requires one to pay close attention to the diversity of ways in which among different Indian peoples temporal “phasings” and historical “commentaries” can extend backwards into primordial eras and forward to embrace remembered individuals and recent events.

A close look at Indian languages reveals few monolithic notions of the past. While the Navajo elder from Tuba City gave precedence, in the

<sup>23</sup> Frank Hamilton Cushing, *Zuni Folk Tales* (New York, 1901), 92.

<sup>24</sup> Leslie A. White, *The Acoma Indians*, Forty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1929–1930 (Washington, D.C., 1932), 32.

<sup>25</sup> Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (New York, 1933), 27.

strained circumstances of an interview with an insistent stranger, to a concept of history which seemed the antithesis of how Euro-Americans construe former happenings, an oft-used Navajo term for the past, *atk'idaa*, literally means “on top of each other,” or more loosely, “experiences or events stacked up through time,” which sounds like a fair description of the direct historical approach of any Anglo archaeologist. At the same time, this generously inclusive term, *atk'idaa*, draws in, according to Kenneth J. Pratt, “events in terms particular to an individual’s recall or personal opinion,” oral tradition relating people and places in remote as well as recent times, and the “major source of healing power for serious illness,” thereby returning us to the more sacred, privileged sense of the word stressed by the old man from Tuba City.<sup>26</sup>

Indian oldtimers and intellectuals alike often grumble that grouping their indigenous histories under cover terms like “mythology” and “folklore” suggests falsehood and simple-mindedness and furthers the stereotype that they had no sense of history. “I want you to know that this is not one of the fairy stories I am telling you, but a fact,” said a Kutenai elder named Abraham Wolf Robe to Harry Holbert Turney-High in 1939 before relating a legend. “It is real history,” he insisted.<sup>27</sup> Yet it has been largely anthropologists, folklorists, and linguists whose interest in Native genres of oral tradition has turned up those embedded and indigenous theories of history which have been variously characterized as “traditional history,”<sup>28</sup> “folk history,”<sup>29</sup> “ethno-ethno history,”<sup>30</sup> or “historicity,” which anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney prefers to “historical consciousness” in order to avoid the implication that “how people think of and experience their history is always conscious,” and which she defines as the “collective understanding of history.”<sup>31</sup>

An awareness that such metahistories might lurk within nonliterate traditions has taken time to sink in. In 1952 historian Bernard DeVoto, no great believer in Indian historicity per se, nonetheless confessed that

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth J. Pratt, “Some Navajo Relations to the Past,” in *Papers from the Third, Fourth, and Sixth Navajo Studies Conferences*, ed. June-el Piper (Window Rock, Ariz., 1993).

<sup>27</sup> Harry Holbert Turney-High, “Two Kutenai Stories,” *Journal of American Folklore* 54(213–14) (1941), 191.

<sup>28</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “Anthropology and History,” in *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (Glencoe, Ill., 1962).

<sup>29</sup> Charles Hudson, “Folk History and Ethnohistory,” *Ethnohistory* 13 (1966).

<sup>30</sup> Raymond D. Fogelson, “On the Varieties of Indian History: Sequoyah and Traveller Bird,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 2 (1974).

<sup>31</sup> Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, ed., *Culture through Time: Anthropological Approaches* (Stanford, Calif., 1990), 19.