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# Stories of History and Memory: Native North American Oral Tradition as Identity Reclamation

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## Abstract

Native identity in North America was ravaged by the European invasion and has continued to be suppressed and erased through settler colonialism. Oral tradition and storytelling acts as a link to Native history and memory, and it functions as a tool of reclamation of an identity nearly erased by colonialism. Research highlights how storytelling culturally and geographically informs Native identity, an ongoing process of individual and collective identification that is constantly negotiated and constructed through social, historical, and political practices. Using 3 unique stories from different Native nations in North America, this essay explores how storytelling can be an act of reclamation of identity. Traditional storytelling acts as a powerful tool of collective identity, and it works to counter the colonial narrative that was violently imposed on the hundreds of unique Native nations in North America.

## **Introduction**

The following essay was written and has been presented as a part of my senior capstone project for Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. The entirety of this project was created in Des Moines, which is traditional Sauk and Meskwaki land. The Sauk and Meskwaki peoples were formally stolen of their land in 1845 and were banished to a small allotment of land in eastern Kansas. Today, the Meskwaki Settlement in Iowa is made up of traditional lands bought privately through generations of Meskwaki peoples, making the Meskwaki Nation a sovereign one. On their nation's website, they state their mission: "To rely on the knowledge and experiences of the past, along with the will to survive to advance the people, culture and well-being of the Meskwaki Nation" (Meskwaki Nation, 2017).

In this capstone project, I explore how oral tradition in Native North American cultures functions as a link to Native history and memory. More specifically, I focus on how storytelling is a tool of reclamation of an identity that has been desecrated by colonialism and erased by assimilation. I do this by examining Native identity as an ongoing process that has been uniquely marginalized in North America, as outlined by Sandy Grande, Timothy San Pedro, and Sweeny Windchief (2015). Further, I explore how this traditional storytelling culturally and geographically informs Native identity. Scholar Keith Basso (1996) discusses the vital connection between Native identity and storying the land through his work with the Western Apache Nation. Scholar Ivanna Yi (2016) further emphasizes how storytelling by Native artists and storytellers acts as a cartography of survivance. I draw from their work throughout this essay as well.

In the following essay, I more closely analyze why Native identity is something that must be reclaimed due to a history of genocide and assimilation of Native peoples, especially in what

we know as the United States. Next, I explore the abstract and complex idea of Native identity and how it is culturally and geographically informed and processed. Then, I look at the significance of storytelling as a tool of reclamation using three stories: “How Medicines Came to the Haudenosaunee,” “Yahula” from the Cherokee nation, and the Navajo Nation Creation Story. This third section highlights the importance of Native American identity reclamation and the validity of stories as a tool in this reclamation. Finally, I conclude with how these stories function against the colonial narrative of Native identity in America.

### **Assimilation and Native Identity Erasure in America**

The very existence of a “Native identity” in America is the result of the colonial state that reduced the hundreds of unique groups on this land to one; “Native Americans” and “American Indians” are a collective construct specifically created to homogenize the people who lived on this land before the European invasion beginning in the fifteenth century (Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief 2015, 107). Hillary N. Weaver (2001) notes that this homogenization undoubtedly ignores the “multifaceted and evolving nature of identity” as well as the differences in the human experience among and within different Native nations. However, despite the differences among Native nations that make each nation rich and unique in history, coercive assimilation erased the freedom of any person native to the Americas to claim Native identity. Thus, the notion of Native cultural identity in this essay is at its most basic level; it is identifying with any group who lived on this land before the European invasion.

The assimilation of Native peoples was and continues to be a multifaceted and multilayered process imposed by white colonial powers in such a way that is unique to the Native experience. Other groups oppressed by colonial powers, such as Black slaves, were subjected to a process of separation and exploitation for economic gain. This contrasts with the

Native experience, for as people already on this land, Natives existed as a barrier to the economic pursuits of colonial powers (Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief 2015, 108). Therefore, rather than separation, Native peoples were subjected to a process of elimination—socially, culturally, and physically.

Elimination of Native culture and identity has taken many different forms. Genocide was one of the first and was the most permanent form of elimination, destroying entire nations of Native people. Other assimilative forces include warfare, forced removal from traditional homelands, forced citizenship into colonial states, religious conversion, child abduction, resocialization (Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief 2015, 108), and forced marriage between Europeans and Natives to disrupt communities and impose European values and customs (Weaver 2001, 244). These methods of assimilation very purposefully broke up communities, forced people from their land, and associated violence and danger with being Native. Without community or sovereign traditional land, Native identity was easily erased, for Native peoples' conceptions of themselves are closely tied to their conceptions of their land and their communities (Basso 1996, 67). As acknowledged by scholar Judy Iseke (2013), the legacies of these assimilative forces have transformed the Native experience and are lasting in such a way that attending to the past will always be a part of looking ahead to the future (571).

Continued assimilation and erasure of Native identity comes from the colonial narratives that have been imposed and adopted as the master narratives of North America. These master narratives come from the imperial tradition of Western states creating stories about others' histories, societies, and cultures and presenting them as universal truths (Hampton and DeMartini 2017, 250). As a result, common colonial stories that discuss the “discovery” of America and the friendship between settlers and Native peoples replace the true history of violence and

assimilation. Another common theme of colonial master narratives that erase Native identity altogether is the myth of *terra nullius* (nobody's land), which suggests that the American continents were empty land, waiting to be taken and developed (Hampton and DeMartini 2017, 253). Researchers Rosalind Hampton and Ashley DeMartini (2017) discuss how this myth is, “key to the systemic destruction and attempted erasure of Indigenous cultures, knowledges, spirituality, and political systems” in order to legitimize the colonial state (253). Narratives created by colonial powers in their own interest continue to play a central role in erasing the history and memory of Native peoples in America, instead replacing the true history with a narrative of their own creation.

### **Native Identity as a Process**

Native cultural identity functions as a process of individual and collective identification. It is essential to consider that this identity moves “beyond a set of inherited or quantifiable traits” and is instead relational, constantly negotiated, and constructed “through sociohistorical and political processes” (Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief 2015, 107). Therefore, Native identity is not a state of being, but rather, it is a process of being. This distinction that clearly frames identity as something that is done rather than embodied by inherited or quantifiable characteristics allows identity to be remade and reworked in a modern contexts and asserts that it is not something that only exists in the past (Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief 2015, 242). As such, Native identity can and should be considered in a contemporary context, but it is also essential to consider how it has been remade from its sociohistorical foundations. A bridge that connects these sociohistorical foundations and the modern reclamation of Native identity are the stories that connect people to their communities and the land upon which these communities were formed.

Self-identification is one facet of Native identity, and it is often cultivated in relation to the stories one knows and the land one feels connected to. How one identifies and understands their identity is continually changing and developing as their sense of self changes (Weaver 2001, 244), and this sense of self is shaped as one constitutes themselves in relation to their native land and the stories that take place upon it (Basso 1996, 40). Stories that have been passed down for generations “have the power to establish enduring bonds between individuals and the features of the natural landscape,” which fortify one’s understanding of themselves in relation to the land (Basso 1996, 40). More than this, stories serve as “roadmaps” that guide one to better understand one’s individual responsibilities as part of a greater community (Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief 2015, 117). Thus, one’s identification of themselves as Native is in part composed by one’s understanding of Native-ness, which may be influenced by stories of the land and the people native to it.

While self-identification is an essential component in the process of Native identity, there is perhaps an even stronger emphasis on group identity that is interwoven with the history and memory of different Native groups. Author and member of the Mohawk Nation Patricia A. Monture notes the importance of group identity, writing, “We, as Indigenous people, do not see ourselves as separate from our people or our land” (Monture 2008, 157). Native identity is relational, and the relations among members of a shared community fosters the exchange of knowledges and values that shape how one understands their cultural belonging; identity is something that is negotiated and part of a “co-constructed process” (Grande, San Pedro, and Windchief 2015, 111). In other words, the process of becoming is driven by and supported by others, and identity is formed as a collective. Many Native authors argue that, “a person must be integrated into a society, not simply stand alone as an individual, in order to be fully human,”

and this personhood is “inseparably linked to sacred traditions, traditional homelands, and a shared history as indigenous people” (Weaver 2001, 245). Group identity is therefore central in the notion and process of Native identity because of its relational creation and participation.

As briefly alluded to above, the importance of the connections among Native identity, community, and place-making cannot be understated. For many Native nations, the physical land is something with a presence more than physical (Ballenger 1997, 798), and it “becomes an extension of the identity of its people” (Yi 2016, 5). The land is a vessel where stories are set, and these stories are core to the creation of a group identity. Stories are methods of creating a “communal self,” and storytellers repeat and pass down stories in which Native people can locate themselves and create a “shared reality” (Ballenger 1997, 796). Therefore, by storying the land, Native peoples are also storying themselves, creating space where their histories, values, and knowledges can be grounded and shared amongst a community.

### **Stories of History and Memory as Reclamation**

There exist a multitude of stories from vastly different Native nations that story the land and can be told in the process of identity reclamation. Often, these stories echo the memory of the past in the present and embrace the history of different nations’ values, knowledges, and practices. This essay will explore only three of these stories: “Yahula,” of the Cherokee Nation, “How Medicines Came to the Haudenosaunee,” of the Haudenosaunee Nations, and the Creation Story of the Navajo Nation. The stories will be abridged and summarized, but all are encouraged to seek these stories out to understand their full reach and impact.

The following three stories were chosen through an extensive process that lasted many weeks in the autumn of 2020. To begin, I read about two hundred stories from different regions

and eras of Native nations. As I read, I began to notice common themes through different stories, including spirituality, practical life lessons, history, witnessing and remembering, and place-making. From this list of themes, my argument about native identity as a process that is relational and influenced by the legacy of the past began to take shape. As such, I chose to focus on stories with themes of history and memory and with ties to the land, and I chose three stories that expressed a nation's history and memory in a distinct way. The stories chosen also represent unique regions to illustrate the impact of storytelling across North America.

“Yahula” is the story of the name of Yahula Creek, which flows by Dahlonega in Lumpkin County, Georgia. In this story, Yahula is a man well known and well-liked by many. His singing and the bells of his ponies were frequent sounds of the mountains. After a great hunt, Yahula did not return to his settlement, and they grieved his death. One day, he suddenly returned, explaining to his friends that he was now living with the Immortals in their village and that he must return to them and only see his friends on short visits. However, after some time, Yahula stopped visiting, and his friends suspected the Immortals had grown tired of his visits and halted them.

At the head of the creek near the settlement, there was a small square enclosure of uncut stone, and it was said this was where Yahula resided. His songs and the bells of his ponies were often heard in the mountains, but only at night, and people feared singing along to his songs at risk of the Immortals taking them, as well. One day, the singing and the bells were silenced, and it is thought that Yahula must have gone away, likely to the West, where the others of his nation had already gone. This is the story of how Yahula Creek got its name (*Yahula*).

The story of “Yahula” is one that very explicitly attaches meaning to a specific place important to the Cherokee nation, and its replication maintains memory of a time before the



European invasion. In this instance, Yahula Creek becomes a specific location to which a group can experience collective memory, and “the land itself becomes a repository of oral traditions through storytelling” (Yi 2016, 3). The placemaking that occurs in this story creates a sort of map of remembrance, and the stories meld geography with native history (Yi 2016, 1). The reproduction of such a story today can act as a link to a nation’s history prior to the arrival of the Europeans, as this story takes place up until the forced western movement of the Cherokee nation. Because of this, one can begin to see how “Yahula” may be a part of the reclamation of Native identity; the story of Yahula Creek tells a story that predates colonial devastation and therefore illustrates a way of being before the influence of European assimilation and erasure.

Next is the story of “How Medicines Came to the Haudenosaunee.” This story takes place in a distant time, when an old man who was tired and hungry was looking for a place to rest. He stumbled upon a Haudenosaunee village with several long houses, one for each of the Clans of the village. He first stopped at the Turtle Clan, asking for food and a place to rest. His pleas were denied. The Wolf, Beaver, Deer, Elk, Heron, and Eagle Clans all turned him away, as well. His last hope was the Bear Clan, and an old woman of the Clan took pity and gave him food and a skin to rest on. The next day, the man was ill, and he told the woman to go into the forest to find specific plants that would heal him, and they did. The next day, he fell ill with a different ailment, and he sent the old woman out to the forest for plants to heal his new ailment. This pattern continued, and the old woman learned how to cure many illnesses. One day when she returned to her long house, there was a young man, shrouded in light. He told her that he was the Creator and that she should not be frightened. He had disguised himself as an old man and came looking for compassion and empathy, and in exchange for this, he taught the old woman

the cures for illnesses which will afflict the real people. As a result, the Bear Clan has since been trusted as the Keepers of the Medicine (“How Medicines Came to the Haudenosaunee”).

This story from the Haudenosaunee presents a different connection to the land than Yahula, for rather than emphasizing a specific location, it emphasizes a unique historical connection between the Haudenosaunee people and the land. The tradition of the Bear Clan as Keepers of the Medicine creates a bond with a past identity, and this memory acts as a “storage device” in the form of a story that tells people “who they are and who they have always been” (Ballenger 1997, 792). Therefore, with the reproduction of a story like this one, people can utilize this “storage device” of memory and reconnect to a way of being that was dismantled and destroyed by European settlers. Of course, the connection to a past identity does not suggest it will take exactly the same form today; however, it may inform individuals or groups of cultural foundations separate from a history that was stolen and reshaped by colonialism.

Finally, the Creation Story of the Navajo people and nation offers a deeply spiritual connection to Navajo history and a shared memory of their origins. In this creation story, there are Five Worlds that the spirits of First Man and First Woman journey through. Each World offers supplies essential to the Navajo nation, but each also drives them to the next World. In the First World, First Man and First Woman gather white and yellow corn, turquoise, and yucca. They meet additional beings, such as Coyote, Spider and other spirits without definite form. In the Second World, the Blue World, were many blue animals who lived in a blue haze. These creatures followed First Man and First Woman to the Third World, the Yellow World. The Third World had rivers and mountains, and these landmarks joined the journey of First Man and First Woman through the worlds. Some of these mountains are known today as Blanca Peak, in Colorado, Mt. Taylor, in New Mexico, and San Francisco Peaks, in Arizona. A great flood drove

the beings from the Third World to the Fourth, and they brought with them the seeds of pumpkin, watermelon, cantaloupe, and muskmelon along with all of the spiritual beings they had met in the Third World. The Fourth World was very small—not large enough for all of the beings to exist—so Badger climbed to the Fifth World before the others followed. The Fifth World is where we all exist today, and this is where the beings became either humans or animals and birds. This is the story of the Four Dark Worlds, and the Fifth World we live in (“The Creation or Age of Beginning”).

Once again, this story from the Navajo nation presents a connection to land and identity unique and distinct from the stories discussed thus far. It offers a more abstract yet equally important connection to the land, as each World traveled through in the story offers pieces of the world that exist and support humankind today. As an origin story, this story “nurtures relationships and the sharing of Indigenous knowledges and cultures” in a foundational sense to the Navajo nation (Iseke 2013, 559). The history expressed through this story embeds memory into every aspect of the world today, from the creatures of the Earth, to the crops that are grown, to the directions of North, East, South, and West, which are essential to the Navajo nation both physically and symbolically. Joy Harjo, a Creek poet, discusses in and outside of her work that the act of remembering blurs the boundaries between oneself and the world, and, “she suggests that memory can hold things we can’t seem to know” (Ballenger 1997, 790). Therefore, the memory embedded into stories and the land teaches lessons that may not be able to be taught or learned any other way. In this way, the Creation Story of the Navajo people acts as agent of learning, for the memory of the history and creation of the Navajo people is embedded into the story, which is a story of the land as much as it is a story of the people.

What all of these stories, along with a plethora of others, function to do is profound. Stories function as collective identity, something core to the reclamation and formation of Native identity. More than this, the act of remembering “erases temporal distinctions,” making “now” and “then” seem more similar than different (Ballenger 1997, 790). This lack of distinction between the past and the present allows the gravity of the messages of the stories to be felt as profoundly now as they were then. “Yahula” highlights this erasure of temporal distinctions by exploring the history of a place that still exists today. It allows the members of the Cherokee nation to remember their history before they were forced westward with a location that perseveres along with their cultural identity. The Creation Story of the Navajo people highlights this lack of temporal distinction in another way by blurring any distinction between the beginning of time and the present. It explains the origins of people, animals, medicine, and food, all of which still as central to understanding the world now as they were during the Creation Story.

Further, the memory and meaning of stories is multilayered and composed of different levels of understanding, which reflects the nuances of influence on those who hear the stories being told. Stories create significance for entire groups emotionally, symbolically, historically, spiritually, and culturally, and this creation of understanding informs the creation of identity in the present (Iseke 2013, 658). For example, the story from the Haudenosaunee highlights the significance of medicine in the Bear Clan, which was a fundamental understanding of one’s role in the nation prior to the European invasion and that can be utilized to reclaim an understanding of one’s history today. In this way, stories “possess the power of meaning-making,” and they shape how individuals understand themselves, the world, and their place within it (Hampton and DeMartini 2017, 247). Thus, “Yahula,” “How Medicines Came to the Haudenosaunee,” and The

Creation Story of the Navajo people illustrate how stories are not just tales, but memories, and these memories resist assimilative colonial forces.

The stories explored in this paper also serve as methods of place-making, which is also central to the creation and understanding of Native cultural identity, especially as it is developed in a setting that has been distinctly shaped by lasting colonialism and imperialism. There are enduring links among storytelling, the land, and sovereignty which allow for the reproduction of stories as a force reclamation (Hampton and DeMartini 2017, 251). This sovereignty can be understood as sovereignty of land, sovereignty of culture, and sovereignty of the self, all of which work against the colonial master narratives imposed on Native groups and nations. Stories and storytellers continually “construct the past, making verbal marks on the land that define it as a place,” and these definitions of place “are a form of “footprints” or “tracks” that invest the land” with the culture and history of Native nations, creating a cartography that “renders the “path” of the past visible in the postcolonial present” (Yi 2016, 5). The importance of place-making can be seen clearly in the stories told in this presentation. All three stories center native land in such a way that these connections persist today. In the end, these stories work as a tool of history and memory, creating a connection among land, sovereignty, self, and identity.

### **Conclusion: Working Against the Colonial Narrative**

This essay has explored how Native identity in North America was ravaged by the European invasion and has continued to be suppressed and erased through settler colonialism. The narratives of the hundreds of unique Native nations on this land were violently dismantled and replaced by a colonial narrative that aimed to strip people of even the most basic ability to identify as someone native to this land. Storytelling can act as an agent against this colonial

narrative, serving a connection to the history and memory of different Native nations and reclaiming a space of cultural knowledges and values.

This is possible because Native identity is a process of individual and collective identity, and storytelling acts as a way to connect an individual to a collective. Stories are a link that incorporate individuals into a greater community, and stories can teach about common histories and memories that can create cohesion among communities that have endured repeated attempts of erasure and assimilation. While Native history is a concrete notion, traceable by events, dates, and writings, the idea of memory is more abstract. Memory is fluid, yet constant. The memory that is being recreated through storytelling will not be an identical replication of the memory of the storytellers from generations ago. However, this does not suggest that the memory has become less salient in reclaiming Native identity. Memory will grow from a common foundation, but it will grow and change with the context in which exists; for Native memory, it must exist in a context with simultaneous generational trauma and generational wisdom.

Moreover, storytelling's connection to the land offers a foundation upon which to reconstruct cultural identity in a present context that is profoundly influenced by continued imperialism even if great physical distance now exists between Native peoples and their native land. The geographically informed component of identity can be reclaimed in the spaces that stories create (Yi 2016, 10). More than this, the land acts as a time capsule for stories. While the meaning and impact of stories will change to fit contemporary contexts, the land itself holds every memory and every story that may be used as pedagogical tools in the present. Thus, the land itself is just as important of teacher as the storytellers who share the stories of the land, for it holds the memory of the stories in their original form.

It is essential to recognize that this presentation's explanations of the reclamation of Native identity through stories of history and memory will not appear identically across Native nations, as Native nations are not identical. Native identity is not monolithic and failing to recognize this would contribute to the colonial narrative that the stories examined in this presentation work against. Reclamation will be unique among the Haudenosaunee, the Cherokee, the Navajo, the Anishinaabe, and the hundreds of other Native nations in North America that may or may not be recognized federally. The stories that are utilized in the reclamation of identity undoubtedly reflect the distinct histories of different groups, and these stories have the power to take back space in which memory lives.

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