

Tribalography: The Power of Native Stories**LeAnne Howe**

It doesn't end.

In all growing
from all earths
to all skies,

in all touching
all things

in all soothing
the aches of all years,
it doesn't end.

– Simon Ortiz
*Acoma Pueblo*¹

What is the power of native stories? Did they create our people, our tribes, ourselves? Are our stories “a living theater” that connects everything to everything, as we say they do? If you attended the conference, “A Celebration of Native Women Playwrights” held March 18-20, 1999 at the Miami University in Oxford, Ohio you might agree that native stories have the power to create conflict, pain, discord, but ultimately understanding and enlightenment - a sacred third act.

The women's conference began innocuously enough. There was a warm welcome by faculty, staff and dramaturgists at Miami University. Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte, Professor of Theatre at the City University of New York Graduate Center and Baruch College gave a keynote address which highlighted, among other things, a new publication, *Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays*. Excellent papers were given by native and non-native scholars; Rebecca Howard, Ann Haugo, ViBrina Coronado (Tuscarora/Lumbee) and Christy Stanlake. But it was the stories told by native women (staged readings and performance) that transformed the event and the people in attendance. Emotions ran the gamut from anger, frustration, tears, to something like love, but not exactly

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Most of us left with a renewed feeling of accord and commitment to tell our stories (plays), and to help the archives of native women's plays continue to grow. Both acts of creation.

Before I tell my version of the story of what happened at the Native Women's playwright's conference, I want to digress and talk about what native stories are. Throughout this essay I am consciously using the terms story, fiction, history, and play, interchangeably because I am from a culture that views these things as an integrated whole rather than individual parts. For instance in Choctaw, an Anoli is a teller, someone who does all of the above, relating all living things.

Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes. America is a tribal creation story. Creation stories, as numerous as Indian tribes, gave birth to our people. It is with absolute certainty that I tell you now – our stories also created the immigrants who landed on our shores. I don't mean that native people imagined them, nor did we "form them out of the dust of the ground, and theatrically breathe into their nostrils the breath of life as their God did."² But our stories created them nevertheless.

When the foreigners arrived and attempted to settle in the upper Northeast, they had nothing to eat, nothing to sustain them but their faith in narratives. So the indigenous people of the northeast³ told them new stories of how to live life in the New World. One example is the story of how the "Three Sisters" taught the English how to plant corn, beans and squash. Today, corn is our nation's number one agricultural export, and Thanksgiving is the holiday on which Americans give thanks to our people for such extraordinary and versatile foods. But the most important narrative the immigrants would hear from indigenous people was how to make a united nation.

It is the eloquent act of unification that explains how America was created from a story. Native people created narratives that were histories and stories with the power to transform. I call this rhetorical space "tribalography." I suggest that by understanding its effects on the original immigrants, the power of Native storytelling is revealed as a living character who continues to influence our culture. The study of tribalography is advanced by first looking at how Indian people made story from events and non-events. Secondly, by examining how the oral tradition and written texts are a symbiosis of Old World and New World, it becomes evident that Native authors are important to expanding our understanding of story at the beginning of the new millennium.

From An Indigenous Story The Founding Fathers Unite

. . . It is that, therefore,
that in ancient times
it thus came that the hodiyaanehshon,

the Federal Chiefs,
our grandsires,
made a formal rule saying
'Let us unite our affairs'⁴

The above is an excerpted quote from Iroquoian into English of an archaic translation of the "Ritual of Condolence," a portion of what is also called the Condolence ceremony. This Iroquois version of the oral drama is spoken by seven elders and is designed to heal the community as a whole. As John Bierhorst notes in *Four Masterworks*, the Iroquois attempted to achieve peace between the tribes and thwart the cult of death and warfare by forming a confederacy.⁵ The Iroquois Confederacy, at the time of contact with the immigrants was scattered over eastern North America across the US-Canadian border. They occupied most of New York state, parts of neighboring Pennsylvania, Ontario, and Quebec. When the immigrants settled among them and wanted to create trading networks, the Iroquois told them stories of how their ancestors had learned to live peacefully together — their story would serve as a kind of cultural guide to the New World. There are many versions of the story and I pulled only a few strands together in what briefly follows.

A long time ago there was a blood lust among the people. A great war engulfed the land and the people were full of merciless killing and fighting one another for supreme rule. Nations, towns, families were destroyed and scattered to the four winds. It was proof of the tyranny which people at that time were capable of. Then along came a great visionary leader, Degenawidah who realized the killing must stop. He began a journey to establish peace, but he knew he had a serious handicap. He stuttered. Since storytelling is an oral art, Degenawidah knew he had to find someone who could speak for him. Along his journey he met the powerful warrior, named Ayonwatha, or Hiawatha as he is known by the whites. Ayonwatha was an Onondaga by birth, and Mohawk by adoption who was mourning the murder of his wife and children. He had vowed to wipe out his enemies, including the man he saw standing before him. But Degenawidah combed the snakes out of Ayonwatha's hair (took away his anger) and together the two men traveled throughout the land to establish peace. Through Ayonwatha's mighty gift of oratory, Degenawidah proposed that the warring tribes of the upper northeast form a confederacy.

Degenawidah became known as the Peacemaker. He set up the families into clans, and then he set up the leaders of the clans. He established a confederacy that would be matriarchal and each clan would have a clanmother. He made two houses within each nation. One he called the Long House and the other, the Mud House. These two houses would work together in ceremony and council,

establishing the inner source of vitality of their nations. The Peacemaker also made two houses in the Grand Council, one called the Younger Brothers, consisting of the Oneida, and the Cayuga Nations, and later enlarging to include the Tuscarora. The other was the Elder Brothers consisting of the Mohawks, keepers of the Eastern Door, the Onondaga, the Firekeepers, and the Senecas, keepers of the Western Door. Then Degenawidah named the united nations, Haudenosaunee, the people of the Long House.

This is a simplified version of a creation story which asserts that united we thrive, divided we fall. The confederacy was founded on the core values the Peacemaker proposed; freedom, respect, tolerance, consensus, and brotherhood. Under the terms and spirit of the NeGayaneshogowa or the Great Law of Peace, all parties pledged themselves to the confederacy's body of laws.⁶

After hearing the Haudenosaunee spokesmen extol the values of unification for over a hundred years, the colonists finally transformed themselves into thirteen united colonies and eventually wrote a document to celebrate the event, the *U.S. Constitution*. As historian Robert W. Venables says in his essay on the Founding Fathers, "the Haudenosaunee influenced both directly and indirectly the generation of the Founding Fathers and their various efforts to achieve unity."⁷ The power and persistence of native storytelling and performance convinced the separate peoples of the Old World to merge for their mutual benefit. Ironically, unification would enable the colonizers to seize almost all of the homelands of the Indians.

Modern scholarly stories place the formation of the Haudenosaunee, the original event, sometime between AD 1000 and 1400. Under these terms a Haudenosaunee governance group known as the Council of Fifty was created and his system gave all Five Nations, later called the Six Nations when the Tuscaroras were included in 1715, equal power. Ever since the Six Nations have gathered to resolve their differences through common consent.⁸

Historian Donald Grinde, Jr. says that numerous colonial documents exist to support the Iroquois' story of unification and its affect on the immigrants. "There is ample scholarly opinion and factual data to conclude that the Founding Fathers respected and used American Indian ideas as the American government evolved."⁹ Grinde points out that Native confederacies were so appealing to William Penn (1644-1718) that he described the whole of Eastern America as political societies with sachemships inherited through the female side. "Penn was also familiar with the Condolence ceremony of the Iroquois which was crucial for an understanding of their confederacy."¹⁰ Again, the ceremony was an oral drama which observed the unification of the Iroquois. The Indian's aim was to achieve peace.

It's important to remember that the influence the Haudenosaunee had on men like William Penn was derived from Penn's firsthand knowledge of the

performance of their discourse. In the case of the Haudenosaunee they made Wampum belts to record events, but never made written accounts. Rather, their spokesmen were trained in the tradition of dramatic oratory, a form of what we would call today theatrical training. The anthropologist, Stephen Tyler says that "discourse is the maker of the world, not its mirror . . . The world is what we say it is and what we speak of is the world,"¹¹ and I would assert, how we act or perform. Tribal spokesmen used allegory, metaphor, imagination, and inventiveness, all the tools of drama used to make their demands known to the colonists.

Michael K. Foster's study of four Iroquois stories¹² suggests that narratives are not memorized and retold word-for-word, but that each Iroquois speaker uses what works at the moment. In other words, to tell the best possible story and achieve the desired results, an orator must be a powerful storyteller. In the case of the Haudenosaunee the discourse was about unity. Although the struggle for immigrant dominance was tumultuous, the Haudenosaunee's call for a unity in the Northeast remained steady, and it is little wonder why. In the seventeenth century the Haudenosaunee had to negotiate with seven white colonial governments on the Hudson.

The inter-colonial context was equally stormy. The Haudenosaunee had to deal with New England colonies to their east and the English colonies to the south which were rivals of the Dutch. After an English government replaced the Dutch in 1664, all the Haudenosaunee white neighbors, except the French in Canada, were now under English rule from London.¹³

In the summer of 1677 Haudenosaunee spokesmen such as Carachkondie and Connondocgoo joined with English officials from New York, Maryland, and Virginia to speak for a unified colonial policy. The Indians wanted to create a foreign policy with the English in order to cement their trade relationship with them. The Haudenosaunee were major political and economic partners of the English in what is now known as the Covenant Chain. Because the Indians were a counterbalance to French interest in Canada (key to the English colonists survival) they often used the councils to retell their origin stories and renew the Covenant Chain. This oratory benefited the Haudenosaunee in two ways. First it presented a unified Indian image to the colonists. Secondly, the act of storytelling, of drama, comedy, and farce, inculcated what historian Ray Fogelson calls an epitomizing non-event for both speaker and audience. Whether the non-event in question ever happened matters very little to the people who believe it. Witness the recent *Shakespeare In Love*, the life of the author retold through his fiction or play, *Romeo and Juliet*. Therefore story creates attitudes and culture, the very glue which binds a society together.

In the western intellectual tradition, the act of writing stories has been given hegemony over the act of telling stories. This phenomenon led to a privileged view of text, so much so that written stories of the past became labeled as "history," and their authors "historians."¹⁴ Currently, debate persists among anthropologists and ethno-historians on what constitutes history and ethnography, from invention and speculation (story). Anthropologist James Clifford has said that much of what is being written about cultures by historians and ethnographers is "true fiction."¹⁵ The histories of Indian and white relations are replete with written documents. On July 4, 1744, Canasatego, a Haudenosaunee spokesman, deliberately projected his Confederacy's goals into the culture and politics of the English living among them. His manipulation of the image of Indian hegemony in the region was considerable. Canasatego's speech, translated by interpreter Conrad Weiser, repeated the origin story of the Haudenosaunee, reminding the colonists that one hundred years in the New World was nothing compared to the fact that Indian people had been created here. Benjamin Franklin printed Canasatego's speech as part of the record of the 1744 Lancaster negotiations, and sent three hundred copies to London. Canasatego's story was read by Londoners as well as colonists.

In 1754 Franklin proposed what was called the Albany Plan of Union, a proposal based on the philosophy of Indian confederations. On June 11, 1776, Franklin's Albany Plan was reported to the committee of the Continental Congress, who later drafted the Articles of Confederation. James Wilson, a delegate from Pennsylvania and future author of the first draft of the *U. S. Constitution*, argued vigorously for a confederation that was similar to the Haudenosaunee. "Indians know the striking benefits of confederation . . ." [and we] "have an example of it in the Union of the Six Nations."¹⁶

William Penn was not the first immigrant enamored with the Indians, nor was he the last. Dozens of influential colonists would write about the impact Indians had on them including social philosopher John Locke, historian Cadwallader Colden, Acting Governor of New York James DeLancey, and Founding Fathers Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and James Wilson.

A year after the League of Nations came into existence in January 1920, a traditional Iroquois chief, Deskaheh, delivered a message from the Cayuga Nation, asking that the rights of small nations to exist be respected. In 1924, the Iroquois Grand Council refused the offer of United States citizenship because it infringed on their inherent sovereignty again arguing that their system of governance predated the founding of the United States. Ten years later Iroquois Grand Council refused the Indian Reorganization Act of 1950. "This is no small achievement," says Onondaga elder Oren Lyons. "We have faced off with the white man for three hundred years and right from the beginning he has learned much from us. He just doesn't want to admit it."

It is not my intention to enter the debate on whether the *U. S. Constitution* exactly replicates Haudenosaunee governance because the document does not in intent or function. Rather, I am trying to show that the Haudenosaunee story of union created an image so powerful in the minds of influential colonists that they believed if savages could unite they ought to be able to do the same thing. That united image remained indelible in the minds of immigrants, so much so that Indians would forever be spoken of as one group, one nation. Today, it comes as a surprise to most Americans that “Indians” have different tribal names, different religious practices, and that there are over three hundred different tribal languages.

Tribalography and The Living Theater

What I suggest is that a native story helped author America, an act of creation. If not acknowledged in the “historical credits,” Native people are certainly the ghost writers for the event and story of America. As I said, I’ve consciously used story, fiction, history, and play, as interchangeable concepts. All histories are stories written down; all stories are the performance of those beliefs, a living theater. The story you get depends on the point of view of the writer. My story of how America gets created is no different. Neither are the Native stories that take place, after creation, when things go haywire. Which brings me back to my narrative of the native women’s playwrights’ conference. It was the act of telling, of speaking and performing the story of a Native woman that first turned the worm of affability inside out.

Choctaws have a mysterious word that represents a kind of creation. It is *nuk* or *nok*, a suffix or prefix that has to do with the power of speech, breath, and mind. Things with *nok* or *nuk* are so powerful that they can create. A teacher, for instance, is a *nukfokchi*.

Vera Manuel’s play, *The Strength of Women*, is what Choctaws would call *nukfokkechi* - a thing that teaches and inspires. Manuel’s play is the story of three women who were forced into residential schools in Canada.¹⁷ After keeping silent for years, the women finally decide to tell what happened to them in order to change themselves and their future families.

Residential school stories are about the physical and cultural genocide committed against Native children by church and state. Often stories involve the rape of Indian girls by Catholic priests, or missionaries (in the case of Protestant-run schools), and the murder of children by poisoning, and starvation. After the staged reading of the play, there was a hushed silence in the theater. In my case, Manuel’s story forced me to think about my grandparents, two of my uncles and one aunt, two generations of my family had been placed in federal boarding schools. I know firsthand their stories of the beatings that occurred, their hunger to see family and home, and their desire to escape. But the events that happened at government boarding schools, both in Canada and the U. S., are often times

difficult for non-Indians to hear. They've never read about the boarding school era in their history textbooks, and if it wasn't written down, perhaps it wasn't real.

As we began to tell more stories relating to the churches and missionaries, the non-Indians became defensive. One woman in the audience asked if we couldn't think of at least one good thing the Catholic church had done for Indians. Others began to tell their stories: the Jewish Holocaust, of the horrors of slavery and what was done to African Americans, the hardships that the Italians and the Irish had faced at Ellis Island. What I believe was happening to the non-Indians was that they were threading their lives and experiences into ours. A shift in paradigm, it's generally believed to be the other way around: Indians assimilating into the mainstream.

If indeed our world is what we, Native people, say it is, acknowledging the wrongs committed against our ancestors is how we speak to future generations. It is exactly what Manuel's play is about. Her story became part of the living theater connecting everything and everyone. Native and non-natives continued talking. The conversation was moved to another location. We gathered in a kind of council circle before dinner, each one speaking in turn and we talked and talked and talked. Full-blood concerns, mixed blood concerns, non-Indian concerns, we kept on talking through dinner, until I thought my head was unraveling.

I have written that American Indian playwrights and writers tend to create stories from the experience of our people. In turn, our work belongs to our ancestors and the next seven generations of American Indians. No doubt there are other versions of what happened at the Women's Playwrights Festival last March. But in my story, all this interaction, and yes resolution to change our perspectives, to change ourselves, to develop new projects together, Indian and non-Indian, began as a result of a native woman's play, a tribalography. Where we go from here is only limited by our imaginations.

Notes

1. *Going for Rain*, Simon Ortiz, 112.
2. *The Holy Bible*, Genesis, ch. II, v. VII.
3. I hope my First Nations' sisters will forgive me from telling a story that centers on the development of the United States. Regrettably it is the one I know best.
4. John Beirhorst, *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature*, 144-46.
5. 109-111.
6. I have used Oren Lyons' speech at the conference "The Iroquois Great Law of Peace, and the United States' Constitution," 1987, and his interview presented in the documentary film *The Native Americans. The Tribes of the Northeast*, TBS Productions, Inc., 1994.
7. From "The Founding Fathers: Choosing to be Romans," in *Indian Roots of American*

Democracy, 68.

8. For a text on the influence of Native American democracy had on the creation of the colonial United States see, *Native American Political Systems and the Evolution of Democracy, An Annotated Bibliography*, compiled by Bruce E. Johansen.

9. From "Iroquoian Political Concept and the Genesis of the American Government," in *Indian Roots of American Democracy*, p. 47.

10. 49.

11. From "Post-Modern Anthropology," *Discourse and the Social Life of Meaning*, 37, 40, 45.

12. *From the Earth to Beyond the Sky: An Ethnographic Approach to Four Longhouse Iroquois Speech Events*, National Museum of Man, Mercury Serv., Canadian Ethnography Service Paper 20. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974.

13. *The Founding Fathers*, 72.

14. For a discussion of the importance of events and non-events and their relationship to story, history, and historians, see Ray Fogelson's paper "The Ethnohistory of Events and Non-Events," *Ethnohistory*: 36:2 (1989).

15. *Writing Culture*, 7.

16. Paul L. Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Putnam, 1904-1905) 430.

17. In the U.S. these schools are called Indian Boarding schools.

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