

The Search for Wisdom in Native American Narratives and Classical Scholarship

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Oral tradition is characterized by three qualities: 1) It is shared orally among people who, to varying degrees, hold common understandings of their histories and cultures. (Some people share in multiple histories and cultures.) 2) The knowledge that comes from oral tradition is learned and subject to common and yet ever-evolving understandings of what constitutes performance and its contents. (Included here is consideration of how stories are told, the roles of storytellers and audiences, the purposes and settings for tellings, and the use of symbols and metaphor to convey what people want to be understood.) 3) Oral traditions are told over time in recognizably similar ways but with variations of detail and emphasis subject to the circumstances of each performance and the liberties taken by the speakers.

In my work, and in the above description, I emphasize the dynamic of living speakers who shape the direction of oral tradition. The speakers decide what stories to tell, when, and why. The stories live and grow in the process of recollection, telling, reception by other people, and re-telling. Others have led me to also consider the possibility of reconstructing oral tradition from written sources. They have demonstrated the potential to use such features in the written record as repetition, culturally charged terms, and the ordering of events to reconstruct what was once implicit for the ancient speakers and their audiences. These scholars weave the remaining threads of evidence into fabrics of understanding. In their classrooms they re-tell the stories and in their publications they explain how to read the orally derived texts. And, perhaps much like the ancient tellers, they use their text-based but originally oral stories to convey wisdom and understanding in their personal lives, to provide comfort in grief, direction in career, or to mount an impassioned plea for justice. Maybe, like the elders I am privileged to work with, these scholars also shape in personal ways responsibility for the direction and perpetuation of the oral tradition. On the

other hand, maybe these scholars don't recognize their role as active participants in an oral tradition that is still evolving.

Whether we work with oral stories in living performance or ancient texts derived from oral stories, we are acutely aware of how important it is to have an audience who shares common understanding of the content, form, and function of the stories and who values them enough to pass them on to future generations. Without sources of oral tradition (written and oral), tellers and audiences, occasions and needs, we are adrift from the wisdom of the past and we have lost a fundamental human potential to address in a collective way both the present and the future.¹

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