

# RHETORIC AND AMERICAN INDIANS

AN INTRODUCTION



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The Indian is an ascribed name, and the name is not native; the ascriptive simulations are the creases of inconceivable discoveries, ethnographic surveillance, and fugitive poses in the pageantry and portraiture of dominance.

Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*

Gorgias: I call it the ability to persuade with speeches either judges in the law courts or statesmen in the council chamber or the commons in the assembly or an audience at any other meeting that may be held on public affairs

Plato, *Gorgias*

## What

TO collect a series of essays beneath the terms "American Indian," "rhetoric," and "survivance" raises significant and potentially vexing questions. The terms of the subject matter are themselves contested. To begin with, why "survivance" rather than "survival"? While "survival" conjures images of a stark minimalist clinging at the edge of existence, survivance goes beyond mere survival to acknowledge the dynamic and creative nature of Indigenous rhetoric. But "survivance" is the easiest of the three terms to explain. For what is meant by "rhetoric"? Are there multiple rhetorics? Is rhetoric merely ornamentation: "the embellishment of speech first in tropes and figures, second in dignified delivery," as Peter Ramus would have it (684)? Or worse, is it the art of deception, making the weaker case seem the stronger? To swing about to the eulogistic side, we might consider the claim that rhetoric is epistemic, a means of actually determining or even creating knowledge. Both condemned and praised since at least the

time of Plato, rhetoric defies easy definition. Yet in an age of post-structuralist uncertainty and renewed attention to the symbolic nature of the reality we inhabit, the importance of rhetoric cannot be ignored.

However, even as we grapple with various definitions of rhetoric, additional questions arise regarding the appropriateness or limitations of applying theories of Western rhetorical traditions to analyze the communication practices of North America's indigenous peoples. As George Kennedy observes, "Some might argue that 'rhetoric' is a peculiarly Western phenomenon, a structured system of teaching public speaking and written composition developed in classical Greece" (2–3). However, if in answer to this position we consider Kenneth Burke's universal definition of human beings as "the 'symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing animal'" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 6), then rhetoric as a distinctly human practice, whether it be the art of persuasion or the art of eloquence, surely transcends cultural boundaries.

Nevertheless, engaging the definition of rhetoric only addresses half of our lexical equation. For the term "American Indian" raises equally challenging questions. As Louis Owens indicates, "[W]e are confronted with difficult questions of authority and ethnicity: What is an Indian? . . . Must one be raised in a traditional 'Indian' culture or speak a native language or be on a tribal roll?" (3). Examined from another angle, we might consider the extent to which the "Indian" is simply "a white invention and . . . a white image" having little to do with actual indigenous peoples (Berkhofer 3). Questions of authenticity and assimilation further complicate the meaning of "American Indian." All of these questions raise the larger question of the degree to which the idea of the Indian is itself a rhetorical trope designed to perform specific functions within various discourses. As Gerald Vizenor asserts, "The word *Indian* . . . is a colonial enactment . . . an occidental invention that became a bankable simulation" (*Manifest Manners* 11). In Vizenor's argument, there are no "real Indians," only more simulations that "undermine the simulations of the unreal in the literature of dominance" (*Manifest Manners* 12).

To further explore and complicate the definitions of both rhetoric and American Indians, consider the cross-cultural encounter at play in the juxtaposition of the terms "rhetoric" and "American Indian." Again, if we limit the definition of rhetoric to a system of techniques for achieving eloquence and effective argumentation, then those who assert that it makes little sense to talk of American Indian rhetoric are correct. For there is little evidence of an effort among North America's indigenous peoples to develop theories of communication as a distinct and isolated field of knowledge or activity, and

certainly not in a manner parallel to the professional rhetoricians of the Sophistic tradition or the systematic studies of rhetoric developed by theorists such as Aristotle, I. A. Richards, or George Campbell.

Yet this is a very limited definition of rhetoric, one to which few contemporary rhetoricians would grant their assent. Indeed, to confine our understanding and definition of rhetoric to the systematic theories of the Western rhetorical tradition is a problem that the essays in this collection implicitly and explicitly address. The very exclusion of voices and practices from outside the Western tradition may be seen as a process of what Stephen Riggins terms "the rhetoric of othering." This division of self and other, us and them, however, brings forth one definition of the universal rhetorical situation; as Burke asserts, "If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 22).

Even as Burke defines rhetoric as a process of establishing "identification" between self and other(s), the call for unity remains troubling for many American Indians haunted by an official United States rhetoric of assimilation that proclaimed a unity just so long as it was "our" unity. In other words, the transformation to consubstantiality, a shared sense of identity, was to be only one way: the white way. As a number of the essays in this collection show, the complex negotiation for many American Indian rhetoricians has been to bridge communication divisions while maintaining an insistence of difference.

It would thus seem, like grasping at water, that a workable definition of rhetoric splashes out even as we close our fist upon it. In *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries*, William Covino and David Jolliffe define rhetoric as a linguistic knowledge-making/knowledge-conveying art that "gives rise to potentially active texts" (5). Covino and Jolliffe use Burke's famous parlor metaphor to define a text "as the momentary entry into an unending conversation" (6).

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of

your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* 110–11)

While Burke's metaphor of the parlor is an inviting representation of the rhetorical situation, it implies equal access to the parlor and the equal opportunity to "put in your oar." As Catherine Lamb notes in the context of women's rhetoric, the producer of the parlor text "takes it for granted that he is invited and can enter the parlor; he also seems to have no doubts about being able to speak, using the proper forms, and being listened to once he speaks" (154). Just as women have historically not been able to take these assumptions for granted, American Indians, burdened by a rhetoric and discourse of othering and often forced to participate in languages and forms not their own, cannot take these assumptions for granted either. The Indian in the parlor, indeed.

Despite these obstacles, many American Indians have, of necessity and by force of will, entered the rhetorical parlor. In studying these indigenous rhetoricians, it is vital to (re)consider Aristotle's assertion that "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Bizzell and Herzberg 153) with an understanding of the limits created by social hierarchy, racist assumptions, cultural differences, language, and education. As most of the essays in this collection indicate, a primary rhetorical task for American Indian speakers and writers since the coming of Columbus has been the process of discovering and applying another's "available means of persuasion." Beginning with Columbus's first step upon the Caribbean shores and continuing through the present moment, the indigenous people of the Americas have been engaged in a serious study of the available means of persuading the newcomers. One can only imagine the persuasive efforts attempted by the five young men, seven women, and three children Columbus "ordered to be detained" and taken to Spain (80). What futile elocutionary gestures did they make to an obdurate audience that could not or would not hear them?

In the light of this history, this collection takes as its foundation, if not its limit, a definition of rhetoric as the use of language or other forms of symbolic action to produce texts (in the broadest possible sense) that affect changes in the attitudes, beliefs, or actions of an audience. In this sense, rhetoric is both an art of persuasion and epistemic—epistemic inasmuch as Native Americans use language to alter our understanding of the world we

inhabit. With this rather open definition in mind, the five-hundred-year relationship between America's indigenous people and Europeans and their descendants may easily be described as an unending chain of rhetorical situations, replete with "exigence, audience, [and often overwhelming] constraints" (Bitzer 306).

Indeed, for much of this period, one of the most pressing exigencies has been the need for native people to establish their equal humanity with Europeans. Roger Williams's publication of 1643, *A Key into the Language of America*, hints at the constraints imposed by Europeans on this claim: "First by what *Names* they are distinguished. . . . [T]hose of the *English* giving: as *Natives, Salvages, Indians, Wild-men . . . Abergeny men, Pagans, Barbarians, Heathen*" (235). Williams's litany of English appellations displays the overarching trend of Europeans to see New World Natives as the savage antithesis to European civilization. As late as 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Hypothesis" would define the United States' frontier as the "meeting point of civilization and savagery." The suasive effects of such "terministic screens" (Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*) can be identified in numerous policies continued well into the twentieth century, including assimilation-oriented pedagogies and relocation programs. For many Native rhetoricians, the task has been to revise, replace, or tear down these screens.

The tendency of Europeans and Euro-Americans to define Native Americans as the embodiment of barbarism and to enact policies designed to transform them places an immense burden on Native rhetoricians. In the aftermath of white military conquests and subjugation, Indians who would speak or write on behalf of Native rights and cultures were and often still are addressing an audience that generally assumes its own superiority. It is not a rhetorical situation conducive to mutual dialogue. For many American Indian speakers and writers, establishing a measure of identification with their white audience has been a primary demand. As Burke asserts, "You persuade a man [*sic*] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 55).

While individual American Indian communities each have their own rich and complex rhetorical traditions developed for numerous ceremonial and decision-making purposes, the majority of the contributors to this collection have focused their attention on the post-contact rhetoric of American Indian orators and speakers who have bridged the communication gap between their own traditions and cultural traditions of the European and American colonizers. While tribally specific rhetorical traditions call for attention in

their own right, this project seeks to enrich our understanding of what might be considered Pan-Indian rhetorical traditions developed over five hundred years of ongoing struggle.

For this reason, a number of the authors in this collection examine the ways in which Native rhetoricians appropriate the language, styles, and beliefs of their white audiences in order to establish a degree of consubstantiality. Across divides of language, beliefs, and traditions, Native rhetoricians have had to find ways to make their voices heard and respected by a too frequently uninterested and even hostile audience. Thus, in the post-contact rhetoric of Native North Americans, one finds an acute awareness of audience. Many of the Native rhetoricians examined in this study confirm the truism that in situations of extreme oppression, the oppressed of necessity know more of the oppressors' ways than the oppressors understand the ways of those whom they oppress. This collection may serve as a small corrective to this intellectual imbalance.

### Why

The conceptual field of rhetorical studies has, in recent years, been expanded, enriched, and complicated by important scholarship in such areas as women's rhetoric and African American rhetoric. Nevertheless, despite the publication of a number of essays in various journals and an increasing number of panels at academic conferences devoted to the subject of American Indian rhetoric, this topic has yet to receive the sustained attention of a book-length project. As the scope of rhetorical studies expands, any attempt to comprehend the rhetorical traditions of the United States that neglects the practices of American Indians remains significantly incomplete.

Although he does not discuss rhetoric explicitly, in *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, Robert Allen Warrior pursues a related course as he argues for "the possibility of understanding contemporary [Native] intellectual production in the context of over two centuries of a written, Native intellectual tradition. In this way American Indian intellectual discourse can now ground itself in its own history the way that African American, feminist, and other oppositional discourses have" (2). In line with Warrior's goal of understanding the American Indian intellectual tradition, the authors in this collection aim at illuminating our understanding of this intellectual tradition as a powerful rhetorical tradition. The rhetoricians and rhetorical practices examined here, from the eloquence of the Seneca orator Red Jacket to Gerald Vizenor's postmodern trickster discourse, demonstrate

not only a mastery of the available Western means of persuasion, they also enlarge conceptions of rhetoric itself. That is, by bringing an *other*, in some ways incommensurably different, understanding of the world into the rhetorical parlor, these rhetoricians expand the terministic reality we all inhabit.

At the same time, Warrior's text illustrates the degree to which recent academic interest in American Indians has been for the most part dominated by studies of literary texts. Not that this is inherently a problem. Indeed, as Wayne Booth demonstrates in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the line between poetics and rhetoric is often hard to sustain. Nevertheless, in terms of Native American textual studies, there has been a conspicuous absence of attention to American Indians as rhetoricians. To some extent, a recent trend initiated by scholars such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Craig Womack, and Jace Weaver has at least implicitly taken the rhetorical turn. Cook-Lynn and Womack both ask how Native literature might function rhetorically to aid Native communities in their defense of sovereignty (Womack 192–93). Weaver has coined the term "communitist" to define the rhetorical function of Native literature: "Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community" (xiii). Yet in the work of these three scholars, the emphasis remains on Native literature as literature.

In "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" Scott Lyons argues that "we begin by prioritizing the study of American Indian rhetoric—and the rhetoric of the Indian" (464). In this same article, Lyons notes that there have been some forays into the analysis of American Indian rhetoric. For instance, George Kennedy devotes a chapter of his *Comparative Rhetoric* to "North American Indian Rhetoric." Yet this chapter and its list of references treat American Indians and Indian rhetoric as a thing of the past, something practiced by so-called traditional cultures. Kennedy concludes his chapter with the following statement: "Rhetoric among the Indians, as in other traditional societies, was largely a conservative, defensive force in transmitting and preserving the independence, way of life, and values of the culture" (108). Regardless of whether his assessment of "traditional" rhetoric is correct, his use of the past tense—"was"—relegates American Indians to the dustbin of history. Kennedy's study reflects an unfortunate reinscription of the "vanishing Indian" narrative. This narrative, rehearsed in numerous representational texts from government policies to cinematic Westerns, has produced in the American social imagination an image of Indians as elements of our past—tragic, noble even, but no longer around.

This collection springs from a desire to alter that perception. American Indians continue to exist, and they continue to develop and apply sophisticated rhetorical practices. From debates over casinos, controversies over mascots, through the insistence of treaty rights and the return of Native lands, North America's indigenous people have been and are insisting upon access to the parlor. As rhetoricians, Indian writers, activists, lawyers, teachers, and political leaders are carrying on rhetorical traditions developed by their elders. For scholars of rhetoric and composition, speech communication, literature, history, and Native American studies, among other disciplines, the essays in this collection are an invitation and an introduction to these traditions.

### Who

In organizing the essays in this collection, I have used thematic guidelines. Clearly there are other valid ways in which these essays could be arranged, yet I believe the groupings illustrate shared concerns that weave together the essays in each section. My hope is that the arrangements will make these concerns explicit and illustrate some of the patterns that the scholars have pursued or discovered in their explorations of the American Indian rhetorical tradition as it has developed over the last three hundred years.

The essays in part 1 examine the appropriations of elements of Christian discourse, sentimentalism, democratic discourse, and an emerging nationalism in the service of sophisticated arguments made on behalf of Native rights and identity. This section illuminates both the burden imposed on Native rhetoricians of communicating in a language and tradition not their own and their success in assuming that burden. Matthew Dennis reveals how the Seneca leader Red Jacket merged Seneca oral rhetorical traditions with white American concepts of "sensibility," nationalism, and Christian ethics. According to Dennis, Red Jacket developed a mediating or "middle ground" rhetoric to successfully argue for the legitimacy of Seneca political status within an expanding United States. As a work of revisionary history, this essay undermines the belief that the autonomy and land Indians still possess are the result of sympathetic and enlightened white leaders who persuaded other whites to allow Indians to retain some rights. What we see instead is an example of the powerful role that Indian rhetors played in successfully arguing on their own behalf.

Patricia Bizzell examines how Pequot author and Methodist minister



William Apess successfully appealed to Christian beliefs, specifically the Jeremiad, to indict whites for their treatment of Indians and to argue for the humanity of Native Americans. Apess's rhetoric is multicultural *avant la lettre* as he applies logic to argue that God must love people of color—he made more of them than white people. Like Red Jacket's syncretic rhetoric, Bizzell describes Apess's rhetoric as "mixed" in that he moves fluidly between allusions to Indian figures, beliefs, and narratives and the figures, beliefs, and narratives of the dominant white culture.

While most students of American history have some knowledge of Cherokee Removal and the Trail of Tears, fewer are aware of the sophisticated written arguments employed by the Cherokee to prevent their removal. Angela Pulley Hudson looks at the rhetorical work of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first Native American newspaper in North America, and its editor Elias Boudinot. Boudinot's anti-removal rhetoric appealed to Enlightenment ideals of rationality, justice, and liberty to counter the removal policy. Pulley argues that removal resulted because of a refusal to grant the Cherokee official subjectivity—no matter how well they spoke or wrote, their voices would not be heard. As a work of rhetorical recovery, this essay shows how the rhetoric of the victor is what we usually remember, despite the frequently superior logic and eloquence of the vanquished.

Borrowing the title "Rhetorical Self-Fashioning" from James Clifford's concept of ethnographic self-fashioning, part 2 brings together essays joined in a shared examination of the rhetorical work performed by a selection of Native American autobiographies. These essays explore how the lives narrated are powerfully responsive to the rhetorical conditions of purpose and audience. Malea Powell's essay situates a reading of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins's autobiography in a period dominated by anti-tribal legislation. Powell argues that Winnemucca's text is a performance of "Indianness" aimed at the expectations of a white audience. Her essay shows how gender stereotypes and the iconic symbolism of Indian women continue to influence how Winnemucca's text is read. Against scholars who read this text as a simple life story, Powell shows it to be a rhetorically sophisticated construction of a self designed to obtain assistance for her people.

In a chapter on Indian boarding school narratives by Francis La Flesche and Zitkala-Sa, I explore how these two Native writers employ irony in order to critique assimilation educational policies. For both authors, irony provides a means to level serious criticisms of white policies and even white culture without thoroughly offending and alienating a mainly white audience. This essay examines assimilation rhetoric and pedagogies and the

ambivalent responses that assimilation education engendered in two of its most successful "products."

Jana Knittel examines the prison memoir of American Indian activist and political prisoner Leonard Peltier. Knittel argues that Peltier draws upon specific Native oral traditions in order to successfully construct an image of himself as a symbol of the historical injustices committed by the US government against Indian people. Knittel shows how Peltier calls on American ideals of justice, elements of his personal history, and the history of American Indian policy to argue that he is a symbol of America's ongoing Indian wars.

In part 3, Holly L. Baumgartner analyzes Native American autobiographies as a genre. Examining a range of works through theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, she illuminates common threads that link writers across time periods and tribal affiliations. Baumgartner shows how, via techniques of cultural appropriation and code switching, American Indian autobiographers mediate a non-Native form, the individual autobiography, in order to perform a collective Native rhetorical purpose.

Karen A. Redfield examines the rhetoric of storytelling in order to challenge commonly held distinctions between written and oral texts. Drawing on her own experiences teaching at the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Community College, Redfield examines the function of Native newspapers and journalism to create an Indian discourse directed at an Indian audience. Redfield shows how Native newspapers perform a rhetorical function that is similar to the function of the oral storyteller. She argues that Native newspapers provide an important mechanism for including Native rhetoric in our classes.

An interest in theory as a Western construct and the theorizing of American Indians unite the essays in part 4. First, Robin DeRosa looks at the theoretical work performed by Zitkala-Sa's *Old Indian Legends*. DeRosa provides an overview of various positions on the relationship between critical theory and cultural specificity in order to consider the extent to which a theory can be translated and/or transformed into a culturally specific idiom. She then reads the trickster stories in *Old Indian Legends* as a model of engaging such concepts as history, culture, author, and reading context.

Anthony G. Murphy's essay is a study of postmodern historiography and postcolonial rhetoric in James Welch's *Killing Custer*. Murphy illuminates the rhetorical essence at the heart of writing history. In his argument, Welch's study of the Battle of the Little Bighorn amounts to a transvaluation of history, a reorientation of the meaning of this symbolic event. Against those who would dismiss Welch's work as not being "history," Murphy shows how the writing of history is always a process of determining which symbols count and whose voices are heard.

Ellen L. Arnold examines Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead* as a work of recuperative and prophetic rhetoric. Silko uses the novel form to retell oral narratives from a variety of traditions. Like the Ghost Dance tradition, Silko's novel argues that the European mind-set will fade from this continent as indigenous values regain their proper standing. Exploring Silko's melding of oral and written forms of expression, Arnold's essay is especially helpful in distinguishing between an indigenous epistemology and a Cartesian understanding of the world.

The power of language is at the center of Peter D'Errico's "American Indian Sovereignty: Now You See It, Now You Don't." D'Errico examines the meaning of the word "sovereignty" as part of his analysis of the rhetoric of dominion and conquest used to legitimize dispossessing indigenous people of their lands and rights. In tracing the ghost of Christian rhetoric that continues to haunt contemporary Indian legal policies, D'Errico notes the power of subtle semantic shadings to determine the fate of entire peoples. D'Errico concludes that as the meaning of sovereignty erodes as an international concept, it behooves Indian people to find new, indigenous, terms for self-determination.

Fittingly, the last piece in the collection is a performance of Native American rhetoric. Richard Clark Eckert provides a postmodern tale of the traditional Anishinaabe trickster hero Wennebojo. In this written instantiation of an oral performance, Eckert illustrates the complicated nature of contemporary American Indian identity and the limitations of language in defining it. Eckert's comic narrative ironizes much of the conventional discourse of Indianness and clears a space for more discourse. In a similar fashion, the purpose of this text is not aimed at achieving the closure of a conclusion; rather, it suggests future directions for the study of American Indian rhetoric.

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