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OF COLONIAL
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EDITED BY SUSAN CASTILLO AND IVY SCHWEITZER

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Recovering Precolonial American Literary History: “The Origin of Stories” and the *Popol Vuh*

Timothy B. Powell

Language and literature involve sacred matter. Among sacred places in America, places of ancient origin and deepest mystery, there is one that comes to my mind again and again. At Barrier Canyon, Utah . . . are preserved prehistoric rock art . . . They are two thousand years old, more or less, and they remark as closely as anything can the origin of American literature. The native voice in American literature is indispensable. There is no true literary history of the United States without it, and yet it has not been clearly delineated in our scholarship. (Momaday 1997: 13–14)

This provocative passage by N. Scott Momaday, the Kiowa writer and Pulitzer Prize winner, clearly delineates the challenge of attempting to include the “native voice” in American literary history. Throughout much of the twentieth century, anthologies and critical narratives of American literature typically began with the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock. Because the definition of “literature” was for so long limited to alphabetic or European forms of writing, indigenous forms were ignored by Americanists. It is only very recently that anthologies like *The Literatures of Colonial America* (Castillo and Schweitzer 2001) have begun to correct this glaring oversight. And yet, difficult questions remain unanswered. How, for example, are we to interpret the title of this anthology given that from a Native American perspective the period of “colonization” did not end in 1776 but continues to this day? Does this anthology respectfully restore Native literature to its rightful place at the beginning of American literary history, or does it simply attempt to assimilate Indians into the chronology of European occupation? Are Americanists prepared to allow Native people to define “history” in terms of their own prophetic, cyclical sense of time rather than the linear temporality of the colonizers? What place is there for non-alphabetic forms of literature which predate “discovery,” a period still referred to by the problematic term “prehistoric”? In the course of answering these perplexing questions, this analysis will

argue that careful consideration of early, non-alphabetic, Native forms will help to move the field of American literature beyond the persistent legacy of Eurocentrism.

The four Native cultures represented in the opening section of *The Literatures of Colonial America* – Maya, Acoma, Seneca/Iroquois, and Winnebago – all have deeply rooted traditions that extend back well before the first European colonizers set foot on the continents. It is important to remember, however, that these four groups represent only a tiny fraction of the more than six hundred distinct tribal cultures that make up what we now call “Native America.” Rather than skimming quickly over the complicated cultural histories of all four of these tribes, I will concentrate here primarily on two texts: the Quiché Maya *Popol Vuh*, one of the undisputed masterpieces of the Mesoamerican tradition, and “The Origin of Stories,” a fine example of the rich oral history of the Seneca, one of the five original tribes that created the Iroquois Confederation. These two works provide a sense of the geographical and cultural diversity that exists within Native America – the Maya being a culture that has long possessed writing from what is now Central America and the Iroquois being a culture that was primarily oral from what is now the northeastern United States. By delving more deeply into the historical and social contexts of these two relatively brief works (the selection from the *Popol Vuh* is an excerpt of a much longer text), I hope to encourage the continued exploration of the vast array of pre-Columbian Native sources, many of which remain relatively unknown to Americanists.

The primary goal of this essay, therefore, is to open up what I am calling the precolonial period of American literary history. To do so will require confronting some of the persistent blind spots that continue to limit scholarly understanding of Native American culture. Too many anthologies, for example, still contain sentences such as this one from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th edition – “we have no actual records that predate 1492” (Baym 2003: 6) – which sadly distort the history of written and oral expression on these continents. While it is technically true that the term “literature” derives from the Latin *littera* or “letter,” this Eurocentric definition does not work well in the context of the Americas. This essay will work self-consciously to expand the spatial, temporal, and formal borders of “American literature” by studying precolonial Native literature from across the continent in the form of storytelling, painted codices, hieroglyphic texts, and rock art.

To recover a precolonial sense of memory will, however, require careful attention to the Native American worldview. As Donald Fixico has observed, those “who study Indian history must think in terms of culture, community, environment, and metaphysics” (Fixico 1998: 87). To do so, it is first necessary to acknowledge that “Indian history” extends well beyond the temporal borders of “colonial America.” The Maya, for example, developed a highly sophisticated system of writing to record historical events, myth, and calendrical calculations as early as 100 CE. And yet, to speak about the Maya written tradition beginning in the “year 100 CE” implicitly imposes the chronological time frame of the colonizer onto a Native American sense of “history.” Thinking beyond the parameters of colonialism will therefore require a leap of the critical imagination for non-Natives who hope to understand these stories from an Indian

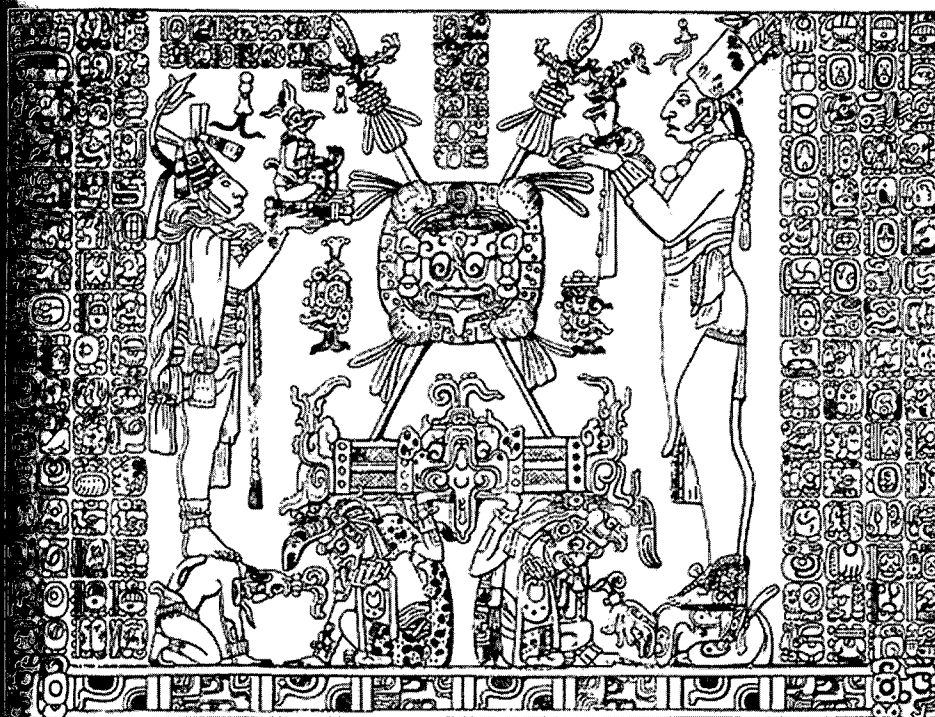


FIGURE 8.1 Panel from the Maya Temple of the Sun-Eyed Shield at Palenque (ca. 690 CE). Dennis Tedlock has translated the first seven glyphs in the left hand column to read: "Since the present world began on August 11, 3114 BC, 275,466 days had passed and it was now October 23, 2360 BC." The history recounted on the panel commemorates the accession of Sun-Eyed Jaguar, shown at age 7 on left and at age 49 on right, to the Egret Lordship (Tedlock 2001: 45).

point of view. In the case of the Maya, it would be more accurate to state that "history" is recorded in relation to a cyclical calendar which integrates the distant past, the present, and future prophecies in relation to detailed observations of the stars and planets. As an exercise in stretching our collective imagination here at the outset, reflect on the fact that the Maya did not see their history beginning in 100 but on the date 13.0.0.0.0 4 Ahau 8 Cumku or, to translate back into the terms of a Western calendar, August 11, 3114 BCE! The challenge, then, is to think outside the framework of European colonization and chronology. In doing so, this essay will work to redefine the central terms – "American," "literature," and "history" – from a Native American perspective.

Native Americans' Conflicted Place in the Canon

Native American culture is the oldest on the continent, yet it is only very recently that it has been acknowledged as part of American literary history. To put this in

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context, the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1979), which is often cited as a benchmark of the field, did not include one Native American author in its almost five thousand pages. It was not until 1994 that Native American literature appeared in volume one of the Norton. And it was not until 2003 that the *Norton Anthology* finally placed the Native American oral tradition in its rightful place at the beginning of the first volume. Sadly, no examples of precolonial writing have yet been included. It is well worth reviewing, then, the social and academic battles that are still being fought in order to bring Native American literature into the canon. Having reviewed this struggle, I will then turn to the complicated question of how to situate Native writers in relation to the "American" literary tradition. My point here is that rather than assimilating Native American tradition into a Eurocentric definition of "literature," critics (and students) need to formulate new methods of reading these oral and non-alphabetic texts. To do so, it will be imperative to listen carefully to the concerns that have been voiced by Native scholars.

Many undergraduates, sadly, are unaware of the courageous efforts of an earlier generation of students, teachers, and activists who successfully changed the curriculum and hiring practices of the academy to make a place for Native American, African American, Latino/a, Asian American, and Women's and Gender studies. This period, which began in approximately 1969 and continues through today, constitutes a cultural revolution of sorts. The early years of this movement were an exhilarating, often dangerous, time. In 1969, for example, students at San Francisco State clashed with police and the college administration in a protracted battle – students went out on strike for five months – in order to pressure the college president to create the nation's first ethnic studies program (Umemoto 1989: 3). That same year, Native American students and activists took control of Alcatraz Island for 19 months in order to protest, among other issues, the lack of educational facilities and programs for and about Native Americans (Smith and Warrior 1996: 28–30). Such scenes played out on college campuses all across the country in a remarkably successful example of political activism. By 1992, 700 African American, Asian American, Latino, and Native American studies programs had been established (La Belle and Ward 1996: 73). And while this represents meaningful change, there is still a long way to go – Native Americans, for example, represent less than half of 1 percent of all faculty in higher education (US Department of Education).

The creation of ethnic studies programs across the country had a profound effect both on the curriculum and critical narratives of American literary history. One of the most meaningful changes was in the ethnic composition of the canon, which can be understood as the essential works of literature that define "American" identity. Beginning with N. Scott Momaday winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for *House Made of Dawn*, a new generation of ethnic writers – Toni Morrison, Derek Walcott, Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Anzaldúa, Leslie Marmon Silko, Rodolfo Anaya, David Henry Hwang, to name just a few – fundamentally transformed the canon of American literature. Analogously, as the curriculum changed, the students and faculty of America's universities became more diverse, changing the face of the academy.

Although it is impossible to list all the scholars who helped bring about these profound transformations, it is important to name just a few: Américo Paredes' *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (1958), Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1970), Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga's *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Elaine H. Kim's *Asian American Literature* (1982), Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984). These writers and academics utterly transformed the field by arguing convincingly that African American, Native American, Asian American, Latino, Gay and Lesbian, Disability, and Women's cultures were centrally important to "American" identity.

Diversifying the canon, however, has produced some unforeseen complications. While changing the complexion of the student body, the faculty, and the curriculum constitutes a meaningful step forward, the sheer multiplicity of cultures that now define American studies has destabilized the field's central focus. In other words, back when anthologies began with the Puritans, the definition of "America" was clearer: a vision of "a city upon a hill" articulated by John Winthrop and William Bradford. With the advent of multiculturalism, however, it has become ever more complicated to explain what the "New World" meant to Spanish, French, British, Portuguese, and Dutch colonizers, not to mention African slaves or Indians who, of course, did not see the land as "new" at all. By devoting far greater attention to the multiplicity of cultures which historically flourished in North and South America, scholars have profoundly altered the way we understand the geography of identity. Throughout the 1990s, scholars of African American, Native American, Latino/a, and Asian American studies developed a new approach called transnationalism, or the study of how cultural identity transcends national borders. Paul Gilroy, for example, called on African American studies scholars to abandon "a nationalistic focus" and to concentrate instead on "the transcultural, international formation I call the black Atlantic" (Gilroy 1993: 4). José David Saldívar's *Border Matters* (1997) taught scholars "how to reimagine the nation as a site with many 'cognitive maps'" so that "American studies" is not necessarily equated with the United States but is "remapped" in hemispheric terms (ibid: ix). At the same time, Rey Chow eloquently articulated "the goal of 'writing diaspora,'" which encouraged scholars to think about the historical complexities of "Chineseness" in ways that go well beyond the notion of "identity based on national unity" (Chow 1993: 25, 24) – shifting the geographic focus away from nation-states (China or the US) towards transnational spaces that included Chinese communities living in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Honolulu, Vancouver, San Francisco, and Lima, Peru. And while transnational scholarship has productively complicated our understanding of cultural identity's intricacies, it also raises difficult questions about whether these cultures consider themselves to be "American," given that many of them were historically excluded from US citizenship.

This is particularly perplexing when it comes to understanding the relationship between Native American culture and American identity. On the one hand, arguing for the inclusion of Native Americans in the canon has important political ramifications – creating a more democratic and historically accurate understanding of the

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cultural diversity which has characterized life on these continents since time immemorial. And yet, on the other hand, we cannot talk about the virtues of "historical accuracy" without acknowledging that, from a Native perspective, "inclusion" has historically come at a terrible price. In 1887, for example, the Dawes Act offered Native Americans US citizenship in exchange for giving up tribal ownership of their land, a policy which ultimately led to the loss of 60 million acres of native land (Foner and Garrity 1991: 268). Soon after, the federal government implemented a reform movement of forced assimilation overseen by men like Richard Henry Pratt, the head of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, whose stated policy was to "Kill the Indian and save the man!" (Warrior 1995: 6). Finally, before we can begin to address the question of how Native American literature fits into an anthology focusing on "Colonial America," it is imperative to acknowledge the painful and violent history of colonization: as Leslie Marmon Silko puts it at the outset of her novel *Almanac of the Dead*, "Sixty million Native Americans died between 1500 and 1600. The defiance and resistance to things European continue unabated" (Silko 1991: 15).

It is important, therefore, to proceed carefully when considering the implications of what it means to start *The Literatures of Colonial America* with a section entitled "Before Columbus: Native American Cultures." The Creek scholar Craig Womack offers a meaningful insight into the troubling issues that arise when trying to map the volatile fault line where the canons of American literature and Native American literature intersect, collide, conflict, and separate:

I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon . . . (Understand that this is not an argument for inclusion – I am saying this with all the bias I can muster that our American canon, the Native literary canon of the Americas, predates their American canon. I see them as two separate canons). (Womack 1999: 7)

The reservations expressed by Womack and other Native scholars suggest that simply assimilating American Indian literature will not suffice. Bringing these two distinct traditions together requires a recognition that there is not *one* canon – dominated by Franklin, Emerson, and Faulkner – into which Native American literature must somehow fit. Rather, Womack's distinction between "our American canon" and "their American canon" suggests that Native literature should be studied in relation to its own distinct cultural heritage, so that N. Scott Momaday is vetted not by comparing him to Ernest Hemingway but by understanding how *House Made of Dawn* draws on the Navajo epic *Diné Bahanè*, which begins in mythic time with the earth's creation. While both traditions can be called "American" in the sense that they occupy the same geographical space, the fact that the Native American literary tradition existed for millennia before white contact makes it necessary to study this tradition on its own unique terms. "Native people have been on this continent at least thirty thousand years," Womack writes, "and the stories tell us we have been here even

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longer than that . . . that we originated here. For much of this time period, we have had literatures" (Womack 1999: 7). Another important reason that the two canons should remain distinct, albeit inextricably intertwined, is because the Native American conception of "history," as we will see, functions entirely differently from that of colonial chronology.

Perhaps the most important aspect of studying Native American literature is a healthy respect for what the Osage literary critic Robert Warrior calls "intellectual sovereignty". Warrior argues against "assimilating and enculturating non-Native values" in favor of a new form of "American Indian intellectual discourse" that "ground[s] itself in its own history" (Warrior 1995: 2). In contrast to prior conceptions of the American canon, I will argue here for a new paradigm, the canon(s) of American literature, which acknowledges the multiplicity of cultures occupying the same land and grants each culture the intellectual sovereignty to define their literary tradition on their own terms. In the case of Native Americans, as Womack implies, "America" is not limited to the political entity of the United States but becomes associated with the land itself, hemispheric in scope – an idea which Rodrigo Lazo explores more fully in his essay in this volume. Like José David Saldívar, I am suggesting that the field be defined by a multiplicity of "cognitive maps." What I propose is a new understanding of literary geography that defines "America" not along national borderlines but according to canonical storylines – a map made out of narratives which is not only *transnational* but also *transtemporal* in scope.

This analysis will produce a new set of spatiotemporal coordinates that extend well beyond the discursive boundaries of European colonialism. It is important to recognize that this approach has not been limited to Native American studies. Wai Chee Dimock's recent work on what she calls "deep time," for example, offers a valuable critique from within American studies. Dimock argues that her approach "produces a map that, thanks to its receding horizons, its backward extension into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates, must depart significantly from a map predicated on the short life of the US" (Dimock 2001: 759). It may also be interesting for readers to compare this approach with Ralph Bauer's essay in this collection. Working in dialogic relation to these theorists, my intent is to trace the storylines of the Maya *Popol Vuh* and the Seneca "Origin of Stories" backwards through time and across space in order to construct a new definition of Native American literary history whose origins predate European conquest by hundreds of years.

"The Origin of Stories"

"The Origin of Stories" provides an exemplary opportunity for studying precolonial Native American literature, offering a meaningful insight into the extraordinary depth of the Iroquois oral tradition and the redemptive powers that these very old stories possess. To look back into the vast temporal expanse of precolonial Native

American literary history requires learning to think according to a very different set of cultural standards. In order to grasp the subtle but profound lessons of this deceptively short tale, it is extremely important to understand that we are encountering a sense of "history" here that differs sharply from the chronological temporality which governs the rest of *The Literatures of Colonial America*. Notice, for example, that all of the other sections of the anthology are organized according to a linear logic, whereby the order of the authors is determined by their date of birth. In "Before Columbus: Native American Cultures," however, there are no authors listed, no dates given. As we will see, it is exceedingly difficult to establish a correspondence between the events in the stories and the chronological time frame that the dominant white culture ordinarily associates with "history."

Perhaps it is best to begin, then, by abandoning the linear logic of colonial temporality, embracing instead a non-linear approach that will lead us back to "the lore of former times" (Castillo and Schweitzer 2001: 17). What I propose is a critical narrative that begins in the present and moves into the precolonial period, using "The Origin of Stories" as a kind of literary map. By following the storyline backwards through Seneca history, a new critical narrative will emerge that establishes a point of temporal origin very different from the one cited in the anthology's bibliography, which states that "The Origin of Stories" comes from a collection edited by Arthur C. Parker entitled *Seneca Myths and Folktales*, published in 1989. Parker, who had Seneca blood but was not an enrolled member of the tribe (although he was later adopted into the Bear Clan of the Seneca), collected this particular story in 1903. The tale was told to him in the Seneca dialect by a Gākāā, or storyteller, living in an upstate New York village that the Seneca had occupied for hundreds of years (Fenton 1989: xi-xv). And yet, as we will see, internal evidence from "The Origin of Stories" suggests that the events in the tale date back far earlier than 1903, when it was first recorded in alphabetic form.

Despite the story's familiar format, neatly framed by the margins of the white page, students need to be aware of the transformations, translations, and cultural shifts that inevitably distort the Seneca oral tradition. Originally, the tale would have been performed in the intimate confines of a longhouse, surrounded by extended family, during the long winter months. According to Parker, the Seneca followed this ritual because, during the season of hibernation, "no animal should become offended by man's boasting of triumph over beasts" and because "to listen to stories in summer made people lazy... All the world stops work when a good story is told" (Parker 1989: xxxii). And while it may be impossible to recreate this setting in an anthology, any attempt to interpret the story must begin by acknowledging what has been lost.

N. Scott Momaday's remarkable essay "The Arrowmaker" provides a helpful commentary for better understanding the oral tradition. Until very recently, Momaday notes, the Native American oral tradition "has been the private possession of a few, a tenuous link in that most ancient chain of language." Because "the tradition itself... has always been but one generation removed from extinction... our sense of the verbal dimension is very keen, and we are aware of something in the nature of language that is at once perilous and compelling" (Momaday 1997: 10). In a sense, a great deal has been

lost by reading "The Origin of Stories" in written form, for students and teachers invariably miss out on the messages a good storyteller conveys beyond mere words—the electric rush of excitement and responsibility one feels when linked by the oral performance to "that most ancient chain of language." On the other hand, the addition of Native American stories to this anthology represents an important opportunity to deepen our collective memory beyond the temporal borders of the nation-state and to create greater respect for the original occupants of these continents.

In order to plumb the depths of Iroquois memory, it may prove helpful to abandon the familiar time frame of the Gregorian calendar and to consider how historical memory works within "The Origin of Stories." This evocative Seneca tale – a story about the power of storytelling – functions as a literary compass, pointing towards an elusive moment of origin identified in the story as "the old days." Whereas a historian would be interested in assigning a chronological date to the culture identified as "the old-time people" in the story, or might even question the historical accuracy of this source because of its mythical qualities, I want to argue here for a literary history that fully accepts the Seneca view of "stories that came forth from the rock" to edify a young orphan, who marries the rock's granddaughter. Like all orally transmitted stories, this tale undoubtedly has many variant versions with multiple meanings. At one point, the tale refers to the cliff as a "standing rock," which may refer to the Oneida, who were known by "the national name of 'Standing Rock'" (Fenton 1989: 62). Given the focus of this section of the anthology – mapping the discursive terrain "Before Columbus" – I will focus here on interpreting the talking cliff as a mythical medium that transmits the "lore of former times."

To locate the "origin of stories" requires a form of literary archeology in which the many layers of storytelling here are studied carefully, both individually and in relation to one another. The first layer, less obvious than the others, always takes place in the immediate present, as the reader opens the book and imperfectly experiences Seneca oral tradition. Given the absence of a Seneca Găkăă, the storyteller here can perhaps be thought of as the literary character "Gaqka, or Crow," an orphan who sets off on a vision quest to give his life meaning (Fenton 1989: ixx). The second stratum, far more clear, becomes evident at the end of the tale when Gaqka, his scars healed and his family ties restored, returns to his village to relate the many stories he learned on his journey. The origin of these stories can be traced back to a deeper, mythological layer of the tale in which these stories were told to him by both the standing rock and his granddaughter, Gaqka's bride. The standing rock does not, however, constitute the original source of the stories. For, as the tale clearly specifies, "the rock spoke and began to relate wonder stories of things that happened in the old days." These "wonder stories" are among the oldest in tribal memory. It is significant, I believe, that they are told here by the land itself, rather than a member of the Seneca tribe. For the tale implicitly suggests that there exists an even deeper layer of storytelling, which perhaps predates the culture we now know as "Seneca."

Difficulties abound, of course, in attempting to assign a historical date to when "the rock spoke" or the "wonder stories" it related. Before turning to the

Iroquois sources, it is informative to study how Western scholars handle the problem of precolonial Seneca history. Although Native peoples have occupied the Iroquois homeland for thousands of years, anthropologist Dean R. Snow notes that “many modern students of the Northern Iroquoians are reluctant to use national terms like ‘Seneca’ or ‘Mohawk’ for periods prior to AD 1500” (Snow 1994: 11). This date is associated with the creation of the *Haudenosaunee* (meaning, literally, “the whole house” or, metaphorically, the five national fires that made up the Great League of Peace and Power). The origin of the *Haudenosaunee* can be traced back to a story, known as the Deganawida epic, which recounts how the historical figures of Hiawatha (Ayonhwathah) and the Peacemaker (Deganawida) bring together the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca to form the Iroquois Confederation (the Tuscarora would later come to be the sixth nation to join the Confederation) (Snow 1994: 58–9). Daniel Richter, a very fine historian of the Iroquois with a healthy respect for the power of stories, writes that “the isolation of warring communities was apparently one factor that caused an originally common proto-Iroquois speech to develop after AD 1000 into the distinct languages of Mohawk, Oneidas, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Susquehannock, and perhaps several others” (Richter 1992: 15). For anthropologists and historians, “Seneca” identity is thus predicated on the development of a distinct dialect and culture, the period before this being “proto-Iroquoian.” “The Origin of Stories,” on the other hand, seems to suggest a much deeper form of collective memory, which can be traced back to the “old-time people.”

It is informative to compare “The Origin of Stories” to another Iroquoian account by the Tuscaroran historian David Cusick, whose *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* (1848) delineates the profound depths of tribal memory. Writing in a hybrid style that blends Western calendrical dates with Iroquoian history, Cusick traces the origins of the five nations. “Perhaps about 1,250 years before Columbus discovered America [ca. 250] and about fifty winters since the people left the mountain,” Cusick writes, “the five families became numerous and extended their settlements, as the country had been exposed to the invasion of monsters” (p. 22). As Arnold Krupat has recently argued in *Red Matters* (2002), the presence of “monsters” in Native accounts too often leads such documents to be dismissed as “myth” or as “historically inaccurate.” “The history of America,” Krupat insists, “must no longer be written without a recognition that there are histories of America... Regardless of the presence or absence of factual accuracy in some Native histories, these narratives nonetheless have every legitimate claim to be taken as ‘real history’” (Krupat 2002: 74–5; my emphasis). My point, then, is not that Cusick’s historical dates are factually accurate, but that the depth of memory in his narrative provides a sense of scale that perhaps helps to locate the “origin” of the story.

Taking the Iroquois’ intellectual sovereignty seriously, I want to connect a moment from very early in Cusick’s *Ancient History* to the standing rock layer of storytelling in “The Origin of Stories.” Writing about primordial history, when animals and humans were first formed, Cusick notes that this period comes down to later generations in

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the form of rock art: "The good mind now accomplishes the works of creation . . . and [the bad mind] attempted to enclose all the animals of game in the earth, so as to deprive them from mankind; but the good mind released them . . . (the animals were dispersed, and traces of them were made on the rocks near the cave where it was closed)" (Cusick 1848: 14). This rock art, like the "wonder stories" of the "old-time people" told by the cliff, suggests an earlier period of tribal history (referred to in the tale as "former times") whose origins lie in deepest antiquity.

As N. Scott Momaday observes in the opening quotation to this essay, scholars of American literature need to find ways to interpret the stories encoded in rock art or, in this case, related by cliffs, if we are to extend the temporal borders of the field to include precolonial Native texts. I believe that this can be accomplished by studying what I am calling the *transtemporal* aspects of these texts or the way that Native American literature transcends Western conceptions of periodization to integrate moments separated by vast periods of time. More specifically, both Cusick's history and "The Origin of Stories" seem to connect what anthropologists or historians term "proto-Iroquoian" cultures with contemporary tribal memory. These two versions of Iroquoian history appear to establish a link between the Seneca and the ancient cultures that occupied the same land. Furthermore, this connection to deep antiquity becomes associated with a redemptive form of healing, clearly seen here by the fact that the standing rock's "wonder stories" work to help cure Gaqka's scars, both physical (wounds to his body) and spiritual (the wounds of being cut off from his tribe).

This metaphor of curing also provides a meaningful insight into gender roles in Iroquoian society. Part of Gaqka's "wound" is the fact that he is not linked to any *ohwachira* or lineage traced through the female line. This tradition originates with the primordial myth of Sky Woman, who descended from the heavens to give birth to the Iroquois people (Snow 1994: 2–5). In stark contrast to their counterparts in colonial European culture, Iroquois women were dominant figures morally, economically, and also politically (Richter 1992: 20). This power is evident in that Gaqka asks his bride's mother, the head of the family, for permission to marry. The standing rock's granddaughter, furthermore, plays a fundamental role in Gaqka's healing. Note, for example, that it is the power of the granddaughter's stories, coupled with the older stories told by the standing rock, which "removes all the scars from [his] face and body."

If we take seriously the idea that stories are extremely powerful artifacts that can establish meaningful connections between different cultures occupying the same land, then perhaps "The Origin of Stories" offers a sense of hope that non-Native readers might learn to see a deeper connection to the continent and the cultures that have occupied it since time immemorial. This bond should not, of course, erase the painful awareness of the horrific violence that led to European cultures taking possession of the Americas. Like Craig Womack and Robert Warrior, I am not saying that Native cultures should be assimilated into "American literature," but rather that we need to theorize a far more complicated understanding of American literary history which

recognizes the primacy of the Native canon. This acknowledgment of multiple canons, in turn, allows us to interpret this story not by comparing it to William Bradford or Bartolomé de Las Casas, but in relation to traditional Indian literature which takes the form of oral traditions, wampum, mythological history, and rock art. The Native American canon, however, is also clearly linked to other traditions – French, Spanish, British, and African American – through their shared (albeit contentious) relationship to the land, all of which together delineates what might be called the literary geography of America. And while the history of these cultural collisions was often tragically violent, I want to call attention to the redemptive power that this story embodies. Within the narrative framework of the tale, the stories that Gaqka receives from the rock transform him from an orphaned outcast into a respected member of the tribe. Analogously, I want to suggest that this powerful Seneca story about establishing bonds between temporally distant cultures and about healing old social wounds can help to mend the break between “American” and “Native American” literatures.

The *Popol Vuh*

Whereas “The Origin of Stories” provides a sense of the ancient and complex nature of Native American oral traditions, the Maya text known as the *Popol Vuh* (or “Council Book”) offers a critical insight into the long history of Native American writing on these continents. As Elizabeth Hill Boone notes in *Writing Without Words*, most scholars are still confined by a narrow definition of “writing” which only recognizes the legitimacy of “alphabetic writing, normally referring to one of the modern alphabetic scripts” (Boone 1994: 3). Boone argues for a more inclusive paradigm that fully acknowledges the diverse scribal forms of Mesoamerica by defining writing as “the communication of relatively specific ideas in a conventional manner by means of permanent marks” (ibid: 15). This shift is exceedingly important in terms of rethinking the space and time of American literature, for as Joyce Marcus points out in *Mesoamerican Writing Systems*, the hieroglyphic tradition can be traced back to two stelae at Monte Albán from 500–300 BCE (Marcus 1992: 41). The challenge of recovering precolonial Native American literature is, therefore, formidable given that Americanists need to begin by filling in the two thousand year gap between the origins of Mesoamerican writing and the arrival of Europeans on the continents. The *Popol Vuh* provides a helpful starting point for this difficult critical endeavor. For although the alphabetic version of the text was inscribed by a Spanish friar sometime around 1703, it is possible to trace the history of the book much further back into Mesoamerican literary history.

Like “The Origin of Stories,” the *Popol Vuh* contains many layers of history. While the alphabetic text was written down during the period of Spanish colonization, many of the events in the second half of the book can be traced back to the early postclassic period (900–1200), while events in the opening section take place in mythological

time. Although it is correct to identify the work as Maya, it is equally important to note that many other cultures have indirectly shaped the text. The excerpt included in *The Literatures of Colonial America* from the opening of the *Popol Vuh*, for example, demonstrates how the Christian and Maya origin myths intertwine. This mixing of cultures is not, however, confined to the Spanish era. To provide a sense of this cultural syncretism in both the colonial and precolonial periods, I will focus on two characters in particular from the opening section: the Heart of Heaven, influenced by the Christian conception of the holy trinity, and Gucumatz, the Quiché incarnation of the Plumed Serpent, a figure which can be traced back into the deepest parts of Mesoamerican memory.

Of all the Mesoamerican written works in this fecund tradition, the *Popol Vuh* garners the greatest respect. This is due in part to the magnificence of Maya culture – the ruins of Palenque, for example, with its towering pyramids and intricate hieroglyphic texts, stand in silent testimony to the majesty of classical Maya architecture from 200 to 900. The precolonial Maya legacy ranges from Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán peninsula, to Palenque in the Chiapas region of what is now southern Mexico, to Tikal in the rainforests of Guatemala, to Copán in the mountains of Honduras where the culture still thrives – there are today more than 4 million Maya in Guatemala, a significant number of whom still practice ancient forms of calendrical prophecy (Tedlock 1982: xiii). The distinguished reputation of the *Popol Vuh* also stems from its literary and historical quality. Spanning the period from the dawn of time to Spanish colonization, this Mesoamerican masterpiece contains a wide array of material, from a mythological journey through the underworld, to a detailed account of postclassic history, to a genealogy of Quiché Maya kings spanning almost half a millennium. Adrián Recinos fittingly describes the poetic style of the *Popol Vuh* as possessing “the beauty of a novel and the austerity of history” (Recinos 1991: 75).

The English translation included in *The Literatures of Colonial America* derives from a copy of the *Popol Vuh* made by a Dominican friar, Father Francisco Ximénez, between 1701 and 1703 in Chichicastenango, built on the ancient town of Quiché. Ximénez copied and translated an older text, written in an alphabetic form of Quiché Maya by an unnamed Indian between 1554 and 1558 (this older copy has been lost). There is no doubt, however, that this earlier version was based on much older, precolonial copies of the *Popol Vuh* that were obviously not written in the alphabet of the colonizer but inscribed in the Maya tradition of codices, which included painted pictures and hieroglyphs accompanied by stories passed down through the oral tradition (Tedlock 1985: 25–30). (See fig. 8.2 for an example of a painted codex).

To locate the “origin of stories” for the *Popol Vuh*, however, entails passing through a wall of fire known as the Spanish conquest. In 1524, Pedro de Alvarado conquered the Quiché, seizing their kings and executing them before a terrorized nation. Alvarado, in a letter to Hernán Cortés, wrote that “for the good and peace of this land, I burned them and ordered the city burned and leveled to the ground” (Recinos 1991: 4). On the other side of this cultural genocide, however, lies the



FIGURE 8.2 A scene from the Dresden Codex, a precolonial Maya painted book from the early thirteenth century, depicting a deluge of water streaming from the open jaws of a serpent in what has been interpreted as an apocalyptic image of the end of the world (Sharer 1994: 520-1).

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wondrous history of precolonial Maya culture. Since it is virtually impossible to locate a distinct point of origin for the *Popol Vuh*, I want to begin with a passage from the opening of the narrative which functions as a kind of literary lens that will allow us to see back into the distant past of Mesoamerica. Dennis Tedlock, in a fuller and more detailed translation of the opening section, includes the sentence (written presumably by the unnamed Maya author who inscribed the 1554–8 copy): “There is the original book and ancient writing, but the one who reads and assesses it has a hidden identity. It takes a long performance and account to complete the lighting of all the sky-earth” (Tedlock 1985: 63). The existence of such “ancient writing” has been widely documented. The bishop of Chiapas, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, wrote in his *Apologética Historia de las Indias* about how the Indians formed “their large books with such keen and subtle skills that we might say our writings were not an improvement over theirs” (Recinos 1991: 8). In the 1550s, Alonso de Zorita visited Las Casas and wrote that he learned about the Quiché political system from “paintings they had of their ancient times, of more than 800 years and from accounts of very old people” (Recinos 1991: 12). As Tedlock’s translation suggests, the history of the Quiché’s “ancient times” was preserved in the form of an “original book” or painted codex that would have been accompanied by a “long performance” passed down through the oral tradition.

It is important to understand, then, that when the alphabetic version of the *Popol Vuh* was written down in 1554–8, it represented the crossing of two very old and powerful cultures – for the Maya, at that point, had been writing their own history for more than a thousand years. The brief excerpt in *The Literatures of Colonial America* (the full translation is more than 130 pages long) offers an important opportunity to study the cultural syncretism of the Maya, both at the moment of colonization and five hundred years earlier during the postclassic period. The influence of Christianity can be seen in a line like “Let there be light,” which is obviously borrowed from Genesis. The character called the Heart of Heaven, who is present at the moment of creation (Castillo and Schweitzer 2001: 20), clearly represents a Maya translation of the holy trinity: “The first is called Caculhá. The second is Chipi-Caculhá. The third is Raxa-Caculhá. And these three are the Heart of Heaven” (ibid). The colonial influence in the opening chapter of the *Popol Vuh* has led some commentators to dismiss this section as inauthentic. The respected nineteenth-century ethnologist Adolf Bandelier wrote, for example, “It appears to be, for the first chapter, an evident fabrication or, at least, accommodation of the Indian mythology to Christian notions, a pious fraud”; Bandelier goes on to praise the rest of the manuscript as “the most valuable work for the aboriginal history and ethnology of Central America” (Recinos 1991: 19).

The volatile question of missionary influence and the enduring presence of Christianity in Native American life must be approached carefully. On the one hand, as Jace Weaver points out, “In the process by which Natives were dispossessed, Christian missionaries were often no less culpable than those wielding rifle or plow.” And yet, as Weaver goes on to observe, it would be a mistake to see Native communities as merely passive victims rather than dynamic participants in “a living faith.” “Native Christians,” Weaver concludes, “give authority to scripture specifically because it resonates with their experi-

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ence . . . They recognize Mary, the mother of Jesus, because she is la Virgen de Guadalupe, or White Buffalo Calf Woman, or Corn Mother, or La Llorona refusing to be consoled at the death of her child" (Weaver 1998: 3, 19). In the case of the Maya, they adapted to the violence of the Spanish Inquisition by incorporating elements of the colonizers' religion, without necessarily giving up older traditions. As Robert Sharer observes, "Maya beliefs and rituals often went underground . . . Although baptized and thus officially 'converted,' many Maya . . . could 'accommodate' their conquerors by seeming to accept the Christian concepts, all the while maintaining their old beliefs under a new guise." The Maya, Sharer continues, "had long worshiped the image of the cross as a symbol for 'the tree of life,' the sacred ceiba supporting the heavens" and therefore "could readily accept the Christian cross, though they often worshiped it for its ancient Maya connotation" (Sharer 1994: 518). It would be inaccurate, however, to see Christianity as nothing more than a veneer. Since the sixteenth century, the two religions have become so inextricably intertwined in Maya society that to separate them would be to oversimplify and to distort the historical reality of how cultures collide, conflict, and coalesce.

It is important, therefore, to resist the academic desire to recover a "pure" essence of Native American identity as it existed before Alvarado, Cartier, and the Pilgrims colonized the continents. As I will demonstrate by focusing on the figure of Gucumatz, from the opening pages of the *Popol Vuh*, Native societies have never existed in hermetic isolation, but have always been engaged in complex negotiations with other cultures.

This can be seen in the middle section of the narrative when, after a long mythological account of the hero twins' journey through the underworld, the *Popol Vuh* suddenly shifts to the historical era, known to anthropologists as the early postclassic period (900–1200). The Plumed Serpent – known as Kukulcan among the Yucatec Maya and Quetzalcoatl to the Nahuatl speakers of the Mexican valley – is a deity whose origins date back to the deepest antiquity of Mesoamerican culture. While difficult to measure, the temporal depth of the story can be formulated in chronological time by noting that the Plumed Serpent is found depicted in Olmec pictographs as early as 1000 BCE (Coe 1968: 114–15). To invoke an indigenous standard, the Maya believed that the Plumed Serpent presided over the dawn of creation. The cult of Gucumatz came to the Maya relatively late, however, through contact with other Mesoamerican cultures. The *Popol Vuh* recounts the moment of Quiché origins associated with the time when a delegation of leaders set off for a kingdom in the east ruled by Nacxit, a Nahuatl title held by the king named Quetzalcoatl, to "reclaim lordship" (Tedlock 1985: 179, 315). There has been a great deal of speculation among anthropologists and archeologists about the place where the Quiché lords went to be crowned. A likely possibility is Chichén Itzá, a large capital where Toltec rulers from central Mexico lorded over Maya subjects who had earlier mixed with conquerors from the Yucatán (ca. 850) (Sharer 1994: 424–32). Chichén Itzá is noted for its stunning architecture and, more pertinent to our search for the origin of Gucumatz's story, as a spiritual center for the cult of the Plumed Serpent.

It is interesting to observe that although the Quiché speak Maya, they do not trace their cultural identity back to the classic Maya (200–900) of Tikal, Palenque, or Copán.

but instead associate their emergence with the moment of contact with Gucumatz: "And this was the beginning and growth of the Quiché, when the Lord Plumed Serpent made the signs of greatness" (Tedlock 1985: 186). This image is beautifully mirrored in the opening section of the *Popol Vuh*, where the Plumed Serpent helps create the world out of primordial darkness. This connection between the postclassic and a still older sense of history, written in mythological terms – "Only the Creator, the Maker, Tepeu, Gucumatz, the Forefathers, were in the water surrounded by light" – offers an important insight into how the Maya conceived of "history" as cyclical. In this case, the primordial birth of humankind overseen by Gucumatz foretells the birth of the Quiché Maya in historical time, when they encounter the cult of the Plumed Serpent. It is also interesting to note that, like "The Origin of Stories," the Quichés' sense of identity is not "pure" but derives from contact with other cultures. In this case, the postclassic capital of Chichén Itzá represents a cultural florescence, when three of the great Mesoamerican cultures – the Yucatec, Maya, and Mexica or Nahuatl – all came together around the spiritual center of the Plumed Serpent.

I would argue that a careful study of the Maya has potentially important implications for a *transnational* and *transtemporal* paradigm of American studies. Rather than projecting the contemporary borders of the United States backwards through time, which anachronistically cuts Mesoamerica out of Native American literary history, Americanists need to become more aware of the masterpieces of this exceedingly rich tradition. This is not, perhaps, as difficult as it would at first appear. The idea of "America," for example, has long stood as a symbol for the mixing and interaction of diverse cultures. What the *Popol Vuh* demonstrates is that this cultural interaction has been characteristic of the continent since long before Cortés marched on Tenochtlán. The Maya conception of cyclical temporality, with its intricate awareness of the relationship between deep antiquity and the present, also offers an important corrective for past conceptions of American studies with its problematic prehistoric/historic periodization. Whereas the linear chronology of the European colonizers tends to ignore all that came before the moment of "discovery," adopting a Maya understanding of cyclical history might allow Americanists to see myth, antiquity, and the present as part of an ongoing continuum.

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