Modern Language Association of America

Research and Scholarship in Composition

Lil Brannon, Anne Ruggles Gere, Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson, John Trimbur, Art Young, Series Editors

1. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran, eds. *Writing, Teaching, and Learning in the Disciplines*. 1992.
2. Cynthia L. Selfe and Susan Hilligoss, eds. *Literacy and Computers: The Complications of Teaching and Learning with Technology*. 1993.
3. John Clifford and John Schilb, eds. *Writing Theory and Critical Theory*. 1994.
4. Edward M. White, William D. Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri, eds. *Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, Practices*. 1996.
5. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnnella E. Butler, eds. *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. 1997.

Writing in Multicultural Settings

Edited by
Carol Severino,
Juan C. Guerra, and
Johnnella E. Butler

The Modern Language Association of America
New York 1997

Teaching American Indian Students: Interpreting the Rhetorics of Silence

Michelle Grijalva

> *I can remember reading that the robins were heading south for winter, but I knew that all winter the robins were around Laguna. It took me a long time to figure out what was going on. I worried for quite a while about the robins because they didn't leave in the winter, not realizing that the textbooks were written in Boston.*
>
> —Leslie Silko

Leslie Silko's anecdote about Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico highlights a perceptual problem facing many Indian children on reservations in the Southwest as they struggle to master English and literature from textbooks that ignore cultural and geographic difference. I was acutely aware of this problem of perspective when I began teaching comparative literature and writing to precollege Hopi and Navajo students at the University of Arizona. The summer of 1993 was the sixth and last summer teaching sophomores, juniors, and seniors from Tuba City High School, because our grant from the Josiah Macy Foundation ended.

Tuba City is about 350 miles north of Tucson on the Navajo Reservation, which encircles the Hopi Reservation in northeastern Arizona: "The 25,000 square mile Navajo Reservation, about the size of West Virginia, extends into Utah and New Mexico, though the majority of its land is in Arizona. There, the Navajo and Hopi share land for hunting, gathering, sheep grazing, and religious purposes. And there, most Hopi make their homes on the three stone fingers called First, Second, and Third Mesas" (Hillerman 59). The Hopi refer to their homeland as Tuwanasavit, "The Center of the Universe." Hopi and Navajo rites, language, and traditions are extremely different. Navajo is an Athabascan language; Hopi is Uto-Aztecan. Ranching is very important for the Navajo, who build their homes far apart; Hopi homes, built of red stone, are clustered around a central plaza. Both tribes believe their homelands to be sacred ground, however, and both have complex cultural foundations and rich oral traditions that begin in time immemorial.

Tuba City is not your typical city at all. Rather, it is a ragtag mixture of trailers and mobile homes, a hospital, a police station, a trading post, a high school, a junior high school, an elementary school, a couple of hotels, prefabricated houses, old stone buildings left over from government projects, a Mexican restaurant, and a few fast-food places—all scattered about in no apparent pattern. The wind blows ceaselessly in the afternoons, raising a fine dust that knits the town together.

My first visit to Tuba City was in July 1988. I had been asked to design and teach an advanced English course for students who would be attending second-session summer school at the University of Arizona. The course was an experiment initiated by Bio-Prep, the high school honors program, which prepared students for advanced courses in math and science. These courses were going well, but the students were uninterested and performing poorly in their English classes. Manny Begay, director of the Bio-Prep program, believed that students would benefit from a rigorous English class at a major university. Not only would the students be able to concentrate on one course, but they would also see what it was like to live in a dormitory, visit a large city, and attend a university.

Because I had never taught high school students before, I was apprehensive about the choice of books, but I knew I wanted to emphasize American Indian literature. I visited the reservations so I could get a feel for the land, and I believe the visit helped me better understand my students. Specific mountains and landscapes play vital parts in the oral traditions of the Hopi and Navajo. The San Francisco Peaks near Flagstaff are considered holy by both tribes. Called Dook 'o'oosliid by the Navajo, these mountains mark the western boundary of their homeland. For the Hopi, the sacred mountain is Nuvatekiaqui, gateway to the home of the kachinas, spirit beings that link the Hopi to their creator. "The *kachinas* create the clouds and bring rain, fertility, and all blessings. They live among the Hopi during the half-year between planting and harvesting, then return to the spirit world through the mountain" (Hillerman 60). These mountains and the long expanse of a Navajo sheep camp invested the Native literature I had studied with a vitality that is often missing from the dusty pages of ethnographic research reports. To see the Hopi mesas was to understand

finally why the Hopi language sounds angular and hard-cut; it mirrors a way of life cast in gray stone and red rock.

I decided to visit the acting superintendent of curriculum while I was there. Even though I was not expected, I was graciously received. I showed him two books I was thinking of using for the course: *Earth Fire: A Hopi Legend of the Sunset Crater Eruption* and *Between Sacred Mountains: Navajo Stories and Lessons from the Land*. A Navajo man, the superintendent was kind and patient, but he was concerned about my choice of texts. He said candidly, "I'm sorry, but the students will not read these books. Maybe they'll peek at them around midnight in their dorms, but they won't read them. They're ashamed of their cultures." I was alarmed by his comment. American Indian literature was not being taught in the high school, even though in 1988 ninety-seven percent of Tuba High's 1400 students from Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah were Native American, giving it the largest Native American student body of any high school in the country. I emphasized that this sense of shame had to be explored, and a starting point could be using American Indian literature in the classroom. He agreed but wondered if it would work. So did I.

Underlying this sense of shame is a long and complex history. To understand the psychological, political, legal, and cultural dilemmas faced by many American Indians, one must understand the historical and contemporary consequences of conquest, subjugation, and colonialism, especially from an indigenous perspective—clearly a daunting task but a mandatory one.

We might begin by examining the history of Indians and boarding schools. In 1879, the Carlisle School for Indians, the prototype of the Indian boarding school, was established, the brainchild of Richard Pratt, whose pedagogical strategy was to "kill the Indian and save the man." Pratt solicited hundreds of Indian children for the school. By the late 1880s, well-intentioned yet misguided American educators were compelled to "civilize" Indian children by removing them from their homes, enrolling them in boarding schools (many of which were designed on the Carlisle model) hundreds of miles away from their families, prohibiting them from speaking any language but English, denying them visits home for five years, demeaning their tribal traditions, cutting their hair, discarding their traditional clothes, and teaching them that to be civilized was to deny their cultural heritage and language. The fine documentary *In the White Man's Image* details the suffering, oppression, and dehumanization of those who survived the "noble experiment." However, killing the Indian and saving the man was an unprecedented failure, producing countless individuals who

felt trapped between cultures—liminal men and women shunned by the dominant society and isolated from tribal traditions. Finally, in the 1930s, the experiment was abandoned, but the insidious portrayal of the Indian as backward and inarticulate still flows in the undercurrents of our educational systems.

At Tuba City High School in 1988, literature was indeed being taught, but the curriculum clearly denied that Indian traditions, cultures, or languages had any literary or artistic merit. The emphasis was on the classics. Roger Dunsmore, the scholar in residence for the Arizona Humanities Council at Tuba High for 1988–89, explains that "the students were fed a steady diet of Anglo standards—*Beowulf*, Shakespeare, Wordsworth—and most had little sense of their own literature or history" (36). Dismayed at the lack of Indian literature at the high school, he met with the English department to discuss including Native American works in the curriculum. He encountered staunch resistance:

> There were teachers who said openly that to bring in the Native literature was an attempt to take us all back to the cave. "We all started in caves!" was the exact comment. And when asked about the environmental wisdom contained in that literature, we were told by this teacher: "We don't need it. When we ruin this planet, we'll get into our spaceships and go to another, and when we ruin that one, we'll go to another, and when we ruin that one, we'll go to another, and another, and another. That's what technology is for." (38)

Clearly, the atmosphere at Tuba High was not conducive to teaching American Indian literature.

Because my class was taught at the University of Arizona as English 195, I had the freedom to choose the texts and films. Entitled Places of People in the Landscape, the course emphasized the connection between identity and place. I used a variety of books to place Hopi and Navajo literature into a world canon. Besides *Earth Fire* (Malotki) and *Between Sacred Mountains* (Bingham and Bingham), we read Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, Yukio Mishima's *The Sound of Waves*, and N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and viewed a series of videos: *Iisaw: Hopi Coyote Stories* (Evers), with Helen Sekaquaptewa; *Running on the Edge of the Rainbow: Laguna Stories and Poems* (Evers), featuring Leslie Silko; *In This Song I Walk: Navajo Stories and Songs* (Evers); *Natwaniwa: A Hopi Philosophical Statement* (Evers); and *Itam Hakim, Hopiit: We the Hopi* (Masayesva).

In the first class, I had thirteen seniors accompanied by Percy Piestewa, their friend, guardian, and counselor. Percy grew up in Tuba City, works at the junior high there, and often travels with students as their chaperone. It was her job to live with them in the dormitory and help them adjust to life in the big city. Several of them had never been away from home. All the students could understand their native language, Hopi or Navajo, but most could not speak it. A few, however, were fluent speakers of their native language as well as English. For all, writing English was harder than speaking it. Some students clipped the ends off English words when they spoke. They explained that this pronunciation is considered a "reservation accent" and is mocked by Anglo teachers at the high school.

I was not sure how to begin the course. The students were incredibly reticent, enveloped in a silence that seemed impenetrable. They did not want to open up and certainly did not want to talk about their cultural traditions. In my research, I had found no truly useful guides or texts that would help me teach American Indian literature to American Indian students, so I decided to tell them about my own cultural experience. I asked, "Do you know what a *curandera* is?" They shook their heads, but at least I had their attention. A tall, lanky Hopi boy asked quietly, "What language is that?"

"Spanish," I replied. "A *curandera* is a healer, a medicine woman. In Yaqui, she is called an *hitebi*. My father's godmother was a healer, a *curandera*, and she lived out at Old Pascua." I pointed northwest, explaining that Old Pascua was the village where we celebrated our sacred Easter ceremonies. "When I was a child, I was an *angelita*, a little angel, and on Holy Saturday morning, all the *angelitas*, the deer dancer and singers, and the *matachin* dancers gathered on the steps of the church to defend it against the evil *chapayekas*. I had to dress all in white—all the kids dressed in white—and my mother braided white roses into my hair. We stood in front of the church and threw sacred flowers, *sewam*, at the evil *chapayekas*, ending their reign of terror. They had taken over the village after Lent and tormented every living creature. Each *chapayeka* dancer made his own mask, and each mask was the incarnation of evil, although only the best and most virtuous men were dressed as *chapayekas*."

"What did they make the masks out of?" asked the same boy. "Different hides," I answered. "It depended on the man, but there was a sacred way of hunting for the animal." The students murmured softly, while the student and another Hopi boy took turns explaining, "You have to pray to the animal you are hunting, thanking it for its life, and you have to have a clear mind and good heart when hunting."

"That's true in our tradition, too," I replied. "My grandfather always said that you have to hunt with *tu'i hiapsimak*, a good heart. Now that I think about it, my grandmother used to say the same thing—that you have to cook with a good heart, *tu'i hiapsimak*." This made the girls giggle, and one Navajo girl commented, "Our traditions sound similar. My grandfather's a singer, and during a sing—" She was cut off by a Hopi girl who asked quietly, "Is that when they cure someone who's sick?" The Navajo girl nodded her head and continued, "You have to have really good thoughts and a good heart or you can mess up the cure." Then she asked if we had singers like that in my tradition. "Well, that takes me back to the *curandera*, who is a powerful healer. If the healer is a man, then he is a *curandero*. My grandmother used to tell me this story about a Yaqui *curandero*." I proceeded to tell the story, and they slowly began telling theirs.

"You know," I encouraged them after they told a few of their stories, "there's a lot of wisdom hidden in stories like these. They are a lot of fun, but they also teach us a great deal, don't you think?" One boy, who spoke Navajo fluently and English carefully, explained, "My grandfather's always telling us stories. My uncle is really good at *yana* stories." Puzzled, I asked, "What's a yaha story?" The class laughed. He clarified, "No, no, *yana* story y-a-n-a. *Yana*." When I couldn't get the pronunciation, he said, "Like banana, you know, *yana* like banana."

"Oh, OK, I got it. So, what are they?" Again, laughter. "Stories about witches, skin walkers, spooky stuff like that." "Well," I said, "Sounds like you guys know a lot of stories. Why don't you write some up for your first assignment?" The students were excited but startled. "Really?" "Yes. I'd like to read them. In fact, I'd love to hear them too. Maybe by the end of the semester, each of you can tell the class one of your favorite stories." The students agreed, but clearly they were surprised that I would not only tell stories from my tradition but also encourage them to tell stories from theirs.

But inexplicably on the following Monday morning the class was beyond quiet or even hesitant; they were encased in a silence that bordered on collective solitude. It was as if they were engaged in a conspiracy of silence that held them together or would somehow protect them. Protect them from what? from me? What was happening here? The students refused to talk. I was stumped. Class ended and we had got nowhere. Finally, Percy confided in me.

Over the weekend, a drunk Navajo boy, a student from another program and another dormitory, somehow turned up on our students' floor. He behaved obnoxiously and attached himself to the group, though they didn't know him or want him around. The boy couldn't

hold his liquor, and he was sick all over the floor and in the main study hall. Since it happened on Saturday night, no one could be found to clean up the mess on Sunday. In the July heat and simmering humidity, the stench became unbearable. But far worse than the smell was the shamefulness of the boy's actions. The Tuba City students couldn't believe what he had done, and they certainly didn't condone his drunkenness. But what bothered them the most was that other people in the dormitory acted as if our students were to blame for this stranger's outrageous acts. Because the Tuba City students were Indian, they were all scorned and made to feel guilty; it didn't matter whether they were Hopi or Navajo. Cutting remarks were made, and it was the first time that many of the students felt the sting of racism. In the eyes of the other dormitory residents, they were all "drunken savages." The treatment was irrational and cruel. Percy was furious. Our students wanted to go home.

It was interesting and ironic how quickly and categorically Indians were stereotyped by the dormitory community. Our students were victims of an interpretation. They were told who and what they were, and their sense of internal integrity and autonomy was negated. The other dormitory residents were, albeit unknowingly, participating on a small scale in a long tradition of domination and dehumanization in which non-Indians have spoken for indigenous peoples.

As I surveyed our situation in the dorm, I felt that if our students returned home, then my students and I would also be participating in this history of subjugation. Following James Clifford's lead, we chose to assert our own ethnographic authority, that is, we refused to accept either the dormitory residents' invectives or Pratt's misguided dictum of killing the Indian and saving the man. In his essay "Man Made of Words" Momaday addresses the question "What is an American Indian?" His answer is an appraisal of the relation between language and experience:

> It seems to me that in a certain sense we are all made of words; that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of a verbal dimension . . . An Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself. And it is a moral idea for it accounts for the way in which he reacts to other men and to the world in general. And that idea, in order to be realized completely, has to be expressed. (162)

Momaday's essay is a difficult one; arranged by juxtaposition, it reads like a spiderweb, with many different threads radiating from a central core, so the narrative is nonlinear, and the essential points can converge in many different ways as the pattern falls into place. Momaday weaves together pieces of stories, strands of memories, and evocations of landscapes into a powerful analysis of the imagination.

We talked about his essay in class the next day and came to understand that identity, like a story, can be considered a rhetorical construction—it is, among other things, a performance that constantly changes, playing itself out in "our daily lives." Consequently, identity for us became "conjunctural, not essential" (James Clifford 11), and we learned that you must "tell your story in pieces, as it is" (Edward Said, qtd. in James Clifford 11). The way to tell our stories in pieces, we learned from good storytellers like Momaday, is to use multiple voices, personas, and genres. Learning this lesson necessitated an intimate knowledge of writing and speaking; that is, we had to learn to imagine ourselves. As Momaday emphasizes, "We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and *that* we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined" (162).

By the second year of the program, the class size had doubled. I team taught with Patrick Baliani, and we continued to focus on the image of the storyteller, and I invited the Navajo poet Luci Tapahonso to visit our class and discuss writing from a Native perspective. Luci emphasized that no sacred stories may be told during the summer; it was against Navajo custom. I explained to her that the students in the first year had asked me why we couldn't talk about these sacred narratives, and I had to confess that I didn't know. I knew that when the snakes are awake in the summer, no sacred tales could be told or we would risk snakebite, but I didn't have a rational explanation. Luci seized on my point and emphasized that in American Indian traditions, it wasn't necessary to know. In fact, she didn't know why certain traditions existed either. She echoed Julian Hayden's point that "there are, as any desert [dweller] knows, many things in the desert that can't be explained logically or on the basis of existing knowledge. These things are to be accepted and not worried about" (227). This concept of knowledge is central to an understanding of Native American literature. American Indian oral traditions are paradigms of mystery, incorporating beauty, humor, and fear into moving constructions of language.

Using Luci Tapahonso's and Julian Hayden's comments as a point of departure, I encouraged our class to understand silence as an effective rhetorical tool that gives shape to sound and meaning—not to confuse it with the inarticulate and illiterate or with the inchoate place of nonbeing, a void that lends itself to shame and insecurity. Rather, the silence of storytellers can remind us that there is such a thing as the unspeakable, something we might call the silence of the sacred, or it can simply signal an inappropriate time to speak. Storytellers teach us that silence is the beat and pulse, the rhythm keeper of the oral tradition. Storytellers who are not afraid of silence can hold their audience; they are survivors.

In the last six years, I have shared my own stories, interweaving dozens of Yaqui tales into my classes, creating our own text. Along with those tales, which in their silences resonate with the sacred, I have told stories about the policy of deportation and extermination that the Mexican government, under Porfirio Díaz, implemented against the Yaquis. I talked about how my grandparents had to flee Mexico to survive and how the Yaquis were not recognized as American Indians until 1978. We discussed the burdens that these hardships placed on the Yaquis, their traditions, and their language. The students responded to these stories and to the Native works we read by writing powerful, evocative essays, stories, and poems that came out of their own struggles with cultural identity and survival. A Navajo girl wrote about her grandparents:

> My grandparents know very little English; I know very little of my native language. Since I was young my mother had always told me I spoke good Navajo. And she could never understand why I stopped speaking it. Maybe I was more involved in modern society, listening to Michael Jackson. Or maybe I thought that knowing about my native tradition wasn't important to me. And for sure, I was definitely wrong about that, because these days everyone is trying to learn about their culture. And those who don't will soon learn the consequences about that which will be lost.

This student's paper captures the struggle of most Indian students on reservations to negotiate between traditional values and the customs of American teenagers in the late twentieth century. Cable television, rock music, fashion fads—orange hair, shaved heads, pierced noses, shredded jeans—contemporary movies, rivalries over sports stars, junk food, and the rest exist on the students' reservations with kiva dances, fry bread, traditional songs, and seasonal ceremonies, as well as Native languages and hogans and centuries-old stone houses. It is not an easy existence or a friendly collaboration. The student ends her paper with her grandfather worried about his grandchildren, hoping that they understand and carry on their traditional ways:

> Grandfather sat on his rough chair in the cool shadow of the afternoon, resting. The clouds then filled the sky of the heavens. Yet, there is no rain. Just the breeze of cool air rushing upon his brown wrinkled face. What surrounded him was a small sandstorm coming from the ground where once my ancestors lived and told their stories of how the *Dine* [the people] came. Through his eyes, I could see the reflections of my ancestors coming closer to me. . . . "My grandchildren," [he said], "look into my eyes and see the darkness brought upon your people. Your grandmother and I are so old. We see the selfishness of the people losing their tradition. Is this the way we all should live? You are the leaders of tomorrow, and you should do something about it, now. We are old and you are young. This is the beginning, where you should be an adult and teach yourself and others to know who you are, a Native Indian. You are the shadows of your ancestors and do what they say."

It is clear that the students we worked with resist efforts to eradicate Indian traditions and culture, yet their struggle to hold on to their Native languages is not easy. A Hopi student explains:

> Early in my childhood I learned how to speak and write in the English language, but at the same time I was learning the Hopi language from my parents. It was hard for me to learn both because most of my friends spoke English, but when I got home I had to flip over to the Hopi side. I can say, I know how to speak and write in the English form, but I don't know it fluently. Then there is the Hopi language, where I can understand it fluently but not speak it fluently, which is kind of odd. . . . I could say I'm caught on a bridge, where one end has the Hopi language and the other end has the English language; I have never been able to reach one side where I am completely aware of what I am speaking or listening to.

He says that if a lecture in English is given too quickly, he gets a bit lost; whereas the difficulty in speaking Hopi is that there are "different

dialects of Hopi being spoken between each village. In some villages the language is spoken with a lot of emotion; whereas in other villages the language would be spoken [in a] monotone which makes it really boring." His piece shows that he has a keen ear for languages, even if he is struggling to master both. He ends his essay with an excellent linguistic analysis:

> A perfect example of the different dialects is between the villages of Shungopavi and Moencopi. Take the sentence: *Hep owi idam by bep gadudani*, meaning: Yes, we will sit there. That is the way it would be said in [a] Moencopi dialect, where the endings of "hep" and "bep" would end with the "p" sound. Whereas in Shungopavi dialect, the endings would be changed from "p" to the "f" sound. It would read: *Hef owi idam by bef gadudani*. Therefore, in the Hopi language you would be expected to know the different dialects.

Hopi is not a written language, so this student was creating one as he tried to transcribe and capture Hopi on paper. His dedication and determination were shared by all the students. In those six years, I never encountered students who were not interested in their cultural backgrounds or languages once they overcame the initial awkwardness or shame of making that interest public.

Luckily, the students were true collaborators, and the program evolved into something much greater than the sum of its parts. The students struggled with difficult cultural problems but continually found themselves "going home"; that is, they became cultural translators, explaining to themselves and their teachers the trials and tribulations of being an American teenager as well as a Hopi, Navajo, or mixed breed. Consistently, their writing involved collective voices of family and tribe, and it was concerned with understanding their histories. As Momaday explains,

> When the imagination is superimposed upon the historical event, it becomes story. The whole piece becomes more deeply invested with meaning. No defeat, no humiliation, no suffering was beyond the power to endure, for none of it was meaningless.
>
> ("Man" 169)