

A detailed painting of a dense forest. Tall, slender trees with dark trunks rise from the forest floor, their branches reaching upwards. Sunlight filters through the thick canopy of green leaves, creating a dappled light effect. In the foreground, large, lush green ferns are prominent. The overall atmosphere is serene and majestic, typical of 19th-century landscape art.

## 2. Indigenous Native American Creation Stories and Cosmogonies

ENGL133 Imagining Nature

**Cosmogony**=story about the beginning of the universe, scientifically and mytically

Etymology: From Ancient Greek *κοσμέω* (kosméō) 'to order, to arrange' or 'to adorn' and genesis 'birth'

Vs. cosmology=the study of the structure of the present universe

**Creation story**=story about the origins of life, human and beyond the human

-A subset of cosmogony

**'Indigenous'**: from the Latin 'indigena': sprung from the land, native

# Indigenous North American Creation Stories and Cosmogonies: Sources, Archive, Terminology, Methodology

## Sources

**Orature**="oral" + "literature"

- verbal art that is passed down through generations and that may, at some point, get written down

- exs. the Indigenous creation stories we read for today, *Beowulf*, the Homer's *Iliad* or anything that may have been sung or spoken before being written down

- elaborated on in the work of the Kenyan novelist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Globallectics : Theory and the Politics of Knowing*

“Orature is the great legacy of African life and languages” (126)

“Each performance was a new imaginative creation” (110-11)

# Sources

## Orality and Literacy

Plato's argument against writing things down (put in the mouth of the character of Socrates):

"For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise. ...

You know, Phaedrus, that is the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly correspond to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive. But if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words. They seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say from a desire to be instructed they go on telling just the same thing forever."

-Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c-275b

-Plato's argument against writing: destroys memory,, makes the ignorant appear wise, gets rid of face-to-face interaction and dialogue

-the relation between oral literature and written literature is not necessarily teleological/linear



# Archive

## How are Indigenous stories transmitted?

What is an archive and why does it matter?

- Lenape story of the “Great Turtle” was first recorded by Europeans ca. 1680 in the journal of Jasper Danckaerts

- the complexity of the Indigenous archive



Northeast portion of Augustine Herrman's Map of Maryland, 1673

# Archive

**We told him [e.g. the Indian] he must not make such a difference between himself and a Christian, because one was white and the other red, and one wore clothes and the other went almost naked, or one was called a Christian and the other an Indian, that this great and good Sakemacker was the father of us all, and had made us all, and that all who did not do good would be killed by Maneto whether they were called Christians or Indians; but that all who should do good would go to this good sakemacker above. "Yes," said he, "we do not know or speak to this sakemacker, but Maneto we know and speak to, but you people, who can read and write, know and converse with this sakemacker."**

We asked him, where he believed he came from? He answered from his father. "And where did your father come from?" we said, "and your grandfather and great-grandfather, and so on to the first of the race?" He was silent for a little while, either as if unable to climb up at once so high with his thoughts, or to express them without help, and then took a piece of coal out of the fire where he sat, and began to write upon the floor. He first drew a circle, a little oval, to which he made four paws or feet, a head and a tail. "This," said he, "is a tortoise, lying in the water around it," and he moved his hand round the figure, continuing, "This was or is all water, and so at first was the world or the earth, when the tortoise gradually raised its round back up high, and the water ran off of it, and thus the earth became dry." He then took a little straw and placed it on end in the middle of the figure, and proceeded, "The earth was now dry, and there grew a tree in the middle of the earth, and the root of this tree sent forth a sprout beside it and there grew upon it a man, who was the first male. This man was then alone, and would have remained alone; but the tree bent over until its top touched the earth, and there shot therein another root, from which came forth another sprout, and there grew upon it the woman, and from these two are all men produced." **We gave him four fish-hooks with which he was much pleased, and immediately calculated how much in money he had obtained. "I have got twenty-four stivers' worth," he said. ...But at noon he returned with a young Indian, both of them so drunk they could not speak, and having a calabash of liquor with them. We chided him, but to no purpose, for he could neither use his reason nor speak so as to be understood.**

-Story of Turtle Island as recounted in *The Journal of Jasper Danckaerts, 1679-1680*

# Terminology

Why “settler colonialism” vs “colonialism”?

- colonialism demands that indigenous peoples “work for” them and also that natural resources be put at their disposal. Critics have called this a “logic of commodification”

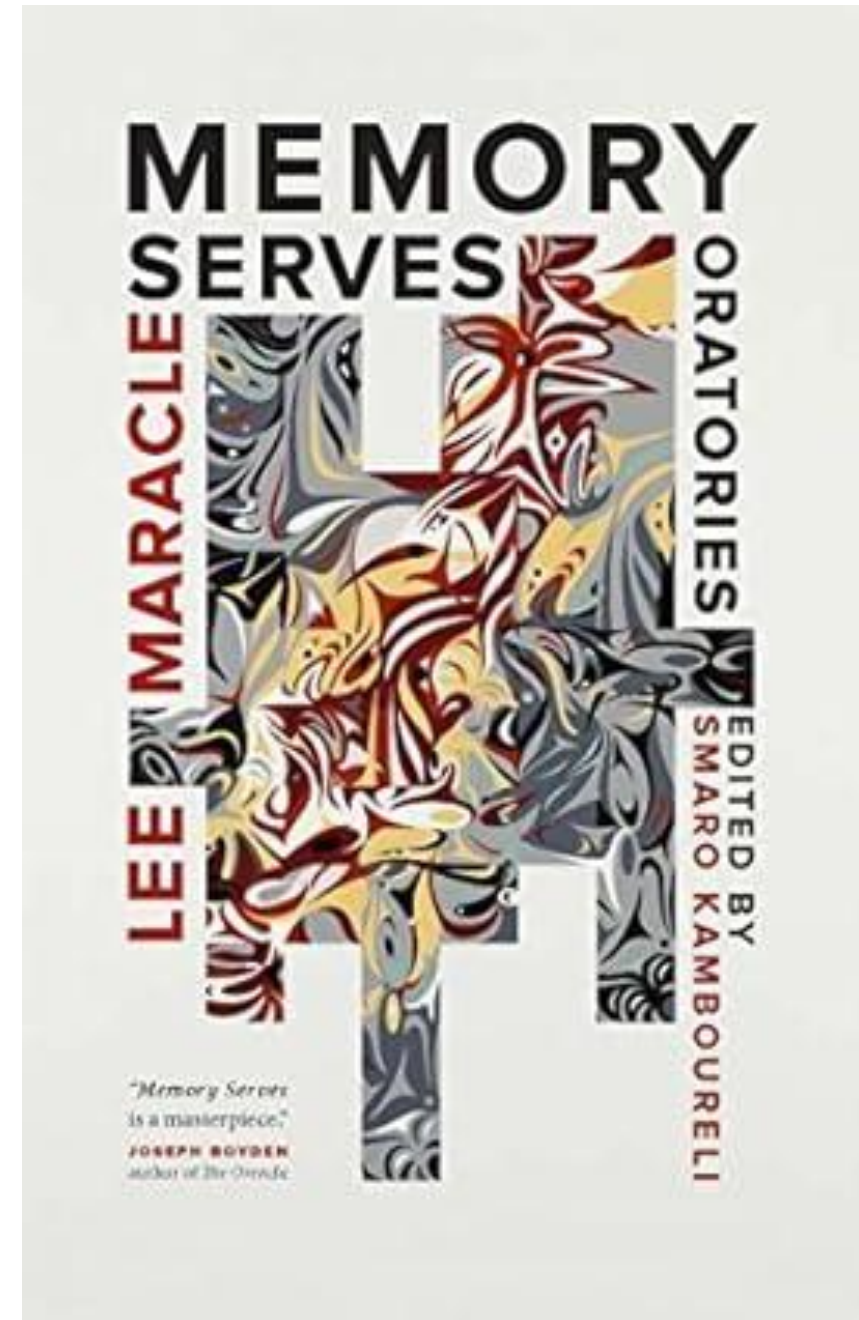
- settler colonizers additionally use a “logic of evacuation to demand that indigenous peoples ‘go away,’” in order to clear land for new arrivals

- settler colonialism and the archive: why it matters for this class?

  - the ethics of the archive



Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) [1950-2021]





# What is an oratory?

Oratory: place of prayer, to persuade. This is a word we can work with. We regard words as coming from original being -- a sacred spiritual being. The orator is coming from a place of prayer and as such attempts to be persuasive. Words are not objects to be wasted. They represent the accumulated knowledge, cultural values, the vision of an entire people or peoples. We believe the proof of a thing or idea is in the doing. Doing requires some form of social interaction, and thus story is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people.

-Lee Maracle, "Oratory: Coming to Theory," *Memory Serves*, 161

# Methodology

## Lee Maracle, “Oratory on Oratory”

- Maracle’s question: How do we create new knowledge and orient ourselves to past stories?
- What is the difference between Maracle’s Indigenous model of understanding stories and Western ones?

### *Study:*

Western ideas of discovering authorial intentional (individualistic and “invasive”) or attempting to “master” nature through science/ technology with no regard for its autonomous status

- characteristic of “the Diaspora” (i.e. those not indigenous to North America)

Vs. Indigenous ways of study:

- goal=to uncover that which is hidden
- object=“the unknown but cherished thing” (240)
- collaborative not oppositional
- processual: discussion and then reflection and then integration
- process common discomfort in the search meaning
- emphasis on seeing
- self-awareness of positionality (masks)
- the need for dialogism with not dominance over the object of study
- recognition that cannot know the thoughts or spirit of the phenomenon
- not for dominion or instrumentalization
- a model of shared ethical attention

# What does oratory value?

*Assumptions about truth:* Maracle: “In a certain sense, fiction/ myth, story, is real: it is historic and reflects life; it is conditioned by the desire to mirror a character’s relationship with the world” (231).

*Narrative expectations:* Story values leanness and concision so that others may participate and expand it

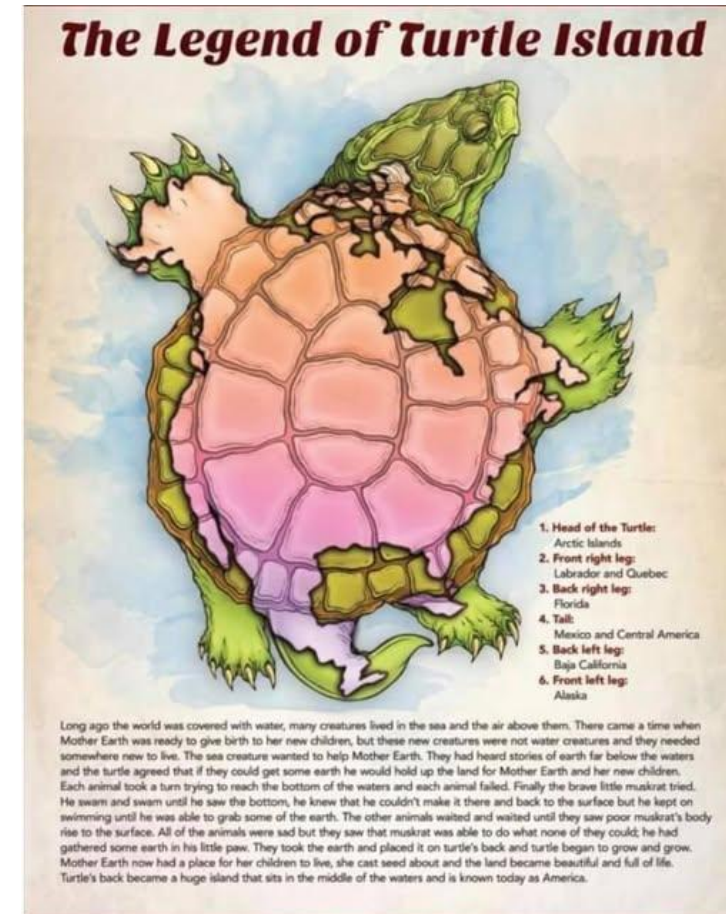
*Oratory’s relation to nature:* “Words are sacred, they are breath, breath is wind, and wind is power. Wind is earth’s bellow stransforming land, water, sea, and weather. Breath is human wind, our bellows urging us in the direction of transformation and relationship forming” (244-5).

*Goal:* “Oratory is a human story in relation to the story of other beings, and so it is fiction, for it takes place in, while engaging, the imagination of ourselves in relation to all beings. Oratory informs the stories of our nations in relation to beings of all life” (241).

# How does this idea of oratory help us to understand creation stories and cosmogonies?

## Story of Skywoman and Turtle Island (common to Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples)

- if we can't know intentions, what can we see?
- what cultural values?
  - interspecies collaboration
  - interconnectedness of the animate and inanimate worlds
  - natural balance (left and right, day and night)
  - Mother Earth
  - the place of humans
  - modern moral?
- ends by saying that this is the “short version”



“Indigenous Reflections” poster incorporating the Lenape / Haudenosaunee Confederacy concept



# Mohawk story of Skywoman and Turtle Island

vs. 1680 story of Turtle Island in *The Journal of Jasper Danckaerts*

-Orature vs literature

-How do we put them in conversation with one another?

-What is present in the Mohawk story that is not present in Danckaerts' account?

-How do these stories embody Maracle's view that we do not speak for other things, whether animate or inanimate things?



Bruce King, *Skywoman, Moment in Flight*

Is the Mohawk version of Skywoman an environmental text according to the criteria set forward by Lawrence Buell? Why or why not?

According to Buell, a text can be considered "environmental" if it meets the following four criteria:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a significant presence that suggests human history is implicated in natural history;
2. Human interest is not understood as the only legitimate interest;
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation;
4. There is some sense of the environment as a process, not just a static backdrop.

