

# A Concise Overview of Native American Written Literature: Early Beginnings to 1968

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**Abstract**—This essay aims at providing a concise overview of Native American written literature since its early beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the Native American Renaissance in the 1960s. Utilizing a historical perspective, the paper will first make reference to the emergence of Native American authors through the publication of protest literature, autobiographies and ethnohistories, in response to the attempts of white American society to eradicate Native cultures. After this, the essay will also deal with the different historical events that happened in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and which gave rise to the publication of novels that were primarily based on the theme of assimilation. In like manner, the paper will also explore the literature written by Native Americans in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; first, it will deal with some literary works from 1900 to 1920, including autobiographies that focus on the ethnohistory of tribes, and collections of short stories that reflect Native history, customs and values; then, it will continue to focus on the publication of multiple novels, which are clearly assimilationist, between 1920 and 1940; after this, the paper will be dealing with the period of darkness of Native literature from 1940 to 1960 and with the involvement of Indians in World War II; finally, this essay will conclude by making a brief reference to the literature of the Native American Renaissance in the late 1960s. As will be seen, the question of Indian identity is a major issue in the different literary works by American Indians, which has certainly influenced the development of Native literature along history. Thus, Native American written literature could be considered as a unifying element for the different tribes that allowed Indians to create a common indigenous identity with respect to the supremacy of the white domineering society.

**Index Terms**—Assimilation, identity, literature, native Americans.

## I. INTRODUCTION

When Europeans arrived in North America, they created a collective identity for indigenous peoples, whom they referred to as “Indians”<sup>1</sup>, a general designation for the inhabitants of North and South America that “stems from the erroneous geography of Christopher Columbus” [1]. However, Native Americans “seemed to have no such common ideas of themselves” [2]. They had different tribal identities that represented the great diversity of indigenous cultures, customs, traditions, languages and lifestyles.

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<sup>1</sup> Taking into consideration that there are many different opinions on which terminology may be the most appropriate, the terms Native American, American Indian, Indian and indigenous will be used interchangeably in order to refer more broadly to indigenous peoples of the United States. However, whenever possible the specific tribal names will be used.

Although multiple hostilities and conflicts used to arise quite frequently among these tribes even before colonization, rivalry among the European powers intensified those tribal differences. White colonists negotiated and made treaties with the tribes as “independent and sovereign ‘nations’” [3], causing a significant and intense division among the tribes, who were fighting against the supremacy of the white dominant society. Some Indians embraced European culture and proceeded to assimilation, whereas others rejected the customs and values imposed by the white society and continued to fight to preserve Native American cultural traditions.

As a result of this conflictive situation, Native peoples needed to find some common ground beyond the tribes since it was necessary to create a strong and firm indigenous identity “and unity based on shared cultural elements, shared experiences, shared needs, and a shared common fate” [4] against European oppression. It was in this context of struggles and confrontations that Native Americans started to write and publish their first literary works. Indians went from telling stories to writing them down in different literary genres such as the novel, short story, poetry and autobiography. This literature written by Native Americans emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and it became an excellent cultural and artistic means to preserve Native cultural heritage and identity throughout history.

## II. THE BEGINNINGS OF NATIVE AMERICAN WRITTEN LITERATURE: 18<sup>TH</sup> AND 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

Prior to European colonization, Native American cultures relied on an extensive oral tradition, which has been categorized as American Indian oral literature. This type of literature was based on Indian traditional storytelling and it primarily consisted of multiple and different stories that were orally transmitted in order to entertain, educate and preserve indigenous cultural traditions. Sometimes these stories were accompanied by pictographs, dramatic presentations and different theatrical elements, which “bear witness to the performance and dramatization of Native American oral storytelling traditions and their similarities and closeness to theater” [5].

When white colonists arrived in America, English started to be taught at schools by Christian missionaries and Native Americans soon began to speak and write in English. As a result, Indians went from telling stories to writing them down using common literary genres like the novel, poetry and autobiography. In other words, Native Americans replaced the magic-propitiatory symbol used in their Native oral traditions for the abstract-phonetic symbol used in Western

cultures, something that was completely foreign to indigenous cultures and identities. This situation also brought on the transition from tribal identity and anonymity in authorship to individual and single-authored texts together with the adaptation of a more figurative thought to a more abstract one.

When Native American written literature emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, whites' conquest of Indian lands and the subsequent education of indigenous children in boarding schools were taking place [6]. Some of the earliest works include protest literature and autobiographies in response to those attempts to remove Native Americans from their homelands and eradicate Indian cultures. Samson Occom's *A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian* (1772) is considered to be the first published work by an Indian author. The Mohegan minister used the popular genre of the execution sermon in order to describe the destructive effects of alcoholism in Native communities. Elias Boudinot, a member of the Cherokee Nation who became the editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix* (1828), the first Native American newspaper, published his popular *An Address to the Whites* (1826). This literary piece consisted of a speech delivered in the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia through which the author described the similarities between the Cherokee and the whites and the ways in which his tribe was adopting aspects of white culture. William Apes (Pequot) also contributed to the development of Indian protest writing with *A Son of the Forest* (1829), an autobiography aimed at criticizing white treatment of Indians during the height of the Indian Removal Bill, and *Eulogy of King Philip* (1836), in which the Pequot writer defied traditional white interpretations of King Philip's War (1675-1676). The Sauk leader, Black Hawk, also published another autobiography, *The Life of Black Hawk* (1833), in which he protested against the current treatment of Native peoples. Sarah Winnemucca, a member of the Paiute tribe, published *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (1883), considered the first autobiography by a Native American woman. Maybe "the only Indian woman writer in the nineteenth century to publish a personal and tribal history" [7], Winnemucca criticized federal Indian policy and the rough treatment towards Native peoples forced to live on reservations.

The literary works on indigenous cultures, customs and myths are also important within this period. Examples include *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* (1827) by David Cusick (Tuscarora), which provides "a written account of the Iroquois oral traditions during the creating of the universe, the foundation of North America, the early settlement of the continent, and the origin of the Five Nations (later six)" [8]; *Legends, Traditions and Laws, of the Iroquois* (1881) by Chief Elias Johnson (Tuscarora), which offers a description of the folklore and history of the Iroquois Indians; and, *Origin and Traditional History of the Wyandotts, and Sketches of Other Indian Tribes of North America* (1870) by Peter Dooyenate Clark (Wyandot), which provides a historical sketch of the Wyandot Nation.

In this early historical and literary struggle of Native Americans to find their own voice within the culture of America, it is also important to make reference to the Pan-Indian response. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries different

historical, prophetic and messianic movements emerged in response to westward-moving Anglo-American settlement. Among the leaders of these movements was the Delaware prophet Neolin, who firmly supported the idea that "the land would be returned to Native Americans through divine intervention" [9]. A similar Pan-Indian effort was made by Pontiac, an Ottawa Indian chief, who used the Prophet's message in order to organize "a military and political resistance to the English among Prairie and a few Eastern tribes" [10]. Equally important to note is Joseph Brant, a Mohawk war chief who held the idea that some Indian nations owned their lands "as their common property" [11], and who also attempted to form a united confederation of Iroquois and western First Nations peoples to block American expansion westwards. Shawnee Indian political leader and war chief Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwataya, commonly known as the "Shawnee Prophet", defended the revitalization of Native traditions through supernatural means. In addition, Tecumseh stressed the common ownership of lands by American Indians, encouraged tribes to form a political confederacy to protect their lands and "identified the white man as the common enemy and constantly reiterated the close relationship of Indians to each other" [12]. Another outstanding leader of these Pan-Indian movements was Wovoka, a member of the Paiute tribe who was the prophet of the Ghost Dance of the late 1880s and 1890s. According to Wovoka's vision, "the time will come when the whole Indian race, living and dead, will be reunited upon a regenerated earth, to live a life of aboriginal happiness, forever free from death, disease, and misery" [13].

As can be seen, the leaders of these religious Pan-Indian movements were prophets and all of them defended and believed in the return of the indigenous lands through divine intervention, thus recovering the importance of the special relationship between the indigenous peoples and the earth. Native American identity has always been closely linked to the land, and the fight to hold onto Indians' ancestral homes and their cultures by these Native resistance leaders was just one more way to consolidate the indigenous identity.

After these Pan-Indian movements, Native Americans needed to reconsider their situation, since they seemed to have realized that divine intervention was not going to restore Native traditions. In fact, Native American cultures found themselves seriously threatened by the influence of the white domineering society, causing some indigenous peoples to proceed to assimilation and abandon their cultures. This could be reflecting the Indians' reactions to a series of historical events that happened in the late 19th century.

Between 1860 and 1890, Native Americans were moved from their ancestral lands and forced to live on reservations authorized by the American government with the aim of assimilating Indians into mainstream American society. As a result, Native American children were recruited to attend government-run boarding schools with the goal of separating them from their parents and their culture, while inculcating "Christianity and white cultural values upon them, and encourage[ing] or forc[ing] them to assimilate into the dominant society" [14]. This situation became far worse with the creation of the Dawes Allotment Act in 1887, which provided for the distribution of Indian reservation land into

allotments for individual Indians and families. More importantly, the Act required Native Americans to live apart from their nations and assimilate into mainstream American society, thus resulting in the abandonment of Indians' communal and collective affinity. At the same time, this law also implied the severe fragmentation of the concept of unity, which has always been a distinguishing feature of Native cultures. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that Indian people generally foster a special relationship with the earth, which they consider as a collective domain.

Also, the end of the American Civil War in 1865 brought about the appropriation of many indigenous lands. These lands were occupied by the white man in his expansion towards the west, supposing the continuity of numerous confrontations between Indians and Americans. Finally, the situation culminated in the Native American victory over the United States Army at the Battle of Little Big Horn in 1876 and their subsequent defeat in the Wounded Knee Massacre in South Dakota in 1890.

This series of events resulted in the assimilation of Native Americans as the only means of survival and was reflected in published indigenous literature during the late 19th century. Examples include *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891) by Alice Callahan (Creek), the first novel known to have been written by an American Indian woman and "the first novel written in Oklahoma, then Indian territory" [15]. The novel tells the story of a lifelong friendship between the white Methodist teacher, Genevieve Weir, and the young traditional Creek woman, Wynema. Although Callahan is said to have used her novel to dramatize the issue of tribal allotments and breakup of communal lands, Callahan shows how strongly learning to read and write in English is related to assimilation. Another Native novel of assimilation is *O-gi-m äw-kwe Mit-i-gw ä-ki [Queen of the Woods]* (1899) by Simon Pokagon (Potawatomi), a kind of romance novel which "is preoccupied with the evils of alcohol consumption" [16]. Pokagon used both English and Potawatomi to write this novel in which he highlights the values of education and assimilation in the face of Native cultural extinction. At the same time, his assimilationist beliefs are apparent in the introductory passages [17], and his renunciation of the Indians' traditional ways can also be found in the section entitled, "Pokagon's Address at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893".

Similarly, Native Americans wrote poetry in the 19th century that reflected very much the influence of European Romanticism. Especially representative are the poems published by Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (Ojibway) in *The Literary Voyager or Muzzeniegun* (1826), "a literary magazine that included poems and essays (mainly on Indian culture)" [18]. John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee) also made use of poetic conventions common in the works of English and American writers in *Poems* (1868), a book-length collection of poetry considered the first of its kind to be published by a Native American author [19]. The collection includes poems dealing with the loneliness of his exile, his mystical relationship with nature, his religious education and romantic love. As Angie Debo puts it, "temperamentally he was all Indian, but the forms of his thought were white" [20]. The influence of Romanticism can also be perceived in the poems

of Emily Pauline Johnson (Mohawk). Although she was born in Canada, her poetry was published in American magazines such as *Gems of Poetry* and she toured throughout the United States, Canada and England performing different poems on indigenous subjects and becoming really successful as an oratory performer. According to A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff's article on Johnson, "From 1892, Pauline supported herself primarily as an interpreter of her own works, performing the Indian portion dressed in a fringed buck-skin dress of her own design and the remainder dressed in an evening gown" [21]. *The White Wampum* (1895) is her first collection of poems on Indian subjects followed by her less successful *Canadian Born* in 1903. Both volumes and some more poems were included in *Flint and Feather* (1912), which is considered Johnson's largest collection of poems and has been reprinted many times. Johnson also published *Legends of Vancouver* (1912), a collection of myths and legends in which she reveals the importance of the interaction between the audience and the storyteller as she develops a conversational tone and uses dialogue to introduce each legend [22].

Similarly, indigenous actress Mary Te Ata Thompson Fisher, of Chickasaw origin, recited and performed Native stories. Although her work as an oral performer began much later than that of Johnson (Te Ata was born in 1895), her performances were so popular that she made her way to Broadway. However, she soon realized that American theater was only interested in the exoticism and novelty that her indigenous character seemed to arouse and inspire: "[I]t was becoming apparent to Te Ata that the commercial theatre was interested in her primarily because she was an Indian with a gifted voice and graceful presence and not because of her acting ability. She was an anomaly and a novelty" [23]. However, Mary Te Ata continued to promote Native cultures by introducing new changes in her performances: "In response to her Broadway experiences, Te Ata decided to take control of her image. She refined her one-woman show, added dramatic adaptations of poetry on Indian themes, and continued to add traditional legends from other Native nations" [23].

Her performances and interpretations were so highly acclaimed that she travelled to Europe and continued to promote Native cultures in that continent. More recently, in 1996 Chickasaw playwright Judy Lee Oliva wrote a play, *Te Ata*, to honor the cultural work and artistic career of this indigenous actress. This play was premiered and performed at a festival held in Oklahoma in August 2006, attracting both Native and non-Native audiences. However, it should be noted that Te Ata was not an indigenous writer who performed her literary works as Emily Pauline Johnson did. Her performances were more concerned with her work as an actress and she basically performed Indian roles in American theatrical productions (*The Red Poppy* in 1922 is a clear example) and traditional Native stories and legends for which "she had to borrow much of her 'Indian' props, including a drum, a bow and arrow, and a costume" [24]. Therefore, it is not possible to say that Te Ata's Native performances contributed to the writing and production of American Indian plays. However, these theatrical performances are certainly indicative of the performative dimension that has always

been inherent to traditional Indian storytelling, and should not pass unnoticed in the history of American Indian theater in the United States [25].

### III. EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

In the early years of the 20th century Native Americans began to write about the ethnohistory of their tribes and their adjustment problems to life on reservations. Among the most important literary works within this period are some autobiographies by Native Americans educated in white-run schools. A clear example is *Indian Boyhood* (1902) by Charles A. Eastman (Santee Sioux), a literary work written in collaboration with his wife, Elaine Goodale Eastman, which recounts the story of his traditional Sioux childhood and youth from a personal perspective. He also published *From Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916), a captivating autobiographical work that tells the story of Eastman's years during school and into his life as a doctor. Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Sioux), popularly known for her pseudonym Zitk̄a-Šá, which means "red bird", also wrote three autobiographical essays, which were originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1900, and that were later included in her book, *American Indian Stories* (1921). In these essays Zitk̄a-Šá tells about her Indian childhood, her life in the missionary school and the times in which she came back to the reservation. Luther Standing Bear (Sioux) also tells about his experiences as a young Indian boy who successfully made the transition from tribal life into the white domineering society in his autobiography, *My People, The Sioux* published in 1928.

During this period Indian authors also published collections of short stories of great ethnographic value that reflected Native American history, customs, and values. Again, Charles A. Eastman, who is considered "the best known of the early Native American authors" [26], made a brilliant contribution to American Indian literature with the publication of *Old Indian Days* (1907). This collection of short stories illustrates the values, customs and history of Sioux people and is basically divided in two parts: "The Warrior" and "The Woman". The first part contains seven stories that make reference to the warriors' behavior, challenges and experiences from adolescence through adulthood [27]. The second section contains eight stories about Native American women, since according to Bernd C. Peyer's essay, the author wanted to "dispel the widespread notion that Native American women were mere 'beasts of burden'" [28].

Another important author that was highly-acclaimed for her collection of short stories is Emily Pauline Johnson. Although she was primarily known for her poetry, the Mohawk writer also published different prose pieces that were well-received. Many of her stories were published in the *Mother's Magazine*, one of the first journals for women published in the United States. Some of these stories were collected posthumously in *The Moccasin Maker* (1913), a volume that includes twelve stories that offer a look at 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian and Canadian women. She also published multiple stories in the then-popular American magazine *Boy's World* that were later collected in *The Shaggonapi*

(1913), a book that contains twenty-two boy's adventure stories. Johnson's prose pieces together with the oral performance of her renowned poetry lead her to become "an important figure in the evolution of American Indian women's literature" [29].

### IV. FROM THE 1920'S TO THE 1940'S

Between 1920 and 1940 Native Americans turned to the writing of novels, while non-fiction prose started to be left aside. In these novels Native American characters accept white values and assimilation into the white domineering society, rejecting their Native heritage and traditional way of life. Examples include John M. Oskison's (Cherokee) *Wild Harvest* (1925) and *Black Jack Davy* (1927), which are often "described as romances of frontier life" [30] (Larson, 1978: 46). Both of them are set in the Cherokee Indian Territory before it became a part of Oklahoma in 1907 and they basically concern white heroes. Although some statements about Native Americans are made throughout the plot, either by white or mixed-blood characters, few Indian people are included in these novels. In fact, it is basically through these statements that we can see how the subject of allotment is dealt with and how Indians are ready for assimilation into American life. A similar case can be found in *Brothers Three* (1935), another novel by Oskison which "still has little to do with the Native American experience" [31]. Focused on the lives of three sons who live off a farm established by their white father and their part Cherokee mother in Oklahoma, the novel focuses on "the importance of honesty, loyalty, hard work, and thrift and on the economic and social history of Oklahoma" rather than on Indian themes [32]. Very much like in the two novels above, *Brothers Three* presents some Native American characters who seem to have forgotten about their Indian heritage and decided instead to assimilate into the lifestyle and culture of the white-domineering American society.

Another novel that explores the assimilationist theme is *Sundown* (1934) by John Joseph Matthews (Osage). This literary piece tells the story of Chal (Challenge) Windzer, a young mixed-blood Osage Indian who is torn between Native American tribal values and the white world. The protagonist is caught between his mixed-blood father, who is a progressive Indian, and his full-blood mother, who is completely attached to Native American tribal customs and beliefs. After returning to the reservation from the white world, Chal became "a kind of drifter with nothing to do" [33]. He develops an emotional conflict between the two cultures [34] and "he becomes a man with no identity at all, a cultural half-caste" [35]. Towards the end of the novel, the cultural conflict and the problem of identity that Chal undergoes seems to be going nowhere. On the one hand, he tried to assimilate into the white man's world, but he failed; on the other hand, he never managed to completely embrace his Native American cultural heritage. Consequently, he ends up declining into a life of alcoholism, womanizing, frustration and loneliness.

Contrary to Oskison, Matthews does not present assimilation as the only hope for Native Americans, but neither does he present the acceptance of Indianness as the

best path to solve Chal's identity. It rather seems that the writer is trying to deal with the dilemma that Native Americans had to face after attending the white man's schools and becoming the victims of the policy of assimilation. Unlike Oskison and Pokagon in their early novels, the reader can perceive that Matthews does not really reject Native American values. However, he created a fictional character who attempted to assimilate into the mainstream society and did not reject the values of the white world. Therefore, the need for acceptance of the white society's values is also present in this novel and seems to be indicative of the writer's acquiescence in assimilation.

The theme of assimilation is also central in Mourning Dove's (Colville) *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927), the only early novel written by a Native American woman. Set in a ranch in Montana, this novel tells the story of a mixed-blood girl who is caught between full-blood reservation Indians and white Anglo ranchers, tradition and change. However, in this case, although assimilation and civilization are presented as being the only hope for Native Americans, by the end of the novel the protagonist seems to understand the importance of her Native American heritage. Although initially Cogewea is infatuated with a white man who is only out for her money and she rejects a half-blood Indian suitor, she finally marries her mixed-blood Indian friend and she recognizes the value that her grandmother represents through storytelling and Okanagan traditions. This is somehow confusing since the theme of assimilation can be perceived throughout the novel and initially the character refuses to marry her half-blood Indian friend because that would mean living as a Native American. This aspect seems to reflect the controversy over the level of influence that collaborator and writer Lucullus Virgil McWorther had over the novel. As Charles R. Larson points out in his study on American Indian fiction, "although the novel might have been less polished if she had written it herself, the author's stance toward her Indian subject (and toward white culture) might not have been so ambivalent" [36]. However, although one can perceive that Mourning Dove was not as supportive of the white man's values as Pokagon, Oskison and Matthews were in the aforementioned novels, the theme of the desired assimilation of Indians is of paramount importance to *Cogewea*.

The need for acceptance of the white world's values and customs in the novels above could be understood as a sort of discrimination against Native American identity at a time when the assimilation of Indians seemed to be the only means of survival. As a consequence, Native Americans started to show more interest in their assimilation than in preserving their Indian heritage. This interest of American Indians in assimilating and accommodating into the white domineering society was also reflected in Modern Pan-Indianism in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Modern Pan-Indianism consisted of different organized movements which were national in scope and strongly based on a common Native American identity. However, these movements were not focused on returning to or restoring Native cultural traditions as prophetic and messianic movements did in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the contrary, Modern Pan-Indianism stressed Native American assimilation and accommodation to the white domineering society. As Hazel W. Hertzberg puts it,

"Modern Pan-Indianism is the crucible in which elements in the larger society combine with elements in Indian life to produce new definitions of identity within the American social order" [37]. In other words, these organized movements sought to combine both indigenous and white elements so that Native Americans could come to terms with the modern white society in the United States.

The earliest Pan-Indian movement was the Peyote religion. It originated in the state of Oklahoma around 1870 after peyote was acquired from Indians of Mexico and introduced by the Mescalero Apaches to the southern Great Plains. Although it was firmly rooted in Native traditions and was considered "the most strongly Indian" [38], the Peyote cult was a movement of accommodation, which "developed ideology and procedures more in harmony with the reality of the Indian as part of modern society" [38]. As it emerged among Indians of the Plains that had recently been confined on reservations, it was a rural movement that "remained closest to reservation life" [38] and was not influenced by urbanization.

However, the Peyote religion took on a Pan-Indian character quite fast and soon became a society religion spreading among other Indians in the United States. As mentioned before, this religious Pan-Indian movement also "sought to come to terms with the present" [38] and was relatively in favor of the assimilation of Native Americans. Some of the leaders of this religious reform movement, such as the mixed-blood Quanah Parker, relied on the adaptation of Indians to the customs of white American society. At the same time, these leaders also believed in the importance of learning the values of white culture and soon the Christian church became the model to be followed by this religious Pan-Indian movement. In spite of this, Native Americans deviated themselves from the customs imposed by the white domineering society and continued to practice the peyote religion. Thus, the peyote cult took place through the creation of different Indian churches among which the Native American Church (NAC) stands out as a clear example. This behavior and attitude of Native Americans, who once again sought to recover and perpetuate their indigenous cultural values, seemed to reflect their willingness to use the advantages of white culture in order to ensure and preserve Native cultural continuity. As a consequence, the dichotomy between Christian and Native traditions brought on a division of the members of the peyote cult: some Indians decided to continue with this religious practice, whereas others preferred to devote themselves to some "more orthodox forms of Christianity" [39]. This situation produced a fragmentation in the Native community that led to the loss of a strong bond to preserve Native American cultural heritage. In this sense, the assimilation of Native Americans seemed to consolidate itself as the best way to preserve their existential and cultural future.

After this religious Pan-Indian movement came the so-called Fraternal Pan-Indianism. This movement emerged in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and showed a great interest in preserving Native cultural values, while proceeding to Indians' assimilation. Basically white in organization, Fraternal Pan-Indianism was urban in nature as it was formed by Indians who lived in the city and sought to

form a community of related feelings [40]. Its primary objective was to preserve Native cultural heritage, while Indians adapted themselves to the white society. This attitude was reflected in the creation of the Tepee Order of America in New York around 1915: "The Tepee Order was originally a secret organization for native-born Protestant young people from fifteen to thirty years of age, and its avowed purpose was 'studying the early history of the natives of America, its languages, customs, and to put into practice the activities of Indian outdoor life'" [41]. Although this Order became one of the earliest Pan-Indian fraternal organizations, it was also not appropriate for the preservation of indigenous cultural values. While its intention revolved around the study of Native cultures, the organization was mainly conformed by white leaders. In addition, Indians were excluded from participation within the organization, and although they were later admitted as members, the white society continued to participate in this fraternal institution. This clearly demonstrates that the primary objective was the process of assimilation of Native Americans into the white dominant society. Once again, everything seemed to indicate that the study of indigenous peoples was aimed at their subsequent integration into the American civilization or those recreational and folkloric activities that the life of Native Americans could provide to the European communities.

Finally, Reform Pan-Indianism emerged at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also contributed to favoring the process of assimilation of Native Americans. This movement was formed by Indians who had left the reservation and were willing to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the white society starting a new life in the city. At the same time, Reform Pan-Indianism was both nostalgic and repulsive of life on the reservations, reflecting a dichotomy that showed the traditionalist and assimilationist character that had fragmented the tribal community. In its intention to proceed to the assimilation and civilization of Native Americans, Reform Pan-Indianism created the Society of American Indians. This was an organization created by the most progressive Indians, who believed in the education of Native Americans and their adaptation to Western culture. However, these progressive Indians ignored the value of the Native cultural traditions that constituted the real indigenous identity. The Society of American Indians was basically run by Native peoples who had been educated within the European culture and that claimed the participation of Indians in American life. Once again, the process of Native Americans' assimilation into the white American society was the most adequate means of survival for Native cultural and existential continuity: "The thinking Indian, therefore, asks that he be treated as an *American* and that a just opportunity be given whereby the race as a whole may develop and demonstrate its capacity for enlightenment and progress . . . as an American people in America" [42].

It can be concluded then that although Modern Pan-Indianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to preserve indigenous identity and culture, the assimilation of Indians was more favored. Therefore, it cannot be said that these movements were really a great success for Native cultural preservation. This situation might have been caused by the influence of white civilization, as the organizations of

Modern Pan-Indianism were mainly led by members of the American society, Native Americans educated in the white civilization, and mixed-blood Indians. These leaders were adapted to the American civilization and did not want to return to the traditional way of life, but to progress in American society.

In contrast, it should be noted that contemporary Native American literature seeks to recover and perpetuate traditional indigenous values, while Indians progressively adapt to new Western changes. Therefore, the presence of Native American literature could be interpreted as a continuation and complementation of the objectives that Modern Pan-Indianism could not achieve. However, these Pan-Indian movements were a necessary step for Native Americans to develop their own identity. It is important to bear in mind that American Indians were able to use the advantages that these Pan-Indian organizations offered them, whilst developing a certain assimilationist attitude that did not lead them to completely renounce their indigenous roots. In this sense, Native Americans were able to continue their evolution as a people by taking back their roots and becoming aware of the different opportunities that the white domineering society could provide them with.

Regarding Native American literature during this period, although it remains true that the earliest indigenous novelists were more in favor of Indians' assimilation, there is also a novel published by a Native American author, which is non-assimilationist and that can be considered an antecedent of the literature of the Native American Renaissance. This novel is D'Arcy McNickle's (Flathead) *The Surrounded* (1936), one of the most outstanding works of fiction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which tells about the life of mixed-blood Archilde Leon, who has returned to his Spanish father's ranch and Indian mother on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana after spending one year away in the city. Very much like in the previous novels, Archilde is torn between white and Indian cultures, and he struggles very hard to find a self within all these pressures. However, like Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), *The Surrounded* "is primarily a novel of renunciation - wholesale rejection of the white man's world" [43]. In fact, in this work of fiction, which is contemporary with Oskison and Matthews, McNickle proposes a return to Native traditions and the rejection of the values and customs imposed by the white American society, suggesting a clear contrast to previous novels and Modern Pan-Indianism. In other words, *The Surrounded* seems to present itself as the antithesis to the historical and literary context of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which the early writers embraced the assimilationist theme and presented assimilation as the only means of survival. Thus, this turn from assimilation to rejection in McNickle's novel could be reflecting some changes in indigenous politics that took place in the 1920s and 1930s.

In 1924, the American government granted citizenship to Indians, and in 1934 the creation of the Wheeler-Howard Indian Reorganization Act ended the distribution of land to Native Americans, thus reaffirming cultural pluralism and reestablishing tribal governments. In 1953, House Concurrent Resolution 108 was created in order to end the federal government's intervention in Indian affairs [44].

These political changes pointed towards a lesser supremacy of white society over indigenous cultures, supposing a certain freedom and independence for Native Americans to continue defending and preserving their cultural heritage. However, it is worth noticing that although the great number of assimilationist novels published by Native Americans between 1920 and 1930 were part of this time of great political change, they did not embrace Native cultural heritage and were clearly in favor of assimilation into the white domineering society. Therefore, it becomes necessary to look into the causes that explain this coexistence of both assimilationist and traditional attitudes in Native American literature during this period.

On the one hand, such a coexistence could be suggesting the fragmentation of tribal communities, since progressive Indians preferred assimilation, while conservative Indians believed strongly in Native traditions; therefore, these two different attitudes gave rise to an ambivalent Native American literature in which most of the authors accepted white values and assimilation into the white domineering society, whereas just a few relied on the importance of Native American heritage and proposed a return to indigenous traditions. On the other hand, the presence of these two different perspectives in American Indian literature could also be implying the loss of a significant part of Native cultures as a consequence of white hegemony. During this period, it seems clear that the future of indigenous peoples was linked to the lifestyle imposed by Western culture and their assimilation seemed to be the most successful path towards Native cultural and existential continuity.

In this sense, the publication of *The Surrounded* seems to suggest a sort of resistance and intransigence towards the future imposed by the white American society, since this novel intended to recover traditional indigenous values and rejected the assimilation of Native Americans. The same holds true for the literature of the Native American Renaissance, “a term originally coined by Lincoln (1983) that refers mainly to the literary works following N. Scott Momaday’s 1969 Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn*” [45]. The novels of this period defend the preservation and continuity of Native cultural heritage, considering the complete assimilation of Indians into white society as a betrayal towards Native culture. Therefore, although *The Surrounded* is chronologically closed to the earliest group of Native American assimilationist novelists, McNickle’s demand for a return to indigenous traditions, as well as his reaction to and rejection of the supremacy of white society, is more in line with the reawakening of Native cultures during the 1960s and 1970s. As Charles R. Larson puts it, “though contemporary with Oskison and Mathews, in his handling of form as well as of theme and content McNickle belongs with the writers of the 1960s and 1970s (of the Native American Renaissance) rather than with those of his chronological period” [46]. Thus, McNickle’s novel could be perceived as a precursor of the Native American Renaissance.

Other Indian authors such as Todd Downing (Choctaw) also published novels during this period. However, the stories included in those novels often focused on very different themes and it was quite hard to identify Downing as a Native American writer. He published nine mystery novels

between 1933 and 1941 [47], which usually contain allusions to indigenous beliefs and some minor characters of Native American ancestry [48]. Examples include *Murder on Tour* (1933), which deals with Aztec and Toltec cultures while focusing on a series of murderers who smuggle Mexican antiquities; *The Cat Screams* (1934), which is said to be Downing’s most successful book, in which he makes use of Mexican Indian folklore and deals with different deaths by suicide around the town of Taxco in Mexico; and, *The Lazy Lawrence Murders* (1941), whose action takes place on a train from Texas to Mexico in which different scandals, hatred and murders are often dealt with. However, as Wolfgang Hochbruck confirms in his essay, “None of the published works discussed bears any marks by which the reader could have identified Downing as Native American” [49]. In fact, it was not until the publication of his travel account, *The Mexican Earth* (1940), which is considered to be an Indian history of Mexico, that he identified himself as a Native person [50].

Something similar happened to Rollie Lynn Riggs, an indigenous playwright of Cherokee origin, who is the only active Native American dramatist during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He published *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), the basis of Rogers and Hammerstein’s musical *Oklahoma!* (1943), and *The Cherokee Night* (1934), which chronicles the demise and decline of the Cherokee people at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, he often disregarded his indigenous heritage and the public of his time did not perceive him as Native either [51]. In spite of this situation, Riggs’ plays became very popular and clearly cemented his place in both Native American literature and American theater [52].

## V. FROM THE 1940S TO THE NATIVE AMERICAN RENAISSANCE

Between 1940 and 1960, American Indian literature went through a period of darkness and the publication of novels by Native Americans was non-existent. When World War II took place between 1939 and 1945, many Native Americans joined the US armed forces and fought in defense of their country. This involvement of American Indians in the conflict changed the indigenous perspective towards Native life, cultures and customs, and also contributed to galvanizing Indians’ patriotic feelings towards the United States. Therefore, many Native Americans left the reservation and joined white culture after the war as they seemed to consider assimilation as a necessary adaptation for success. This gave rise to a higher standard of living for Indians, including job options, educational opportunities, and better healthcare services. However, others returned to reservations and suffered from the typical aftermath of the conflict, including homelessness and the so-called post-traumatic stress disorder.

This situation was reflected in the indigenous literature of the Native American Renaissance, especially the novel. A clear example is *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), which tells the story of Abel, a young Pueblo mixed-blood who has just returned to his reservation in New Mexico after World War II. The novel revolves around his problems of adaptation and confusion upon his

return, since after his terrible experience in the war, Abel finds it very difficult to trust and return to traditional Native values. In spite of this situation, at the end of the novel and after his grandfather's death, Abel participates in the race of the dead, a ritual his grandfather told him about, and he seems to come back to his people, traditions, and his place in the world. This seems to reflect the importance and connection between identity and place, an issue that occurs quite frequently in the literature of the Native American Renaissance. As will be seen in the different novels during this period, this issue is not easily answered. However, the attempts to recover and perpetuate Native cultural heritage and the repudiation of the white man's world illustrate "a symbolic turn toward the life-sustaining roots of traditional Indian belief" [53], which generally permeates the literary works of the Native American Renaissance.

These attempts to embrace and perpetuate indigenous cultural heritage seem to be influenced by the reawakening of Native cultural traditions and ethnic pride that took place between the late 1940s and the late 1960s. The rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s also contributed to this resurgence of Native cultures since it demanded not only an end to racial discrimination, but also the right of minorities to speak for themselves. In addition, during this period, there were different social and political changes in favor of Native cultural traditions, which are widely known as the Red Power Movement and that also helped increase indigenous ethnic pride "and a sense of cultural uniqueness" [54]. This context of hope and self-expression for Indians in the United States also brought on the emergence of contemporary Native American theater through the creation of several theater companies in order to "renew traditional dramatic forms and to incorporate outside elements into older drama, but also to assimilate and adapt the forms of Euro-American drama" [55].

The first efforts to form companies of Native actors were carried out by the Cherokee writer and director Arthur Junaluska, who cofounded the American Indian Repertory Company in New York during the 1950s [56]. Some years later, in the 1960s decade, Native authors including Jay Silverheels (Mohawk), Noble "Kid" Chissell (Cherokee) and George Pierre (Colville) founded the Indian Actors' Workshop in Los Angeles. At the same time, the foundation of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, established a theater program with the aim of writing and performing Native drama by Native Americans and focusing "on the cultural dimensions of Native life, both past and present [57]. In addition, the IAIA also produced some Indian plays such as Monica Charles's (Clallam) *Mowitch* in 1968, a piece that depicts "the cleansing of troubled spirits within an Indian Shaker church" [58].

Although Native theater did not start to gain momentum until the 1970s decade (especially after the premiere production of Hanay Geiogamah's (Kiowa) *Body Indian* in 1972), indigenous peoples began to bring their oral and performing traditions to the stage through the publication and production of multiple theater plays, which continue up to the present day. In this sense, Native Americans seemed to have found a point of confluence between their cultures, based on orality and performance, and Western civilization, based on

written texts, through Native theater.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to provide a brief overview of Native American written literature from its emergence in the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the 1960s by utilizing a historical perspective. In order to carry out this approach, the question of Indian identity was selected because it is an issue of great relevance in Native literary works, which has certainly influenced the development of American Indian literature along history. In other words, the changes that Native identity has gone through along history have been reflected in the literature written by Native Americans since its emergence until the Native American Renaissance, continuing up to the present day.

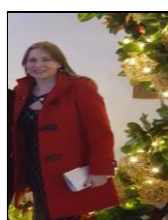
First, in the early historical and literary struggle of indigenous peoples to find their own voice in the culture of America, Native Americans relied on the publication of protest literature together with various works on indigenous cultures, customs and myths, which cover the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and a great part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there were a series of historical events that resulted in the assimilation of Indians to white American society, which led to the publication of different novels that deal with assimilation as the only means of survival. Some years later, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Native authors published various autobiographies that focused on Indians' adjustment problems to life on reservations, and also some short stories of great ethnographic value that basically deal with indigenous history, traditions and customs. Between 1920 and 1940, Native American writers turned to the writing of novels and explored the theme of assimilation with more detail. In these novels, Indian characters accept white values and assimilation into the white society, whilst rejecting Native American heritage. This seems to reflect the dilemma that Indians had to face after attending the white man's schools and becoming the victims of the policy of assimilation.

However, there is a gap in Native American literature between the 1940s and the 1960s, which represents a break and a turn from assimilation to rejection of the values and customs imposed by the white domineering society. This attitude is reflected in the literature of the Native American Renaissance, which seeks to recover and perpetuate traditional indigenous values, while Indians progressively adapt to new Western changes. This seems to imply a reconciliation between Native cultures and the white American society that can be perceived through different literary genres, especially Native theater. Although this is an aspect that requires further research and a detailed analysis and exploration of Native literature from the 1960s to the present day, it can be said that written literature by Native Americans has become a unifying element for Indians, who did not have a collective identity until the arrival of Europeans. At the same time, this type of literature has certainly helped to create a common and solid Native identity with respect to the supremacy of the white domineering society.



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