

Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

MY STORY OR YOURS: CHALLENGES, CRITICISMS AND
COLLABORATION IN NATIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY NON-NATIVE
COLLECTORS

By

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Integrated Studies Final Project Essay (MAIS 700)

Submitted to Dr. Nanci Langford

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

December, 2014

ABSTRACT

Historically, various literate cultures have chronicled their experiences through journals, diaries and articles. In contrast to the written word, storytelling, or the pre-literate oral tradition of Native people in North America has been the most significant teaching tool for Native peoples to pass on sacred languages and traditions. While the term autobiography implies a first person account, oral cultures have relied on collaborative work with researchers to translate their experiences to text. However, important facets of individuality and tribal culture have often been misconstrued or lost in translation. Over the past two decades, a new relationship has developed between anthropologists, ethnographers and their Native subjects. This new approach uses ethnography based on personal, lived experiences to look at the cultures being studied. This paper details new methods of collaboration in documenting North American Native autobiographies, including techniques that respect the voices of indigenous people in telling their own stories and preserving their histories for future generations.

Introduction

One of the distinctive features of Native autobiography in North America is that over the course of 150 years, it spans a transition from a pre-literate to a literate people (Krupat, 1985). The term Native as used in this paper refers to the indigenous inhabitants of North America, their ancestors and descendants, prior to the arrival of Europeans in the late 15th century. As a way to express daily life, Natives have told their stories through chants, songs, rituals, dances, visions and artwork. Due to the nature of artistic expression and lack of recording tools, this history is often difficult to trace prior to the involvement of white, European ethnographers. Historically, how have oral traditions been recorded? What have been the concerns of scholars in giving voice to the experiences of Native people and what challenges and criticisms have they faced?

In *Telling About Culture: Changing Traditions in Subarctic Anthropology*, anthropologist Julie Cruikshank (1998) cites an enormous increase of interest in Northern cultures. She stresses that a focus on current research methods and a conscious desire on the part of ethnographers to give voice to their subjects will continue to benefit both audience and Native people in reflecting their own representation (Beck, Walters & Francisco, 1997). In addition to Cruikshank's work, contributions by professor of literature Arnold Krupat and American Studies professor Hertha Wong among others, identify many of the difficulties and benefits of writing and compiling Native experiences and are highlighted in answering the research questions posed by this paper.

Representative cases from existing literature are presented where new methods of ethnography and collaboration redress the omissions of past research. The relevant contribution of feminist theory, specifically of feminist scholar Trin Minh-ha through her

work, *Not You/Like You: Post Colonial Women and Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference*, is included for its discussion on matrilineal societies. The method of analysis for this paper is qualitative research, specifically interpretive content analysis. It is investigative and exploratory to provide the reader with a base for further understanding the challenges involved in recording oral history.

Recording Oral Traditions

Language has many purposes, including the exchange of complex thoughts as well as serving as a social and political bonding tool between people (Repko, Szostak & Newell, 2012). Skepticism about the presentation of traditional texts as well as feminist concerns with writing culture has cited a risk of manipulation and misrepresentation by the ethnographer (de Laine, 2000). The genre of writing known as ethnographic realism describes human interactions while narrating the author's observations and experiences as if they were witnessed directly. In the past, anthropologists have not been overly concerned with nuances of voice, dialogue, feelings, and social relationships (Simon, 2013). However in recent decades, these particulars have become the focus of debate calling for a move past ethnographic realism as anthropologists have become critical of this sub-genre for lacking a reflexive approach (de Laine, 2000). Several publications have highlighted questions about the 'crisis of representation' and called for more collaborative methods of research, concentrated on the rights of individuals: *Writing Culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), *Tales of the field* (Van Maanen, 1988) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). In their work *Research Decisions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives*,

authors Palys & Atchison (2008) quote feminist bell hooks (1989) in regards to the power differential that often exists between the speaker and the recorder:

Often this speech about the ‘other’ annihilates, erases: ‘no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me...your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. I am still the colonizer, the speak subject, and you are now the centre of my talk (p. 213)

Scholarly Concerns & Challenges: Self, memory & “the other”

Importantly, raising the question of identity opens a discussion of self in relation to ‘the other’ in the enactment of power dynamics. Identity has long been open to assumed interpretation and subjectivity of the author. Today, the researcher’s focus on identity entails finding a lost self that is genuine, authentic and original, despite being once situated in a corrupted, westernized text (Kremer, 2003). Feminist scholars have pointed out that writing should seek to reflect the integrity of the relationships cultivated during fieldwork (Minh-ha, 1997). Immersion into a new cultural group by academics has always held the inherent pressure to be as scientifically objective as possible. But this pressure often caused researchers to compartmentalize work into data ultimately used in the construction of a text that lacked connection to first person accounts. To overcome depersonalization, many ethnographers spoke in the first person voice themselves, relegating the personal experiences of their subjects into footnotes, for fear of exclusion from the academic audience for which their work was mainly intended (Kremer, 2003).

Hence, the dilemma of how to best represent their subjects has frequently put researchers in a vulnerable position. Texts that historically described lives through a hegemonic lens fraught with stereotypes and historical anachronisms are now used to influence researchers towards a more humane relationship in the field through contrast and comparison with the egalitarian approach now implemented. As such, the contemporary ethnographer's job has changed. Ethnographers must establish quality of work under new criteria. While opinions differ on what contemporary texts should include and exclude, most writers are in agreement that science cannot make claims about ultimate truth and knowledge in recording oral history (Kremer, 2003). Today, the focus relies on addressing voices long silenced, through humanistic enquiry. Humanistic enquiry refers to the study of individualized cases over generalized theory, focusing on subjectivity in studying individual people and their personal experiences (Garman & Piantandia, 1994, 2006).

In comparison to the western concept of self, the self- concept of North American Natives has been described as generally more inclusive of others, as individuals develop an understanding of their own identity by placing themselves within the framework of family and tribe. The Native quest for self-worth and identification within a spiritual context involves establishing a connection to the landscape and the universe. Native societies value their collectivity over individuality, which, though important, remains subordinate to the tribe to which they belong (Wong, 1987). Where the Westerner may write to set oneself apart from others, Native autobiography may have the goal of socializing the individual into the community by creating a tribal link (Wong, 1987).

Life, and what makes it meaningful, is unique to each culture and an important facet of autobiography. The focus of speech and its processes to pre-literate Natives describes lives as they are being lived, rather than in retrospect, an aspect that may appear fragmented and out of place to the non-Native writer. In *Discovery of Gold on the Klondike: Perspectives from Oral Tradition*, linguist and author Julie Cruikshank (1996) revisits the story of Skookum Jim, a story based on oral tradition that provides interesting insights into the process of combining oral and written accounts. Cruikshank remarks that beginning with the word *discovery* in the title, the reader is somewhat misled as it points to a single incident rather than to the oral stories combined over a number of years by three women (Cruikshank, 1996). The author stresses that while working with differing accounts, it became apparent that no singular version was more accurate than another, nor did combining them create a clearer picture. Rather, they had to be viewed through different contexts and perspectives. This is vitally important in pinpointing how different methods bring forth different analyses and interpretation and how one may become relegated to collective memory while the other becomes 'official' (Cruikshank, 1996).

While an enormous amount of literature has been written about the Klondike, little reference is made to the effect it had on indigenous people (Cruikshank, 1996). Writings about the first discoveries of gold mention a few names repeatedly: Skookum Jim, his sister Kate and her husband George, who was non-Native. Written accounts present Skookum Jim as a strapping, self-made folk hero who worked closely with whites and transformed his own life greatly. Conversely, oral accounts tell a vastly different story, describing instead Jim as a man whose convictions emphasize a deep

understanding of familial obligations within his community and family in caring for his sisters. The spirit helper: a frog, and his encounters with a superhuman being known as “wealth woman” who helped him discover gold, are missing from written accounts. In his community, Jim was characterized as a central male character that had a requisite journey in which new experiences, if handled carefully, could be brought back to his community to bless and enrich the lives of others through insight. As such, the oral narrative surrounding Jim reinforced values of “foreground resistance rather than defeat, community rather than individual circumstance, and ongoing attempts to maintain autonomy in the face of ongoing and cultural dislocation” (Cruikshank, 1996). This example highlights the differences in perspectives between oral and written accounts, in that different values are highlighted, based on the values and norms deemed important within each culture.

As a function of autobiography, memory connects past experiences with the present self. Memory contains, “social and directive or action-guiding functions as well as identity related functions” (Alea & Bluck, 2003). Youthful memories are usually episodic in nature prior to becoming fluid and autobiographical in adulthood. Conflicts over memories most certainly exist and versions of experiences differ from one another. But unlike the culture of the majority which serves the politics and historical version of the white, male, dominant class perspective, Indigenous cultures are concerned with protecting first hand experiences that occur within the community as protecting values that describe what reality feels like, not what a hegemonic class decides it should be (Confino, 1997). Oral culture stresses authenticity, intimacy and shared ideals. In this way, the beauty of memory is that it is somewhat informal, connected to unrelated

subjects and used to illuminate solutions to old problems (Confino, 1997).

Understanding memory in Native culture is to understand a whole larger than the sum of its parts, including experiences and social representations that may seem unrelated or vague by western standards but contribute to cultural norms in smaller groups. Individual memories are then understood in relation to a corresponding group of practices of which the subject is a member. Too many past writings have attempted to describe representation without exploring transmission, diffusion and the meaning of the representation. As a result, these writings present fragments of information without context. *What* is received is not as crucial as *how* it has been interpreted and received (Confino, 1997). Writing, when approached correctly, has the ability to comprehensively present memory as a synergistic relationship between individuals and a global historical context. Oral stories may contain different dimensions in their approach. For example, Margery Wolf's *Thrice Told Tale* takes the same event and writes it three times: As a social scientific theory, as a fictional story and as field notes. As such, the audience is granted a more comprehensive opportunity for understanding the story. Similarly, other ethnographies have been told through fiction, poetry writing, notes about a village or a combination of survival stories and academic writing (Richardson & St. Pierre, 1994).

And lastly, in regards to challenges, is the subject of understanding "the other". While difficulties exist in transmitting the lives of marginalized groups, this is not unique to Native experiences and Mullen-Sands notes that overcoming bias against minorities by researchers is a work in progress, not likely to disappear altogether for some time (Mullen-Sands, 1997). Critics might argue that all autobiographical narratives are subject to manipulation and flawed by virtue of the fact that it is storytelling, memory is not

infallible and history is subjective. Many Native elders have preferred to avoid writing themselves, requesting the services of non-Natives in recording their lives. Native stories will continue to be told with each succeeding generation, a tradition that is essential to the survival of the culture. But in order for the culture to be understood further, outside of the tribe, written narrative becomes necessary. One Lakhota man stated:

The only possible opening for a statement of this kind is that I detest writing. The process itself epitomizes the European concept of “legitimate” thinking; what is written has an importance that denies the spoken. My culture, the Lakhota culture, has an oral tradition and so I ordinarily reject writing. It is one of the white world’s ways of destroying the cultures of non-European peoples, the imposing of an abstraction over the spoken relationship of a people. So what you read here is not what I’ve written. It’s what I’ve said and someone else has written it all down. I will allow this because it seems the only way to communicate with the white world is through the dead, dry leaves of a book (Means, 1980 as quoted by Churchill, 1983, pp. 24)

Criticisms

In *The As-Told-To-Native Biography: Whose Voice is Speaking?*, Edward Valandra (2005) points out that historically, much has been said of non-Native writers who interpret oral accounts without taking into consideration the culture in modern context, thus leaving an inaccurate picture of contemporary Native life, laced with pre-existing racial stereotypes. Valandra (2005) states:

By issuing the expected lamentations about being Indian in North America...They’ve made redundant statements of how the white man took over

the land and how the Indians themselves, alas, fell into drinking great quantities of booze, committing debaucheries of various kinds and emerging from such a hapless condition, rhetorically at least, redeemed and at the edge of self-knowledge (p. 111)

Valandra (2005) continues his criticism by asserting that North American Native autobiographies have long been written by whites in a patronizing fashion, which implicates Native people as lacking the necessary literary skills to complete such a task themselves and also marginalizing their subjects in a demeaning way for the goal of creating interesting social commentary. Undoubtedly, European ethnographers have historically grappled with misunderstanding and misrepresenting those of other cultures. Gauged by their own standards of propriety and civilized, Christian behavior, early writings of colonizers and explorers have perpetually misinterpreted and misrepresented other cultures (Bruchac, 2009).

Feminist Theory

As previously mentioned, feminist scholars have voiced concerns over gender representations in documenting Native experiences (Minh-ha, 1997; Mullen-Sands, 1997). Lack of recognition for the voices of women within Indigenous groups have been of particular concern until writers such as Kathleen Mullen-Sands, Julie Cruikshank and Trinh Minh-ha have specifically sought to highlight their experiences. Aune (2012) describes feminist ethnography as a field that relies on observational research with a commitment to women and how gender operates throughout different cultures and societies. Fueled by the women's movement of the 1960's and 1970's, it is a relatively new area of research, which aims to rectify the exclusion of women in traditional

ethnography where they were omitted or minimalized as active participants. The circumstances and lived experiences of North American Native women are as varied and diverse as any other cultural group and therefore, it is inaccurate to write from a singular perspective. By compiling as many experiences as possible, the audience has not only the opportunity to gain a greater understanding about Indigenous cultures but also to challenge the hegemonic structures that have dominated the field of historical narrative for so long. In an attempt to acknowledge and reclaim the full memory and history so often omitted by previous ethnographers, today's authors are refusing to engage in the previous methods, based in patriarchy and racism (Mullen-Sands, 1997).

For example, pre-1960's writings on the Lakota Native community have consistently omitted the societal status of women (Valandra, 2005). As a matrilineal society that cherishes womanhood, modern Lakota women are as respected, involved and as integral to their communities as their predecessors. Lakota communities are described as "common cause", where the topic of man versus woman simply does not exist. Women's participation in meetings, discussions and decision-making is egalitarian in every respect. However, writers have consistently doubted that this dynamic would appeal to the patriarchal audience for which the writing was intended (Mullen-Sands, 1997). In her essay *Not you/Like you: Post Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference*, feminist scholar Trinh Minh-ha remarks that ethnographers have long assumed that the lives of Native women revolve around babies, diapers, cooking and emotions, never intersecting with intellect (Minh-ha, 1997).

Biographer Kathleen Mullen-Sands (1997) expounds on these concerns by describing how most pre-1960's autobiographies bear the name of the collector as the

sole author with no mention of who narrated the story to the researcher. She suggests that the most rational way to approach the autobiographies of Native American women is to view them as creative dialogues that encompass, “the past, memories of personal experiences, and culturally defined events shaped by the accumulated knowledge and cultural attitudes of both narrators and collector at the time of the inscription process” (Mullen-Sands, 1997). The process must involve both the author and narrator every step of the way in discussing details, which must be read not only contextually but also intertextually, meaning cultural norms must be described to produce understanding about what has been said. Though daunting, fulfilling this responsibility can provide an insightful, critical analysis when the sharing of life stories can be examined from an interdisciplinary standpoint and conducted honestly and unsentimentally. Within these parameters, she describes a relationship characterized by respect and understanding of cultural norms and differences. In fact, those trained in disciplines that encourage accuracy and ethical writing such as anthropology and sociology continue to produce texts that may overcome many of the obstacles presented in the problematic writings of the past (Mullen-Sands, 1997).

Towards a collaborative approach

The shift away from power relations between the observer and the observed in recording oral history denotes a positive move towards moral relationships based on ethics rather than social stratification. Ethnographers today increasingly work to make sense of the lives of their subjects to provide valid accounts (Oral History: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2014). The personal and social experiences of the researcher are muted in order for the group of study to be presented without bias

(Cruikshank, 1988). Accounts now lay themselves open to scrutiny and assessment without the authoritative hegemony that once prevailed in ethnographic texts. Today, conditions of fieldwork require methodological self-consciousness on the part of the researcher that shatter pre-existing, hegemonic stereotypes about minorities. The text's aesthetic quality is what allows the reader to be touched and enriched. Such is the main criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research (Garman, 1994; Piantandia, 2006). The author also has the ability to move certain voices to centre stage or leave them positioned in the background, better respecting the wishes of participants. This presents the author as a learner, a new participant to the culture (with neutral value to the piece) eliminating the judgment of past research methods (Cruikshank, 1988).

A poignant example of collaborative autobiography is the story of Yvonne Johnson in *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (Rymhs, 2005). While serving a prison sentence for murder, Johnson requested the help of writer Rudy Wiebe to document her autobiography. This collaborative effort took a total of five years. Wiebe was selected by Johnson based on his impressive historical writings of her great-great grandfather, Plains Cree leader, Big Bear. Johnson had tried in vain to compile stories from her life but was limited in scope due to her inmate status. Over the course of the project Wiebe acted not only as a scribe but also as an advocate who wanted to present a finished story worth reading to his audience (Rymhs, 2005).

Johnson allowed herself to be represented by Wiebe after refusing to give testimony or voice to her case for fear of racial prejudice and condemnation. As a type of separate hearing, she chose instead to tell her story her own way by working on an autobiography with Wiebe. *Stolen Life* chronicles the effects of colonization and racial

struggle through present storytelling. Johnson valued Wiebe as both articulate and accurate, devoid of a patronizing attitude or superiority complex (Rymhs, 2005). Aware of prevailing inequities in cross-cultural examination, Wiebe initially questioned his suitability for the job as a white, educated man from a privileged background. But in addition to being a writer, he shared a link to Johnson's ancestral history. Finding a method for compiling differing narrative modes for a life riddled with violence, abuse and poverty proved challenging for Johnson and Wiebe alike. They decided to engage in the collaborative act of *witnessing* together. Psychiatrist Dori Laub (1992) describes the process as follows:

To a certain extent, the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt she bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which make possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the redeeming truth (p. 225)

As one facet of any story, testimony given during legal proceedings constitutes an incomplete truth of sorts, meaning it is often given out of context without a backstory. Johnson felt her personal account could speak to the reader comprehensively and after five years of collaboration was able to describe the night of the murder herself, without Wiebe's input, including details and circumstances that placed her in a precarious situation without pre-meditation. The reader was then permitted to see Johnson as not only a victim of terribly unfortunate circumstances but also the legal system. She closed with, "Please try to hear me with your spirit" (Rymhs, 2005, p. 396).

In many ways, this collaboration gave a voice to Yvonne Johnson that she might not have otherwise had. The fact that Johnson was found guilty showed that when she did speak, she was labeled “a witness without credibility” (Rymhs, 2005). It also showed that her own victimization was never taken into account. Writing with Wiebe provided a sense of validation and acknowledgement otherwise unavailable. In her own words she stated, “Maybe not only my story-but it is mine. Others maybe won’t agree, but I want to tell my life the way I see it” (Rymhs, 2005, p. 24). Johnson was one voice of many Indigenous people who have been failed by the legal system, unable to tell their full story. While the responsibility for Wiebe proved a heavy one, it was not an insurmountable task to be ethical to Johnson and her intended audience by treating her with justice, fairness and equality, providing a means by which a disadvantaged subject could speak for herself without fear of distortion or misrepresentation by a writer with a personal academic agenda.

Julie Cruikshank documents emerging guidelines for researchers in the field. Where anthropologists used to decide where to commence based on personal interest, new models of collaboration are being negotiated with the communities themselves. This has resulted in a large number of anthropologists choosing to spend the majority of their careers in Northern Canada and Alaska (Cruikshank, 1988). During the past two decades, locally based collaborative projects have called for new writing genres and methods of questioning while conducting research. Cruikshank (1988) cites that primary among these changes was the mandate to view Northern individuals as diverse in personalities, customs and opinions, rather than as one homogenous group. Local people themselves have shown an active desire to participate in forming questions that guide

research and collaboration with anthropologists and researchers. In *Ethnoautobiography as a Practice of Radical Presence*, Jurgen Kremer (2003) remarks:

My answers to the question ‘who are you?’ have evolved over the years, not just by deepening my understanding of the contemporary context of the northerly Indo-European peoples and their cultural and political histories and interactions with neighbouring peoples, but also by deepening my understanding of the contemporary context and need to provide answers outside of the framework of modernity (p. 1-2)

Changes have not only occurred in how ethnographers approach their questioning, but also in how audiences read and interpret post-colonial literature. In *Decomposing the canon, alter/narratives from the borderlands*, teacher Stephen Brown describes how texts have played a major role in how we understand the lives of Northern People (Brown, 1998, p. 157). On a teaching assignment for three years on the Athabascan Indian reserve in Alaska, Brown wondered if the designated class literature could be re-read, in order to reconnect the disenfranchised Native students to their landscape and traditions. Polemic in nature, the majority of the ‘classics’ designated Natives as noble or violent ¹. These textual stereotypes reinforced colonizing attitudes of restraining degenerate savages in order to justify conquest (Brown, 1998). Dominant white culture was always portrayed as the norm, working to uphold itself against the abnormal Native subculture, rather than emphasizing human traits shared by both groups. The books reinforced existing social

¹) The romantic works of Fennimore Cooper and Chateaubriand as well as the realist novels of Jack London describe the Alaskan wilderness through negative stereotypic images of natives and their homeland through a colonizer’s perspective (Brown, 1998. P. 161).

barriers between white and Native children. As a first step, Brown relegated the 'classics' to supplemental readings, available for spare time.

Because Native American autobiographies focus on a self, which is constructed through multiple forces, Brown chose the as-told-to autobiographies of Mary Crow Dog, Lame Deer and Black Elk. These stories took place over the past century and highlighted the landscape. While the idea appealed to students, a segment of the faculty and parent group took issue with the changes. Brown (1998) persevered, and a discussion began to emerge in the classroom, with students identifying with characters in the books. Native children began to feel a connection to the cultures and legends of their heritage. Students were encouraged to create their own folklore by explaining the origins of animals and oral storytelling. The division that had existed between the Native and non-Native students, both socioeconomically and culturally, began to blur somewhat and parallels of racism between modern lives and the narratives the children were reading prompted discussion. For example, Lame Deer wonders how to jump back and forth between both cultures, a topic familiar to many of the children (Brown, 1998, p. 172). Furthermore, his description of his own nihilistic behaviour raised awareness of the students to the conditions of oppression and division that sometimes exist on reservations. One of Brown's students, David, said:

We didn't want to be nothing. We wanted to be something. I felt that I was only half a man, that all the old honoured, accepted ways for a young man to do something worthy were barred to me...just as there was a fence around the reservation, so they had put a fence around our pride. Well, I had to invent a new way of making a name for myself, of breaking through that fence. Going on that

joyride for me was like going on the warpath...of saying, 'Look, I'm a man. I exist. Take notice of my existence! (Lame Deer & Erdoes, 1973; Brown, 1998, p. 172)

As an educator, Brown (1998) stressed the need for teaching methods that foster an environment where students can learn to challenge stereotypes that exist in borderland texts, so students like David could develop critical and resistant voices to themes of indigenous cultures that describe discouraged, nature-worshipping souls surrounded by feathers, beads and drums who rely on alcohol to combat the hopelessness of colonization (Brown, 1998. p.173).

Outcomes & Conclusion

The bulk of Native autobiography compiled by non-Natives since the 1920s was conducted through simple observation, primarily intended for an academic audience. Difficulties in the appropriation of voice occurred due to hegemonic stereotypes, academic pressure to present texts in a certain way and uncertainties about authorship. Feminists brought specific attention to the omission of female voices and representation in texts. Over the past several decades, increasing consideration is being given to who owns the story, how ownership is properly attributed; with the principles of humanity and kindness considered at the forefront. Ethnographers and anthropologists today specifically encourage authenticity when recording dialogue. The question of 'who are you' was once answered through the lens of the white, academic framework. Kremer (2003) states that today the answer increasingly emerges from personal Native voices that describe their experience as "the other", to help all audiences understand decolonization, nature and spirituality, and collectivism.

While oral traditions still struggle to find a spot in the academic mainstream, they continue to move forward. The audience has now shifted to include a politically aware, literate Native population, among others. New guidelines as outlined by academic institutions, researchers and Native communities themselves often include collaborative research teams in a concerted effort to understand the studied cultures from the inside, with inherent symbolism and meanings, rather than binary questions about social structure. For Native elders, oral tradition still holds strong ties to both teacher and listener, and it is increasingly understood that to preserve it, the written word is required (Cruikshank, 1988). History should always be viewed as a social construct open to revision, since the writings have historically been predominantly comprised by hegemonic structures that favoured selective texts that minimized or omitted the valuable experiences of others. Many organizations now aid Native people in tracing and reconstructing their genealogy in order to pass a written ancestry to their descendants, who through breaks in culture such as residential schooling and foster care, have lost connection to their rich heritage. Today's researchers work as closely and ethically with Natives as possible. As a result, unbiased Native autobiography has become available to a broad audience, which uses their own voices and forms of representation.

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