

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE –ORAL NARRATIVE

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Overview Oral narratives have served as an important vehicle of cultural transmission, not only stories of origin and identity but also of communal beliefs, values, aspirations and fears. In cultures without a written language, oral narratives were passed down and became the treasured storehouse of religious knowledge. They were also important in establishing genealogical traces and thus cementing the authenticity of a group and its leadership. Later, oral narratives became touchstones of cultural change, and also places where the often unacknowledged magical thinking manifested itself, despite a dominant culture of rationalism and technocracy.

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC): The Clovis peoples did not leave signs of oral narrative, except potentially in the brilliantly crafted arrows, knives, and blades, which point to narratives associated with apprenticeship and knowledge transfer.

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The important elements of Desert Southwest cultures include many shamanistic animal tales, which illustrate the human qualities of animals, and their function as spirit guides and exemplars. They include the kokopeli, coyote, turtle, bear, and others, which take on transformative powers (such as in the case of coyote, the trickster).

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): The Eastern Woodlands oral narrative shaped itself around creation stories, animal spirits, and a genealogy that tied to matriarchy. In addition, stories that incorporated the salvation crops -- corn, beans, and squash – figure prominently in the narratives.

Colonial (Early Modern)

American Jeremiad: Early Puritan narratives were filled with apocalyptic tales, telling the people in no uncertain terms that their community was one of true believers, and the only one that would be saved in a sinful world. Like the Old Testament's Jeremiah, the Puritan preachers exhorted their people to repent of their sins because the end was nigh, and only the true believers would be spared perdition.

Ghost stories: Ghost stories were a prevalent feature of Colonial oral narrative, especially in New England. Some were recorded by authors such as Washington Irving, and they included the "Headless Horseman" and other ghosts, mainly of Native Americans and of doomed lovers.

Salem Witch narratives: The Salem Witch trials codified the oral narratives that had been circulating for years. Looking at the trials from a 20th century perspective, it was clear that they were a way to enforce a behavioral code among women, and also to not allow any woman to threaten male dominance or patriarchy. The social narrative of exclusion and norming, which is an extreme form of bullying, becomes internalized quite easily, leading to destructive attitudes about women and creative self-expression (and especially non-conformity).

Old Testament: Old Testament narratives were transmitted by oral means. There were several that almost all would know: The Creation, Adam and Eve and the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Jacob's Ladder, Moses and the Burning Bush, Noah's Ark, just to name a few. The common knowledge of the key Biblical narratives created a shared knowledge base, and the possibilities of alluding to them via art, architecture, sculpture, and literature.

New Testament: Most people in Colonial America (and in the 19th century) would have been familiar with the Nativity Story, Birth of Jesus, Wise Men, Woman at the Well, Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son, Loaves and Fishes, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.

Nineteenth Century

Ghost stories: Ghost stories continued to proliferate, and there were many stories that were told in different regions, usually having to do with doomed lovers, terrible accidents, revenge, and lost treasure. All towns had at least one haunted house, and the resident ghost was often one who had met a violent end, or was stricken with love.

Indian tales: Stories of great Indian warriors abounded, and they took on almost mythical aspects. Perhaps the most renowned was Geronimo, who was famed for leading uprisings. The oral narratives perpetuated stereotypes and helped justify often brutal policies and behaviors.

Alamo / Texas Origin narratives: Myths of origin are important in the development of an identity, and perhaps one of the most superlative examples of a regional identity is that of Texas. Texas was its own Republic for a period of time after it broke away from Mexico, and the defining moment occurred at the Battle of the Alamo. Ironically, many of the elements of the story of the battle are not factual, but it is a case in which the desired narrative overtakes the reality. Today in Texas, the shape of the Alamo is a dominant motif, so that the oral narrative is also reinforced by a visual one.

Slave narratives: Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass were just two of several former slaves who, against all odds, learned to read and write, and then they wrote the stories of their lives. In addition to writing about the conditions of slavery, writers such as Harriet Tubman wrote about her missions to rescue slaves and to lead them to freedom through the Underground Railroad.

Gold Rush narratives: When gold was discovered in Sutter Creek in 1848 a tremendous gold rush ensued which led to the despoliation of John Augustus Sutter's agricultural experiment, New Helvetia, which consisted of 50,000 acres in the Sacramento Valley which had been granted to him by the Mexican government. Sutter, a Swiss immigrant who became a Mexican citizen, constructed an entire community using the management principles of the Jesuit missions. None of that mattered, however, when gold was discovered. The "gold bug" that infected people was powerful, and the settlers who were thinking of long-term investments in farms were no match for the "get rich quick" mindset and the boomtowns that sprang up.

Tall Tales: Oral narratives tend to have trickster and hero figures, and North American tales told by the settlers were no exception. Paul Bunyon was perhaps the most well-known, and there were others who were not only in story form but also as folk songs.

African American folk tales: The stories of Br'er Rabbit evolved from the trickster tales of the African slaves who came to America. In fact, there are many similarities between the Br'er Rabbit character (which Br'er Fox and Uncle Remus) and the African jackal stories. They were captured by Joel Chandler Harris, but were in reality a part of a rich folk narrative tradition. In the Br'er Rabbit stories, the weaker, disempowered rabbit had to use his wits against the stronger, oppressive dominant culture or power structure.

Twentieth Century

Folk stories: Columbia-educated African American author and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston collected stories of the South in order to study their origins. She also did so in Haiti, where she collected and analyzed the Creole oral narratives and folklore, especially those having to do with zombies.

Great Depression oral histories: In the 1930s, the United States Library of Congress embarked on a large project to hire anthropologists and to record narratives of cultural significance. Among the narratives recorded were those of sharecroppers, oil field workers, Dust Bowl refugees, and former slaves.

Urban Legends: Urban legends have been passed down through oral narrative, and in the latter part of the 20th century, by means of social media and digital communications. They reflect deep psychological truths about a culture and its hopes, fears, and aspirations. Not surprisingly, then, there are many that seem to repeat themselves, but with variations. For example, there are several variations of the contamination tale, which usually goes something like this: A woman orders fried chicken tenders from KFC, and as she is eating them, she notices a

strange texture... and a tale. She pulls it out of her mouth to find that she has partially consumed a piece of Kentucky Fried **RAT**.

Political narratives: At the beginning of the 20th century, grassroots movements led to a number of oral narratives. The most dominant were connected with the Women's Suffrage movement, as well as the Temperance Union and unionization. Some oral narratives were promulgated by leaders of the movements, such as Mother Jones (union movement), Carrie Nation (temperance) and Susan B. Anthony (women's suffrage). Mother Jones, in particular, developed a narrative about her background (family died in the Chicago Fire), and a series of tragedies that radicalized her and made her sensitive to the plight of the downtrodden.

Alien Abduction Tales: In the 1950s after the advent of nuclear weapons, strange lights and movements were witnessed in the American western desert, near where nuclear weapons were developed and tested. They were tagged as Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs). After sightings in Roswell, New Mexico, among other places, stories started to circulate of people being abducted by alien creatures, who took them to their crafts, conducted experiments, and then released them back to where they found them.

Super Food and Contamination Tales: With the increasing use of steroids, pesticides, and fertilizers, people became worried about the food supply, and the quality of the food. At the same time as stories were circulated about the contamination of the supply, narratives emerged that had to do with healing properties of plants, herbs and foods. The so-called "super foods" were touted as having almost miraculous properties. Paradoxically enough, one year's super food narrative could easily become the next year's "never eat this" food narrative.

Technology fears: Oral narratives that reflect the deeply unsettling nature of technological advances, particularly those of surveillance and invasion, tend to circulate quickly. The narratives often have to do with identity theft, surveillance, cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and more. The oral narratives are often presented in the form of cautionary tales, and sometimes are used in conjunction with the sale of a protective device or policy.

Conspiracy Theories: Oral narratives (whether disseminated via face to face methods or via digital technologies) are powerful. They are so powerful that they can even disrupt or influence electoral processes, as in the case of so-called "fake news" (disinformation) which were shared by individuals face to face and via social media. Many were conspiracy theories about cover-ups or deep plots by individuals or groups to do harm to a culture or a way of life.

Discussion/Questions

1. Many of the stories of early American groups had to do with methods of transformation. For example, the animal tales often were used in shamanistic ways to both explain or allegorize human nature. They were also used as vectors of change or transformation. Explain how the story featuring an animal or bird (bird, hawk, bear, for example), could lead to personal transformation.
2. During Colonial times, the Bible was a foundational document and its stories were known, shared, and used in daily narratives. Explain how the stories of the Bible could be used to bring together a community, and also to reinforce ethics and a moral code, either for good or for bad.
3. In the 19th century, stories abounded that reflected the almost mythical conception of the American West. Identify three or four oral narratives that reflect underlying beliefs, hopes, and dreams about the American West and what it could do for individuals.
4. Thanks to the development of mass media, oral narratives came to be transmitted by more methods than before. At first, they were transmitted through radio, and later through television, and finally through the Internet and social media. Describe how urban legends, conspiracy theories, and political narratives were communicated to different groups, and describe the specific use of mass media.

Readings

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