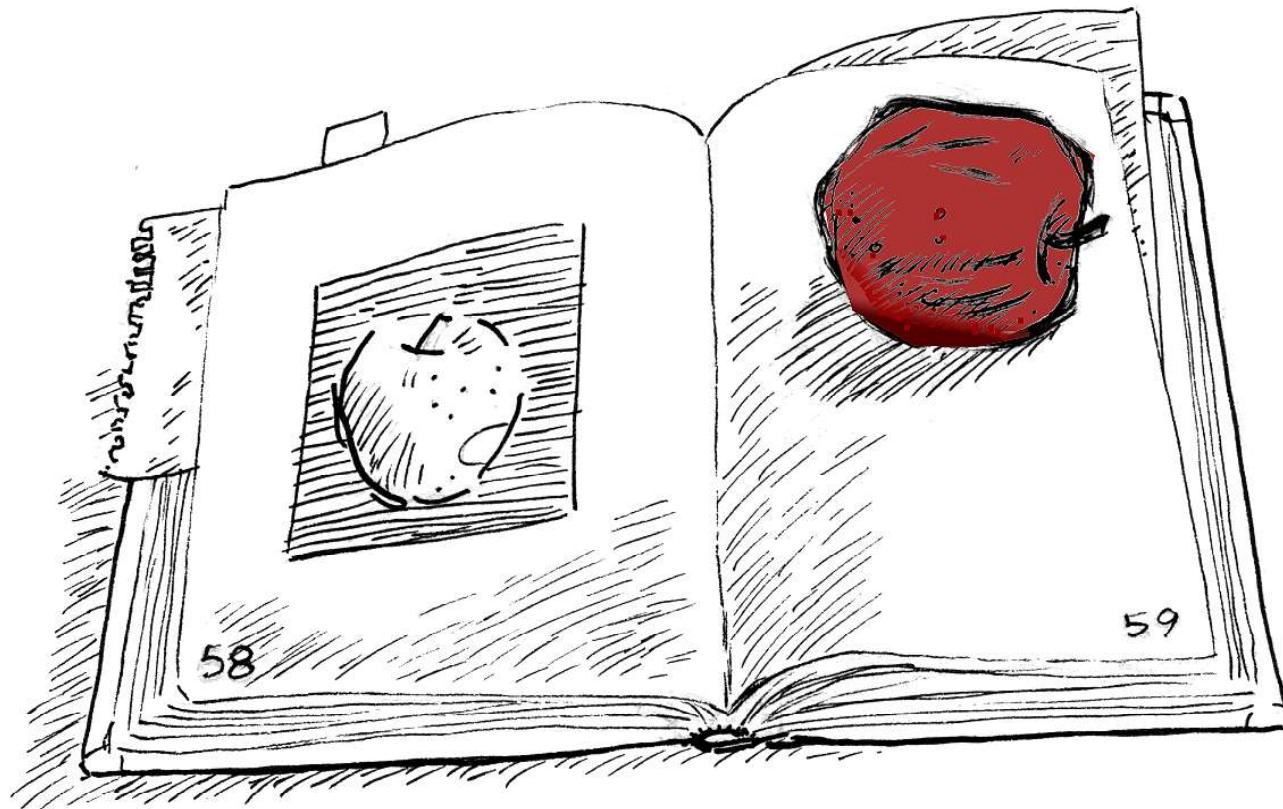


Native American Folktales



overview

Native Americans are a diverse collection of various social groups.

- These groups are made up of **networking tribes** of unique people.
- As a result, most origin myths by the different bands have common attributes:
 1. often **show the people emerging from out of the land itself**; some explain that their ancestors arrived out of a labyrinth-like cave underground
 2. some tribes say the first people emerged from lake-beds to settle in nearby territories
 3. all of these stories establish a **hierarchy of nature elements and humans**
 4. all of these are **anonymous stories** told in an oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation
- **Very few Native Americans developed written form of communication** in North America

overview

The system of oral traditions strengthened social knowledge for their individual structured cultures.

These traditions include:

- myths
- rituals
- songs
- poems
- prayers
- parables
- legends
- narratives

Lincoln, Kenneth. *Native American Renaissance*. Berkeley: U of Ca Press. 1983. Print.

overview

To complicated matters: when white Europeans began the process of removing Native Americans out of their territories, the people were forced to relinquish their languages, their society structures, their religions, their oral traditions, as well as their land. **Many stories have been lost and entire cultures erased** due to Spanish and English settlement policies—*but also because the people themselves did not want to have their culture bond by the printed word or a foreign power.*

In a manner of speaking, Native languages exist as a living, spiritual, *and* meditative practice. The tribes who maintained their ancestral histories and folktales did not want to translate their beliefs into English. In their eyes, an aspect of the holiness of the prayer would be lost. The living word, the spoken phrase, would become static and penned up. The original intentions of a love chant or death prayer would be lost.

overview

- The oral tales more often were chants, performance pieces, art recitations.
- Extreme amounts of cultural meanings are lost in the appropriations.

Critic Kenneth Lincoln proposes, the reality of the song-poems is altered since the original words do not lie flat on the page—the spoken word may be visually presented in one line of text, or broken into stanzas and restricted to form.

The original Native American poems and stories were created by unknown authors.

- The intentions were to leave the works anonymous.
- No one could “own” the work, nor own the idea.
- The idea itself “found” the chanter.
- The song-poem was intended for the tribe and for nature. Through performance the poet, or story-teller gives the song, prayer, chant, story back to the world.
- **The spoken word is a living thing; language is a sacred idea.**

overview

Story Tellers themselves serve as:

- **historians**, record keepers
- **educators** of natural history and science
- **artists** who supply a source of culture; physical representations of creativity
- **identity**; establish sense of self for a collection of people
- **archivers** of traditional customs

Specific Folktale Characteristics

- magical creatures abound
 - magical situations frequent
 - protagonists down-trodden: orphan, stepchild, cast-out prince, prodigal son
 - protagonist goes through psychological, physical, spiritual transformation
 - protagonist must prove worthiness before transformation; must earn title
 - protagonist is pure good
 - antagonist is pure evil } no in-between grey areas
 - extreme violence, gruesome situations
 - pattern numbers
- > in the Old World Europe the people used three as a pattern:
 three tasks, three wishes, three journeys (due to Judeo-Christian influences)
- > in the New World, the pattern was set as four (sometimes five or seven)
 perhaps due to the four principal directions of North, South, East, West
- > some tribes associate specific deities with these cardinal points