

“A Trail in the Sand”: Helen Sekaquaptewa’s

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The irony of being asked to discuss American Indian spirituality in an academic setting does not escape me. After all, it was a mere hundred years ago that Colonel Richard H. Pratt entrenched the motto of the Carlisle Industrial Training School: “Kill the Indian, Save the Man.” Sacred rituals and practices were outlawed by the United States Government in an institutional campaign to assimilate Native peoples into mainstream society. Christian missionaries systematically attempted to persuade Indians to abandon their tribal traditions upon joining the flock. As with the vicissitudes of many American Indian topics and policies, the pendulum has swung to the opposite side. Rather than eradicating indigenous customs and beliefs, the trend has shifted to modes of appropriation. Thousands of websites offer insight to “the Medicine Way.” Book-sellers display a plethora of titles regarding crystals, healing, and pseudo shamans. In the spring of 2000, HarperCollins sent out a call to American Indian authors for a popular book to be published by their “religion and spirituality” division. Native American Literature and Spirituality has become a course topic in the academy. In his “Diary of a Teacher’s Last Year,” Professor David

Alford of Columbia College in California recounts an experience from
fall semester 1999:

We started the world religion class with a New Age, Native American shaman drumming and singing. When she passed the talking stick, a middle-aged woman said, "I've been waiting for this class all my life," her face gleaming with revelatory sincerity.

Alford effusively evaluates such "native" experiences, commenting that "moments when we are truly loving feel like an astonishing epiphany."

This trend is all very complex, interesting, and troubling. Among the many reasons a general population might be attracted to Native spiritualism would be refuge from the "culture of narcissism" and the frenzy of the postmodern industrial age. Individuals burdened by history seek solace found not in their own system of beliefs but encountered in both the genuine and the sometimes fraudulent "Indian traditions as alternative sources of knowledge and spirituality" (Donaldson 677). Further, instead of being ashamed by association with savage images, many individuals seek out noble American Indian ancestors, creating the "My great-grandmother was a Cherokee Princess" syndrome. I even have had two of my students tell me they were studying Native literature because they were Indians in previous lives. Laguna Pueblo scholar Paula Gunn Allen notes of her teaching experiences:

[M]ake no mistake, many students come to be titillated by Indian lore, seeing—however unconsciously—Native spiritual life as a curious artifact, as they've been conditioned to see all things Indian.
(64)

Meanwhile, as Native American literature has become canonized and incorporated into the mainstream curriculum, opportunities for study have developed for both Native writers and scholars. In a 1979 seminal essay "Native American Literature in an Ethnohistorical Context," Michael Dorris (Modoc), then chair of American Indian Studies

at Dartmouth, declared that there is no American Indian literature as a whole, only tribal literatures. A survey of literatures by American Indians reveals an array of statements of survival, of tribal and intellectual sovereignty. Academic study also has created a space to bring forth many Indian voices beyond the “fab five” of Momaday, Silko, Welch, Erdrich, and Alexie. At the same time, there are concerns about what is appropriate for the non-Indian/general public. For example, Allen has criticized Silko for disregarding the sacredness of stories by recounting them in the novel *Ceremony* (1977). Of greater concern is a colonial relationship among the academy, students, and Native texts. Cherokee professor Laura Donaldson reveals the following incident:

I had just presented a documentary film raising questions about the non-Native borrowing of Native spiritual practices. During the ensuing discussion, a young white woman stated that she did not understand why Indian people held “grudges”; “Why does imitation bother you, anyway? I’m flattered when people want to imitate me.” “But what are you leaving out?” I asked. The student looked puzzled. “How about five hundred years of colonialism? Your parallel of ‘I’m flattered/they should be flattered’ leaves out the entire history of Euramericans taking everything that we as Indian people have: lands, resources, and, now, even our cultures.” (677)

Many indigenous scholars, like Donaldson, are resisting exploitation of traditional and cultural values in academic settings. Study of Native American literatures should not be essentialist but should certainly be sensitive to cultural and tribal contexts. For most Native cultures, no separation exists between the sacred and the profane. The spiritual aspects of life are circumscribed into the whole of existence through every thought, gesture, word, and deed. The metaphysical events in novels by American Indians are not, as some critics wrongly suggest, magical realism¹ but a manifestation of a tribally unique way of perceiving and relating to the world. Some traditional stories should not be told or taught except in the winter. Some translated stories should not

be told at all. When examining traditional texts that outline sacred beliefs, origin stories, comic/trickster tales, one should consider the following questions: Who is telling the story? Why is the story being told? Who translated the story? Where? When? What is the function of the story? And what are the circumstances? Perhaps most importantly, the tribal-specific contexts of the literatures must be heeded. Creek/Cherokee writer Craig S. Womack describes this comprehensive theoretical approach as

a literary criticism that emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture. This criticism emphasizes unique Native worldviews and political realities, searches for differences as often as similarities, and attempts to find Native literature's place in Indian country, rather than Native literature's place in the canon. (11)

Womack is suggesting a transition from object to subject, that a Native point of view be central to the criticism. Such an approach demonstrates that indigenous literatures have been produced and will continue apart from current theoretical, ideological, and political trends. This is not to create an isolationism, but to posit that definitions and critical viewpoints ought to be developed from tribal centers rather than through imposition or colonization. The perspective also applies to the idea of spirituality in American Indian literatures.

I have chosen as a model for this approach a complicated work, Helen Sekaquaptewa's autobiography, *Me and Mine*. The book is in the

¹Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (Crow Creek Sioux) acknowledges that the roots of magical realism are based in a Latin American literary/political movement beginning in the 1950s (133). The supernatural events of Latin literature are quite different than those events grounded in traditional tribal myths and represented in American Indian novels. Magical realism derives from political absurdities and oppressions whereas mythic realities have a sense of origin based in tribal-specific traditions.

pattern of the “as-told-to” biography and includes conversion to a non-Indian religion. Published in 1969, *Me and Mine* is an example of early twentieth-century life stories of American Indians and of writing that encompasses the wholeness of spirituality. Helen’s Hopi name is Dowawisnima, which means “a trail marked by sand.” She was born in 1898 and died in 1990, living her entire life in Arizona. As a Hopi woman, she witnessed significant transitions from isolated traditional cultural practices to a more cosmopolitan contemporary life. Yet her worldview is informed by Hopi history, which intersects with various Christian influences. Helen’s life story was recorded and edited by her Mormon Relief Society companion Louise Lee Udall (1893–1974), granddaughter of John D. Lee and Jacob Hamblin (significant figures in Mormon history), wife of Arizona judge Levi Stewart Udall, and mother of contemporary political figures Morris and Stewart Udall. While the literary relationship between Helen and Louise suggests complications and patterns common to American Indian autobiographies, even more intriguing is Helen’s discussion of her Mormonism. In place of simply viewing her life as a paradigm of oppositions—male and female, Hopi and non-Indian, non-Christian Hopi and Mormon—Helen’s life story suggests a holistic, spiritual way of life.

In many regards Helen’s life story is timeless. Her Hopi worldview is defined and designated by a native language whose verbs have no tenses or “no basis for an objectified time” (Voegelin, Voegelin, and Jeanne 581).² Her sense of history is therefore as much in the present as the past. The traditional stories she tells are in the eternal present and exemplify a complex oral tradition of socialization, literature, and culture. Helen introduces her people, Hopitu or the Peaceful

²“Hopi verbs make a minimum division of time in terms of stative or active conditions expected or wanted or predicted or otherwise contemplated, but not yet occurring versus conditions occurring now or in the past. This is roughly the minimum division that verbs make in respect to two tenses that saliently combine with modality the notion of the time an event or condition occurs. But Hopi sentences are not restricted to this minimum division of time: for example, time adverbs make possible a further distinction of the nonfuture tense into present time and past time” (Voegelin, Voegelin, and

ones (Silverberg 14), and places them in history by inextricably connecting them with the land they inhabit. In Hopi tradition, the people entered the earth through a sipapu at the bottom of what is known to us as the Grand Canyon, and it is there the dead travel to a house below (Hieb 578). Helen says:

My homeland is the arid, sandy plateau country of northeastern Arizona, where dwell the Hopi people in eleven villages, each with similar characteristics and mores, yet each a separate city-state, and not always on friendly terms with the neighbors.

My village, Oraibi (oh-rye-bee), [is] known to have been inhabited continuously since the time of Columbus. (3)

She introduces some cultural aspects, such as the “kachinas [or] messengers from the gods” and underground worship chambers or kivas that are organized by clan structure (4-5). Helen then situates herself within her family. She naturally begins with her mother, as the Hopi are matrilineal. Although the major part of the narrative continues with the chronology of her own life, observations, and experiences, she will return (as I will discuss later) to her sense of origin.

Me and Mine omits some crucial historical details which surely were a component of Helen’s comprehension of her place in the world, regardless of whose choice it was to omit that part of the story. To begin, the Hopi are known to have lived in northern Arizona for at least 2,000 years and probably have been there for 10,000 years. From their perspective, they have been there since their emergence from the previous world. The first Hopi encounter with Europeans occurred in 1540 when Coronado sent a group of seventeen horsemen, three or four footmen, and a Franciscan friar from Zuni in search of a waterway to the “South Sea.” The formidable Grand Canyon turned the Spanish away, but not for long. In 1598 Don Juan de Oñate and his entourage invaded and claimed Nuevo Mexico (including the Hopi land in Arizona) as a province of Spain.

The Hopi did not have continuous interaction with Europeans until the arrival of more friars in 1629. The Franciscans were determined to

civilize and convert the Hopi and other Pueblo peoples to Christianity. Despite the martyrdom of a friar in 1633 (Silverberg 88), the priests patiently continued their efforts and imposed terrible conditions on the Hopi. According to historian Robert Silverberg:

At the pueblo of Oraibi the Hopi were forced to haul logs from a forest forty miles away to build the huge mission. They called it "the slave church" and secretly went on worshiping the kachinas. When a friar caught a Hopi in "an act of idolatry" at Oraibi in 1655, he thrashed the man until blood came, then poured burning turpentine over him. The man died; when the Indians complained, the friar was transferred to a different district. Another priest, unwilling to drink water from the springs around Oraibi, demanded that his water be brought from a source fifty miles distant. (88)

This priestly treatment was not unique to the Hopi. Many Natives suffered under the cruelty of the Spanish church and government. In 1680, the indigenous Pueblo peoples organized a revolt against Spanish rule and successfully drove out the conquistadores. The Catholic church was "demolished" and its wooden beams were used in a kiva (Silverberg 118-119). Among Oraibi rituals that Helen may have observed is a reenactment of the martyrdom of the four Franciscans during the Pueblo Revolt.

The Pueblo peoples held back the Spanish for twelve years, the only successful indigenous rebellion in the history of European colonization. However, in 1692 the Europeans returned with a vengeance. Captain General Diego de Vargas violently and systematically recaptured the Pueblos and reinstated Christianity. In practical terms, though, most Natives continued and still continue to practice their traditional rituals and beliefs, often consolidating Christian and Native customs. De Vargas's last effort was the Arizona Hopi villages. Bad weather and lack of economic incentive allowed him only a marginal victory. The isolated villages were technically under Spanish rule, but ten of the eleven Hopi pueblos rejected Catholic Christianity. In 1741 the King of Spain

turned jurisdiction of the Hopis away from the Franciscans and over to the Jesuits. The Jesuits never managed to complete the journey to Arizona, and the Franciscans tried to regain control by “submitting false reports of thousands of Hopi converts; however, the Hopis remained obstinately and successfully anti-Christian” (Brew 522).

This story is integral in the history of Pueblo peoples, yet as a significant aspect of Hopi history not part of Helen’s recorded autobiography. The precise details of Hopi involvement in the Revolt of 1680 remain a part of Hopi sacred history not generally known to the public. Despite the wide-ranging documentation of the revolt and the history and anthropology of Hopi people themselves, some sacred knowledge remains out of the public realm. The guarding of such knowledge in *Me and Mine* was Helen’s choice and that of her shadow editor, her husband, Emory. According to Helen’s daughter and literary executor, Alison, the editorial and authorial representations in the book were mostly as Helen wanted, except for Louise Udall’s epilogue, published in early editions of the book. Current editions from the University of Arizona Press substitute a short remembrance of his parents by son Emory and a “Retrospect,” Helen’s eulogy delivered at Louise’s funeral in 1974. Helen recounts Louise’s close friendship and her willingness to work hard among the tribe. In Helen’s eyes, Louise was “part of my family” (253).³

In the preface to *Me and Mine* Louise speaks in her own voice and tells of her friendship with Helen. During their automobile rides from Phoenix to Relief Society meetings on the Maricopa Reservation, Helen would tell Louise stories. Louise relates this conversation with Helen:

“You should write the story of your life for your children and grandchildren.”

Her answer was, “I have thought of doing it, but didn’t think I was capable.”

³During a conversation with Alison Sekaquaptewa Lewis and Kathleen Sands in Mesa Arizona in January 2000, both women spoke at length of the fond-

I [Louise] started writing the events as she told them. . . . The Trader at Oraibi asked, "What is Mrs. Udall writing? I know she is writing something."

Helen replied, "I am talking. She is writing." (Frontispiece)

Louise, the narrator, misses any suspicion in the Trader's question, and there is no way of knowing what other subtleties are missed. Lacking confidence as a speaker of English as a second language, Helen as well may have overlooked nuances in Louise's final written product. My observation is not intended to dismiss this type of autobiography but to illustrate its difficult nature, the challenges of language translation, cross-cultural interpretation, and patronizing rhetoric. Major issues in American Indian literature and other minority literatures as well address problems of authority and power to articulate one's own story. Even in the best of circumstances, editors and transcribers cannot help but influence the narrative, and in worst-case scenarios they appropriate and overwhelm the source voice. For example, in an interview with Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Sands, Helen regretted that Louise edited out references to a threatening sexual experience. Helen also told the interviewers "she wish[ed] she had been more forceful and confident about including [Hopi ways]" (Bataille and Sands 101). Nevertheless, Helen observed that Louise was "invaluable in developing a coherent and polished narrative" (100).

The chronology of Helen's life occupies the first two hundred pages of the book. She relates the major events, her boarding school education that trained her for manual labor, her marriage, and the milestones of her family life. Occasional comments on Hopi politics and history are included when they reflect on her life. Strife in 1906 between "Hostiles" and "Friendlies" is documented by Louise's research at the National Archives (84). The final three chapters are "My Church," "Dasube" (the Hopi word for twilight), and the epilogue by Louise (later deleted) that follows the lives and careers of Helen's children. The chapter "My Church" articulates Helen's most sacred beliefs. She begins with a retelling of the Hopi creation story and how the people emerged through the earth:

Once the people lived in the under world. The time came when so many of them were wicked that the leaders of those who were good held a count and decided to find another place to live. . . . Finally all the good people had climbed up through the hole in the sky. (224–25)

The origin story includes the appearance of the white man and the white chief brother who “will come and bring peace and right living.” (227)

Helen reveals that she learned this story from her father and other men in her family, though it is generally told to men in the kiva. She also notes the allegorical nature of the Creation story and its orality, that the stories are learned through repetition (230). She observes the manner of socialization among genders and how proper behavior is instilled through storytelling and ritual. However, she observes: “While the ritual part of the Hopi religion had no appeal to me—it was crude—the things my parents taught me about the way to live were good” (234). With that validation, Helen recounts that her father taught her to value a written record over the oral tradition, that “There will come a time when all the people of the earth will belong to the one true church, and we will all speak the same language and be as one people” (235). Helen observes that “Traditionals would now deny” such a declaration, which she segues into an introduction to the Book of Mormon and a historical account of Mormon and Hopi encounters (236).

Although Helen places the arrival of Mormon missionary Jacob Hamblin in Oraibi in the 1860s, other sources identify his initial contact as occurring as early as 1858 (Dockstader 524). Hamblin was the first Christian missionary to gain general acceptance among the Hopi after the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. Later in the nineteenth century the Moravians, Baptists, and Mennonites established missions, yet the number of Mormons among the Hopi remains significant. Helen observes:

The Hopis always classed the Mormons as different and separate from other whites, especially after Tuba’s [Hopi leader] visit to Utah [1871]. They felt that the Mormons were friendly and did not look down on the Indians. They were industrious and would share their food with hungry Indians. The Hopis said, “When we

go to their homes they invite us in to sit at the table and eat with them. The do not give us food on a plate to eat outside like dogs." (238)

Helen had several encounters with Mormons, although she also associated with the Baptists and the Mennonites (Interview). She and her husband were eventually taught by full-time Mormon missionaries in the 1950s. On May 3, 1953, at the age of 55, Helen was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by her son, Wayne, who had previously converted. She states:

I have no doubt I did right. I have never been sorry. It has made a better woman of me, and I have surely been happy in my church. I have had great satisfaction working in the church, even though it seemed like everything was against me at times. (242)

She saw Relief Society, the Mormon women's organization, as a natural extension of her willingness to help others. And she enjoyed teaching and participating in the Singing Mothers of the local Mormon church.

Although the chronological aspect of narrative would seem to privilege Helen's Mormon conversion, recall that she begins with deeply traditional Hopi storytelling and images. In a universe of essentialism, the two versions of cosmology would be incompatible; the paradigm of polar opposites would categorize these two spiritualisms as inconsistent. Although Helen makes many compromises in her life, she does not sacrifice one system of belief for another. She sees how they work together to complement her existing spiritual values through the whole of her life. *Me and Mine* validates her whole life, and her Mormon conversion is merely another event on a timeless continuum. Thus her story does not follow the traditional structure of conversion narratives, where major changes mark the "new life" of the convert. Bataille and Sands comment on Helen's Mormonism:

Conversion, then[,] is not the climax or turning point of Helen's life, nor the focus of her story. It is, rather, a very gradual and nat-

ural outgrowth of both her Hopi and non-Hopi observations and experiences about religion, another resolution of the old and new in her life. (109)

While she was involved in practicing the Mormon faith, she continued her role as a respected Hopi elder, serving as matriarch of the Eagle Clan; and her husband functioned as a traditional Hopi judge. Like the choices she made between historical and modern practices, she tried to choose the best of both worlds. She asserts: "Reading the Bible and the Book of Mormon has helped us to understand the Hopi traditions, and the Hopi traditions help us to understand these books of scripture" (236). By experiencing Mormonism as a complement rather than a conflict, Helen asserts her Hopi way of seeing the world as a whole, as a sphere where the apparently incompatible can co-exist without one having the need to consume the other. At the heart of this complement is Helen's spirituality, defined in her own terms and experiences. She does not require or expect readers to emulate her or to expect more than she is willing to offer. She protects the most sacred aspects of her culture that are not for public consumption. In a later interview, Helen asserts the authenticity of tribal specificity in her story, a way of knowing her collaborator did not share:

But not being a Hopi, [Louise] couldn't understand some things that the Hopis believed or did, and it was very hard for her to understand. So, finally I went down to her house . . . to write a few chapters myself where it was not so correct. (Interview)

Reading and studying Helen Sekaquaptewa's life reveals much about Hopi traditions and spirituality melded with a particular Christianity. She demonstrates how a person can maintain those tribal traditions and still embrace distinct religious traditions. A scholar can read the spirituality of a text such as her life story without appropriating it, without colonizing it, without imitating it to create a false comfort in the practices of another. I hope this is how Helen would have liked it.

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