

**theories and
methodologies**

The Primacy of the Present, the Primacy of Place: Navigating the Spiral of History in the Digital World

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IN HER INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH INSTITUTE'S E-BOOK *ON PERIODIZATION*, THE EDITOR, VIRGINIA JACKSON, REMARKS ON THE ABILITY of its "digital format" to invite innovative ways of interacting with texts. Marshall Brown's article in the book, for example, allows readers to hear Joseph Haydn's music while they read nineteenth-century literature, giving them an immediate understanding of the musical metaphors Brown uses for describing literary history. Our contemporary presence and capabilities in the digital world, Brown suggests, may help us to understand periods as "linked episodes within the rolling flood of time," enabling what Jackson describes as "a literary historical process" that "is not progress but wave, not transcendence" but, as Brown writes, "the metrics and bar lines shaping the pulse of history" (Jackson, par. 4). The authors of *On Periodization* suggest a practice of periodization that allows for simultaneities: "a new plane of historicity on which several temporalities unfold at once" (Jackson, par. 4). This conception of time is made possible by the present moment, the (relatively) new technologies we have in our midst, through which this e-book is expressed. This "new plane" of simultaneities reflects the primacy of the present in that the technologies we use are actively shaping how we experience literature and literary history (Martin 153–56). Furthermore, while chronological periodization can dis-embed events from their places, our process of reading rhizomically in the digital world may move us to reconsider the primacy of place.

The pulsing wave may leave us wanting, but as scholars including Stephanie Fitzgerald, Hillary Wyss, Timothy Powell, and Wai Chee Dimock have suggested, other metaphors may enable us to break the vexing boundaries and narratives of progress inherent in (or inherited from) the process of periodization. As Dimock notes, many people still assume that the linear division of time—represented by minutes and hours, as well as periods and eras—is an ontological truth, as if time were "a measuring tape, with fixed segments" that by its own force permeates all spaces over which we impose it.

However, in concert with many Indigenous studies scholars, Dimock questions that assumption, revealing that in other places beyond the “Western world” “a very different ontology of time prevails.” For her, it is the image of the spiral, so prevalent in the literatures of the Americas, that is most compelling (2; see also Cohen, “New England” 315).

This spiral is embedded in place(s) but revolves through layers of generations, renewing itself with each new birth. It cannot be fixed but is constantly moving in three-dimensional, multilayered space. It allows for recurrence and return but also for transformation. Its origins lie in ancient worlds, but it moves through our own bodies in the present, perhaps with a sense of irony. As the Muskogee poet Joy Harjo writes, “[W]hen the mythic spiral of time turned its beaded head and saw what was going on, it snapped” (*In Mad Love* 54). While a romantic reading inherited from salvage ethnography might suggest that the spiral’s “beaded head” was cut off by modernity, a reading inspired by recent Native literary criticism might see the spiral as a dancer who “snapped” her beaded head fiercely, suddenly directing her gaze toward the incredulous world swirling around her. The phrase implies a break, a need to pay attention, a need for considered analysis from the perspective of the spiral, which embraces simultaneity (Fitzgerald and Wyss 272; Womack, *Red* 250–51; Kolosov 47).

As Dimock notes, scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Anthony Gibbons have argued that the linear measurement of time is “a mark of modernity, linked to the rise of the nation-state and the rule of the mechanical clock” (2). However, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out, the “emplotment” of time may also be a mark of colonization, whereby the concept of “modernity” parallels the sweeping narratives of “civilization” and “progress” (55; see also Powell, Weems, and Owle 4–5; Wishart 307). As Dimock acknowledges, many colonized peoples retain alternative

conceptions of time that share space, albeit unequally, with the ticking of the clock, an instrument that came to be known in the Western Abenaki language as *papeezokwazik*, “that thing which makes much noise and does nothing useful” (J. Bruchac 9; see also Laurent 290). It may be that in the digital “age,” if we choose to retain such a label, the measuring tape of time will become decreasingly useful and, perhaps, increasingly (self)destructive.

This essay presents an opportunity to raise questions, to expose the “fissures” that may open when the primacy of the present—that is, the possibilities of the digital world and the rise of Indigenous studies in global networks—is put in conversation with the primacy of place, particularly the “American” landscape that many readers of this volume now inhabit (Martin 154). What would it mean to privilege place when discussing periodization, to consider, as the geographer David Wishart does, that “period” and “region” are deeply linked narratives? What different shape might literary history take if we account for distinct conceptions of time that arise simultaneously from particular places? How might Indigenous methodologies help answer some of the vexing questions that literary historians ponder in our present world?

Literary history did not emerge on this continent when Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492. As Colin Calloway wrote, “What Columbus ‘discovered’ was not a ‘new world’ but another old world” (14; see also Anderson 286). Multiple forms of textualities emerged from this “old world,” literary media deeply intertwined with oral narratives, which in the last several centuries have also taken the form of alphabetic print. David Cusick’s *History of the Six Nations* (1825), for example, is one of several alphabetic texts that recount the narratives of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, drawing on wampum belts, written accounts by Haudenosaunee scribes, and extended oral narratives relayed in the longhouse.¹ Cusick allows for multiple

reckonings of periodization in his narrative, even as he calls our attention to the recentness of Columbus's voyage. For example, in telling the story of the "stonish giants," he relates that this "invasion" of "the country" by a nation from the Mississippi River occurred "about two hundred and fifty winters since the people left the mountain," or "perhaps about 1250 years before Columbus discovered the America[s]" (20). This account of an actual battle is layered with narratives about an ongoing, spiraling contest between figures of the upper world of the sky and the lower world of the waters, which spread rhizomically into the past and future, as well as through networks that cross the continent. To interpret this one episode in Cusick's narrative with insight requires reading rhizomically within the extensive narratives of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the related oral traditions and graphic media of the continent. Our interpretive travels would take us east to the Wabanaki coast, where petroglyphs of the same figures can be viewed in stone; west to the Mississippi, where iconography of the upper and lower worlds appears in pottery and earthworks; north to the Anishinaabe country, where similar stories are mapped in birchbark scrolls; and south to Mesoamerica, where related narratives are carried in codices, sung in poetry, and inscribed on painted walls (Brotherston; Mann; Mann and Fields; Quilter et al.; Reilly and Garber; Townsend and Sharp; Tedlock; Popol Vuh). We might be led to these places by contemporary literature, tribal history, or "wampum chronicles" on the Web (Bonaparte).

Scholars have only recently begun to turn their attention to the "wealth of literary media" in the Americas and to the ways in which these media and their associated oral literatures might redirect our questions toward new interpretative possibilities (Brotherston 4). What will American literary history look like if we take seriously Indigenous frameworks for reckoning time and conceiving

of literature? To place Cusick's narrative in what Roger Echo-Hawk terms "Ancient American history," for example, we would be compelled to consider Haudenosaunee "epochs" as relayed in the longhouse, as Barbara Mann does, and, as Gordon Brotherston does, to consider the text's relation to Quiché Mayan "worlds" and to the larger "Mother Corn era," proposed by Echo-Hawk, which encompasses the emergence of the Haudenosaunee Great Law during the agricultural revolution and ties the narrative to the emergence of the Quiché nation as the "people of corn," as related in the epic *Popol Vuh*. What would it mean to acknowledge that time does not necessarily roll over us like a flood or a measuring tape? What if time also operates like a spiral? What would it mean to think in terms of "worlds" rather than "periods"? How might these alternative frameworks help us to work "creatively," as Timothy Powell asks, to "free" American literary history "from the taxonomic grid of chronological time that commences with the moment of colonization?" (Powell, Weems, and Owle 8). Instead of answering these questions in full, I hope to raise possibilities, examples that might cause us to "snap" our heads and pay close attention to "what [is] going on" around us.

Let me offer an example drawn from a place I have come to know well, Harvard Yard, at the time of the college's origins, when the fledgling university was located just downriver from the Massachusetts *Saunk-skwa's* town of *Missitekw*.² Here, in the preparatory school beside Harvard Hall and the Harvard Indian College, English and Indian students learned the "truth" about time from their primers, including Thomas Shepard's *Catechism*. In answer to the question "How may it be proved that there is a God?" students would have repeated by rote, "From time, for we see that months come before years, and weeks before months, and dayes before weeks, and heures before dayes . . . and a minute of time before an hour, and there-

fore there must necessarily be some minute of time before the world began, & therefore a God who gave it this beginning.” The primer relayed a tricky but potentially persuasive form of circular reasoning: the existence of linear, divided time was a fact of the world, and since it could presumably be observed by all humankind, the movement of time demonstrated the orderly vision of Jehovah and the world he created. Therefore, time was an a priori creation of the divinity, and the divinity could be witnessed in chronological time.

Yet Wampanoag students like Caleb Cheeshateaumuck and Joel Iacoomes, as well as English missionary students like Matthew Mayhew, would have read and recited a Wampanoag version of the same question. “Oohgôk je korâmen neh átta Mandouh?” “How prove you that there is a God?” the bilingual “Some Helps for the Indians” asked (Clark 343). Here *Mandouh* referred to an Algonquian conception of ambivalent, ambiguous power that moves through all beings. Among the rote answers offered by the text was the reply “there is *Mandouh* common to all men, nor is it changed by the changes of times; therefore it must arise from some light which is common to all men” (Clark 344). This depiction reflected and reinforced the presence of an indefinable spirit or “light” that inhabited a spiraling, spatialized conception of “deep time,” permeating all spaces and temporalities (M. Bruchac 56; see also Dimock 6; Powell, Weems, and Owle 3; Silverman 26–28, 59).

The Dakota novelist (and Harvard alumna) Susan Power demonstrates a similar conception of layered time in her compelling short story “First Fruits,” based on the history of the Harvard Indian College. Emphasizing the primacy of place and the spiral of history, Powers creates a young protagonist steeped in Indigenous history who is seeking to understand a new, seemingly foreign place as a freshman at Harvard College. Although Georgiana Lorraine Shoestring, or “George,” occupies a contemporary moment, a place we

share, she pursues a deep relationship with her predecessor, Caleb Cheeshateaumuck. She finds herself “going out of my way, wandering behind Matthews Hall, to that spot where the Indian College once stood” every day, “looking for Caleb” (126). For her the history of the Indian College is an “elusive,” animated space that permeates old buildings and new friendships. George finds her place at Harvard by imaginatively understanding Caleb’s, and, ultimately, it is writing that allows her to find “Caleb Cheeshateaumuck’s elusive spirit” (131). Literature is the vehicle that enables her to travel. Her own writing carries her beyond Harvard’s halls to Caleb’s home on the island of Noepe (Martha’s Vineyard), where his “spirit” has rejoined his family. In one of the most powerful passages in the story, George reflects, “I was taught to believe that time is not a linear stream, but a hoop spinning forward like a wheel, where everything is connected and everything is eternal. In this cosmology, I am here because Caleb came before me, and he was here in anticipation of me” (127). This statement has proven potent, not only for the imagined Dakota student but also for countless Native people who have come through Harvard’s halls, feeling a deep, if conflicted, connection to the young men who came before them and to the buried histories and descendant communities that continue to inhabit this place.

Indeed, as George discovers, literature itself embodies the spiral of history. As Dimock notes, “Literature is the home of non-standard space and time” (4; see also Cohen, “New England” 315). We love fiction for its ability to transport us to imagined places and times without requiring us to follow a strictly chronological path (Martin 155). So why are we compelled to contain literature within the bounds of literary periods? What would it mean to follow paths of intellectual kinship, moving through rhizomic networks of influence and inquiry? What would Web-based networks of literature look like?³ As Fitzgerald

and Wyss suggest, we might adopt Robert Warrior's model of "intellectual trade routes," which already guides our readings of Native American literature, more broadly (Fitzgerald and Wyss 272; Warrior 181). This process of reading rhizomically "across time," common in Indigenous studies, enables us to apply the insights of the nineteenth-century Pequot author William Apess to contemporary questions of sovereignty, identity, and justice; or to see the ancient Pueblo story of Yellow Woman, as Leslie Silko does, moving through the life of a contemporary woman (*Storyteller* 55); or to read glyphs and their associated oral traditions as a "map to the next world," in the words of Harjo's poetic vision ("Map" 19).

The digital world is moving in concert with Indigenous literary traditions, carrying us to a place where we are already reading with simultaneity across intellectual trade routes. Our students do this kind of lateral, rhizomic reading without pause. At least half the texts I assign in my courses are now accessible on the Web, and nearly every question my students pose as they are reading can be answered by pursuing a branch into the digital world. They can answer old questions about word definitions, historical context, author biography, or cultural frameworks instantaneously. The questions that drove me to the library at 6:00 a.m. while I was in graduate school can now usually be answered, even at 3:00 a.m., by the Web. Texts as rare and fragile as the Eliot Bible, which Caleb Cheeshaumuck held in his hands, can be viewed as PDF files. Places can be mapped and viewed by satellite on *Google Maps*. We can instantly communicate with each other, seeking answers to our most pressing questions, by e-mail, Skype, or *Facebook*. Even a technophobe like me can appreciate the possibilities offered by the digital world. My students, as one thesis advisee explained to me, were born into this space. They do not know a world that is not wired. Sometimes, Web-based intellectual trade routes take us to places unimagined when we began. Some-

times, they drive us to distraction. However, they are the reality of our world, perhaps part of the scenario that makes the spiral of time snap her beaded head, at the newness not of modernity but of the ancient networks of thinking renewed in innovative forms.

Our globalized, digital world, as scholars including Matt Cohen (*Networked Wilderness*), Jerome McGann, and Walter D. Mignolo have suggested, may be more like the world in which Caleb lived than we realize. Furthermore, as Timothy Powell demonstrates, this space offers "dynamic new possibilities for presenting stories from the Native American oral tradition," a form not easily contained by "the logic of periodization" (Powell, Weems, and Owle 2). Just as the vehicle of writing enabled George Shoestring to find Caleb in an unexpected place, the vehicle of the Web enables us to create spaces for oral traditions that continue to live and evolve within Native communities. In "Native/American Digital Storytelling," an online essay that provides its readers with links to digital maps, Web sites, and digital video, Powell allows his readers to view and listen to Freeman Owle, a highly respected Eastern Cherokee storyteller, relate two significant Cherokee narratives in a contemporary setting, the teller surrounded by books. Owle's account is not left to stand on its own, as an artifact of Cherokee culture. Rather, Powell demonstrates through his analysis the complexity of oral traditions and their operation within multiple temporalities.

For example, Powell's analysis reveals how Owle's story of the Great Buzzard and the origin of Cherokee medicinal knowledge use a mode he calls "ancient present tense," both "going back to the beginning of time" and occurring in the moment of telling (Powell, Weems, and Owle 10; see also Basso 6, 33; Connelly 75). Powell demonstrates that gaining knowledge through interpretation is an ongoing process. The story does not simply relate how an object of knowledge was acquired; rather, it functions as a vehicle

for transmitting knowledge. Furthermore, that knowledge is not contained within the bounds of the story, captured in a book or *YouTube* clip, but is developed in contemporary Wolf Clan women's interaction with the narrative, as well as with the plants and people through which the knowledge is practiced in a particular place. Interpretation occurs in multiple media—digital, oral, land-based, material—and through the intimacy inherent in the relationship between a healer and her kin. Just as the story operates in multiple temporalities, there are also multiple layers of access and interpretation.

Oral traditions such as this story, Powell maintains, “provide a glimpse of vast temporal vistas or what might be called *deep American* literary history” (Powell, Weems, and Owle 2). “Instead of forcing native storytelling into a rigid linear time frame of western ‘history,’” as some anthologies have attempted to do, assuming all oral traditions belong to the period before colonization, Powell theorizes “alternative forms of temporality,” which move through Native oral traditions and “more accurately account for the deep time and nonlinear movements of indigenous poetics.” His aspiration is that the “critique” and analysis he offers, in conversation with tribal historians, elders, and scholars, will “contribute to the ongoing process of recognizing the Native/American oral tradition as a point of origin for American literary history” (Powell, Weems, and Owle 3). This is quite different from proposing that Native American origin stories be included as part of or precursor to American literary history. In this work, Powell suggests a new path for mapping American literary history, a spiraling cycle of emergence in an old place. Like Silko's character Tayo in *Ceremony*, he calls American literary history to move through and acknowledge its own colonization and the colonization of the land, in order to emerge with new eyes into an old, but always transforming, space.

Powell also performs “digital storytelling” by leading us through the digital world

to the “site” of the Cherokee Nation, where we can view an image of Kituwah, the Cherokee Mother Town, and the “home” page of the contemporary nation, while we are listening to Owle's telling of the “Kituhwa Mound Story” (Powell, Weems, and Owle 15–16). As Eric Gary Anderson notes, “The early and the contemporary are close enough to touch and are powerfully intertwined” in such “narrated places” (281). Kituwah is simultaneously the place where the nation and its “laws” emerged, where its oral traditions were inscribed, and from which its national fire was renewed and redistributed every year. It is also the site of contemporary contests. As recently as 2010, the ancient mound was threatened by the planned development of a Duke Energy substation.⁴ Just as they used the printing press to disseminate news and arguments against Removal during the nineteenth century, the Cherokee Nation used the Web to communicate with tribal citizens and the general public, stirring opposition to the project, the digital world offering new technology to expose threats to the community and its motherland. The nation is located at once in the deep, extending layers of Kituwah, in Oklahoma and North Carolina, and in the networks of the digital world. With the technology of the Web, Powell's essay puts us in Cherokee space; like a glyph, the image of Kituwah makes us hold the land and its stories, ancient and contemporary, in our mind, our wired present spiraling us back to the primacy of place.

In his essay “The Presence of Early Native Studies,” Anderson writes, “Known, lived, remembered, and living, the land is quite literally the grounds of Native knowledge, literacy, and textualities” (281). Likewise, instead of “theorizing ‘America’ as an ideology or a nation,” Powell seeks to “look beyond the toponym” of “America” to consider a “literary history of the land” (Powell, Weems, and Owle 3). Thus, rather than think of American literature as a corpus centering around the emergence of the political body of the United

States, we might consider the vast landscape of textualities that have emerged from this land. To do this, we will need to develop new old modes and methods of interpretation.

A major aspect of this education will involve acknowledging the land that marks the “grounds” of knowledge and the “nations” where “the Ancient Word” has been “inscribed” and “implanted” (Popul Vuh 63). If we wish to follow Harjo’s map into “the next world,” we will need to turn our attention not only to textual media but also to map texts inscribed in place, whether the “Storied Walls” of Mesoamerica and the southwest, the mnemonic petroglyphs carved on rock along great waterways, or the striking mounds and sculptures built from earth, “achievements in science and aesthetics on a monumental scale,” all of which are deeply intertwined with oral traditions and contemporary literature (Allen 808).⁵ The safeguarding of places like Kituwah is necessary to protect not only the sovereignty and historical heritage of the Cherokee Nation but also the archives of the land. Such earthworks may, as the literary scholar Chad Allen suggests, represent “a still readable form of indigenous writing—not simply on the land but literally through the medium of the land itself—toward nothing less than imagination of possible renewal” (Allen 808; see also Hedge Coke). As many contemporary Native writers, such as Silko, Louise Erdrich, Allison Hedge Coke, and Harjo, have noted, the land itself can operate as a living text map, steering our ability to navigate an ever-changing world (Silko, “Interior and Exterior Landscapes” 32). Along with the Web, texts, petroglyphs, and wampum belts, the land is part of the “spiral on the road of knowledge” (Harjo, “Map” 20). Like Harjo’s readers, we will have to read a “map printed with the blood of history” and to navigate by our “mother’s voice,” but together we might, as Harjo urges, “make our own map” and emerge into a new old world, spiraling in place (“Map”).

NOTES

1. The longhouse of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacy represents the longstanding, complex governance system of the confederacy; the geographic space of Haudenosaunee territory; and the physical structure in which councils and ceremonies have traditionally been held.

2. This *Saunkskwa*, or female leader, was known also as “Squa Sachem” and “the Massachusetts Queen.” The towns of Cambridge and Charlestown were established with her consent, and she reserved lands for herself and her people on the west side of Mystic Ponds. See, e.g., Paige 383; Shurtleff 254, 394; Frothingham 35–36.

3. The Rossetti Archive (www.rossettiarchive.org), an online database providing access to all of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s textual and pictorial works, is an early, compelling answer to that question, although it still relies on traditional periodization for part of its organizing principle. For more on the development of the archive, see McGann.

4. Even as I was rereading Powell’s essay, published in 2006, the digital world took me to articles from 2010 about the potential development near Kituwah mound (McKie; Carpenter). This experience exemplifies the kind of rhizomic reading in which we are constantly engaged. The crisis was resolved through negotiations between the Eastern Band of the Cherokee and Duke Energy of the Carolinas, which led to the selection of an alternative site for the substation.

5. See, e.g., Womack, *Drowning*; Erdrich, *Books and Tracks*; Hedge Coke. See also Allen on Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run*; Womack, *Red*, on Harjo and the tie snake; Fitzgerald and Wyss on Erdrich’s *Tracks*; Quilter et al.

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