

From Early Indigenous Voices to 1968: The Evolution of Native American Written Literature

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ABSTRACT

Native American written literature represents a rich and evolving tradition that reflects the resilience, cultural continuity, and intellectual contributions of Indigenous peoples in North America. This paper traces the development of Native American written literature from its earliest expressions to 1968, a landmark year marked by the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, a novel widely recognized for inaugurating the Native American Renaissance. While Indigenous cultures sustained their histories, beliefs, and values through oral traditions for centuries, the emergence of written texts introduced new modes of cultural preservation and self-representation. Early Native American writings including speeches, autobiographies, letters, sermons, and tribal narratives were often produced within the constraints of colonial institutions, yet they remained significant vehicles for asserting Indigenous identity and documenting tribal experiences. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Native authors increasingly employed the written word to negotiate cultural change, resist assimilationist policies, and challenge stereotypical portrayals imposed by non-Native writers. Through this historical overview, the paper demonstrates that Native American written literature evolved as a dynamic medium of resistance, identity formation, and cultural renewal, preserving Indigenous voices while adapting to changing historical circumstances.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Indigenous Literature, Oral Tradition, Native American Renaissance.

INTRODUCTION

Native American literature constitutes one of the oldest and most enduring literary traditions in North America. Long before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous communities preserved their histories, spiritual beliefs, social values, and collective memories through rich oral traditions that included myths, legends, songs, chants, prayers, and ceremonial narratives. These oral forms were not merely artistic expressions but also served as repositories of tribal knowledge, moral instruction, and cultural identity. Storytelling functioned as a communal practice through which each generation inherited the wisdom of its ancestors and maintained a profound relationship with the natural world, sacred landscapes, and tribal customs. The emergence of Native American written literature was shaped by centuries of cultural encounter, colonial expansion, missionary activity, and changing educational systems. Although many of the earliest written texts were produced under the influence of European literacy and often mediated by missionaries, translators, or government officials, Native authors gradually transformed writing into a powerful means of preserving Indigenous perspectives. Early speeches, autobiographies, petitions, letters, sermons, historical narratives, and tribal histories reveal Native writers' determination to document their experiences, defend their communities, and assert their cultural identities in the face of dispossession and assimilationist policies. These writings challenged dominant colonial representations by presenting Indigenous voices from within their own cultural traditions.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a gradual expansion of Native American literary production. As more Indigenous authors gained access to formal education, they began to employ English not as a symbol of cultural surrender but as an instrument of cultural survival and self-expression. Rather than abandoning their traditions, these writers incorporated tribal philosophies, oral narratives, myths, and ceremonial knowledge into written forms, creating a distinctive body of literature that bridged Indigenous worldviews with Western literary conventions. Their works addressed issues of land dispossession, cultural continuity, identity, spirituality, sovereignty, and the enduring consequences of colonialism while reaffirming the resilience of Native communities. This period also witnessed significant historical transformations that influenced Indigenous literary expression. Federal policies of forced removal, reservation life, missionary education, and boarding schools sought to eradicate Native languages and cultural practices. Despite these

pressures, Native writers continued to preserve tribal memory through written narratives that resisted cultural erasure. Their works demonstrate that Indigenous literature evolved not in isolation but through continuous adaptation to changing historical and political realities. Writing became an extension of traditional storytelling, enabling Native communities to communicate with broader audiences while safeguarding ancestral knowledge for future generations.

By the mid-twentieth century, Native American literature had developed a substantial intellectual and artistic foundation. Writers increasingly asserted Indigenous perspectives, experimented with literary forms, and questioned prevailing stereotypes that had long dominated mainstream representations of Native peoples. Their contributions established the conditions necessary for the remarkable literary resurgence that followed the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1968, a work widely recognized as inaugurating the Native American Renaissance. The achievements of this later movement, however, were rooted in the efforts of earlier generations of Indigenous writers whose works laid the groundwork for renewed cultural confidence and literary innovation.

From Oral Tradition to Written Expression

The history of Native American literature begins not with the written word but with a vibrant oral tradition that flourished for thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. Across North America, Indigenous communities developed sophisticated systems of storytelling through which they transmitted their history, religious beliefs, social customs, ecological knowledge, and moral values from one generation to the next. In the absence of a widespread writing system, oral narratives functioned as living archives, preserving the collective memory and cultural identity of each tribe. Storytelling was therefore far more than a form of entertainment; it was an educational, spiritual, and communal practice that sustained the continuity of Indigenous civilizations. Native American oral traditions encompass a wide range of narrative forms, including creation myths, origin stories, legends, heroic tales, trickster narratives, chants, ceremonial songs, prayers, and historical accounts. Each genre served a distinct purpose within tribal life. Creation stories explained the origins of the universe, humanity, animals, and sacred landscapes, while migration narratives preserved the historical movements of tribes across the continent. Trickster stories, featuring figures such as Coyote, Raven, or Nanabozho, conveyed ethical lessons through humour, transformation, and paradox. Likewise, ceremonial chants and sacred songs accompanied religious rituals, reinforcing the spiritual relationship between human beings, nature, and the Creator.

Unlike written texts, oral narratives were dynamic rather than fixed. Storytellers adapted their performances according to the audience, the ceremonial occasion, and the social circumstances while preserving the essential meaning of the stories. This flexibility ensured that Indigenous traditions remained relevant to changing historical conditions without losing their cultural significance. Knowledge was therefore understood as a communal inheritance rather than the intellectual property of an individual author. Elders, medicine men, clan leaders, and gifted storytellers were entrusted with preserving these traditions and transmitting them with accuracy, dignity, and cultural responsibility. The oral tradition also reflected the Indigenous understanding of language as a sacred force. Among many Native nations, words possessed creative and spiritual power. Speaking a story was considered an act of renewing cultural memory rather than merely recounting past events. Stories connected individuals with their ancestors, affirmed tribal identity, and reinforced ethical relationships among people, animals, the natural environment, and the spiritual world. Consequently, storytelling became an essential means of sustaining Indigenous worldviews and maintaining social harmony.

The arrival of European colonizers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries introduced alphabetic literacy and fundamentally altered the cultural landscape of Native America. Missionaries, explorers, traders, and colonial administrators sought to record Indigenous languages, customs, and histories, often through grammars, dictionaries, translations, and ethnographic descriptions. While these early records preserve valuable historical information, they were frequently shaped by colonial assumptions and failed to represent Native perspectives accurately. Indigenous voices were often filtered through translators or European editors, resulting in narratives that reflected both Native experience and colonial interpretation. Despite these limitations, literacy gradually became a means through which Native peoples could communicate beyond their own communities. Christian missionary schools and later government-sponsored educational institutions introduced many Indigenous individuals to reading and writing in European languages, particularly English. Although these educational systems were frequently designed to promote cultural assimilation, Native authors adapted literacy for their own purposes. Writing became a means of preserving tribal history, defending Indigenous rights, documenting cultural traditions, and challenging colonial misconceptions.

The transition from oral tradition to written expression did not represent a rejection of Indigenous cultural practices. Rather, Native writers viewed writing as an extension of oral storytelling. The narrative techniques, symbolic patterns, repetitive structures, and communal perspectives characteristic of oral literature continued to shape Indigenous written texts. Speeches delivered before colonial governments, petitions defending tribal sovereignty, personal letters, autobiographies, sermons, and historical narratives retained many of the stylistic features of oral discourse, including repetition, parallelism,

vivid imagery, and direct audience engagement. Consequently, early Native American writing maintained strong connections with the oral traditions from which it emerged. This transformation also reflected changing historical realities. As Indigenous communities faced land dispossession, forced migration, missionary intervention, and political marginalization, writing became an increasingly important instrument of cultural survival. Native leaders recognized that written documents could preserve treaties, defend legal claims, and communicate Indigenous concerns to colonial authorities and the wider public. Thus, literacy was not simply adopted as a colonial practice but was reshaped into a tool of resistance and self-representation.

By the nineteenth century, Native American written literature had begun to develop its own distinctive voice. Indigenous authors combined Western literary forms with tribal philosophies, oral narratives, and cultural memories, creating works that differed significantly from non-Native representations of Indigenous life. Rather than abandoning their oral heritage, they incorporated traditional storytelling techniques into written narratives, thereby ensuring the continuity of Indigenous knowledge across changing historical circumstances. This synthesis of oral and written traditions laid the intellectual and artistic foundation for the subsequent growth of Native American literature. Native American written literature produced before 1968 reflects the historical experiences, cultural values, and intellectual traditions of Indigenous peoples across North America. Although Native authors belonged to diverse tribal nations with distinct languages, customs, and worldviews, their writings reveal several recurring themes that illustrate shared concerns arising from colonization, cultural change, and the struggle for survival. Early Indigenous literature was not merely a record of historical events; it functioned as a means of preserving cultural identity, transmitting ancestral knowledge, and asserting Native perspectives within a society that frequently marginalized Indigenous voices. These themes formed the literary foundation upon which the Native American Renaissance would later flourish.

One of the most significant themes in Native American written literature before 1968 is the affirmation of Indigenous identity. From the eighteenth century onward, Native writers sought to represent themselves and their communities through their own voices rather than allowing outsiders to define Indigenous cultures. Their writings challenged stereotypes that portrayed Native peoples as either "noble savages" or obstacles to civilization. Instead, Indigenous authors presented Native societies as complex, dynamic, and deeply rooted in their own cultural traditions. Autobiographies, speeches, memoirs, and essays frequently emphasize the importance of tribal heritage, family relationships, and communal responsibility. Writers portrayed identity as inseparable from tribal history, language, spirituality, and the natural environment. Even those educated within missionary schools or government institutions continued to affirm their Indigenous heritage, demonstrating that cultural identity could survive despite colonial pressures. This commitment to self-representation enabled Native authors to reclaim authority over their own histories and experiences.

Before the widespread development of Native written literature, oral storytelling served as the principal means of preserving Indigenous knowledge. Consequently, oral tradition remained central even after Native authors adopted written forms. Many early texts incorporate narrative techniques derived from storytelling, including repetition, symbolic imagery, circular structures, communal narration, and the blending of myth with historical experience. Stories functioned not only as entertainment but also as repositories of cultural memory and ethical instruction. Creation narratives, migration stories, trickster tales, and ceremonial accounts continued to influence written literature by providing frameworks through which Native writers interpreted both historical events and contemporary realities. The transition to writing therefore did not replace oral tradition but extended its reach, enabling Indigenous communities to preserve their cultural heritage for future generations while communicating with wider audiences.

Another enduring theme in Native American literature is the intimate relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land. Unlike Western concepts of land as private property, many Native traditions understand the natural environment as sacred, living, and inseparable from communal existence. Mountains, rivers, forests, plains, and ceremonial sites are portrayed not merely as physical landscapes but as places where history, spirituality, and identity converge. Early Native writers frequently expressed the emotional and cultural consequences of displacement resulting from colonization, forced removal, and reservation policies. The loss of ancestral homelands represented not only material deprivation but also a disruption of spiritual relationships and cultural continuity. Literature therefore became an important means of preserving memories of sacred places and reaffirming Indigenous connections to ancestral territories despite geographical displacement.

The experience of colonial expansion constitutes one of the central concerns of Native American written literature before 1968. Indigenous writers documented the effects of European settlement, military conflict, treaty violations, forced migration, and government policies that sought to undermine tribal sovereignty. Rather than presenting Native peoples as passive victims, these works emphasize resilience, adaptation, and resistance. Many speeches, petitions, autobiographies, and political writings challenged unjust policies while defending Indigenous rights to land, cultural practices, and self-government. Resistance was expressed not only through political action but also through the preservation of language,

ceremony, and historical memory. Literature itself became an act of resistance by enabling Native authors to counter colonial narratives and preserve Indigenous perspectives that might otherwise have been silenced.

Spirituality occupies a central position in Native American literature because religious belief is deeply interwoven with everyday life, community relationships, and the natural world. Indigenous writers frequently depict human beings as part of an interconnected universe in which harmony depends upon maintaining respectful relationships with animals, plants, ancestors, and spiritual forces. Unlike Western literary traditions that often separate religion from daily experience, Native literature portrays spirituality as an inseparable aspect of existence. Ceremonies, sacred stories, visions, prayers, and rituals are presented as essential means of maintaining physical, emotional, and spiritual balance. Even when Native authors wrote in English or adopted Western literary forms, they continued to express Indigenous philosophical principles that emphasized interconnectedness, reciprocity, and respect for all forms of life.

Language is another recurring theme in Native American literature before 1968. Indigenous languages carried tribal histories, ceremonial knowledge, ecological understanding, and cultural values that could not always be fully translated into English. As colonial educational policies increasingly promoted English while discouraging Native languages, many Indigenous writers became deeply concerned with preserving linguistic heritage. Although numerous Native authors composed their works in English to reach broader audiences, they frequently incorporated Indigenous words, expressions, songs, and narrative patterns into their writings. This blending of languages reflected both adaptation and resistance. English became a medium through which Native writers communicated their experiences, while Indigenous languages remained symbols of cultural continuity and collective identity. Literature thus served as an important vehicle for protecting traditions threatened by linguistic assimilation.

Historical memory constitutes another important theme in pre-1968 Native American literature. Indigenous authors viewed history not simply as a chronological record of past events but as a living inheritance connecting present generations with their ancestors. Through memoirs, autobiographies, tribal histories, and oral narratives recorded in written form, Native writers preserved the experiences of their communities while correcting historical distortions found in colonial accounts. Remembering the past was regarded as essential for maintaining cultural continuity. Historical narratives frequently emphasize the endurance of tribal traditions despite warfare, displacement, and cultural disruption. Rather than focusing exclusively on loss, these works highlight the persistence of Indigenous knowledge and the capacity of Native communities to adapt while retaining their cultural foundations.

Unlike many Western literary traditions that emphasize individual achievement, Native American literature frequently presents the individual within the broader context of family, clan, and tribal community. Personal identity is portrayed as inseparable from communal relationships, shared responsibilities, and collective well-being. Individual actions acquire meaning through their contribution to the survival and harmony of the community. This emphasis on communal values reflects Indigenous philosophies that prioritize cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility. Early Native writers repeatedly demonstrate that cultural survival depends not only upon individual resilience but also upon the preservation of communal traditions, ceremonies, and social bonds. Consequently, literature serves as an expression of collective memory rather than solely personal experience.

A final recurring theme in Native American literature before 1968 is the balance between adaptation and continuity. Indigenous communities encountered profound historical changes through colonization, missionary activity, formal education, and increasing participation in American society. Yet Native writers consistently rejected the notion that cultural adaptation required the abandonment of Indigenous traditions. Instead, their works illustrate how Native peoples selectively incorporated new ideas while preserving essential elements of tribal identity. Writing itself became an example of this process. Indigenous authors adopted alphabetic literacy and Western literary forms without relinquishing the oral traditions, spiritual beliefs, and communal values that defined their cultures. This creative synthesis enabled Native literature to remain both historically grounded and responsive to changing social realities.

Native American Renaissance

The publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1968 is widely regarded as the beginning of the Native American Renaissance, a period marked by an unprecedented flourishing of Indigenous literature in the United States. However, the literary achievements associated with this movement did not emerge suddenly or in isolation. They were the culmination of centuries of cultural endurance, literary experimentation, political activism, and intellectual transformation. The Native American Renaissance was built upon a long tradition of Indigenous storytelling and the efforts of earlier Native writers who preserved tribal histories, asserted cultural identities, and challenged colonial narratives. Understanding the significance of 1968 therefore requires an examination of the historical, social, and literary developments that prepared the ground for this remarkable resurgence.

The decades preceding 1968 witnessed profound changes in the political and cultural circumstances of Native American communities. During the first half of the twentieth century, federal policies continued to promote assimilation through boarding schools, restrictions on Indigenous languages, and the erosion of tribal sovereignty. Although the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 encouraged limited tribal self-government, subsequent policies such as the federal termination program of the 1950s once again threatened the political and cultural survival of Native nations. At the same time, the Urban Relocation Program encouraged thousands of Native Americans to leave reservations for cities in search of employment, creating new experiences of displacement, cultural adaptation, and identity negotiation. These historical realities became important themes in the literature that followed.

The post-World War II period also produced a new generation of educated Native intellectuals. Many Indigenous veterans returned from military service with broader social experiences and heightened political awareness. Increased access to colleges and universities enabled Native students to engage critically with history, literature, and public policy while rediscovering their tribal heritage. Education, once employed primarily as a means of assimilation, gradually became an instrument through which Indigenous scholars and writers reclaimed their cultural traditions and articulated their own perspectives. This intellectual awakening contributed significantly to the emergence of modern Native literature.

Equally important was the growing climate of political activism during the 1950s and 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement inspired many Native communities to organize against discrimination, treaty violations, and the continued loss of tribal lands. Indigenous organizations increasingly demanded recognition of treaty rights, educational reform, religious freedom, and political self-determination. These movements encouraged Native writers to address questions of identity, sovereignty, historical injustice, and cultural continuity with renewed confidence. Literature became closely connected with activism, serving as a medium through which Indigenous peoples could recover suppressed histories and challenge dominant representations of Native life.

By the mid-twentieth century, Native American literature had already established important literary precedents through the works of earlier authors. Writers such as Samson Occom, William Apess, Sarah Winnemucca, Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa), Zitkala-Ša, Mourning Dove, John Joseph Mathews, and D'Arcy McNickle demonstrated that Indigenous experiences could be effectively represented in written form while remaining deeply rooted in tribal traditions. Their autobiographies, novels, essays, speeches, and historical writings documented the realities of colonization, preserved cultural knowledge, and defended Indigenous rights. Although these writers often worked under difficult social and publishing conditions, they created a literary foundation upon which later generations could build.

Another important development before 1968 was the increasing recognition of Native American literature within academic and literary institutions. Universities gradually expanded the study of Indigenous history and culture, while anthropologists and folklorists documented Native oral traditions with greater scholarly attention. Although many early studies reflected non-Native perspectives, they nevertheless contributed to preserving Indigenous narratives that later writers reinterpreted from within their own cultural frameworks. Simultaneously, independent publishers and literary journals began to provide greater opportunities for Native authors to reach wider audiences, encouraging the growth of Indigenous literary production.

The continuity between oral tradition and written literature remained one of the defining characteristics of this emerging literary movement. Native writers did not simply imitate Euro-American literary conventions; instead, they integrated tribal myths, ceremonial structures, oral storytelling techniques, and Indigenous philosophies into modern literary forms. This creative synthesis distinguished Native American literature from mainstream American writing and enabled Indigenous authors to present alternative understandings of history, community, spirituality, and the natural world. The preservation of oral traditions within written narratives ensured that literature remained connected to tribal memory while addressing contemporary realities.

Against this historical background, the publication of *House Made of Dawn* in 1968 represented both a literary achievement and a symbolic turning point. Momaday's novel combined modern narrative techniques with Kiowa and Navajo cultural traditions, ceremonial symbolism, and Indigenous concepts of healing and identity. Its success demonstrated that Native American literature could achieve national critical recognition without abandoning its cultural foundations. The novel's receipt of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969 further expanded public and academic interest in Indigenous writing, encouraging publishers, universities, and readers to engage more seriously with Native American literature. Viewed within its historical context, the Native American Renaissance was the result of a long process of literary and cultural evolution rather than a sudden beginning. The year 1968 serves as a convenient landmark because it brought Native literature into mainstream critical attention, yet its intellectual roots extend back to the earliest Indigenous oral traditions and the pioneering efforts of Native writers across the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The transition from oral

storytelling to written expression, the preservation of tribal knowledge despite colonial oppression, the emergence of Indigenous intellectuals, and the rise of Native political consciousness collectively prepared the conditions for this literary renewal.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Native American written literature from its earliest expressions to 1968 reflects a long and continuous process of cultural resilience, literary adaptation, and intellectual self-determination. Rather than emerging suddenly with the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Native American literature developed over centuries through the interaction of Indigenous oral traditions, colonial encounters, and the persistent efforts of Native writers to preserve their histories and articulate their identities. The year 1968 is therefore best understood not as the beginning of Native literary expression but as the moment when a well-established tradition gained widespread critical recognition and entered the mainstream of American literary studies. Ultimately, the history of Native American written literature before 1968 is a history of continuity rather than discontinuity. It reveals that Indigenous literary expression evolved through adaptation without abandoning its cultural foundations. The Native American Renaissance was therefore not an isolated literary phenomenon but the culmination of centuries of Indigenous creativity, perseverance, and cultural affirmation.

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