**Native Literature**

American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. There was no written literature among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America before the first Europeans arrived. As a result, Native American oral literature is quite diverse. Narratives from quasi nomadic hunting cultures like the Navaho are different from stories of settled agricultural tribes such as the pueblo-dwelling Acoma; the stories of northern lakeside dwellers such as the Ojibwa often differ radically from stories of desert tribes like the Hopi. Tribes maintained their own religions worshipping gods, animals, plants, or sacred persons. These tribal variations enter into the oral literature as well. Indian stories, for example, glow with reverence for nature as a spiritual as well as physical mother. Nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces; main characters may be animals or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual. The closest equivalents to Old World spiritual narratives are often accounts of shamans’ initiations and voyages. Apart from these, there are stories about culture heroes such as the Ojibwa tribe’s Manabozho or the Navajo tribe’s Coyote. In one tale they may act like heroes, while in another they may seem selfish or foolish. Examples of almost every oral genre can be found in American Indian literature: lyrics, chants, myths, fairy tales, humorous anecdotes, incantations, riddles, proverbs, epics, and legendary histories. Accounts of migrations and ancestors abound, as do vision or healing songs and tricksters’ tales. Certain creation stories are particularly popular.

The songs or poetry, like the narratives, range from the sacred to the light and humorous: There are lullabies, war chants, love songs, and special songs for children’s games, gambling, various chores, magic, or dance ceremonials. Generally the songs are repetitive. Short poem songs given in dreams sometimes have the clear imagery and subtle mood associated with Japanese haiku or Eastern-influenced imagistic poetry. A Chippewa song runs:

A loon I thought it was

But it was

My love’s

splashing oar.

Vision songs, often very short, are another distinctive form. Appearing in dreams or visions, sometimes with no warning, they may be healing, hunting, or love songs. Often they are personal, as in this Modoc song:

I

the song

I walk here.

Indian oral tradition and its relation to American literature as a whole is one of the richest and least explored topics in American studies. The Indian contribution to America is greater than is often believed. The hundreds of Indian words in everyday

American English include “canoe,” “tobacco,”“potato,” “moccasin,” “moose,” “persimmon,” “raccoon,” “tomahawk,” and “totem.”

**THE LITERATURE OF EXPLORATION**

Had history taken a different turn, the United States easily could have been a part of the great Spanish or French overseas empires. Its present inhabitants might speak Spanish and form one nation with Mexico, or speak French and be joined with Canadian Francophone Quebec and Montreal. Yet the earliest explorers of America were not English, Spanish, or French. The first European record of exploration in America is in a Scandinavian language. The first known and sustained contact between the Americas and the rest of the world, however, began with the famous voyage of an Italian explorer, Christopher Columbus, funded by the Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus’s journal in his “Epistola,” printed in 1493, recounts the trip’s drama - the terror of the men, who feared monsters and thought they might fall off the edge of the world. The new world that Columbus boasted of to the Spanish monarchs in 1500 was neither an expanse of empty space nor a replica of European culture, tools, textiles, and religion, but a combination of Native, European, and African people living in complex relation to one another. After early wonder and awe at their unexpected discovery of inhabited land, Europeans used their technological edge in weaponry (gunpowder and steel) to conquer the region. They were aided in this task by the host of diseases they had brought from the Old World, against which early Americans had no immune resistance. Smallpox, measles, and typhus decimated Native populations, and in response to the lack of a local labor force the Spanish began importing Africans to take their place, thereby compounding genocide with slavery. But by no means were Natives merely helpless victims. Many adopted European weapons and tactics to defend themselves from invaders, and while some collaborated with Europeans, as did some Aztecs with Cortés’s Spanish force against their king Montezuma, or the Narragansetts and Mohegans with the New Englanders against the Pequots, they did so not out of submission or gullibility but to gain a temporary upper hand against their Native rivals-truly, a resourceful response to an impossible situation.

Bartolomé de las Casas is the richest source of information about the early contact between American Indians and Europeans. As a young priest he helped conquer Cuba. He transcribed Columbus’s journal, and late in life wrote a long, vivid *History of the Indians* criticizing their enslavement by the Spanish. Initial English attempts at colonization were disasters. The first colony was set up in 1585 at Roanoke, off the coast of North Carolina; all its colonists disappeared, and to this day legends are told about blue-eyed Croatan Indians of the area. The second colony was more permanent: Jamestown, established in 1607. It endured starvation, brutality, and misrule. However, the literature of the period paints America in glowing colors as the land of riches and opportunity.

In the 17th century, pirates, adventurers, and explorers opened the way to a second wave of permanent colonists, bringing their wives, children, farm implements, and craftsmen’s tools. The early literature of exploration, made up of diaries, letters, travel journals, ships’ logs, and reports to the explorers’ financial backers - European rulers or, in mercantile England and Holland, joint stock companies - gradually was supplanted by records of the settled colonies. Because England eventually took possession of the North American colonies, the best-known and most-anthologized colonial literature is English. As American minority literature continues to flower in the 20th century and American life becomes increasingly multicultural, scholars are rediscovering the importance of the of the continent’s mixed ethnic heritage.