

**"AN INCIPIENT STUDY OF THE INDIAN HALF OF THE DIALOGIC:  
NATIVE RHETORICS AND OCCOM'S USE OF INDIRECT DISCOURSE"**

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"Oratory receives [. . .] little [. . .] understanding on the part of the white public, owing to the fact that oratorical complications include those of Indian orators."

-- Luther Standing Bear, "What the Indian Means to America," *Land of the Spotted Eagle*

Much of the critical writing on Samson Occom, Mohegan Indian, Christian minister, and naturally on his role as a mediator between Indians and whites in the Colonial era and on the role Christianity played in colonization and assimilation. The works of Dana D. Nelson, Eileen Razzari Elrod, David Murray, Michael Elliott, Margaret Connel Szasz, and Bernd Peter have all focused on some aspect of how Occom manages to address both colonizing and colonized audiences at once, offering a plurality of meaning in one piece of discourse. Of course, all of this scholarship grows out of an increasing interest in applying a Bakhtinian dialogic to the study of written Native literature, a literature, which for a variety of reasons, is inevitably cross-cultural.<sup>1</sup> But as Kimberly Blaeser has pointed out, even in studies which attempt to create a "dual vision to adequately appreciate the richness of Indian Literature, the native half to that vision has still been conspicuously absent" (57).

To a reader familiar with Native rhetorics, what is "conspicuously absent" in the studies of Occom's heteroglossia is any mention of indirect discourse. Though several scholars arrive at interpretations at times that are similar to those which can be derived with an awareness of this phenomena in Native speech, often, their cultural distance has caused them to arrive at conclusions divorced from a Native reality. Even when their interpretations are more harmonious with those based on Native rhetorics and epistemologies, studying how Occom uses, or more accurately, adheres to this "rule" of politeness, enriches and expands their readings.

Native cultures, though extremely diverse, for the most part, place a high value on honor and on showing respect in culturally-sanctioned ways. Speech rules aid in maintaining harmonious relationships. Taboos and customs regarding speech abounded in traditional societies. For instance, as Carolyn Niethammer points out, among both the Dine (Navajo) and Blackfoot peoples, mothers-in-law and their daughters' husbands were prohibited from even entering the same structure, much less from speaking to one another (88-89). Niethammer also documents that in some groups, "joking relationships" were customary for those who were sexually forbidden to each other in order to dispel sexual tension (211); those for whom this was culturally-dictated could expect a mutual ritual teasing each time they came into contact. Rules applied, to not only what could be said to whom, but also when things could be said. For example, in many cultures even today, certain stories can only be told at certain times of year, and some, as Paula Gunn Allen points out, are not to be shared with outsiders at all.

Though speech rules as strict as some of these have, for the most part, fallen out of common use, adherence to some rhetorical traditions are common to those acculturated as Indian. Indirect discourse is the one speech custom that is most widely observed among Native cultures, even, and perhaps especially, in pan-Indian situations. When someone has done

something either wrong or foolish, when an error needs to be addressed, care is taken that that person does not feel "put on the spot," that he or she can remedy his or her mistake without losing honor. Implication, rather than explication, is the usual means of conveying a message intending to guide the recipient into seeing a more balanced choice. Barbara Duncan recalls the time she told her Cherokee friend, Hawk Littlejohn, about some relationship difficulties she was experiencing. Rather than telling her she was co-dependent, Littlejohn told her this story:

'You know, once there was an old man crossing over Soco Gap . . . going East from Cherokee towards Maggie Valley. And it was the fall of the year, and it was cold. And just as he got over the top of the gap, and was starting down, he looked down and saw a rattlesnake laying there beside the trail. And it was frozen, about frozen to death. And because he was ani-yunwiya, one of the real people, he had had compassion on his relative. And he reached down and picked up that rattlesnake and put it inside his shirt to warm it up. Well, he was coming down the mountain, and he felt the snake move a little bit. And he came down a little further, and the snake moved a little bit more. [He came] on down the mountain, and the air was getting warmer, and the snake was moving around. [He came] on down a little more, and the snake was moving around, and it bit him.

And he reached inside his shirt and pulled the snake out and said, 'Why'd you bite me? I picked you up and saved your life, and now you've bitten me and I might die!'

And the snake said, 'You knew I was a rattlesnake when you picked me up.'

I sat there for a minute taking this in.

'You knew I was a rattlesnake when you picked me up,' Hawk repeated.

'Uh huh,' I said, 'and this means?'

'If you know somebody's a rattlesnake,' he said, 'you don't have to pick them up.'  
(16).

Straightforwardly saying that the person in question was bad for Duncan would have been rude, not only because talking badly of people is typically considered so, but also because Duncan's foolishness would have been pointed out. Additionally, despite the emphasis on the group among tribal peoples, Native Americans have a great deal of regard for an individual's autonomy in making personal decisions. In critical terms, the person maintains "agency." Littlejohn, while he obviously cares enough for his friend that he would like to see her out of a destructive relationship, avoids directly telling her what to do. Had Duncan been accustomed to indirect discourse, the story alone would have sufficed. Even when she indicates with her question that she does not see how the story relates to the earlier portion of their conversation, Littlejohn finds other ways to imply this rather than fully explicating his "reading" of her situation.

Violating this rule of polite speech brings censure. Scott Kayla Morrison tells of the time her aunts were giving her advice after she had graduated from college, and one aunt, Aunt Opal, an alcoholic who rarely contributed to these sessions, joined in with a comment:

Aunt Little Al's raised eyebrow at Aunt Opal's remark was the only indication of surprise. Aunt Opal was still able to be coherent, as this rare moment of sharpness indicated. The aunts exchanged bare glances, not at Aunt Opal, but at Little Al for showing surprise. She was still not ready to be called plain 'Alice,' and a helluva long way from being called 'Big Al.' Children seeking counsel from elders called for a certain decorum, decorum which comes from internal control over individual emotions. This solemn discussion concerned the collective interest of the community. It did not relate to the individual concern of Aunt Opal being sober. 'Big Al' would have known that. Even plain 'Alice' may have suspected that. But Little Al did not, and thus had acted on her impulse. She had a long way to go, but the aunts were in no hurry. (94-95)

Alice's foolish or childish behavior in showing surprise, albeit without actual speech, is enough to be impolite.

Even children in Native cultures are treated with the same respect, which would be accorded to an adult when it comes to correcting their behavior. As Diana Steer says, "Young people [are] expected to grow up with the ability to direct their own lives, think for themselves and not merely take orders from others as whites [are] trained to do, both at home and at school. Only with a good sense of self [can] a child show . . . respect and caring for others" (38). Lakota anthropologist and novelist Ella Deloria shares that a common technique for letting children know they are behaving inappropriately is for the caregiver to compliment another child's good behavior. Alternately, the adult might rebuke an older child, "so that the little one would hear the lesson without being personally humiliated by it" (qtd. in Steer 38). Telling a story with a moral that the child needs to hear is yet another way of doing this. Cherokee children, as Duncan remarks, are warned about the dangers of bragging and conceit by hearing how possum lost his tail; children behaving greedily hear about Rabbit tricking Fox out of a stringer-full of fish; children who make fun of those who are different hear of the time that the birds and animals played stickball, and so on (12-13).<sup>2</sup>

Knowing that Occom uses indirect discourse as a way to avoid offending anyone's honor, even when this meant he had to show respect to those who had shown him none, can make a great deal of difference in how we understand his intentions. Near the end of "A Short Narrative of My Life," Occom parenthetically interjects, "I speak like a fool, but I am Constrained" (618); a phrase that has been commented on by various scholars. Elrod suggests that Occom makes an association here between himself and the apostle Paul by quoting 2 Corinthians 11, making a related association between the white missionaries and "the ungrateful and recalcitrant Corinthians" (142). Nelson reads the interjection as evidence of "Occom's own sense of self-division . . . a pained awareness of the contradictions that finally may have no resolution within the (mono)logic of colonialism. . . ." She argues that "the cultural hegemony of colonialism . . . undercuts Occom's attempt to argue his own worth . . . exactly at that moment that he compares himself to a white missionary." As Occom makes this self-commentary right before he mentions his having acted as his own "interpreter," one justification for why he should deserve at least as much, if not more pay, than white missionaries, Nelson feels it ironic that "as he asserts a fuller worth because of his ability to speak his native tongue, he finds himself compelled to apologize for his lack of eloquence in English" ("I Speak . . ." 58).

While both Elrod and Nelson may have valid points, I feel that Occom makes this interjection because he feels forced to speak rudely; that is, he must directly point out the un-

Christian behavior of his superiors on the missionary boards. Despite his repeated appeals to Wheelock for help, despite the hardships he had endured in "Instructing [his] poor Kindred" because of his "uncommon Pity and Compassion to [his] Poor Brethren According to the Flesh" (615), Occom has been treated abominably. The round of accusations leveled at him after his breaking with Wheelock – that he was not really Mohegan, that he was only recently converted for the purposes of the fund-raising tour-along with accusations of drunkenness and family troubles, leave Occom feeling as if he must defend himself forthrightly. But like "Little Al" in the excerpt from Morrison above, Occom would look foolish within his own cultural context for speaking so frankly, and he indeed seems to feel so.

The next section of his narrative, the anecdote of the "Poor Indian Boy" beaten by a young man in his white master's family, is evidence of Occom's use of indirect discourse as a rhetorical technique. Even though, in this context, he somewhat explicates himself – having already "made a fool of himself" anyway – Occom avoids pointing out that the ministers who have beaten him metaphorically, complaining of his service, are not his masters. Rather, they, like the young man in the story, are subject to answering to the master themselves. David Murray's interpretation of this passage, that it is "almost . . . an expression of solidarity" for Indians mistreated by whites, is too cursory. Realizing that this passage of an Indian rhetorical device used in a Christian religious context, albeit a syncretic one, makes clear that Occom is suggesting that whites will have to answer to God for their treatment of him based on nothing more than his race, and he refuses to sacrifice his dignity any further by spelling out for them the moral that derives from their own scripture.

Occom clearly used indirect discourse in communicating with other Indians in ways that they recognized. In a letter to Wheelock regarding his work among the Oneidas, Occom relates this speech, in which the Oneida leaders give their consent to having him stationed as a missionary among them.

'Father, We are very glad you have come among us with the good Word of God, or God's News: And we think we are thankful to God, and give you Thanks, and the good Men who assisted you up here.

We will, by the Help of God, endeavor to keep the Fire which you brought and kindled among us; and we take our *old Customs, Ways, and Sins*, and put them behind our Backs, and never look on them again; but will look straight forward, and run after the Christian Religion.

Whenever we shall attempt to erect Schools among us, we beg the Assistance of good People your Way.

*We intreat the great Men to protect us on our Lands, that we might not be encroached on by any People.*

We request that the great Men would forbid Traders bringing any more Rum amongst us; for we find it not good; it destroys our Bodies and Souls. This Belt shall bind us together firm in Friendship for ever.' (qtd. in Blodgett 63-64)<sup>3</sup>

The belt, a gift of wampum, places the exchange in an Indian context, the gift sealing what we now must view as an oral contract. And clearly Occom has implied to these chiefs, leaders who at this time were finding it impossible to fulfill their traditional obligations to their people, that the agreement to become Christian would do more than provide for their peoples' spiritual salvation. Both sides for whom Occom was a go-between had expectations not detailed in this oral contract. Occom recorded in his diary just prior to this event that the English had been demanding to extradite an Oneida accused of killing a Dutchman (qtd. in Blodgett 60).

Additionally, Sir William Johnson, who negotiated with the Oneida regarding this incident, reports in his diary that the Oneidas were "in a very wretched situation . . . for the want of provisions ... they were starving" (qtd. in Blodgett 61). And Wheelock's own correspondence suggests that his real reason for sending Occom and his brother-in-law, David Fowler, was not to establish a mission, but rather to recruit more students: "a fine Opportunity this to obtain Boys Judiciously chosen for our Design from remote Nations" (qtd. in Blodgett 55).

While Peyer indicates that the Oneidas might expect the "requests" they make in this "meeting," as he terms it, will be fulfilled by Occom's residing among them as a missionary, an understanding of indirect discourse in combination with the knowledge that this is an oral contract reveals even more. Obviously, the Occom has implied to the Oneida leaders, whom he would not wish to offend by pointing out directly their failure to fulfill traditional obligations to their people, that whites will tolerate their continued existence if they will assimilate, that this will be the only way in which they will now be able to care for their people. *Sin*, for these Indian Christians, is the maintenance of traditional *Customs* and *Ways*. Occom's strictness with the Oneidas in this regard, noted by Gideon Hawley, a white missionary, as stricter than necessary (qtd. on Blodgett 64-65), is his attempt to save them physically by making them appear less Indian. And Occom's concern over their alcoholism, which Wheelock refers to in a letter to Rev. George Whitefield (qtd. in Blodgett 67), admittedly one likely cause of their impoverished circumstances, also is a concern that they are being stereotypically Native.

An experience Occom had on the way to the Oneidas offers convincing evidence that Occom himself could not have believed that acting white necessarily made one a Christian. Having traveled on the outskirts of New York City, Occom records his shock in his diary, a forum in which he is obviously much more straightforward about his opinions:

'But I never Saw a Sabbath Spent so by any Christian People in my Life as some Spent it here . . . Drunkards were Realing and Staggering in the Streets, others tumbling off their Horses, there were others at work in their farms, and if ever any People under the Heavens Spoke Hells Language, these People did, for their Mouths were full of Cursings, Prophaning Gods Holy Name – I greatly Mistake if these are not the sons and Daughters of Belial . . .

I have thought there was no Heathen but the wild Indians but I think now there is some English Heathen, where they Enjoy the Gospel of Jesus Christ too. Yea, I believe they are worse than ye Savage Heathens of the wilderness . . .' (qtd. in Blodgett 56-57)

Occom, in this state of mind, cannot truly believe the Oneidas should give up their mode of dress and change their hairstyles in order to be more Christ-like. Rather, as the agreement between them implies, Occom believes these changes necessary to prevent their being uprooted by whites.

These few examples of how the Indian rhetorical tradition of direct discourse informs Occom's writings suggests to me that further examination of his works from a Native viewpoint is warranted. His "A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, an Indian," delivered to a mixed audience, does offer itself up to a dialogic examination like his other works do, as the scholars mentioned in my introduction indicate by their methods. But including the Indian half of this equation is the only way we can access a fuller interpretation. Michael Elliot asks of the sermon, "Did Native Americans understand that Occom was delivering a different message to them than to his Anglo audience? Could Anglo-Americans see that he questioned their treatment of American Indians? To what degree did any of his listeners or readers question the sincerity

of Occom's Christian faith?" (235). While Elliot acknowledges that Occom uses a "pluralistic rhetoric," a familiarity with Indian rhetorics is plainly needed to answer his questions fully. It will only be then that Occom's role as "cultural broker," to borrow Szasz's term, can be more comprehensively understood.

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### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>Of course, part of this cross-cultural status is due to the fact that Native ideas are being written in English, rather than being recited orally in indigenous languages. But the liminality of this literature also arises from the liminal status of most Native authors, many of whom are mixed-blood, all of whom transcend cultural boundaries by writing primarily to a white audience.

<sup>2</sup>The tendency to use indirect discourse or other hints rather than offending someone's honor is so strong that Native Americans will sometimes violate other taboos just to avoid speaking directly. At a recent powwow I attended, a dancer had dropped an eagle feather without its being noticed. Dropping an eagle feather is taken to be a very bad sign, and certain procedures have to be followed by the dancer in order to avoid repercussions and in order to show proper respect for the sacred nature of the feather. The dancer should have noticed this. In cases like this one, where the dancer did not notice, it is the responsibility of the Arena Director to let the dancer know so he "can honor the feather out" properly. However, the Arena Director himself had failed to notice, giving those of us who had seen the feather a big dilemma. This Arena Director had been violating decorum all evening, upsetting many people greatly and, in general, making the evening tense for many of us. Despite this, and perhaps even because of it, no one wanted to offend his honor by pointing out the feather to him, showing him, in effect, that he had not been doing his job, that he had not been behaving properly all evening, and that now, his ill behavior was coming back on us all, manifesting itself there on the floor where we avoided stepping on it, dancing as carefully as we would have to avoid stepping on a sleeping baby or a sleeping copperhead. No matter how much we all stared at the feather each time we passed-and my husband says we all looked like a bunch of GIs who had just dropped the American flag at a state funeral-the Arena Director did not seem to catch on. Finally, in the confusion of people moving on and off the floor between dances, someone broke the taboo against touching the feather and retrieved it, leaving on the emcee's table for the Arena Director to find later and take care of. In this way, he would be able to come to terms with his misbehavior on his own, without being made aware of it publicly, even by those whom he himself had wronged earlier.

<sup>3</sup>My italics.