

In Harmony with Nature

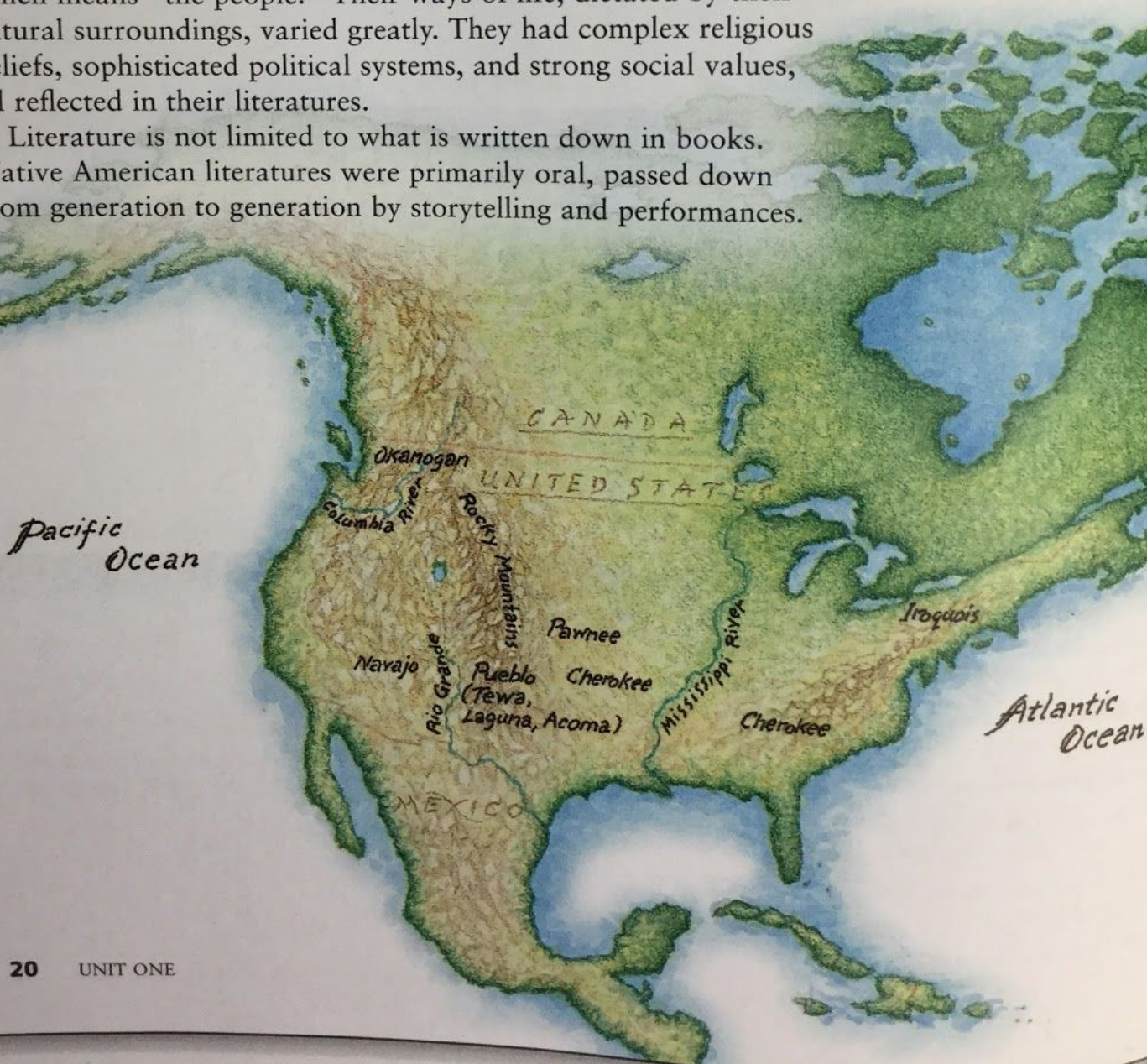
Native American Traditions



The first American literature was created by the first people to live here—the Native Americans, who inhabited North America thousands of years before the first Europeans arrived. To be sure, the Native Americans did not think of themselves as living in a single nation, as most Americans do today.

A Rather, the original native peoples belonged to more than 200 distinct groups who spoke more than 500 different languages. They called themselves names such as Anishinabe, Diné, and Lakota—each of which means “the people.” Their ways of life, dictated by their natural surroundings, varied greatly. They had complex religious beliefs, sophisticated political systems, and strong social values, all reflected in their literatures.

B Literature is not limited to what is written down in books. Native American literatures were primarily oral, passed down from generation to generation by storytelling and performances.



THE LESSON OF THE BIRDS
Pawnee



One day a man whose mind was open to the teaching of the powers wandered on the prairie. As he walked, his eyes upon the ground, he spied a bird's nest hidden in the grass, and arrested his feet just in time to prevent stepping on it. He paused to look at the little nest tucked away so snug and warm, and noted that it held six eggs and that a peeping sound came from some of them. While he watched, one moved and soon a tiny bill pushed through the shell, uttering a shrill cry. At once the parent birds answered and he looked up to see where they were. They were not far off; they were flying about in search of food, chirping the while to each other and now and then calling to the little one in the nest.

The homely scene stirred the heart and the thoughts of the man as he stood there under the clear sky, glancing upward toward the old birds and then down to the helpless young in the nest at his feet. As he looked he thought of his people, who were so often careless and thoughtless of their children's needs, and his mind brooded over the matter. After many days he desired to see the nest again. So he went to the place where he had found it, and there it was as safe as when he left it. But a change had taken place. It was now full to overflowing with little birds, who were stretching

Some widespread types of Native American oral literature are creation myths, which explain the beginning of the world; tales of heroes and tricksters who transformed the world to its present state; and the ritual songs and chants that are part of ceremonies. **C**

This part of Unit One presents a small sampling of works from Native American oral traditions: a creation myth from the Iroquois of the Northeast, two ancient songs from the Tewa and the Navajo of the Southwest, and two trickster tales from the Okanogan of the Pacific Northwest. Preceding these, in *Voices from the Times*, is a fable from the Pawnee of the central plains.

As readers of a textbook, you will not be experiencing these works as you would if you belonged to the cultures they came from. You will not be hearing them or seeing them performed; you will be reading them on a page, in a language different from the languages in which they were created. These pieces were collected in the early 1900s and translated into English by anthropologists—or in the case of the Okanogan stories, by a bilingual member of the tribe with the help of white editors. Despite the limitations of translations, they remain the best way to expose a wide audience to the beauty, wisdom, and humor of Native American oral literature.

Although traditional Native American literature has many forms and functions, much of it emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with the natural world. In Native American belief, human beings have a kinship with animals, plants, the land, heavenly bodies, and the elements. All of these things are seen as alive and aware, as when singers address Mother Earth and Father Sky in the Tewa "Song of the Sky Loom." Furthermore, the human and the nonhuman are seen as parts of a sacred whole. To Native Americans, human beings do not have dominion over nature; they are part of nature and must act to maintain a right relationship with the world around them. Notice **D**

Between Heaven and Hell

The Puritan Tradition

A Puritans too often have the reputation of being black-clad moralists self-righteously proclaiming the values of thrift and hard work. According to the American writer and humorist H. L. Mencken, a Puritan is one who suspects that “somewhere someone is having a good time.” To call someone a puritan is usually not a compliment.

This negative image, however, is based on a stereotype of the 16th-century Puritans that, like most stereotypes, is full of half-truths and misconceptions. True, the Puritans did value hard work and self-sacrifice, but they also honored material success. Wealth was considered to be the reward of a virtuous life. Some Puritans, especially the early Pilgrims, wore severe black clothing because that was all they had. Those who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony after 1630, however, were better off financially. They could afford decorative and colorful clothing—when they could find it in the colony, that is. These Puritans were even known to drink beer and other alcoholic beverages on occasion.

B Puritans also valued family life, community service, art, and literature. They were the first in the colonies to establish a printing press, free public grammar schools, and a college (Harvard).

C On the other hand, the Puritans *were* arrogant in their religious faith and completely intolerant of viewpoints different from their own. Puritans who remained in England

Tombstone design
from Puritan
New England

