

Understanding Colonization through Word Studies: A Digital Project for the Literature Classroom

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Abstract: Diane Glancy's fictionalization of the indigenous woman who accompanied Lewis and Clark on the Corps of Discovery Expedition in her novel *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea* (2003) offers opportunities for students to discuss how words and technology function as vehicles of colonization. Accordingly, this article describes a digital project involving *Stone Heart* and the online archive of the Lewis and Clark journals that requires students to work with digital tools and to consider how technology both oppresses and empowers marginalized individuals and communities.

By juxtaposing excerpts from *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* with a fictionalized story of the indigenous woman who accompanies the explorers, Diane Glancy's *Stone Heart: A Novel of Sacajawea* (2003) demonstrates how words and technology function as vehicles of colonization. Whereas the indigenous people in Glancy's story construct maps out of the land itself, drawing lines in ashes to aid Lewis and Clark in their planning, the explorers describe places, people, and events with books and written language. As Sacajawea observes Lewis and Clark, she thinks, "How can they say what the land is like with their marks?" and "They write in their journals. But they do not know the land" (25). Sacajawea's observations highlight the trauma of colonization while also conveying her own awareness of the power the explorers hold by naming, drawing maps, reporting events, and writing narratives.

In a course on Native American literature, my undergraduate students complete a project with Glancy's *Stone Heart* that requires them to analyze the novel, from postcolonial and ecological perspectives, alongside digital historical documents. Glancy's depiction of Sacajawea points to the damaging outlook of the single-minded colonizer who dominates people and nature with words. For example, Sacajawea narrates, "They give the animals names that do not belong to them. They do not say what they are. That do not fit. They do not hear the birds. They do not see the ghost horses" (25-26). In this passage, the character demonstrates how colonization demeans its subjects by misnaming and misunderstanding them. As my students read the novel, consequently, we engage several discussions that acknowledge how technologies such as paper, written records, history books, and official documents have facilitated various abuses of people and nature. These discussions help

students to gather ideas, locate relevant passages in *Stone Heart*, and become attuned to the particular topics and questions they will pursue as they study words with digital tools.

The digital project requires students to work with online archives of the Lewis and Clark journals created by the Center for Digital Research in the Humanities with the University of Nebraska Press. As they approach the archive, my students formulate approximately five questions they can apply to the journals and discuss in relation to Glancy's Sacajawea character. The questions must lead the students toward reflection on the texts from a postcolonial and/or ecological perspective. Sample questions include

- What do Lewis and Clark care most about when they depict nature and people?
- What aspects of nature and people are most interesting to them?
- What adjectives are most common?
- What verbs do the explorers use to describe their own actions?
- What verbs do they use when other people act?

After they have formulated questions, students begin exploring the archive, which they can search by the year and month. Some students are interested in reading entries that appear in *Stone Heart*; others select a succession of days that document particular compelling events. They select passages that might provide answers to their questions and input the journal entries into *Wordcounter.com*, an online tool that will generate a ranking of the words used in the journals and their frequency.¹ For example, on October 23, 1805, the word "place" is used 11 times to denote a precise location, and the word "canoe" is used 32 times in a way that conveys the explorers' concern about protecting their modes of transportation.

Using the data from inputting the selected journal entries into *Wordcounter.com*, students document their research with charts or spreadsheets, noting the journal year, month, and day. They also state the words they researched, their frequency, and brief notes on their connotations. These charts include at least five days of word studies from the Lewis and Clark journals. After students have completed their charts, they write short papers in which they answer and reflect on their initial questions about colonization, the environment, and the

¹ *Wordcounter.net* is a free online resource that can be accessed at <https://wordcounter.net/>

Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice

Spring 2020 (11:1)

treatment of human beings. Their papers must discuss their interpretations of the words they studied from the Lewis and Clark journals in conjunction with their observations about *Stone Heart*, particularly Sacajawea's perception of books, maps, and written language. In their analyses of the novel, students compare and contrast the two texts they studied, searching for what word usage reveals about the perspectives and assumptions of each writer and narrator.

When students submit their charts and papers, we have a final discussion on word usage, technology, and colonization. I provide students with a short overview of the history of the numerous treaties between the U.S. government and Native American tribes, particularly ways these official documents were used to manipulate the latter communities. As a class, we watch a portion of Layli Long Soldier's interview for the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, wherein she discusses a reading exercise she led at Diné College with the Navajo Nation treaty. She states, "Language is a place of power," and she advises her students, "Have the language at your command," to avoid being manipulated by it. This video serves to reinforce the important skills my students learn through reading *Stone Heart* and completing their digital projects, specifically that words can function equally as instruments of freedom and oppression. Words care for, as well as bring harm to, their recipients. As college students preparing for lives of leadership and service, they confront their responsibility to use language and technology honestly. Glancy draws attention to this responsibility in *Pushing the Bear: A Novel of the Trail of Tears* (1996) when one character reflects, "The white man had a way with words," and "We could do anything with written words. We had to be careful we didn't use them that way" (224). Accordingly, I hope the assignment helps students to realize that having "the language at [their] command," as Long Soldier states, offers some protection against those who use it as a weapon.

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Spring 2020 (11:1)

Works Cited

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