Introduction to Native American Literature
Background

- It is thought that the first Native Americans arrived in what is now the US approximately 20-30,000 years ago.

- It is believed that they came by a landbridge across the Bering Sound, from Siberia into Alaska.
Although most Native Americans did not come from **India**, the name “Indian” was given to them by **Christopher Columbus** who mistook **North America** for islands in the **Indies**.

When Europeans arrived in North America (16th – 17th Century), there were approximately **ten million** Native Americans living here.
Background

- The Europeans started to push Native Americans off the land and take “ownership” of the land for the rich resources.

- Many wars were started in which the Native Americans were disadvantaged because of their lack of adequate weapons. This led to the Indian Removal Act by President Andrew Jackson in 1830.
Indian Removal Act

- The Indian Removal Act gave Jackson the right to negotiate removal treaties with tribes living east of the Mississippi River.

- Many tribes were forced to relocate to land west of the Mississippi River to “make room” for white settlement and slavery.
The New Reality

- The wars ceased at the end of the 19th century with the battle at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1890.

- During the growth of the European population in North America, many Native Americans were exposed to new diseases to which they had no immunity.

- Many Native Americans were forced onto reservations and many children were to go to boarding schools in which their culture was devalued and forbidden.
Reservations

- Native American Reservations are defined as tracts of land set aside for the ownership or use of particular Native American tribes. The term comes from the 19th century agreements, in which the tribes’ lands were seized by the US government except for the portions ‘reserved’ for their own use.
Boarding Schools

- **Boarding schools** were started in 1879 by Captain Richard A. Pratt whose **goal was to “Kill the Indian, save the man.”**

- Pratt wanted to assimilate Native American children into **white European culture** and did this using **brainwashing tactics**.

- Children were usually **taken far away from their homes** and were refused communication with their families.
Video Clips

Video 1: Click here
Video 2: Click here
Results

- Although many Native American reservations are considered key to the survival of Native American culture, they are homes to some of the most impoverished people in the US.
- About 26% of students drop out of school.
- 30% of Native American Youth have thought about or attempted suicide.
- Alcoholism is one of the major issues on reservations today.
- In 1928, the Meriam Report was issued, that exposed and condemned the inadequate education and conditions of Native American Boarding Schools.
- This initiated a process of replacing boarding schools with day schools closer to the reservations.
- The last boarding school was closed in 1968.
Native Americans Today

- Native Americans today are struggling to overcome a long history of degradation and abuse.
- There are many Native American writers and activists that are working to educate people about Native American history, culture, and what it means to be Native American. However, stereotypes still exist...
Look familiar?
Stereotypes

Common stereotypes:

- “Savage”: Considered uncivilized and animalistic
- “Squaw”: A derogatory name used towards Native American women
- Having Red Skin: Used towards Native Americans, classifying them by their skin color
- Wearing Feathers: Not all Native American tribes wore feathers or head dresses
- Living in a tipi: Not all Native Americans lived in tipis
- Making whooping sounds: Often associated with celebration or war victories

Four main “Indian” characters portrayed in pop culture:

- The wise elder
- The drunk or savage
- The Indian princess
- The loyal sidekick
Native American Literature

- Primarily oral, passed down from generation to generation by storytelling and performances.
- Includes creation myths (stories that explain the beginning of the world), tales of heroes and tricksters (who transformed the world to its present state), and the ritual songs/chants that were part of ceremonies.
- Much of it emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with the natural world.
Why study Native American Literature?

- We must remember that Native Americans are a part of our history as Americans. Their stories remind us of the importance of equality, freedom, and justice in the United States.
- They had complex religious beliefs, sophisticated political systems, and strong social values; all reflected in their literatures.
- Their stories, experiences, and culture deserve to be heard and respected.