

# *Reasoning Together*

THE NATIVE CRITICS COLLECTIVE

by

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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.

30. Occom, "Short Narrative," 618.
31. Elrod, "I Did Not Make Myself So," 142.
32. Nelson, "I Speak Like a Fool," 58.
33. Occom, "Short Narrative," 615.
34. Murray, *Forked Tongues*, 54.
35. Quoted in Blodgett, *Samson Occom*, 63–64. Emphasis added.
36. *Ibid.*, 60, 61, 55.
37. *Ibid.*, 64–65, 67.
38. *Ibid.*, 56–57.
39. Elliot, "This Indian Bait," 235.

## *Blind Bread and the Business of Theory Making, by Embarrassed Grief*

AS TOLD BY LEANNE HOWE

### Introduction

She said, "Let me tell."

People assume that a writer begins a story with a blank piece of paper. But it's quite the opposite. First there is a question, a longing to know one thing, then another that causes a story to stalk the writer like a hunter after prey. When I began to write about how Natives reason together to translate the stories of our world, Embarrassed Grief appeared. My need to know, and perhaps my dreams, brought her across time and space to help me tell the story. She is the narrator, I am the translator. To be any good at translation, one must do a kind of disappearing act, which, in a way, signifies the trope of Native existence in America. We remain invisible. Yet we continue.

For the purposes of this volume, I will be substituting the word "theory" with "story" and engaging the essays of Christopher Teuton and Cheryl Suzack, but it will be through my characters that you will hear the story.

### Overture

In the weeks before the passage of NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Embarrassed Grief stands weeping at the

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corner of Dubuque and Clinton in Iowa City, Iowa—as is her custom. It is a ritual she's adopted from a photograph she saw in *National Geographic* illustrating how Quiché women protest against the Ladino-controlled government by weeping daily in the streets of Guatemala. However, Embarrassed Grief is not weeping for the remains of our ancestors stored in the bowels of the Smithsonian. At least that's not what her sign says. It reads: "Peace will come only when America recognizes its Native people."

I cringe. Embarrassed Grief doesn't look anything like the Quiché women in the photograph. Nor does she look particularly Native. She has green eyes, the pale skin of a dried cornhusk, and long colorless hair. No one on any reservation would ever mistake Embarrassed Grief for a rez girl because she's wearing rings on every finger, sandals, and a long swishy robe like Jesus. But she fits in here. This is Iowa City, Iowa, the "Athens of the Midwest," and Embarrassed Grief is vice president of the American Indian Student Association (AISA). She is also a graduate teaching assistant in the Department of English at the university. When she sees me, and a group of Indians, across the street, she dabs a white paper napkin at the corners of her puffy eyes, then heads straight for us.

I make an immediate about-face, hoping to avoid her, but she runs like a hulking bear and grabs me around the neck. It is amazing how fast she is for a woman her size.

"I hate the IHS in Tahlequah," she says, sobbing on my T-shirt. "Indian Health Services—they're killing my parents."

Under normal circumstances I would return her bear hug. (Oklahoma Choctaws are big huggers.) I would tell her that her parents are going to be all right. (Oklahoma Choctaws are also known for giving erroneous advice.) I would then offer to buy her a cup of coffee. But these are deviant times. I work at the University of Iowa and I'm totally out of my element, a duck out of water, a Choctaw out of Oklahoma. I'm surrounded by cranky academics. They question everything. They've got me doing it too. But to tell you the truth, I've always been a little cantankerous. I make no secret that I'm antagonistic toward Embarrassed Grief.

"You're right," I say. "The IHS is full of conniving murderers who would dissect the cadavers of their own mothers. If I were you, I'd tell my parents to give up their Cherokee identity and pretend to be starving, homeless white people. They'll get better health care on welfare."

Embarrassed Grief seems startled at the verve of my honesty and her eyes tear up again. "But we could change the IHS," she says sniffing. "I have an idea that . . ."

"Forget it. Go home and take your parents to real doctors. That's how you can truly be of service to them." I walk away, hoping she will stop pestering me. And stop making a spectacle of herself on behalf of Indians.

Later, at the Chicano and American Indian Cultural Center, when the subject of Embarrassed Grief comes up, I hiss in a menacing voice. "Some-

thing must be done about that woman. She's not Embarrassed, she's embarrassing. I've never seen an Indian woman cry like that in public."

"She's upset about her parents," says Debbie Begay. "Don't pick on her; she's had a difficult life. I heard what you told her."

Debbie is a young Navajo student and the mother of three children. She came to the University of Iowa to study economics.

"And what's up with her name?" I ask.

"Indians often change their names."

"The ones avoiding the law."

"Lots of tribes have naming ceremonies."

"The Cherokees around Tahlequah don't."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Debbie sits cross-legged on the sofa and cradles her sleeping baby in one arm. "Besides," she says, opening a textbook with her free hand, "her name was changed for her."

"By whom?"

"Someone in the Philippines."

"Oh, sure."

"It's true. When she studied abroad to learn Spanish, she was drawn to a convent in Manila, and that's the name the sisters gave her. But she decided against becoming a nun."

"Why?"

"Because they told her she would have to give up playing softball."

I lean toward Debbie and whisper conspiratorially. "Do you hear yourself? These kinds of things just don't happen to real people."

"Maybe not to everyone," says Debbie, "but some people live extraordinary lives."

"You'll believe anything," I say, taking a couple of apples from my sack.

"Diné people will give the benefit of the doubt. You Oklahoma Indians are so mean. Leslie Silko is right about that."

I offer a slice of apple to Debbie. "Silko said what?"

She waves it away. "It's in all her stories. Oklahoma Indians think they're superior to Pueblo and Diné people."

"Define superior."

"What's the capital of Mamlaktu-al Bahrayn?" asks Debbie.

"Manama," I say, slicing another piece of apple. "The kingdom is east of Saudi Arabia in an archipelago of the Persian Gulf. But why are you using the country's formal Arabic name?"

Debbie looks sorrowful. "I didn't think you'd know it."

"Every Oklahoma Indian knows it," I quip. "We're from oil country, too, you know!"

We stare at each other for a moment. Other students are coming into the center with their children in tow. For now we realize our geography wars are over.

"Look," I say, "Embarrassed Grief is all drama and no substance. I don't care if she is a great softball player and a failed nun. White people are going to think we're all as wacky as she is."

"C'mon," says Debbie, "she's not hurting anyone."

Debbie smiles at her baby. "Have a little compassion. We're all Indians."

A month goes by and I try to forget about Embarrassed Grief and her weekly protests in downtown Iowa City. While I still believe she is an oversized chameleon, always taking up ludicrous causes—her most recent is a letter-writing campaign to U.S. congressmen, urging them to pass a law to regulate the earnings of taxicab drivers—Debbie Begay has made me feel self-conscious about my hostility. Why does Embarrassed Grief bother me so much? Am I wary of Embarrassed Grief because she has strange ideas and is willing to act on them? I haven't counted on my own intellectual deficiency as the cause of my dislike. That's hard to take. So later in the semester when Embarrassed calls a meeting of AISA, I decide to support her, no matter what kind of screwy idea she's come up with.

At the meeting, she does seem different. Gone are the sandals and robe. Instead, she wears a T-shirt and jeans. Before she gets up to speak, I sit with my dog-eared copy of *The Dialogic Imagination*, worrying that she has arranged to have us all arrested.

"I've been thinking about our old stories," she says. "While the bones of our storytellers still reside in the Smithsonian, they won't be there much longer. So in order to celebrate the passage of Public Law 101-601, and their imminent freedom, we should feed the homeless population in Iowa City on Thanksgiving Day. What a statement that will make, especially since Indians have been feeding the tired, the poor, the huddled, homeless masses yearning to breathe free since 1492. We should continue that tradition."

Her politics have agency in our group. Everyone (including me) becomes animated over the idea of taking control of our history. We vote to host a frybread giveaway and marshal our resources. We come up with about five hundred dollars to buy all the ingredients necessary to make enough frybread and bean soup to feed the local homeless. I volunteer to make the dough, and Debbie Begay offers to fry it. Embarrassed is in charge of publicizing the event and gathering the homeless.

On Thanksgiving Day we prepare the soup and frybread. When the first homeless people arrive at the door of the Chicano and American Indian Cultural Center, Embarrassed greets them with open arms. Throughout the day, over one hundred people arrive to be fed by the American Indian students.

In the beginning, Embarrassed is a very animated hostess. Often she converses in Spanish. Sometimes Chinese. She theorizes on the temperature at the center of the earth with one scruffy-looking gentleman as she offers him a second piece of frybread.

I am only able to catch fragments of her conversations

"*Bakhtin, Foucault, Derrida*," she chants in a high-pitched voice. "Yes, I've known them all. Derrida once kissed me flush on the mouth. Drink plenty of liquids if you go out with him."

She doesn't wait for a response but moves on to the next person in line for frybread.

"Pluto isn't the farthest planet in our solar system," she says.

"I didn't know that," says an old gentleman. It's obvious he's too busy eyeing his plate of food to formulate a further response, so he just shrugs.

"Oh, don't doubt me, Sir," says Embarrassed. "I've been in outer space and there are seven more planets yet to be discovered."

"It could happen," I say in a low voice to Debbie.

Debbie and I are responsible for making the bread. As I roll out another dough ball and pass it to her, I add, "I've read about such things happening in the *National Enquirer*."

"Shush!" says Debbie. "Not another word."

Toward the end of our feast, Embarrassed Grief is showing signs of growing anxiety. She's talking faster, and more incoherently, about her theories on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. She begins to wring her hands. When the last homeless couple has left the building, she sobs.

"Is Rome burning, or is it the frybread? You know St. Embarrassed was a Christian martyr during the Roman Empire. She was killed because she rescued the bodies of her slain brothers. I saw her in a dream once. I'm still trying to make sense of it so I can write a paper on her true identity."

"She's very keyed up," whispers Debbie.

"Overstimulation of the motor nerves," I say. "A serious case."

Debbie flashes me a cruel look and says that *our* friend is in bad shape and that we must take her to the hospital. "Are you going to help her, or just make jokes?" she asks testily.

"Okay, okay, I'll help."

I ask Embarrassed to step outside with me so we can talk over the politics of reciprocity among Indian tribes. As we breathe in the crisp November air of Iowa, I tell her that her idea of using our past to feed the future was a good idea.

"What's going to happen?" she asks, wiping her tears.

"Maybe you need to go home for a good rest," I answer.

We lock eyes. In that moment I realize that she has heard "Tahlequah" in the word "home." Place, land, home hold a more tribal meaning for her than I imagined. Embarrassed stands up, dries her eyes, and we fall silent and watch our breath make vapor rising in the night air.

Eventually, Debbie Begay drives her car into the parking lot of the Chicano and Native American Cultural Center. Other American Indian students have come to help Embarrassed Grief into the 1983 Oldsmobile along with Debbie's three children, a stray dog, and a sack of frybread. Before they drive away, Embarrassed rolls down her window and waves a piece of bread in the air.

"Home is like blind bread," she says to all of us in the parking lot.

"How's that?" I ask

“Both nourish anyone who partakes of it, regardless of where they come from or who they are. I have a theory about that.”

I wave until the car is out of sight. Since it is my turn to clean up the kitchen at the center, I use the time to think. Ever since I first met Embarrassed Grief, I thought something “big” was going to happen to her, but my scenarios have usually involved the police. I’d never imagined that I would learn from her.

Slowly life returned to normal at the Chicano and American Indian Cultural Center. For many months I continued to think about Embarrassed Grief and what might have happened to her after she left the university. In some ways she was like the woman in the Choctaw story *Ohoyo Chishba Osh*,<sup>1</sup> who came from far away only to leave left behind a strange gift that would benefit the people. The story goes something like this: Two Choctaw hunters are out traveling when they encounter a woman they’ve never seen before. The strange woman tells them she is from a place very far away. She then trades with the hunters, giving them seeds for their roasted hawk meat.

From these few seeds, the Choctaw were able to grow corn. In other words, through the exchange of stories, and a gift, corn changed the people in ways they could have never imagined. Today, corn remains one of America’s leading exports, and according to the Kentucky Corn Growers Association, some thirty-five hundred foods and consumer and industrial products contain some form of corn.

### Stories Are Theories

Native stories by Native authors, no matter what form they take—novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, or history—seem to pull together all the elements of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, multiple characters, and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieu. (Present and future milieu means a world that includes non-Indians.) The Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another becomes a theory about the way American Indians tell stories. Oral or written, I have called this genre “tribalography.”<sup>2</sup>

Embarrassed Grief is not unlike Redford McAlester, Tema Billy, and Adair Billy, all characters in my novel, *Shell Shaker*. All have traveled widely, traded information, adopted new tools, and then returned home with new ideas that are both dynamic and destructive. They are international and intertribal, reflecting a larger worldview that would have been as important in the past as it is in the present. That’s the nature of tribal interactions—and for me that’s when a story really begins to cook. I, as the translator of these events, want to know what comes next.

In “Blind Bread and the Business of Theory Making,” Embarrassed is a

Cherokee from Tahlequah who travels to Manila to study abroad. She is adding experience and knowledge to her belief system. For reasons that aren’t fully realized in the excerpt, Embarrassed leaves Manila and makes her way to Iowa before going back home to Tahlequah. One thing, though, is clear: being so far from “home” takes its toll on her emotional health.

In *Shell Shaker*, Redford McAlester also leaves home and tries organized religion. He preaches the Gospel and even travels to the Baptist seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, before going to schools back east. Eventually he returns home to run for chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, and his emotional health affects the entire tribe.

Both sisters Tema Billy and Adair Billy also leave home. Tema Billy moves to New York and becomes a stage actress. When she returns home to help her family, she is able to save her sister Auda Billy by reciting lines from “The Conference of Birds,” a twelfth-century mystical poem by Sufi author, Farid Ud-Din Attar. When Tema encounters an intruder in her mother’s home she remembers an oral story about Choctaw warriors. Combining the oral Choctaw story with her experience in acting, Tema is then able to kill the invader. Anthropologist Jason Jackson has said that “linking the narratives in the present to speech and action in the past is an expression of what Richard Bauman, Dell Hymes, and others have called traditionalization.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, my characters are doing some of the same things that Choctaws have done in the past. They link the stories they’ve heard about their ancestors with the stories they are living. This linking of the narratives breathes meaning into their world (as well as breathing life onto the pages of written stories).

In Christopher Teuton’s essay in this volume, “Theorizing American Indian Literature” he makes it clear that he sees oral stories as a template for the ethical codes and social context of contemporary Cherokees. I could not agree more. While Teuton uses Cherokee creation stories as one example, the concept he elucidates plays out in the actions of my Choctaw characters. Two sisters, Delores and Dovie Love, in *Shell Shaker* enact the oldest Choctaw traditions concerning bone picking and burial. Their Choctaw elders taught them the stories.

Redford and Tema and Adair Billy all share similar characteristics with Embarrassed Grief in that they idealize their tribe’s past. Embarrassed is also angry with her tribe for allowing the federal government to make a mess of her parents’ health care. As her new name suggests, she’s developed into a kind of perpetual sacrificial victim. The irony is that by allowing her name to be changed to that of a martyred saint, she loses the thing she wants to hold onto.

Cheryl Suzack argues in “Land Claims, Identity Claims” (in this collection) that indigenous feminism is crucial to changing tribal politics: “I examine how American Indian feminist critics have theorized a relationship between community identity, tribal history, and women’s collective agency in connection with gender identity in order to create an oppositional space from which to restore gender identity as an analytical category in discussions of tribal

politics and community values.” In other words, American Indian women must assert themselves in tribal governance if tribes are to survive.

As vice president of the American Indian Student Association, Embarrassed Grief has a political role, as do many of the female characters in my stories. She argues for combining two federal events, the Thanksgiving holiday and the passage of Public Law 101-601, NAGPRA. In a metaphorical way, she’s trying to link to Foucault’s “archaeology of knowledge” in a literal way. NAGPRA, as most people are aware, provides a process whereby museums and federal agencies can “return” to their original homelands certain Native American cultural items—human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony—to lineal descendants, culturally affiliated Indian tribes, and Native Hawaiian organizations. Most American Indians (and ethnographers) consider their elders to be living libraries. Elders are great sources of history and story. Embarrassed and the other students link NAGPRA to Thanksgiving in America’s history and story and acknowledge that the bodies of those held captive in the Smithsonian are sacred. Such sacred texts must therefore be returned to their tribal libraries, their homelands. In “Blind Bread and the Business of Theory Making,” it is evident that insane or sane, healthy or sick, useful or useless, dead or alive Indians must return home. Indians<sup>4</sup>—the ones I know, the ones I admire, the ones I admonish, the ones I’m interested in writing about—go home. Embarrassed will do the same. Who knows what will happen to the Cherokees after she runs for tribal council? This is the beginning of the story equation that Native writers make for their readers. We link one thing to another thing.

Another point I want to stress is that Embarrassed Grief uses Bakhtin’s ideas on how language registers conflicts between groups. Her protest sign reads, “Peace will come only when America recognizes its Native people.” She’s tried Foucault’s ideas on objectivation and subjectivation and has determined she is both—objectified and subjectified.

Embarrassed also claims she’s gone out with Derrida. She has swallowed deconstructionism and even talks about kissing him/it flush on the mouth. She argues that AISA should make a point of feeding the homeless on Thanksgiving in order to subvert the meaning of the holiday. What is implied is that Embarrassed, the other students, and even the narrator have read the many histories of contact between Indians and non-Indians. They’ve been reading the words that the ethnographers wrote down that their ancestors said—and they are now subverting the assumptions and challenging those same “nation-state” stories. Embarrassed says, “I’ve been thinking about our old stories,” which signifies that she is doing what Jason Jackson says the Yuchi do when they read the stories of their ancestors in the texts and interpret them. “They possess a strong willingness to make new inquiries among themselves to reflect upon and refine their own interpretations of myth and ritual, and to extrapolate deeper interpretations based on further consideration and new evidence. . . . For the Yuchi today, the ethnographic record, rather than

codifying belief and stifling this process, provides another resource enabling contemporary ritualists to maintain a dialogue with the old people who served both as consultants to earlier researchers and as the previous generation of Yuchi community leaders.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Shell Shaker*, Auda Billy, Redford McAlester, and the Jesuit priest Renoir are engaged in this same process. Auda Billy, a historian, knows the oral stories of her family, and she has the material culture to prove it: burden baskets that belonged to her ancestors Haya and Anoleta. What does Auda do? She *writes* a story, a history of the Choctaws that is both from her oral history and from documents. In one scene Auda tries to tell what happened at an eighteenth-century Choctaw battleground, only to be challenged by her audience at an Oklahoma Historical Society event.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the audience does not agree with Auda Billy’s theory of events that shaped her tribe’s past.

At this point, it is important to stress again that “theory” and theories are themselves stories that literary critics tell. When Craig Womack asked us to write a collective document on theory that would guide future generations of American Indian and non-Indian scholars who teach American Indian, Alaska, and Native Hawaiian literatures, I was both pleased and skeptical. He asked *us* to create Native knowledge. I did not think I could do this alone, and I said so. However, as this book evolved, the process was revealed, and I realized I wasn’t writing (or creating) alone. My characters, as well as the other authors in the volume, would create theory with me.

This is not unlike the way I work in fiction. When I’m in the writing zone, there are dozens of people standing around my computer screen watching what I type. First, there are my grandmothers, my mothers, uncles, aunts, ancestors, my children, and my characters. Next, other Indian writers enter my office and stand around the computer—N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, Maurice Kenny, Simon Ortiz, Susan Power, Craig Womack, Joy Harjo, Phil Deloria, Brenda Child, Jean O’Brien, and Vine Deloria, Jr.—all Native writers who are somehow engaged in their tribal communities and homelands.

### Why *Shell Shaker* Is about Choctaws

In the beginning there are Choctaw stories. There are Cherokee stories. There are Diné stories. There are Lakota stories. I am trying to say that we, the people, are derived from creation stories. We are people of specific landscapes, and our specific stories are told about our emergence from a specific place.

I came up with the term “tribalography” because I didn’t agree that American Indians tell strictly autobiographical stories, nor memoir, nor history, nor fiction, but rather they tell a kind of story that includes a collaboration with the past and present and future. Hence the term “tribalography.” In the case of the Haudenosaunee, their story has remained consistent over the many decades. They have said their confederacy was founded on the core values the Peacemaker proposed: freedom, respect, tolerance, consensus, and brotherhood. Under the terms and spirit of the *NeGayanesogowa*, or the Great Law

of Peace, all parties pledged themselves to the confederacy's body of laws. United we thrive, divided we fall.

Historian Robert Venables says that the Haudenosaunee influenced the founding fathers to unite the people of the Old World. This is literary praxis at its best. A native story taught the immigrants the value of unification. In that sense a native story created America.

This is not unlike how tribes were created. In the case of the Choctaw, the Nanih Waiya (Bending Hill) is the story of where we came from, both literally and metaphorically. To some, the mound is Ishki Chitto, or Great Mother; to others our birthplace is where our ancestors crawled up out of the cave, *near* Nanih Waiya, and combed their long hairs to become people. I am not attempting to say whose story is the oldest, nor am I going to delineate them all, but in using the following accounts I am highlighting the fact that today, as in the past, the mound located in Winston County near Philadelphia, Mississippi, is recognized by Choctaw people as a symbol of our ancient existence in the Lower Mississippi Valley.

One story told by Hopakitobi (Prophet That Kills) says that he considers himself a part of the people who came from inside the Earth: "The Great Spirit created the first Choctaws, and through a hole or cave, they crawled forth in the light of day. Some say that only one pair was created, but others say that many pairs were created."<sup>7</sup>

Choctaws defined where we came from. The language is full of descriptive old town names that tell a story, or the history of a specific space: Kashtasha, Fleas Are There; Halunlawansha, Bullfrog Place (Philadelphia, Mississippi); Kati Oka hikia, Thorn-bush Standing in Water; and Kafi talaia, Sassafras Thicket; to give a few examples.

Nakshobi is another Choctaw place-name that is very specific. The Choctaw word, "Nakshobi," means, "to stink" and is indicative of "bad-smelling waters." Eventually Nakshobi was transliterated to "Noxubee." Over time Noxubee in Mississippi has become a powerful metaphor for spiritual life and death—and political corruption. Hernando de Soto's destructive sixteenth-century expedition brought European diseases into this site; Europeans introduced Christianity and alcohol in Noxubee; a Choctaw civil war took place there in 1748–1749; in the 1812 Creek-Choctaw war an estimated five hundred people were killed in Noxubee County. The controversial Dancing Rabbit Creek Treaty was signed there on September 27, 1830, which forced the relocation of eight thousand Choctaws to present-day Oklahoma. The site in Noxubee County was near a poisoned spring, so named by the Choctaws because rabbits staggered with convulsions after drinking the bad waters.

Noxubee County is also the birthplace of Peter Pitchlynn, a Choctaw leader in the early 1800s who told this story of Choctaw emergence. In his story, Pitchlynn states that the people he is associated with came from the Gulf of Mexico and immigrated north onto the prairie lands:

According to the traditions of the Choctaws, the first of their race came from the bosom of the magnificent sea. Even when they first made their appearance upon the earth they were so numerous as to cover the sloping and sandy shore of the ocean, far as the eye could reach, and for a long time did they follow the margin of the sea before they could find a place suited to their wants. The name of their principal chief has long since been forgotten, but it is well remembered that he was a prophet of great age and wisdom. For many moons did they travel without fatigue, and all the time were their bodies strengthened by pleasant breezes, and their hearts, on the other hand gladdened by the luxuriance of a perpetual summer.<sup>8</sup>

A Choctaw woman named Pisatuntema tells another story. Her account appears originally in *Myths of the Louisiana Choctaw*, by David Bushnell, Jr.

Soon after the earth (*yahné*) was made, men and grasshoppers came to the surface through a long passage that led from a large caravan in the interior of the earth, to the summit of a high hill, Nane chaha. There deep down in the earth, in the great cavern, man and the grasshoppers had been created by Aba, the Great Spirit, having been formed of the yellow clay. For a time the men and the grasshoppers continued to reach the surface together, and as they emerged from the long passageway they would scatter in all directions, some going north, other south, east or west.<sup>9</sup>

I use these few accounts to show how Choctaw stories collected by ethnographers inform our contemporary written stories. In fact, the oral stories are the legal primacy we used to make our original treaties with foreign nations. In the nineteenth century Andrew Jackson's men believed that Choctaws stories were true. Otherwise how can we explain the treaties they made with us? Why would a foreign government make a contract to trade for land if they didn't believe we [the Choctaws] weren't the original holders of the land?

### Tribalography in Indian Literature

When my birth mother told me stories about our origins, she talked about the land in Mississippi, the Nanih Waiya, and she said described us as "Eastern people." I was never really sure what she meant until I researched the Choctaw Confederacy and learned that our tribe was divided between eastern factions and western factions, as well as other designations. Mother also told me stories of the Little People who once harassed my uncle when he came home late at night. She talked of the strange water spirits that live around Choctaw lakes and rivers in Mississippi and Oklahoma. She told me stories of the blue lights. And she told stories about my grandfather, aunts, uncles, and our relatives who are not related by blood. One example of our fictive kin is my

Choctaw grandfather's "adopted" white brother. Even after the "brother" had grown to manhood, he was regarded as a member of our family, though he was not Choctaw.

All this is my way of explaining how *Shell Shaker* is also a tribalogy. I used some oral stories from my birth mother. I found documents in the historic record; I used stories of Choctaws who were gourd dancers, and stories of women who shook shells, and stories of dancers who covered themselves in white powder before they danced. I also used stories about the women who made sashes from porcupine skins. Many of these traditions and events were forgotten in the twentieth century. So why did I choose "Shell Shaker" as a title for my novel, knowing that most Choctaws do not shake shells? The main reason is that I wanted to remind my community that a long time ago Choctaws had many different dances and ceremonies and customs, and yes, there is evidence that some communities shook shells. If I wrote about some of them, I hoped the others would begin to rise up out of the land where they've been kept—waiting on us to remember to call them out.

Only this past summer, in order to enlarge Green Corn celebrations, a Choctaw-Chickasaw man talked of reclaiming another old chief's grounds in southeastern Oklahoma. While he was talking, I was reminded again that dreams and stories and songs don't just visit one or two of us. Eventually they come to many of us. The revival of Green Corn grounds in Oklahoma over the past twenty years has done a lot to reinvigorate our communities. Perhaps this is the reason I didn't invent a tribe in *Shell Shaker*. By writing, by interacting with my tribe, I am a part of the future stories that will rise up. My mother helped me write the Choctaw language in *Shell Shaker*. Choctaw was her first language. While the novel is "fiction," much of the history is as accurate as I could interpret it, especially the skirmishes in 1738 and 1739 between the Chickasaws, who supported the English, and the Choctaws, who supported the French.

Choctaws suffered our first civil war in 1747 with the assassination of war chief Red Shoes on June 22. I wanted to write about self-destruction and the horrors of war through the vehicle of Red Shoes's soliloquy. This following section is told from Red Shoes's point of view. He is narrating the future, but in present tense, as if it were happening to him at that very moment. I also wanted to follow the example of my family who tell all their stories of the past in present tense.

"But my story is not finished," I argue. "I will caress the inevitable coming to life in front of me. My head on a pole branches like the red leaves of autumn pruned too late to heal. On the longest day of the year when the eye of the Sun finally closes, an assassin will set fire to my body, then remove my head. Then nothing, not even breath can come between Anoleta and me in a place where the net of air and earth have been rearranged for this purpose. It is she and Haya who will track me

down on the road to Couechitto. After the slaughter at the Alibamu Conchatys, after the hundreds dead, I decide I *do* want to sacrifice myself. I will help in my own death, but when heat rising from the fire makes me vomit the last bite of moisture out of me, I don't want to end. Red smoke sizzles on my tongue. A hot tingling runs over the top of my head, I am being roasted alive. Flesh oozes down my cheek, tears of light run down my face. I am no longer one who is here, yet I am here. A chorus of frogs, deep voices, announces my departure, and I understand, there will be no birds coming for me. Everything around me is moving away, unsteady. I am raining down on the ground dissolving in a blood clot of sadness. In my last solemn moments I pray for a reflection, a shape that will defy the astounded dead. I will not be a stone without eyes. I will not live where no one sees me or knows my name. I will return, I sing. I will return, I sing. I will return."

*You are raving.* The wind says.

"Huh! A road does come for me. There is a whistling sound, searing. A meat-whistling that shrivels everything."<sup>10</sup>

With the above passage, I am writing the red history of our tribe and illuminating the dynamic nature of Choctaw time. In it, the "we" is ever-present, which is how I believe Choctaws express spirituality. The spirit is ever-present. The present is ever-spirit. Red Shoes was killed as he made camp, the evening of June 22, 1747. His assassin tracked him down and chopped off his head. It was then posted on a post, and burned, as was the rest of his body.

In the next passage, Isaac Billy is visiting his grandmother, Nowatima, who explains the interaction between the Natchez, the Choctaw, and the French—from a Choctaw point of view.

Isaac digs in his pocket and takes out a tiny gray stone no bigger than his thumb. It resembles a skull and once belonged to his great-grandmother Nowatima. After he returned home from boarding school, he'd sit with her for hours in front of their fireplace. Night after night she would draw stories in his mind. He saw a hurricane so powerful that it made the Mississippi run backwards. At the river *Ahepatanichi*, he saw kettling birds of an unknown species dropping excrement on the heads of Spanish invaders. "What the Hispano didn't realize," smiled Nowatima, "was that magical excrement containing the seeds of potatoes had been dropped on them. So the invaders would unknowingly spread potatoes to starving people everywhere. A gift from our Seven Grandmothers." Isaac witnessed a war between the Natchez and the French that began over the slaughter of trumpeter swans. Nowatima said the French didn't know that they built their fort over a bird refuge, a place protected by the Natchez. When the Natchez leader, Stung Serpent, and his son brought a pair of mated swans to Chépart, the fort's commander, he threw them out of his house and shot the birds just to show



how little he regarded their gift. This so enraged the Natchez that they killed Chépart and two hundred and fifty other Frenchmen. Then they planted the French heads on pine posts in the center of the fort. Food for birds. Eventually the Choctaw helped the Natchez move in with the Ouachitas who were living along the Red River. "You see," said Nowatima, "that is how the Choctaws saved the French, our allies. Otherwise the Natchez would surely have wiped them out. Now you know how a people in the swamp can slip into another name as easily as food slips inside your mouth. But the real truth of my stories is that nothing ever dies." Isaac removes his bulky glasses and brushes a small tear away. Sunlight glints on his face like a mirror, the morning sky is bright blue.

Many years after Nowatima's death, he asked Auda to find out what the historians wrote about the Natchez war. She told him it happened in 1730, but that the French had called the swans worthless waterfowl.

*Hekano*, he does not question Nowatima's stories. Her words were confident, rich with details. A long time ago—she would say. Isaac drifts into the world she made for him and the stone warms his hand.<sup>11</sup>

In my view, the above paragraphs illustrate my theory, or story, about Choctaw events. The French military officers in their letters first told the story of the Natchez war. Later in the 1750s, the French travel writers retold this same story from another point of view. Then in the twentieth century, American historians and ethnographers wrote about the Natchez war and the Choctaw's involvement. Two centuries later, while writing *Shell Shaker*, I would finally recapture this story and tell another version of it. By using French documents, and by using stories my uncles told about World War II, and by using my dreams, I was able to reimagine our history from many point of views: mine, my relatives, and our ancestors. I hope I am talking through our ancestors, the ones whose words were written down in the documents, and untangling the stories within stories within stories—and smoothing them out for the future, so that some other Choctaws will write their version of our stories.

In this essay, I've translated for Embarrassed Grief, other characters, and my relatives. I've even talked about my writing methods to explain what a tribalogy is and how it is an ethical Native literary praxis. In this story within a story it is the characters who have shown how a Native writer remains in conversation with the past and the present to create the future. We are makers of theory bread, and we hope that our reasoning together will not only inform but nourish you.

#### Notes

1. For a full account of the story, see H. B. Cushman's *The History of the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Natchez Indians*. While Cushman has been widely criticized for his fanciful use of language, I believe there are some useful cultural markers

found within this story. Specifically useful is Cushman's attention to the "call and response" song that the unknown woman brings to the two Choctaw men. It should be noted today that Choctaw songs are famous for their call-and-response motifs.

2. Howe, "Story of America."

3. Jackson, *Yuchi Ceremonial Life*, 114.

4. The most academically acceptable term I know is "Native," but I will most likely use "Indian" and "American Indian" throughout this essay.

5. Jackson, *Yuchi Ceremonial Life*, 240.

6. Howe, *Shell Shaker*, 44.

7. Swanton, *Source Material*, 35.

8. *Ibid.*, 31.

9. Bushnell, "Myths," 527.

10. Howe, *Shell Shaker*, 173–74.

11. *Ibid.*, 78–79.