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# Repugnant Aboriginality: LeAnne Howe's Shell Shaker and Indigenous Representation in the Age of Multiculturalism

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Repugnant Aboriginality: LeAnne Howe's Shell Shaker  
and Indigenous Representation in the Age of  
Multiculturalism

LeAnne Howe's 2001 novel, Shell Shaker,<sup>i</sup> opens with an idyllic image of an ancient Choctaw village where "food is plentiful" and life is "[l]ike a party," "a series of games and dances."<sup>ii</sup> We learn that "[e]very day, the men sang with a drum in the square grounds while the women tended their children and drunk from gourds filled with sweet peach juice" and that the villagers dancing together at night were beautiful: "[t]heir skin was smooth, and their teeth were white and straight" (SS, 1). A few pages later, however, this paradise-like vision of abundance, leisure, health, beauty and peaceful harmony is replaced by a scene of ritual execution, in which a woman's head is smashed with a wooden club. The contrast is striking. Far from avoiding the brutality of the killing, Howe narrates the event as attentively and vividly as possible, in the voice of the executed woman herself:

I feel an icy hot explosion in my head. Deafening.  
Blood gurgles from my mouth. My hands spring to my

head involuntarily, blood is seeping out of my head and flecks of bone are strewn through my hair. My arms jerk wildly, like a wounded bird trying to fly away, as the old man hits me again. ... I feel my body twitch, perhaps someone turns me over. I can no longer see, my head is unraveling. (SS, 16)

Howe makes sure we are repulsed by the scene's gruesomeness by emphasizing the anatomical detail of a body in extreme trauma: the flecks of bone, the seeping, gurgling blood, the twitching flesh do their work well here, particularly so in contrast to the idyllic opening scenes from the village which focused on the perfection and beauty of similar bodies. Aware that, inured as we are by violent spectacles of bodies undergoing extreme harm pervading contemporary popular culture, we might pass over the scene too quickly, Howe stops us in our readerly tracks. We do not merely witness the execution; third person narration would serve that purpose perfectly well. Instead we suffer through it vicariously as we mouth the dying woman's words and for a moment inhabit her consciousness.

The first person narration increases not only the visceral quality of the scene but also our regret at the woman's violent death. In the course of the first chapter,

readers are invited to admire this woman who has been narrating the story from the beginning. Her opening instruction—“Ano ma Chahta sia hoke oke. Call me Shakhbatina, a Shell Shaker” (SS, 1)—may momentarily disorient those readers who do not speak Choctaw; but it also, immediately, extends a metaphorical helping hand by evoking the famous opening line of Herman Melville’s Moby Dick.<sup>iii</sup> Shakhbatina first alienates readers by asserting her linguistic difference,<sup>iv</sup> then she puts them at ease by reverting to English and offering a bit of easily-recognized Americana.<sup>v</sup> And yet clearly drawn distinctions again follow this acknowledgement of cultural commonality. Unlike Ishmael, whose assertions of individuality generously pepper the opening of Moby Dick, Shakhbatina dwells in collective history. She emphasizes her precise placement in a network of social relations: as a Shell Shaker she is “an Inholahta woman, born into the tradition of our grandmother, the first Shell Shaker of our people” (SS, 1). As she explains that Shell Shakers “are the peacemakers for the Choctaws” (SS, 1), Shakhbatina’s individuality folds into the collectivity of her clan and her people. Instead of Melville’s male suicidal individualist, who substitutes a ship deck for pistol and ball,<sup>vi</sup> Howe offers a woman narrator with a high degree of

awareness of her embeddedness in history and in a specific, politically inflected, kinship genealogy.

We—and I have been using this collective pronoun advisedly here to emphasize the readerly experience presumed in the novel and to draw you, my reader, into its interpretive complexities—have trusted Shakhbatina as our native informant; she has introduced us to the world of pre-conquest North America and reported on its violent unraveling which followed the arrival of Europeans. She has been a persuasive chronicler and a lyrical storyteller. We regret her death and see it as unnecessarily brutal: by 1738, when the execution takes place, Choctaws had already acquired guns, which would assure a cleaner and more expedient death. We see it as unjust: Shakhbatina committed no crime; in fact, she attempts to save a daughter falsely accused of murder and to temporarily forestall a war between two tribes. Recalling the scenes of human sacrifice readily available in the European discourse on the new world from the first encounters on, we zero in on the wooden club, the gurgling blood, the flecks of bone. Transfixed by this gruesome, therefore authentic, spectacle,<sup>vii</sup> we have also conveniently forgotten that the scene takes place in the mid-eighteenth century, amidst intertribal conflicts precipitated by engagement with the

French and the English rather than in some pre-modern past. So we tend to see Shakhbatina's unjust death as an anachronistic remnant of a primitive ritual, a fitting testimony to the savage ways of pre-contact indigenous America. In other words, we resort, or fall victim, to what Roy Harvey Pearce called savagism and defined as a discursive "solution to a major human problem"<sup>viii</sup> in the Americas: the European encounter with indigenous difference.<sup>ix</sup> And this is, precisely, where Howe wants us: teetering ill at ease on the borderline between sympathy inculcated by contemporary multiculturalism and revulsion inherited from earlier discursive formations, uncertain whether we are able to extend recognition and respect to the historic Choctaws in the face of their apparently repugnant alterity.<sup>x</sup> Through this interpretive dilemma Howe stages for us the peculiar predicament of indigenous representation in North America at the turn of the twenty first century.

Like all contemporary American Indian artists, Howe has inherited a specific representational difficulty, one shaped by a long history of European Indian playing which articulated American identities as radically distinct from their old world counterparts and by the legacy of salvage ethnography which welded Indian authenticity to its pre-

contact versions.<sup>x<sup>i</sup></sup> In tandem, these performative and discursive traditions led to the equation of indigenenity with a necessarily doomed form of (first racial, later cultural) difference, ever irrevocably in retreat before encroaching European modernity. As a result, any representations of indigeneous difference necessarily navigate between the proverbial Scylla and Charybdis of appropriation and exoticization, between what Chadwick Allen called saming and unsaming arguments structuring much of the past and contemporary approaches to the study and representation of indigenous cultures and societies. As Allen explains,

“saming” arguments approach American Indian topics as though they are similar to American, multicultural, ethnic, postcolonial or western topics and, thus, are amenable to the same critical methods. “Unsaming” arguments, in marked contrast, approach American Indian topics as though they are in some significant way distinctive—perhaps even radically distinctive—from American, multicultural, ethnic, postcolonial, or western topics, thus, they require distinctive methodologies, critical interventions or theories.<sup>x<sup>ii</sup></sup>

Allen's model extends from the realm of scholarly methodology to that of literary, and more broadly cultural, representation. If, let's say, mainstream historians or literary critics are reluctant to articulate any kind of difference on behalf of pre-contact societies out of fear of appearing to be exoticizing indigenous peoples and thus confining them to the past, American Indian writers also confront this dilemma. Thus we encounter, for example, accounts of pre-contact societies that make them look just like contemporary democratic capitalist societies: dynamic, open, and culturally pragmatic—always already multicultural even—all engaging in continental trade in material and intellectual goods as some kind of precursors to NAFTA.<sup>xiii</sup> We can see Shell Shaker deploying that very option through the depictions of historic Choctaws as a dynamic society open to multiple networks of economic and political alliances in the novel's opening chapters. But whenever, either in artistic representation or academic argument, we translate indigenous difference into the parallel forms of the social present or, alternately, consign it to the past as irremediably savage, we forfeit its apprehension as a viable contemporary alternative to the settler forms of sociality. In other words, we exclude it from the intellectual public commons as anything but an auxiliary to



the articulations of the Western, the modern, the contemporary.

Paradoxically, this limited representational horizon has shrunken further under the rhetorical strictures of postcolonial criticism and, eventually, multiculturalism, because, as Robert Young explained,

since Sartre, Fanon and Memmi, postcolonial criticism has constructed the antithetical groups, the colonizer and the colonized, self and Other, with the second only knowable through a necessarily false representation, a Manichean division that threatens to reproduce the static, essentialist categories it seeks to undo. In the same way, the doctrine of multiculturalism encourages different groups to reify their individual and different identities at their most different. <sup>xiv</sup>

The latter of Young's critical indictments in particular comes as a surprise. After all, multiculturalism first emerged as a panaceum to a long history of representational erasure or misprision of difference. It promised a kind of representational liberation to all of America's putative historical and contemporary others, one depending precisely

on a far ranging appreciation of difference as crucially constitutive of the American past *and* present. To be sure, the interested subjects have taken full advantage of the hard-won opportunities that multiculturalism, first as a fighting creed, later as a state-sponsored cultural and political program, presented. The arguments on behalf of the politics of recognition,<sup>xv</sup> the ideological heart of North American multiculturalism, gave rise to the concept of cultural citizenship<sup>xvi</sup> and led to a vastly increased political and cultural representation of minority subjects in North American democracies.

And yet, early on, it became clear that the conception of difference informing the politics of recognition presented the evident dangers of reification and essentialism—a transformation of history into identity understood as a set of a priori given understandings about who we are<sup>xvii</sup>—ironically, a contemporary version of ahistoricism traditionally imputed to indigenous thought. Emerging at a time of increased anxiety about difference in democratic states considerably changed by the mid-twentieth century's wave of social liberation movements, struggles for decolonization, and by globalization of capital, multiculturalist politics of recognition quickly came under criticism for serving as a tool to secure (an illusion of)

sovereignty for the contemporary liberal subjects and states on one hand and, on the other, for providing a smokescreen of performances of cultural difference to obscure the ongoing homogenization of economic realities in late capitalism.<sup>xviii</sup> Further, numerous critics have charged that for the contemporary liberal democracies, such as the United States and Canada, multiculturalism has served as the best yet political tool in national integration by allowing these states to translate their colonial histories into uplifting narratives of national and ideological triumph. The political and literary accounts of each ethnic group's overcoming of subordination—invariably caused by prejudice that simply needed to be cleared away by the group's educational efforts on behalf of the dominant society—and its eventual ascension on the nation's representational, if not always economic, ladder testified to the success and rightness of liberal integrational policies. But as indigenous critics in particular have pointed out, these multiculturalist narratives of coming into visibility in the nation's public imagination as co-citizens have also functioned to obscure the ongoing colonial status of indigenous nations in North America and to render their demands for recognition of their political rather than merely cultural difference, anachronistic.<sup>xix</sup>

Multicultural democracies, the lesson of this criticism is, dwell on their colonial pasts, if at all, only in order to celebrate their irrevocable passing, of which multiculturalism's ascendancy as a model of social relations is the primary evidence.

Thus Howe, and other contemporary indigenous writers and artists, necessarily confront a specific dilemma: How to represent historic and contemporary indigenous difference in a rhetorical situation in which emphasizing difference and minimizing it are equally bad solutions? How to depict the concrete historical specificity of indigenous societies, past and present, in a way that does not imply their fundamental similarity to the mainstream cultural formations or, by contrast, does not foreground their unredeemable difference, an alterity that excludes them from the realm of modernity? In other words, how to avoid the presentism of saming approaches to representation of indigeneity on one hand and, on the other, how not to feed the multiculturalist appetite for performances of merely cultural difference, performances which ultimately serve to sustain the self-assertion of the contemporary liberal states and obscure the indigenous nations' demand for political sovereignty?

This particular representational predicament has elicited a variety of responses from indigenous artists and intellectuals in North America. Much of contemporary indigenous artistic and critical energy focuses on decolonizing the mind by seizing interpretive control over representations of indigeneity in literature, visual arts, film, and scholarly writing, in a process in which, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains, "indigenous people...tell [their] own stories, write [their] own versions, in [their] own ways, for [their] own purposes."<sup>xx</sup> Many of these stories, whether in fiction or criticism, focus on chronicling tribally specific intellectual and political traditions, in an effort to preempt the multicultural interest in indigenous culture with insistence on American Indian nations and their historic claims to political sovereignty.<sup>xxi</sup> Others offer trenchant analyses of the changing rhetorical environment in which indigenous peoples, be they artists or political activists or both, construct their accounts of historic and contemporary realities.<sup>xxii</sup> Howe's unique contribution in this latter effort is her attempt to radically transform this rhetorical ground by fundamentally retraining those contemporary readers who are willing to examine and potentially suspend their customary reading practice.

Let's now backtrack to Shell Shaker's opening to explain how Howe guards against the multiculturalist appropriation of Choctaw difference by turning to the representations of the repugnant, that is, of the ancient practices now prohibited by law or found reprehensible by a public sense of ethics.<sup>xxiii</sup> It is important to make clear that the opening chapter of Shell Shaker goes to great lengths to counteract all of the (mis)perceptions regarding the purported savagery of the early Choctaw, even as it appears to invite them in its unflinching description of Shakhbatina's death. Howe insists that the execution is a final act of a long process sanctioned by tradition (hence the wooden club rather than the gun). It is a process of intricate and persistent negotiation between two nations engaged in a dispute, one involving highly ritualized strategies of persuasion and sustained patience to secure unanimous consent: Shakhbatina "must keep talking until all the Inholahta people agree to support [her] decision" (SS, 5). It has been initiated and insisted upon by Shakhbatina herself, who sees her sacrifice as a way of bringing (at least temporary) peace to the warring parties. There is nothing impulsive, spurious, or forcefully imposed about the event (unless, of course, we acknowledge that culture itself is nothing but an imposition). In fact, the entire

process culminating in Shakhbatina's chosen death is a testimony to what we would call today democratic social and legal mechanisms firmly in place and properly functioning.

To prepare us for this particular insight about the execution—its political reconciliatory function—Howe has already offered, early on in the chapter, a different scene of brutality, this one perpetrated by the Spanish invading Choctaw lands in the sixteenth century under the command of Hernandez de Soto:

The whole town was burned. Unspeakable acts were then committed by Hispano Osano. They fell into a barbaric blood lust and cut off the heads and hands of the stickball players, and the Mabilians. Later, the Hispanos displayed them wherever they went as souvenirs of their courage. (SS, 3)

Here Howe reverses the settler culture's favorite equation which aligned savagery with the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas and civilization with the arriving Europeans. However, lest we become facile with such reversals, Howe is careful not to draw the lines of distinction too categorically. Following just a couple of pages on the above scene of the Spanish collective rage, Shell Shaker

offers another account of beheading. In this scene, a child Shakhbatina watches a Choctaw warrior perform a ceremony following a victorious encounter with an enemy:

Ilapintabi, Kills It Himself, jammed the head of his victim onto a post, then thrust his sharp blade into the soft flesh of the neck, fastening it to the wood. Then he painted his own face red. Tied hawk feathers in his hair. Danced and sang in a defiant gravel voice. (SS, 6-7)

The differences between the two scenes at first appear obvious: in place of a crazed blood-thirsty horde sowing indiscriminate and gratuitous death and destruction, we witness a solitary warrior who, through his enemy's dead body, confronts the enemy's spirit. Shakhbatina's account of the Ilapintabi's ceremony makes clear that it is a reenactment of a kind of violence visited on Choctaw warriors by the English. She watches because, as she says, "even though I was young, I had known warriors who'd been dragged off by marauding bands of Inkilish okla. I wanted to see what would happen to me if I were captured by our enemy" (SS, 6). Her witnessing has the effect she desired: "Ilapintabi's cries washed over me like a soothing rain. ...



After his song I was cleansed of fear" (SS, 7).

Ilapintabi's ceremony has a double function: it serves to process a violent event and it models courage for others as it purifies them of fear. And yet, both scenes are governed by the same fundamental logic—the emphatically ideological function of public displays of violence—and by the same reliance on the aesthetics of gruesomeness, for a lack of a better term, to evoke a visceral response in the readers. By pointing out similarities as well as differences between these separate scenes of violence—de Soto's raid, Ilapintabi's ceremony, and Shakhbatina's execution—Howe forces us to consider the context in which violence unfolds. In the raid scene, brutality is spurious rather than considered, useless rather than constructive, deployed and experienced en masse rather than singly and deliberately. It is a testimony to a temporary lapse, literally a fall, from civilization into unrestrained rage, into barbarism. By contrast, far from being an emblem of savagery, Shakhbatina's execution is part and parcel of a highly organized society. If the gruesomeness of the execution allows the readers to indulge in interpretive strategies governed by the logic of Allen's unsavory approaches to the understanding of indigenous societies, the socio-political background Howe provides to

contextualize the same execution invites, in turn, the opposite reaction: the appropriation of the saming approach.

As if all this ethnographic and historical context was not enough to ease the blow of the execution scene, Howe concludes the chapter with a brief lesson in Choctaw spiritual belief. Shakhbatina speaks in the wake of her death, from a different temporal and spatial realm, where she can observe the relatives left behind but where she is freed from the limitations of materiality:

I feel myself growing younger in this place. ... An unknown language floats around me. Each word is in Old Code that I must decipher. Suddenly there are streaks of white and the delicious scent of tobacco fills the air as the spirit of an animal appears. Big Mother Porcupine walks into view and takes me by the hand. I open my mouth to speak but my thoughts escape into the wind. (SS, 16)

Shakhbatina's violent death is her release into freedom, though one consisting of ongoing responsibilities: not only to decipher the language and speak but to grieve over her people. Her death in 1738 creates the conditions for the

novel's fundamental structural conceit, one calculated to translate Choctaw cosmology into a specifiable aesthetic form. With her death Shakhbatina is freed to travel across time; she can reappear, over two centuries later in 1991, in the Choctaw tribal government offices in Old Durant, Oklahoma to pull the trigger of the gun that kills the nation's chief. She can also return to narrate this event in the novel's concluding chapter throwing up in the air all of the conclusions that the readers might have reached about the novel's central enigma: the circumstances of the chief's murder.

To represent this specific cosmology, Howe designed Shell Shaker to unfold through two separate plotlines situated in two geographically and historically separate spaces and times: mid-eighteenth century Mississippi and several contemporary locations: Old Durant, Oklahoma; New Orleans, Louisiana; and New York City. Each historical plane is inhabited by a separate set of protagonists. However, early on in the novel it becomes clear that the contemporary Choctaws are reincarnations of their historic predecessors, or, that they live out the same historical processes, the same political entanglements, that their ancestors did, but are additionally charged with the imperative to bring them to satisfactory conclusions where

their predecessors failed to do so. In Shell Shaker people move through time and space—from the eighteenth century to the twentieth and back—but they always inhabit bodies that are historically and geographically specific; no Connecticut Yankee in King’s Arthur Court here. This insistence on historicity counteracts the common perception that traditional indigenous societies operate outside of time, that they are ahistorical. We are familiar with the readily available antitheses of mythical, astronomic, or cyclical understanding of time characteristic of pre-modern cultures and the modern understanding of time as linear, as unfolding in history. From its opening paragraph, Shell Shaker stakes claim to both modes of locating events in time. Before the narrative begins, Howe specifies: “Yanàbi Town. Eastern District of the Choctaws. September 22, 1738. Autumnal Equinox” (SS, 1). Here, and on numerous occasions throughout the novel, Howe anchors events in both astronomic time and in the Gregorian calendar brought to the Americas by Europeans. She thus suggests that indigenous consciousness is not oblivious to historicity, but that it operates in time differently: according to the Western conceptions of the historical and across them, within their strictures and through them, but not outside of them at all.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Some of these apparently impossible travels across time can be explained away as dream sequences, as when the twentieth-century protagonists lose consciousness in 1992 and find themselves in the bodies and lives of their eighteenth-century ancestors. Others, such as Shakhbatina's presence at the chief's killing or her husband's appearance in the form of a panther in his daughter's hotel room, cannot be so explained within the rationalist logic of the European west. Rather, they serve to substantiate the idea of bodies moving in Choctaw space, the space that is time then and now, the logic that Howe's novel emphatically embraces in its conclusion.<sup>xxv</sup> In this context, Shakhbatina's closing description of the chief's execution as the moment when "past and present collide" (SS, 22) does not merely reveal the identities of the killers, but asserts a specific Choctaw cosmology, especially its conception of time, place, and subjectivity. Shell Shaker's particular narrative structure, where past and present are simultaneously separate and contiguous, becomes a formal figuration of a system of belief and a crucial component of Howe's ultimate novelistic goal and challenge: to represent a contemporary traditional tribal society as an extension of historic Choctaws and their surviving system of belief as a foundation for a viable political, and not just merely

cultural, alternative to the contemporary liberal settler state.

To prompt our careful consideration of these two different forms of philosophical and political organization, Choctaw and U.S., Howe resorts to a familiar generic convention: a murder and detection plot featuring a contest between two different conceptions of justice, the retributive justice governing the settler society judicial and penal systems and the traditional Choctaw ethics of restoration. Popular and scholarly disputes over tribal justice and jurisdiction have taken place in the United States since the inception of the state. They reached a weighty culmination late in the nineteenth century when the famous Crow Dog trial allowed the federal government to curtail tribal jurisdiction and impose the settler judicial systems on tribal societies through the Seven Major Crimes Act.<sup>xxvi</sup> To this day, justice systems in indigenous national territories (otherwise known as reservations in the United States and reserves in Canada) are thoroughly syncretic, combining administrative forms of local tribal and federal legal oversight and often offering conflicting remedies for consequences of crime. From its opening pages, Howe's novel asserts the viability of the indigenous notion of justice as a restoration of balance. This understanding of justice

has been passed down among Choctaws through the generations of women: the Shell Shakers of the novel's title, whose primary social function as peacemakers is to "make things even" (SS, 2). Lest, tempted by etymological confluence, we too easily equate tribalism and retribution, it merits pointing out that notions of justice characteristic of many of the America's indigenous societies differ significantly from Western identificatory retributive justice. Making things even does not mean seeking retribution for specific trespasses by meting out punishment to identified perpetrators, but rather restoring the original balance in the material and spiritual universe typically presumed by indigenous cosmologies.<sup>xxvii</sup>

To contrast these two conceptions of justice, along with practices they inform, Shell Shaker features two solutions to the murder plot. The novel first offers an extended court scene during which the main suspect in the murder of Red McAlester, the chief of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, is exonerated. Based on testimony by an elder who is the tribal government's telephone switchboard operator and on material evidence of taped conversations she provides, the chief's killer is identified and the circumstances of his death explained in detail sufficient to satisfy the demand for rational cause-and-effect

explanation of the mystery. The warrant for the killer is promptly issued and Auda Billy, McAlester's lover and assistant, who was found unconscious at the murder scene, smoking gun by her side, walks free. As far as the court is concerned, the investigation is concluded and the expectation of justice met.

But the novel does not end there. The final chapter, titled "The Shell Shaker," offers another explanation of McAlester's murder, one that explicitly contradicts the conclusions of the court and implicates Auda all over again. We learn that Auda did, indeed, point the gun at McAlester that fateful afternoon, but she was aided by Shakhbatina—the woman we see executed at the novel's opening—who helped squeeze the trigger. We learn all this from Shakhbatina herself as she speaks in a first person narrative directly to us:

Now I must tell you what really happened. ... My story is an enormous undertaking. Hundreds of years in the making until past and present collide into a single moment. Auda did hold the gun in her hands, gently, as if it were inlaid with jewels. It was then that I slipped my hands in front of her hands, and



together we struck the pose. The day was hers, all hers, but it was my day, too.

Nuklibishakachi, my breath is warm with passion; we Choctaws are hatak okla hut okchaya bilia hoh illi bilia. Life everlasting.

Hekano, I am finished talking. (SS, 222)

By claiming that she collaborated with Auda in killing McAlester, Shakhbatina exposes the court-sanctioned version of events as a ruse devised by the defense team in order to circumvent one kind of justice to make another kind possible. Unlike the court decision, which left Auda not guilty but disempowered, Shakhbatina's account both implicates and exculpates Auda, without depriving her of agency. By killing McAlester Auda acts as a responsible clan mother, one more in a long tradition of Billy peacemakers, most notably including Anoleta and Haya who assassinate a corrupt Choctaw leader, Red Shoes in 1747. She removes a compromised tribal chief from power, a task traditionally undertaken by clan mothers in those indigenous societies that are matrilineal. What's harder to accept is that Shakhbatina too pulled the trigger. Her account makes sense within traditional Choctaw cosmology, but just as the Choctaw language passages in the text are

not accessible to most readers, neither is that system of belief. Shakhbatina's explanation is viable only if readers share Choctaw cosmology. If they do not, if they instead rely on Western rationalism to make sense of the world, it is no explanation at all. In fact, it can come across as a joke, a taunt directed at readers: I will tell you what happened. See if you can believe it. Shell Shaker tells us exactly "what really happened" (SS, 222). It is this really, though, that becomes the unsolved enigma of Howe's novel. How do we determine what really happened, in the presence of contradictory explanations?

Instead of an ongoing enigma regarding the identity of the killer,<sup>xxviii</sup> in Shell Shaker we have abundance of interpretive options, each presenting a different solution to the murder plot. If we choose Shakhbatina's version, we acknowledge that the sequence of events accepted by the tribal court is false. If we stick to the court version, we explicitly dismiss Shakhbatina's account. There is a third possibility too: we acknowledge that Auda committed the murder, but believe that she did it herself, without any unearthly intervention. In other words, we hold on to our allegiance to Western rationalism. Or, as another option still, we decide that all of the accounts are true. In this last instance we suspend our disbelief and, like all good

contemporary American multiculturalists feel compelled to do, recognize the existence of different belief systems. Both Western rationalism and Choctaw cosmology are valid; they can cohabit the multiculturalist universe. The novel, however, does not take this relativist position at all. It aligns itself with Shakhbatina by giving her the last word. After Shakhbatina is "finished talking," no one else gets to speak. And yet, importantly, if the novel easily sides with the traditional Choctaws, Howe makes it difficult for her readers to follow.

Shell Shaker's conclusion precipitates a specific interpretive problem. Instead of the identity of the killer, Howe's novel enigma is how to solve detection plots when radically different, if not contradictory, systems of belief are available for our use. Each solution to the central detection plot requires allegiance to a separate system of belief. Selecting one excludes the other. This detection plot dilemma exemplifies a specific impasse of the contemporary multicultural exchanges of recognition: the vexed question of the negotiation of different cosmologies presumably coming into contact in such exchanges.

Howe's novel takes up the issue of translation between radically different cosmologies that have come face to face

in America several times in its course. The wider American public is typically familiar with the problem only from one perspective. We have been taught about the long tradition of Europeans coming to terms with America's distinctive societies—all those travelers, missionaries, and anthropologists describing indigenous societies they encounter in the new world, transcribing and translating their languages, interpreting their customs and beliefs. A tentative list of examples of such endeavors begins with the letters of Christopher Columbus, chronicles of Bartolomé de las Casas, the narratives by Garcilaso de la Vega and Cabeza de Vaca, John Smith's reports to King George or Roger Williams's linguistic work, George Caitlin paintings, Edward Curtis photographs, and continues all the way to the twentieth-century anthropologists fanning across the American continents in an attempt to comprehend and represent for the rest of us the essence of the indigenes.

Shell Shaker depicts some of these endeavors, often ironically, in the episodes concerning Jean Baptiste Le Moyne Sieur de Bienville and the Jesuit father Renoir's history writing. The latter, in particular, exposes European history writing as a process motivated by attempts to resolve the conflict between the desire for the indigenous life (Renoir abandons the church and embarks on

a life with a Choctaw woman, Nashoba, whom he loves) and the culturally ingrained imperative to offer a supposedly objective, but in reality politically motivated, account of historic events, one that will justify the European colonizing project in the Americas.

But more importantly, Shell Shaker gives us the opportunity to reverse this ethnographic dynamic in which the Europeans are the observers and the indigenous the observed. Throughout the novel Howe depicts Choctaws as they make sense of the European traders, settlers, and missionaries who intrude upon their world. For example, we overhear two warriors condemning the English for trading with Attakapas, a local tribe known to practice cannibalism, because they believe that trading has an ethical dimension, beyond its pure economic utility. In another striking example, a young Choctaw woman, Anoleta, embarks on a theological dispute with a Jesuit priest concerning eternity. In a reversal of the early European discourse on American cannibalism,<sup>xxix</sup> her rendition of the Eucharist ceremony reveals a thoroughly cannibalistic imagination at the heart of the Christian Mass all the while opposing to it the Choctaw conception of life everlasting. In yet another example I describe above, we watch a group of traditionally minded contemporary Choctaw

successfully subvert the workings of the BIA tribal court to substitute traditional Choctaw justice for the western logic of retribution.

These extended ethnographic lessons in Choctaw cosmology, social, and legal systems appeal to our multicultural acumen; they allow us to translate Choctaw otherness into familiar terms. However, the brutality of Shakhbatina's execution interferes with this sympathetic identification with ancient Choctaw sociality. Howe's gruesome authentic first deployed here leaves us uncomfortably suspended between the facile recourse to the idea of savagism and the increasingly easy multicultural truism about the need to recognize and respect cultural difference, searching for alternatives to these interpretive options. The scene of Shakhbatina's execution, thus, functions as a preview of a specific narrative strategy repeated in the novel and culminating, most forcefully, in the lengthy depiction of the Choctaw bone-picking ceremony, placed at the center of the text.<sup>xxx</sup>

The passage describing the ceremony deserves to be quoted at length because it exemplifies how Howe combines disparate representational registers to evoke contradictory (and often visceral) responses from her readers, a strategy that is central to her larger effort to render Choctaw

specificity without succumbing to the multiculturalist appetite for merely cultural performances of difference. Through a third person narration we witness a scene involving the most tenacious of the settler society's taboos: necrophilia and dismemberment of dead bodies. Koi Chitto, Shakhbatina's husband, is compelled to perform a bone-picking ceremony earlier than customary. Shakhbatina's body has been laid out for only three, rather than the requisite six, months on a scaffold exposed to weather and animals. Koi Chitto has been preparing himself for this ceremony for three days by fasting and inducing trance-like states.

The drums grow louder. They seem in rhythm with Koi Chitto's heartbeat, and he drops the basket. At last, the roar of forest, the constant drumming, and he begins to chant to the crowd gathered below the scaffold.

"I am the Bone Picker, dancer of death, transformer of life, the one who brings sex, the one who brings rebirth. You must have death to have life. The people live by killing, by stripping the flesh from the animal corpse. The people live by dying. That which dies is reborn."

A shrill moan comes from the belly of Koi Chitto. He dances faster, and rolls his eyes back in his head. He is again in the center of na tohbi. ... He sees his wife dancing towards him, and he shouts. "Shakbatina is coming. She is here!"

She looks like she did so many years ago. Her skin is vibrant brown and she is half-naked. Her calf-length hair glistens in the moonlight. She comes very close, puts her hands on his penis. He puts his hands around her hands and together they stroke him, until he ejaculates on her body and screams, "Flesh of my flesh, I will be with you always. Flesh of my flesh, I will return with you always. Until nothingness becomes everything. I am the Bone Picker, dancer of death, transformer of life, the one who brings sex, the one who brings rebirth."

Shakbatina's spirit dances around the platform and Koi Chitto can hear her talking to him. "Dance with me, my husband, this is the dance of life and rebirth. This is my body. Pull away my remaining flesh. I charge you to get inside me. Release me now, so I may watch over our people. Dance the dance that releases me."



She smiles and entreats him to touch her corpse and tear the remaining flesh from her bones. "Hatak holitopa, beloved man, release me and dance the dance of life and death. Che pisa lauchi. I will see you."

Hearing her promise of return, Koi Chitto gathers his courage and tears Shakbatina's skull and spinal column from the rest of her bones. He holds them in both his hands high above his head and salutes the four directions. He believes when he finishes this spirit dance, and Shakbatina's bones are painted and placed in a box, he will not see her again for a long time. Until then he lets her fading scent engulf him. He closes his eyes. They are together, dancing the dance, both knowing that this is the ecstasy of life and rebirth. (SS, 106-7)

Like Shakhbatina's execution, this scene follows upon an extended tour through the mid-eighteenth century American landscape strewn with burning villages and charred bodies left in the wake of the encroaching English. As before, Howe inserts lengthy ethnographic passages explaining the meanings of the ritual about to unfold: "Koi Chitto believes, as all Choctaws believe, that the spirit is related to the body as perfume is to the rose" (SS, 105) or

“They also pierced her stomach and bladder in order for the bloating gases to escape to the wind. This was to announce to the animal world that a woman of the people was coming” (SS, 105). This time, she also aestheticizes and eroticizes the ceremony: Shakhbatina’s “small jawbone and teeth lie surrendering to the sun, like gleaming pearls...[her]smell was erotic” (105) and borrows from the language of Catholic liturgy: “Flesh of my flesh...This is my body” (SS, 107).

Yet again, as before, what rivets attention are the details that historically the settler culture rarely failed to associate with Indian savagery: the deafening rhythm of the drums, the trance-like state of the people performing the ceremony, Koi Chitto’s fingernails which have been cultivated into claws since his wife’s death, and ultimately his act of masturbating and ejaculating on his wife’s partly decayed body, just before he proceeds to tear her head from her spinal column and pick the remaining flesh from her bones—all related to us in unflinchingly meticulous detail. Howe abandons the reliance on the ethnographic and the rational and engineers instead readers’ visceral response to what historically has been designated by the settler culture as repugnant.

This insistence on the repugnant as an emblem of savage authenticity and a sustained attempt to evoke

revulsion are surprising. They appear to undermine all the autoethnographic efforts of Howe's writing. Shell Shaker is clearly invested in representing contemporary indigeneity. Howe's late-twentieth century Choctaws are modern people, often living outside of their nation, thoroughly embedded in settler culture and society: actresses, historians, newspaper editors, stock brokers, lawyers and so on. They argue over the meaning of contemporary indigeneity. They worry, for example, whether Indians who learn to play piano cease to be tribal, or dispute the ideological effects of Indian collaboration in the commodification of Indian culture. Shell Shaker is a reflection on contemporary indigeneity, one strung between the notions of tribalism, authenticity, and modernity. Why, then, would Howe find it necessary to resort to the most overused stereotypes of Indian savagery?

Howe is aware of the long and persistent tradition that Pearce named savagism. When she has a BBC reporter ask one of her Choctaw interviewees whether it would be "fair to say that [the] savage-style assassination was an ancient Choctaw ritual...?" (SS, 54), Howe cautions us that her lapses into stereotyped Indian imagery are not accidental. By having the reporter collapse Pearce's paradigm—"savage-style assassination"—with the multiculturalist interpretive

cop-out—"ancient Choctaw ritual"—she reiterates the interpretive problem regarding representation of the indigenous. Howe's reaching for the repugnant is a response to what Elizabeth Povinelli identified as the core dilemma that the politics of recognition poses for the indigenous: "how to present a form of difference that is maximally other than dominant society and minimally abrasive to dominant values."<sup>xxxii</sup> In Australia, for example, the aboriginal societies seeking restitution of their land title confront a particularly vicious circle, what Povinelli called the cunning of recognition. They are required to establish their distinctiveness and historical continuity through adherence to rituals which are often found to be repugnant by the settler society and prohibited by Australian law.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In the United States, at least for the nations that had signed historic treaties with the U.S. government and therefore are not compelled to seek federal recognition, the issue of claiming entitlements pertaining to their status as "domestic dependent nations" is simpler.<sup>xxxiiii</sup> All the courts demand to extend such entitlements is a tribal enrollment card testifying to a genealogical connection to members of historic nations. There's no requirement of proven continuity of traditional belief and practice.<sup>xxxv</sup>

And perhaps for that reason, the repugnant, that is, the ancient practices now prohibited by law or found reprehensible by a public sense of ethics, furnishes an opportunity for Howe to mount a critique of the very conditions pervading the late-twentieth and the early-twenty-first century multicultural democracies under which indigenous artists undertake self-representation. Depictions of the repugnant become a strategy allowing Howe to escape the integrative thrust of contemporary multiculturalism and to stake a claim to an identity that would be recognizable as other than that required by the settler society's political discourse. To put it still differently, Howe is after otherness *other* than, *different* from that demanded by multiculturalism. Her depictions of the repugnant forestall the "uncanny convergence of interests" between the ideological functions of indigenous self-representation and its project of decolonization and "the national and legal imaginary of multiculturalism,"<sup>xxxv</sup> one bent on the redemption of the contemporary multicultural democracies from their colonial past and on the continued mystification of their colonial present.

Howe proceeds in this effort by inviting both identification with and revulsion from aboriginal ritual practices; she elicits Allen's saming and unsaming

interpretive approaches simultaneously. She constantly alternates between disparate representational registers, so to speak. In the ethnographic narratives of customs which interrupt the twentieth-century mystery novel plotline, her detailed renditions of bone-picking ceremonies or ritual executions represent these potentially repugnant rituals in terms intelligible to Euroamerican readers. In the description of the bone-picking ceremony we get the scientific language of rationalism in the body preparation scene, the religious language of liturgy, the philosophical language of the sacred and sublime, the ethnographic language of social difference, and the aestheticizing language of beauty and eroticism. Howe offers plenty of opportunities to assimilate what's taking place, even deeply appreciate the terrifying-sublime-beauty of the ritual. At the same time, however, she thwarts such assimilation by giving unrelenting play to the gruesomeness, potential horror even, of the traditional Choctaw practices she describes. She forces her readers to visualize crushed skulls, half-decayed bodies coming apart in other people's hands, necrophilic sex, and so on. The novel takes time to explain Choctaw rituals and yet, paradoxically, withholds full comprehension from its readers as they recoil at what they are witnessing.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The

repugnant works to block our strategies of sympathy by cultural analogy, even as Howe reminds us that these strategies are available to us. She forces us to teeter on the precarious line between what we continue to perceive as savage and civilized, despite the now decades-long education in multiculturalist tolerance and appreciation of difference.

In a reversal of the multiculturalist truism about knowledge and toleration, Howe's depictions leave a strong residue of revulsion to elicit respect without full comprehension. One of the central premises of the multicultural experiment in North America—including official recognition of cultural difference, revamped school curricula and publishing programs, updated museums and other sites of national commemoration, and so on—is a belief that lack of knowledge about the racial and, later, cultural others of settler America was at the root of prejudice and resulting inequality. What multiculturalism stresses, then, is a program of tolerance through education. Patchen Markell calls this model cognitive recognition and explains that

unlike toleration, which can be grudging, and is consistent with utter ignorance of the people to whom

it is extended, recognition involves respecting people precisely in virtue of, not despite, who they are; and so proper relations of recognition must be founded on accurate mutual knowledge among the people and groups involved.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In a multicultural democracy, reading minority literature, viewing minority art, attending minority cultural festivals is good citizenship; "eating the other," to recall bell hooks' well-known formulation of this social dynamic,<sup>xxxviii</sup> is part and parcel of the larger integrative national project. One way to disable the appropriating mechanisms of multiculturalism, then, would be to forestall cognitive recognition by withholding information. Literary and cultural scholars have argued that withholding of ethnographic information, cultivation of secretiveness and enigmas—all strategies undertaken by minority artists<sup>xxxix</sup>—work to refuse the mainstream audience the mastery of cultural otherness through knowledge, a mastery we expect to obtain from ethnic literature and art. In Shell Shaker we have a different strategy. Howe jams the mechanisms of cognitive recognition not by withholding information but rather by flooding us with it. Like Shakhbatina with her final promise to tell us what really happened, Howe seems



to tease the reader, saying: I will tell you everything you might want to know, with meticulous detail and expert ethnographic gloss, and still you will not understand.

Because the semblance of knowledge is dangerous in the context of inequality historically sustained by discourses of aboriginal savagery, Howe insists on the refusal of understanding and potential identification on the part of mainstream readers. Her strategy of what I would like to call multicultural misrecognition resorts to representations of the repugnant to pre-empt identification through difference, multiculturalism's main tool of national integration. The repugnant serves to sustain a kind of epistemological gap that Howe produces throughout the novel, from its opening juxtaposition of historical and astronomic time as well as standard English and transliterated Choctaw, all the way to Shakhbatina's concluding explanation of the circumstances of Red MacAlester's murder, her attempt to tell us "what really happened" (SS, 222). This epistemological gap emerges because of our inability, or reluctance, to suspend disbelief, a reluctance subtended by Western rationalist logic—still the intellectual genealogy of the majority of contemporary American readers—which makes it difficult for us to really believe Shakhbatina's story. The novel's

final sentences remind us about that difficulty also in graphic ways: as Shakhbatina's voice retreats from English into transliterated Choctaw, this epistemological gap gains a visual expression and we are returned to the novel's opening sentence remembering that Choctaw language is the ultimate imagined horizon and the frame that holds the novel and its world together in ways that are not fully intelligible to the majority of the readers.

But Howe also knows that in the late-twentieth century North America readers have at their disposal interpretive strategies that can mitigate such an epistemological inadequacy too vividly felt in encounters with radically different systems of belief. Token recognition, swift translation into our own terms, and ensuing toleration of difference, which has been officially sanctioned as an undeniable social good, and as a necessary corollary to nationalist projects in contemporary multicultural democracies,<sup>x1</sup> are always available as interpretive strategies. Howe's depictions of the repugnant make these approaches to indigenous difference difficult, or, unsatisfactorily facile. The repugnant heightens the interpretive dilemma posed by the multiple solutions to the novel's detection plot. It makes us pause in our multicultural reading practice to consider its predicament

and ramifications. By making that pause possible, by jamming the literary exchange of recognition, it serves to forestall the easy consolidation of a transcendental national monoculturalism,<sup>xli</sup> an integrative logic according to which we are all the same because we are all different, operating behind the smokescreen of multiculturalism's celebration of difference. On this logic, difference is tokenized to such an extent that its performances are fully interchangeable—it does not matter if we read a novel by a Native American or African American writer, for example, as long as we are reading multiculturally, that is, extending recognition to our putative others and, as critics have charged, in the process re-asserting our sovereign agency as liberal subjects engaged in the process of national reformation. Howe wants us to know and understand enough to recognize the distinctiveness of historical and contemporary Choctaws, enough to see their spiritual universe and social organization as viable, even preferable, alternatives to settler society. But she wants us to understand just short of enough to comfortably cross the boundary into the Choctaw epistemological territory, just short of enough to appropriate and to celebrate, only to-knowingly-dismiss.

In effect, then, Howe's novel is an acute diagnosis of the contemporary multiculturalist reading practice and the representational predicament it poses for indigenous artists. In that sense it provides a literary counterpart to the efforts of contemporary American Indian visual artists, such as Jimmie Durham, Gerald MacMaster, Hulleah Tsinshjinnie, Jane Too-Quick-to-See Smith, and Sheley Niro, among many others, whose plastic and performance art has functioned to showcase the paradoxes of the North American multicultural exchanges of recognition taking place privately and publically between the settler and indigenous subjects and societies.

Shell Shaker is also, and perhaps more urgently, a plea for alternative strategies of apprehending difference in contemporary North America, whether we attempt it through reading literature or other private or public practices. To borrow from Patchen Markell again, Howe's novel extends an invitation to consider replacing the politics of recognition underlying our current multiculturalist interpretive strategies with the politics of acknowledgement. Through a meticulous critique of recognition from its formulation by Hegel all the way to the contemporary multiculturalism, in Bound by Recognition Markell has striven for a concept of recognition devoid of

the dynamic of appropriation and mastery. Inspired by Hannah Arendt's famous declaration that "if it is good to be recognized, it is better to be welcomed, precisely because this is something we can neither earn nor deserve,"<sup>xlii</sup> he called it the politics of acknowledgement and defined as a process of coming to terms with one's ontological condition of finitude and vulnerability in the intercourse with others on one hand, and, on the other, of facing relations of privilege and subordination structuring such encounters.

Howe's novel invites two kinds of acknowledgement. In refusing the readers interpretive mastery of the text, it facilitates the Markellian acknowledgement of one's ontological condition of finitude and of resulting limits on knowledge and understanding of the other. By redefining the interpretive ground of contemporary reading practices, Shell Shaker clears the space for the potential welcoming of the (indigenous) other despite freshly experienced limits of understanding, a welcoming that, unlike cognitive recognition, is not presumed on exacting the prize of transparency in exchange for acknowledgement. And yet further, in keeping with Howe's project of representing contemporary Choctaw indigeneity, the novel prompts an acknowledgement of contemporary indigenous nations, and the

contemporary versions of indigenous traditionalism in particular, as viable forms of governance and sociality, forms that already successfully constitute political reality in North America. In this later sense, Howe's writing offers an imaginative and instructive corollary to the efforts to recover and revitalize indigenous intellectual and political traditions at the heart of the contemporary indigenous intellectual work.

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<sup>i</sup> A winner of the 2002 Before the Columbus Award, along with a number of other prizes, Howe's novel earned enthusiastic praise (see Ken McCullough, "If you see Buddha at the Stomp Dance, Kill Him! The Bicameral World of LeAnne Howe's Shell

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Shaker," SAIL 15 (Summer 2003) and Jane Hafen, "Review of Shell Shaker by LeAnne Howe," Multicultural Review 11 (Summer 2002). But it has not acquired wide readership nor has it been subject to much scholarly scrutiny. As I write this essay, Patrice Hollrah's "Decolonizing the Choctaw," which appeared in the January 2005 issue of American Indian Quarterly and Bernadette Rigal-Cellard's "Plotting History: The Function of history in Native American Literature" included in Transatlantic Voices: Interpretations of Native North American Literatures (Lincoln, NE: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2007) are apparently the only two articles on the subject of Howe's novel.

<sup>ii</sup> LeAnne Howe, Shell Shaker (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2001), 1. All subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text as SS.

<sup>iii</sup> Who, among American literature enthusiasts, does not remember "Call me Ishmael"? Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York: Random House, 1950), 1.

<sup>iv</sup> Since there are only 10,000 speakers of Choctaw in the United States today, chances that readers of Shell Shaker will understand the opening sentence are indeed slim. The issue of preserving Choctaw as a living language is of great urgency to the contemporary Choctaws, who have

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expressed alarm at the low levels of Choctaw fluency among the nation's youngest people. For information on language revitalization efforts, see the nation's official website at [www.choctawnation.com](http://www.choctawnation.com). My reading thus presumes non-Choctaw speaking readership, both indigenous and non-native. For LeAnne Howe's comments on Choctaw language, see the appendix to the novel.

<sup>v</sup> American culture as a public commons shared by Howe's narrator and her readers features prominently in Shell Shaker. References to familiar events and cultural icons throughout the novel serve not only to locate Howe's twentieth-century Choctaw protagonists firmly in contemporary American reality, but also to mitigate, though not erase, the impact of many of her distancing strategies deployed in the sections of the novel dealing with the eighteenth century, from the use of transliterated Choctaw to uncompromising depictions of ancient rituals and systems of ethics that many contemporary readers, indigenous and non-native alike, may find unacceptable or incomprehensible.

<sup>vi</sup> Melville, Moby Dick, 1.

<sup>vii</sup> If we have any doubt about the hold this mode of representing ancient indigeneity—the gruesome authentic, we



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could call it—still has on the contemporary public, it's enough to consider Mel Gibson's latest version, Apocalypto.

<sup>viii</sup> Roy Harvey Pearce, Savagism and Civilization (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of California Press, 1988), xviii.

<sup>ix</sup> I extrapolate from the reading experience of my students in the course of teaching the novel during the years since its publication at a large private university in the American Northeast and a liberal arts college in the Southeast. An interesting study, which I cannot, unfortunately, undertake would be to examine readers' responses to the novel among traditional Choctaws, that is, readers potentially familiar with Choctaw language, history, and ancient philosophy and custom.

<sup>x</sup> Let me add here by way of clarification that violence in Shell Shaker is shocking not so much in itself—we see much worse daily, as one of this essay's readers pointed out, in American movie theaters and in mainstream tv programming—but in contrast to the novel's opening scene of peaceful harmony, and, more importantly, in the context of savagism as defined by Pearce. Mutilated bodies showcased weekly on CSI do not prompt us to conclusions about the savage and uncivilized nature of "Miami-an" society or culture; they

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merely suggest the extent of pathology of a few individual residents of the city, simultaneously putting into sharper relief the health of all the others. But the long discursive tradition of twinning representations of indigeneity with representations of brutality has resulted in a kind of knee-jerk interpretative behavior, so persuasively chronicled by Pearce. Should we find a blood-soaked eagle feather near any of those CSI victims, as Sherman Alexie imaginatively demonstrated in his 1996 novel Indian Killer (Warner Books, 1996), our forensic acumen would immediately be overtaken by the fear and thrill of Indian savagery.

<sup>xi</sup> On playing Indian, see Philip J. Deloria, Playing Indian (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1998) and Laura Browder, Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000); on salvage ethnography, see Michael Elliott, The Culture Concept; Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Brad Evans, Before Cultures; The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>xii</sup> SAIL listserv, November 3, 2003.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Examples of exoticized Indian difference are ample in American popular culture; it overflows with figurations of Allen's unsaming arguments. But their opposite might be less obvious to readers brought up on American westerns or New Age fads. So here's a good example of the contemporary saming arguments about the indigenous from The Earth Shall Weep by James Wilson: "Anthropologists point to the many similarities of belief, mythology and ceremony among different peoples as a proof that, far from being becalmed in a kind of changeless, timeless prehistory, Native American societies were open, vital and dynamic, pragmatically accepting cultural practices from each other. This appears to be borne out by the evidence of extensive trade networks, linking areas as far apart as present-day Mexico and Canada, which carried, presumably, not only materials and artifacts but people and ideas back and forth across the continent" (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>xiv</sup> Robert J. C. Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

<sup>xv</sup> For a seminal essay on the politics of recognition see Charles Taylor and Amy Gutman, Multiculturalism (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).

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<sup>xvi</sup> For definition of cultural citizenship see Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth. The Remaking of Social Analysis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) and "Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy" Cultural Anthropology 9 (August 1994): 402-411.

<sup>xvii</sup> I borrow this formulation from Patchen Markell's Bound by Recognition (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003).

<sup>xviii</sup> For an account of multiculturalism's collusion with western liberalism see Markell and Elizabeth Povinelli, The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2002); on multiculturalism as a cultural logic of global capitalism see Slavoj Zizek, "Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," NEW LEFT REVIEW 225 (September-October 1997): 28-51.

<sup>xix</sup> See Povinelli, Colin Samson, A Way of Life that Does not Exist: Canada and the Extinguishment of the Innu (London: Verso, 2003), Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Anti-Indianism in Modern America (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, ) and New Indians, Old Wars (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2007), Maureen Konkle, Writing Indian Nations (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. Of North Carolina Press, 2007), Chadwick Allen, Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity

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in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts (Durham, N.C.: Durham Univ. Press), the concluding chapter in particular.

<sup>xx</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People (London and New York, NY: Zed Books, 1999).

<sup>xxi</sup> For an overview of the major trends in literary criticism of American Indian literatures, see Shari Huhndorf, "Literature and the Politics of Native American Studies" PMLA 120 (October 2005): 1618-27. For most influential examples of contemporary nationalist criticism see Craig Womack, Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, Robert Warrior, and Lisa Brooks American Indian Literary Nationalism (Albuquerque, NM: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2006). For an overview of the nationalist American Indian criticism and its most recent example see Lisa Brooks, The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008) and Daniel Heath Justice Our Fire Survives the Storm: Cherokee Literary History (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006). For a critique of the nationalist Native American literary and cultural

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criticism, see Shari Huhndorf, "Picture Revolution: Transnationalism, American Studies, and the Politics of Contemporary Native Culture" American Quarterly 61 (June 2009): 359-381.

<sup>xxii</sup> Gordon Henry's The Light People, Diane Glancy's Pushing the Bear, Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer, and David Treuer's Translation of Dr. Appelles are notable examples of this approach along with the photographic work of Hulleah Tsinhajinnie and Shelley Niro, visual art of Gerald MacMaster, Jimmie Durham, and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, to offer just a few examples.

<sup>xxiii</sup> I borrow this definition of the repugnant from Elizabeth Povinelli's The Cunning of Recognition.

<sup>xxiv</sup> For a different account of Shell Shaker's doubled narrative structure see McCullough.

<sup>xxv</sup> In her 2007 novel Miko Kings (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), Howe creates a protagonist, Ezol Day, who develops the Choctaw theory of language, reality and time early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and returns to help the present day narrator understand that she too is "a body moving in Choctaw time" (221).

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<sup>xxvi</sup> On Crow Dog trial and Major Crimes Act see Francis Paul Prucha, The Great Father (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), 228-232.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For accounts of indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, and notions of justice see Anne Waters, ed., American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), Phillip J. Deloria and Neil Salisbury, eds., A Companion to American Indian History (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), Russell Thornton, ed., Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), Taiiike Alfred, Peace, Power, Righteousness (London & New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), Joel W. Martin, The Land Looks After Us: A History of Native American Religion (New York and London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), Clara Sue Kidwell et al. Native American Theology (Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001).

<sup>xxviii</sup> The strategy of another contemporary American Indian novel, Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer (Warner Books, 1996).

<sup>xxix</sup> For the ideological functions of cannibalism in accounts of early encounters with the indigenous peoples in America, see Shirley Samuels, Romances of the Republic (Oxford & New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

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<sup>xxx</sup> The material from the chapter including the bone-picking ceremony was the first section of the novel to see print, appearing as "Dance of the Dead" in Looking Glass (San Diego, Ca: San Diego Univ. Press, 1991) and as "Dance of the Dead: From The Bone Picker" in Fiction International 20 (Fall 1991).

<sup>xxxi</sup> Povinelli, 68.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Povinelli, 3.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> This legal formulation of the U.S. paternalism towards indigenous nation originates with the Marshal Court decisions in Georgia Cherokee cases in the 1830s and continues as a foundation of the federal Indian law at present. For the discussion of the Marshall Court decisions and the continued colonial nature of the U.S. Indian policy see Eric Cheyfitz, The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures in the United States since 1946 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> This is not the case for the nations that are seeking federal recognition. Their situation resembles that of the Australian Aborigines. See for example, James Clifford, "Identity in Mashpee," in The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 277-348 or the ongoing



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attempts of the Abenaki of Vermont to gain state (granted in 2007) and federal recognition.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Povinelli, 8.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> A necessary corollary to this account of the reading scene projected in Shell Shaker, one I do not have space to develop here, is an acknowledgment of its voyeuristic aspects.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Markell, 40.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in Sharlene Hesse-Biber, Christina Gilmartin, and Robin Lynderberg, eds. Feminist Approaches to Theory and Methodology (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 179-194.

<sup>xxxix</sup> For an account of a variety of such strategies, see, for example, Doris Sommer, Proceed With Caution (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999) and Mary Lawlor, Public Native America (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2006).

<sup>xl</sup> On collusion of multiculturalism with democratic nationalist projects see Povinelli, Markell, and Samson.

<sup>xli</sup> I borrow the phrase "transcendental national monoculturalism" from Povinelli, 29.

<sup>xlii</sup> Markell, 180.