

Red on Red

Native American Literary Separatism

Craig S. Womack

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INTRODUCTION

American Indian Literary Self-Determination

My purpose in writing *Red on Red* is to contribute, probably in a small way, toward opening up a dialogue among Creek people, specifically, and Native people, more generally, regarding what constitutes meaningful literary efforts. My attempts toward such a conversation, I hope, are more suggestive than prescriptive, more a working out of beginnings rather than endings, more gauged toward encouraging tribal people to talk about literature rather than dictating the terms of such a dialogue. My greatest wish is that tribes, and tribal members, will have an increasingly important role in evaluating tribal literatures. It goes without saying that I cannot speak for Creek people or anyone else; however, I do have the responsibility as a Creek-Cherokee critic to try to include Creek perspectives in my approaches to Native literature, especially given the wealth of Creek wisdom on the subject. This book arises out of the conviction that Native literature, and the criticism that surrounds it, needs to see more attention devoted to tribally specific concerns.

This study, unfortunately, does not include all Creek writers and artists. A number of people, such as Vincent Mendoza, Eddie Chuculate, Susanna Factor, Helen Chalakee Burgess, and others, deserve to be included. Jim Pepper's horn probably belongs in here somewhere. Creek author Thomas E. Moore, writing under the nom de plume William Harjo, continued his version of the Fus Fixico tradition in the 1930s for Oklahoma City and Tulsa newspapers in a regular Sunday feature entitled *Sour Sofke*. Stephanie Berryhill's wonderful series on original Creek allottees, in which she records the language of elders in all its beauty without trying

to shape it into “proper” English, is superlative work that has been appearing as a regular installment in the *Muskogee Nation News*. Durango Mendoza’s short story “Summer Water and Shirley” is a beautiful evocation of a Creek worldview that could be discussed in these pages.¹

Earlier writers offer further possibilities for study: Charles Gibson, a journalist and contemporary of Alexander Posey, wrote comic caricatures in *Red English*,² and G. W. Grayson recounted his Civil War experience in a very interesting autobiography.³ In the final analysis, limited by the demands of time and the strictures of publication in terms of length requirements, I made the trade-off between writing a “perfect” book and a book that actually appears in print.

Just as there are a number of realities that constitute Indian identity—rez, urban, full-blood, mixed-blood, language speakers, nonspeakers, gay, straight, and many other possibilities—there are also a number of legitimate approaches to analyzing Native literary production. Some of these, I will argue in this book, are more effective than others; nonetheless, *Red on Red* is merely a point on this spectrum, not the spectrum itself. I do not believe in a critical approach that preempts or cancels out all those that came before it. In fact, I will try to point out the ways in which tribal authors are influenced by those writers in their own tribes who preceeded them. Although we are in dire need of examination of new ways to engage in the discipline rather than unquestioned acceptance of what we have inherited under the rubric Native studies, we have nevertheless been passed down an important intellectual tradition built not only on the last thirty years or so, in terms of the rise of Native studies programs in universities, but on past generations of Native writers and thinkers.

Indian people have authored a lot of books, a history that reaches back to the 1770s in terms of writing in English, and hundreds of years before contact in terms of Mayan and Aztec pictoglyphic alphabets in which were written the vast libraries of Mesoamerica. As rich as oral tradition is, we also have a vast, and vastly understudied, written tradition. *Red on Red* assumes that attention to this Native-authored written tradition should prove valuable toward formulating literary theory. We have a large group of authors available for study, including Samson Occum, David Cusick, William Apess, George Copway, Elias Boudinot, John Rollins Ridge, Peter Dooyentate Clark, Elias Johnson, Sarah Winnemucca, William Warren, Alice Callahan, Simon Pokagon, and E. Pauline John-

son, as a mere sampling of Native people writing before the turn of the century. This does not even include those writing for periodicals and newspapers, or the early-twentieth-century writers who are often overlooked, as well. These are some of our ancestral voices, the pioneers, those who came before us whose writings paved the way for what Native authors can do today. Nineteenth-century Indian resistance did not merely take the form of plains warriors on horseback; Indian people authored books that often argued for Indian rights and criticized land theft. In addition to publishing books, many of these authors engaged in other rhetorical acts such as national speaking tours lobbying for Native rights. Their life stories, as well as their literary ideas, provide a useful study of the evolution of Native thought that has led up to contemporary notions of sovereignty and literature. Not nearly enough of this intellectual history has been brought to bear on a study of contemporary Native writings. Most approaches to the “Native American Literary Renaissance” have proceeded as if the Indian discovered the novel, the short story, and the poem only yesterday.

Because of these factors, I do not bother much in this book with the skepticism of postmodernism in relation to history. It is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven’t yet constructed it. We need, for example, to recover the nineteenth century, especially in terms of understanding what Native writers were up to during that time and how their struggles have evolved toward what Indian writers can say in print today, as well as the foundational principles they provide for an indigenous criticism. Abenaki poet Cheryl Savageau, in a personal correspondence that she gave me permission to publish, said this:

I never even encountered the word “essentialist” before coming to grad school, and then it was thrown at me like a dirty word, mostly because I wrote something about Native writers and the land in a paper.

... The same professor who labeled me “essentialist,” said there was no truth, no history, just lots of people’s viewpoints. I argued that some things actually did happen. That some versions of history are not just a point of view, but actual distortions and lies.

It is just now, when we are starting to tell our stories that suddenly there is no truth. It’s a big cop out as far as I’m concerned, a real political move by the mainstream to protect itself from the stories that Native people, African Americans, gay and lesbian folks... are telling. If everybody’s story is all of a sudden equally true, then there is no guilt, no

accountability, no need to change anything, no need for reparations, no arguments for sovereign nation status, and their positions of power are maintained.

... As I write this [statement about intellectuals who seem smart and have garnered a lot of power] I can hear my grandmother saying, "but smart and good aren't the same things." Such an essentialist, huh?

So, at least until we get our stories told, especially in terms of establishing a body of Native criticism in relation to nineteenth-century writings, postmodernism may have some limitations in regards to its applicability to Native scholarship. Encouragingly, things have started to change, and we see more and more Native scholars examining the nineteenth century and tracing developments in this century as well that lead up to the great outpouring of Indian literature we have seen recently. Osage writer Robert Warrior, I think, has provided us with incredibly important models in these regards, especially the way he traces out the intellectual underpinnings of the Indian movement through several decades this century in his work *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee*. His work will influence many of us in the years to come.

I would like to think, then, that I have not written *Red on Red* in a rejectionist mode but that, to the contrary, I seek to examine these histories to search for those ideas, articulated by Indian people, that best serve a contemporary critical framework. More specifically, in terms of a Creek national literature, the process has been based on the assumption that it is valuable to look toward Creek authors and their works to understand Creek writing. My argument is not that this is the *only* way to understand Creek writing but an important one given that literatures bear some kind of relationship to communities, both writing communities and the community of the primary culture, from which they originate.

In arguing, then, that one viable approach is to examine Creek authors to understand Creek texts, or, more generally, Native authors to understand Native textual production, this study assumes that there *is* such a thing as a Native perspective and that seeking it out is a worthwhile endeavor. I do not subscribe, in other words, to the notion that a Native perspective is, at best, problematic, if not impossible. I feel that Native perspectives have to do with allowing Indian people to speak for themselves, that is to say, with prioritizing Native voices. Those voices may vary in quality, but they rise out of a historical reality wherein Native

people have been excluded from discourse concerning their own cultures, and Indian people must be, ultimately will be, heard. Native viewpoints are important because, to quote Métis scholar and activist Howard Adams, the state, rather than Indians, controls "the mental means of production."⁴ Adams goes on to say:

Aboriginal consciousness cannot be a facade; it is an intrinsic or inner essence that lies somewhere between instinct and intuition, and it evolves from the humanness and spirituality of our collective, Aboriginal community. Without an indigenous consciousness, Indians, Métis, and Inuit peoples' only claim to Aboriginality is race and heritage. That is not enough to achieve true liberation. To accomplish self-determination, we need more than racial pride. We must have Aboriginal nationalism, an understanding of the state's capitalist ideology and its oppression, and, ultimately, a counter-consciousness.⁵

The idea of a Native consciousness interests me. The critics of Native literary nationalism have faulted Native specialists with a fundamental naïveté, claiming we argue that Native perspectives are pure, authoritative, uncontaminated by European influences. This misses the point. Native viewpoints are necessary because the "mental means of production" in regards to analyzing Indian cultures have been owned, almost exclusively, by non-Indians. Radical Native viewpoints, voices of difference rather than commonality, are called for to disrupt the powers of the literary status quo as well as the powers of the state—there is a link between thought and activism, surely. Such disruption does not come about by merely emphasizing that all things Native are, in reality, filtered through contact with Europe, that there is no "uncorrupted" Indian reality in this postcontact world we live in. This is an assimilationist ideology, a retreat into sameness and blending in.

To be sure, there is no one pure or authoritative act that constitutes Native literary criticism. We can only take such a notion so far, though. The postmodernists might laugh at claims of prioritizing insider status, questioning the very nature of what constitutes an insider and pointing out that no pure Creek, or Native, viewpoint exists, that Native and non-Native are constantly deconstructing each other. In terms of a reality check, however, we might remind ourselves that authenticity and insider and outsider status are, in fact, often discussed in Native communities, especially given the historical reality that outsiders have so often been the ones interpreting things Indian. Further, it seems fool-

hardy to me to abandon a search for the affirmation of a national literary identity simply to fall in line with the latest literary trend. The construction of such an identity reaffirms the real truth about our place in history — we are not mere victims but active agents in history, innovators of new ways, of Indian ways, of thinking and being and speaking and authoring in this world created by colonial contact.

Whatever we might say about the inherent problems concerning what constitutes an Indian viewpoint, we can still reasonably assert that such a viewpoint exists and has been silenced throughout U.S. history to the degree that it finally needs to be heard. Whatever one might argue about postmodern representation, there is the legal reality of tribal sovereignty, recognized by the U.S. Constitution and defined over the last 160 years by the Supreme Court, that affects the everyday lives of individuals and tribal nations and, therefore, has something to do with tribal literatures as well.

Take as an example earlier writers: let's say the novelists, autobiographers, and poets of the nineteenth century; as another group, the writers, such as Charles Eastman, Carlos Montezuma, and Gertrude Bonnin, associated with the Society of American Indians (SAI) in the early part of this century; then, finally, the Native novelists of the 1920s and 1930s. In many cases, these earlier writers were uncertain or hesitant about whether a Native voice, Native viewpoint, the narration of tribal life, or even a Native future was possible. In a short time, Native writing has come a long way toward legitimizing tribal experience as an appropriate subject for writing and, most importantly, toward assuming tribal life will continue in the future. The uncertainty of this earlier epoch seems a little like a first cousin to the ambiguity of this later postmodern criticism with its tendency to decenter everything, including the legitimacy of a Native perspective. This kind of criticism hearkens back to the earlier days of questioning whether a Native voice was even possible. No matter how slick the literary strategy that gets us there, this seems the wrong political move to me.

To take this one step further, the primary purpose of this study is not to argue for canonical inclusion or opening up Native literature to a broader audience. Efforts toward that end may be necessary for forming broader alliances, and others have taken up these issues in other books. This study takes a different tack. I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal lit-

eratures are the *tree*, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures. We are the canon. Native people have been on this continent at least thirty thousand years, and the stories tell us we have been here even longer than that, that we were set down by the Creator on this continent, that we originated here. For much of this time period, we have had literatures. Without Native American literature, there is no American canon. We should not allow ourselves, through the definitions we choose and the language we use, to ever assume we are outside the canon; we should not play along and confess to being a second-rate literature. Let Americanists struggle for their place in the canon. (Understand this is not an argument for inclusion — I am saying with all the bias I can muster that *our* American canon, the Native literary canon of the Americas, predates *their* American canon. I see them as two separate canons.)

Some Native American writers have made inclusionary arguments, claiming that they do not wish to be considered “just an Indian writer.” My problem is with the word “just,” and my question is, why not? When we use this kind of language, admitting lesser roles for ourselves, to what degree are we internalizing dominant culture racism? What's wrong with being an Indian writer? Why is that a diminished role among writers? Who made up these rules? Why should we want to adhere to them? Does a description of Faulkner as a Southern writer make him any less an important figure? Should his Nobel Prize be taken back because he was “just a Southern writer”? Just what is there to write about that is more important than Native authors testifying to surviving genocide and advocating sovereignty and survival? Here, I am endorsing Flannery O'Connor's well-known argument that the deeper an author delves into her own home country, the more universal and powerful her writing becomes.

The current state of Native literature is, at least partially, a colonized one. This colonization can be seen in many forms, but I'll mention a few examples from the academic end, since that is an arena I operate in frequently. One is the way Native literary specialists must present their work at Modern Language Association conferences (not a bad thing in and of itself); but as of yet, MLA has few, if any, ties to Indian communities. The degree to which such participation is voluntary for Native lit scholars is somewhat questionable, since he or she must go to MLA for job interviews and to present papers, or to other conferences equally

removed from Indian communities, to remain credible in his or her department and to get tenure if the scholar works, or ever wants to work, in an English department. Of course, MLA has begun to open up spaces for building a body of interest in important underdeveloped areas of Native literary inquiry, such as panels on nineteenth-century Native authors, so again, the institution, as monolithic as it is, is not to be totally discredited.

Another example of the colonized state of Native literature might be the way in which teaching jobs in the field are often advertised as “ethnic literature” slots or housed in “ethnic literature” departments, calling for academics who have broad comparative backgrounds rather than training in tribally specific cultures. Often, the candidate soon discovers, even jobs advertised as Native lit positions are really minority lit jobs. Having experience with a specific tribe often discredits the applicants for these positions. Departments often look for someone to do multicultural literature rather than Native studies; teach an Amy Tan novel now and then, throw in a little Ralph Ellison, a native author once in a while, and string it all together with the same damn Bakhtin quotes we’ve all heard a million times, reducing literary studies to little more than an English department version of the melting pot. Everybody loses — this is demeaning and destructive to Asian American studies, African American studies, Native American studies, and other minority literatures, a system that makes it difficult to hire those with close ties to the subject matter they teach. Fortunately, this is not always the case — a number of English departments, and even some of the ethnic literature departments, have hired people for very solid Native lit jobs where the candidate teaches only Native literature and develops a core program of Indian literature courses within the department — but enough of the multicultural recruiting exists to cause concern.

Another example of colonialism related to teaching and hiring might be the number of search committees for slots in Native literature with no Native people on the committee. As difficult as that is to justify from an Indian viewpoint, I know I have sat in many a job interview facing that very situation, answering questions posed by people who did not even know what to ask. Or what about this — Native studies programs with few or sometimes even no Native faculty? What would we say about African American studies or Chicano studies programs that were run without African Americans or Chicanos? The appropriation of Na-

tive issues by non-Natives is still acceptable in Native studies in ways that have long been unacceptable in regards to other minorities. Native scholars have faced variants of these stories in a thousand different ways, so there is no use in belaboring the point here, other than to say that surely we need to work toward creating a better space for Native literary studies than what we have inherited. Perhaps we need some retrospection at this point — a time of self-scrutiny as to where Native literature has been, where it is going, and to what degree Indian people should control how it gets there.

Although her comments reference written histories, perhaps Anna Lee Walters’s cogent remarks apply here as well:

Scholars or authorities from academia, from outside tribal societies, do not necessarily know tribal people best. There is an inherent right of tribal people to interpret events and time in their worlds according to their own aesthetics and values, as a component of American history, even when this interpretation is different from that of mainstream history.⁶ *

I might add, *especially* when the interpretation is different from that of the mainstream.

Finally, as Native writers, our own resistance to forming a substantive body of critical discussion surrounding our own literature and our willingness to turn the task over to outsiders, to “those who write criticism,” or “those who do theory,” may indicate the degree to which we have internalized colonization. We have gone too long thinking that storytellers cannot also talk about stories, that fiction writers and poets do one thing and critics and academics quite another. When I am back home (that is, in Indian communities in Oklahoma), I am always amazed when I encounter individuals who are encyclopedic in their knowledge of their own tribe — they sort of put me in a state of awe. Though often having no formal connection to the academy, they have read every book on their tribe; they can recall family tribal histories with a breadth that is astounding; they have an amazing sense of place and culture. I often wonder why *these* people are not doing literary criticism and writing book reviews. Of course, I know some of the reasons why they are not; nonetheless, I lament this loss and wish some of these folks, the real Indian experts, could have a more prominent place in the development of our literary approaches.

I was reminded of these things at Tahlequah recently, at a Native writers’ festival, after I heard what seemed like the umpteenth-million

poem (read by writers whining about being mixed-bloods) about nice, kindly Indian grandmothers and was having difficulty recognizing any of the Indian women I have known in these highly tamed, docile old ladies. Surely, there are other areas of discourse we can give our attention to while paying the appropriate kind of respect to ancestral voices. My point is this: I was dismayed at just how little formal discussion there was among Indian writers concerning who controls Indian literature, what is the purpose of Indian literature, what constitutes Native literatures of excellence, how such criteria should be determined, what set of ethical issues surrounds being a Native writer, and what role should tribes play in the whole process. What happens, it seems to me, is that when we abandon such a discussion, we give away all our power to a group of outsiders who then determine our aesthetics *for us*, and this happens without even a fight!

A more subtle form of the colonization of Native literature may occur as an aftereffect of a phenomenon that has been overall very positive. Literary critics have attached a great deal of relevance to the "Native American literary renaissance," the great outpouring of texts authored by Native writers over the last thirty years, noting, among other things, that Native people have taken up the pen to speak rather than be spoken for. To quote Vine Deloria's polemic title, "We talk, you listen." Native literature is ahead of the game, compared to other areas of Native studies, in that one can teach courses on Native lit, and now even on Native literary criticism, assigning as texts, books authored exclusively by Native people. This is much harder to do in history or anthropology or other areas of inquiry (though not impossible, and it seems to me that the minimal requirement for a Native studies course should be that every classroom text is written by a Native author; otherwise, how can we possibly lay claim to presenting Native perspectives?).

To continue in regards to the "renaissance" and this great outpouring of Native-authored texts, one overwhelming theme of the authors writing Native creative literature is that the cultures of which they are writing have not vanished. These works seek creative and evocative ways to argue that Native cultures continue to survive and evolve. Perhaps, however, some further questions need to be asked about this renaissance, given that so much ground has been gained in the areas of fiction, especially in the forms of short stories, novels, and poetry. In addition to the many positive aspects of this burgeoning literature, does

the frontier for fiction serve partially to deny Native peoples a place in the nonfictional world, in the arena where sovereignty, religious freedom, treaty rights, land claims, language retention, tribal education, and many other elements of culture continue to affect the daily destinies of tribes? Why haven't Native-written histories, or political analyses, for example, experienced a renaissance of the same magnitude?? Does the fictional work of the "renaissance" effectively present these Native social realities?

Overall, it seems to me, Native-written fictional stories about reconnection to Native culture enjoy a much wider popular appeal than nonfiction written by Indians concerning their tribe's land claims or politics. In terms of fiction itself, take as an example the glaring difference between the attention given to Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*, a novel about a warrior's reintegration into Laguna society, and the same author's *Almanac of the Dead*, a novel that posits that indigenous peoples throughout the Americas will take back their land. America loves Indian culture; America is much less enthusiastic about Indian land title.

Does the Native American literary renaissance, in addition to its many positive qualities, also play, in troubling ways, into the vanishing notion by allowing Native people to be fictional but not real? In this study, I will concentrate on the idea that Native literary aesthetics must be politicized and that autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty serve as useful literary concepts. Further, I wish to suggest that literature has something to add to the arena of Native political struggle. The attempt, then, will be to break down oppositions between the world of literature and the very real struggles of American Indian communities, arguing for both an intrinsic and extrinsic relationship between the two. I will seek a literary criticism that emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connections between literature and liberation struggles, and, finally, roots literature in land and culture. This criticism emphasizes unique Native worldviews and political realities, searches for differences as often as similarities, and attempts to find Native literature's place in Indian country, rather than Native literature's place in the canon.

What is called for, perhaps, is a kind of "Red Stick" literary criticism. I am referring to the group of traditionalist Creeks in 1813 to 1814 who, seeing their land invaded from all sides, with demands for land cessions increasing all the time, had to come up with a radically different

way of dealing with a threat that hitherto had not existed. What they had to develop was a vision that was not simply reactionary but the application of tradition in radical new ways with attention given to analysis, criticism, and political reflection. This anticolonial movement, fueled by religion and myth, was both influenced by Shawnee ally Tecumseh's apocalyptic teachings and rooted in the Creek square grounds. In Joel Martin's book on the Red Sticks, entitled *Sacred Revolt*, the author says, "Not only did they react and rebel against colonialism — they also innovated on tradition and initiated new ways of life within the world created by contact."⁸

There is a difference here that is vital. In looking at Creek literature, I want to emphasize "innovat[ion] on tradition" and "initiat[ion of] new ways of life" rather than "the world created by contact." European contact is a given; toward the purpose of contributing something toward Native studies, however, I am more interested in what can be innovated and initiated by Native people in analyzing their own cultures rather than deconstructing Native viewpoints and arguing for their European underpinnings or even concentrating on white atrocities and Indian victims. When cultural contact between Native Americans and Europeans has occurred throughout history, I am assuming that it is just as likely that things European are Indianized rather than the anthropological assumption that things Indian are always swallowed up by European culture. I reject, in other words, the supremacist notion that assimilation can only go in one direction, that white culture always overpowers Indian culture, that white is inherently more powerful than red, that Indian resistance has never occurred in such a fashion that things European have been radically subverted by Indians.

In terms of Native literature, I relate this to a more radical "Red Stick" approach — the assumption that Indian viewpoints cohere, that Indian resistance can be successful, that Native critical centers are possible, that working from within the nation, rather than looking toward the outside, is a legitimate way of examining literature, that subverting the literary status quo rather than being subverted by it constitutes a meaningful alternative.

I am not claiming that such a task is a particularly easy one, especially given that we have had five hundred years of being whipped into believing we have no intellectual history of our own making that might provide such frameworks for analysis, and we have critics who would

still have us believe this to be the case — that the ones we do have are not "pure enough" to be taken seriously as Indian, that Europe is as much the center of these writings as Native cultures.

If we take the Spanish book burnings of the Mayan codices in the 1540s as an example, we might describe this act of cultural genocide as one culture finding itself threatened by the profundity of the Other's literacy. These were illiteracy campaigns, sponsored by the group claiming to be the most literate. Symbolically, and literally, this campaign still continues; how many Native writers have commented on their long struggle simply to believe in the legitimacy of tribal voices in racist America, where they have been taught that such voices are not possible? In dominant culture, the term "Indian intellectual" is an oxymoron. Yet we have produced written intellectual texts for centuries, not to mention indigenous-based intellectual knowledge so much a part of the oral tradition.

And in contemporary literary criticism, it is still a struggle simply to legitimate Native approaches to Native texts, to say that it is OK for Indians to do it their own way. Indian critics, like any others, should be subject to critique, but sometimes the critique has approached the absurd when they have been accused of being atheoretical for wanting to examine their own cultures or for using their own authors as sources for building literary ideas, or when their ideas about looking at Native intellectual history have been characterized as a belief in the pristine quality of all things Indian. Rather than taking more time to present counterarguments against the ridiculous, I hope this study provides a positive example of why looking toward primary Native cultures, authors, and histories can enrich Native literature. If we Native critics share the fault of being "theoryless," my contention would be that this comes from not looking enough at our home cultures, not from looking too much at them. Naturally, this process does not call for abandoning literary theory, and if one examines the work of most Native critics, one will find that few of us have anyway.

Even postcolonial approaches, with so much emphasis on how the settler culture views the other, largely miss an incredibly important point: how do Indians view Indians? Literature departments have done little to answer this question, and this area of history we must dig up ourselves. Let me give a concrete example of Indian literary history not being uncovered by postcolonial or other approaches. In its thirty-year

history, the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) at Santa Fe, New Mexico, has turned out a tremendous number of Native artists, more than three hundred. The way art was taught at IAIA, especially from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, and the movements that have come out of this school (such as Native abstractionism) have had a tremendous influence on Native poetry and, to a lesser extent, Native fiction. Yet none of this literary history has been uncovered by those practicing conventional Native literary criticism. This is a missed opportunity, and our understanding of contemporary Native literature suffers as a result.

Native literature, and Native literary criticism, written by Native authors, is part of sovereignty: Indian people exercising the right to present images of themselves and to discuss those images. Tribes recognizing their own extant literatures, writing new ones, and asserting the right to explicate them constitute a move toward nationhood. While this literary aspect of sovereignty is not the same thing as the political status of Native nations, the two are, nonetheless, interdependent. A key component of nationhood is a people's idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation and gives sovereignty a meaning that is defined within the tribe rather than by external sources.

The point that Elizabeth Cook-Lynn makes so well is that there *already* exists a Native literary critical school:

The second worry for the nativist is the question of whether or not opening up the American literary canon to include native literary traditions and contemporary works will have much relevance, given its own set of unique aims — the interest in establishing the myths and metaphors of sovereign nationalism; the places, the mythological beings, the genre structures and plots of the oral traditions; the wars and war leaders, the treaties and accords with other nations as the so-called gold standard against which everything can be judged. These are the elements of nationalism which have always fueled the literary canon of tribal peoples and their literary lives. In my own tribal literary traditions, there is a fairly long list of Dakota/Lakota writers and storytellers as well as a huge body of ritual and ceremony against which everything may be compared. Reference to the body of nationalistic myths, legends, metaphors, symbols, historical persons and events, writers and their writings must form the basis of the critical discourse that functions in the name of the people; the presence of the Indian nation as cultural force a matter of principle.⁹

Tribal authors have the right, as well as the responsibility, to explore these national literary tendencies in order to pass on the traditions of their respective tribal nations to the next generation. If Indian writers write only about tribes other than their own, and if critics fail to look at Native philosophies and philosophers in developing their criticism, what happens to the next generation in their own communities back home? What have we left for them? Perhaps it is time to really dig in, to entrench ourselves with what we have inherited from our home cultures.

Standing Rock Lakota scholar Kelly Morgan makes an impassioned plea for national literatures. She argues that imaginative literature — fiction and poetry — is a more accurate gauge of cultural realities than the ethnographic, anthropological, and historical record; that in fact, given the absence of Lakota women at all in non-Indian accounts (except for women as docile drudges), the imaginative writings of Lakota women are vital. Literature, Morgan posits, contributes to Lakota cultural survival because it extends knowledge of cultural practices to future generations. In comparison to rigid non-Indian “scientific” depictions, literature is unfixed, ever growing and evolving, and influenced by “the diversity of Lakota people themselves.”¹⁰ As an example, Morgan states that traditional Lakota oral stories, even in their written forms, can teach Lakotas valuable kinship roles that have been a part of Lakota worldviews for centuries. She goes on to say that these texts have the potential to aid in the cultural survival of the people, especially for young people who have suffered a loss of self-esteem from racism and stereotypical dominant culture depictions of Indians. One way this loss of identity occurs is when Native children have replaced what they have learned at home with external definitions of Indianness from fixed anthropological, ethnographic, and historical texts, or portrayals from popular culture. Morgan believes that the primary audience for Lakota texts are Lakota people themselves, and she sees the written word as a vehicle for carrying forward oral stories. This kind of nation building, I believe, is vital to the authorship and critical response of the future.

To legitimize a space for national critical studies and native intellectual history, scholars of Native literature need to break down the oppositional thinking that separates orality and literacy wherein the oral constitutes authentic culture and the written contaminated culture. The aforementioned Mayan codices, written in Mayan pictographic symbols before contact, and in Mayan in the Latin alphabet afterward, are

a fascinating study in these regards because recent scholarship has shown that these books were used as a *complement* of oral tradition rather than a *replacement*.¹¹ The books were recited and even read in precontact schools to educate the young in the oral tradition.

The idea, then, of books as a valid means of passing on vital cultural information is an ancient one, consistent with the oral tradition itself in the case of the Mayans. This example opens up a space for Native intellectual discussion, in the form of textual production, in contact, not competition, with the oral tradition. Surely, in today's literate society, this represents one hope for Native people in terms of passing on culture. In these regards, the Mayan codices are also interesting in terms of their national literary character; the texts taught Mayans what it meant to be Mayan — their history, their cosmogony, the evolution of their political system, and so on.

Another aspect of Native literatures that needs to be discussed in terms of their national character is their mimetic function, the link between literature and social realities that is a natural part of the oral tradition. Many authors have discussed the pragmatic nature of literatures in oral traditions where a song, poem, or chant is used toward utilitarian ends such as fostering successful hunting relationships, warding off evil, germinating crops, curing illnesses, going through the day with respectful thoughts and actions, and so on. In a classroom essay, Kirk Zebolsky, one of my Native literature students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, made an interesting comment on the way Native literatures continue to link themselves with Native politics, a contemporary form of this unique mimesis:

Implicit in this description of the U.S. as "stolen" is the presumption that parts or all of it should be returned. Thus Louis and other Native authors have an important role in dialogue about Native land rights. Perhaps they have the most important role in terms of getting across the point that indigenous land rights have been grossly violated. American Indian writers are assuming a unique role — being the primary and most articulate voices in calling for major political changes and property transfers in the country which is the world's only superpower and the most militarily powerful nation in history.¹²

Native artistry is not pure aesthetics, or art for art's sake: as often as not Indian writers are trying to *invoke* as much as *evoke*. The idea behind ceremonial chant is that language, spoken in the appropriate ritual con-

texts, will actually cause a change in the physical universe. This element exists in contemporary Native writing and must be continuously explored in building up a national body of literature and criticism — language as invocation that will upset the balance of power, even to the point, as Zebolsky argues, where stories will be preeminent factors in land redress.

The early part of this book assumes that the political history of the Creek Nation, the ceremonies that form the ritual knowledge of the tribe, and the oral tradition, are central to an understanding of Creek literature. Chapter 1, "The Creek Nation," historicizes Creek government, beginning with the origin story, and describes the most important event of the Muskogean religious calendar, the Green Corn ceremony. Although individual Creeks, like members of other tribes, vary in terms of their degree of acculturation, I do not know of any Creek writers who have never witnessed the night dances between the arbors, and I argue that the sound of shells shaking and the responsorial rhythms of Creek singing show up in Creek literature.

Chapter 2, "Reading the Oral Tradition for Nationalist Themes: Beyond Ethnography," seeks to politicize the oral tradition and argue for a deeper investigation of narratives that goes beyond the simple structural categories of creation, hero, journey, monster slayer, and so on, in which the stories most frequently get cast. The chapter seeks to point out that nationhood and sovereignty are not European constructs but that Creeks had their version of such notions in terms of actual political practice as well as embodied in their literature. This is where the structural categories become problematic — they separate the stories from their political contexts. To demonstrate this interdependency of politics and literature, I use as an example Creek elder Phillip Deere's contemporary telling of the Muskogean origin story, and the political gloss he includes throughout his telling. The last part of the chapter deals with the ramifications of opening up the oral tradition to political readings.

Chapter 3, "In the Storyway," features Creek elder Linda Alexander's telling of the story of how turtle got his shell busted. Alexander is an extraordinarily talented word weaver, as well as a great shell shaker at the grounds, and an elder respected for her knowledge and many abilities. The turtle story is referenced throughout this book, and I have heard Linda tell it many times. I feel as if her turtle story is one of the factors that keeps this book from busting up, that has sung the words

back together and, at times, has sung my own life into place. I include Linda's version in both Creek and English, as well as her comments and interpretation of the story. I attempt an analysis of the story myself, especially as part of a national body of literature.

Next I discuss a Creek writer who marks an important, if thorny, beginning point, in chapter 4, titled "Alice Callahan's *Wynema: A Fledgling Attempt*." Alice Callahan is the first Native woman to write a novel, a work, as it happens, quite problematic in its depiction of Creeks. Callahan's novel, nonetheless, causes us to ask important questions: What should a Creek novel do? What are some reasonable demands on Creek writers and their writings?

In chapter 5, I take up a discussion of a writer who may be one of the most effective Native literary artists in terms of using writing to address national concerns given the immediacy of the dangers his nation faced and his degree of involvement in response to perhaps the greatest threat to Creek nationhood in Creek history—the dissolution of tribal government under the Dawes Act. In "Fus Fixico: A Literary Voice against the Extinction of Tribal Government," I argue that the primary purpose of the Fus Fixico letters was not satire, caricature, or dialect writing but the thwarting of the Oklahoma statehood interests. Further, Posey is used as an example of the complexity of the Creek world, one that, like any other nation, contains a diverse population. Posey's life demonstrates that reductive categories like "assimilationist" or "traditionalist" are often more complicated than they seem.

In chapter 6, entitled "Louis Oliver: Searching for a Creek Intellectual Center," I argue that a central feature of Oliver's creative work is an intense journey toward understanding what it means to be a Creek intellectual. Similar to Phillip Deere, the Creek elder discussed in chapter 2, who glosses his creation account with political commentary, Oliver glosses his stories as well, but with philosophical reflection. Oliver's singular contribution to Creek intellectualism is that he places this pursuit of knowledge in the context of ethical questions involving the responsibilities of writers to their cultures and to the community of Native writers, past and present.

One of the obvious areas of inquiry in Native studies in the future will have to be the effect of pan-tribalism on Native cultures, from boarding schools to the urban demography of Native populations, to the powwow circuit, to beginning global alliances and awareness among in-

igenous populations worldwide, to name a few examples (not that these few phenomena mark the beginning and ending of pan-tribalism, but they seem like cogent ones). How does a study such as this, with its intense concentration on tribal specificity, deal with pan-tribalism? To answer this question, I look at a Muskogee poet whose work is solidly rooted in both Oklahoma Creek Indian realities and national, and international, indigenous perspectives. "Joy Harjo: Creek Writer from the End of the Twentieth Century" explains how Harjo's Creek nationalism strengthens, rather than weakens, her ability to take on pan-tribal concerns.

The final chapter may seem like a strange departure in that, in a study devoted to Creeks, I shift to a Cherokee writer, yet I feel the inclusion of Lynn Rollie Riggs an important one because of the way in which Riggs formulated actual written theories about Oklahoma. Further, inquiry into Riggs's life and writings opens up Native studies to the subject of sexual orientation, a topic long overdue in our field given the tremendous contributions of Native gays and lesbians to Native cultures and Native literatures. The chapter also attempts to set a record for the longest and most obnoxious title in the book: "Lynn Riggs as Code Talker: Toward a Queer Oklahomo Theory and the Radicalization of Native American Studies." I do a reading of Riggs's play *The Cherokee Night* that some may feel approaches the bizarre, but nonetheless, I hope to point out that the troubling phenomena of many writers earlier this century, endorsing vanishing viewpoints and tragic portrayals of Indians, is wrapped up in a complicated set of historical and personal factors. For Riggs, this had to do with the incredibly oppressive larger social milieu an Indian gay guy faced in the thirties, and I hope to show that Riggs's portrayal of doomed and tragic Cherokees has everything to do with his closeted condition. As a Native gay guy who, like Riggs, has walked the halls of the English Department of the University of Oklahoma, taught freshman composition classes there, demonstrated the same old mixed-blood proclivity for picking up a guitar and warbling out cowboy songs, and felt both the beauty and terror of life in Oklahoma, sometimes having to flee from home to survive, I must say that reading Riggs's biography was a spiritual unfolding for me. Riggs too is an ancestral voice, his an emergence story that needs to be brought out into the light so that the people can "come out" into the larger landscape, provided with an example through imagining and historicizing

Riggs's struggle. Or instead of the white gay notion of "coming out," we might coin Beth Brant's phrasing in her beautiful book *Writing as Witness* and say that such stories might teach us how to "present ourselves" to our communities as whole persons.¹³

If anything, I hope this study encourages young Creek writers to keep writing; to trust their own voices; to tell the stories of family, home, and nation; and to know the history of those who told such stories before us.

What identifies a Creek work, in my mind, in addition to its authorship by a Creek person, is the depiction of geographically specific Creek landscape and the language and stories that are born out of that landscape. The character Hotgun steps out of Creek literary history—that is, out of the letters of Alexander Posey published in the *Eufaula Indian Journal* just before Oklahoma statehood and into the letters written by Jim Chibbo to his buddy Hotgun in the pages of this book, *Red on Red*. Jim Chibbo says he done this because he wants to convey to his readers what it feels like in his little part of the world that is his home, his nation. In his past experience, he has found that reading literary criticism has done little, if anything, to spark that feeling. He's not satisfied with explicating Creek texts if he has never tried his hand at creating anything Creek himself. He wants you to drive around McIntosh County and take a look-see for yourself, maybe get out, walk a spell, and watch a couple turtles slip off their sunny spots on half-submerged logs in the Canadian River and plop down into the brown swirling water; or you might even consider stopping inside Keck's grocery store in Weleetka and see if they tell you the story of that awful murder that occurred there when my dad was a boy.

Pardon me if I jump out of the end row into a new furrow, but I gone on to explain to Hotgun and Jim that the university is about the meanest business any fool could ever find himself in. After I laid it all out, and they kind of studied it for a spell, Hotgun told me that he'd been through most everything, but that if he were ever to become a university professor, he wanted me to beat him over the head with a hickory ballstick and put him out of his misery. To avoid the nastiness of a profession that is just pitiful mean, Jim tries to tell a few funny stories here and again to consider the most serious critical issues in the book without becoming mean hisself. Him and Hotgun found that they could get to the heart of matters quicker by funning each other than by writing

literary criticism, and they could use jokes instead of taking up the hickory stick themselves as a bloody cudgel on everybody who disagrees with them. Hotgun said they might reconsider, though, in the case of one or two individuals who been asking for a whupping, but that they was very special exceptions.

What's more, they suspicioned that what happened was that Creek writers read other Creek writers, and anyhow, if they don't, they ought to, and that Creek written tradition is passed on as well as oral tradition. They come up with the notion that the best way of going about all this was to get Stijaati Thlaako, Big Man, and Rabbit together to talk to some of these Creek authors and trace the history of how one influences the other, and Jim and him would write back and report on what their friends had to say about all this. They felt that as Creek critics, or just Creeks who talk a lot, if they abandoned their role as storytellers, something very significant would be missing from their criticism. They didn't want merely to write a book *about* Creek literature; they wanted to write a Creek book.

Hotgun and Jim was had remind me on the same occasion of the special symbolism of the Fus Fixico letters—they represent Indians addressing other Indians because they were published inside Indian Territory, inside the Creek Nation, and in the *Eufaula Indian Journal*, which was an Indian newspaper at the time. If we take a look at the nineteenth century, we might note two facts: lots of whites spoke on behalf of Indians, and when Indians did author their own books, they had to address a white audience, since they were writing in English, and their people, for the most part, couldn't read them. Those days are over. Educating white folks about Indians can only be taken so far. Hotgun claims it's like teaching hogs to sing: it wastes your time and only frustrates the hog. Now it's time to direct our literary efforts toward our own folks, and personal letters symbolize insider efforts, speaking a special language recognized by a particular community. Posey himself resisted having his letters published outside of Indian Territory because he was trying to get things stirred up *within* the territory, among the tribes, as will be discussed further in chapter 5.

Finally, Jim and Hotgun just clean didn't cotton to reading another dang work on *House Made of Dawn*, *Love Medicine*, *Ceremony*, *Winter in the Blood*, and *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*, even though they're great admirers of all those novels. Most of all they didn't care a lick to

hear critics talk about how these authors and their characters were a bunch of mongrelized mixed-bloods who weren't sure if they were Indians as they muddled about in some kind of hybridized culture, serving as the footpath between whites and Indians.

I tell you what's the truth: by and large, they just wanted to write something that was *different* and something that was fun. They tried their best to do it right, but if they done it wrong, then they hope you'll write your book too and improve on the overall situation.

*Mado,
Craig*

Dear Hotgun:

While Stijaati Thlaako drag ass like squared-up mule on last furrow and Big Man bawl loud as a weaned calf from his recliner OU football game and Rabbit pretend like he cain't find no clean shirt and mebeso they wives hollering them out to they Indian cars to get going to the gospel singing at Indian Methodist Church just south of Sapulpa where Rabbit's cousin Yahola Choffee is master of ceremonies for the evening, Chebon all out of breath from writing down his long-winded literary introduction take more time than getting them guys loaded up for singing hymns. They was to go a whole lot easier if it was catfish fry with white filet, beans, and coleslaw like last week, and Chebon's work go a whole lot easier if he didn't have to write the whole book before he was to understand what it was about so he could go back to make up the introduction.

Hymn singing went on forty pages too long, like most chapters in Chebon's book, and Rabbit poke his paw a little bit over the edge of the pew, turn it over palm up, and let his Zippo flash at Stijaati in row behind him. This Indian sign language for time to slip out and smoke during the next letup when old ladies start rustling pages to find next song. Big Man done sitting in back to make his way out first chance he get.

They slip behind one of the camping-in houses and light up, breathing deep and sighing along with the cicadas singing in the trees who sound purtier to them than the second verse of "Cesus Momis Apeyakathles." And that's purty.

Or mebeso it'd be more like what with the woods surrounding them, and the cicadas stuttering in the wet air, it sounded out kindy like twin fiddles on "Maiden's prayer" kin to what Stijaati was heard play in Johnny Lee Will's music shop in Tulsa.

Meanwhile, out back of the church house, Rabbit was had exhale smoke and say, "The Surgeon General has determined that hymn singing causes lung cancer in Indian men."

Stijaati was ask, "Isn't that Jimmy Johnny's Zippo?" He suspicioned Rabbit might was got holt of Jimmy's lighter, and he notice the small circle of *red earth* Rabbit is standing in. "That thing sure gets around."

Stijaati holds up his red-and-white package of Marlboros and was say, "How's this pack of cigarettes like Chebon's book?"

Big Man wonder, "Is this a quiz?"

Rabbit was say, "It turns your fingers yellow?"

Stijaati actually asking oratorical question, wants to lecture. "It ain't," he answers hisself, "Chebon's book about the Red, not the white."

Rabbit was exclaim, "I love trick questions!"

Big Man was say, "Ain't that a little naive? A Red book?"

Rabbit was answer, "Only if you believe white always swallows up Red. I think Red stays Red, most ever time, even throwed in with white. Especially around white. It stands out more."

Stijaati ignores interruptions and shakes out his tail feathers and swells up, ready now for sure. "They's a literary critic who was quote he got into Native literature on account of bring it up to a higher level, from its 'virtually pre-technological level of sophistication,' he says."

Rabbit was got a wild onion showing on his front tooth when he talk and say, "I believe Chebon is in it to bring Native literature down to a lower level."

Stijaati snubs out his cigarette. "Nothing wrong with the Lower World," he mumbles, as he takes his cowboy hat back off and wanders slowly toward the church house, listening to the hymns make their way toward the woods.

Sincerely,
Jim Chibbo

CHAPTER ONE

The Creek Nation

Contrary to *The Road to Disappearance*, the title of one of the most comprehensive books about Creek history, the Creeks have anything but disappeared. As of 1994, members of the Oklahoma Creek Nation numbered 36,695, and they make up a sovereign country existing within the borders of the United States and covering ten counties in East Central Oklahoma. Their Alabama kinfolk around Poarch, Alabama, also a federally recognized nation, descendants of Creeks who escaped removal from their homelands in the 1830s, number 2,106. In addition, there are a number of state-recognized bands of Creeks in Alabama and Florida.¹ Taking into account the first census after Indian Removal in 1859, which enumerated Oklahoma Creeks at 13,537,² a decrease of as much as half the population of the nation due to the forced removal, today's numbers are amazing. The size of the nation has tripled compared to its population shortly after removal and is even double the number it was before Creeks were forced from Alabama. Oklahoma Creeks, owing to their larger numbers, have perhaps remained more traditional than their Alabama relatives, still maintaining around eighteen of their ceremonial grounds, where they continue to practice the stomp dance religion and retain the Creek language that many adults still speak. In recent years, however, there has been much contact between Oklahoma and Alabama Creeks, Oklahomans making trips to Alabama to teach their relatives stories, language, stickball, and stomp dancing.

Because I believe that one approach to Native literatures should be a study of the primary culture that produces them (for instance, learning