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“Narrative Truth and Historical Identity”: Identifying as Choctaw and Irish in LeAnne Howe’s novel *Shell Shaker*

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“Narrative Truth and Historical Identity” examines the complex relationship between poststructuralism, marginalization, language empowerment, and constructions of historical knowledge and truth. Employing the ideologies of both Derrida and Foucault, the article proposes and outlines the concept of literary discourse communities as one means of negotiating truth in a culturally diverse society. The article then provides an example of the potential for discourse and knowledge/truth construction through literary discourse communities by applying the concept to an interpretation of Choctaw author LeAnne Howe’s novel, Shell Shaker.

This article explores the disconnect between the goals of poststructuralist Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction —both those goals stated, and by extension, those goals associated through language signification —and the inadvertent consequences often experienced by groups deconstruction would theoretically empower through language. After considering essentialist criticism which asserts that identity-based discourses function in opposition to deconstruction, the article suggests a more inclusive theory for the interpretation of identity construction discourses, one ironically based on combined ideologies of Derrida and Foucault, that allows for the negotiation of knowledge and truth through what is termed literary discourse communities. The article then provides an example of the interpretive potential for communication, knowledge, and negotiated truth available through these literary discourse communities.

Derrida advocates the deconstruction and perpetual reconstruction of privilege in language. In theory, this concept of deconstruction — particularly as Derrida describes it in his essay “Et Cetera” — appears to facilitate ideologies of ultimate equality, as concepts such as truth and identity are constructed to be perpetually questionable, disallowing stereotyping and assigning of identity by those who once enjoyed the privileged status in the dichotomy. Theoretically, such deconstructions apply universally, as in *Spectres of Marx* (1994), in which Derrida establishes society as increasingly and ultimately global in realms that ultimately include identity. Yet, if Derrida’s principles have indeed led to an environment where discourse is globally equalized, why then does it appear — as evidenced in election results and public rhetoric from the United Kingdom, parts of Europe, and the United States — that portions of society continue to feel disenfranchised and respond to their perception of marginalization by regressing to more polarized attitudes and political positions?

One explanation for increasingly polarized populations within society may be the perception of a denial to open discourse experienced by marginalized discourse communities whose members are united by ideologies or cultural perspectives. Identification with a particular discourse community may be based on a wide range of experiences, values, or perspectives; however, members of these

marginalized discourse communities are united in the perception that their right to collectively express their understanding of truth, to choose an identity, and to be heard as a collective political voice from the perspective of that chosen identity is being dismissed. These marginalized discourse communities maintain that, although unintended by Derrida, linguistic privilege deconstruction has also by extension been employed at times to negate the experiential reality that language signifies. Thus, in direct contrast with the expected outcomes of deconstruction, these groups perceive powerful agents within societies as creating global, master narratives. These master narratives propose the concept of a global society that has, or at least *should* have, moved beyond the experiences and subsequent issues that these groups of individuals believe remain unaddressed and of paramount concern.

At times, these groups are dismissively and erroneously labelled essentialist, a concept that is in part proposed in juxtaposition to deconstruction. This label derisively designates one who believes in an inherent, unchanging nature in the face of the perpetual deconstruction of language and the identities signified by that language. Describing the consequences of the essentialist label in the era of unquestioned poststructuralist understandings and the subsequent dismissal of chosen identity discourse in *Postmodern Blackness*, African American scholar bell hooks maintains that “the overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstances” (2481). Expressing their frustration, members of these alienated groups, including the Native American group explored in this article, contend that the media, government, and academia as a whole often deny the validity of the language through which they express identity and thus their voice for political power and self-determination, frequently simply by labelling them essentialist.

Specifically addressing the Native American struggle against the characterization of essentialist, in his 2008 introduction to *Reasoning Together*, Creek-Cherokee scholar Craig Womack asserts that “the most consistent and damaging critique against Native intellectuals involves labeling them as ‘essentialists,’” a classification based on a Native desire to be heard from the perspective of Native discourse communities (7). Professor of Anthropology Thomas E. Sheridan confirms that there remains a continuing struggle between those scholars who would dismiss Native discourse community perspectives as essentialist and those who strive to “embrace both rigorous scholarship and indigenous perspectives” (71). In *Strategic Essentialism and the Future of Ethnohistory in North America*, Sheridan reviews two scholarly texts which “follow their own scripts” rather than “engaging in a dialogue” when discussing the value of Native participation in discourses concerning them. Sheridan concludes that “challenges and tensions,” both “theoretical and methodological” at this particular postmodern juncture” continue in gaining recognition for what I designate Native discourse communities (64). Further, Native Americans are not alone in the academic struggle for discourse community recognition. For example, Chicana scholars Andaluza, Mohanty, and Moya face similar struggles for discourse community recognition within academia. These are just a few of the many groups who currently struggle to collectively express themselves.

Functionally, then, by employing the label of essentialism, critics deny the validity of cultural or racial group-based identity discourse, resulting in a questioning of the justification for certain

individuals to legitimately act as a whole to resist various forms of subjugation, whether such subjugation arises through government, law enforcement, or the continued colonial practices of society in general. In this way, the poststructuralist claim to the conception of an individual otherness has been appropriated to actually facilitate the continuation of long-established social and political power, leaving those who continue to be marginalized, such as Native American tribes, without a cohesive discourse through which to establish cultural knowledge and political resistance to social injustice and continued practices of colonialism.

One avenue for establishing an empowered, critical discourse that can be employed in several essential ways is through the recognition of what this study will term literary discourse communities. These literary discourse communities can be used as a catalyst toward a reconciliatory acknowledgment of historical realities. They can also facilitate contemporary ways of creating knowledge. Finally, these literary discourse communities can provide a venue through which a movement toward social justice may be established.

First, one may consider the existence and formation of these literary discourse communities as originating from the perspective of ideological communities in which there is common intention, interpretation, social context, and historical circumstances shared by identifying members with substantially similar knowledge and ideologies. Next, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault asserts that “the question posed by language analysis . . . is always according to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made?” (27). This question is a primary consideration in the establishment of a literary discourse community as inclusion of texts and interpretive methodologies are to be determined through adherence to common rules, goals, and cultural knowledge established by the discourse community. Further, employing these discourse-specific rules and knowledge will be essential to explication of works originating within literary discourse communities if the communicative goal of language is to be achieved. Speaking to the analysis of discursive language, in our case literary discourse communities, Foucault subscribes to this premise for interpretation, stating that in considering texts we must “describe their interconnexion and account for the unitary forms under which they are presented: the identity and persistence of themes” (35). Foucault’s criteria can be accomplished by employing the concept of literary discourse communities.

Based on the above definition and criteria for a literary discourse community, for the remainder of this article, I will consider literature written by specific peoples within one Native American literary discourse community. This literature represents common experiences of marginalization, historical erasure, and/or colonization, and must be interpreted employing the interpretive knowledge and practices of this particular literary discourse community in order for communication of ideas to occur. In no way, however, does the accepted existence of this or any Native literary discourse community based on lived historical experiences and social conditions suggest static group identities, nor is membership racially or culturally assumed. Rather, I will consider individuals who have chosen to identify with a particular discourse community based on the rules of that community.

When analysing literature as a source of historical, social, and cultural experience and as a form of persuasive discourse, literature from a particular discourse community can best be understood by employing scholarly practices that harmonize with the systems and understandings of that discourse community. While such a premise may on the surface appear obvious, it is important to recognize the actual struggles groups such as Native Americans face when participating in their own discourse communities. Responding to those who have dismissed or appropriated Native literature, Native scholar Craig Womack asserts that “there is such a thing as a Native perspective and seeking it out is a worthwhile endeavor” (4). Further, Womack contends that “literature bears some kind of relationship to communities, both writing communities and the communities of the primary culture from which they originate” (4) and that “there is a link between thought and activism” (5). Here, Womack’s assertions confirm the importance of formally recognizing Native literary discourse communities. This formal recognition does not preclude non-Native scholars from analysing Native literatures; however, it does necessitate that Native understandings and scholarly practices should be employed in explicating these literary works so as not to inhibit discourse.

In his text, *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World* (2003), Native scholar Donald L. Fixico details experiences that have necessitated observations such as Womack’s. He explains that, “for American Indian intellectuals, it has been an uphill struggle in gaining recognition for their work and even for their ideas to be entertained” (79). Like Womack, Fixico contends that “point of view becomes the issue in Native studies,” citing “prejudiced books and articles” from academia which have been “written about [Native peoples] and their culture” where their authors failed to consider the understandings of the tribal discourse community being studied (130). Addressing this dismissal of input from the originating Native discourse community, even as they are the subjects of study, Fixico maintains “it is only fair to consider that American Indians have something to say about the research and literature about them” (131). He contends that while “Indians have not remained silent, their voices have been ignored,” leading to misinterpretations and misconceptions regarding Native people and their literature (131). Fixico affirms that

the basic truth about Indian people and their communities is much deeper than the scholars have written. The majority of literature about American Indian people only scratches the surface of the inherent depth of native cultures. By not delving deeply enough into the native cultures and learning the socioeconomic infrastructures and meeting the people of Indian communities, outside scholars writing about Indian people have redirected the importance of indigenous peoples and what they are truly about. (133)

In another example of the dismissal of Native lived experiences and ways of creating knowledge, in his text *Red on Red* (1999), Womack quotes from a personal correspondence with Abenaki poet Cheryl Savageau, who expresses skepticism regarding the motives of those who purport to be merely expressing poststructuralist understandings. Instead, Savageau claims that poststructuralist theories are being appropriated as a “political move by the mainstream to protect itself from the stories that Native people . . . are telling” (3). She expresses this sentiment after the dismissal of her lived experience by a graduate

professor who maintains that “there [is] no truth, no history, just lots of people’s viewpoints” and who labels Savageau essentialist after she includes a common Native literary discourse community perspective involving the importance of land to certain tribal peoples in a graduate paper (3). Here, by erroneously labelling Savageau essentialist — one who believes in an essential or unchanging inherent nature inborn in Native Americans — rather than acknowledging the values expressed through a literary discourse community, Savageau is indeed denied participation in her own literary discourse community by an outsider.

Because of the historical and continued social and cultural misrepresentations of Native peoples in academia and contemporary culture, it is imperative that scholars acknowledge and understand the cultural, social, and political perspectives of indigenous peoples as presented through literary discourse communities in order to avoid impeding indigenous discourse for Native social and political activism. In a demonstration of ways in which scholars can avoid appropriation and misinterpretation, the remainder of this article will consider one particular historically and socially marginalized Native group. Specifically, from the perspective that Choctaw author LeAnne Howe’s novel *Shell Shaker* (2001) is written from the perspective of a particular literary discourse community, it will explore how Howe employs literature to convey historical, social, and cultural lived experiences through her novel. This analysis will be based on Choctaw theoretical understandings and intellectual scholarly practices, recognizing and considering aspects of historical colonialism, tribalography, and the process of cultural reimagining. It will further assert that through her novel, Howe suggests the empowering potential for a cultural reimagining through which Choctaw problems can be identified and addressed by Choctaw peoples using Native-centric approaches; solutions that are in keeping with the common rules and understandings of her tribal literary discourse community. In short, the interpretation will both acknowledge the Choctaw literary discourse community to which the novel belongs and will follow the associated interpretive practices. In juxtaposition, I will also examine an interpretation of Howe’s novel which assumes a version of deconstruction whereby the possibility of Native American tribal identity constructs and in which Native literary discourse communities are dismissed and deemed an overall impediment to reaching what the author believes should be the economic and social goals towards which Native Americans should strive in the United States.

A summary of *Shell Shaker* is problematic, as Howe does not focus on a single character or group of characters but on the relationships between multiple characters, both in the present and through points in colonial history. Beginning with descriptions of cultural consequences experienced by the Choctaw during the period of early contact, then including perspectives from the era of forced boarding schools and the individualist movement, Howe intertwines these experiences with similar issues faced by Choctaw people today — people who would refute the label of postcolonial, as they assert continued economic and cultural colonialism. The novel focuses on colonial systems and outcomes that inhibit the practice of tribalism, such as capitalism, individualism, and the devaluing of women, while also suggesting a path for reimagining traditional values of Choctaw culture.

The example of a non-Native interpretation used in this analysis of Howe’s novel is the 2008 article “‘Primitive’ Discourse: Aspects of Contemporary North American Indian Representations of the

Irish and of Contemporary Irish Representations of North American Indians.” In this article, author Joy Porter derisively describes Howe’s *Shell Shaker* as “a comic novel” with “an obvious cipher” (77), labelling it an unrealistically essentialist text that relies on potentially harmful “stereotypes,” which Porter asserts never go beyond “re-presentation” (79). Again alleging essentialism, Porter takes issue with Howe’s “determination to reaffirm the indestructible nature of American Indian culture” (78) and with Howe’s presentation of “Choctaw culture [as] everlasting and more resilient than its recent colonizers have ever imagined” (79). In her rejection of Howe’s assertions, however, Porter erroneously interprets Howe’s description of Choctaw cultural resilience as an essentialist call to return to all pre-colonial cultural practices. Instead, Howe’s work is both an expression of a Native literary discourse community that values traditional Native Choctaw spirituality and a tribalographical representation of cultural reimagining. Consequently, through her assertions, Porter demonstrates not only a lack of recognition of Native theoretical practices but also a casual dismissal of Native ways of knowing.

Confronting scholars like Porter who summarily dismiss the critical importance of Native texts, Craig Womack confirms that, “the most consistent and damaging critique against Native intellectuals involves labelling them as ‘essentialist’” (6). However, by grouping all Native tribes into a representative group, it is Porter who practices the essentialism of which she accuses Howe, by “making universal, overarching assumptions about [all] Indians,” failing to acknowledge the diversity of tribal understandings and the perspectives of Native intellectual practices (7). Conversely, Howe, in keeping with the Native intellectual practices described by Womack, “[delves] into [the] particulars” of Choctaw history and culture, “[avoiding] the kind of literary work that has been so very popular” among non-Natives authors who “avoid historical research and base their criticism exclusively on tropes and symbols” (7). Indeed, Howe’s *Shell Shaker* stands in contrast to such employment of tropes and the actual symbolic appropriation of Native experience included in literature by authors who later wrote from and of the region of Native Choctaw territory such as Faulkner, Gordon, Lytle, and Welty.

Describing her use of Native theoretical understandings and intellectual practices in “The Business of Theory Making,” Howe explains *Shell Shaker* as occurring within a genre she designates “tribalography,” a genre which depicts the constructed truth of those identifying with this Choctaw literary discourse community by conveying the authority of lived experience. Howe’s tribalography is similar to Native scholar Louis Owens’ theory of cultural reimagining, which employs Native stories from both the present and past to reclaim Native histories and to reimagine contemporary Native identity. For Howe, tribalography describes Native stories that “pull together all of the elements of the storyteller’s tribe — meaning the people, the land, multiple characters, and all their manifestations and revelations — and connect these in past, present and future milieu” (330). As a work of tribalography, *Shell Shaker* is told from a Choctaw perspective, with Howe describing past events, incorporating current lived realities, and warning against future Euro-American cultural and economic ploys designed to facilitate the self-destruction of the Choctaw people. In these warnings, Howe depicts the acceptance of capitalist values and patriarchal domination — ideas traditionally foreign to Choctaw cultural practices — as two of the primary historical and contemporary conditions that have resulted in Choctaw cultural self-destruction.

Speaking of *Shell Shaker* as a work of tribalography, Howe emphasizes that “[her] characters are doing some of the same things that Choctaws have done in the past ... [linking] the stories they’ve heard about their ancestors with the stories they are living” and by “this linking of the narratives, [breathing] meaning into their world” (331). Today, this linking of historically important oral stories with currently lived narratives and modern written literatures remains important in reimagining culture and establishing literary discourse communities for removed Southeastern tribal peoples such as the Choctaw. Howe also establishes that her characters in the novel, much like her historical ancestors, are both “international and intertribal as they reflect a larger worldview that would have been as important in the past as it is in the present” for the Choctaw (330). Addressing the historical and cultural representations in *Shell Shaker*, Howe asserts that “while [*Shell Shaker*] is ‘fiction,’ much of the history is as accurate as I could interpret it,” noting that she includes examples of traditional “Choctaw stories collected by ethnographers” that “inform my contemporary written story” (“The Business of Theory Making” 335-336). Historian Greg O’Brien authenticates Howe’s assertion of accuracy in *Pre-removal Choctaw History*, stating that, “though a work of fiction, *Shell Shaker* is based on deep research in historical sources and on first-hand experience with Choctaw cultural values” (16). Through both Howe’s own research and through the extensive research of Choctaw historians, then, *Shell Shaker* is validated as an authentic representation of Choctaw history, values, and tribalography.

Yet, Porter summarily dismisses both the accuracy and the value of the novel based on Howe’s inclusion of an Irish connection without exploring and understanding the historical and cultural connections apparent to Howe and therefore included in *Shell Shaker*. In fact, understanding the Irish connection presented in *Shell Shaker* is imperative to understanding the novel, as this connection reflects the Native understanding of circular time presented throughout the novel — with past events tied closely with and affecting current realities — and as it depicts the similar effects of economic colonialism on peoples who were connected through historical ties. Thus, Howe’s depiction of the Choctaw and the Irish as an enemy of the British and of Britain’s predatory colonialism in dealings with both groups plays a justifiably significant role in the novel, just as it played a significant role in Choctaw history.

Addressing Howe’s inclusion of an Irish connection in *Shell Shaker*, Porter argues that “the James Joyce we are more familiar with is in one sense a surprising figure for a Native American author to empathize with” as he was a writer who “acknowledged that British and Roman imperialism had irrevocably shattered indigenous Irish culture and who held that to try to revive it was to immerse oneself in kitsch and foolishly to attempt to navigate ‘by the broken lights of ancient myth’” (77). However, in this comparison, Porter does not acknowledge the concept of Native cultural reimagining, which emphasizes values over exact practices, stressing the incorporation of traditional cultural values into modern Native realities. Moreover, Porter does not acknowledge the significance of the colonial connections between the two cultures nor Howe’s use of the character James Joyce. By exploring the relationships in the novel from the perspective of the literary discourse community, it is evident that Howe is not attempting to express empathy with famous Irish author James Joyce as Porter suggests; rather, Howe identifies with those Irish who similarly suffered under the practices of British colonialism

as seen through her inclusion of corresponding instances of racism, historical injustices, and assimilated capitalist corruption.

In *Disturbing Calculations*, Melanie Benson astutely describes the colonizing forces that invaded Southeastern Native tribes as “a reflection of a widespread imperial, colonial drive to condition, calculate, and control those perceived to be darker, weaker, and lesser across the globe” (165). Howe, employing tribalogy, acknowledges these past race-based colonial practices described by Benson and demonstrates her historical understanding of the comparable global colonial atrocities and their similar consequences, paralleling the Irish physical suffering, economic deprivation, and cultural struggle under British expansion with that experienced by the Choctaw tribe. Describing these similar colonial experiences in her article “Ireland’s Troubling History: British Colonialism’s Effect on Irish Research,” Jean Roth depicts original Irish society as tribal, much like Native tribes of the Southeast, with the country ruled by multiple “Gaelic chieftains” (1). According to Roth, employing methods identical to those later utilized in attempts to deculturalise the Choctaw, the English imposed their own “law, language, and culture” on the Irish, forbidding traditional language, cultural, and religious practices, and implementing “Anglicanism as an institutional religion” (1). These occurrences described by Roth not only mirror Choctaw colonial experiences, they serve as a type of strategic guide for them, as discussed below. Consequently, Howe’s incorporation of the Irish into her work of tribalogy is not only appropriate, but to be expected.

Discussing several authors who share Roth’s perspective in her article “‘Will Come Forth in Tongues and Fury’: Relocating Irish Cultural Studies,” Katie Kane quotes Glen T. Morris from his article “International Law and Politics: Toward a Right to Self-Determination for Indigenous Peoples,” Morris confirms that “English colonizing doctrines, perhaps the most enduring for Indigenous peoples, were employed first on the Irish and then exported to the Western hemisphere” (62). Kane concurs that English colonial forces created “the stereotypes of ‘barbarity’ and ‘incivility’ from the ‘native’ population of Ireland” and then transferred this approach to the Native populations of the Americas for “reasons of social discredit,” which would aid them as they attempted to justify brutal colonial practices (106). Moving on from ideologies of social to cultural inferiority, Nicholas Canny notes in “The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America” that “the colonists in the New World used the same pretexts for the extermination of the Indians as their counterparts had used in the 1560s and 1570s for the slaughter of a number of the Irish” (575). With complete extermination impractical, however, as was the case with the Choctaw tribe, Irish chieftains were eventually given the choice between death and removal to undesirable land in the West, “the western Irish province” that, similar to the rock and clay soil of Oklahoma, “had the poorest land in Ireland” (Roth 2). Just as many Choctaw starved on their journey to the western territory in Oklahoma while occupying soldiers were well supplied, many Irish would starve in a land where “there was no shortage of food,” where “eight ships a day filled with food [were] being exported to England” (4). Roth concludes that “it was not simply a ‘famine’ but a starvation based on systematic British exploitation of the Irish people, inaction in the face of the potato crop failure, and a vindictive, racist attitude toward the Irish,” citing that, like the many Choctaw who died while forced to walk on what would come to be known as The Trail of Tears, “nearly two million [Irish] died out of a population of eight million” (4). Roth draws on Frank O’Connor’s memorable statement

that “famine is a useful word when you do not wish to use words like genocide and extermination,” words familiarly associated with the Choctaw colonial experience as well (4). Through the above descriptions, it becomes clear that given the similarity of and connections between their lived experiences, Howe’s inclusion of the Irish in her Choctaw literary discourse is not only highly significant, but also a reflection of actual historical relationships.

In addition to the similar experiences at the hands of British colonialists described by both Choctaw and Irish historians, Porter does not acknowledge that Howe includes the Irish in her novel because, historically, her Choctaw ancestors purposefully included themselves in the Irish colonial experience. Thereby, each became a part of the other’s history, a part of each other’s tribalography, a part of a circular experience through time. Howe introduces this Choctaw/Irish connection early in the novel, immediately after introducing the Native idea of circular time expressed at the historical death of Shakbatina, which was incited by the acts of colonially corrupted Red Shoes. Next, Howe moves into the present, similar corruption of Redford McAlester; yet, she again circles back in time to connections of the past, significantly linking the experiences and lessons of time. Through the character of Red McAlester, Howe immediately makes readers aware of the “potato famine anniversary” when “the old chiefs donated seven hundred dollars to the starving Irish in 1847,” and of the coinciding modern reenactments of the Great Irish Potato Famine of 1847 and the earlier Choctaw walk on the Trail of Tears (25). Here, Howe draws from her own knowledge of the sacrifice of the Choctaw monetary gift to the Irish, which came shortly after their own removal, starvation, and impoverishment in 1831. Later, she juxtaposes this sacrifice against a corrupt, modern Choctaw involvement with the Irish, as she attempts to demonstrate through the content of her novel the need for modern Choctaw reimagining of traditional cultural values.

Referencing international historical connections again, this time through the thespian characters of Tema and her British husband Borden, Howe also derides the British colonial idea of a superior cultural civilization, an idea employed as an excuse for the brutal physical, economic, and cultural repression of the Choctaw and Irish described earlier in this article. Tema points out the inconsistency between British representation and action, opposing Borden who asserts that if “people came to the theater and understood Shakespeare, there would be no more wars, or killing, or suffering” (36). Noting the contradiction between British presentation and practice, Tema points out that “the English have had Shakespeare for five hundred years and it didn’t stop them from colonizing the world,” including the Choctaw and the Irish (36). Speaking to a British dismissal of Choctaw human and cultural significance, Howe’s character Isaac Billy “is amazed that the English [journalist is] paying any attention to the Choctaws,” even given the violent death of their chief, as Choctaw tragedies would be historically unimportant to them; however, “he understands why the Irish are interested in [the Choctaw]. They have something in common: colonialism and potatoes” (53).

Finally, in explaining the history of her legal case, Howe’s character Auda recites historical occurrences, encouraging Gore to

remember, [the] tribe gave money to the Irish in 1847 for famine relief. The Irish were starving because English bureaucrats withheld food from them. The English, who

would become the ruling class of the Americans, forced Indians to walk on the Trail of Tears, and they withheld food and supplies from them. (94)

Here, Howe references the legacy and exercise of brutal colonizing practices left behind by the British in their former colonies. Although the Trail of Tears officially occurred after the United States formed an independent nation, the use of British colonizing practices by a predominantly, historically British citizenry is apparent in the Choctaw experience. Through this dialogue, Howe also emphasizes the similar circumstances and experiences faced by the Choctaw and the Irish, remaining true to her genre of tribalogy and to the common cultural and economic concerns and experiences expressed through her literary discourse community. Thus, she juxtaposes the economic colonialism practiced by and sense of superiority held by the colonizing English against the communal, sacrificial nature of the Choctaw people. Howe's circular tale of tribalogy then launches into outcomes of these colliding values.

Throughout her descriptions of present-day Choctaw experiences, Howe juxtaposes colonial capitalism against Choctaw communal values, elevating the idea of returning to or reimagining a Choctaw communal tribalism as a solution for Choctaw social and economic problems. According to Native scholar Louis Owens, the "attempt at the center of American Indian fiction" is "recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community" (5). For Howe, this place is a Choctaw place and her literary discourse is therefore specific to Choctaw cultural beliefs, values, and practices involving community.

Finally, in her novel, Howe presents colonial capitalism as a continuing corrupting element, problematically experienced by the Choctaw government and by the organization known as the I.R.A. Again, however, Howe's purpose in presenting this connection is misunderstood by Porter, who — through a lack of inclusion of both Choctaw cultural beliefs and literary interpretive practices — views the connection as Howe's "cipher," employed so that "the novel resolves happily" with James Joyce facilitating both Auda's vindication and Adair's romantic reconciliation (77). However, by focusing on the surface-level detail of a current romantic reconciliation and having dismissed the Choctaw perception of circular time, Porter misinterprets Howe's intent. In an interview with Howe for Oxford University Press, interviewer Kirstin Squint notes the tribalogical aspect of *Shell Shaker* in that it deals "with intersections between historical and contemporary figures" which she believes is made "possible through a series of century-crossing ceremonies" (218). In response, to Squint, Howe expresses her view that the past and present connect as one, particularly through land and events, explaining that this is the basis for her novel. Indeed, a close examination reveals that all of the characters and events in *Shell Shaker* are closely connected with past Choctaws and the events they experienced. Thus, Howe's purpose in depicting a connection between the current Choctaw tribal government and the I.R.A is to demonstrate that by embracing methods of patriarchal, colonial capitalism both organizations that purported to serve their people have actually become a source of capitalist corruption. Much as McAlester — in an act of patriarchal privilege and greed — has placed priority on his personal wealth and on the tribal organization rather than on meeting the needs of the people, Joyce gives evidence to Gore which will implicate the I.R.A. because he "is angry with his own

organization,” knowing that “the money that McAlester paid them didn’t go toward” the stated goals of the organization, but to “I.R.A. bureaucracy” (208). Ironically, while British bureaucracy, greed, and colonial expansionist capitalism historically brought devastation to the Irish and Choctaw, assimilation to bureaucratic structuring, greed, and capitalistic practices once again bring death, destruction, and disillusionment to a people in Howe’s *Shell Shaker*. Through this comparison of events and consequences through time, Howe—presenting the perspectives of her discourse community—provides her strongest argument for cultural reimagining and a return to traditional Choctaw values.

In keeping with the Choctaw literary discourse community to which she belongs and in keeping with traditional Choctaw cultural values, Howe’s *Shell Shaker* focuses on “understanding relationships,” (Fixico xiii) on how “asking for more than a person can use might incur misfortune,” (Fixico 54) and on how, although Choctaws are individuals, the cultural emphasis is on collectivism, which is “[preferable] over individualism” (Fixico 66). Consistent with the identified ideologies of her literary discourse community, Howe presents this focus in an attempt to recover or rearticulate the value of Choctaw cultural practices, as well as to facilitate a continued critical discourse of empowerment. By disregarding Howe’s intent as essentialism, Porter’s analysis of *Shell Shaker* presents a misrepresentation of the characters, the action, and the purpose of the novel as a whole.

Although this article has focused primarily on one particular Native American discourse community that continues to struggle for recognition, the principle of literary discourse communities is universally applicable. In sum, language from the literary discourse community must originate from the perspective of an ideological community in which there are common intention, interpretation, social context, and historical circumstances shared by identifying members with substantially similar knowledge and ideologies. In order to avoid the suppression and appropriation of discourse from various groups who meet the criteria for a literary discourse community, it is critical that scholars recognize knowledge, historical understandings, and/or socioeconomic conditions originating from diverse literary discourse communities. Further, they should employ discourse-specific theoretical understandings to facilitate communication. By acknowledging these understandings of discursive language, both the stated and implied goals of poststructuralist language deconstruction can be realized, and perhaps truth can be more readily negotiated in societies that are becoming increasingly polarized.

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