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ARTICLE

Tribalography and the Native "South(s)" *For Leanne Howe*

KIRSTIN L. SQUINT

Preface

When I was asked to write about the "Native South" for *Transmotion's* 10th anniversary issue, an article which would both reflect on the state of Indigenous literary studies and look to its future, I was simultaneously excited and deflated. At that time, I had just finished two chapters on the subject matter, both for books designed to be companions for studies of U.S. literatures, and I felt that I had said my piece on the matter. Yet, I also knew that I hadn't found a way to properly articulate my own discomfort with the label "Native South," from the position of someone who primarily works in the field of southeastern U.S. Indigenous literary studies. In addition, I am descended on both my mother's and father's sides of the family from settlers to the region and continue to live there as a settler scholar and professor of Native American and Indigenous literatures. For many years, I have attempted to understand and deploy

Indigenous literary methodologies in order to decolonize my scholarship and teaching, as well as to ally myself with tribal nations in the region. Because of my close engagement with the work of Choctaw Nation scholar, poet, novelist, playwright, and documentarian LeAnne Howe, whose writing I have previously argued is an exemplar of Native southern literature,[1] I decided to read the "Native South" through her decolonizing methodology of tribalography. As she notes in her paradigm-shifting essay, "The Story of America: a Tribalography," this is "a tall order" (42). What follows is my attempted tribalography, structurally modeled after "The Story of America," in which Howe demonstrates the multi-modality and non-linearity of the approach. Given Howe's own evolution of her neologism, I thought it fitting to weave in her concept of "embodied tribalography," a later theorization, which argues that Native Americans embody the lands from which they originate, highlighting the central role of land within Indigenous epistemologies (Howe, *Choctalking* 174). This experiment, reading the field of Indigenous southeastern literature through a tribalographic lens, compels a decolonial reckoning and demonstrates what Howe notes in our interview with Gina Caison on the podcast *About South*: the "Native South" is "a fiction" (19:33).

Part I: Acknowledging the Land

The coast of the land that became known as North Carolina was ground zero for English colonialism in what became known as North America. The Algonquian peoples residing on the barrier islands east of the place where I now live and work first welcomed and then later warred with the English colonials who settled on their land. Manteo, of the Croatoan village, and Wanchese, of the Roanoke village, traveled to England, met Queen Elizabeth, and taught the scientist, Thomas Harriot, how to speak their language. Yet, what appeared to be a burgeoning alliance fell apart due to repeated aggressions by the English and their unwillingness to engage in the diplomatic protocols set forth by the Croatoans (Lowery 23-25). Volumes have been written about Walter Raleigh, Francis Drake, John White, and a certain "lost colony," so

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that is not a line of inquiry I intend to pursue. As Lumbee historian Malinda Maynor Lowery notes, "Far less is written in tribute... to the Indians who continued to maintain power in that region for more than a century after these events unfolded" (27). In Lowery's *The Lumbee Indians: an American Struggle*, she painstakingly details the ways that tribal peoples banded together to avoid settler colonialism on North Carolina's coastal plain, and in particular, the ways that distinct groups coalesced along the swamplands of the Lumber River, in the present-day home of the federally-recognized Lumbee tribe (32-39). Lowery maps the lands of Lumbee ancestors as far east as the state's barrier islands, where first contact and its subsequent alliances and antipathies played out.

My institution of employment, East Carolina University, sits on the traditional lands of the Tuscarora Nation. Lowery describes the Tuscarora War, from 1711-13, as a "violent explosion" (30). It was a product of settler encroachment across North Carolina's coastal plain and resulted in "fifteen hundred to two thousand Tuscaroras" migrating northward to become the sixth nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Richter 239). This history is adjacent but connected to "The Story of America: a Tribalography," in which LeAnne Howe makes a compelling argument about the ways that the story of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the coming together of the original Five Nations in approximately 1500 A.D., influenced figures such as William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson as they imagined the unification of the colonies which would become the "United States" (39-42). Howe's essay demonstrates how history, whether it is scientific history or political history, is always a form of story. This premise sets up her neologism, "tribalography," defined as a specific Native approach to storytelling that encompasses infinite temporal modes, tribal members and their kin (human and non-human), and non-tribal members (42). The form of Howe's essay also demonstrates that tribalography is multi-modal and can include a

diversity of genres such as oral stories, scientific theories, critical analysis, political history, and poetry.

In *LeAnne Howe at the Intersection of Southern and Native American Literature,* I detail the ways in which the author's work can be classified as both Native American and southern literature, thus falling within the classification of "Native Southern" literature. Howe is a Choctaw citizen, the first of the tribes Removed from the region that became known as "the South" in the southeastern United States, through her birth mother. She is also the daughter of a Cherokee Nation man and an adoptee of a Cherokee family in Oklahoma (formerly Indian Territory), where she was born and raised (Squint "'An American in New York,'" 99). Though some critics have resisted the idea that Oklahoma Natives from tribes that were forced westward to Indian Territory by the Indian Removal Act of 1830 should not be classified as "southern"[2] or even "southeastern,"[3] my scholarship has argued otherwise since Howe has set creative work in the Southeast such as her novels, *Shell Shaker* and *Miko Kings*, and selections from her poetry collection, *Evidence of Red*. She also regularly alludes to the traditional lands of the Choctaw in present-day Mississippi and Louisiana, in particular the Nanih Waiya mound in Winston County, Mississippi, the sacred emergence place of the Choctaws, according to some oral traditions.

How Indigenous southeastern literature is defined has evolved over the last couple of decades with increased literary criticism on the topic. Scholars of southern literature have wrestled with how to talk about Indigenous literatures of the region, given the field's continuing emphasis on the black-white cultural binarisms that evolve from the legacies of plantation slavery. Annette Trefzer rightly claims in her monograph, *Disturbing Indians: the Archaeology of Southern Fiction* that "[all] Southern literature begins with American Indian literature of the South" (92), and Eric Gary Anderson bolsters this idea by noting that the South is "a place that has been Native for vastly longer than it has been southern" ("Literary" 18). Yet the name, "Native South," centers the colonial construct of "the South," which typically connotes those

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states which seceded from the U.S. as the Confederate States of America. Of course, "Native" is a term that is still regularly used as a referent to Native American people of the United States, but what problematizes this issue is the nativism of some white southerners who "[appropriate]" and/or are "[preoccupied]" with Indigeneity (Byars Nichols 173).[4] Despite such concerns, it is also true that many Indigenous peoples of the U.S. Southeast use the term "Native South" or "Native Southern" or refer to themselves as "southern," as a clear identification with the region that produces our unique accents, foodways, and other cultural markers.[5]

Aside from the connotative problems of what both "Native" and "South" can signify separately and together, it is a limiting classification in which to encompass diverse lifeways from a complex geographic region that extend long before European and U.S. settler colonialism. These lifeways continue in contemporary Indigenous literatures through ancient forms such as oral traditions and contemporary forms such as novels and screenplays. However, the term became reified with the first publication of the history journal *Native South* by University of Nebraska Press in 2008 (Squint 18), and it was defined broadly, considering the violent ramifications of settler colonialism, including the widespread diasporas of the Indian Removal Act. In order to intervene in what I saw as a problematic narrowing of that definition in the aforementioned texts, *Reconstructing the Native South* by Taylor and *The People Who Stayed* edited by Hobson, McAdams, and Walkiewicz, I introduced the term "Interstate South," in my monograph on Howe's work to demonstrate the mobility of Southeastern Indigenous identity, "a space in which Native Americans travel physically and metaphorically between tribal national and US boundaries" (Squint 21). This term doesn't adequately solve the problem of referencing "the South," and this particular definition of "Interstate" can also clearly refer to other Indigenous peoples' experience. Gina Caison has argued in a similar vein that,

> the narrative does not have to be *about home* to *write home* within an Indigenous tradition. This reading allows critics to loosen 'a sense of place' from land claim and renegotiate the tensions that inform settler colonialism as occupying spaces in an attempt to undermine indigeneity as coterminous with land tenure (5).

Caison's claim relies on Choctaw scholar Michael Wilson's ideas about Indigenous resistance fiction and how authors "write home" (5). Specific to the U.S. Southeast, Miriam Brown Spiers succinctly explains, "the legacy of Indian removal complicates purely spatial distinctions" (54).

In order to localize my position, I am grounding this essay in eastern North Carolina because it is the land upon which I live and work, and I wanted to take the advice of Drew Lopenzina, who teaches at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, about two and half hours north of my home. In his introduction to the *Routledge Introduction to Native American Literature*, Lopenzina suggests that teachers of Native American literature "begin where you are" and "ground your discourse in the Native space you occupy" (5). I do this in my Native American literature courses at East Carolina University, linking to the institution's Land Acknowledgement page on our course website,[6] not only making students aware of North Carolina's state and federally recognized tribes, but also giving them information about ways to support Indigenous students. In addition, I give them an assignment that involves visiting our Indigenous People's Space adjacent to the university's main campus student center and writing about what they learn there. I have also recently begun a community- and archivally-engaged research project with the Neyuherú·kę' wampum belt, gifted to "the people of North Carolina" by the Tuscarora Nation in 2013 and preserved in East Carolina University's Special Collections, as one form of commemoration for the traumatic outcomes of the Tuscarora War three hundred years prior.[7] Lopenzina's institution, Old Dominion University is situated in Virginia's Tidewater region, which he describes as "ground zero in regards to English settlement on this continent" (5) given the presence

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of Jamestown and local namesakes reflecting the stories of that early colony such as Pocahontas Street, Powhatan Avenue, and Matoaka Avenue (5). Lopenzina notes the ways he discusses both Virginia's Indigenous history and its contemporary Indigenous peoples, and when I read his essay, I think about the ways that teaching Indigenous literatures in Virginia and North Carolina have similar challenges because of the weight of English colonial mythologies that have so long hung over these spaces.

Yet despite the heaviness of colonial mythologies, they do not mark the beginning of the Southeast's Indigenous literatures. Oral traditions continue as they have for millenia and sometimes find their way into books, as do the Choctaw oral traditions LeAnne Howe shares such as "The Unknown Woman" (32-33) and "the story of the hunter who became a deer" (35) in her essay "The Story of America." Horatio Bardwell Cushman transcribed "Ohoyo Chishba Osh"[8] or "The Unknown Woman" and published it in *The History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians* in 1899. Howe drew inspiration from that text to write short dramatic pieces that appeared in both her creative collection, *Evidence of Red*, and historian, Greg O'Brien's essay collection, *Pre-removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths*. Ethnologist James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokees*, first published in 1900, has also provided fodder for Native writers, such as Cherokee Nation novelist, Blake Hausman, who discusses his use of Mooney's collection for his futuristic novel, *Riding the Trail of Tears*, in a recent interview with me and Miriam Brown Spiers. Hausman explains, "I had all these sticky notes, dozens of sticky notes, and writings in the margin... While the Mooney book was not the only thing that I drew on, it was certainly part of what I was drawing on to reclaim and mobilize some old school stories" (57). Hausman also discusses his inner conflicts about using a white ethnologist's early twentieth century collection as a source text for a book that plays with Cherokee history, describing it as a "paradox" (56).

James Mooney worked for the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology as a salvage ethnologist, his work predicated on the idea that Indigenous peoples' cultures were quickly being eradicated (Duncan 17). That said, his work is valued by the Eastern Cherokees, as explained by Sarah Muse Isaacs:

> [Mooney's] collection, though problematic for a number of reasons, is the most extensive set of translations from Cherokee to English of the oral offerings of Cherokee storytellers from the Eastern Band to date... The modern storytellers with whom I have worked have each referred to Mooney's *Cherokee History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas* at various times through their artistic careers for clarification or simply to compare the written version of a story with the spoken one that they themselves learned from their mentors. (20)

Isaacs's, *Eastern Cherokee Stories: a Living Oral Tradition and Its Cultural Continuance* (2019), along with Barbara Duncan's *Living Stories of the Cherokee* (1998) and Christopher Teuton's *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars' Club* (2012), represent more recent turns in the collection of oral literatures, emphasizing their continuance. These collections also highlight the collaborative nature of collecting stories, such as Duncan's "oral poetics" approach, which attempts to emulate the oral elements of the stories (23). Both Teuton and Isaacs center Cherokee epistemologies as a means of framing the stories in their collections. Teuton contends that Cherokee storytelling/lying, or *gagoga,* is an integral part of communication within the Cherokee community, or *sgadug* ("Indigenous Textuality" 134), while Isaacs reads Cherokee storytelling through the concepts of *Gadugi*, in which individuals "come together as one and [help] one another" (26) and *Duyvkta*, "the right path to walk and live" (28).

In addition to the oral tradition, non-alphabetic texts are another example of how Indigenous Southeasterners have told stories. Eric Gary Anderson discusses how "Native cultures in the South and elsewhere were richly multitextual and intertextual long before European landfall" (18) in "Literary and Textual Histories of the Native

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South." Anderson's essay explores texts such as wampum belts, tally sticks, and hatched trees used as trail or boundary markers, drawing from anthropological and historical work by Robbie Etheridge, Angela Pulley Hudson, Nancy Shoemaker, and others. He also discusses earthworks and the oral stories associated with them as they appear in contemporary writers' works including those by LeAnne Howe and Geary Hobson. Howe extensively examines mound sites and their relationship to tribalography in a more recent development of her theory, "embodied tribalography," describing this idea's evolution as connected to her research on ancient ballfields and mounds while writing her novel, *Miko Kings: an Indian Baseball Story*. Embodied tribalography suggests that "tribal peoples may embody the land from which they come" (Squint 127), and Howe uses the creation of Bird Mound in Poverty Point, Louisiana, built over three millenia ago, as a central example of this process.[9] Howe asserts "that the people who came together, from many directions, to write the story of Bird Mound into the land must have considered her an important symbol for their communities" ("Embodied Tribalography: First Installment" 181). Embodied tribalography is part of a turn toward land-based epistemologies in twenty-first century Indigenous studies, forms of which can be seen the work of Citizen Potawatomi scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer, Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Yellow Knives Dene political scientist Glen Coulthard.[10]

Part II: Tribalography as Methodology

In March of 2022, I flew to New Orleans to attend the Center for the Study of the Gulf South's Indigenous Studies Symposium at Tulane University. It was just a few weeks after Mardi Gras, and the live oaks of the city were hung decadently with purple, gold, green, and silver beads, leftovers from the parades of the season. As my taxi

meandered through the narrow streets near campus, I saw students throwing footballs and lounging in the verdant green lawns of spring in the Crescent City.

When I arrived at a nineteenth-century mansion-turned-hotel on St. Charles Avenue, I saw LeAnne Howe seated at a table on the wide verandah, sipping water and writing in a journal. Before I exited the taxi and began the drudgery of toting luggage and checking in, I took a photograph in my mind of that moment, the fashionably dressed, bespectacled writer with a shiny, short black bob, *à la* the silent film star Louise Brooks, after whom she had patterned the style of her character Adair, in *Shell Shaker*. Howe had worked in the securities industry in the 1980s and spent long periods of time living in New Orleans, also like Adair. I have often wondered how much Howe's characters are patterned after her own life, such as when Adair looks out at the Mississippi River from her 11th floor office and thinks, "[She] can't imagine living anywhere else but New Orleans, where so much Choctaw history occurred," and yet she also says, "there remains no trace of her people" (41). I suspect that 1980s New Orleans may have felt that way for an Oklahoma Choctaw woman working in the cutthroat field of bond brokerage, long before the era of Bvlbancha Liberation Radio[11] or the Nanih Bvlbancha,[12] a mound built by a coalition of the city's Indigenous peoples in 2024. "Bvlbancha" means "place of other tongues" (Tulane Land Acknowledgement) and is the Choctaw name for the ancient trading place we now call by the anglicized version (New Orleans) of its French colonial name (La Nouvelle-Orléans).

Howe was the writer who had set my imagination afire, and I thirsted to learn about the Gulf South homelands of the Choctaw people when I first read *Shell Shaker* in 2006, as a doctoral student at Louisiana State University. Because of Howe's work, I began to research the Choctaw placenames around me—Bogue Chitto (*bok chitto*), Bogalusa (*bok lusa*), Atchafalaya (*hacha falaya*)—and learn about the cultures that had been obfuscated first by Spanish and French colonialism, and later by U.S. settler colonialism.[13] One of my earliest peer-reviewed works is an interview I conducted with Howe in 2008, and published in 2010, my first monograph (2018) was my single-author

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study of Howe's work, and just the month before our meeting in New Orleans, my edited collection of interviews with Howe had been published. Her writing has been central to my research for most of my career, and I was thrilled to be co-presenting with her at Tulane's conference.

Those days in New Orleans were filled with amazing food and the strange freedom of the post-vaccination phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. What I remember most, however, is the reception that Howe received from a contingent of Gulf South tribal peoples attending the conference, especially a Choctaw Nation citizen working for the Mississippi Band of Choctaws who had enthusiastically read her work. The week previous to the conference in New Orleans, I spoke at an event at the University of Oklahoma, celebrating the donation of Howe's archive to the university's Western History Collection. There I saw Choctaw and other tribal peoples honoring her contributions to Native American literature. What I realized in New Orleans was that LeAnne Howe's writing is, in a way, reuniting Choctaw peoples from Oklahoma and Mississippi and Louisiana, those who have been divided by the ethnic cleansing of 19th century Indian Removal, much like her character Delores Love, in *Shell Shaker*. In the novel's climactic scene, Delores leads a ceremony at the Nanih Waiya to bury Red Shoes/Red McAlester the corrupt chief who caused the Choctaws so much trouble in both the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, a ceremony that involves the participation of women from "Zwolle, Louisiana; Homa [sic], Louisiana; Lexington, Texas, and Mobile, Alabama" (196). The hopeful symbolism of Delores's role is clear: "She exhales, pushing all herself out of her body and, in this moment, she feels a miraculous beginning as she and the other Chahta women of the Southeast join hands and sing" (197). The optimism that I read into this passage has counterpoints, such as Melanie Benson Taylor's interpretation which asks if rather than being a "new beginning" the Nanih Waiya scene is actually "just another revolution in an uncannily

repetitive and cruel history?" (64), given that Delores and her husband, Isaac Billy, are killed by the Mafia shortly after the ceremony. I have previously argued that the novel privileges the actions of spirits and that the self-sacrifices by both Delores and Isaac are intentional, designed to protect future generations from the spirit of the *Osano* (bloodsucker) chief. It is this futurist element of that scene which I find particularly intriguing, given the text's desire to reunite the Choctaws across time and space and can be understood through Cherokee Nation scholar Daniel Heath Justice's concept of "[imagining] otherwise" (156). In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Justice asks the question, "How do we become good ancestors?" (113). For Justice, one of the ways to do this is through Indigenous literature that "articulates and even anticipates our potential for transformational change, if only we bring to it the best of our imaginative selves. Freedom of love, of desire, of life, culture, and political survival—these are only realized through the link of our courage to our imaginations. We can't possibly live otherwise until we first *imagine* otherwise," (156), as LeAnne Howe has done in *Shell Shaker*.

On my return flight to North Carolina from the conference at Tulane, I continued to read the book I was teaching my undergraduate Native American literature students at the time, Joy Harjo's most recent autobiography, *Poet Warrior*, written during the Muscogee Creek author's tenure as the first Native American Poet Laureate of the United States. I found Harjo's descriptions of her many mentors (a diverse group including her mother, Creek poet Alexander Posey, Emily Dickinson, and Audre Lorde), compelling as an exploration of artistic development; however, it was the description of her long-term relationship with the writer and activist, Meridel Le Sueur, that resonated deeply with me. Harjo met Le Sueur when she was an undergraduate student at the University of New Mexico and began a relationship through letters, phone calls, and visits until the elder writer's death in 1996 (167-174). The memoir makes clear that Harjo values Le Sueur's proletarian, feminist work, but her poignant stories about their friendship, such as when Harjo picked up Le Sueur at a bus station

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in Iowa City with her children in tow, made me begin to think about the ways that my academic interest in Howe's work had evolved into something on a deeper emotional level. I remember visiting Howe in Athens, Georgia, in 2016, to attend a party she hosted, celebrating the publication of a new book by her colleague at the University of Georgia and my dissertation director, John Lowe, and sharing with her my grief about losing my mother in my early thirties. She told me that I could still talk to my mother, that she is still here. Howe's writing, especially her novels, *Shell Shaker* and *Miko Kings* and her play-in-verse, *Savage Conversations*, make clear the thin boundary between the living and the dead and the ways that spirits can interact with the living; this is a theme that reverberates throughout the works of various Indigenous literary and cultural productions, including in the recent and highly-acclaimed television series, *Reservation Dogs*, set in Oklahoma and featuring a small community on Muscogee Creek tribal lands. In "The Story of America," Howe shares a story her grandmother told her about the death of her neighbor, Lum Jones, who was carried "toward the heavens" by the Angel of Death, which Howe described as a "bird-man" (31). She explains, "Of course, everyone in my family agreed that right after Grandmother saw Lum Jones being carried up through the tree, he was as dead as Andrew Jackson. It was a fact. Grandmother could see life and death, and she told me not to be afraid of either one. That was the first lesson I learned from her" (31).

So, what do these reflections on my relationship with a writer whose work has deeply shaped my own have to do with tribalography as methodology? Howe's most well-known definition of the term appears in "The Story of America":

> Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film history), seem to pull all the elements together of a storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and

> future milieus (present and future milieus mean non-Indians). I have tried to show that tribalography comes from the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another. (42)

"The Story of America" is itself a tribalography, form following function, in which Howe "connects one thing to another" such as the stories told to her by her grandmother linked to the scientific theory of symbiogenesis, which she suggests is a "Choctawan way of looking at the world" (34). The essay demonstrates the validation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (well before the term was regularly used) through its multiple examples of "scientific discovery" confirming what Indigenous stories have long held to be true, despite such stories being denigrated by Westerners as "myths" (37). This idea scaffolds her points about the ways that the story of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy informed the founding ideologies of what became the United States. Howe explains "that the Haudenosaunee's *story of their union* created an image so powerful in the minds of colonists that they believed if 'savages' could unite they ought to be able to do the same thing" (41-42). Howe's essay also contains compelling literary analyses of two Native-authored texts, Irvin Morris's (Diné), *The Glittering World* and Mona Susan Power's (Dakota) *The Grass Dancer*. Regarding Morris's collection of stories, Howe notes "What is most significant about [his] work is that while he is telling specific Navajo tribal history, culture, and his own revelatory stories, he also regards this textual space as a contemplative reflection of identity. What does it mean to be Navajo, but to connect with people who are not?" (44). Of Power's novel, Howe underscores "connections between Dakota ancestors and the present-day culture... Time travels counterclockwise, and there are multiple narrators giving their versions of events. This creates a multigenerational story that touches all the characters in the book" (44). These representations of connections between Natives and non-Natives and Indigenous ancestors and contemporary tribal members, or of time moving counterclockwise, multiple narrators, and multigenerational storytelling are all also

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elements one can easily find in most of LeAnne Howe's work. Howe has also pointed out the multi-modal nature of tribalography in further discussions of the concept such as in her interview with Jeremy Reed, in which she described it as "the way American Indians tell stories—in multiple genres" (90).

To read the "Native South" as a tribalography might seem easy on the surface: the U.S. Southeast is a geographically and culturally diverse region in which connections, whether between original Muscogean, Siouan, Algonquian, and Iroquoian peoples or between European, African, and Indigenous groups, have been and continue to be made. For me, as a settler scholar, the challenge of navigating "present and future milieus" ("The Story of America" 42) is to avoid replicating colonialist methods. I can see the connections between regions, literatures, and peoples, but to attempt to write a tribalography means to take a leap outside of the false objectivity of traditional Western scholarly discourse—cognizant of my position as a settler descended from German, English, and Scots-Irish immigrants whose family entered what became Kentucky as a result of the Treaty of Tellico with the Cherokee Nation—to try to read through an Indigenous lens.[14] As Howe made the point that stories themselves, whether they are told by her grandmother, herself, or are a part of Haudenosaunee oral tradition, are important to a theory of Indigenous storytelling, I am making the point that my multi-modal stories about LeAnne Howe's significant impact on contemporary Native literature and scholarship (including on this scholar's work) can help us understand "past, present, and future milieus" of the Native South. To answer the question I posed at the beginning of the previous paragraph, my reflections on my relationship with LeAnne Howe demonstrate her role as mentor, friend, and confidante to me as I try redefine the "South," on both an intellectual and personal level, in order to evoke change from my multiple positions as a settler, as a scholar, and as a teacher. When I read about Harjo's relationship with Meridel LeSeur—

with its letters and conversations and dancing and professional advice and laughter and tears–I thought instantly of my relationship with LeAnne Howe–with its emails and texts and conversations and dinners and professional advice and laughter and tears – an embodied connection that has taught me more than words on the page or lectures from a podium.

To date, both *Shell Shaker* and *Miko Kings* have been analyzed tribalographically, as has Howe's collection *Evidence of Red*. Her work has also been read through the lens of embodied tribalography.[15] The 2014 issue of *Studies in American Indian Literature*, edited by Joseph Bauerkemper, explored the versatility of tribalography beyond Howe's own work, including how it might be used to counter settler ideologies in the classroom and how scholars might use it as critical methodology. In his article in this special issue of *SAIL*, White Earth Anishinaabe descendant Carter Meland compares students in Native American literature courses in "majority culture institutions in the United States" to Schrodinger's cat, "in a superposed state" (26). Unlike the famous cat of quantum physics experimentation, however, such students are not in an "alive-dead" state; rather, they are simultaneously "colonialist-decolonized" (26) with the "*potential* of both" (26). Meland sees Howe's essay, "The Story of America" as "a valuable tool in realizing the decolonizing potential within our students" (26) for the way it "questions colonialist authority" and "seeks to share authority between the various genres of writing that appear in [it]" (30). In her article, "Making It Work: a Model of Tribalography as Methodology," White Earth Anishinaabeg scholar Jill Doerfler explores how tribalography can be a key to an "ethical Native literary criticism" by balancing "rights and responsibilities via a system of relationships... which necessitate reciprocity" (65). Such a methodology can reflect the importance of "[understanding] the relationship between scholarship and the real life experiences of Natives" (65) for the discipline of American Indian Studies. Poet and critic Dean Rader has gone so far as to argue that "tribalography is the most significant theory of American Indigenous writing to emerge in the last twenty years–maybe ever"

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(vii). In our co-authored chapter on *Shell Shaker* in *Postindian Aesthetics: Affirming Indigenous Literary Sovereignty*, Kenneth Roemer and I noted that Howe's theory of tribalography sets her alongside Gerald Vizenor and N. Scott Momaday as "among the few Native novelists and poets who have written influential theoretical manifestos" (69).[16]

Beyond Howe's oeuvre, few works by Southeastern Indigenous writers have been read through the lens of tribalography. In the spirit of Howe's approach of storytelling, theoretical postulation, and critical analysis in "The Story of America," I have selected Joy Harjo's 2019 collection, *An American Sunrise,* as an example of an Indigenous Southeastern text which can be analyzed through a tribalographic lens, given its form and its fluid movement through time. Harjo's book is collection of poetry, memories, trickster and origin tales, and archival documents that tell the stories of Creek Removal, Southeastern returns, origins, mournings, and blessings. Like "The Story of America," *An American Sunrise* "questions colonialist authority" (Meland 30) in its resistance to settler stories about Southeastern Natives, particularly stories about nineteenth century Indian Removal. The text is also notable for Harjo's nods to the writers and artists who inspire her, such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Emily Dickinson, and T.C. Cannon. The titular poem, "was written first in response to a call for Golden Shovel poems, a form initiated by Terrance Hayes to honor Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry" (Harjo, "Singing"). In "An American Sunrise," the last words of each line are phrases in Gwendolyn Brooks's highly anthologized "We Real Cool." As in Brooks's poem, Harjo's repetition of the word, "we," highlights community elements that involve playing pool, listening to jazz, and drinking gin. Harjo notes that the poem is connected to her own interest in "Muskogean Indigenous peoples in the origin story of blues and jazz" (Harjo, "Singing").

Though *An American Sunrise* is rich for an extended tribalographic reading, my focus will be on those poems that depict aspects of Harjo's family's experience leaving traditional Creek lands in what becomes Alabama with her own return to the Southeast when she lives in Knoxville, Tennessee. The text sinuously moves back and forth in time, its prologue an explanation of how Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act which led to the "deportation," as historian Claudio Saunt describes this "assault on indigenous sovereignty" (xiv), of thousands of Southeastern Natives. Harjo notes that there existed "many trails of tears of tribal nations all over North America of indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed from their homelands by government forces" linking that experience to "indigenous peoples who are making their way up from the southern hemisphere" as a "continuation of the Trail of Tears" (xv); Harjo's rhetorical move underscores tribalographic connection-making through the continued and unjust trans-Indigenous[17] dispossession of land. It also complicates the only story of Indian Removal known by most majority culture U.S. citizens: Cherokee people walking across a dangerous and frozen landscape in the winter of 1838-1839. The final line of the prologue, "May we all find the way home" speaks to how the collection will not only be a tribute to her own Creek ancestors but also a far-reaching and inclusive homage to the land itself, of which we are all a part, as seen in the final poem, "Bless this Land." Howe's vision of the possibilities of tribalography for consensus building are epitomized in the ending of "Bless this Land," when Harjo riffs on Woody Guthrie: "These lands aren't our lands. These lands aren't your lands. We are this land" (108). Natives and non-Natives are defined as the land, sacred and unownable.

Following the prologue, Harjo includes a map of Creek Removal, with this caption: "This is only one trail. There were many trails of tears from the homelands of the Muscogee Creek Nation west, just as there were for the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, and many other tribal nations" (xvi). Harjo notes in the book's acknowledgments that this map comes from Christopher Haveman's 2018 monograph, *Bending Their Way Onward: Creek Indian Removal in the Documents*.

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Haveman's book contains a total of fifteen maps of the routes taken from Alabama to Indian Territory by the Creeks from the period of 1827-1837, including "voluntary" and "forced" journeys which he describes variously including as "emigrations," "removals," and relocations" (iii-iv), with some overland Removals but also many water Removals via southeastern rivers and the Gulf of Mexico.

One of the ways that *An American Sunrise* tribalographically engages with ancestors is through the story of Harjo's grandfather Monahwee Okfuskee, a Red Stick chief, whose Removal to Indian Territory began on September 17, 1836, with Detachment 3. Harjo notes that Detachment 3 "was conducted to Indian Territory by Dr. R.W. Williams on behalf of the Alabama Emigrating Company" (46). In *Bending Their Way Onward*, Haveman explains that "the Alabama Emigrating Company was composed largely of land speculators, many of whom had cheated the Creeks out of their reserves" (244). The "Journal of Occurrences" maintained by Lieutenant Edward Deas, included in Haveman's book, tracked the journey of Detachment 3 from their departure from Talladega, Alabama, on September 17, 1836, to their arrival at Ft. Gibson on January 23, 1837. Detachment 3's was mostly an overland journey, but Deas spends a good deal of time documenting what occurs during its Mississippi River crossing, the preparations for which commenced on November 1. That day began the "operation for ferrying Indian Horses and Ponies across the Mississippi" (316), and by November 6, the majority of the 2,696 Creeks in the detachment (308) and their belongings had been loaded onto boats. Deas notes that "Two of the Chiefs have refused to go by water as many of the Indians have a prejudice against steam boats" (317), one of whom was Harjo's ancestor, Monahwee. It was decided that a group of Creeks led by Monawhee[18] and Tuscoona Hadjo would meet up with the rest of the detachment on the far bank of the White River in Arkansas where the boats would land after journeying south on the Mississippi and then up the smaller tributary. The reunion

of the detachment turned out to be a slow process that occurred at various points along the journey across Arkansas, but the disparate groups were finally completely reunited in early January in between Little Rock and Ft. Gibson.

The chiefs' "prejudice against steam boats" was well founded, as evidenced by the story of Sin-e-cha, which Harjo includes in a piece called "Mvskoke Mourning Song" in *An American Sunrise*. Sin-e-cha was aboard the steamboat *Monmouth*, which sunk in the Mississippi River in October of 1837. "Mvskoke Mourning Song" is found poetry from an interview with Elsie Edwards in a 1937 issue of *Indian-Pioneer History*. Harjo's piece focuses on the oral tradition embedded in Sin-e-cha's story, her song of Removal: "I have no more land. I am driven away from home, driven up the red waters, let us all go, let us all die together and somewhere upon the banks we will be there" (51). Edwards includes the heart-wrenching detail that Sin-e-cha's song was sung by others onboard the *Monmouth* when it sank. Haveman describes how the steamboat was traveling with six others up the Mississippi from New Orleans, when it took a western route around Profit Island, just north of Baton Rouge, instead of taking the eastern route that it should have. Another steamboat crashed into it, causing the cabin to detach from the hull and the boat to sink (225-226). Approximately 300 hundred of the 700 onboard, mostly Creek refugees, died in the accident. According to Yvonne Lewis Day, of the Baton Rouge Genealogical and Historical Society, most of the bodies of those who died in the crash washed ashore near Port Allen and were buried in unmarked, mass graves (Bethencourt). These water crossings of Mvskoke peoples in Harjo's *An American Sunrise* underscore the complex undertaking that was Southeastern Indian Removal. Boat voyages across the Gulf of Mexico were as much of a Trail of Tears as were the overland journeys, and New Orleans played a prominent role, alongside Memphis, for Mississippi River embarkations.

An American Sunrise, like *Shell Shaker*, operates as a "form of strategic counter-Removal" (Anderson, "On Native Ground") by a contemporary Native writer whose ancestors were forced from their homelands by the Indian Removal Act. Such a textual

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"counter-Removal" operates in the same way that Meland suggests Howe's "The Story of America" does: by "[questioning] colonialist authority" and "[sharing] authority between the various genres of writing that appear in [it]" (30). Some of the poetry in the text was presumably written during Harjo's tenure as endowed chair at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, such as "Exile of Memory" which describes a return to the Southeast. This return is one of trepidation, as the speaker begins, "Do not return,/We were warned by one who knows things/You will only upset the dead" (6). Despite such fears, the speaker describes the first night in a "condo above the Tennessee River," during which "Those who continued to keep the land/Despite the imposition of newcomers/And the forced exile of our relatives/All night, they welcomed us/All night, the stomp dancers/All night, the shell shakers/All night circle after circle made a spiral/To the Milky Way" (8). Harjo's poem demonstrates the possibility of Southeastern Indigenous returns through its depiction of welcoming ancestor spirits, despite the generations of trauma caused by Removal. This act of creating poetry out of genocide is much like an iron pot Harjo describes in both her free verse poem "Washing My Mother's Body" in *An American Sunrise* and in her memoir, *Poet Warrior*. In the poem, an extended metaphor for spiritual caretaking, the speaker describes the iron pot: "My mother had the iron pot given to her by her Cherokee grandmother,/whose mother gave it to her, given to her by the U.S. government/on the Trail of Tears./She grew flowers in it" (31). Harjo's creations are the flowers of intergenerational trauma, and they teach us something about the history of Indian Removal in the Southeast and about its successes and failures. This interconnection of history and poetry and memories and trickster tales and blessings demonstrates the relevance of a tribalographic approach because as Howe explains, "the landscape of Native stories may remain just beyond the grasp of the reader if the

stories are pressed into narrow categories of what is fiction and what is historical truth" ("The Story of America" 46).

Part III: *Nukfokechi*

LeAnne Howe's work often weaves Choctaw language into English, and I have previously written about the ways that her stories, novels, poems, and plays "Choctalk."[19] This idea is derived from her usage of the phrase, "Choctalking on Other Realities," the title of a short story in her collection *Evidence of Red* first published in 2005, a one-woman play performed at the University of Illinois in 2009, and her 2013 award-winning memoir/travelogue, and I define it as a form of "cultural coding, the way in which one can speak or express through a Choctaw worldview" (5). Howe Choctalks in "The Story of America" in which she discusses the term *nukfokechi* to make a point about the relationship between language and creation. This relationship between language and creation is the central theme of the essay: that the U.S. founders heard a story told about nation-building by Indigenous peoples and created the story of their own nation. Howe suggests that it is important to understand *nukfokechi* in order to understand tribalography:

> Before I continue with the scholarly account of tribalography, I want to tell you a Choctaw story. My tribe's language has a mysterious prefix that when combined with other words represents a form of creation. It is *nuk* or *nok*, and it has to do with the power of speech, breath, and mind. Things with *nok* or *nuk* attached to them are so powerful they create. For instance, *nukfokechi* brings forth knowledge and inspiration. A teacher is *nukfoki*, the beginning of action. *Nuklibisha* is to be in a state of passion, and *nukficholi* means to hiccup, or breath that comes out accidentally. (30)[20]

Howe, herself, is *nukfoki*, teaching us a form of Indigenous critical methodology. As previously noted, Howe has described the term "Native South" as "a fiction," ("It's About Story"), and I would argue that fiction is much like the United States in "The Story of

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America," a story inspired by, but not created by, Native peoples. The question then becomes, how do we decolonize our readings of Southeastern Indigenous literatures? Tribalography is, of course, one way, as I have attempted to demonstrate in my reading of *An American Sunrise* here.

Given Howe's own reliance on Choctaw language in her body of work, we might also consider hermeneutic approaches that privilege Indigenous knowledge through tribal languages. One example is reading Cherokee writers through epistemological constructs such as *Gadugi*, as Mae Miller Claxton has done with Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle's essays[21] and as Sarah Muse Isaacs has done in her interpretation of the tribe's oral stories. Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd has argued that *yakni patafa*, Chickasaw for "split" or "furrowed land" provides a critical praxis to "provide some deeper understanding toward the continual return of exegesis" in which exists the possibility of Indigenous peoples' returns to Southeastern "spaces as agentic participants capable of determining their own pasts and futures beyond those of the vested and occupying nation-states" ("A Return to the South" 619). *Yakni patafa* stands in contrast to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County in which "the prior presence" of Natives peoples, as Byrd notes, "[is required] to locate his own authority to write convincingly and compellingly about the place" ("Souths as Prologues "18). In LeAnne Howe's *Miko Kings: an Indian Baseball Story*, the early twentieth century physicist protagonist Ezol Day, writes a theoretical paper arguing that Choctaw and European Americans experienced time and space differently, based on the way Choctaws represent time linguistically. Day's theory is exemplified through the word, *okchamali*, meaning "both blue and green," which she argues signifies "life," considering that it might also refer to "the blue and green swamplands" of the origin place of the Choctaw peoples and attributes a temporal aspect to the word: "*Okchamali* could be a description of a place name of a primeval epoch when the sky and the sea were so

close that there was almost no atmosphere in between... *Okchamali* then becomes a descriptive remnant, the color of a time that the ancient Choctaws experienced" (38). Ezol Day further explains that the temporal aspects of the language rely on verbs: "We have evidence in our language that our people experienced other dimensions through our use of particles and verbs which attend to specific movements in and out of spacetime" (39). I would suggest that it is possible to consider this idea outside of the bounds of Howe's novel. If we can read the blue-green swamplands of the Gulf South through *okchamali*, in its temporal and material aspects, what might we learn about how to exist in such spaces? How to live in the Gulf South is a question that is explored in the writing, photography, and documentary film of Houma artist and activist, Monique Verdin, whose body of work would be rich for consideration within the linguistic and temporal framework of *okchamali*.

The significance of language as cultural key is explored in Robin Wall Kimmerer's bestselling essay collection, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Kimmerer recounts her challenges learning to speak Potawatomi from various sources including an in-person class led by the nine remaining elders who fluently speak the language at the annual tribal gathering, in an online language revitalization class, and from an Ojibwe dictionary. She is deeply moved by one of the elders who explained the urgency of learning Potawatomi: "It's not just the words that will be lost... The language is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world. It's too beautiful for English to explain" (50). Despite her desire to learn, Kimmerer struggles with a language comprised of seventy percent verbs, noting, "70 percent of the words have to be conjugated, and 70 percent have different tenses and cases to be mastered" (53). She also explains other differences from English: "Potawatomi does not divide the world into masculine and feminine" and "[nouns] and verbs both are animate and inanimate" (53). At one point, even though she knows her tribe's language is nearly extinct because of settler colonial practices that include the inhumane punishment of

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Potawatomi-speaking children in boarding schools such as literally washing their mouths out with soap (50), she is so overwhelmed by the linguistic difficulty that she is ready to quit her studies (53). What nearly stops Kimmerer is what she names "the grammar of animacy," as she tries to understand how the word "bay," a body of water as understood in English, could be a verb. Then she has a revelation that she describes as "[hearing] the zap of synapses firing" (55) and elaborates in this way:

> In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift into the sand. A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*... But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to *be* a bay—releases the bay from its bondage and lets it live. 'To be a bay' holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that too. (55)

Kimmerer realizes that the grammar of animacy is what she has needed to describe her experiences in the woods as a botanist. She says, "this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us. And the vestiges of boarding schools, the soap-wielding missionary wraiths, hang their heads in defeat" (55). Kimmerer's example demonstrates the connectedness of Indigenous languages and, therefore Indigenous cultures, to the earth, both land and water, a concept that is akin to LeAnne Howe's vision of embodied tribalography.

The "Native South" is a story, a "fiction" (69) as Howe calls it, one that has been created to organize academic ideas about Indigenous peoples in today's U.S. Southeast. The term may or may not be embraced by scholars and writers, Native and non-Native; regardless, it can only give us the briefest glimpse of the land and its peoples because it is an exterior classification, one that limits the subjectivity of discrete

tribal nations and individual citizens. Can we lose the label and listen more closely to diverse Indigenous languages and cultural productions, especially their expressions of kinship, their connections with peoples and lands and waters, or as Howe describes it, "the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another" (42)? In the U.S. Southeast, it is certain that we must "[reckon]" (Saunt xix) with the history and legacy of Indian Removal, including its silencings, its dispersals, and its contemporary returns. As Claudio Saunt has noted in *Unworthy Republic: the Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory*, such a reckoning never happened (xix), but I believe it is one of many decolonial moves necessary within the academy and beyond for an ethical Indigenous literary praxis, and perhaps, the means to "imagine otherwise" in these lands and waters, previously and still, home to Muscogean, Siouan, Algonquian, and Iroquoian peoples.

Notes

[1] See *LeAnne Howe at the Intersection of Southern and Native American Literature*.
[2] See Melanie Benson Taylor's discussion of LeAnne Howe's work in *Reconstructing the Native South: American Indian Literature and the Lost Cause* (24).
[3] See *The People Who Stayed: Southeastern Indian Writing after Removal* edited Hobson, McAdams, and Walkiewicz (19).
[4] See also Caison's *Red States* on the topic of "white southern nativism" (3).
[5] Such references to "Native Southerners" can be found in spaces as diverse as Elizabeth Ellis's 2023 monograph *The Great Power of Small Nations: Indigenous Diplomacy in the Gulf South*, a fall 2024 exhibit at UNC-Pembroke's Museum of the Southeast American Indian entitled "Native South Community Art Show," or Dr. Marvin Richardon's 2019 lecture at East Carolina University's Indigenous People's Day event.
[6] https://lwcc.ecu.edu/indigenous-land-acknowledgement/#:~:text=We%20acknowledge%20the%20Tuscarora%20people,and%20air%20that%20Greenville%20consumes.
[7] https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/65926

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[8] According to John DePriest (Choctaw Nation), a linguist at Tulane University, "Ohoyo Chishba Osh" is an unusual construction, and that "most people refer to her as *Ohoyo Osh Chishba*" which roughly translates as "woman who is unknown."
[9] See also Chadwick Allen's *Earthworks Rising: Mound Building in Native Literature and Arts* for a discussion of his collaboration with Howe and his own readings of Indigenous earthworks through an embodied tribalographic lens.
[10] See *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation," and *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.
[11] Bulbancha Liberation Radio is an "Indigenous led micro-grid communication and collective power building station based in Bulbancha," per its website: https://www.bvlbancharadio.net/.
[12] https://nanihbvlbancha.net/
[13] *Yakoke* to John DePriest for insights about Choctaw language and its epistemological groundings.
[14] The practice I am describing is not uncommon. In the field of Native American and Indigenous studies, there are several examples of settler scholars privileging Indigenous epistemologies. An early example is James Cox's *Muting White Noise: Native American and European Novel Traditions* (2006) and more recently, Anne Stewart's *Angry Planet: Decolonial Fiction and the American Third World* (2022).
[15] See Bauerkemper, Horan and Kim, Squint (*LeAnne Howe at the Intersections of Southern and Native American Literature*) and Howe ("Embodied Tribalography").
[16] Craig Womack and Daniel Heath Justice are also important Indigenous fiction writers who have written landmark theoretical pieces.
[17] See Chadwick Allen's *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Study*.
[18] Haveman uses alternate spellings including Monawee and Menawa. Harjo notes that "Menawa" is a variation of her ancestor's name (*An American Sunrise* 5).
[19] See Ch. 1 of *LeAnne Howe at the Intersection of Southern and Native American Literature*
[20] DePriest notes that *nukfokechi* "seems to be more 'a reminder' than a teacher.'" I suspect that Howe was using the term as defined Cyrus Byington's *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language* (294).
[21] See *North Carolina Literary Review*'s 2023 special feature section focused on Native American literature of North Carolina, edited by Squint.

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