Listening to ghosts: 
an alternative (non)argument

Malea Powell

Do you remember when you twisted the wax from your ears and shouted to me, 'You finally speak!' because now you could finally hear? . . . and from the pain of forgetting we almost agreed.

—Wendy Rose, “For the Scholar Who Wrote a Book About an American Indian Literary Renaissance”

This is a story.

Hueston Woods (Oxford, Ohio), 1997

The sun rises above the heartbeat blue of this man-made lake and illumines the beach with the stark-sharp shadows that only a midwestern morning can withstand. This is the spot where, blanket and book in hand, I held theory-communion with a deer. She’d come to investigate my readings of Kaja Silverman; I’d come to hear the voices of my ancestors, their songs woven into the wind burning my cheeks as I tried to discern “the subject of semiotics.” We drew breath together, the deer and I, and the first shadow of this writing rose from the long grass at the water’s edge as I stood on that beach, all my relations peering over my shoulder, creeping into text.


This is a well-ordered essay. This is a ghost story.

I think a lot about ghosts. No, not white-sheeted apparitions, but the ghosts who appear in the stories we tell each other here in the academy. Not only those arisen from the mess of blood and bones upon which “America” is literally built, but also those rooted in other knowledges, other ways of knowing, other ways of being and becoming that frequently go unheard and unsaid in much scholarly work. For me, ghost stories are both the stories of material colonization and the webs and wisps of narrative that are woven around, under, beneath, behind, inside, and against the dominant narratives of “scholarly discourse.” I think a lot about what ghost stories can teach us, how in telling them I might both honor the knowledge that isn’t honored in universities and do so in a way that interweaves these stories with more recognizable academic “theorizing” as well. For me, this is the most exciting component of “alternative discourses” — telling a story that mixes worlds and ways, one that listens and speaks, one that participates in Lyotard’s language games as both a rule-governed subject and a paralogic trickster, a use, as deCerteau would have it, that is more tactical than strategic, a pose that uses historical knowledge as a heuristic in creating a written, writing self (Royster 2001b).

Much of how I came to know myself as an academic has been predicated on what Janice Gould has called the fundamental relationship of Indians to the academy; that is, “there is not a university in this country that is not built on what was once native land” (1992, 81-82). The histories of Native peoples on this continent are shadows, present only in their absence from the promises of Manifest Destiny and New Age spirituality: these shadows, the “names and nicknames” of ancestors are stories (Vizenor 1994, 14). These are troublesome stories, rife with blood and anger, conciliation, assimilation, blood quantum, enrollment, removal, resistance. My writing has always been an attempt to live in the shadows of presence. To insist upon an existence, a voice. To write myself and my body into comprehensible space. But human existence is haunted by leavings, by to flesh.

I got my first ta

It is a circle of s

I don’t anymore
dian time” here
clock-watching
similar drawing
Mexico where
America wait
through life—

denotes have m
of space, the sp
sun, another set

When I enter a
also” an Ind
leagues’ eyes, a
also” is the
Euroamericans
tribal nations. In
ference prevented
an interesting a
funding from the
many who were
disguised as a c
exactly how many
white-laced
what Robert Al
For Warrior, s
American Indian
ences of others.

One thing I know of

uncertain hum

counter causes:
points of entry
those like me. I am
in every direct
earl work: An
by leavings, by disappearance. In disappearing, the writing moved from paper to flesh.

I got my first tattoo the summer I wrote my master’s thesis.

It is a circle of spirals on my left wrist. I used to wear a watch on my left wrist. I don’t anymore. Lots of people would be happy if I said something about “Indian time” here. If I claimed that my tattoo was a way to step away from the clock-watching of the Western world. But it’s not. The spirals roughly mimic similar drawings on the cliffs at Puye—a petroglyph site in northern New Mexico where some of the oldest inscriptions on the continent of North America wait for us to read them. The spiral describes the path we take through life—recursive, fluid, maze-like. Both the visible line and the space it denotes have meaning here, one an erasure of the other—the line an erasure of space, the space an affirmation of the line. The spiral also represents the sun, another set of meanings delineated by dis- and re-appearance.

When I enter a classroom, in my students’ eyes I enter as a teacher who is “also” an Indian. When I speak at a department meeting, in many of my colleagues’ eyes, I speak as a faculty member who is “also” an Indian. In that “also” is the reiteration of the very rhetoric of empire that enabled Euroamericans to found and build their universities on lands that belonged to tribal nations. During the fall of 1999 I attended a “Native American Literature” conference in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. The cost and location of the conference prevented many Native scholars from attending, so we ended up with an interesting assortment of Native scholars who had managed to scavenge for funding from their home institutions and non-Native scholars and hobbyists, many who were excited about the promise of sun, sea, surf, and free drinks disguised as a conference. Knowledge hit hard in Puerto Vallarta. I now know exactly how many Indians it takes to start an intellectual revolution, and how many white-ladies-who-love-Indians it takes to remind me of why we need what Robert Allen Warrior has called “intellectual sovereignty” (1995, xxiii). For Warrior, such sovereignty is “a cultural criticism that is grounded in American Indian experiences but which can draw on the insights and experiences of others who have faced similar struggles” (1995, xxiii).

One thing I know for sure. My own scholarly practices are firmly rooted at the crossroads between what Gerald Vizenor calls “trickster hermeneutics” (“the uncertain humor and shimmer of survivance”) and “narrative chance” (“the counter causes in language games”) (1994, 15; 66). This crossroads offers points of entry into discourses, language games, meant to discipline me and those like me. A signpost reads “look for other ways of being here.” Roads run in every direction. One road takes me to the standard story of my own scholarly work: American Indian public intellectuals . . . negotiations of dominant
notions of Indian-ness... tactical authenticity... rhetorics of survivance... pow-wow observations and postcolonial theory... expands the discipline of rhetoric and composition... aggressive anti-imperial pedagogies... and so on, and so on. It is not that I don't believe in that story. It's not that I'm not committed to that story. It's that there's so much more involved in being able to have this story than the telling of it can hold. The having spills over, the seemingly unutterable excess of the story. Another road reminds me that I do this "alternative" work to save my own life, to give sense and meaning to my existence as a human, that the simple possibility of what I have elsewhere called "mixed-blood rhetoric" is at the center of my having a story to tell at all, and that I am haunted by that having. Another road haunts me differently. This is the road of remembrance, one traveled by those who have walked this earth before me, literally and figuratively. Native people like Sarah Winemucca Hopkins and Charles Eastman and Gertrude Bonnin and Susan La Flesche, Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa and Little Turtle—those who encountered Euroamerican culture, learned the language of the colonizers, and negotiated the demands of "civilized" life as they critiqued, resisted, and survived its impositions.

CCCC2001, Session K.30, "Resistant Communities: Indians Writing (and Speaking) as Indians":

Joyce Rain Anderson and Janice Gould talk about tribal language traditions, both oral and written, and both talk about language reclamation work within their tribal communities, Wampapaq and Koyang'auwi Maidu, respectively. I look around the room as we all ponder the weight of language loss, and thus the miracle of recent language revivals, among the indigenous tribal nations of North America. What does it mean to speak as an Indian to have "the words to carry a friend from her death to the stars correctly"? (Harjo 1994, 3).

Because of relocation, loss of land base and the dispersment of tribal members, Miami language quickly deteriorated until the last of the fluent speakers had passed on by the mid-1900's. What has survived into modern times are several prayers, songs, Miami naming practices and several elders who remember the language spoken... [Miami] are actively pursuing revitalization efforts and have active language programs... (The Miami Language 2001)

Ilaataweeyankwi. We speak such a language.

More than once during these forty minutes the listeners in this room have been moved to tears. We are crying in a conference room in a multinational hotel. The simple knowledge of Native people speaking our languages again makes us weep with joy and with sorrow. We wonder aloud if the other folks who attend this conference would be interested in language reclamation. We ponder the organizational commitment to Students' Rights to Their Own

Language an
Language and question if that includes Native students and their rights to re-
claim their own languages.

So what does Lyotard have to do with language reclamation? What does de
Certeau have to do with intellectual sovereignty? In drawing on the “insights
and experiences of others” who at least have faced similar projects of alter/
nativity, why might I turn to French theory? Can I do so without worshiping
at the altar of the wisdom of the Theorist, without committing that act of cul-
tural homage that so angered Barbara Christian in “The Race for Theory?”
Good question. Christian frames her 1987 essay by claiming that “there has
been a takeover in the literary world by Western philosophers from the old lit-
erary elite” who have separated the “author” from the text and thrown “mean-
ing” out the window (51). This, she says, they have done for their own
purposes, and because the literature of the West “has become pallid,” leaving
critics less concerned with literature than “with other critics’ texts” (51). Fur-
ther, because these critics have the power “to be published, and thereby to
determine the ideas that are deemed valuable,” they have turned this Theory into
a commodity in a continuing race for “academic hegemony” (52–53). Chris-
tian does not see this turn to Theory as innocent. Even as it lays claims to ideas
that Christian claims “her folk” (African American women) have long under-
stood—imagining text as “the hieroglyph, a written figure that is both sensual
and abstract” and “dynamic and fixed—this theory still wants to imagine it-
self as “major” in relation to the rest of the world, still “tries to convince the
rest of the world that it is major” (52, 54). For Christian, “they” are out to si-
lence “us” with Theory.

The inevitable parallel arises here—“alternative discourse”—what discourse is
this Other discourse alternative to? Academic discourse, after all, isn’t at the
center of the lives of most of the humans on the globe. As Jackie Royster re-
cently remarked: “academic discourse is an invention, not a natural phenom-

enon” (2001, Academic). And why am I even interested in alternatives at all
when we already have so many categories for describing what we do here in the
academy—American Indian Studies, English Studies, Composition Studies,
Rhetoric Studies, Literary Studies—that we have lost sight of the simple fact that
the only difference between a history, a theory, a poem, an essay, is the one that
we have ourselves imposed. We have cut the wholeness of knowledge into little
bits, scattered them to the four winds and now begin to reorganize them into cat-
egories invented to enable empire by bringing order to chaos and civilization to
the savage. So, is this turn to alternatives just another ploy to convince ourselves
that the academy is the center, that we are major? Or is this a genuine turn to a
embrace “alternative assumptions about discourse” (Royster 2001a)?

The ghosts raised by Christian’s configuration rise before me. As resonant as
I find her objections to Theory, I also find her separation of “literature” and
“theory” into distinct and antagonistic categories troubling in the face of her claims that women of color are theorizing. “In narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language”—in other words, in “literature” (1987, 52). Of course we theorize in literature, but what about her “them,” those white-guy-philosopher-types? Don’t they also theorize in literature, in stories and riddles and proverbs? Yes, yes, her point is about “kinds” of theory, “kinds” of writing, and the kinds of values assigned to those theories and writings, but assigning value—and allowing assigned values to intimidate and silence us—is also what troubles me here. I am unwilling to cede to what Christian calls “literary critical theory” the place of Theory that towers over and intimidates story/stories. To do so is to participate in a project of internal colonialism whereby the colonized believe in and accede to the terms and hierarchies of the colonizers. What Christian marks out as white-guy-philosopher-type Theory (and what we call Academic Discourse) is stories and riddles and proverbs which we’ve been taught are “special” and central to the survival of “civilization” and Western culture because, in fact, they are the stories that create the rhetoric of civilization, the riddles that inaugurate Western culture, proverbs which make us believe that the earth is made of folks either “savage” or “civilized.”


I am sitting in a cement-blocked classroom where this presentation is taking place. Ellen Cushman begins her talk with an explanation about the connections between her and the subjects of her research, welfare recipients from an upstate New York community. As she invokes those days when she and her husband were welfare recipients, she begins to weep. Some of us weep with her. When she is finished, Jackie Royster (one of the featured speakers for this conference) offers advice to us, a collection of mostly grad-student scholars. She says something like “your work should move you.” I thought about this for a long time. Several years later I am sitting in the living room of an old Craftsmen home in Lincoln, NE. A young Chicana scholar is reading a paper for “the minority lit group”—a friendly collection of local scholars who listen and respond to one another’s work. She is about halfway through the paper, recounting the death of an important Chicano writer and activist, when she begins to weep. She apologizes and says, “I’ll never be able to read this paper at a conference. At conferences you have to pretend not to care about your work.” When she is finished reading I tell her what Jackie said: “your work should move you.” She agrees. But we both know that crying at conferences is generally not allowed, is not interpreted as “scholarly” or “professional” behavior. And I wonder anew at a discipline that asks its participants to dedicate their lives to its expansion, but that requires a kind of imperial objectivity, a gaze that sees but rarely feels. And I wonder why it is that I so often hear the words “Now I see” and “are limited, but...”

“This is a box,” Dennis and me (1988), in which and “civilization’s imaginings” is out of the seen

The colonizers of Anglo-ignoble had obviously one radical theory of the Indian cosas

Pearce links the

which Slotkin offers European culture to cut off the Indian (1973, 16). This...
that I so often do cry during conferences. And I hear Janice Gould in my head: “Now I see how we must decide, how we must make a choice. We think we are limited, but forms are tricky things” (1996, 17).

“This is a book about a belief” (xvii). Thus begins Roy Harvey Pearce’s now-classic *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (1988), in which he makes the now commonplace claim that both “savagism” and “civilization” are simply beliefs, ideas (constructions, discourses, imaginings) imposed by Europeans and Euroamericans as a way to make sense out of the seeming chaos of this “New World” (1988, 3). Pearce writes:

*The colonial concern with the savage Indian was a product of the tradition of Anglo-French primitivist thinking—an attempt to see the savage, the ignoble savage, as a European manqué. When, by the 1770’s, the attempt had obviously failed, Americans were coming to understand the Indian as one radically different from their proper selves . . . [they] worked out a theory of the savage which depended on an idea of a new order in which the Indian could have no part.* (1988, 4 emphasis mine)

Pearce links this new “theory” about Indians to a burgeoning nationalism, and emphasizes that this new “American” came “to know who and what he was and where he was going,” to know [his] past and [his] future” most effectively through comparison with “the Indian who, as a savage, had all past and no future” (1988, 135). Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (1973) offers a slew of companion stories to Pearce’s book about “beliefs.” Slotkin’s “Americans” are created in relation to and at the expense of indigenous peoples. Newly arrived European colonists, according to Slotkin, brought their own “myths” about the order of the universe; their continuous contact with what they saw as “primitive” cultures “ensured that the colonists would be preoccupied with defining, for themselves and for others” the nature of their relationship with this “other” (1973, 16). This process of defining ultimately resulted in the violence through which Slotkin claims “America” was constructed as a utopian space, able to offer European settlers the opportunity to “regenerate their fortunes, their spirits ... their church and nation” by removing the one obstacle in their way—the Indian (1973, 5). In Richard Drinnon’s *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (1990), the project of imagining “America” is seen as primarily a project of destroying memory—“they sought to cut off the Remembrance of them from the Earth,” writes Captain John Mason of the colonial intent during the Pequot War of 1637 (quoted in Drinnon 1990, xii). The thread of “belief” which runs through the analyses of these three white-guy-American-Studies-scholar-types is that “the Indian” was (is) a figure against which “the American” can be rendered from the raw materials of “the Euro-colonist,” and rendered most effectively by making “the Indian” a thing of the past.
My troubling with Christian’s story is not to say that hegemony doesn’t “exist” and that these discourses that have come to be dominant don’t have power over material bodies. Clearly, as Pearce, Slotkin, and Drinnon have all argued in detail, discourses matter. Dominant discourses are not “merely imaginative”; they are an “integral part of European material civilization and culture” (Said 1993, 87). I just want to suggest that one way to change the manner in which they matter is, quite simply, to divest them of their initial capitals—Theory to theory, Discourse to discourse—and hear them as what they are: stories that explain how the world works. If dominant narratives only attain dominance through imagining themselves whole in contrast to other/Other narratives, then we must imagine those narratives differently, imagine ourselves in a different relationship to them. The challenge, then, is to imagine an alternative, not an Alternative, one that confronts difference and race, racism and empire, in the very discourses that bind us. This imagining “must penetrate to our very bones” (Okawa 1999, 141). It “require[s] stamina and perseverance, a preparedness to incur risk, often a willingness to absorb the consequences of revolt, whether overt or covert” (Churchill 1996, 286). Remember Pearce—“this is a book about a belief”—and believe differently. Better yet, remember Captain John Mason—“to cut off Remembrance of them from the Earth”—and remember differently.

Tattooing is a way of disappearing, of rewriting trails across the signifying space of my body, reimagining the stories that can be heard in the text that is my flesh, inscribing an accumulation of histories alongside the history told by the privilege of my skin color, the seeming certainty of my biology. A needle slipping into skin, marking, inscribing, erasing. A pen marking paper, ink injected into wood fiber, soaking through. Binding layer upon layer of accumulated blood, skin, paper, ink. Binding. Leaving a space to mark the presence of absence—a story tying me to this land of indigenous bones and blood. Ghosts. University buildings sunk deep into my skin, alleyways where young gay men are beaten and bloodied, classrooms where young middle-class white students imagine themselves oppressed. All this anchored in the land, my skin.

**A new French and Indian War, part one:** Lyotard offers a flexible, if imperfect, concept of participation in the world as a language game. Language is a game in which we occupy stations/positions through which narration moves. What we can say to each other is governed by “rules”—we play by those rules in order to be heard. There are ways, however, to say “that which cannot be said” but to do so runs the risk of encountering terror (the coercions that keep us from breaking the rules) and of not being heard. Consensus keeps the rules in place, keeps us in place, and remember, this consensus is held together through terror, not justice (Lyotard 1984). “But there are language games in which the important thing is to listen, in which the rule deals with audition.

Such is the game one listens, if Thebeaud 1986 is correct, the other game is parallel and these strands of the names of metaphor, then, for gather up the them as relatively listening to gl:

In the early language Baldwin Jr., a get a master’s early work of literary series of cour. ROM—to bring

Lafayette, IN, Waapaasihki (formed by a few these kids had keep their stor children speak the of Native child language that nan, first packet of phrases: alénigoo), eeyilikwii

A new French Michel de Certeau groups and in which they live “scattered over imposed upon methods of potentially controlled, limited strategies are “circu- tired,” and they are composed of ta...
Such is the game of the just. And in this game, one speaks only insomuch as one listens, that is, one speaks as a listener, not as an author" (Lyotard and Thebaud 1985, 71–72). Listening becomes a way to justice in another game, the other game, the alternative discourse. Participation in both of these games is parallel and contiguous, simultaneous. Joy Harjo writes: "We gather up these strands from the web of life. They shiver with our love, as we call them the names of our relatives and carry them to our home" (1994, xvi). A metaphor, then, for a kind of scholarly work that listens, and speaks, doubly. We gather up the strands from our multiple participations + we love them, name them as relatives and take them home = alternatives to academic discourses = listening to ghosts.

In the early 1990s the Miami Nations of Oklahoma and Indiana began holding language workshops. This was made possible through the work of Daryl Baldwin Jr., an Indian Miami descendant of Little Turtle, who took the time to get a master's degree in linguistics in order to be able to understand the scholarly work of linguists who study our language so that he could then develop a series of course materials—booklets, cassette tapes and an interactive CD-ROM—to bring the language back to the people.

Lafayette, IN, July 2000: I am in the great room of a lodge overlooking Waapaashiki (the Wabash River) watching an impromptu puppet show performed by a few Miami children. The storyline is imperfect but as we watch these kids huddle behind their makeshift puppet-theatre table and struggle to keep their story afloat, many of us begin to cry. We are watching Miami children speak the language of our ancestors. We are hearing a new generation of Native children create themselves as Native people, as Miamis, in the language that named this land long before Europeans made the scene. I order the first packet of instructional materials immediately. I devour the words and phrases: aléní (man), miténhs (woman), pyaayaání (I come), iiyaaayaaíni (I go), eeyiihkwiíáííni (I am hungry), weehs’íinííáííni (I eat).

A new French and Indian War, part two: In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau argues for the importance of studying the use to which groups and individuals put the representations and behaviors of the society in which they live. This use, or making, is "a production, a poiesis," hidden and "scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of "production" and imposed upon by "a dominant economic order" to such an extent that the methods of possible consumption, the ways of using are themselves controlled, limited (1984, xii–xiii). For de Certeau, there are two basic practices of use possible in relation to this dominant order—strategies and tactics. Strategies are "circumscribed as proper," they postulate "a place that can be delimited," and they "serve as a base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats [to the dominant order] can be managed" (1984,
Strategies are, then, actions that are delimited by the propriety of the system. They are connected to the power of the dominant order, sustained by it. Tactics, contrarily, are not proper; they have no sense of “a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” (1984, xix). They don’t recognize the propriety of the system as binding. Tactics are “calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus” (1984, 37), a production of knowledge determined by its absence, not its presence, in discourses of power, which are “bound by [their] very visibility” (37). The place of the tactic, then, is “the space of the other,” able to insinuate itself into systems of dominance (37). De Certeau’s example of tactical use is that made by los indios (the indigenous inhabitants of Central and South America) of the products of Spanish colonization: “the Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them by force or by fascination to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within” (1984, 32). It is the ability of indigenous peoples to consume and not be consumed, “to remain other within the system” that has seemingly assimilated us, which maintains our “difference in the very space that the occupier was already organizing” (32). This is survivance.

Native scholars Joy Harjo (Muskogee) and Gloria Bird (Spokane), in the introduction to their edited collection *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: Contemporary Native Women’s Writings of North America*, argue that

We are coming out of one or two centuries of war, a war that hasn’t ended. Many of us at the end of the century are using the “enemy language” with which to tell our truths, to sing, to remember ourselves during these troubled times. . . . But to speak, at whatever the cost, is to become empowered rather than victimized by destruction. . . . These colonizers’ languages, which often usurped our own tribal languages or diminished them, now hand back emblems of our cultures, our own designs: beadwork, quilts if you will. We’ve transformed these enemy languages. (1997, 21-22)

To reinvent ourselves in English is, then, for many of us already alternative. We are all already alternative. What many of us are faced with now is the possibility of reinventing ourselves again, in the indigenous languages that named this continent. Muskogee scholar Craig Womack envisions a tribally based scholarly intervention, one that “emphasizes Native resistance movements against colonialism, confronts racism, discusses sovereignty and Native nationalism, seeks connections between literature [broadly conceived] and liberation struggles,” a kind of scholarly performance that is rooted in “land and culture” (1999, 11). Imagine that. Imagine an American scholarly practice that both confronts racism and roots itself in land and culture. A practice that challenges “the nature of what we have inherited in the discipline” (Womack 1999, 303). What will our models be? Our standards for tenure and promotion? Our guidelines for assessment? Our affirmative actions? How can, how could, this
be? An American scholarly practice that is local, particular, unremittingly honest about privilege and power and money and language? Imagine. We are, after all, as Momaday says "what we imagine"—the who, the what, the "that" we are (1975, 103).

I end this story, then, with an invitation, an invocation for all of us to listen, listen to the whispers of those continental ghosts. To feel their shadows skim along the surface of our skin. To write our bodies into text and reinvent our writings in another voice, another language. To use history and family to remember the land upon which we play. To play these language games lovingly, tenderly, remembering that "all acts of kindness are lights in the war for justice" (Harjo 1994, xv), all acts of scholarship are battles in a war of words, and of worlds.

Works Cited


Okawa, Gail Y. 1999. "Removing Masks: Confronting Graceful Evasion and Bad
Habits in a Graduate English Class.” Race, Rhetoric and Composition. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook. 124–43.


In recent years, many have raised questions in the special language. A model between language

Shirley Brice Heath in Language Communities (1983) has shown how thorough a grounding in the theory of writing is an important factor in the many forms of the academic work inside. J. Greer Graff (The Reader's Culture and Practice, 1987), and Richard Brandt (Literacy: An Introduction to the Theory, 1990). By 1995 a study on writing in the university showed how the way to understand the interconnections of the discourses between the academic and non-academic worlds, the people and the knowledge, is to look at the way the language is used and the role it plays in the social and cultural processes.