

Picking the Bones of Indigenous Literature

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*Indigenous literature reflects the diversity of peoples across the globe. Works by indigenous authors present a plethora of landscapes, architectures, aesthetics, music, traditions, and religious rituals. Although each culture is unique, this analysis utilizes Arnold Krupat's Indigenist critical literary theory to scrutinize burial rituals revealed in three novels portraying similarities from diverse communities. Some traditional rituals support a belief in regeneration or reincarnation while others secure a path to an afterlife. Regardless of the intended outcome, these ritualistic preparations of human bodies and bones denote the reverence of groups of indigenous peoples for the dead and their skeletal structure. The three novels are Louis Owens' *Wolf Song*, LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*. Each novel reveals burial practices and includes three basic concepts: Transference of indigenous knowledge from elder to youth, a specific process to care for the bodies and bones of the dead, and the purpose for following that process carefully - to insure the transference of the soul to the desired realm.*

Indigenous literature reflects the diversity of peoples across the globe. Works by indigenous authors present a plethora of landscapes, architectures, aesthetics, music, traditions, and religious rituals, each embracing and revealing aspects of “communal identity.”¹ Although each indigenous culture is unique, some traditions and practices found in such novels are similar across several communities. As a way to frame these similarities, Arnold Krupat’s “Indigenist” critical literary theory from his book *Red Matters*, interrogating literature through the lens of “persons with different bodies of systematic knowledge,”² allows a respectful and insightful

1. This evokes Indigenist literary critical theory. For more information about this theory, please see generally Arnold Krupat, 2002, *Red Matters: Native American Studies*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press), chapter 1 page numbers.

2. *Ibid.*, 6

view into the cultural communities depicted in these indigenous novels. One such practice involves the rituals and ceremonies for the care and storage of the bodies and bones of the deceased. Some traditional rituals support a belief in regeneration or reincarnation while others secure a path to an afterlife. Regardless of the intended outcome, these ritualistic preparations of human bodies and bones denote the reverence of groups of indigenous peoples for the dead and their skeletal structure. Even though peoples across the globe engage in diverse rituals for preserving or revering the dead, the fact that several indigenous groups from far-reaching geographical areas engage in similar rites and rituals for the dead is significant. Three novels that specifically include discourse concerning rituals involving the disposition of bones are Louis Owens' *Wolf Song*,³ LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker*,⁴ and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*.⁵ Each novel reveals practices of a specific indigenous people: the Salish of the Northwest, the Choctaw of Oklahoma and Mississippi, and the Maori of New Zealand, respectively. Specific ethnographic information concerning each indigenous community above illuminates the excerpts from each novel. As one moves through the passages and supporting materials, the traditional significance of bones for these indigenous groups emerges, whether these inner frameworks symbolize the cultural core of reincarnation or the traditional placeholder of the essence of life.

These burial and preservation rituals embody the importance of transferring a portion of the cultural identity, information, and knowledge from elder to youth, so the label of traditional has been attached. However, tradition is not simply the transfer of information from the past into the present. The word "tradition" comes from the Latin "tradere" which means to deliver and infers the continuation of "the handing down orally of customs, beliefs, stories, etc. from generation to generation."⁶ The intent of such a body of teachings is to perpetuate the societal culture, instill a sense of belonging for the individual to a specific group, and carry forward the harmonious existence within the indigenous community. This paper describes

3. Louis Owens, 1995, *Wolfsong*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press).

4. Howe, LeAnne. *Shell Shaker*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 2001.

5. Keri Hulme, 1986, *The Bone People*, (New York: Penguin Books).

6. David B. Guralnick, ed., 1971, *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, (New York: World Publishing), 499.

and analyzes ceremonies and rituals that relay physical and symbolic burial traditions of the Salish, Choctaw, and Maori peoples. Richard Handler asserts that tradition presents “a major ambiguity: does tradition refer to a core of inherited culture traits whose continuity and boundedness are analogous to that of a natural object, or must tradition be understood as a wholly symbolic construction?” He argues that tradition as symbolic is the “only viable understanding.” Tradition must be viewed as a learned process – rather than “an unchanging core of ideas and customs always handed down to us from the past.”⁷ Although traditions may change over time – new customs are added and some others forgotten – the value of tradition remains. Throughout this analysis, excerpts from the aforementioned novels and supporting ethnographic information reinforce the position that the burial rituals found in the three novels are simultaneously objective and symbolic. Objective ritualistic processes involving the physical bones of the dead are performed, the specifics of the process are transferred orally from generation to generation, and the proper performance of the ritual initiates a symbolic shift of the spirit or soul into an alternate realm.

Although the fictional pieces used for this analysis span diverse areas and lifestyles, all these three elements are present in each community. Geographically, the three indigenous groups are quite diverse. Louis Owens sets the reader in the Cascade Mountains of the contemporary northwestern United States, describing in great detail the valley plant life and the mountainous landscape with its lakes and glaciers. LeAnne Howe writes simultaneously of pre-Revolutionary War, eighteenth century life in the rich woodlands of the southeast region of the United States and urban life on a twentieth century Oklahoma reservation where tribal government and economic activities revolve around a casino. Keri Hulme’s novel places the reader along the New Zealand coast, describing an island lifestyle inundated with the ocean and its plant and wildlife. Regardless of time period or geographical setting or types of plant and animal life, each author brings into the discourse a transference of indigenous knowledge from elder to youth, the specific process

7. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Innekin, 1984, “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” *Journal of American Folklore* 97, no. 385: 1.

to care for the bodies and bones of the dead, and the purpose for following that process carefully – to ensure the transference of the soul or spirit to that desired alternate realm.

LOUIS OWENS – BONES IN THE STREAMS AND RIVERS

*He thought of the importance of water in the stories. The most powerful spirits lived in the water, and water separated the worlds of the living and dead. The world was an island in a great ocean. 'You can see how it makes sense,' his uncle had explained carefully. 'The rivers keep leaving but they're always here. People keep dying but there's always more of them.'*⁸

Much like the ever-present weave of streams and berry vines Louis Owens describes in *Wolf Song*,⁹ ancient traditions and contemporary themes are tangled throughout this text. Tom Joseph comes home from attending college in Southern California for his uncle's funeral, searching for his Indian identity but finding tribal traditions and cultural values disappearing like the "sacred cedar"¹⁰ trees being trucked off the mountains. Then Tom learns that the local entrepreneur, J.D. Hill, plans to drain sacred Image Lake to supply water for a mining project. Tom takes action, accidentally killing Hill, and becomes a fugitive fleeing across treacherous glaciers. The themes of a homecoming due to a death in the family and of a search for Native identity pervade the main plot of the novel, but traces of Salish traditions pointing to the significance of bones are also tangled in the thick undergrowth of the discourse.

For example, as Tom walks through his small hometown towards his mother's humble house, he thinks, "he felt as though he were passing from one world to another . . . as if he'd stepped out of one of those x-ray machines that made everything a shadowy silhouette of bones."¹¹ This contemporary imagery introduces the reader to the "essence" of this young man. Additionally, it describes the terrain

8. Owens, *Wolfsong*, 51-52.

9. This commentary is based on Lee Schweninger, 2008, "Cultural Identity, Storytelling, Place: Revision and Return in Louis Owens's *Wolfsong*." *Listening to the Land: Native American Literary Responses to the Landscape*, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press), 113-130.

10. *Ibid*, 113

11. Owens, *Wolfsong*, 24.

through which Tom travels – an inner conflict between two worlds. Outwardly, he is a strong, intelligent, young man, but, inwardly, a “shadowy silhouette” of crossed cultures and beliefs.

Throughout the novel, Tom attempts to solidify his Native identity by remembering his uncle’s stories. Somewhere in these stories, he should find purpose and clarity to sharpen the inner silhouette of bones that defines his indigenous essence. He remembered hunting trips and the lessons of traditional life he learned from his uncle:

Then he’d listened to his uncle’s stories in the dark, almost believing he could see the wolf spirit, staka’yu. . . But he’d learned that the wolf spirit brought deer to the man who possessed it. It wasn’t complicated. The man just had to walk up to the deer who came to give itself. The deer liked to be taken by such a man, and afterwards, if all was done properly, if their bones were sunk in a stream or pond, they would come back. ‘That’s the way it used to be,’ his uncle said. ‘In the real world, before everything became crazy!’¹²

Tom’s uncle refers to the “way it used to be” in the “real world,” inferring that world of old growth cedars, wolves, and bones is sane while the contemporary world of loggers, mines, and machinery is “crazy!” The conflict between these two worlds and ways of life persists throughout the novel. Owens entangles Tom’s search for his Native identity into Hill’s promise of jobs and economic stability for the people of the town through extracting natural resources at the expense of sacred sites. According to Lee Schweninger, “The juxtaposition of cutting sacred cedar and the uncle’s death implies that capitalistic destruction also involves the physical, spiritual, and familial lives and deaths of the people.”¹³ These two “deaths” at the beginning of the novel mirror the loss of cultural connections to the landscape and language, as well as the traditional values and stories. The uncle’s oral story explains that the deer give themselves to the man of that sane world, “if all was done properly,” referring to traditional prayers for the hunt, “if their bones were sunk in a stream or pond,” a process of regeneration, and then “they would come back.” The story goes on:

12. Ibid., 34-35.

13. Schweninger, *Cultural Identity, Storytelling, Place*, 113.

*. . . with Dakobed, the big white mother mountain, standing above them. They'd shoot a deer, remove the meat from the bones, and let the river take the bones, his uncle praying. Then they'd pack out the deer's flesh without anyone knowing.*¹⁴

This tradition of offering the bones to the water also occurs with salmon or other fish bones. The practice insures the return of deer, as in the story in the novel, but also the return of the salmon year after year. The traditional practice is both objective and symbolic, as well as based in indigenous knowledge and ecological stewardship. By placing the bones in the streams, necessary nutrients for the survival of the fish and other animals are added to the water supply.¹⁵ This practice of reciprocity is an integral part of the Salish belief in regeneration or reincarnation. The deer and the salmon surrender their flesh to the hunter or fisherman so that the people may survive. In turn, upon death, the human bodies are placed on platforms or in trees and that flesh consumed by other animals and insects. Eventually, the decomposed body washes from the elevated spot and the bones move into the earth and waters. According to Jay Miller, “The shadow went to the land of the dead under the Bella Coola Valley. After a long time there, it died again to be reborn as a human infant,”¹⁶ representing both physical and symbolic traditional beliefs. In the novel, Owens reveals some of this process to the reader from the point of view of the undertaker:

*These Indians didn't even put their dead in real cemeteries. If it wasn't for the law they'd probably still be sticking them up in trees and letting them rot, dropping bones all over the place. The woods must have been a great place for picnics back then, he thought, with fucking corpses falling out of trees on you.*¹⁷

The passage above encapsulates the Euro-western attitude toward the dead. The dead should be transformed into a petrified form, interred in a sarcophagus of satin

14. Owens, *Wolfsong*, 42.

15. Ronald Trosper (University of Arizona, American Indian Studies Department Head) in discussion with author, November 15th, 2012.

16. Jay Miller, 1999, *Lushootseed Culture and the Shamanic Odyssey an Anchored Radiance*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press), pg. 73.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=41627>.

17. Owens, *Wolfsong*, 50.

and carved wood, and buried “six feet under” with a carved marble marker. In other words, the dead are hidden so that the living are disconnected from the process of decay. Owens relays an alternate view of interment:

Three generations of Stehemish (Salish) were planted over, under and between the long, twisting hemlock, cedar and fir roots. . . The graves hung on the edge of the Stehemish River; moss-eaten stones and rotten crosses tilted out of a mad growth of ferns and vines and the broad-leafed devil's club. Here the old-growth had never been taken, and the cedars towered on trunks eight and ten feet through, while enormous, sagging hemlocks dripped needles and moss upon the hidden graves. Mushrooms, orange chanterrels and brown and red boletus sprouted beside carved stones lying flat in the fern and salal and bunchberry and the forest buried the dead in layers of humus and tangled vegetation.¹⁸

Owens builds an image of burial as part of a natural process of returning to the earth. The contemporary Stehemish, Owens's fictional name for the Salish, are now “planted” in the local cemetery. But the natural elements of the land envelope them, welcoming rather than condemning their transformation from life to death. Then, once again, the reader is reminded through Tom's memories of his uncle how the traditional stories blend into the contemporary landscape:

Visible in pale sketches through the forest, the river gnawed at its banks, taking a little more each moment. One day, after a big rain or heavy snowmelt, the current would cut through and sweep the Stehemish people away, tumbling the bones smooth and dropping them on sandbars and gravel bottoms. Steelhead and salmon would slip through shallows where the bones of the people trembled in the current...He thought of the importance of water in the stories. The most powerful spirits lived in the water, and water separated the worlds of the living and dead. The world was an island in a great ocean. 'You can see how it makes sense,' his uncle had explained carefully. 'The rivers keep leaving but they're always here. People keep dying but there's always more of them.'¹⁹

18. *Ibid.*, 51.

19. *Ibid.*, 51-52.

Tom's memory of his uncle's stories creeps through the discourse much like the berry vines that spread everywhere in this mountain landscape. These story vines bear the fruit of traditional indigenous knowledge, informing the reader of Salish cosmology and epistemology. The stories explain the importance of local rivers and waterways to the people, reinforcing the connection between the generative land, the living body, the death rituals, the significance of bones, and the regenerative water where the "most powerful spirits live."

These "story" vines Louis Owens describes in *Wolf Song* entangle ancient traditions and contemporary themes, portraying Tom Joseph's confusion of residing in a Euro-western world while attempting to adhere to traditional indigenous beliefs. Tom's homecoming for a relative's funeral is a typical theme in Native novels, as is his search for his Indian identity. He finds tribal traditions and cultural values disappearing, and, even though his uncle has died, uses the remembered stories to evaluate his proper place in this "crazy" contemporary world.

Although not one of the main themes of the novel, Owens tangles traditional Salish beliefs and customs into the discourse through Tom's memories and his uncle's stories. Many of these beliefs and customs refer to the proper care of the body upon death and how life regenerates when the deceased's bones, whether animal or human, are placed into the waters of the natural landscape. Information gleaned from Schweninger, Trosper, and Miller, whether from articles, interviews, or ethnographic materials, underpin much of the information delivered to the reader through these fictional memories and stories. Both objective and symbolic details concerning the "palmate" bone as central to the spirit, the custom of returning the bones of animals to the regenerative waters, and the reincarnation of the soul into a newly born infant reinforce the validity of the cultural beliefs and customs of this communal identity discussed in the novel. Especially significant to this investigation is the use of stories to deliver knowledge concerning the process and rituals for the treatment of the dead and their bones. Clearly, Louis Owens's *Wolf Song*, as indicated by the passages included herein, incorporates these three elements: the oral delivery of a cultural tradition expressing a component of communal knowledge, the significance of a physical process that includes the bones of the dead, and

the release or transference of the soul or spirit to an alternate realm if the ritual is performed correctly.

LeAnne HOWE - BONE-PICKERS

When Grandmother's life came to an end many years later, Itilauichi kept his promise to her. She was strapped on her burial scaffold and released by the bone-picking ceremony to join Tuscalusa. Together they reside high on Holy Spirits Bluff. Sometimes they appear as eagles, or the kettling hawks suspended in the sky. Other times they are the mated swans we see along the rivers and bayous. They have never left us.²⁰

Leanne Howe's fictional novel entitled *Shell Shaker* draws the reader into a story that mingles strands of the past with the present. The novel weaves the lives and deaths of eighteenth century Choctaw people in the southeastern woodlands of North America into a mystery surrounding corruption and murder in twentieth century Durant, Oklahoma. Members of the contemporary Billy family engage in scenarios that parallel stories involving their ancestors from the 1700s. Auda Billy is accused of murdering Redford Macalister, Chief of the Choctaw, mirroring her ancestor Annaleta's murder of another chief, Red Shoes. Auda's mother, Susan Billy, accepts responsibility for that murder in much the same way as Shabatina surrendered herself for execution to save Annaletta from death by blood revenge. A sash adorned with porcupine quills and a pair of turtle shells are physical objects passed down from their ancestors to the Billy women. These heirlooms carry the promise of making peace when possible and war if necessary. Themes of sacrifice for the good of the community, a homecoming to support a family member in troubled times, and a connection between generations of Choctaw across time and geography pervade the main plot of the novel, but Choctaw traditions announcing the significance of bones are also prevalent in the discourse.

The novel shifts in time and place from pre-Revolutionary War Choctaw life in the southeastern United States to late twentieth century reservation Choctaw life in urban Oklahoma. Unlike the remembered stories in *Wolf Song*, *Shell Shaker*

20. Howe, *Shell Shaker*, 7.

delivers the Choctaw traditions and ceremonies through immersing the reader into the plot and characters of each time period with shifts into present tense and first person point of view. The first chapter introduces the reader to Shakbatina, whose first person explanation of her own execution sets the tone for Howe's graphic and violent imagery. Within her explanation, an image of the body's treatment after death and the transformation process provides the reader a glimpse into Choctaw cosmology:

*On this day I will follow our Choctaw ancestors to our Mother Mound at Nanih Waiya. When released by the bone-picking, I will grow and sprout up like green corn. From the mound I will watch over our people. Do not cry for me, I am a fast grower.*²¹

This passage states the burial ritual with no elaboration, but holds the essence of the themes of the novel – a connection between generations of Choctaw across time to “watch over” and assist the family and community when necessary. Two important factors included in the passage, “our Mother Mound at Nanih Waiya” and “the bone-picking,” hold significance for understanding the Choctaw rituals for the dead and their bones. One origin story tells that the Choctaw traveled for a long time from “the far west,” carrying the bones of their ancestors in “buffalo sacks.” They followed two brothers named “Chata and Chicksa,” moving in the direction that a “magical pole” leaned each morning, until one morning the “pole remained upright” in the ground. There the people buried the bones of their ancestors, naming the resulting mound “Nanih Waiya.”²²

The discourse of the novel weaves the relationship of the Choctaw to the ancestral “Mother Mound,” the importance of the “bone picking” ceremony, and the transformative action of burying the bones of the dead at Nanih Waiya. In the novel, this transformation manifests in the return of ancestors, sometimes in the shape of animal helpers, to bring warnings or assistance for the family or community.

21. Howe, *Shell Shaker*, 9.

22. “Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma,” Official website of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, accessed November 12, 2012, <http://www.choctawnation.com/history/choctaw-nation-history/>.

In the following passage taking place in eighteenth century Choctaw lands, an old woman porcupine spirit visits Shakbatina's husband, bringing him a message and a warning:

The old warrior walks away from his campfire and stands facing the darkness. He will give the alligator one more chance . . . He turns to look at his guest. Still captivated, it must obviously be a gift. He picks up his war club and walks toward it. It never moves or stirs, even when he bashes in its head . . . He gives thanks to the animal's spirit before he lops its tail off and roasts the flesh. . . As he sits watching the meat sizzle someone pokes him in the back. He whirls around. An old woman with a wizened bronze face stands before him. With her spiny fingers she gestures obscenely at him. He realizes she must be an animal spirit, and smiles sheepishly. He takes a small deerskin pouch filled with tobacco and passes it to her . . . She accepts it and spits. 'Old man, what are you doing?' . . . 'Cooking.' . . . 'Ai, ai, ai! It's bone-picking time,' she says, bobbing her head up and down like a porcupine. She opens her mouth wide, revealing cotton-white gums. Koi Chitto understands what she wants and blows smoke in her mouth. She fans the rest around her body. 'Ai, ai, ax, you better get going to Yanabi Town. Trouble is coming.' . . . Koi Chitto agrees, and offers her a second pinch of tobacco and she snatches it. He takes the alligator meat off the fire and presents it to her. She refuses. 'The alligator is for you – he must give you the strength to finish what you start. Use the river like an alligator and go fast, it's bone-picking time.' . . . Koi Chitto argues with the porcupine spirit. 'It is not time for her ceremony. Only three moons have passed since my wife's death, three more must pass.' . . . 'Aaaaaaghh! You are wasting time. Get going!' She hollies. Smoke tendrils spun themselves around her and she goes up in fumes.²³

This long passage holds two significant Choctaw beliefs, the belief in reciprocity between the animal and human world and the belief in helper animal spirits. Koi Chitto takes the life of the alligator only after he believes that the animal has come to the fire to give himself to the “old warrior,” and “he gives thanks to the animal's spirit before he lops its tail off.” The old woman substantiates this “giving” when she tells Koi Chitto that the alligator meat is for him and to “use the river like the alligator” to go home for the bone-picking ceremony he has promised to perform. Much like the death rituals of the pre-Christian Salish of the Northwest, the eighteenth

23. Howe, *Shell Shaker*, 97-99.

century Choctaw did not bury their dead in the ground. Rather, the deceased was placed on an elevated platform for several months while the body decomposed and predators ate away the flesh, completing the cycle of reciprocity between animals and humans. After about six months, a “bone-picker” performed a ceremony of cleaning the skeleton completely, painting the skull with vermilion, and burying the bones in a house or mound.²⁴ The spirits of the dead did not depart to a separate destination but remained in an alternate dimension from which the deceased could return as a messenger or helper, sometimes in animal form.

Throughout the novel, animal helpers such as panthers and porcupines bring messages to the contemporary characters and also act as physical helpers when necessary. The reciprocity between the human and animal worlds and the regenerative components of the bone-picking ceremony also appear in the following excerpt of Koi Chitta’s performance of the bone-picking ceremony for Shakbatina’s decomposing body:

*The drums grow louder. They seem in rhythm with Koi Chitto’s heartbeat, and he drops the basket. At last, the roar of forest, the constant drumming, and he begins to chant to the crowd gathered below her scaffold. . . I am the Bone Picker, dancer of death, transformer of life, the one who brings sex, the one who brings rebirth. You must have death to have life. The people live by killing, by stripping the flesh from the animal corpse. The people live by dying. That which dies is reborn.*²⁵

This language from the novel inextricably links death to life and humans to animals. The reciprocity of flesh transforms into a weaving of human and animal essence, allowing for the Choctaw belief in animal spirit helpers that appear amorphously in human and animal form. This weaving, physical and symbolic, of essences merges Howe’s storytelling with the reader’s consciousness, transferring the traditional beliefs viscerally rather than cerebrally. In other words, the traditions are felt and understood physically as well as mentally.

24. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby, eds., 2009, “Choctaw” in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life: Vol. 2: Americas*, 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale), 134-138.

25. Howe, *Shell Shaker*, 107.

Another first-person account of Shakbatina's bone-picking ceremony upholds these traditional beliefs and communal knowledge, also conveying the information viscerally through the use of first-person point of view. Analetta, Shakbatina's daughter for whom this mother died, speaks of the bone-picking ceremony:

*Analetta --'Did you not see my mother, the one called Shakbatina, raised up from the scaffold this very night? Did you know my mother's flesh was food? Her blood was drink? Alive, we use the animals. The animal is consumed. In death, the people are consumed by the animals.' Pointing to herself she says, 'We are life everlasting.'*²⁶

Analetta again voices the core of the Choctaw belief in reciprocity between humans and animals. She comments that in life, “the animal is consumed” by the human and, “in death, the people are consumed by the animals,” once more reiterating the theme of mutual dependency and reciprocity. Then she speaks to the weaving of spirit and time as Shakbatina's language of “ever alive” becomes Analetta's language of “life everlasting.” Analetta's term, “life everlasting,” appears to have absorbed Christianity and syncretized Christian resurrection with the Choctaw belief in regeneration expressed in Shakbatina's “growing fast” as green corn from the “Mother Mound at Naniht Waya.” Shakbatina's words express regeneration in an alternate temporal and physical space or essence, not necessarily human, or as she says, “ever alive.”

Other characters in the novel also express the importance of bones and their regenerative essence. Father Renoir writes in his journal that “I am convinced now that Chahtas pay more respect to their dead than any other race. To them the bones of their relatives are holy. Proof that they existed in the past as they will exist forever.”²⁷ Once again, the “bones of the dead” is linked to “forever alive.” Father Renoir goes even further when he asserts “existed in the past as they will exist forever,” inferring that the past, present, and future are woven together with the spirits or essences of the “Chotta” people.

26. *Ibid.*, 132.

27. *Ibid.*, 179.

At the end of the novel, Shakbatina reveals herself to Auda in the mirror when Auda goes upstairs to put away the porcupine quill sash that once belonged to Shakbatina, “she sees some other woman’s face staring back at her, radiant and bright with anticipation. Someone she’s never seen “before . . . The day” was hers, all hers, but it was my day, too.”²⁸ Shakbatina had helped pull the trigger in Redford’s office, moving through time and geography to help her family and community. Then Shakbatina finishes her story, this story of a peace maker and shell shaker, by saying, “Nuklibishakachi, my breath is warm with passion; we Choctaws are hatak okla hut ok.cha.ya. bilia hoh Mi bilia. Life everlasting.”²⁹ Shakbatina and Auda are joined in what Barbara Siebert calls “collective history.”³⁰ Siebert goes on to point out that “Shakbatina’s individuality folds into the collectivity of her clan and her people,”³¹ and “Howe offers a female narrator with a high degree of awareness of her embeddedness in history and in a specific, politically inflected kinship genealogy.”³² This “kinship genealogy” includes family, clan, and community, as well as weaving the stories and ancestors of the past into the fabric of the people of the present and the fringes of the future.

Thus, it is shown that Howe’s fictional novel pulls the reader into a story that weaves strands of the past with the present – the lives and deaths of pre-conquest, eighteenth century Choctaw people of Mississippi into the murder of Redford Macalister, the Choctaw’s Chief, in urban, twentieth century Durant, Oklahoma. Shakbatina and Auda Billy grip the gun together through time and place to rid their nation of corruption. Animal helpers appear to give warnings or messages, and to help the family overcome the backlash surrounding that murder. Shakbatina’s porcupine sash and the turtle shells continue to flow through the family, holding the embedded history, both objective and symbolic. Albeit that themes of sacrifice for the good of the community, a homecoming to support a family member in troubled times, and a connection between generations of Choctaw across time and geography

28. Ibid., 224.

29. Ibid., 225.

30. Barbara Monika Siebert, “Repugnant Aboriginality: LeAnne Howe’s *Shell Shaker* and Indigenous Representation in the Age of Multiculturalism.” *American Literature*, 83 (1):93-119.

31. Howe, *Shell Shaker*, 1.

32. Ibid., 94.

are central to the main plot of the novel, Choctaw traditions announcing the significance of bones is clearly prevalent in the discourse.

Within the passages included herein, several characters relate specific information about the bone-picking ceremony. These accounts are illuminated by ethnographic materials of the Choctaw Nation. The preparation of the body after death and placement on a burial platform begins the regenerative process. This reciprocity with the animals completes that cycle. The bone-picking ceremony, along with the preparation of the bones and burial in a house or mound, allow the spirit or essence a release from the physical and entrance to an alternate realm. The essence may then emerge as “green corn” or an “old woman porcupine” or other animal helpers, such as the “mated swans” who “never leave us.” Regardless of the form of regeneration, the three elements are evident in the discourse. The oral delivery of a cultural tradition and communal knowledge, the significance of a physical process that includes the bones of the dead, and the release or transference of the soul or spirit to an alternate realm if the ritual is performed correctly are all woven into this intriguing novel about Choctaw life and “collective history” and a people who are “ever alive.”

KERI HULME - THE BONE PEOPLE

*When one dies, one must journey. The journey is well-known. You must know it. One goes north to The Rerenga-wairua, down the grey root of Akakitererenga, onto the rock platform and into the sea. Into the seahole that leads into Te Reinga.*³³

Keri Hulme constructs a trio of damaged characters in *The Bone People*, a novel set in New Zealand. First, there is Kerewin Holm, an independently wealthy young woman living like a hermit in a castle-like tower near the ocean's shore. Into her solitary life comes Simon Peter, a trouble-making seven year old boy who cannot speak. He communicates with hand signals and neatly written notes. Joe Gillayley, Simon's foster father, sidles into Kerewin's life through the opening created by Simon's intrusion into her library one cold morning. All three characters

33. Hulme, *Bone People*, 354.

come into the relationship as damaged souls. Kerewin has estranged herself from her family and the community. Simon appeared on the beach after a storm, battered and broken. Joe found him and took the boy into his then happy family. Within a year after finding Simon, Joe's wife Hanna and their infant son died, leaving Joe and Simon to mourn and manage life together. As the novel progresses, each character's dark and sinister past and problems emerge through the discourse, eventually breaking apart this fragile, triangle of friendship and causing each to journey alone towards death. The reader experiences each character's ordeal through first person narratives from each character's point of view. The reader stands at the edge of the abyss with Kerewin and Simon and Joe as they contemplate death and as they attempt to heal. Each character travels a solitary road to recovery and finds that cutting the fetters of the past through an act of selfless giving begins the individual healing process. Peppered throughout each character's journey, stories of ancient and contemporary Maori life and traditions emerge. As in the other two novels included herein, Hulme's work incorporates the three same elements: the oral delivery of a cultural tradition, the significance of a physical process that includes the bones of the dead, and the release or transference of the soul or spirit to an alternate realm if the ritual is performed correctly.

Although the novel deals most often with the contemporary life in this Maori community, some beliefs in the alternate dimension of the dead seeps through the everyday incidents of the characters. For example, Kerewin expresses her belief in communications from the realm of the dead when she found an artifact from a burial site washed out onto the ocean floor. She tells Joe and Simon:

'So I won't tell him about the graves up on the cliff, and how that probably got washed out with its former owner. . . sour him off if he knew the smell of bones went with it, eh? He can be happy with his hei matau . . . because the old ones might have given it to him. They gave mine to me . . .' She told them, when the celebrating died down . . . *'That's the fourth piece I know that's been picked up round by the south reef. One of my brothers found two adzes -- they're in the Otago museum now. And I found Tahoro Ruku.' . . . 'No, it's a weird kind of pendant. I don't know whose family it belongs in. I made enquiries round all of my relations, and most Ngai Tahu hapu.*

*Memory of it is lost. Or maybe,' thoughtfully, 'they've changed the name of it. You see, when I picked it up -- I was just going onto the reef for pupu and a wave uncovered it at my feet -- when I picked it up, there seemed to be voices all around me saying "Te tahoro ruku! Te tahoro ruku!" It was bright sunlight, I wasn't drunk, and there were people further out on the reef who didn't look round or anything, so the voices must have been in my head. But they were loud. They echoed.' She shivered. 'I picked it up, and the voices went on and on, and I got scared. I said, maybe inside myself, "E nga iwi! Mo wai tenei?" And there was silence. Only after a little while, one voice returned, an infinitely old voice whispering, "Tahoro ruku, tahoro ruku."'*³⁴

Kerewin shares this experience for the first time in her life with her two friends. Simon found a *hei matau*, a piece of carved green stone jewelry, along the shore. He displays it to Kerewin triumphantly, and she shares her story of finding a similar piece. Her brother's museum pieces, the adzes, hoe-like tools for carving wood, support Kerewin's supposition that funerary remains have washed from burial sites into the coastal waters. Of significance to this investigation is the connection between Kerewin's *hei matau*, the fact that she believes that the piece was given to her by "the old ones," and the ancient voices naming the pendant 'tahoro ruku, a contradictory phrase meaning "to cause to crumble down" or "pour out" and "to bind."³⁵ Her holding of the *hei matau* invokes "voices all around." These voices then name the green gift from the waters, perhaps "binding" her, not only to the pendant washed from a grave site, but also to the source of that "infinitely old voice." Within the discourse, Kerewin asserts that she is one-eighth Maori, but the author uses her to relay information about the plant life along the shore, about fishing practices, as well as Maori language, traditions, and customs.

On the other hand, Joe Gillayley is genetically Maori but cares little about Maori history or traditions. At Joe's most desolate point in the novel, he is found by an old Maori man who befriends Joe and educates him through stories. Joe confides in the old man the dreams about his wife. For Joe, everything good in his life flowed from his relationship with Hanna. Her death gnaws at him, but, until now, Joe could

34. *Ibid.*, 373-74.

35. Polynesian Society, 1892, *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, (Wellington, New Zealand: Polynesian Society).

not reveal his nightmares to anyone. He talks about Hanna returning to him as a moth, devouring him in his dreams. Then, the old man explains the dreams:

Sometimes she turns into moths. Sometimes she decays in my arms. Sometimes she eats one of my sons and then starts on me, beginning at my privates. That is all business for a psychiatrist maybe, but not any exemplar of Maori truths. . . The kaumatua drew on his pipe. 'I think it is,' he says at last. 'I have more experience in these matters than you. Listen! There are three versions of what happens to you after death. If you go to Te Reinga, it is held that you live as you did here. Eventually, you die again. And then the rot sets in. If you get past the spirit-eaters, Tampico and Tuwhaitiri, you get past them, there is underworld after underworld, each less pleasant than the last. In the [last] one of all you get a choice. The choice is to become nothing, or to return to earth as a moth. When the moth dies, that's you gone forever -- just putting off the evil day, hei?' Cackle. He simmers down. 'But that is allegory, I think. It means you journey on and on, becoming less human and more . . . something else. Your wife has just about reached the end of that road, I think.' He leans forward a little. 'The second way is to journey along the sea path. You surface once to say goodbye to Ohau, the last of this land you'll ever see, and then go ever westwards till you reach Te Honoiwairua in Irihia. There, there is a judgment, and you're thrust into heaven or hell.' He spits at the fire again, thoughtfully. 'I think that idea is cribbed. It doesn't sound quite Maori. The third version however, I like, therefore,' chuckle, 'it is more sophisticated. Some of us believe that the soul has a choice of which journey to make, to stay with Papa, or to join Rangi. Graveminders used to put a toetoe stalk, a tiri, into the ground at the end of the grave so it pointed to the sky. Then the soul could leave the body, and hang in the sun awhile, like a cicada crawled from its larval husk. It would choose which way it wanted to develop, the earthly, or the heavenly, and if it chose Rangi, away into the firmament it would go. Maybe as far as the tenth heaven where Rehua of the long hair smiles hospitably; Rehua the giver, eldest child of Rangi and Papa, Rehua the star of kindness with the lightning flashing from his armpits, Rehua who disperses sadness from strong and weak alike. Today I shall call, "Ki a koe, Rehua! Rehua, ki a koe!" His voice rings out, stronger than Joe has heard it yet. It is the voice of a triumphant young man.'³⁶

The *kaumatua* is an elder of the community, knowledgeable in the Maori stories, customs, and traditions. This person is never self-selected. Rather, this elder, whether

36. Hulme, *Bone People*, 354.

male or female, becomes endowed with the title through his or her willingness to pass on this knowledge to younger generations. Hulme creates this character to help Joe through his healing process, providing a traditional story explaining Hanna's return as a moth. Embedded in the conversation are the Maori alternate dimensions of post-death travels and existence. The stories of the moth and "Papa [the earth] or to join Rangi [the sky],"³⁷ enrich Joe's, and the reader's, understanding of Maori creation stories and death rituals. The second story, which the *kaumatua* thinks is "cribbed" or incorrect, incorporates components of the Christian religion, "there is a judgment, and you're thrust into heaven or hell,"³⁷ demonstrating some syncretism. The final story leads the spirit into the personal choice of an alternate realm after death. If one "chose Rangi, away into the firmament it would go. Maybe as far as the tenth heaven where Rehua of the long hair smiles hospitably."³⁷

The *kaumatua* goes on to tell Joe about his own grandmother who raised him from a young boy. He cared for her body in the ancient Maori way, except that he could not eat her flesh. He explained that her bones lay in a secret cave along the ocean's shore and she wanders the land because of his failure to follow the rituals precisely.³⁸ The Maori take special care of the dead and their bones to assure the transference of the spirit after death.

The Maori once practiced what anthropologists call "secondary burial." Secondary burial involves two interments of a corpse or its remains. When a person died, the body would be laid out on ceremonial mats for viewing by relatives and other members of the village. After a few days, the body was then wrapped in mats and placed in a cave, a tree, or buried in the ground. After one year had passed, the body was removed from the primary burial and the bones were cleaned and painted with red ochre. These remains were taken from village to village for a second period of mourning. Following that, the bones were interred in a sacred place.³⁹

The "second burial" process has a striking resemblance to those of the Salish and the Choctaw, as described in the Owens and Howe novels. The waiting time

37. Timothy L. Gall and Jeneen Hobby, eds., 2009. "Maori." in *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*, 2nd ed. Vol. 4: *Asia & Oceania*, (Detroit, MI: Gale), 619-622.

38. Hulm, *Bone People*, 361.

39. Gall and Hobby, *Maori*, 620-21.

lengthens from the Choctaw six month decomposition period prior to the bone-picking ceremony to a complete year before the Maori bones were cleaned and painted with red ochre. Then, as with the Choctaw, a ceremony involving the final interment takes place. This ritual, if conducted correctly, moves the deceased soul or spirit along on its journey through the afterlife.

Readers find that Keri Hulme's novel about three damaged people and their separate paths to physical and spiritual healing also supplies insights into Maori stories, traditions, and burial rituals. Hulme conveys Maori traditions and practices through the hermit Kerewin Holm as she interacts with the plant and animal life from a castle-like tower near the ocean's shore. Some of this knowledge is directed to the reader through first person views, but some comes through stories told to Simon Peter about Maori beliefs and artifacts. Joe Gillalee and his encounter with the *kaumatua* and the elder's stories further instruct the reader on the cosmology and ceremonies of the Maori. All three characters begin the novel as damaged souls and, through interactions concerning Maori beliefs and communal knowledge, find ways to heal. The ancient voice from the ocean comes to assist Kerewin later in the novel. The *kaumatua* filters Joe's dreams about Hanna and their infant son through Maori beliefs concerning an afterlife and a reincarnation as an integral part of the passage of the spirit from life into final death. The breaking apart of the fragile triangle of friendship causes each character to journey alone towards death, but ancient and contemporary Maori helpers point out the path to achieving peace. The reader experiences each character's ordeal through first person narratives from each character's point of view, bringing an urgency that resonates with the reader. The reader stands at the edge of the abyss with Kerewin and Simon and Joe as they face death and as they are helped to heal. The oral delivery of the cultural Maori traditions, the significance of a physical process that includes the bones of the dead, and the release or transference of the soul or spirit to an alternate realm if the ritual is performed correctly all appear in Hulme's *The Bone People*.

This essay moves between three indigenous authors and their novels, traveling from the Salish of the Northwest to the Choctaw of the Southeast and then to the Maori of New Zealand. The three authors employ different expositions, themes, and

writing styles. But all include the telling of stories that convey community specific traditions, beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies involving the preparation of the bodies and their bones after death. In *Wolf Song*, Owens sets the reader in a dying Salish community located in the Cascade Mountains of the contemporary Northwest. His protagonist, Tom Joseph, becomes entangled in the struggle between the extraction of natural resources and the preservation of sacred sites. He ponders his Indian identity and his proper place in his Salish home town through remembering his uncle's traditional stories. These stories contain clues to Tom's dilemma by describing the relationship between humans, animals, and the landscape, including the power of the waters and their part in the process of regeneration and reincarnation. Ethnographic information from Ronald Trosper and Jay Miller reinforce the communal knowledge of the Salish practices and beliefs depicted in Owens' novel. These beliefs lead to pre-conquest rituals that secured reciprocity between the human and animal worlds, as well as the return of the bones to the earth and the waters to initiate regeneration and reincarnation. Leaving the snow covered Cascades, the investigation then travels to the woodlands of the Southeast in Howe's *Shell Shaker*.

Rather than employing remembered stories, Howe uses the first person point of view to invest the reader in the stories. Shakbatina's story of execution and regrowth graphically describes the practice of placing the dead on a platform, an act of reciprocity between human and animal worlds, and then the performance of the "bone-picking" ceremony and the final interment of the bones in a house or mound. This ritual weaves the spirit into a state of timelessness in which the spirit can move across time and geography to warn or help family members or the community. Barbara Siegert and cultural information from the Choctaw Nation attest to the validity of these communal customs and ceremonies. Shakbatina's pre-conquest story is woven into the contemporary murder mystery involving the Billy family in Durant, Oklahoma. As Auda and Susan Billy mirror events from Shakbatina's eighteenth century story, the significance of the burial rituals is revealed, giving life to her words, "ever alive." The final novel discussed in this essay is New Zealand and Hulme's *The Bone People*. This trio of three damaged souls searching for regeneration through the stories and help of Maori beliefs also contains discourse about

Maori cosmology and ceremonies for the bodies and bones of the dead. Stories of funerary artifacts, dreams of moths, and rituals involving the interment of red ochered bones flow into the contemporary lives awash with problems of love, loss, and estrangement. With the assistance of Maori helpers, both dead and alive, the three main characters find their way back home. Throughout, the traditional stories, underpinned by Maori historical information, convey important ethnographical elements within the discourse. Regardless of plot or time period or geographical setting, each of these three indigenous authors brings into the discourse transference of indigenous knowledge from elder to youth, the specific process to care for the bodies and bones of the dead, and the purpose for following that process carefully – to insure the transference of the soul or spirit to that desired alternate realm.

In summary, it is clear that indigenous literature reflects the diversity of indigenous communities and that works by authors of this literature present a plethora of landscapes, traditions, and religious rituals, each embracing and revealing aspects of specific communal knowledges and cultures. This being said, some traditions and practices are similar across the three communities included herein. By utilizing the Indigenist lens, readers of these three novels can understand practices such as the rituals and ceremonies for the care and storage of the bodies and bones of the deceased. Some traditional rituals support a belief in regeneration or reincarnation while others secure a path to an afterlife. Regardless of the intended outcome, these ritualistic preparations of human bodies and bones denote the reverence of groups of indigenous peoples for the dead and the skeletal structure. Also, the fact that several groups from far-reaching geographical areas engage in similar actions is significant, demonstrating beliefs that bones act as the essence of life for some indigenous societies. The intent of such a body of traditional teachings is to perpetuate the societal culture, instill a sense of belonging for the individual to a specific group, and carry forward the harmonious existence within the indigenous community. By picking the bones of indigenous literature, ceremonies and rituals that relay physical and symbolic burial traditions of the Salish, Choctaw, and Maori peoples inform on the underpinnings of each unique cosmology, but also testify to the similar trends. The similarities of practices of reciprocity between animals and

humans, along with the rituals for the care and disposition of the bodies and bones of the dead suggest a mutual belief in the harmonious existence of indigenous communities with all the inhabitants of Mother Earth, whether human, plant, animal, or spiritual.

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