The Trouble with History

History is a wearisome presence in native life, both as sequence of past events and as theory of collective memory. How did Christians contribute to the process of colonial dispossession? How have native people fared under a settler regime simultaneously committed to immigrant religious freedom and to indigenous religious suppression? How should we interpret the legacy of Christopher Columbus, the experience of the biblical Canaanites, and the connection between these foundational narratives? How might we address anachronistic stereotypes that romanticize native people and confine them to a tragic past? How do our tribal, family, and personal histories bear on the broader task of historical representation? How shall we construe the relationship between oral traditions and written scriptures, between indigenous and immigrant mythologies, between discourse and morality? How can figurative language help liberate us from the constraints of historicism?

My first formal coursework in native studies was a seminar on tribal sovereignty, which covered the political history of the European invasion of the Americas. I wrote an essay outlining Christian complicity in the historical progression of "Discovery, Conquest, Assimilation," an easy target. A revised version later served as a chapter of my MA thesis, where I considered the implications of this history for native Christians. The following semester I narrowed the scope of my historical inquiry by studying "Christianity in U.S. History" with Baptist historian Eldon Ernst. We discussed key themes such as pluralism, civil liberties, proselytizing, social justice, and

secularization, hot-button issues in the dominant culture that are also critical concerns for native religious communities. This course afforded me an opportunity to focus on native—and especially Creek—struggles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to experiment with the use of a fictional first-person voice in historical narration.

My last semester of graduate school coincided with the Columbus Quincentenary, a commemoration that generated considerable debate over the interpretation of American history. The early nineties seemed like an extended referendum on European colonialism and its aftermath, and I had many opportunities for public speaking and writing to distract me from my scholastic chores. Reflecting on homologies between American imperialism and the biblical narratives of conquest, I spoke about "The Canaanite Problem" on several occasions before this text was codified and published in Daughters of Sarah, a Christian feminist quarterly. I also served as a teaching assistant to several professors during this period, my first attempt at college-level pedagogy. I was especially fortunate to work with Jean Molesky-Poz, an expert on contemporary Maya spirituality, who taught me indispensable lessons about the learning process. Our collaboration led to my first professional paper, at the annual conference of the American Studies Association, and my first academic publication, in the ASA journal American Quarterly. "Engaging Students with Native American Community Resources" details some of the pedagogical techniques we used to counter the historical preconceptions that face anyone teaching native studies.

Having survived Columbus and the doctoral program as well, I began teaching full-time in Santa Cruz, the Spanish colonial mission town named for a sacred

execution. The new faculty routine was strenuous but also flexible, allowing more time to read up on Creek history and to follow contemporary Creek affairs. Before long I ran across a branch of the family that had not been swindled out of Creek country; lively matriarch Grace Escoe welcomed me home like a lost child. She took me to Fourth Sunday meetings at Butler Creek Baptist Church, which her father had pastored, and I enjoyed hearing her speak Muscogee over dinners served in the camp houses. In 1997, I wrote a series of review columns on books about Creek history and culture for the Muscogee Nation News, one of which focused on "Telling the Mvskoke Story." I would later play a role in various literary events held at the Creek Council House Museum, which preserves the nineteenth-century capitol of the Creek Nation, Indian Territory.

Academic opportunities led me from California to New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Illinois, tracking eastward like the original Muscogees who tried to reach the sunrise. "Natural Metaphors and the Written Word" emerged from an analogous path of unintended consequence. The middle sections exploring Creek and Columbian origin accounts were originally drafted for the prologue of Around the Sacred Fire. I cut them from that manuscript and later added the opening and closing sections, having been invited to contribute to a journal issue on the work of Creek writer Alexander Posey. This project fell victim to editorial neglect, as did a subsequent book venture that never went to press, so the essay appears here for the first time.

In the past, my historical interests centered on sources and interpretations; in recent years, my attention has shifted to questions of representation and language.

My latest effort along these lines was published in Writing the Cross Culture, an anthology of short fiction by native writers. Needing a suitable means for editorial comment, I wrote "Inscribing the Wound World" as a performative afterword in hopes of avoiding the all-too-common academic blunder of form subverting content. Coherence may be the highest ethical obligation for any critical discourse, and for anyone making history.