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Weaving Accessibility and Art in Marilou Awiakta's
Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree
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by
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Art

ABSTRACT

Weaving Accessibility and Art in Marilou Awiakta's
Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom

by
James David Basinger

In Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom, Awiakta enlists the reader to participate on the path to knowing Selu, Corn-Mother to us all. In particular, the book provides a reader with a text that blends ancient Cherokee teachings of the oral tale of *Selu* with contemporary Western, Appalachian-American thought and experience. Awiakta adopts and adapts *Selu* in order to capture and express the essence of the tale within a contemporary American aesthetic.

Though Awiakta's approach is didactic, it rises above mere teaching to achieve an aesthetic characterized by accessibility, simultaneity, and liminality. She purposely combines stories, poems, teachings, histories, and cultural reflections to produce art that is dynamically personal and cultural. The purpose of this study is to investigate how Awiakta's construction of art surpasses didacticism to express the liminality of the author's cultural identity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom (hereinafter referred to as Selu), Marilou Awiakta uses the traditional Cherokee oral tale of *Selu* as a vehicle for expressing variances on the theme of unity with diversity. Even though she acknowledges the teaching purpose of *Selu*, Awiakta reveals an American aesthetic as presented through the author's experience, knowledge, and societal reflections. While she examines the historical tracings of *Selu*, Awiakta does not limit the tale to its ethnic origin but rather expands and expounds on the dynamic nature of the tale that transcends culture and time. Awiakta reveals the essence of *Selu* through an examination of her life and cultural heritage, presenting historical information while at the same time considering more universal themes. *Selu* acts as the catalyst that binds Awiakta's life with all of humanity and nature. She expresses the themes of *Selu* within her own experience and the world in which she resides.

The didactic nature of the book guides and challenges the reader. Awiakta's purpose is clearly stated throughout the book but is best surmised in the Foreword by Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, who states "...Selu, gave me and gives the reader some practical advice on how to use ancient wisdom in contemporary life" (Selu ix). Mankiller also reveals the author's initial problem: the transference and transmission of an ancient oral tale through a contemporary written medium. Awiakta confronts this task with a strong narrative voice that is

instructive, informative, and most of all purposeful. In addition, by asserting herself in the narrative, she enacts a personal style of presentation reflected in the opening page when she states:

This doublewoven basket-
this book of seed-thoughts-
is for you
your family and loved ones
as it is for mine. (v)

In the Foreword, Mankiller reveals the larger conceptual and humanitarian concerns that *Awiakta* also challenges the reader to consider. Mankiller states that the “wrong balance,” which began when the Cherokee people first signed treaties and land cessions with the British, led to a “hundred years of acculturation and dehumanization” (ix). Mankiller introduces the fundamental Cherokee concept of balance and harmony juxtaposed against Western ideas of scientific explanation. She states that those in the Western world “seldom are able to suspend that analytical state of mind and just believe that Selu can be our mother, that the stars can be our relatives, that the river can be a man, and that the sun can be a woman” (ix). Throughout her book, *Awiakta* contrasts the Western assertion that man/woman is separate from nature with the Cherokee belief that human beings are a part of nature.

Furthermore, Mankiller captures the urgency in *Awiakta*’s book stating that it will help “you to gain a clear sense that there is a way we can stop destroying the very

world that sustains us, and we can return to a time of balance and harmony” (x). In Selu, Awiakta explores Cherokee concepts of harmony and balance and how they relate to environmental stewardship, gender roles, and individual responsibility. Through a mix of prose and poetry, she creates an aesthetic that demands the reader consider social and environmental issues while at the same time investigating the historical and personal trends that contribute to their cause. Urgency arises when Awiakta discusses situations where balance and harmony within society and the environment have gone awry.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Awiakta’s construction of art in Selu surpasses didacticism to express the liminality of the author’s cultural identity and ultimately reveals an American aesthetic. Chapter 2 considers the variety of narrative voices that Awiakta uses and examines the task of transferring an oral tale to a written one. Chapter 3 discusses the didactic style of presentation and the effect of the author’s personal voice and didactic style upon the reader. Chapter 4 illustrates how Awiakta’s varied style of construction creates an active field that contributes to the simultaneity of experience within the text. Chapter 5 considers components within the narrative voice that reflect cultural liminality, concentrating on those cultural aspects that influence the shape of the narrative. The study concludes by asserting that Awiakta’s didactic tone is necessary in order to facilitate the transference and transmission of *Selu* from an oral/ancient format to a written/contemporary medium. Moreover, Awiakta constructs art that surpasses mere didacticism to reveal a uniquely American aesthetic indicative of her varied cultural heritage, personal experience, and educational background.

Awiakta's style of art reflects her varied heritage and is not restricted to a particular literary genre. As she develops each narrative voice, Awiakta chooses from an array of modes that both complement and diversify *Selu's* wisdoms. As a result, an investigation of Selu requires the reader to consider literary classification along with narrative voice.

While Selu is classified on its jacket cover as "Native American/Spirituality," attempting to characterize Awiakta within literary traditions is more elusive. Her two other books—a collection of poems, Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet, and a historical fiction, Rising Fawn and the Fire Mystery: A Child's Christmas in Memphis, 1833—do not provide a consensus that is broadly applicable to all of her work. However, Awiakta's Cherokee and Appalachian heritage is evident within her work, and any literary analysis of her work should begin within established traditions.

In Selu, Awiakta infuses Native American philosophies into a Western literary format; however, she is not the first writer to introduce Native American spirituality and philosophy to a Western audience. In Black Elk Speaks, John G. Neihardt presents the autobiographical account of Black Elk, a Sioux Holy Man. Through interview and interpretation, Neihardt provides a text that is not only for the "non-Indian populace" who desire knowledge of Native Americans but also appeals to the "contemporary generation of young Indians who have been aggressively searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality" (xiii). Awiakta's text also appeals to both groups by adapting the traditional oral tale of *Selu* into a contemporary written medium.

Awiakta's text departs from Neihardt's when one considers the autobiographical narrative style of each. For example, while Black Elk Speaks is autobiographical in nature, Neihardt transcribed Black Elk's speech to construct the oral text. According to Andrew Wiget in Native American Literature, "Neihardt added some material to the narrative" arguing "that these words represented only what Black Elk 'would have said if he had been able'" (56). Conversely, Awiakta controls the language and substance in her text. She uses her life, education, and experience as a means to discuss the state of the Cherokee and their effect on contemporary Western culture. While Neihardt's narrative style is noted to have been successful in effecting a "bicultural composite authorship," Awiakta's narrative voice possesses the character of her diverse cultural education (56).

While Awiakta's writing draws from her personal and cultural experience, she provides select histories of the Cherokee and the United States policies regarding their welfare. Although Selu does not document Native American history as fully as does Dee Brown in Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, historical reference is woven throughout her text. For Awiakta, history inspires her essays and the subject matter of her poetry. Awiakta's creative use of history is best illustrated in her earlier work, Rising Fawn and the Fire Mystery: A Child's Christmas in Memphis, 1883, where she creates fiction from historical record and the stories of those whose relatives lived through the Removal policies of the late 1800s. Forrest Carter's The Education of Little Tree also draws from this important historical period.

Awiakta's use of Native American oral tradition, folktale, and spirituality links her with most Native American writers, especially those who provide explanation and teaching. For example, in Seven Arrows, Hyemeyohsts Storm imparts Plains Indian folktales and spirituality in a style similar to Awiakta's in that they both explain to the Western reader philosophies that provide access to and further understanding of Native American spirituality. Storm explains the Medicine Wheel, which is "everything to the people," before telling the stories (1) and describes the oral tradition responsible for preserving the tales (10). Likewise, Awiakta explains *Selu*, "Mother to us all," while acknowledging the oral history of the Cherokee (Selu xv). In both texts, Western understanding is applied to Native American philosophies.

Ultimately, Awiakta is one of the contemporary Native American women writers who create from the woman's perspective. Paula Gunn Allen asserts in her text The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions that "putting women at the center of the tribal universe—is not particularly revolutionary, though it has entailed groping around in a false dark created by the massive revisionism . . ." (264). Allen focuses on the shift of Native American literature "from a male to a female axis. One of the major results of the shift is that the material becomes centered on continuance rather than on extinction" (262). In Selu, Awiakta gives the reader "survival wisdoms (time tested) and other seed thoughts" (xv) by emphasizing the role of women in society and by asserting their need to enter into positions of power in both business and government.

In conclusion, Awiakta's versatility as a writer, combined with her varied cultural heritage, creates a style that is not readily classified. Her didactic presentation of the oral tale of *Selu* is similar to Barbara Duncan's Living Stories of the Cherokee. However, while Duncan edits seventy-two traditional Cherokee folktales collected from contemporary Cherokee storytellers, Awiakta further expands and expounds the traditional tale of *Selu* through her prose and poetry (Duncan). On the other hand, Awiakta's manipulation of the tale is similar to Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony. In Ceremony, Silko begins telling a traditional tale that is offset from the prose, but as the novel progresses, she weaves the traditional tale into the prose. By the novel's end, the tale becomes intertwined with the prose. In Selu, Awiakta similarly strives to create connections and promote clear understanding of *Selu* by weaving the tale within the prose and poetry in her text. Awiakta's creative use of a variety of styles within her fiction broadens possible classifications of her work.

CHAPTER 2

NARRATIVE VOICE

In Selu, Awiakta adopts a variety of narrative voices in order to convey the essence of the traditional Cherokee oral tale *Selu*. Her personal voice carries and connects the stories, teachings, poems, histories, and cultural reflections that constitute the text. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the narrative voices that Awiakta chooses, focusing on how these voices are derived from both *Selu* and the author's diverse cultural heritage. Primarily, this chapter examines Awiakta's challenge of maintaining the integrity of the ancient oral tale while creating art within a written format.

In Selu, Awiakta creates a hybrid literature that transfers the essence of the oral tale of *Selu* into a written form. For Awiakta, the essence of the tale resides "in the belly of story," and the story is the life of the people (154-5). Each strand of her text is designed out of the oral tradition in Awiakta's Appalachian mountain heritage. She states:

In the mountains of East Tennessee, where I come from, stories and the oral tradition are a way of life. Whatever one's individual heritage—Cherokee, Celtic, African, or a combination of the three—we all live by stories. And not only those that humans tell. The Great Smokies and their foothills, themselves, are Story—older than the Rockies, older than the Andes. Veiled in blue haze, whose source remains a mystery, the

mountains were never covered by the Ice Age. Their root system of plant and forest has been continuous for millions of years. Mountain people see this ancient web of life with our eyes. We feel it beneath our feet. We know we are part of the story. (154)

In The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America, Highwater discusses storytelling among Native Americans, emphasizing the duality of the told story and the “impulse behind the story” (69). He states, “both of these aspects (tangible and intangible) of an image are of equal importance. They are fundamental to an understanding of imagery and the experience of ‘seeing’ in the primal sense” (69). Awiakta uses a concept of intangibility that is similar to Highwater when she discusses Cherokee aesthetics. She states that a Cherokee elder told her, “Look at everything three times: Once with the right eye. Once with the left eye. And once from the corners of the eyes to see the spirit [essence] of what you’re looking at” (167). Within her essay “Daydreaming in Primal Space,” she explores Cherokee philosophies that enable them to sing, dance, and live poetry as a “habit of being.” The Cherokee are stated to have lived in harmony and “considered themselves co-creators with the All-Mystery, the Creator, whose wisdom spoke through Mother Earth and the universe” (167). Awiakta’s orientation to and experience with Cherokee and Native American philosophies promote access to and understanding of the essence of *Selu*.

Through a written text, Awiakta provides the reader with a record of her own consideration of the essence of *Selu*. She states, “In each traditional Native story, the

people who originated it concentrated their understanding of the mystery. The story is alive. It creates that path in the human mind and heart that conveys wisdom from the whole corn—the grain and the spirit” (Selu 22). Awiakta’s version of *Selu* emphasizes the mystery of the tale in that each voice that she creates evokes the essence of her experience blended with her reverence for the oral tale of *Selu*. She is able to create stories while acknowledging those who transferred the story to her; her creation of art depends on tradition but is not frozen by it.

Awiakta’s approach to writing is similar to that of Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko who states, “I think that growing up within a community that has this concern for language storytelling is important because you get attuned to hearing stories. A person accustomed to listening, who knows what a story is, can glean out of all sorts of information the heart of the story” (qtd. in Arnold 22). Author and critic Jamake Highwater asserts of Silko that there “is no question whatever of Silko’s success in writing directly out of her Laguna Pueblo tradition, rather than simply writing about it” (110). Awiakta differs from Silko in that her Native American lineage is less direct. Awiakta’s storytelling tradition is shared with the Appalachian and Scots-Irish traditions of her family. While Awiakta certainly writes about her heritage, she also uses her heritage as a muse for her poetry and essays.

Although Awiakta’s heritage provides a basis for her book, her task of transferring the oral tale into written form is difficult. In his article “Ray Hicks and the Oral Rhetorical Traditions of Southern Appalachia” in Appalachian Inside Out, Reese

argues that “Oral rhetorical tales can never adequately be represented in writing. Writing and speaking are such different linguistic systems that it is as difficult to translate a short story into a poem as it is to translate an oral tale into some type of written counterpart” (503-4). “Nevertheless,” Reese states, “oral rhetorical forms can coexist in literary cultures and often serve as a foundation for certain developmental stages in regional and national literatures” (504). While Awiakta relies on the oral tale of *Selu* to generate writing, her art extends beyond merely translating *Selu* to transmitting the manifestations of the author’s orientation and experience with the tale.

Awiakta’s status as a Cherokee/Appalachian writer certainly allows for regional and national classification; however, whether her work represents the developmental stage of a given literature is irrelevant to the present study. She uses *Selu* to create a literature that fuses her personal cultural reflections with literary style. Her varied narrative style reflects her attempt to bring the reader closer to *Selu*. The dynamic nature of *Selu* is expressed through the range of voices the author weaves throughout the text. Overall, Awiakta’s style demands that the reader consider literary style along with ethnic, gender, and regional sensibilities.

Reese’s analysis of Appalachian storytelling provides a framework and asserts a criteria for the existence of an “oral rhetorical tradition” (495). While Reese analyzes speech for connection to the oral tradition, Awiakta’s connection to oral tradition is expressed primarily through her prose and poetry. Her style of presentation demonstrates similarities to Reese’s criteria in that it connects the oral traditions within her heritage.

For example, Reese asserts that an “oral rhetorical tradition is a series of verbal and cultural forms passed from generation to generation which enables a speaker to talk about personal and cultural experiences in a way that distinguishes the narration from normal conversation” (495). While she uses both verbal and written modes to express the tale, Awiakta highlights Cherokee ethos through her own description, analysis, and promotion of Cherokee oral tradition. She asserts that those who live the oral tradition believe that “speaking their ways and myths,” keeps their ways “immediate and relevant. The sound of the words themselves makes them live in the present” (Selu 120).

Furthermore, she observes that “storytellers may vary language and add amplifications adapted to a specific audience and specific circumstances, but they cannot change the story’s basic elements. My poetic version is designed with the themes of this book in mind and for general audiences” (Selu 24). Through this description of her text, Awiakta reveals both the strengths and limitations of the written text compared to the oral experience. The reader must extract the specific from the general; whereas, the storyteller has responsibility of transmitting the story to the oral tale. Awiakta’s text is viable because it adds to the told story dimensions of contemporary American culture blended with native and Western cultures of past and present.

According to Reese, for an oral tradition to exist, a culture must place a “high positive value on human interaction and more value on people than on objects” (495). Awiakta states, “Creating Community is the Corn-Mother’s specialty.” In fact, the construction of Awiakta’s text celebrates the community of storytellers whose

“knowings” and “insightful conversation” add insight to and “deepen the connotation of the printed word” (*Selu* xi). Throughout her text, Awiakta emphasizes the human interaction required to construct her book while also emphasizing those who participate in passing the wisdoms and teachings of *Selu*.

One prominent example that Awiakta offers for valuing human interaction is her description of the surroundings at the Reunion of the Cherokee Councils of East and West held at Red Clay, April 4, 1984. The site is located on a state reserve near Cleveland, Tennessee, where in 1837 “the last council met, faced with the federal government’s adamant demand that ancestral lands be relinquished” and eventually where federal troops forced the march of the Trail of Tears. The councils are stated to have discussed “mutual concerns about health, education, legislation, economics, and cultural preservation” (*Selu* 100). While her characterization of the council’s business and proceedings reflects traditional Cherokee values, Awiakta’s description of the crowd interaction of the twenty-thousand, five to six thousand of whom are of “Cherokee heritage,” best characterizes the nature of the interaction among the people at Red Clay (100). She states:

Something is moving among us. I feel it in many images—an energy as invisible and as real as the atom’s. Governor Alexander calls it electricity. A reporter, an aura. As I walk the council grounds, I gather these images as healing medicines for bleak seasons I know will come again. The most striking image is the ceaseless current of men, women and children,

moving peaceably among the knolls, over the meadow. Here pooling quietly for a ceremony, there running in rivulets among the food and craft booths that edge the grounds, pausing in eddies of conversation, then moving on, a constant lively contented murmur. (102)

Reese asserts that a society “must prize verbal ability and encourage its artistic use” (495). As Awiakta relates the stories of the Cherokee, she acknowledges those responsible for deepening her understanding of the stories: “in the oral tradition, ‘knowings’ is a more accurate term than ‘research,’ because insightful conversation deepens the connotation of the printed word” (*Selu* xi). Throughout the text, Awiakta highlights the abilities of the storytellers who influenced the construction of her book. She relates how her grandfather imparted *Selu*’s wisdom as they picked corn together. She relates how he was able to weave the lessons of *Selu* into an incident when, as a curious girl, Awiakta destroyed a corn plant by digging it up to see the roots (15). She also notes the creative adjustments that the storyteller Siquanid enacted upon *Selu* in order to “make the story relevant to listeners” (10). Both storytellers are described as having the ability to creatively alter the story in order to broaden the lessons.

Awiakta gives an example of prized verbal ability in her description of Maggie Wachacha, “an eighty-eight-year-old member of the Eastern Band, scribe for the tribal council, and a ‘rememberer.’” It is clear from Awiakta’s discussion of her that Wachacha’s high status with the tribe corresponds with her verbal ability as a “rememberer.” Her reputation as a storyteller is bolstered by her grandson, whom

Awiakta quotes as stating, “Grandmother heard her elders tell how they walked the Trail of Tears. When she speaks of it, we hear their voices. We feel their sorrow” (Selu 103). Through these and other examples, Awiakta creatively transfers the Cherokee reverence and regard for storytelling.

Next, Reese asserts that societies “must have a designated forum for the practice of the tradition and provide positive reinforcement to those who participate in it” (495). The Red Clay Reunion of East and West Cherokees is an ideal place for the practice of the oral tradition; ironically, the last meeting there took place in 1837 prior to the 1838 removal that led to the Trail of Tears (Selu 100). However, the stories told by Maggie Wachacha are valued as part of the Cherokee oral history and keep alive the stories of those who suffered along the Trail of Tears (103). Wachacha’s elevated tribal status at the 1984 meeting as a “rememberer” testifies to the value that Cherokee culture places on the oral tradition. “Memory of language and culture spiraled in the cells of children, where the ‘rememberers,’ including Mother Earth, the greatest rememberer of all, have known how to call it forth” (105). For the Cherokee, the forum for storytelling resides undoubtedly in their culture.

Furthermore, Reese states that the “tradition must not be in opposition to other major elements in the culture, that is, it must increase the narrator’s ability to succeed in other ways in the culture” (495-496). Although Cherokee culture is in opposition to the dominant Western culture of America, Awiakta has enjoyed success by perpetuating Cherokee myth within a Western format. However, Awiakta neither claims to

exclusively represent the Cherokee nor does she deny that she is part of Western culture. In fact, even though she generally demonstrates the differences between Cherokee and Western culture, her main objective resides in promoting positive lessons of respect and harmony that contribute to the well being of the individual and the future of the environment. While Cherokee culture is in opposition to Western culture, the practice of storytelling within the Cherokee tradition remains vital.

Finally, Reese asserts that the “tradition itself must be an unconscious part of the culture and learned through living participation rather than formal study” (496). Reese argues that Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks

weaves the world of Jack into reality for the children around him. We listen to him talk of galax, of how the same galax he gathers always was and always will be, and suddenly we realize he is not talking just about gathering herbs—he is talking about the nature of man, the nature of the universe, the nature of God, and the way these are intertwined. (494)

Reese’s description of Ray Hicks serves as an example of a natural setting where the wisdom of the Jack Tales is transferred into an everyday life lesson. According to Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Awiakta’s Selu “gave me and gives the reader some practical advice on how to use ancient wisdom in contemporary life” (ix). Certainly, Awiakta’s text is filled with lessons that are variations upon the themes derived from the oral tale of *Selu*; furthermore, the themes are woven into the life and experience of the author. Reese states that the “tradition itself must be an

unconscious part of the culture and learned through living participation rather than formal study” (496). For Awiakta, the oral tale is a known and important component to those who practice its teachings. When one participates in the oral traditions, he/she becomes both a living record of the past and a new voice of ancient wisdom blended into contemporary society.

While Reese’s analysis of Appalachian oral rhetorical tradition provides limited critical value in analyzing Cherokee oral traditions, his criteria for an oral rhetorical tradition does provide insight into Awiakta’s diverse cultural heritage. Reese offers another compelling insight through his description of non-Appalachians’ responses to mountaineers like storyteller Ray Hicks. He states that outsiders “see these mountaineers not as actual people who reside in the same world as they do, but as mythic personages who represent a way of life incompatible with the essential, rational, everyday mode of behavior within their culture” (494). Reese’s description of non-Appalachians’ conception of Ray Hicks parallels Western cultural perceptions of Native Americans that Awiakta highlights throughout her book. Awiakta acknowledges the cultural differences between the Cherokee and the dominant culture and, in fact, uses the incongruities to promote particular discussions. In this study, these points are considered in chapter 5 discussing liminality.

Additionally, Reese states that “Rhetorical Traditions are more enduring than any of their particular manifestations and may take on forms unthought of by previous generations” (496). While Awiakta’s choice of the written medium changes the mode of

transmission, her transcribed text adds to the proliferation of the oral tale of *Selu*. Her approach reflects both the Cherokee's Western acculturation and the author's quest to promote and revive the ancient stories and their wisdom in her own life combined with her desire to affect those in the larger culture wherein she resides. Awiakta's consideration of the oral tale dominates the narrative voice of her text. Each voice that she creates is dependent on the facet of *Selu* that she wishes to express. As Awiakta's strong personal voice guides the reader, the oral tale serves as the base from which her voices emanate.

Awiakta's orientation to *Selu* guides the reader through a variety of narrative voices while she expresses the diversity of *Selu* through the unity of her perspective. She constructs a broken narrative style that connects both her prose and poetry and highlights the dynamic nature of the oral tale. Although Awiakta's didactic intention dominates the narrative perspective, this chapter addresses the range of voices that comprise the narrative. A discussion highlighting didacticism follows in chapter 3.

The narrative style that Awiakta enacts in Selu is notably personal. The book unapologetically centers on the author's life and cultural heritage, using personal knowledge and experience while presenting universal themes that emphasize community. However, Awiakta announces the collective nature of the book's organization throughout the text. Her discussion of the community construction of Selu creates a narrative voice that highlights Native American aspects of individual and tribal identities while she emphasizes the individual's responsibility to contemporary society as well. Her personal

voice possesses a duality that seeks to compare tribal and contemporary motifs while also framing their differences. According to Highwater in The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America, “the idiosyncratic characteristics that gradually arose in Europe during the Renaissance and became known as *individuality* and *originality* are virtually unknown among Indians and other aboriginal craftsman . . .” (56). Awiakta’s acknowledgment emphasizes the community aspect of the construction of the text stating that “she set a field of people working to bring this book to harvest” (Selu xi). This type of writing style enables Awiakta to freely weave the narrative using both personal and societal perspectives.

According to Highwater, “Among the Indians of the Americas the tellers of stories are weavers, the makers of *cultural autobiographies*. Their designs are the threads of their personal sagas as well as the history of their whole people. Though the designs are always traditional, the hands that weave them are always new” (113). Awiakta’s voice is so prominent throughout the text one could argue that cultural and philosophical concepts related in the book emanate exclusively through the author. However, she constructs her art in celebration of her heritage and culture, stressing the collective nature of American culture. Awiakta becomes the next generation of storyteller to weave *Selu* into her personal life equally with society as a whole. She creates a text that is organized as a “doublewoven basket (Cherokee style)” that imparts *Selu*’s wisdoms as presented by Native Americans who have preserved them” (Selu xv).

Awiakta's shifting narrative style effectively juxtaposes Native American and Western philosophies while simultaneously considering the individual's role in society.

At the center of Awiakta's personal narrative style is her commitment to the tale of *Selu*. In fact, her own introduction to and subsequent revelations about the tale guide the reader and form the basis of the book. Her reverence for the tale is demonstrated in the acknowledgment where she states, "Traditional stories always have been preserved and held in trust by families" (ix). The Cherokee reverence for *Selu* can be illustrated in Myths of the Cherokees where Mooney states, "Hagar notes it briefly in his manuscript *Stellar Legends of the Cherokee*. . . . It is one of those myths held so sacred that in the old days one who wished to hear it from the priest of the tradition must first purify himself by 'going to water,' i.e. bathing in the running stream before daylight when still fasting, while the priest performed his mystic ceremonies upon the bank" (431). Certainly, Awiakta doesn't request such ceremony from her readers but instead guides them through the tale via her personal vision and art.

Awiakta's reverence for *Selu* is mixed with her awareness and knowledge of the history and origins of the oral tale of *Selu*. She is not limited by *Selu*'s history but instead creates a text that relates the essence of the tradition *Selu* expounded within a contemporary form. The reader begins the "path of knowing *Selu*" by tracing the tale's history and Awiakta's familial orientation to the tale (Selu xv). Awiakta also demonstrates a contemporary link to the spirituality of *Selu* by relating an incident when a Cherokee medicine man "established its spiritual base immediately" by introducing the

story thusly: “In the beginning, the Creator made our Mother Earth. Then came Selu, Grandmother Corn” (Selu 9). While Awiakta’s commitment and reverence for *Selu* influences her narrative voice, she also emphasizes how ancient forms can be used and modified to gain pertinence in a world that does not resemble ancient Native American society.

Awiakta traces the origins of *Selu* within the traditions of indigenous peoples who occupied the Americas for thousands of years. She states that the “indigenous peoples of the Americas have formally recognized corn as teacher of wisdom, the spirit inseparable from the grain” (Selu 9). The spiritual reverence for corn led to many variations of stories designed in order to provide a “link to the spirit” (9). Awiakta asserts that the spiritual base of corn is common among those who “perceive corn as a gift from the All-Mystery, the creator, the provider” (9). According to Perdue’s Cherokee Women, archeologists believe that the ancestors of the Cherokee “built villages along the region’s rapidly flowing creeks and rivers for thousands of years and that since about A. D. 1000, they had grown corn in the rich alluvial soil” (13). While the exact date of the oral tale of *Selu* is unknown, Awiakta presents a version “translated from the verbal text” stated to be “very old” and “rare in other ways” (Selu 10).

The version that Awiakta uses in her text derives from the book Friends of Thunder by Jack and Anna Kilpatrick. The Kilpatricks, “distinguished Cherokee scholars who spoke, read, and wrote in their native language,” interpreted into English the oral tale of *Selu* as told to them during the 1950s by Siquanid, an elder Cherokee (qtd. in Selu:

10). While the tale has been somewhat modernized, “Siquanid substitutes guns for bows and arrows,” the essence of tale remains. Awiakta states that “Siquanid’ tells the story in perfect harmony with its design to entertain, instruct, and inspire” and is able to make the Corn-Mother’s teachings familiar and accessible (14). Awiakta relates her own familial experience with *Selu* when recalling a “lesson on the law of corn” given by her grandfather, who was known to “have a way” with corn (14-15). While she affirms her family’s closeness to the tale, she relates her own desire to expand the story of *Selu* for a general audience. Awiakta’s personal narrative voice weaves *Selu* within a mix of personal anecdote and societal reflection. The historical voice that Awiakta creates provides yet another facet of her overall narrative construction.

Awiakta creates a sense of urgency when she discusses the environmental and social concerns that affect the harmony and balance of the planet. The immediacy of her message begins with her reply to the last message line in a FAX that appears after her introduction. She answers “Reason for Making Our Journey” with the prophetic “So we won’t die / Neither will Mother Earth” (xv). From this point forward, the foreboding tone she creates permeates the narrative creating an immediate and consequential voice, one that is further accentuated in her poetry appearing in the section. Each poem is representative of the strong narrative presence that flavors the overall narrative voice. A brief summary of each yields valuable insight into Awiakta’s style connotated from the ancient Cherokee oral tale of *Selu*.

In “Dying Back,” Awiakta relates the power that people have to destroy themselves and the planet (*Selu* 5). In the first stanza, she refers to trees, “hemlock, spruce, and pine,” as “standing people” who are “dying back” an “Unatural death” from “acid greed.” It is easily discernable from Awiakta’s clear verse that she is referring to human greed and the acid rain that is destroying mountain forests. Her focus is the human consumption and resultant disregard for the environment.

In the second stanza, the “walking people” are “dying back” through drug abuse and neglect of their children (5). Awiakta accentuates her environmental message at the end of the stanza where she presents the logic that all species who kill their own seed ultimately destroy themselves. The interplay between the “standing people” and the “walking people” demonstrates the connection between harmony and responsibility that Awiakta develops within the major themes throughout her book: every individual’s responsibility for and connectedness with nature.

In “I Offer You a Gift,” Awiakta pairs doom with the “gift” of *Selu* (8). The first stanza describes the “still of the night . . . ,” and appeals to nature: sun, moon, cricket, bird, wind, and earth. The scene of the poem has a serene tone that is abruptly broken with the possibility of the Earth’s demise. The urgency of the poem heightens as the narration changes from description to warning when Awiakta asserts to the reader, “you know / we may not make it.” Awiakta enacts this dual narrative style in her text as she moves between general and specific voices connecting the individual to larger society.

Although hope arises as the theme by the end of the poem, the effect of the prophecy of doom remains throughout. While the first three lines of the last stanza reflect upon the loss of hope present in “your heart and mine” (8), by the end, Selu is offered as a “gift . . . a seed to greet the sunrise” (8). Awiakta weaves a promising but realistic message of hope throughout her text.

These four poems acclimate the reader to the variety of narrative voices and subject matter that Awiakta uses and considers in her text. Also, she challenges the reader with structural and symbolic possibilities that must be considered in order to gain better understanding of *Selu*. All in all, the poems capture the urgency as well as the hopefulness that Awiakta enacts in her narrative voices when she attacks human greed, wastefulness, and destructiveness juxtaposed against hope, harmony, and balance.

Awiakta’s narrative voices combine the personal, historical, political, and environmental perspectives of the author with the ancient and contemporary wisdom of *Selu*. Each voice expands and expounds upon the themes proliferated from the tale derived from the author’s interpretation. While Awiakta explicitly expresses the didactic purpose and design of the oral tale of *Selu*, she extends the tale through an art that celebrates its transcendent possibilities. She creates a variety of narrative perspectives that represents both the continuity of the tale through time and the contemporary expression of the essence of the tale.

CHAPTER 3

DIDACTICISM

The didactic style of Awiakta's Selu is obvious and fundamental. She speaks directly to the reader, informing and instructing, while imparting "survival wisdoms" and "seed thoughts" (xv). Her personal voice carries and connects the essays, poems, and stories providing explanation and insight. Awiakta's didactic style is fundamental to transferring and transmitting the Corn-Mother's wisdom. She presents Cherokee history and myth surrounding the tale of *Selu* in order to "be accurate and useful . . ." because a "Native American story, like a compass needle, must have its direction points" (10). This chapter acknowledges Awiakta's varied didactic style of presentation while also considering its necessity and the effect upon the reader.

Wilma Mankiller states in the Foreword, "This book, *Selu*, gave me and gives the reader some practical advice on how to use ancient wisdom in contemporary life" (ix). The key word in Mankiller's statement is "advice." Awiakta gives the reader advice. The text does not simply unfold as a narrative story, for the author inserts instructions within the narrative that direct the reader to consider particular points or "seed thoughts." For example, in the Introduction, Awiakta states that her editor requested that she "tell [her] readers what the book is about, how it's organized and what they can gain from reading it" (xiv). The FAX that Awiakta creates in response to her editor's request is representative of the direct teaching style enacted in her text. She states, "we walk the path together, gather thoughts, then contemplate *Selu*'s wisdoms as

presented by Native Americans who preserved them” (ix). The presence of the author is as teacher, giving advice and explanation.

While Awiakta speaks directly to her audience, advising and/or informing, she also incorporates instructions from other sources. For example, at the beginning her text in Section I, Trailhead, she offers the following sets of advice on taking a journey:

The spirit always finds a pathway. ... If you

Find a deer trail and follow that trail

It's going to lead you to medicines and

Waterholes and a shelter

—Wallace Black Elk

The Sacred Ways of the Lakota

To take shape

A journey must have

Fixed bearings,

As a basket has ribs

And a book its themes

—Awiakta

Take your bearings at the trailhead

Or you'll wind up lost.

—Appalachian Mountain Maxim (3)

The combination of these distinctly different sets of instructions reflects Awiakta's overall varied didactic approach. While her intention is clearly to instruct and inspire, she draws from her own experience and the experience and knowledge of others.

In Section II, *Killing Our Own Seed*, Awiakta discusses the controversy surrounding the building of the Tellico Dam. She connects her personal experience of struggling to write about the controversy and the effect of the experience on the Cherokee. The dam was conceived in 1940 and became operational in 1979 upon the flooding of Chota, "the heartland of Cherokee history" (43). She reflects upon the constant hope that the Cherokee placed in the United States Constitution despite the sustained poor treatment they received from the Federal Government. For example, the Historical Preservation Act of 1966, which was prior to the initial construction of the dam, gave the Cherokee hope but ultimately did not apply to their history (47).

She uses the Removal of 1838, which led to the Trail of Tears, as an example of the continued pattern of harsh and unfair practices enacted by the Federal Government. She highlights the government's propensity not to follow the Constitution when considering affairs concerning the welfare of Native Americans. While researching, she discovered that many of the members of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee connected the two events. Awiakta reflects, "To them, as to me, the Trail of Tears was not only a vivid memory, it was an old pattern they saw repeating in the Tellico Dam controversy. . . . As one young man said, 'Tellico is the Removal all over again. First our ancestors. Then

our history. Then us” (44). By the end of the Tellico struggle, Awiakta is “discouraged, dispirited and had resolved to quit writing” (63).

In the end, however, Awiakta guides the reader through her own recovery of hope via her association with writer and activist Alice Walker. Walker inspires Awiakta by relating the story of her own protest against a proposed nuclear reactor to be built in Diablo Canyon, California. When Awiakta relates the Cherokee experience at Tellico, Walker states, “It seems like I’ve heard this before.” As the women discuss and draw connections between the struggles in which they are currently embroiled and the struggles endured by their ancestors, Awiakta involves the reader by asserting directly “(as you have perhaps been thinking as you read it), ‘seems like I’ve heard this story before’ . . .” (64). Walker displays an interest in Awiakta’s ideas and encourages her to “write all that down, write it just like you’re talking to me” (64). Awiakta, in turn, becomes the student, and Walker the teacher. Throughout her text, Awiakta’s style of didacticism combines her own learning experience with historical documentation and personal informants.

While Awiakta’s recovery of hope receives encouragement and support from Walker, the Cherokee sustained hope through the preserving and displaying of Cherokee artifacts in museums built on a fulfilled promise by TVA. Also, the Eastern Band of Cherokee conducted a burial ceremony for 191 of their ancestors whose bones were recovered before the flooding of Chota (Selu 62). They also survived through their continued belief in the United States Constitution. Awiakta’s own understanding of the

Cherokee's belief in the Constitution came through the words of Seneca scholar John Mohawk, who asserts that the "Constitution of the United States is much bigger than a document" (319). Mohawk claims that the idea of fairness within document was a promise for the 20th century and "says that the rule of law is sacred. The arbitrary thoughts of a dictator or somebody else are not sacred, and a people have said they will die unless they can be ruled by a rule of law based on a principle of fairness" (319). Furthermore, Mohawk asserts that the people believe that the fairness within the document has been honed and developed since its declaration (319).

While Awiakta illustrates the resiliency of the Cherokee, she also offers her parents' words that demonstrate the resiliency that her immediate family gained during the Great Depression. They state, "Do what you can. . . . Mother Earth may go down for a while, but she always comes back. Even when things look worst, down underneath, she's on her way. When you've done all you can, stand and wait. Have faith . . . head east" (63). Her parents' words exemplify the above examples, both personal and general, and are illustrative of the intangibility of faith. Despite continued disappointment and sorrow, the Cherokee endure committed to their faith. Again, Awiakta uses individual experience to analyze the larger societal experience, whereas, lessons of faith and resiliency are examined from both perspectives.

Awiakta makes use of a personal and general pattern throughout the text to teach the lessons of *Selu*. The poem "Star Vision" uses this method and additionally demonstrates how Awiakta effectively blends poetry into her teaching style. The poem

captures an almost magical, or religious, experience within a “moment;” however, as the moment passes, the narrative returns to the world of “bone and flesh.” The poem also illustrates Awiakta’s method of blending the tangible and intangible, which is discussed below in chapter 5, Liminality. Additionally, the poem serves to prepare the reader for Awiakta’s discussion of atomic energy in the section, “Baring the Atom’s Mother Heart” (Selu 66).

In “Star Vision,” the narrator states, “my Cherokee stepped in my mind.” As a result, the Cherokee is “suddenly in every tree, in every hill and stone.” The narrator’s awareness of the environment increases to include minutiae when perception is recorded at the atomic level. At the climax of the poem, the atoms increase to the millions in the narrator’s hand and become “so bright they swept me up with earth and sky.” The return to large environmental divisions culminates with “one vast expanse of light.” In the last stanza, reality returns to “bone and flesh” (65).

“Star Vision” introduces Cherokee philosophies regarding the environment as the narrator is “swept” up into the universe in “one expanse of light.” The universe is reduced to one common phenomenon of light. A similar orientation is expressed in The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America by Black Elk, who states, “While I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw: for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and shape of all shapes as they must live together as one” (qtd. in Highwater 67). According to Highwater, “he [Black Elk] makes it perfectly clear that for Indians the oneness of consciousness is not an

ultimate and fixed reality but a sacred capacity for centeredness, for an integration of the self and the world that is learned” (67). Awiakta’s poem captures the consciousness of one who has this particular orientation.

The poem provides the more practical beliefs of the Cherokee while preparing the reader for the discussions involving nuclear energy in *Baring the Atom’s Mother Heart*. It also denotes a duality of experience common amongst Native Americans. Ernst Cassirer recorded the “pragmatic side” of Native Americans in 1944:

We are in the habit of dividing our life into the two spheres of practical and theoretical activity. In this division we are prone to forget that there is a . . . stratum beneath them both. [Primal] man is not liable to such forgetfulness. All his thought and his feelings are still embedded in this . . . original stratum. His view of nature is neither merely theoretical nor merely practical; it is *sympathetic*. If we miss this point we cannot find the approach to the mystical world. [Primal] man by no means lacks the ability to grasp the empirical differences of things. But in his conception of nature and life all these differences are obliterated by a stronger feeling: the deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible *solidarity of life* that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms. He does not ascribe to himself a unique and privileged place in the scale of nature.

(Highwater 69)

Many of Awiakta's lessons carry extreme consequences. For instance, in *Baring the Atom's Mother's Heart*, Awiakta relates a childhood incident when a man disregarded the power of nature. When Awiakta is nine years old, she discovers that her father's secret job in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, is tied to the death and destruction of Hiroshima, Japan, December 1945. Awiakta asks her mother, "What is the atom, Mother? Will it hurt us?" (66). She responds by telling the horrific story of a man's burning to death. At six years old, Awiakta witnesses a man running down the street burning and eventually collapsing "slowly into a charred and steaming heap" (67). Apparently, the man, despite being repeatedly forewarned, stoked the furnace after using a flammable cleaning solution. A spark ignited the fumes and set the man ablaze. Awiakta's mother explains that the "atom was like the fire. . . . Never tempt nature, Marilou. . . . It's the nature of fire to burn. And of cleaning solution near heat" (67).

Also within this section, Awiakta presents an overview of nuclear technology beginning with theories from the 19th century; continuing with Einstein, who published his theory of relativity in 1905; and extending to 1970s scientific research into the quark: "a particle ten to one hundred million times smaller than the atom" (69). While Awiakta weaves the story of the atom into her life, society, and the environment, she includes historical and scientific references dispersed within Cherokee/Native American sensibilities. By framing lessons in historical and scientific contexts, Awiakta provides the reader with a foundation for understanding the abstract concepts she relates. While

the didacticism of Baring the Atom's Mother Heart is direct, Cherokee philosophies are artfully presented through her poetry.

While Awiakta uses her own life experience, knowledge of history, poetic creativity, and social comment within her lessons, her knowledge and use of Cherokee myths and folktales, especially her knowledge of the oral tale of *Selu*, are the foundation of her text. *Selu's* primary purpose is to instruct, inspire, and inform. Awiakta states that according to contemporary native people:

These are indivisible:

The corn—grain and spirit.

The story and its cultural context.

The wisdoms and the people

who have preserved them. (229)

Also, the contemporary native people consider among the wisdoms “strength, balance, harmony, adaptability, cooperation and unity in diversity, centered in the law of respect” (229). Awiakta imparts Cherokee beliefs in a direct manner, along with informing the reader of the Indian scholars and tribal elders who aided in the research and development of her book. Each section of her text is rooted in interview, historical record, and documented research while Awiakta's teaching style clearly emphasizes the wisdom of her teachers.

Though the didactic nature of Selu is undeniable, Awiakta expresses her art uniquely by expanding *Selu's* wisdoms into her life while simultaneously drawing

connections to historical events, environmental mishaps, and social ills. Describing her didactic style as artistic, however, may conflict with Western conceptions of art, but according to Highwater:

The “conceptualizing” of art into something special called “Art” produced a wide separation between commonplace experience and *specialized* forms of expression. For primal peoples, on the other hand, the relationship between experience and expression has remained so direct and spontaneous that they usually do not possess a word for art. (55)

Awiakta produces art by creating a combination of prose and poetry that both transfers and transmits the essence of the Cherokee oral tale of *Selu*. Although didactic intention is fundamental to *Selu*, Awiakta surpasses mere didacticism through her artful production of narrative voices. While her poetry is the most notable art form in her text, the construction of a written form from an oral tale is the most apparent act of art. The oral tale is Awiakta’s muse, and the lessons she produces reflect her most creative consideration of the tale’s wisdoms.

CHAPTER 4

SIMULTANEITY

In the novel *Ulysses*, James Joyce creates a dynamic text that requires the reader to rely on memory in an effort to maintain control over several motifs and modes of repetition. The multitude and variance of signs, signifiers, repetition, and textual devices that Joyce employs create a simultaneous effect within the text. In his article “Decomposing Form of Joyce’s *Ulysses*,” author and critic Henry Staten asserts, “*Ulysses* is a text that freely allows the subliterate to circulate within it”; moreover, realism is created through a process that “simultaneously reconstitutes it in a way inconceivable by the laws of classical representation” (380). Staten investigates the “movement of form-making and of the dissolution of form that is the common matrix of text and body” present in *Ulysses*. Within the text, the character “Stephen Dedalus declares the identity of this double movement in the body and text: ‘As we, or mother Dana, weave and unweave our bodies . . . from day to day, . . . so does the artist weave and unweave his image’” (380). Staten asserts that Joyce’s construction is not an “alternation,” but is “rather, the simultaneity, if not the unity, of composition and decomposition; and *Ulysses* acts out this simultaneity” (380).

Certainly, Awiakta’s text does not require the reader to grasp such complex codes of meaning or literary devices that Joyce demands of his readers. However, like Joyce, Awiakta’s narrative appears broken but is unified through thematic associations. For example, the combination of structures—FAX, poetry, histories, stories, and personal

observations—appear broken but unite thematically. Awiakta creates simultaneity of experience within her text when the reader considers the oral tale of *Selu* as a point of reference for particular concepts, such as harmony and balance, and experiences it through the woven disparate structures.

Sandra K. D. Stahl refers to the concept of “frame of reference” in her article, “Style in Oral and Written Narratives” (43). While the oral narrator uses the “common frame of reference,” the “popular allusion” is a more “inclusive, more general frame of reference that might be more easily used by the writer” (44). In *Selu*, Awiakta creates a “popular allusion” through her repetitive referencing of the *Selu* story throughout the book. Awiakta further creates simultaneity of experience when the reader considers *Selu* as a “frame of reference” from which all meaning within the text is focused (Stahl 44).

Secondly, Awiakta uses the concept of harmony as a point of reference from which her text emanates from the Foreword, written by Mankiller, to Mary Adair’s prose and accompanying drawing, *Future Unfolding*, which appears at the end of the book (*Selu* 328-329). For Mankiller, harmony resides in the Cherokee belief that the “world existed in a precarious balance and that only right or correct actions kept it from tumbling. Wrong actions disturbed the balance” (ix). Mankiller also states that the Cherokee have been “searching for balance” ever since their first treaty with the British hundreds of years ago. She states that *Selu* provides a “rare and fleeting” moment where she can experience the “harmony and balance that our ancestors frequently refer to” (ix). The combination of Mankiller’s comments with Adair’s drawing and words demonstrate

the diverse structural possibilities of the concept of harmony. Awiakta creates simultaneity through a pattern of unity with diversity combined with narrative structures that vary from interview to illustration; through *Selu*, Awiakta unifies the concept of harmony.

In *Future Unfolding*, Mary Adair presents harmony through her drawing and preceding description. She uses visual art and language mediums to depict the “beginning of life on earth” while also encompassing Cherokee mythology, religious symbols, and numerology. Also within the illustration are four circles that represent the “four stages of the earth, with the last one left vague, as yet to be determined” (328). The drawing appears busy at first glance because of the numerous (approximately twenty) concepts conveyed; however, it is united symbiotically as each part represents a necessary element to maintaining harmony. Adair’s message of harmony alludes to the unknown but lacks the grave reality contained in Mankiller’s description of a world teetering out of balance. Adair’s conception of harmony maintains hope; while overall, in *Future Unfolding*, the reader discerns harmony through symbol and myth.

The combination of Mankiller’s Foreword and Adair’s conceptual drawings demonstrates the range of ideas related to harmony expressed in Awiakta’s book. Mankiller begins with a description of the earth out of balance before referring to Awiakta’s text as a tool for helping one “onto a path that will enable you to gain a clear sense that there is a way we can stop destroying the very world that sustains us, and we can return to a time of balance and harmony” (x). Adair’s drawing is a vessel that carries

the world anew while encompassing the Cherokee world along with the four stages of the earth. Awiakta balances hopefulness with sorrow as she unifies the principles of harmony within her text, creating a simultaneous effect when the reader considers the combination of structures and ideas that express harmony.

In the section, *Selu and Kanati: Genesis of Human Balance*, Awiakta presents stories that “well express the Cherokee philosophy of harmony” (Selu 23). She focuses on the balance between genders stating that they “must get along, for themselves, for the sake of the community and the environment” (23). In the story, Kanati, the “First Man” is so bored and lonely that he kills far more game than he can use. The animals then plea to the “Creator” for help before Kanati kills “too many of us” (24). The Creator solves the problem by seeking out Kanati and then causes a “corn plant to grow up beside him, near his heart” (24). From the stalk of corn, the “First Woman,” Selu, arises. Once Selu enters Kanati’s life, he remembers the “original courtesy—the sweetness of his own heart” and “Kanati felt in harmony with all that lives” (25).

Through this tale, Awiakta presents Cherokee principles of gender, harmony, and balance. Furthermore, the gender story imparts the “cardinal balances” in nature: “the balance of forces—continuance in the midst of change . . . the balance of food—vegetables and meat . . . the balance of relationships—taking and giving back with respect” (25). The Cherokee, “like many other native people, have applied the principle of gender balance to all levels of their society” (25).

While Awiakta discusses harmony among genders, she also concentrates on the individual, highlighting her desire to attain balance and harmony in her own life. She states that *Selu* and the story of Little Deer, *Awi Udi*, have combined to serve as spiritual guides to achieving balance and harmony throughout her life. In the same section, she discusses the influence of *Selu* and *Little Deer* on Native culture. In “Native ceremony, art and thought, as in nature, the deer and the corn are usually companions. They signify balance and harmony in nature, as well as in human gender—male and female” (26). Awiakta also draws connections regarding harmony between the individual and society stressing the individual’s vital role in the social community. “National balance begins with the individual. That’s why this book of thoughts is our personal journey together as well as a contemplation of issues, events, places and people. An individual’s life intertwines with the whole; it is a strand of the web” (27). Awiakta creates simultaneity of experience when the reader perceives *Selu*’s lessons from both micro and macro perspectives.

Awiakta emphasizes the disharmony caused by atomic power through her description of the discord between pro and anti-nuclear groups. “It is not true that all who believe in nuclear energy are bent on destruction. Neither is it true that all who oppose it are ‘kooks’ or ‘against progress’” (70). In order to bridge the gap between the groups, Awiakta turns to Cherokee history emphasizing women’s prominent role. She states that despite being “outnumbered and outgunned,” the Cherokee Nation survived, aided by the strong role played by women (70). She espouses women’s “traditional

intercessory skills” and the necessity to empower women so they can influence decisions and ultimately effect harmony. (71). Awiakta emphasizes the need for women to “share equally in policy making” in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as industry, science, and government (71). Perdue states that the “concept of balance was central to their [Cherokee] perceptions of self and society, and the responsibility for maintaining balance fell to men and women” (15). While the nuclear protests were unsuccessful, Awiakta expresses hope that women’s views will give balance to future social and political decisions; thus, harmony may be achieved. In this example, Awiakta emphasizes harmony as an ideal of hope instead of an achieved reality. Moreover, harmony is expressed through environmental and gender issues. Baring the Atom’s Mother Heart adds to the variety of ways harmony and balance are expressed, thus adding to the simultaneous effect in Awiakta’s text.

Awiakta’s art is reflected through the Cherokee cultural trait of adaptation; she creates simultaneity when she weaves and connects Cherokee philosophy with that of dominant culture. Once again, *Selu* becomes the focal point of Awiakta’s discussion. In the section Harmony and Adapting, Awiakta introduces the Cherokee concept of restoring harmony first from within. She relates the struggle for survival endured by Wilma Mankiller upon suffering a near fatal car wreck. Mankiller is brought back to health by healers, spiritual counselors, and medicine men who “worked to help restore harmony from the inside out” (283). “This pattern of restoring harmony from the inside out, and of extending that concept from the individual to the community, is a classic

example of the Native American ability to adapt and survive.” Awiakta credits corn, which “embodies principles of strength, balance and unity in diversity,” for teaching these principles of harmony to “her human partners.” *Selu*’s wisdom has taught Native people to be “culturally adept at taking a principle from one sphere and applying it appropriately to another” (283).

According to Highwater, “In all spheres of Indian life, harmony, as we have seen, was mandatory—a condition of nature itself, the resonance of a kind of sanity that predates psychology” (193). In *Selu*, Awiakta creates simultaneity within her text by adapting the oral tale of *Selu* into a written medium. Her text demonstrates the adaptability inherent in Cherokee philosophy and worldview. The concept of harmony is so intertwined within the myth and philosophy of *Selu* that it influences every discussion in Awiakta’s text. While James Joyce creates simultaneity by creating an aesthetic system comprised of a maze of symbols, codes, and literary devices, Awiakta’s text artfully adapts the oral tale of *Selu* while reflecting upon concepts of harmony and balance within Cherokee life. While Awiakta’s version cannot replace the oral tale, *Selu*’s teachings survive, however ambiguously, through the text she provides. Simultaneity occurs when the reader considers the multitude of teachings that Awiakta presents as lessons derived from the oral tale of *Selu*.

CHAPTER 5

LIMINALITY

When Awiakta transcribes the Cherokee oral tale of *Selu* into a written text, she writes from a perspective of transition that both expresses and exposes cultural liminality. This chapter identifies and examines elements of cultural liminality articulated in Awiakta's text, focusing on how liminality is revealed in her diverse heritage and the Cherokees' cultural transformation. The study draws on Victor Turner's concept of liminality, first developed by Arnold van Gennep, and applied to the study of *rites of passage* (Turner 234). In *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Turner states:

Liminality is a term borrowed from Arnold van Gennep's formulation of rites de passage, 'transition rites'—which accompany every change of state of social position, or certain points in age. These are marked by three phases: separation, margin or *limen*—the Latin term for threshold, signifying the great importance of real or symbolic thresholds at this middle period . . . and reaggregation. (232)

At the end of his article, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," Turner invites those who investigate ritual to "focus their attention on the phenomenon and processes of mid-transition. It is these I hold, that paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we return to the structural realm" (243). In *Selu*, Awiakta writes from a perspective of mid-transition that

is similar to the “betwixt and between” perspective described by Turner (Dramas 232). Awiakta borrows the tale of *Selu* from a Cherokee nation that had been largely acculturated (Mooney 12). While the oral tale of *Selu* represents continuity of Cherokee culture over time, it serves as an antipode of the past and a marker of the marginalized social identity in contemporary American society, perforce that Cherokees are simultaneously Native Americans and American. They are in essence, bicultural beings whose existence is located on the hyphen.

The Cherokee way of life, their myths and culture, was challenged by the dominant culture who believed that in “a hundred years, there will be no more Cherokee” (Selu 120). “For two hundred years the Cherokee tried to work out a harmonious coexistence with European settlers, adopting many of their ways” (120). Although the Cherokee attempted to assimilate into Western culture by dropping their matrilineal form of government and adopting a Western democratic patrilineal system of government, they were subjected to the Removal, the Trail of Tears, which “decimated the nation” (120). However, “the roots held fast: the Cherokee now number about sixty-five thousand” (120). According to Awiakta, the tribes of the Cherokee (Eastern and Western bands) have been “kept alive by two concepts the Cherokee share with other Native Americans. One is the view of time as a continuum, a fusion of past, present, and future, and related to this concept is the oral tradition. By speaking their ways and myths, the people keep them immediate and relevant” (120). Awiakta achieves liminality in her text by creating an art form that reflects both the Cherokee’s acculturation and their desire to hold on to

their culture. She produces art from an “in-between” state present today in contemporary Cherokee culture.

In Selu, Awiakta examines both the Cherokee Nation’s acculturation and its desire to hold on to its cultural roots. The most prominent example of cultural division is the gap between Native Americans and Western/European-Americans. Awiakta highlights this division in her prose and poetry as she considers the state of the Cherokee, as well as the state of the environment.

In Rising Fawn and the Fire Mystery: A Child’s Christmas in Memphis, 1833, Awiakta creates a fictitious story (based on real and combined historical record) about a seven-year-old Choctaw girl growing up during the Choctaw Removal of 1833. In her story, the Choctaw girl is able to escape the plight of her family during the removal when a soldier performs an act outside of dominant culture by saving her from other soldiers who brutalize and even kill during the onset of the removal. While the family is being attacked, he hides her away and eventually moves her to Memphis where she is taken in by a white couple. The soldier’s kind act demonstrates the philosophical dynamic within American society where philosophies collide, thrive, and meld.

While the Choctaw girl eventually accepts her new family, she is able to remain loyal to her original family by saving the corn seed and the myth of *Selu*. Her life reflects the liminal state of acculturation endured by the Cherokee while the soldier represents the marginal experience of the dominant culture when he acts in opposition to the other

soldiers who burn and destroy the Choctaw village. Here Awiakta clearly illustrates liminality within the marginality experienced by the soldier and the Choctaw girl.

In Selu, Awiakta examines the cultural liminality experienced by Native Americans since the Removal. She highlights the differences between Native Americans and European-Americans that have caused disharmony in America. While the story of the Choctaw girl occurs during the span of a few years, Awiakta examines the effect of European-dominant American culture on Native Americans from initial contact to the present.

In the section Red Clay: When Awi Usdi Walked Among Us, Awiakta reflects upon the present state of the Cherokee nation through the festivities surrounding the 1984 Reunion of the Cherokee Councils of East and West held near Cleveland, Tennessee. She states that the last council meeting was in 1837 and “here in 1838 began the Removal, the Trail of Tears that divided the people into what is now the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, most of whom live on the Qualla Reservation in North Carolina. Others scattered along the Appalachian mountains from Virginia to north Georgia” (Selu 100). Mooney notes the differences in the groups as early as the 1890s when he states:

. . . those in the Indian Territory, with whom the enforced deportation, two generations ago, from accustomed scenes and surroundings did more at a single stroke to obliterate Indian ideas than could have been accomplished by fifty years of slow development. There remained behind, however, in

the heart of the Carolina mountains, a considerable body, . . . it is among these, the old conservative Kitu’hwa element, that the ancient things have been preserved. . . . There is change indeed in dress and outward seeming, but the heart of the Indian is still his own. (12)

In Selu, Awiakta reports on the state of the Eastern Band of Cherokee and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma in 1984. “Many things separate the eastern and western bands: twelve hundred miles, federal bureaucracy, lack of formal contact for nearly a century and a half.” (107). The eastern band is “geographically enclosed and has a tourist economy,” whereas, the “Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma owns several businesses” and is mostly “integrated into the dominant culture” (107).

At Red Clay, Awiakta reports on the liminal state—both fractured and unified—of the Cherokee in 1984 while describing the spectrum of Cherokee and others attending the festivities and ceremonies honoring the reunion. Throughout her discussion, Awiakta highlights the “five to six thousand” who are of Cherokee heritage out of the crowd of twenty thousand (Selu 100). “The Cherokee set the tone for the crowd. Though visually they often may be distinguished only by a deeper tint of skin or hair, a bit of beaded jewelry, an occasional ribbon shirt or dress, they are still, as an observer of the 1837 council described them, ‘the decorous Cherokee’” (102). Awiakta’s description of Maggie Wachacha, “scribe for the tribal council, and a ‘rememberer,’ represents the traditional presence at Red Clay (103). Conversely, she describes a man adorned with a “feather headdress and pilot glasses” claiming “he was a ‘shaman who had healing

hands,” though later he was revealed to be a charlatan. (111). While Awiakta points out obvious skin tone and traditional and non-traditional differences, she highlights the harmony of the group. “The most striking image is the ceaseless current of men, women and children, moving peaceably among the knolls, over the meadow” (102). Awiakta both expresses and exposes liminality in the Cherokee Nation through her description of the variety of people and interaction surrounding the Reunion of the Cherokee Councils of East and West at Red Clay.

Within her narrative of Wachacha, Awiakta inserts two paragraphs that were spoken in 1837 that highlight the marginal perspectives present at Red Clay. The first was recorded by George W. Featherstonhaugh and regards the government’s promising of land in Oklahoma (Selu 103). The second is a description of Red Clay by an English naturalist “whose eyewitness account is used extensively in the modern reconstruction of the historic area” (104). Both paragraphs represent the split of culture endured by the Cherokee. Awiakta emphasizes Wachacha’s special connection to and understanding of the stories. “Briefly her eyes meet mine, and I know. All are one to her: past, present, future, and the experiences they bring” (103). By inserting Wachacha as the human link to Red Clay of 1837, Awiakta demonstrates the liminality of the Cherokee oral tradition in linking the past. Additionally, Awiakta demonstrates the link to the future through her description of “two merry teenage girls” who are selling “Remember the Removal” t-shirts from a booth (104). Overall, Awiakta’s description of the mix of traditional and non-traditional, and the resulting community at Red Clay, reflects liminality.

Awiakta also creates liminality in her discussion of opposing views regarding the environment. While her orientation to the environment reflects *Selu's* teachings of harmony and respect, she is acutely aware of those who view earth as a material object only to be consumed. She draws upon the teachings of *Selu*, as well as personal experience, to create an active field of aesthetic possibilities in her prose and poetry. For example, in the poem, "When Earth Becomes an 'It,'" Awiakta presents two differing perspectives regarding Earth (Selu 6). The first two stanzas demark the philosophical differences between those who "call Earth 'mother,'" and those who "call Earth 'it.'" Awiakta's clear verse enables the reader to easily discern the differences between the identified groups. Those who call Earth "mother" cherish and respect nature while those who call Earth an "it . . . consume her strength . . ." and "die." The last stanza acts as a warning to those who don't "call her by her name" (6). The poem concentrates on the materialism of those who destroy the planet. Throughout her text, Awiakta juxtaposes Cherokee environmental conservation with the materiality of the West while emphasizing the ultimate devastating effect people have on the vitality of the Earth's environment and population. Moreover, as a teacher, Awiakta produces liminality through necessity because she presents Cherokee myth and philosophy in a Western format.

In the poem, "Out of Ashes Peace Will Rise," Awiakta adds to the prophetic doom and gloom featured in the previous poem with the lines, "we will vanish . . . if we are not resolute" (Selu 7). However, she balances negative themes with ones of courage and peace that infuse hope within her narrative voice. The lines "out of ashes / peace will

rise” appear seven times, including the title. Also, the lines are repeated four times after the line “In the Four Directions.” The repetitions are significant in that they relate directly to Cherokee numerology. According to Mooney:

the two sacred numbers of the Cherokee are four and seven, the latter being the actual number of the tribal clans, the formulistic number of upper worlds or heavens, and the ceremonial number of paragraphs or repetitions in the principal formulas. . . . The sacred four has direct relation to the four cardinal points, while seven, besides these, includes also “above,” “below,” and “here at the center.” (431)

Through an obviously structured design, the reader is directed to consider the significance of the form. In the context of the book, the structure acts as an example of the hybrid literature that the author creates when blending the cultures in which she lives.

All in all, Awiakta reveals liminality in her text by producing an art form that relies heavily on the ancient oral tale of *Selu* while firmly considering contemporary social and political issues. Awiakta’s art relies on the tension created in the liminal spaces where Cherokee meets Western-European-American. While her weaving style contrasts Native American and Western philosophies, it demands the reader to blend both perspectives. Awiakta’s art surpasses didacticism through the ambiguity she creates while juxtaposing the reader’s ability to understand ancient myths and rituals with the contemporary message of harmony and balance that is woven into the text.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Marilou Awiakta's Selu surpasses mere didacticism to achieve an aesthetic characterized by accessibility, simultaneity, and liminality. While Awiakta acknowledges the original design and purpose of the oral tale of *Selu*, she creates her didactic voices to promote access into Cherokee culture, past and present. Her purpose is to instruct, but she transcends mere teaching by manipulating a variety of narrative voices in an artful manner. While her poetry, along with Mary Adair's drawings, is specialized forms of art and literature, her essays and histories reveal the artful choices of the author herself.

Awiakta's strong voice dominates the narrative while at the same time facilitates the reader's access into the oral traditions within her Cherokee/Appalachian heritage. Throughout her text, Awiakta develops a variety of narrative voices to transfer the oral tale of *Selu* to a written form. She selects voices that demand the reader to consider *Selu* from many perspectives. At the center of Awiakta's narrative voice is her respect for the history and nature of the oral tradition. While she obviously cares deeply for the integrity of *Selu*, Awiakta also seeks to express the ancient tale anew. She provides the reader with lessons that convey the vitality of the tale while also acknowledging the traditions of the past.

Throughout her text, Awiakta speaks directly to her readers, guiding them through a variety of literary structures and cross-cultural discussions. She connects *Selu*'s

wisdoms to lessons of harmony and balance that appeal to both the individual and society. Awiakta's most compelling lessons highlight the philosophical differences between Western and Native Americans. She creates complexity through the range of narrative voices that she develops in expressing the wisdoms of *Selu*. Ultimately, her use of didactic voice throughout Selu facilitates access into the Cherokee oral tale of *Selu*. Mankiller states, "Selu, gave me and gives the reader practical advice on how to use ancient wisdom in contemporary life" (Selu ix). All in all, Awiakta constructs a contemporary text while at the same time expressing the didactic intention of the ancient oral tale.

Selu achieves simultaneity when the reader considers the variety of narrative modes that Awiakta uses to express *Selu*'s teachings. With *Selu* as the focal point, Awiakta creates a series interrelated lessons that both reflect and adapt *Selu*'s wisdoms. From Mary Adair's drawings to Awiakta's poetic memories of her childhood, Awiakta unifies disparately placed literary structures thematically throughout the book. Awiakta creates simultaneity of experience when the reader considers particular concepts, such as harmony and balance, within an active field of artistic manifestations inspired by *Selu*. The prose, poetry, and drawings present in her text contribute to the overall simultaneity of experience.

Awiakta adapts the ancient oral tale of *Selu* to a contemporary format, revealing cultural liminality. This is most apparent when Awiakta compares and contrasts Native American and Western culture. As her lessons weave between discord and harmony,

between micro and macro, she exposes a uniquely American culture that accommodates seemingly incompatible philosophies. Awiakta guides the reader through discussions that juxtapose Native American and Western-European-American experience while at the same time weaving her own life experience and knowledge artistically into the narrative. Undoubtedly, Awiakta's art reflects the tension between opposing social and political philosophies present in American culture(s) and the deliberate modes in which she expresses them.

While liminality creatively shapes the narrative, simultaneity uniquely characterizes the experience of the reader. *Selu* acts as a catalyst for Awiakta's art as she weaves a literary presentation of the essence of the ancient oral tale. Although her primary intention is to instruct, her lessons produce artful manifestations of *Selu*.

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