



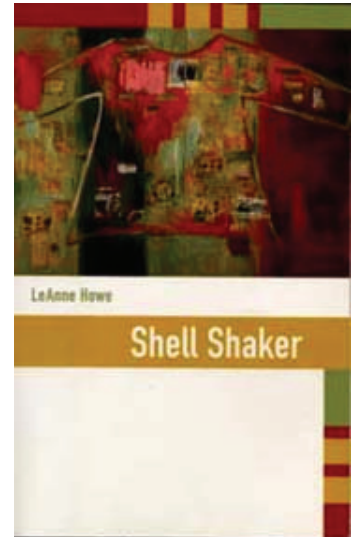
Voices  
from the  
Gaps

# Shell Shaker by LeAnne Howe

“Native stories are power. They create people. The author tribes. America is a tribal creation story, a tribalogy.” This assertion is made in the opening lines of the essay, “The Story of America: a Tribalogy,” written by LeAnne Howe in *Clearing the Path, Theorizing the Past in Native American Studies*. Howe’s assertion is grounded through her own storytelling in the novel *Shell Shaker*. In this novel, Howe connects to her readers, challenging them to gain an awareness of the corruption and misuse of power prevalent with our leaders. By creatively taking on history as it relates to the present, she challenges her readers to unite to restore balance.

*Shell Shaker* is the story of two political leaders of different centuries, overtaken by greed, who divide people by making war-and about members of the community whose destiny is to make things even with the help of the spirits. There are two murders-two seemingly independent events-that occur simultaneously in their telling, so that the reader is made to question the importance of the connection between the present and the past. It is as though the rhythm of certain historical events resonates in the present as a fire burns, then extinguishes, then flares up again. The smoke lingers, shrouding the misuse of power, until it is cleared by the counter force of the community. Everyone plays their part, making sacrifices for the whole in order to solve the following mystery: who killed these two leaders, and why?

Howe writes audibly. Power transmits through the voice behind her vivid, tangible descriptions and her beautiful, drop-dead-funny dialogues. She strikes a nice balance between describing and telling. She balances the horrific reality of war and death with the restoring and often humorous dynamics of love and family. Howe dances carefully along the limits of the English language, negotiating beyond it in order to express knowledge that adapts the very categories of English, especially concerning time. Howe is a feisty writer who picks a fight with America by exposing it to itself. She does this elegantly, fluidly, and craftily, with considerable style.



Publisher: Aunt Lute  
Press, 2001



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This story begins with the telling of the origin of the women peacemakers among the Inholahta Choctaw clan from the eastern town of Yanbi. The woman Shakbatina recounts a tradition that began with Grandmother-the tradition of the Shell Shaker. When the town heard the story of the Osano (WAH-sano), bloodsucker, Hispano de Soto, the people became very worried. Tuscalusa, Grandfather, prepared to lead the enemy into a trap. Grandmother prepared in another way. She built a fire and strapped empty turtle shells around each ankle and moved her lips in silent prayers. She danced around the fire for four days and nights until the ground around the fire was red with her blood and Miko Luak, fire's spirit, took pity on her and carried her prayers up to Itilauichi, the Autumnal Equinox, who listened with compassion (p 2). "Through your sacrifice of blood," he said, "you have proven yourself worthy. The things you desire for the people will be given" (p 2). Grandmother survived the horrors of warfare, and afterwards she decided she would become a peacemaker.

It is in 1738 that the force of the Osano has taken over the heart of Red Shoes, great warrior leader, and husband to Shakbatina's daughter, Anoleta. From Red Shoe's malicious intent a situation arises in which Anoleta is accused of murdering a Chickasaw woman from the Red Fox village. The death of this woman has brought war between the two clans. Shakbatina states, "I am a Shell Shaker. I know when it is my time to return to the earth. . . I will sacrifice myself, knowing that peace will follow between our two tribes" (p 4). She paints her face with vermilion war paint, a sign to her people that they will have to go to war. Shakbatina reflects that she "did not know, at the time that this incident would affect [her] family for generations to come"(p 5).

In 1991, this story continues with the descendents of Shakbatina and of Red Shoes-the Billy family-who again need to go to war, this time in Old Durant, Okalahoma. In between these two times, the Choctaws, among other nations, were forcibly removed from their tribal lands, east of the Mississippi river, to Indian Territory, under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, passed by President Andrew Jackson. This forced removal is known as the Trail of Tears. Over 4,000 Choctaws died from exposure, disease and starvation as they were driven west of the Mississippi to foreign land. In 1907, when Indian Territory became the state of Oklahoma and the land was taken away from the Indians through allotments, the spirits moved away. They "shed their skin that bound the land and people together" (p 17). However, this condition changes in Old Durant, Oklahoma, on the Autumnal Equinox of 1991. "Now they've returned, pulling stars down from the sky, causing a fifty-mile prairie fire. . . all the land along Highway 70 is seared black, like a piece of burnt toast. It's a sign. They've come back to pick a fight" (p 17).



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Two seemingly independent years and series of events have critical significance for each other, as the story of the assassination of Red Shoes, in the 18th century, plays out as the story of the assassination of Redford McAlester, Chief of the Choctaw Nation, in the 20th century. It is the Billy family, peacemakers and warriors, whose destiny it is to solve both murders through the power of the Shell Shaker.

Auda Billy and her mother, Susan Billy, both claim responsibility for McAlester's death. They are put into custody. The whole family, related by blood and the Indian way, reunites in Old Durant to cause a ruckus to get Auda and Susan out of Jail. Then it is their task to get the bottom of the mystery of Redford's death and the money scandal he was involved in. The son of Tema Billy, Hoppy, who the local deputy would classify as a "dangerous college artist," rallies warriors with the giant peanut mobile to save Auda from being murdered on one occasion. The movie stars, Dovie and Delores Love, who are related to the Billy family in the Indian way, arrive to offer support as well. When the Italian Mafia come to Oklahoma and Auda's sister Adair and her friend Gore go to New York to find a secret agent of the Irish Republic Army, who calls himself James Joyce, it is clear that this assassination has wide reaching implications for the fate of the Choctaw Nation, the United States, Ireland, and England. It takes intervention from the French actress, Sarah Bernhardt (who is also a porcupine), to straighten things out.

Redford McAlester and Red Shoes, though originally well-intentioned, become overtaken with greed. They become Osano. Although Hispano de Soto was Osano, and the reader may presuppose that all European arrivals or those of European descent could be considered Osano, this is not the case. Howe problematizes simple notions of corruption and evil, demonstrating that these themes are cross-cultural phenomena. Corruption is not an inherent attribute of money because as the character Adair exhibits, money can be acquired appropriately and used for good things. Nor is corruption necessarily a condition of Americans and American society overall, and if it is, then American Indians are participants, not exempt. In this story, Delores and Dovie are Hollywood actresses, after all. Auda has a PhD in history, Gore is a very successful lawyer, and Adair is a six-figure Wall Street guru. The English aren't wholly corrupt either, as Tema, the actress sister, is married to the Brit, Bordon Beade, although "Issac [Billy] believes [the Choctaws have] always preferred les Français. Better Food" (53). Corruption is an aspect of power. Osano means horsefly. It is used in this book to describe an individual leader's desire for personal power, his simultaneous desire for power for the tribe, and how all this power overtakes him. He becomes corrupt and commits hurtful, destructive acts. He devours human life. Howe takes readers into the minds of the corrupt so that they may be shocked into an understanding of how corruption occurs, and that they may be incited to take a critical look at the actions of their own leaders.



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Ultimately, this story is about the importance of community. When the people come together, they amass the necessary restorative force to counteract the corruption and restore balance. This story follows what the critic William Bevis has called a “homing-plot.” This roughly means that instead of the characters setting out and leaving home, they are coming or returning home. He comments that “homing-plots all present tribal past as a gravity field stronger than individual will”(Bevis, p 598). And even at the end of the novel, when the characters set out from Old Durant to places like Louisiana and England, they do so knowing who they are and where their home is. When trouble arises, they come home because their past and their relatives compel them to help. Every member of the community is compelled to make sacrifices for the whole. This is also the foundation of the Shell Shaker, who sacrifices for peace. In the beginning, readers may be startled by Shakbatina’s move to instill peace through self-sacrifice. Readers may be shaken by Howe’s depiction of the violent events that take place in the struggle to shift things into balance. But it is important for the reader to understand this is a story of war, as well as peace, and the characters take on what they have to in order to make things even.

Heroism is not equated with one individual character, either. There is no single protagonist; rather, *Shell Shaker* is told through many characters, including Red Shoes and McAlester. This story is about a community, a people, who are continually making sacrifices for the benefit of all. If one member of the community is in trouble, the whole community is in trouble, because when everyone is related, troubles resonate throughout the entire community. This community must, in addition to using their skills and talents of the present, access their traditions to find the tools and wisdom they need. Howe’s contemporary characters rely on the knowledge of the historical story of their ancestors to unravel the mysteries at hand and determine how to proceed.

Howe isn’t necessarily writing about past events, though. In the English language, the word “past”, as an adjective, tends to mean “gone in time and no longer existing.” In this story, the events of 1738 simply cannot be described as past, so it is clear that Howe isn’t writing about what was past. Rather, she is writing about what is present. Red Shoes is reminded, shortly before his own death, “do not forget that the dead are helping the living” (p 171). The past elements of *Shell Shaker* are only limited to the physical bodies of some of the characters, and this means that there is something eternal that extends through generations of Choctaws: it is the beautiful rhythm of a story spoken softly and continuously, in and between the text.



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The problem of the English language is that it tends to define time as a line on which events occur independent of each other. Howe does an exceptional job of collapsing this line with her use of the present tense, so that the reader understands that the events of the past are reoccurring in the present. In this story, the events of 1738 and 1991 impact each other—it is as though the events of each year occur side-by-side, mediated by Itilauichi, the Autumnal Equinox. Howe leads the reader along both halves of the circle. Although occurring at separate places, this story ends where things are made even and can rest, in a sacred place, at the center, the Nanih Waiya. Nanih Waiya literally means “Productive Mound” and it is often referred to as “The Mother Mound” in Choctaw (Choctaw Nation History, 2001). According to Howe in her short story, “Choctalking On Other Realities,” published in the Winter 1999 issue of *Grinnell Magazine*, the Nanih Waiya is the place where “the earth opened her body and beckoned us [Choctaws] to join her above ground. So our ancestors tunneled up through her navel into tinges of moist red men and women”(p 51). In *Shell Shaker*, things are put to rest at the Nanih Waiya, because this story is about Choctaw people and corruption within the Choctaw Nation. Howe offers a culturally suitable solution to a problem within a specific culture. Through her use of English, Howe takes readers into a way of knowing time and history that is very different from the knowledge that typically accompanies the English language. She, therefore, pushes the limits of English and challenges the associated epistemology of the native-English speaker.

Howe takes on history in a way that imparts its meaning and power to us, the readers. History is significant because it has a vast and complex influence on the present. It is the task of the characters in *Shell Shaker* to be aware of this influence. Just as the characters of this book are conscious of history, as readers we are called to be conscious of history’s influence and presence in our own lives. This book may cause us to reflect on the importance of history and how it resonates in everything we do. History is present in the institutions and structures that surround us, and it often resides in the underlying motivations for our actions. It is the accumulated knowledge of a people over time. Peacemaking and balance are parts of Howe’s accumulated knowledge. In an interview about *Shell Shaker*, she explained that “being in balance is something my Grandmother/Mothers taught. Not overtly, of course, but in small everyday lessons.” She gained her knowledge of how to be and act in the world from others, particularly from her mothers and grandmother who gained this knowledge from their mothers and grandmothers. Thus, we know history from each other, so it is a common history that binds a community together. It is history that teaches us how to act to combat corruption in the present.

When things are thrown out of balance by corruption, we should ask ourselves how we are to respond. In the same interview about her novel, when asked about *Osano* and its relevance to readers today, Howe responded:



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*Look around you, they are everywhere. Since 9/11 within our own country, corporate America leaders, men and women in Congress, people who feed off the blood of others are becoming embarrassingly visible. Since 9/11, fifteen billion dollars in aid and loan guarantees for airline companies, but not one penny for laid-off airline workers. \$800 million lump-sum transfer from the FEDS to General Motors. FED insiders, (read Congressmen and their lobbyists on CNN) will argue that the money will lead to more investment by the company. But General Motors is already sitting on \$8 billion in cash. Congressional leaders like Dick Armey and Tom Delay say they believe in free markets, but they take from the poor and give to the corporate rich. In other eras these kinds of tactics would be called political bribes and pay-offs, but not today. Mainstream Americans, so far, have not objected, at least not yet. And if and when they do, will Attorney General John Ashcroft accuse them of being political terrorists? Subversives? This is an old story and it seems we're doomed to repeat it. Shell Shaker is a book about power, its misuse, and how a community responds. It's not for Indians only.*

When Howe says that this is an old story and it seems we're doomed to repeat it, she is indicating that history cycles. We live in a pattern of cycles, time cycles, events cycle. By telling two stories side-by-side, Howe reveals the continuance of scandalous internal politics, and the continuing need to practice peace-making in our own world.

In light of *Shell Shaker*, we may discover that the answers to the possibilities for our futures lie in our history. When asked about what she perceives the impact of *Shell Shaker* to be on the world, she responded, "Oh jeez, I cannot say. We'll have to see what happens next."

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