

PREFACE



In the shadow of ships, where riveters hammer and welders rain down showers of sparks, Dan McGhee sweeps wood and paint chips, steel shavings and cigarette butts, into a neat pile, when the whistle screams. On 21 September 1943, he tears open a Lucky Strike, sprinkles tobacco on the waves, torches another, turns his collar up, and shuffles out of the Oakland shipyard, heading home to his woman and supper. He plods through the Eastern garden, up the walkway to the strange, low porch steps of the rented home with Japanese architecture. A toe fumbles on the step, slips, and McGhee crashes to the ground, his head a confusion of love, loss, and home. Days later his wife, Oba, opens her grieving fingers and lets fall a train ticket in the conductor's palm. She smooths her dress, and then sits down to endure the rattled ride back to Oklahoma, her man's body awaiting only cars away. She swears never to ride the train again.

Like many other Native people of their generation, my great grandparents, unable to pay the taxes on their federal "allotment," had lost their land, and sold on the hope of what came to be called Indian "relocation." They left Oklahoma and headed to Oakland, California, for work during World War II. Born in 1877, Stooeastah, or Dan McGhee, experienced massive changes in the Cherokee Nation. In 1838, his own grandparents settled on Honey Creek, after their displacement west, in what came to be called the Trail of Tears. After 1898, McGhee witnessed the hegemony of the Curtis Act to allot communally owned Cherokee territory into individual parcels, a plan designed to conclude Cherokee tribalism by transforming the people into yeoman farmers, and, conveniently, selling off the so-called surplus land to European American settlers. McGhee watched the insidious railroads tear through his homeland, and he saw the final and desperate erasure of the Cherokee Nation when the promised Indian

Territory became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. Having been reared in a Cherokee school, having spoken Cherokee as his primary language, and having sworn off his painful “white man shoes,” I imagine that McGhee foresaw the end of his life when he finally headed west to the “darkening land,” the traditional destination of Cherokee souls. From his place in Cherokee history, one might see the life of McGhee as the clear-cut story of an Indian suffering a white man’s world. But lives intersect.

In the same year Dan McGhee died, Dillon Myer, working as the director of war relocation under Harry Truman, engineered the evacuation of Japanese Americans from their homes to concentration camps and even to Indian reservations. In so doing, their property, businesses, and homes were now conveniently available to other Americans. But this was hardly the first case of this form of injustice. In this pattern, groups of people have been demonized, dehumanized, criminalized, torn from their land, and sent into exile, thus making their property available for others to take. Indeed, in 1838 the Cherokees suffered a similar exile when seven thousand federal troops, under the command of General Winfield Scott, felled trees and built roads into isolated Cherokee mountain towns to strip, literally hand by hand, the people who kneeled there hugging their trees. So in 1943, Myer merely refined this program, albeit with utmost efficiency, when Japanese Americans were later “compensated” for their loss, though Cherokees have never been fully compensated for theirs. Later, as commissioner of Indian Affairs (1950–52), Myer designed the relocation program to move American Indians off their lands and into urban areas, thereby once again securing tribal mineral resources for the production of Cold War weapons and preparing Native peoples for the “termination” of their legal relationships as tribes with the U.S. government.

How strange, then, must have been that evening when my great-grandfather hit his head on the porch of the confiscated Japanese American home. Though separated by people and history, such histories often violently collide to reveal a shared stake in the future not only of subjugated groups but of all of us in the United States. Were Dan McGhee and Japanese Americans to know their shared part in this narrative of domination and were they to organize against it, what social justice might have blossomed in the United States? And, were all Americans to discern this entrenched pattern of demonization and exile, betrayal and theft in our colonial history, what ethnic cleansing might have been averted?

Beginning with such narratives, this book seeks to ground studies of American Indian life and art in a material past and present. For only in

linking and testing our theoretical claims in the real world will any of us ever really understand how over half of all Native people today reside in urban areas, or, despite this displacement, why Indian people so defiantly defend a distinct cultural identity. Indeed, in situating Indigenous literature within narrative histories that intersect, scholars expand and empower Native studies. For in so doing, we are asked to deal more honestly with unpleasant truths often expurgated from our histories, such as the lottery winners in Georgia who rushed to their stolen Cherokee homes or my great-grandparents who availed on the low rent of a confiscated Japanese American home. But while I seek to discover the historicizing narratives that, across cultural and social differences, often join us, I also attempt to claim different ground on particular histories that define us. Were we not to dare articulate those real events that shape discrete cultural identities, we risk undermining the very differences that enrich a diverse society.

Looking down the hill from Oakland, Dan McGhee would have seen Alcatraz Island, where Indians had been imprisoned since the 1870s. He never would have dreamed, however, that in a mere thirty years his grandchildren's generation would in 1969 occupy that worthless island for months in the name of Indian rights, thus setting off the Red Power movement of Native consciousness-raising and American Indian writing—the era and subjects of this book. Again, the ironies of Indian displacement pervade. Native people like my great-grandfather had been displaced to cities only to bolster a savvy population of Indigenous organizers. From my own experience, I was a child of that Red Power era, and, like a child, I lived on some of the innocent hope of the movement. During the 1970s, with my father often away, I saw my mother, Judith Fox, become beautiful. On afternoons, we five brothers would await her return from her waitress job, then rub her feet as she silently planned our escape with food stamps and a new husband. It was a time when she, like many inspired by Red Power, began to grow proud of her Indianness. As a first-generation college graduate and a professor of English, I recall those Indians of other eras and am made aware of the privileged ground on which I now stand, where such a life was not possible for Dan McGhee or Judith Fox. From such a view, I hope to look out on a new Indian Country where social transformation is for many of us now more than ever within our grasp. But, as I argue and demonstrate in this book, it is a transformation that must be theoretically grounded in the past and the land, in identity and experience, concepts I develop in the pages ahead.

To do so, I have sought to organize a new approach to Native studies. I begin by engaging a widespread theoretical assumption in the field, often growing out of poststructuralism, which I characterize as a rejection of our human capacity to make normative claims to knowledge. Denied this capacity, however, Indian scholars are unable to justify how Native cultures can change and still be authentic, or moreover, how Indigenous people can experience legitimate cultural or political growth in relation to community and land. I thus foreground the epistemological claims of this position to disclose its limitations in decolonizing Native America. My concern, however, about the usefulness of theory in American Indian studies should be understood as a forward-looking critical examination of what is thought to be a progressive position in the field.

With these practical goals for Native culture and literature in mind, I explore an alternative theoretical position drawn from Indigenous oral philosophy, which I call tribal realism. I link this view with other minority scholars, who develop a similar “postpositivist realist” view, which allows for genuine debate and exchange across cultures, while still respecting how social location may grant special access to knowledge. Though all of us may share a world, that world is also different for tribal peoples, especially as long as colonialism exists. Indeed, in recognizing these social facts of colonial control, tribal realism develops more secure knowledge about American Indian culture and literature. From this more grounded perspective, our theoretical attachments to history or culture are less obstacles to block objective knowledge than they are tools to serve it. Notwithstanding the humane goals of skeptical theories of knowledge, the U.S. government implicitly employs this position to disable Natives’ relationship to land, people, and self. For this reason, I argue that Indian people can and should engage such relations as a serious philosophical issue. Properly theorized, identity, for example, can produce reliable knowledge about a colonized world. From a realist perspective, such concepts are certainly mediated—but also relational. Identities are theories we develop in order to explain our pasts, our lands, our daily lives. Through identity we may intellectually evaluate our experiences, and new accounts of our experiences may demand a change in self-conception. In so doing we achieve a homeland and a culture and a politics.

I have set out to compose a more objective view to Native knowledge because without a workable understanding of how we know the world—in relation to our own selves, our personal and collective tribal pasts, our homelands, and our colonized present—we cannot adequately plan an

Indian future. Such an understanding must enable us to imagine and realize a decolonized Indian Country, first in terms of lands (as I show in part 1 of this volume) and then, growing from that ground, in terms of politics (part 2). In each chapter, these central cultural and philosophical issues facing Native peoples guide my readings of the Red Power novel, particularly as it represents the political and moral transformation of Native people responding to various forms of repression. Red Power provided the social vision for this kind of novel to emerge. This was a time when American Indian activists, scholars, and artists, across myriad differences, joined hands and raised their voices to claim a forgotten history and a stolen land. So began a political awakening that made available alternative narratives of tribal lives: new knowledge for a new Indian future.

How often it is that scholars, when meeting me, ask where I am from. As a Cherokee citizen with light skin, I imagine I invite curiosity when some seek to place me. But as I hope this book will show, our own worlds have a lot to do with what we come to know, and we come to know other worlds by examining and sharing our own. Trusting that truth, I offer much of myself in this book to be clear about from where and for whom I speak. As Dan McGhee's reluctant trail west would attest, to be "from" the land of one's ancestors is a right, ironically, denied many Indigenous people. Here, I work to show Indians like McGhee another way home, at least intellectually, where they may justify the recovery of land and culture. This book is my own best attempt to honor those lives.

