

The Double-Weave of Self and Other: Ethnographic Acts and Autobiographical Occasions in Marilou Awiakta's *Selu*: *Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*

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In the opening pages of Marilou Awiakta's *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*, the author offers a metacommentary on her delightfully hybrid text, likening it to a "double-woven basket (Cherokee-style)."¹ The image resonates on many levels with the author's tribal traditions and thus serves to foreshadow the text's wealth of material on Cherokee culture and history, but readers soon discover that Awiakta actually integrates the design of the double-woven basket into the very form of her text. In so doing she produces a book that through its combination of circularity and quadratic symmetry resists the linearity of traditional Western narrative and challenges many of the epistemological assumptions that follow from that tradition. My reading of *Selu* builds on a recognition and appreciation of the form of the text by examining a less explicit but, I argue, equally significant manner in which the double-weave basket structure serves as a metaphor for the text's complex autobiographical dimensions. In particular, the double-weave design of traditional Cherokee basketry is replicated not only in Awiakta's affirmation of both her Celtic-Appalachian and Eastern Band Cherokee roots but also in her simultaneous expression of a collective tribal identity and an individualistic artistic identity. Throughout *Selu* Awiakta demonstrates her ability to weave back and forth between autoethnography, on the one hand, in which her representation of selfhood is collective, virtually inseparable from her insider's explanations of Cherokee myths, history,

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and cultural practices, and conventional Western autobiography, on the other hand, in which she gives a narrative account of the development of an autonomous, in this case artistic, identity. This autobiographical double-weave of relational and autonomous modes of subjectivity, of identification and individuation, underscores Mick McAllister's observation that "an American Indian autobiography is by its nature a bicultural document."² It also serves as a good example of what Arnold Krupat has called, in a different context, a cosmopolitan critical perspective, in which American Indians and members of other historically marginalized groups are negotiating with increasing deftness competing socially constructed definitions of selfhood to find discursive freedom in the cultural borderlands.³

FORMING AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND SHAPING SELFHOOD

Selu is such a thorough hybrid of generic forms that some readers may initially find little in it that resembles what they consider autobiography. Certainly, if one were to rely solely on Philippe Lejeune's oft-cited definition of classic autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality," then *Selu* does not fit the bill.⁴ Awiakta's primary objective in *Selu* is to present a message of healing and harmony drawn primarily from traditional Cherokee myths, which she accomplishes through a combination of essay and personal narrative, myth and history, prose and poetry, drawing with equal ease from tribal oral traditions and European and Euro-American literary and scientific sources. At the thematic center of the text is the figure of Selu herself, the Cherokees' mythic personification of the life force whose story serves as a reminder of the human tendency to take nature for granted and a warning of the dangers that lie therein. Although Selu, the Corn Mother (along with Little Deer, or Awi Usdi, Selu's counterpart in the animal world), operates as the central and most visible trope in the text, however, the autobiographical persona of Marilou Awiakta plays a less obtrusive but equally crucial role in the book's considerable persuasive appeal.⁵

Through her use of the first-person singular (and, at times, the first-person plural) Awiakta weaves her own story into the story of Selu and the story of the Cherokee people, which she in turn weaves into her environmental critique. In so doing she invokes a kind of referential authority that is specific to the genre of autobiography. According to Lejeune, who, to his credit, immediately recognized the overly restrictive nature of his above-cited definition and sought to define autobiography in more useful terms, the genre is best distinguished from other forms of writing by the type of response it elicits from its readers, something that takes place when the name of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are the same, an alignment Lejeune calls the "autobiographical pact."⁶ Although *Selu* has no protagonist in the sense one finds in a traditional autobiographical narrative, Awiakta does in fact weave a narrative of her life story into the text and thus meets the conditions of the autobiographical pact. When such an alignment takes place, Lejeune argues, the implicit rules for reading are changed.⁷

By positioning her autobiographical persona on the imaginary boundary between traditional Native American culture and contemporary mainstream US society, and speaking as one who is equally at home in both worlds, Awiakta fashions an autoethnography, a genre that Françoise Lionnet describes as “the defining of one’s subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history, and ethnographic analysis.”⁸ For anthropologist Irma McLaurin, an autoethnography is a text that is, in essence, “dialogical, in that it represents the speaker/writer’s subjective discourse, but in the language of the colonizer. In speaking the colonizer’s language, the ‘native’ demonstrates her capacity to be both like the colonizer and unlike him. In deploying autoethnography, the ‘native’ serves as cultural mediator.”⁹ Although Awiakta clearly takes this role of cultural mediator very seriously, she also infuses it with some humor. For instance, the book’s introduction is written in the form of a fax to her readers.¹⁰ Although Awiakta’s role here differs in a crucial way from that of the traditional tribal storyteller, in that she is sharing her stories and wisdom with an outsider group primarily rather than with members of her own tribe, she nevertheless fulfills a crucial part of the traditional role by not simply telling the story but explaining its significance as well, just as she explains to her readers the significance of the structure of her text.

In her discussion of the manner in which the double-weave is integrated into the basic quadratic structure of the basket/text, Awiakta explains, “In the *double-woven* basket style, buckbrush vines, called ‘runners,’ are used instead of reeds. At a certain point, the ribs are turned down and weaving begins again, back toward the base. . . . The two sides are distinct, yet interconnected, and they reconverge in the basic law of respect and balance” (35). In such a manner the first half of the book, titled “Weaving I: A Path to Selu,” and the second, titled “Weaving II: Selu, Spirit of Survival,” are integrated into a holistic design. “A Path to Selu” brings the reader into the Cherokee world-view and personal experience of the author, and then the “Spirit of Survival” applies the lessons from part 1 to the environmental and social problems of the United States. The motif of the distinct sides “reconverging” in harmonic balance plays out in numerous ways in the text, not only in the emphasis given in traditional Cherokee religion to humans’ harmony with nature and to the sacred balance of the masculine and feminine but also to Awiakta’s bicultural



heritage, which she represents most vividly in a mystical vision that conflates Western science and Cherokee myth.

Awiakta's choice of the basket as the model for the form of her text is especially appropriate and evocative, given her interest in transmitting tribal history and legends and gendering the religious and ecological dimensions of the Cherokee people's relationship with their natural environment. Sarah P. Hill, author of *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and their Basketry*, notes that "among Cherokees, women have been the primary makers and users of baskets." Besides their purely functional purpose, Hill claims, "baskets have both meaning and reason. The meaning of Cherokee basketry, evident in legend, custom, and history, relates to the role and work of women as the source of food and life, as providers and sustainers of families."¹¹ By connoting these gendered roles, the basket structure of the text reinforces the values transmitted in the story of Selu. Furthermore, as Hill observes, when compared to the problematic written record of Cherokee history, basketry provides an invaluable perspective on Cherokee history and traditional life: "Each [Cherokee] basket is both an individual and collective expression of . . . complex processes," telling "stories [that] encompass strands of the past and present, and [that] represent transformations in lives, minds, and landscapes."¹² Similarly, *Selu* seeks to honor and give expression to a collective tribal experience and tradition while simultaneously providing a record of and vehicle for an individual's personal transformation in relation to that collective experience.

The relationship between collective and individual expression in autobiographical writing has in the last twenty-five years been subjected to intense scrutiny. In particular, feminist critics such as Mary G. Mason, Susan Stanford Friedman, and Sidonie Smith have persuasively discredited the masculinist and ethnocentric biases that once universalized individualistic models of selfhood and privileged narratives (almost exclusively by white men) of an individual's achievement of autonomy while excluding from the canon narratives (typically by people of color and white women) of identification and affiliation.¹³ Applying this gender critique to an ethnic model, Krupat describes Native American autobiography as a tradition in which "the self most typically is not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from others, but, rather, by the achievement of a particular placement in relation to the many voices without which it could not exist."¹⁴ Although Krupat's acknowledgment of a polyvocality and strong identification with a collective tribal experience in Native American autobiography is certainly valid—the pattern is clearly manifested in *Selu*—one result of distinguishing autobiographies by members of marginalized groups in this manner has been to polarize autobiographical strategies into a falsely dichotomous dominant group/other binary. Warning against such generalizations, Anne E. Goldman notes that "in privileging the 'we' over the 'I' recent responses which celebrate the collective in the theory and criticism of ethnic literature, autobiography, and gender studies run the risk of oversimplifying the relation between distinction and affiliation as surely as did the ethnographic conditions under which these books were originally published."¹⁵ *Selu* serves as a case in point, as Awiakta deploys a full range

of autobiographical strategies along a continuum from near total self-effacement to bold self-assertion and from identification to individuation.

LISTENING TO SELU'S STORY

From the very beginning of the book, in its first telling of the Selu myth, we see this polyvocal pattern in which the transmission of tribal stories is interwoven with ethnography and individual autobiographical remembrance. Asking, "Who is Selu?" Awiakta writes, "She will speak for herself in the following traditional Cherokee story. . . . From my childhood I have found this story very interesting." The figure of Selu, which translates in English as "Grandmother Corn," is a "spirit being" and in Cherokee "both [spirit and grain] are spelled s-e-l-u" (9). "Especially during the past decade," Awiakta writes, "I've been seeking the deeper understanding of Selu's wisdoms and ways of applying them to contemporary life, including my own. . . . Our compass for the journey is Selu's traditional story *and its cultural context*. To be accurate, and useful, a Native American story, like a compass needle, must have its direction points" (9–10). Later in the text, Awiakta points out how these compass points correspond with the ribs of a basket, and with the four central themes of the book: "Wounds, Mother Earth, Healing, and Selu" (35).

Contextualizing the ethnographic act in which the version of the story she relates was collected, Awiakta recounts how an elder named Siquanid told the story to Jack and Anna Kilpatrick in the 1950s near Tenkiller Lake, in Oklahoma. Briefly, in Siquanid's version of the story two grandsons prepare to go hunting, when the grandmother tells them that on their return she will have prepared for them a stew made from the old meat and something new called corn. The boys wonder about the origins of this mysterious new food, which they find to be delicious when they eat the meal she has prepared. The same thing happens the next day, and on the third day one of the boys decides to sneak back home, where he spies the grandmother entering the smokehouse carrying a large bowl. Peeping through a hole in the side of the smokehouse, he sees his grandmother stand over the bowl and strike her sides, causing grits to fall from every part of her body until the bowl is full. When the boys refuse the stew that night, the grandmother realizes they know her secret and becomes mortally ill. Telling them she is going to die, she gives them detailed instructions on how to bury her, how to care for the corn that will blossom from her grave, how to store for the winter and plant in the spring the kernels from the corn, and even how to prepare for eating the corn they harvest after that. "I will be the Corn Mother," she tells them. "Don't ever forget where I am buried." The story ends with one of the brothers taking a wife and the couple expanding their corn crop from year to year until "there became so much corn that everyone in the world had some" (10–15).

With an easy turn of the reed, Awiakta then weaves Siquanid's version of the Selu legend into her autobiographical reminiscence from her childhood, when her grandfather told and interpreted the story to her as they picked corn from the family's garden in east Tennessee. When she asks him whether

Grandmother Selu was angry at the boys for spying on her, he responds, “She wasn’t mad or mean-spirited. She just told them how it is. Back in the beginning of time, the Creator put the Law in Mother Earth and all she gives. If you take from her, you have to give back respect and thankfulness. If you don’t do that, why then she quits giving. So when the boys were disrespectful, Selu had to leave. That’s the Law” (15). After recounting her grandfather’s instruction at greater length, Awiakta assumes the role of interpreter of the story, but she takes care to mark the boundary between her tribal community and that of the larger readership by noting, “We won’t delve into Selu’s secret or into tribal ceremonies or counsel that elders have given me in confidence. Only what Selu and tribal people offer to the public will be considered” (18). The remainder of the book seeks to elaborate an explanation of the significance of the story as it pertains to the four ribs of the basket (the themes of Wounds, Mother Earth, Healing, and Selu), and that explanation in turn entails recent chapters in Cherokee tribal history (in particular the tragic story of the Eastern Band’s failed legal challenges to the construction of the federal Tellico Dam project on tribal homeland); a biographical portrait of Wilma Mankiller, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma; a history of the early US republic; portraits of the author’s own family members; recollections of her childhood spent in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, during and immediately after World War II; and her personal path to spiritual wholeness and self-affirmation as a writer.

LITTLE DEER AND THE PATH TO *SELU*

This gesture of artistic self-affirmation is ultimately the most striking example in *Selu* of what Goldman calls the “impulse towards self-presencing,” which she takes to be an “essential characteristic of life writings,”¹⁶ though, admittedly, it is impossible to fully separate this quintessentially individualistic autobiographical act from Awiakta’s expressions of tribal affiliation. For Awiakta the “path” to the writer’s simultaneous self-recognition and self-declaration is a circuitous one, as we learn in another of the text’s many metacommentaries, and involves two separate stages. The path begins in the first half of the book, in the chapter titled “Following the Deer Trail.” There Awiakta relates another Cherokee traditional story, this one about Awi Usdi, or Little Deer. “Understanding Little Deer is important,” she writes, “because, by a long and circuitous route, he led me through the 1980s to Selu. . . . The path weaves and spirals through the years of the past decade in the same way a trail moves through the mountains (or reeds through the ribs of a basket). The terrain of my life itself shaped the path (and the form of this book)” (26).

In the story of Little Deer that follows we learn that the animals held a meeting when the human hunters began overkilling the deer, threatening their extinction. Awi Usdi, the chief of the deer, goes to the humans to tell them that they must from now on ask permission before killing one of them, and if any hunter fails to do so, Awi Usdi will use his magic to cripple the hunter so that the hunter will no longer be able to hunt. Awiakta then explains how the turns in her own path of life had led her away from a full

cognizance of the simple message of respect and harmony contained in the story of Little Deer and how, through a mystical vision, she simultaneously regained this knowledge and recreated her personal identity as a writer.

This turning away began with Awiakta's childhood in Oak Ridge, where her father worked during and immediately after World War II and where the scientific view of life embraced there seemed to negate the truths she had earlier found in her Cherokee and Appalachian folk traditions. From there she earned degrees in English and French at the University of Tennessee, which distanced her even further from her tribal teachings. But when she moved to France, she began to see the value of her roots and to relate them to her cosmopolitanism: "Living in France made me think deeply about who I was," she writes, "about the value of my heritage, and about the necessity of working out harmonies with peoples from different cultures. By the time I returned to America, I knew that I was a Cherokee/Appalachian poet. I was determined to sing my song" (31). Yet she was unable at first to reconcile that part of her identity and her growing concern over pollution of the environment with the scientific worldview she had internalized, and with the sense of constraint she felt in her role as mother and wife, until she returned to Oak Ridge and visited the Museum of Science and Energy. At this point in her narrative Awiakta describes the vision that synthesizes the previously disparate elements of her life and offers her a path toward artistic achievement and personal fulfillment:

I stood in front of a giant model of an atom—an enormous, translucent blue ball with tiny lights whirling inside, representing the cloud of the electrons. Stars whirling . . . whirling . . . whirling . . . drew me into an altered state of consciousness.

Suddenly I saw Little Deer leaping into the heart of the atom.

In that instant, as if irradiated, his story sprouted, shot up and bore fruit. The synapse in my mind electrified. With my whole being I made a quantum leap and connected Little Deer to the web of my life—at the center. The vision was clear.

But what did it mean? That night, I drew what I'd seen: a white stag leaping at the heart of three orbits. To signify the electrons, I put a tiny star in each orbit. And I wrote these lines:

From the heart of the mountain he comes
With his head held high in the wind.
Like the spirit of light he comes
The small white chief of the deer. (32)



As she explains, this vision eventually became the centerpiece for her first book, a collection of poems titled *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet*.¹⁷ (Many of those poems are reprinted in *Selu*.) More important, she writes, "The vision of Little Deer changed all my relationships. . . .

Primarily it changed my relationship with myself. I understood who I was and the meaning of my middle name which I had never used in print: *Awiakta*, a derivation of the word 'eye of the deer.' . . . I would, in time . . . choose to be known by this name. From this center, my work expanded."¹⁸

Just as the vision of Little Deer in the model of the uranium atom culminates in a personal transformation that leads in turn to an important development in Awiakta's self-fashioning as a writer—the publication of *Abiding Appalachia*, which she describes as “the ‘eye’ of [her] mature life and work”¹⁹—a second revelation leads her to the writing of another key text in her literary development: *Selu*. But whereas the first revelation had come “like a lightning bolt,” the second “arrived as what the Navajo call a ‘she-rain’—gentle, steady, long-term, and deeply permeating.”²⁰ This part of Awiakta's life narrative is contained within a section of the text titled “Arrow of Warning and Hope,” and it is this portion of *Selu* that comes closest to the type of survivor's testimony conventionally associated with earlier Native American autobiographies, as well as with slave narratives and Holocaust narratives. Here Awiakta recounts her personal involvement as a journalist and protester in the doomed fight during the late 1970s to prevent the Tennessee Valley Authority's construction of the Tellico Dam in east Tennessee. Nominally a hydroelectric project (its power output was miniscule compared to the other dams already in operation), it eventually flooded “the historic and spiritual heartland of the Cherokee nation . . . [which] includes the sites of Chota, the holy city and ancient capital of the nation; Tuskegee, the birthplace of Sequoyah, inventor of the Cherokee syllabary; Tenase, for which the state of Tennessee was named; and many other towns, as well as sacred burial grounds” (47). An epigraph at the start of the section from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* frames the Tellico Dam story as a repetition of the Cherokee Removal of the 1830s: “*It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . the only thing is, the names sound different.*” To drive the point home she includes a second epigraph, taken from the Cherokee Memorial to the United States Congress, 29 December 1835, in which the Cherokees express their faith in the “kindness,” “humanity,” and “benevolence” of the US government and a shared belief in “the cause of liberty and justice” (42).

For Awiakta the most frustrating aspect of the story was not the government's failure to honor its promise made in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 to protect the country's archaeological heritage or even the arrogant display of power by the TVA. Rather, she directs her greatest anger at the national media for neglecting the story of the Cherokees' struggle to protect their sacred sites and the remains of their ancestors and focusing its limited attention to the controversy almost exclusively on the snail darter, a small endangered fish whose presence in the Little Tennessee River allowed activists to challenge the project on the grounds that it violated the recently signed Endangered Species Act:

Most Americans still believe the Tellico Dam controversy centered on the snail darter. For years, that's where the press focused their attention. Last November, when the TVA closed the gates of the dam in East Tennessee and began filling the reservoir, the typical public

reaction was, "It's about time. When it's a choice between 'progress' and a three-inch fish, the fish has to go."

The Cherokees reacted differently. What their leaders had protested vigorously since 1965—when the dam was in the planning stages—came to pass. Raising waters drowned the spiritual and historic heartland of the Cherokee nation. (57)

In the months following the flooding of the Tellico reservoir, Awiakta writes, she was consumed by a despair that affected her work. "In those days all I saw were wounds and hopelessness. Anger froze my mind, made it impossible for me to write." Yet, as she was to discover in retrospect, the tragedy contained its own redemptive seed, as it led indirectly to a key moment of professional encouragement that emboldened her to synthesize into a self-defining literary statement the disparate elements of her Cherokee-Appalachian cultural heritage, her burgeoning feminism and environmentalism, and her respect for the destructive as well as healing potential of science and technology. In an effort to bolster the spirits of Awiakta, who was "discouraged, dispirited, and had resolved to quit writing" in the wake of the Tellico debacle, a friend sends her a copy of Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Garden." Inspired by its positive message of hope in the face of adversity and its affirmation of a feminist vision of life-sustaining generational continuity, Awiakta writes Walker, who responds by inviting her to visit her at her home in California the next time she is out West. The resulting visit is fortuitous. To her delight, Awiakta discovers that Walker has read one of her essays and even had pinned above her writing desk the logo of Little Deer in the atom Awiakta had sent her. Learning that Walker has just returned from a protest at the Diablo Canyon nuclear facility, Awiakta tells Walker about her own complicated associations with atomic energy: "Beginning with my experience with Little Deer, including his traditional story, I went on with thoughts I'd had about connecting him with the atom and about doing the same with the traditional spirit and history of Cherokee women, connecting them with what I called 'The atom's mother heart.'" On hearing Awiakta's ideas, Walker then tells her visitor to "write all that down, write it just like you're talking to me," and even offers to help the aspiring author find a publisher for it. Struggling for a title, Awiakta asks Walker, "How does 'Baring the Atom's Mother Heart' sound to you?" (64).

If Awiakta's motivations for including the detailed recounting of the encounter were solely to express gratitude and appreciation for Walker's encouragement of her literary aspirations, then the scene would end there. But she continues her account by relating the meeting to the genesis of *Selu* and to her spiritual reconnection to the Corn Mother herself. "As we sat sipping tea and honey, sharing thoughts," she writes, "outside the open window a wind soughed the boughs of a nearby pine . . . a song in harmony with Alice's voice." They speak of their mixed heritages ("Alice has three heritages—African, Cherokee, and European."), Awiakta tells Walker about the Tellico debacle, and they talk "about tears and 'trudging along' and questing for an upward path." Then Awiakta reconnects, albeit vaguely at first, with the

voice of Selu from her childhood. “Through Alice’s voice but coming from beyond it,” she writes, “I faintly heard singing, strong and lively, even at a distance. I didn’t know who was singing, but I set out in the direction of the sound, heading East.” In the event that the reader has not understood whose voice she is hearing, she adds, “This time I remembered to take a hoe.”

This turn to the East represents a turning toward the dawn and the direction of hope it symbolizes. Because Awiakta is sitting in Walker’s home in California, the direction also represents a return to the hills and traditions—both Cherokee and Celtic—of Appalachia and the Southeast. In this one recounted moment, and in the text of *Selu* that ultimately grows from the recounted moment, Awiakta uses the autobiographical occasion to affirm her connection to a number of communities, most immediately the Eastern Band of the Cherokee and a sisterhood of women writers, but also to affirm her uniqueness and integrity as an artist with her own vision of how to connect to the world. In so doing she integrates into the double-weave design of *Selu* her individuality, in harmony and balance with the collective identity she promotes there as well. Thus, among the many stories interwoven in the text of *Selu* is the narrative of one writer’s beginnings, her literary aspirations recounted and confirmed in the same bold self-assertion of the autobiographical “I.”

NOTES

1. Marilou Awiakta, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother’s Wisdom* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1993), xv.

2. Mick McAllister, “Native Sources: American Indian Autobiography,” in *Updating the Literary West* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1997), 133. For representative discussions of the theoretical issues at stake in the reading of Native American Autobiography see David Brumble, *American Indian Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Arnold Krupat, *For Those Who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); and Hertha D. Wong, “First-Person Plural: Subjectivity and Community in Native American Women’s Autobiography,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 168–78.

3. See Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 14–18.

4. Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 4.

5. From a rhetorical perspective the primary persuasive appeal of the book is through *ethos*, for the environmental critique that runs throughout the text is grounded in a Native American ecological ethic of reverence for and coexistence with nature (rather than the ethic of stewardship that informs the Western worldview). Unsympathetic readers might counter that the persuasive appeal of *Selu* is primarily one of *pathos*, that the book’s frequent references to Native American religion constitute a persuasive strategy common to the New Age movement, which in turn can be traced back to Rousseau’s romanticization of the Noble Savage. For a recent discussion of the New Age movement’s appropriation of Native American religious practices see Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 154–80.

6. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 14. Similarly, Elizabeth Bruss argues that there is no “intrinsically autobiographical form” but rather a set of “illocutionary acts” that together elicit a type of response from the reader that is distinguishable from the range of responses elicited by fiction (Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976], 10, 11).

7. Oddly, the developments in poststructuralism that have placed in serious question both the referential possibilities of language itself and the concept of unified selfhood on which the tradition of autobiography rests have done little to change the basic ways in which readers respond to this pact. For Paul John Eakin, the tenacity of autobiography’s appeal to referentiality should not be dismissed as a “mark of critical naivete.” Rather, “it is a response to . . . a kind of existential imperative, a will to believe that is, finally, impervious to theory’s deconstruction of reference as illusion. The presumption of truth-value is experientially essential; it is what makes autobiography matter to autobiographers and their readers” (Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1992], 30).

8. Françoise Lionnet, “Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*,” in *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. William L. Andrews (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 114. First published in Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

9. Irma McLaurin, “Theorizing a Black Feminist Self in Anthropology: Toward an Autoethnographic Approach,” in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McLaurin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 64. McLaurin’s definition draws heavily from the definition given by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal essay, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992). For a useful survey of the different understandings of the term *autoethnography* see Deborah E. Reed-Danahay’s introduction to *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, ed. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (Oxford: Berg, 1997), esp. 4–9.

10. Awiakta, *Selu*, xv.

11. Sarah P. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), xvii, xix.

12. *Ibid.*, xvii.

13. See Mary G. Mason, “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 207–35; Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 35–61; and Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). Friedman notes that the fundamental inapplicability of individualistic paradigms of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity.

14. Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), quoted in Anne E. Goldman,

“Autobiography, Ethnography, and History: A Model for Reading,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 289.

15. Goldman, “Autobiography, Ethnography, and History,” 288.

16. *Ibid.*, 289.

17. Marilou Awiakta, *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet* (1978; repr., Bell Buckle, TN: Iris Press, 1995).

18. Awiakta, *Selu*, 33.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*