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Who We Are and What We Do

Jim Barnes

*H*alito, chin achukma? (Hello, how you all doing?) It should be obvious to you shortly that I don't know what I'm doing here. You know, I left the Kingdom of Academia four years ago after being captive for thirty-three years, thirty of which were in the wrong place, the last three in the right place. But now I'm free of it all, thank God. I never was much of an academic. I bided my time, I did my work, I played the game but tried not to play the role. This gave me time to write, you know, and that's what I always wanted to do. I didn't know who I was really until Ken Lincoln told me many moons ago in one of the seminal books of criticism of our time. *Native American Renaissance* (1985) did much to pave the road that had been little more than a trail for too many generations. I have felt I owed him something ever since the book was published. That's the main reason why I'm here today, to make a payment on account. The credit cards, I finally got them paid off, you know. Now I'm working on the more important debts. A few moments ago you heard my heritage mentioned and my work praised, for which I am humbly grateful. But I need to set the record straight: I don't have any Cherokee blood, but I would claim it if I did have. It's rich in DNA. Actually, I'm part Choctaw, part Welsh, and as I've often said, I'm a whole lot of mongrel American, whatever that is. I'm really proud to be a part of this movement that started in the sixties. I knew that something wonderful was going on. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), I'd never seen anything like them before, and I was glad, and I gave thanks for them.

JIM BARNES is the author of nine volumes of poetry, most recently *Visiting Picasso* (2007). His autobiographical *On Native Ground: Memoirs and Impressions* (1997) received the American Book Award in 1998.

I wanted to write from the time I learned to read. Maybe the first poem I ever read was “Hey diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle,” not a bad way to begin, you know, much better than the “Trees” I was made to memorize in school. God help us for the awful gush we have been forced to swallow. I worked my way through “The Song of Hiawatha,” and I liked the sounds, but I knew that it wasn’t Indian stuff. I did what I was told I had to do to discover the good stuff: I read everything I could lay my hands on. Result: bad eyes from poor advice. I write poetry, I write fiction. No, not fiction: I write short stories. I make a distinction between short stories and fiction. Short stories have substance and form; fiction doesn’t require as much. You know, it’s just out there, floating. I’m hearing lately terms like *narrative nonfiction*. Now what the hell is that? I’m hearing *Native narrative nonfiction*, and I’m really confused. Whatever happened to words like *essay*?

I tell stories that are real, that are lies. You know, it’s always been like this: the storyteller makes things up. He’s got to get to the big Truth, and he can’t do it if he sticks to facts. I make no apologies. I am an artist. I tell stories. When I was a child, I got into trouble for telling stories. You know what I mean. If you don’t, then you missed something essential in your upbringing. I try to sing songs. I believe in form. I believe you invent the form for each piece that you do. I detest free verse, as I detest free fiction. There is no such thing as free poetry. An old Choctaw saying tells us that “if it don’t cost nothing, it ain’t worth nothing.” You have got to pay the price. There is broken prose or broken song, but unless you give it rhythm, unless you give it structure that it must have, it falls empty on whatever ears that are straining to hear. By the way, the new edition of *On Native Ground* is out, excellent bedside reading. Please put the best sellers away and buy one that isn’t such a best seller. Second edition with a ten-page postscript to bring it up to date. It is a collection of poetry and prose, whatever prose happens to be. Someone once said, “How do you tell the difference between prose and poetry?” And I said, “Well there’s a look to it, isn’t there? There’s a different sound to it, isn’t there?” And then I read in *House Made of Dawn* that beautiful episode where John Big Bluff Tosamah is telling about what it takes to continue the world and what must be done with periodic regularity to make sure the world goes on and about that moment of stasis in which the eagle-bone whistle sounds four times and everything begins, again. Pure poetry, yet it’s written in prose—that is, narrative fiction.

I was never much of an academic, though I have a PhD in comparative literature, three languages required. I’m interested in languages, always have been and will be, I hope, until the day I die. I make a plea for the preservation of all languages. I finished undergraduate school in 1964 at Southeastern Oklahoma State University, and the year after I left they started offering the Choctaw language. I taught for a while in the sixties at Tahlequah’s Northeastern

Oklahoma University, and the year I left, they started offering courses in the Cherokee language. I could feel the Sikwayi script waltz right by me and out the door. You know, I had a right to complain that I was finishing with certain colleges too early. If there is a chance that you may study a language somehow or another, then you must do so, study to learn and to preserve. I know the Choctaw that I know, which is very little, from being raised among those who spoke the language and those who ate the food. There wasn't much left but the language and food of the Choctaw culture when I was growing up. What there is now has been learned lately from books and from the old ones who knew a little more and were not afraid to invent, to let the language evolve. But I know that we loved horses (*isuba*), we loved watermelons (*shukshi*), and we sometimes could say a few words about things in Choctaw (*chakta*). Not really often, but sometimes. If we lose the language, we lose the culture, or much of it. I strongly believe that the language must somehow be preserved, should be spoken, a word or two here and there at least, more than that if possible, especially since we are writers, in the poems and in the stories. This is after all what Yeats did, is it not? He used his contemporaries' names, a little Gaelic once in a while; he used mythology. American Native authors must do as much. But that's not what makes us writers. What makes us writers is something within. It has as much to do with instilled learning and environment as it does with the blood. I don't think my blood talks to me as loudly as what I get hammered with daily. I better watch out, you know. If the old DNA were just verbal, maybe we would have a better chance of survival. Unfortunately, however, DNA gives us only tools with which we may make discoveries. If I had not been raised among Choctaws (that is, if I had not had Choctaw blood and exposure), I wouldn't know the Choctaw names of things. I give thanks for what little I do know. I would like to know more. I'm trying to learn more, but the Choctaw speakers are few nowadays. Not as few as other tribes. God bless the casinos. Maybe their funding of cultural programs will ensure that the language will be taught by universities now receiving "educational revenue."

I've made a fool out of myself a number of ways over the years. Many years ago, I had the great good fortune to speak with a little girl, a seven-year-old, who was studying Yuchi under the tutelage of her grandmother, one of eleven Yuchi speakers left at that point in time. The Yuchi, who chronicle in their oral history a great migration from the east, *over a great water*. I listened carefully and jotted down, in a phonetic system that I was studying at the time at the University of Arkansas, some terms, some phrases, some words here and there as we talked those two or three hours one night. She was playing with her dolls and talking about her grandmother's teachings at the same time. "Bo-shee," she said. "That means cat. *Sha-fa*, that's moon in Yuchi." And she told me how to say "hello" and "where are you going?" and taught me about different

fruits and vegetables. Well, you know, the next day I saw her, and she said, “*Wa-hin-gee, Jimbo?*” And I said, “*Yubo-ah-tee-tee-on-dee-dee-tah.*” She laughed and laughed and laughed. That was the only thing I’d remembered from the night before, so beautiful and easy was the rhythm of the words. What she had said was “*wa-hin-gee,*” or “where are you going?” And I had replied, “I want an orange.” She gave me this much-needed encouragement: “Better the orange than nothing,” she said. “Keep on, you’re trying and that’s what counts.” And so we try. *Achunanchi!*