

## Native American Shorts



"A Single Place: Meaning(s) of Race,  
Ethnicity, Culture(s) & Home!"

Dr. Abdullah-Matta

ENG 235. 0912

## **"Housing Conditions of One Hundred Fifty Chippewa Families" (Kimberly Blaeser)**

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*White Earth Reservation, 1938:*

wigwam  
peaked lodge  
bark house  
tipi  
log house  
tar-paper shack  
frame house  
u.s. rehabilitation house.  
sister hilger  
you counted each one—  
*seventy-one tar-paper shacks,*  
*eight united states rehabilitation houses*  
*two wigwams*  
*bark houses at rice camps—*  
you graphed  
photographed  
measured dimensions  
calculated cubic air space  
enumerated every construction detail—  
*23 with broken windows;*  
*99 without foundations, buildings*  
*resting on the ground;*  
*98 with stove pipes for chimneys.*  
house, dwelling, place, structure—  
home. Endaayaang.

June to November  
the year my mother turned five,  
Mary Inez you walked these lands  
the fervor of your order tucked  
under one billowing black-sleeved arm,  
amassing details of crowded quarters,  
common-law marriages, miscegenation,  
illegitimate children, limited education,  
economic dependence on the WPA and CCCs  
for charts that have outlived  
those Anishinaabeg of the  
one hundred and fifty chosen families.

Now you perch in my history  
at one of *71 homemade or 79 factory-made tables*

sitting tall and precise on one of the *84 benches*,  
*49 backless chairs*, or *81 arm chairs*,  
or standing, Mary Inez, in the homes  
of one of the *16 tar-paper-shack families*  
or *8 frame-house families*  
for which you record *none*  
under the heading of *chairs*.

Methodically you recite  
like prayers of deliverance  
each prepared question:  
*Why are these so many*  
*unmarried mothers on the reservation?*  
*Why are there so many common-law*  
*marriages on the reservation?*  
*What do you think can be done*  
*to stop*  
*the drinking to intoxication among the Indians?*  
I hear you interrogate each family  
daily gathering indulgences  
or ink smudged statistics  
on what you label in caps *SOCIAL PROBLEMS*.  
*Any unmarried mother in the home?*  
*Any intoxication in the home?*  
So dutifully you prompt each betrayal—  
*Father? Mother? Son? Daughter?*  
and then remind yourself, in print,  
in a parenthetical aside  
of the unreliability of the interviewee—  
(*Check this information*  
*with some outside person.*)  
As if anyone then or now could forget  
with whom resides the authority  
for your social accounting

Ah, sister, I pity you  
the prickly mystery of those questions  
whose answers could not be checked  
nor changed  
by *some reliable outside person*.  
So confidently you asked  
*Would you like to leave this home?*  
But *seventy-three per cent of the occupants*  
*of tar-paper-shacks* on White Earth Reservation  
in northwestern Minnesota in 1938  
said no.

*No matter, you wrote, how dilapidated  
and inadequate the homes were,  
the tar-paper shack families  
were quite unwilling to leave them.*

So they were asked again  
asked another way  
because it was thought  
knowing the alternative  
might change their mind:  
*Would you like to move into a rehabilitation  
house; one of those fine new houses  
the Indian Bureau built for the Indians?*  
But the negative answers grew.  
Fewer still would think of leaving their home.  
Not *thirty-five-year-old Anna*,  
*fifty-year-old Mary*,  
not *a widowed mother, sixty-one years of age*,  
*living on the outskirts of one of the highway towns*,  
not *Old Man Mink, seventy-eight years of age*,  
nor *his wife, ten years his junior*,  
who *agreed they liked their one-room shack*,  
not *Mike, twenty-nine and a regular League of Nations*,  
nor *his white wife Jane, twenty-eight*,  
nor *their ten-year-old son*.  
Gaawiin. Gaawiin niwii-naganaasiin.  
Like *Jim, forty years of age*  
and *Ella, thirty-eight*,  
they wanted to stay  
*in the old ramshackled, tar-paper-covered homes.*

And did you hear the bullrush psalms  
of Gaa-waabaabiganikaag  
as you painstakingly recorded each  
softly intoned explanation?  
And does the land remember you  
Sister Inez, of the tar-paper-shack dwellers?  
As surely it remembers Mary  
who felt *well acquainted with the woods*,  
or Anna, who believed she was living  
*more like the old Indian ways?*  
Somewhere in that *rolling land of rich loam*  
is the adorned body of *Old Man Mink*  
and perhaps somewhere roams the spirit  
of the Midē wiwin elder who vowed  
*I'll stay right here. I won't leave here.*

*I've lived here too long.*  
I wonder, Mary Inez,  
did your BIA-commissioned sojourn  
in the land of white clay  
somewhere lay its soul mark  
looming crow dark  
at the ruled edges of report ledgers  
spilling into cautious recollection  
even as the measured drip of black ink  
might draw tabulations  
upon white pages?

Before Minnesota winter winds  
rattled the *162 full-sized, 104 half-sized,*  
*and 47 less than half-sized unbroken windows,*  
before that biboon nodin blew through  
those *23 houses with cardboard-covered*  
*broken windows* or blew through  
your tight-lipped post-allotment spirituality  
you returned to the Order of St. Benedict  
and to the list of standards set out in 1935  
by the National Association of Housing Officials,  
those standards against which all our measurements  
fall short, become sub-sub-standard, sub-human.  
You left Mary Inez, the Latin Mass  
and rosary zipped safely in one pocket—  
the names of each Midē wiwin elder  
drumming and chanting in the other.

\*All italicized words are taken from Sister M. Inez Hilger's *Chippewa Families: A Social Study of White Earth Reservation, 1938.*

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### **"After Words" (Kimberly Blaeser)**

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Because the smallness of our being  
is our only greatness.

Because one night I was in a room  
listening until only one heart beat.

Because in these last years I've  
worn and worn and nearly worn out  
my black funeral shoes.

Because the gesture of after words  
means the same thing no matter  
who speaks them.

Because faith belief forever  
are only words, no matter.

Because matter disappears  
always and eventually.

Because action is not matter  
but energy  
that spent, changes being.

And if death, too, is a change of being  
perhaps action counts.

And if death is a land of unknowing,  
perhaps we do well to live with uncertainty.

And if death is a forested land,  
it would be good to learn trees.

And if death is a kingdom,  
it would be good to practice service.

And if death is a foreign state  
we should loosen allegiance to this one.

And if the soul leaves our body  
then we must rehearse goodbye.

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## **"Rituals, Yours—and Mine" (Kimberly Blaeser)**

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I.

living by your words  
as if I haven't enough of my own  
ever  
to make them stretch  
that long distance  
from home to here  
from then to now.

and all the new words  
i've ever read learned  
or shelved so neatly  
can't explain myself to me  
like yours always do.

sometimes that one gesture  
of your chin and lips  
my memory of  
that sideways movement of your eyes  
are the only words  
from that language  
i can manage  
put things in their place

II.

walked in on you today  
closed the screened door quietly  
so you wouldn't notice  
just yet  
stood watched you  
mumbling shuffling about the kitchen  
your long yellow gray braid  
hanging heavy down your back

wanted to see you turn  
just that way  
hear that familiar exclamation  
you snapping the dishtowel  
landing it just short of me  
shame on me for surprising you

you walk toward me laughing  
don't change anything i chant silently  
wiping your hands on your faded print apron  
you lay them gently still damp cool  
one on each side of my face  
for that long long second

*When'd you come? Sit down, I'm making breakfast.*  
i watch the wrinkled loose flesh jiggle on your arms  
as you reach to wind and pin your braid  
hurry to find your teeth behind the water pail  
pull up your peanut butter stockings  
pull down your flowered house dress  
and wet your fingers  
to smooth the hair back behind your ears

### III.

smoothing away time with the fluid line  
of your memory  
i am in place at your table  
in the morning damp of your still dark kitchen  
i wait for you to come

stepping through the curtained doorway  
you enter intent on this day  
restart the fire  
fill place the kettle  
pull open the kitchen door  
inviting daylight to come  
welcoming it into your house—  
bringing it into mine.

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**"Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation" (Natalie Diaz)**

Angels don't come to the reservation.  
Bats, maybe, or owls, boxy mottled things.  
Coyotes, too. They all mean the same thing—  
death. And death  
eats angels, I guess, because I haven't seen an angel  
fly through this valley ever.  
Gabriel? Never heard of him. Know a guy named Gabe though—  
he came through here one powwow and stayed, typical  
Indian. Sure he had wings,  
jailbird that he was. He flies around in stolen cars. Wherever he stops,  
kids grow like gourds from women's bellies.  
Like I said, no Indian I've ever heard of has ever been or seen an angel.  
Maybe in a Christmas pageant or something—  
Nazarene church holds one every December,  
organized by Pastor John's wife. It's no wonder  
Pastor John's son is the angel—everyone knows angels are white.  
Quit bothering with angels, I say. They're no good for Indians.  
Remember what happened last time  
some white god came floating across the ocean?  
Truth is, there may be angels, but if there are angels  
up there, living on clouds or sitting on thrones across the sea wearing  
velvet robes and golden rings, drinking whiskey from silver cups,  
we're better off if they stay rich and fat and ugly and  
'xactly where they are—in their own distant heavens.  
You better hope you never see angels on the rez. If you do, they'll be marching you off to  
Zion or Oklahoma, or some other hell they've mapped out for us.

Natalie Diaz, "Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Rezervation" from *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. Copyright © 2012 by Natalie Diaz.

**"No More Cake Here" (Natalie Diaz)**

When my brother died  
I worried there wasn't enough time  
to deliver the one hundred invitations  
I'd scribbled while on the phone with the mortuary:  
*Because of the short notice no need to RSVP.*  
Unfortunately the firemen couldn't come.  
(I had hoped they'd give free rides on the truck.)  
They did agree to drive by the house once  
with the lights on— It was a party after all.

I put Mom and Dad in charge of balloons,  
let them blow as many years of my brother's name,  
jails, twenty-dollar bills, midnight phone calls,  
fistfights, and er visits as they could let go of.  
The scarlet balloons zigzagged along the ceiling  
like they'd been filled with helium. Mom blew up  
so many that she fell asleep. She slept for ten years—  
she missed the whole party.

My brothers and sisters were giddy, shredding  
his stained T-shirts and raggedy pants, throwing them up  
into the air like confetti.

When the clowns came in a few balloons slipped out  
the front door. They seemed to know where  
they were going and shrank to a fistful of red grins  
at the end of our cul-de-sac. The clowns played toy bugles  
until the air was scented with rotten raspberries.  
They pulled scarves from Mom's ear—she slept through it.  
I baked my brother's favorite cake (chocolate, white frosting).  
When I counted there were ninety-nine of us in the kitchen.  
We all stuck our fingers in the mixing bowl.

A few stray dogs came to the window.  
I heard their stomachs and mouths growling  
over the mariachi band playing in the bathroom.  
(There was no room in the hallway because of the magician.)  
The mariachis complained about the bathtub acoustics.  
I told the dogs, *No more cake here*, and shut the window.  
The fire truck came by with the sirens on. The dogs ran away.  
I sliced the cake into ninety-nine pieces.

I wrapped all the electronic equipment in the house,  
taped pink bows and glittery ribbons to them—

remote controls, the Polaroid, stereo, Shop-Vac, even the motor to Dad's work truck—everything my brother had taken apart and put back together doing his crystal meth tricks—he'd always been a magician of sorts.

Two mutants came to the door.  
One looked almost human. They wanted to know if my brother had willed them the pots and pans and spoons stacked in his basement bedroom. They said they missed my brother's cooking and did we have any cake. *No more cake here*, I told them. *Well, what's in the piñata?* they asked. I told them God was and they ran into the desert, barefoot. I gave Dad his slice and put Mom's in the freezer. I brought up the pots and pans and spoons (really, my brother was a horrible cook), banged them together like a New Year's Day celebration.

My brother finally showed up asking why he hadn't been invited and who baked the cake. He told me I shouldn't smile, that this whole party was shit because I'd imagined it all. The worst part he said was he was still alive. The worst part he said was he wasn't even dead. I think he's right, but maybe the worst part is that I'm still imagining the party, maybe the worst part is that I can still taste the cake.

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**"Stenciled Memories" (Lorna Dee Cervantes)**  
***for Gra'ma***

There was always fabric in your lap  
and a whistle in your heart. A sweet  
sap to be sucked waited in the garden.  
Nymphs of newts nestled under rock,  
your role as *She Who Brings the Waters*  
intact. Between the trilling of the crickets  
educating into the night and the sad sack  
of cans in the mornings something grew,  
flourished in the dark — vines as sturdy  
as telephone wire writhed in the breezes.  
You patched together a blanket of us,  
sewed together the mismatched and lopped  
off edges. And anger grew a twin, ripped  
through the bermuda grass, something stubborn  
and determined: Me, in a leather patchwork skirt,  
the bitter lemon song returning to its beginning  
over and over on the Howdie Doody phonograph,  
a handful of bandages, a faceful of ghosts  
delivered from the mirrors. How did you stand it?  
All of it. Us crunching through your set life,  
kids scuffling through the mounds of leave.  
Always making do. Your sunshine eyes,  
those stenciled memories where  
we still live.

Lorna Dee Cervantes, "Stenciled Memories" from *Sueño*. Copyright © 2013 by Lorna Dee Cervantes. Reprinted by permission of Wings Press.

**"Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe" (Esther Belin)**

I.

And Coyote struts down East 14th  
feeling good  
looking good  
feeling the brown  
melting into the brown that loiters  
rapping with the brown in front of the Native American Health Center  
talking that talk  
of relocation from tribal nation  
of recent immigration to the place some call the United States  
home to many dislocated funky brown

ironic immigration

more accurate tribal nation to tribal nation

and Coyote sprinkles corn pollen in the four directions  
to thank the tribal people  
indigenous to what some call the state of California  
the city of Oakland  
for allowing use of their land.

II.

And Coyote travels by Greyhound from Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA thru  
Dinéah  
to Oakland, California, USA  
laughing  
Interstate 40 is cluttered with RVs from as far away as Maine  
traveling and traveling  
to perpetuate the myth  
Coyote kicks back for most of the ride  
amused by the constant herd of tourists  
amazed by the mythic Indian they create

at a pit stop in Winslow  
Coyote trades a worn beaded cigarette lighter for roasted corn  
from a middle-aged Navajo woman squatting  
in front of a store

and Coyote squats alongside the woman  
talking that talk  
of bordertown blues  
of reservation discrimination

blues-ing on the brown vibe  
a bilagáana snaps a photo  
the Navajo woman stands  
holding out her hand  
requesting some of her soul back  
instead  
she replaces her soul with a worn picture of George Washington on a dollar bill

and Coyote starts on another ear of corn  
climbing onto the Greyhound  
the woman  
still squatting  
waiting  
tired of learning not to want  
waits there for the return of all her pieces.

## II.

And Coyote wanders  
right into a Ponca sitting at the Fruitvale Bart station  
next to the Ponca is a Seminole  
Coyote struts up to the two  
"Where ya'all from?"  
the Ponca replies  
"Oooklahooma"  
pause  
the Seminole silent watches a rush of people climb in and out of the train  
headed for Fremont  
the Seminole stretches his arms up and back stiff from the wooden benches  
pause  
he pushes his lips out toward the Ponca slowly gesturing that he too is from Oklahoma  
Coyote wanders  
"where 'bouts?"

the Ponca replies  
"Ponnca City"  
pause  
the Seminole replies  
"Seminoolle"

Coyote gestures to the Ponca  
"You Ponca?"  
the Ponca nods his head in affirmation  
Coyote nods his head in content  
to the Seminole  
Coyote asks  
"You Seminole?"

pause  
the Seminole now watching some kids eating frozen fruit bars  
nods his head

and Coyote shares his smokes with the two  
and ten minutes later  
they travel together on the Richmond train  
headed for Wednesday night dinner at the Intertribal Friendship House.

IV.  
And Coyote blues-ing on the urban brown funk vibe  
wanders  
in and out of existence  
tasting the brown  
rusty at times  
worn bitter from relocation.

Esther Belin, "Blues-ing on the Brown Vibe" from *From the Belly of My Beauty*. Copyright © 1999 by Esther Belin. Reprinted by permission of University of Arizona Press.

#### **"When Roots Are Exposed" (Esther Belin)**

I.  
The empty of stomach  
manifests silence  
a stillness  
that levels  
coffee in a cup  
and in a respectful manner  
allows steam to penetrate  
the surface.  
Reversal of action  
has created my sandstone canyon  
rooted cedar and sage at my feet.  
This movement is where  
a tranquility stems.

II.  
When my child creates  
bubbles through a soapy wand,  
I occupy the action of fate  
that bursts the perfect form.  
A halcyon absorbed  
nesting within  
the existence of the form  
that no longer exists.

The formless form  
is where my mind floats.

III.

It is easy to give form  
especially with English words  
a promotion of mechanical ligaments  
binding spirit with assembly-fabricated molds.  
Just as my hair poses an appendage of my brain  
my tongue poses an appendage of my heart.  
I cannot classify this thought as a typewritten symbol.  
An ideogram of essence  
cultivates my stillness to action.

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