

WHERE MOUNTAIN MEETS ATOM, WITHIN THE HEALING CIRCLE: THE WRITING OF MARILOU AWIAKTA

BY S. BAILEY SHURBUTT

Growing up in the nuclear shadow of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, Marilou Awiakta has developed a body of work which draws from three unique traditions: Cherokee, Appalachian-Celtic, and scientific-technological. Weaving the “nuclear” metaphor into her Native American traditions, Awiakta writes that the “whole forest is really one huge network of roots . . . a living organism.” “Although trees, plants, grasses seem to be separate individual living things,” she continues in *Interviewing Appalachia*, “in fact they are one sensate entity. The forest is a microcosm where the mountain and the atom meet, where the ancient and contemporary meet, where on the deepest levels we are all one, where what happens to one will happen by chain reaction to all,” what Native Americans call “the Sacred Circle” (Crowe 1994, 228). Awiakta alludes to the force that through “the green fuse drives the flower” in her poem “Where Mountain and Atom Meet:”

Ancient haze lies on the mountain
Smoke-blue, strange and still
A presence that eludes the mind and
Moves through a deeper kind of knowing.
It is nature’s breath and more—
An aura from the great I Am
That gathers to its own
Spirits that have gone before.

(Awiakta 1995, 61, lines 1 - 8)

Awiakta explains that though science and Native American tradition use different terminology as they attempt to explain the essence which underpins Matter, the intent and reference is the same. The reverence with which they hold the essence, however, is not the same. She writes in her award winning work, *Selu, Seeking the Corn-Mother’s Wisdom*, of the “shining web of light” that “unites the universe”: “For centuries the Native American has called it spirit. The scientist calls it energy. The major difference is that Native Americans consider the web sacred. But both they and the scientists agree that the web is real. Here, where mountain and atom meet, is the still center of my life and work, the place from which I speak to you” (Awiakta 1993, 154).

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The image of the atom, with its source in the “great I Am,” thus informs all of Awiakta’s ideas—from the interconnectedness of the universe to the non-linear narrative structure of her writing. In *Selu* she writes of twentieth-century nuclear research:

The linear path was bending . . . [and] the path ended in an infinitesimal circle: the quark. A particle so small that even with the help of huge machines, humans can see only its trace. . . . A particle ten to one hundred million times smaller than the atom. Within the quark, scientists now perceive matter refining beyond space-time into a kind of mathematical operation, as nebulous and real as the unspoken thought. It is a mystery that no conceivable research is likely to dispel, the life force in process—nurturing, enabling, enduring, fierce. I call it the atom’s mother heart. (Awiakta 1993, 69)

Awiakta is an award-winning poet, novelist, and essayist, whose words have been featured in Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Gloria Steinem’s *Revolution from Within*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Southern Exposure*, *Southern Style*, *A Southern Appalachian Reader*, *Bloodroot*, the French literary journal *Poesie Premiere*, and others. She is author of *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet* (1978), *Rising Fawn and the Fire Mystery* (1983), and the critically acclaimed *Selu* (1993). She is also recipient of the Distinguished Tennessee Writer Award (1989), the award for Outstanding Contribution to Appalachian Literature (1991), and the Appalachian Heritage Writer’s Award (2000). Awiakta’s reading of *Selu* earned a Grammy nomination in 1996, and the book was given the distinction of becoming a Quality Paperback Book Club selection.

Intermixed with Awiakta’s Cherokee roots is her Celtic or Scots-Irish heritage. In *Selu*, she writes about the traditional connection between these two groups, explaining:

From first contact centuries ago the Celt and the Cherokee got on well together because of what they shared: devotion to family; love of the land; reverence for the Creator and the natural law; the egalitarian relationship between men and women; the sense of fierce independence and outrage at foreign invasions . . . [and] the love of ceremony and symbol. All of these combine in a quality of soul that relies on the inner life of the spirit to survive. (Awiakta 1993, 299)

In “An Indian Walks in Me,” the central poem of her canon or what Awiakta calls her “credo” poem, she suggests how the three traditions of her mountain heritage—the atomic, the Celtic, the Cherokee—have shaped her as an artist. The allusion in lines three and four to the atom’s photon, which is of the same material as the star, suggests the interconnection between earthly matter, celestial substance, and the speaker:

An Indian walks in me.
 She steps so firmly in my mind
 that when I stand against the pine
 I know we share the inner light
 of the star that shines on me.

I listened
 Long before I learned
 the universal turn of atoms, I heard
 the Spirit’s song that binds us
 all as one.

(Awiakta 1995, 14, lines 1—5, 17—21)

Awiakta believes that her task as a writer is to create harmony and healing, by pointing out the connections that we all have with the world around us and with each other. “Writing,” she says, is a matter of “listening,” and listening “means using all the senses to commune with the cycle of sound” at the core of the universe. “Mountain speech [the Appalachian dialect],” she writes in her essay “Sound,” “carries the sound of the land where it’s spoken,” and that sound has shaped Awiakta as an artist. The function of the artist is to “weave” or translate what she hears into print, “translating from the oral to the written form” (Awiakta 1998, 43). Weaving this idea into a poem found in the same essay, Awiakta explains:

Like most mountain people,
 I’m a natural-born listener
 and sounder
 Sound has shaped me:
 mountains sending thoughts
 elders telling stories
 memory running in my blood
 or crying out from ground
 where blood was spilled.
 Everything I see/smell/hear/taste/feel

I translate to words on the page,
sheet music of the song.

(1 - 9, 13 - 14)

A central idea that comes to her keen artist's ear as she "listens" to the sound of "mountains sending thoughts" is reverence for the earth that sustains us. She particularly sees a distinction between the Western or European way and the Native American way of envisioning and interacting with the landscape. Europeans came to America and saw the landscape in terms of natural wealth and how it could be utilized to create personal economic wealth, with ownership of the land tied to its "efficient" use (in the Western sense); the term "manifest destiny" became the driving force behind the transformation of the American landscape and many of the environmental disasters that have visited us in the past century. Native Americans, on the other hand, looked at earth less in terms of ownership than as a sustaining, sheltering mother, personified for Awiakta in *Selu*, the Corn-Mother. Awiakta writes in *Selu*: "Where the Western dynamic is detachment, the Native American dynamic is connection" (Awiakta 1993, 164). Detachment, turning the land (or people) into "other," results in a cacophony of woes, as explained in "When Earth Becomes an It":

When the people call Earth "Mother,"
they take with love
and with love give back
so that all may live.
When the people call Earth "it,"
they use her
consume her strength.
Then the people die.

(1 - 8)

Environmental pollution, child and spousal abuse, and a host of modern-day maladies have their antecedents in the Western or patriarchal habit of objectification and domination. Awiakta explains in an interview with Thomas Rain Crowe:

Then came the Europeans with their dominator system.
They had the concept of woman as inferior, unclean, . .
. unintelligent, unstable—and sinful, unless she was a
'virgin.' A schizophrenic concept, totally out of harmony
with nature. They believed woman should be dominated
and controlled, like the earth. They had the same attitude

toward indigenous peoples and men without property. The Europeans followed laws of property. (Crowe 1994, 225)

The result was a patriarchal, “hierarchical” model, a stratified socio-political system based on ownership of property and the strict class/gender distinctions that emanate from the polarizing dualities characteristic of patriarchy. In “Women Die Like Trees,” published in *Abiding Appalachia* (1995), Awiakta delineates the connection between woman, the natural world, and the patriarchal propensity to dominate—and those destructive results that follow:

Women die like trees, limb by limb
 as strain of bearing shade and fruit
 drains sap from branch and stems
 and weight of ice with wrench of wind
 split the heart, loosen grip of roots
 until the tree falls with a sign,
 unheard except by those nearby—
 to lie . . . mossing . . . mouldering
 to a certain softness under foot,
 the matrix of new life and leaves.
 No flag is furled, no cadence beats,
 no bugle sounds for deaths like these
 as limb by limb, women die like trees.

(1 - 8, 11 - 13)

Nowhere is the ruinous outcome of such an off-balanced political and social power system more evident than in her own Appalachia. Awiakta explains in *Selu* that here, “as elsewhere in the world, the effects of humanity’s ‘major malfunction’ are evident. Through lack of reverence for the web of life, humans have upset the balance of nature on a global scale. Poison is invading the ozone layer, the forests, the waters, the food chain—perhaps even the very heart of Mother Earth” (Awiakta 1993, 181). In “Dying Back,” published in *Selu*, Awiakta makes the connection between the abuse of the land and abuse of people, who cannot thrive when there is no reference for Mother Earth:

On the mountain
 the standing people are dying back—
 hemlock, spruce and pine
 turn brown in the head.
 The hardwood shrivels in new leaf.

Unnatural death
 from acid greed
 that takes the form of rain
 and fog and cloud.

In the valley
 the walking people are blank-eyed.
 Elders mouth vacant thought.
 Youth grow spindly, wan
 from sap too drugged to rise.
 Pushers drain it off—
 sap is gold to them.
 The walking people are dying back
 as all species do
 that kill their own seed.

(5)

Awiakta suggests that patriarchal excesses may very well reach their limit and the species quite possibly could self-destruct. In a wonderfully ironic poem in *Selu*, "Mother Nature Sends a Pink Slip," she employs a traditional strategy of patriarchal rhetoric to "turn the question" on the establishment, utilizing the language of big business to send a warning to "Homo Sapiens":

To: Homo Sapiens

Re: Termination

My business is producing life.
 The bottom line is
 you are not cost-effective workers.
 Over the millennia, I have repeatedly
 clarified my management goals and objectives.
 Your failure to comply is well documented.
 It stems from your inability to be
 a team player:

- you interact badly with co-workers
- sabotage the machinery
- hold up production
- consume profits

In short, you are a disloyal species.

Within the last decade

I have given you three warnings:

- made the workplace too hot for you
- shaken up your home office
- utilized plague to cut back personnel

Your failure to take appropriate action
has locked these warnings into
the Phase-Out Mode, which will result
in termination. No appeal.

(88)

Awiakta, however, is not without a sense of hope, for like the phoenix, we too can rise from our own ashes: "Out of ashes / peace will rise, / if the people / are resolute" (Awiakta 1993, 7). As she reaches for solutions, Awiakta returns to the idea of the Universal Web or interconnection of all things, a balance that has historically been omitted from the patriarchal system Europeans brought to America. Although she doesn't specifically call herself a "feminist," Awiakta is convinced that the "womanly" has not been fully utilized in our institutions and social constructs, and our European social system has thus become off-balanced, an idea reminiscent of Alice Walker's "womanist" philosophy and perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in events following the "9-11" disaster in this country. Looking toward the Cherokee model, she writes: "The Womanly is strength, nurture, patience, wisdom—a force of nature. . . . The Womanly is life force, like the atom and like Mother Earth herself. The Manly is different but equal. . . . In American Indian tradition, woman embodies continuance; man embodies change and the transitory. Together they make a whole" (Crowe 1994, 224).

In "The Birth of Selu," Awiakta shares the Native American legend of First Man and First Woman, a myth distinctively different from the Judeo-Christian construct which focuses on the lopsided relationship between Adam and Eve, where Eve is portrayed as God's after-thought, born from Adam's rib, and perceived as "scapegoat" in the patriarchal explanation of the presence of evil in the Universe. In the Cherokee version of the "First Couple's" story, as Awiakta explains in *Selu*, Kanati (Adam) is a solitary hunter, bored and lonely, given to masculine excesses, particularly killing too many deer in the forest. At length, the animals become sick of Kanati's ways and meet in a great council to plead for help from the Creator. "Kanati is killing too many of us," they lament. "If he keeps on going like he is, there soon won't be any of us left." The Creator seeks out Kanati and finding him asleep in the sun causes a corn plant to grow up beside him. The stalk is "tall and straight, the leaves curved and gleaming green. From the top of the stalk" rises the beautiful "brown, black-haired woman, the

First Woman"—Selu. Kanati awakens to her singing and remembers the "sweetness of his own heart—that the Creator had given him." He holds out his hand for her, but she signals that he must wait while she gathers the corn about her, knowing that "you must always take your heritage with you, wherever you go." Kanati's loneliness disappears, and his tendencies toward destructiveness are tempered. He becomes Selu's counterpart, teaching the law of respect for forest and animals. Awiakta writes: "Woman and man represent cardinal balances in nature. . . . A lack of respect, between genders disturbs the balance in the environment, just as imbalance in an individual invades the web of his or her life and affects all relationships" (Awiakta 1993, 24 - 26).

In contrast to this Native American paradigm, the patriarchal model—one-sided and thus distorted—is, for Awiakta, fraught with pitfalls and the potential for social disorder; its extreme might be found in Afghanistan under Taliban rule in the 1990s, where women were assigned solely to the fringe of the social-political framework, their voices silenced and their contributions to the social fabric effaced. In contrast to such an extreme patriarchal construct, the Cherokee model is "matrilineal," where family and social traditions are traced through the mother's lineage, where children receive the mother's family surname and husbands join and live with a wife's family; it is a "partnership" model that attempts to balance masculine and feminine principles, neither of which alone would serve the people well. Awiakta constructs a metaphor for the ideal gender balance that maintains universal harmony and keeps destructive forces in check in the "Corn-Mother," born, as she writes in *Selu*, "as an androgynous plant, one that incorporates the balance of genders not only in sexual parts of silken ear and tassel, but also in the forces of nature that female and male represent—continuance in the midst of change" (Awiakta 1993, 247). Thus, the Cherokee model of shared responsibility, curbing of violent tendencies, and harmony with the natural world is one that Awiakta believes can revitalize social, governmental, and industrial segments of society and bring health and well-being to both the Appalachian region and to the world.

For Awiakta, these ideas also require an appropriate mode of storytelling, "a new model inclusive of other cultural values, in life as well as in literature" (Awiakta 1995, 67). The linear narrative structure and the hierarchical genres and styles associated with patriarchal models that result from the binary masculine mind no longer suffice in this dangerous world in which we live. Awiakta writes in *Selu*: "Usually, the Western story (especially if a white male writes it) has organic unity with the thought construct from which it arises. . . . The elements of the story can be neatly arranged. It is written either in prose or (rarely) poetry. It has a category: novel, short story, myth, fable, folklore or some such. The structure of the story separates easily into components" (Awiakta 1993, 164 - 65). Awiakta

prefers to weave together the genres and skew the linear story line, her cadences and repetitions as rich as the chants of the Native American ceremonial song, and in this respect she is turning toward her own traditions for storytelling models. Thus the mode of narration in a book such as *Selu* breaks with accepted Western tradition of narration. Its blending of story-legend, poetry, and essay formats is both different and rewarding, a kind of Native American *Walden*.

Awiakta looks simultaneously backward and forward as she expresses her unique form of feminism, one reflective of the multifaceted and multicultural faces of feminism today. Hers has been a personal odyssey that has traversed a range of contemporary social, environmental, and feminist issues, expressed in a language and a style that is both politically charged and revolutionary in nature. In a chapter of *Selu* called "Womanspirit in the High-Tech World," she shares the poem, "Motherroot," which captures the spirit of her revolutionary ideas, ideas that offer hope in an increasingly dangerous and polarized world:

Creation often
needs two hearts
one to root
and one to flower
One to sustain
in time of drouth
and hold fast
against winds of pain
the fragile bloom
that in the glory
of its hour
affirms a heart
unsung, unseen.

(184)

In the afterword of *Abiding Appalachia, Where Mountain and Atom Meet*, Parks Lanier, Jr. describes the "holistic" approach that Awiakta takes in her writing and the expression of her ideas. "She opposes Cartesian dualities that are fragmenting our lives," Lanier posits and then continues to explain:

She celebrates components of our lives which our society demeans or pushes aside in its mad haste: the maternal and nurturing; the untamed (love of wildness and wilderness); the innocent and child-like; the mythical, magical, and visionary. These things she takes seriously despite the

suspicion of a world out of balance or 'koyaanisqatsi' as the Hopi say. The poet's eye, the eye of the deer, sees balance and harmony where others see chaos. (Lanier 1994, 67)

What Awiakta has ultimately done is to "revision" the potential for a world of harmony, a sacred circle, which she sees in the conventional emblem of the atom, with its revolving protons, neutrons, and electrons, reconfigured, however, with the figure of Awi Usdi, or Little Deer, in the center. As she explains in *Selu*, Little Deer, the chief of the deer who convenes the council requesting an antidote to the destructive propensities of Kanati, is the embodiment of nature's demand for respect, harmony, and curbing of human excesses (Awiakta 1993). Awiakta remembers going to the Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge in 1977 and standing mesmerized before the giant model of the atom: "For a long time 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 electrons. Stars whirling . . . whirling . . . whirling . . . drew me into an altered state of consciousness." Suddenly, she recalls, "I saw Little Deer leaping in the heart of the atom." From that point on, she writes, "I understood that he embodied the sacred law of taking and giving back with respect, the Sacred Circle of Life. I was certain that Little Deer and his story would reveal ways to make harmony in my own life and in the world around me" (Awiakta 1993, 32). From that epiphany and life-affirming moment onward, she has used her Native American name, "Awiakta," the Cherokee word for "eye of the deer" (Awiakta 1993, 33). Thus the message of Little Deer that Awiakta brings to us in her writing is a message that offers hope for revisioning our own lives as well as hope for revisioning those institutions that propel us toward the violent and destructive tendencies so prevalent in our world today.

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