

ANCESTRAL, HISTORICAL & LIVING ARTS *by* INDIGENOUS PEOPLES *of the* AMERICAS

American



NO. 23, SUMMER 2019



DISPLAY UNTIL SEPT. 30, 2019

MIAMI RIBBONWORK
AMANDA CROWE & HER LEGACY
CLEMENTE HUMANITIES COURSE
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D. Y. BEGAY
BENJAMIN HARJO JR.
FREDDY MAMANI
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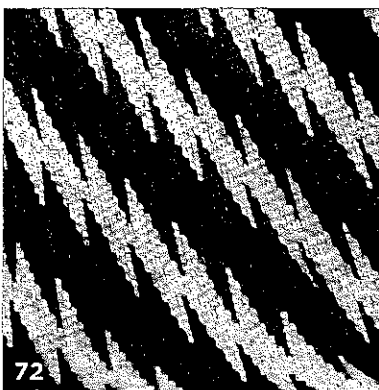
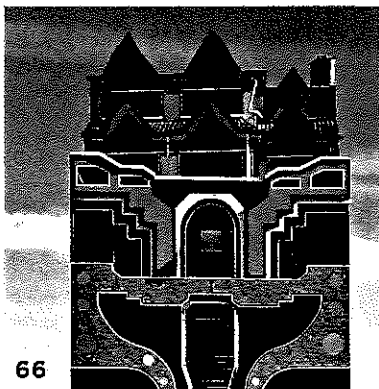
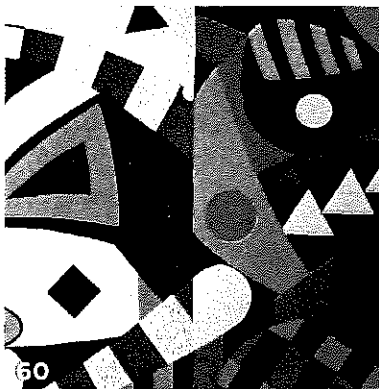
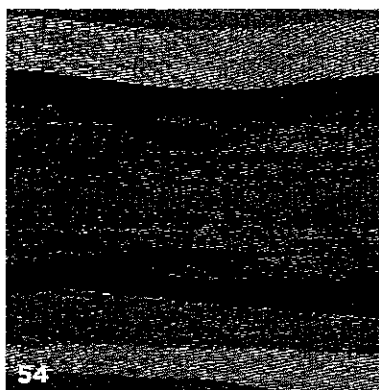
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COVER Benjamin Harjo Jr. (Absentee Shawnee/
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man, 2016, gouache on Arches watercolor paper,
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Reclaiming Space in Native Knowledges and Languages

THE CLEMENTE COURSE IN THE HUMANITIES

By Laura Marshall Clark (Muscogee Creek)

AS I GROW OLDER, I laugh to remember how much I struggled in college humanities courses. Considering my love for the arts—painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and architecture—this didn't make sense. It does make sense, however, when recalling darkened classrooms and aging films whose sound sputtered while yellow scratches wriggled like worms on the frames. The narrator's voice, reminding me of old cigarette commercials, droned on while tinny trumpets played in the background. I cast certain blame, too, on overly thick tomes masquerading as textbooks. I would have never guessed then how much I would love the humanities today.

Humanities in its simplest definition means all that tells the story of humans, all that expresses humankind. It is the study of histories and cultures, languages, cultural practices, spirituality, art theory and criticism, music, literature, philosophy, jurisprudence, and more.¹ The humanities are not the act of creating art or literature or law or music but the examination and interpretation of such things. They are reflexive in the exploration of who we once were—individually and collectively—who we are today, and who we are becoming. Studying the humanities can be a journey into wonder, into the labors and delights of being human, and also into disappointments and pain.

No one knew this better than Earl Shorris (1936–2012), an American journalist, lecturer, editor, and novelist who held a deep passion for the humanities. Shorris also cared for marginalized people in the world. As a thought leader in the early 1990s, Shorris doggedly set out to discover a key to alleviate poverty, crisscrossing the nation and interviewing more than 600 individuals of diverse backgrounds over five years. What he discovered about poverty was what he would call an inescapable “surround of force,” relentlessly pressuring the poor through hunger, illness, isolation, abuse, addiction, crime, and racism, among other social ills.² What he didn't expect was to find a solution—what he called his “riches for the poor”—in the most unlikely way. It would also become a key to unlocking the preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures for tribal people.

UNLIKELY SPACE

THE LIGHT BULB CAME ON for Shorris during one of his interviews in a New York women's maximum-security prison. He called it his “prison epiphany.” The prison environment, Shorris observed, is a “highly evolved miniature” of the surround of force—a place where there are no constants, no reason, no

escape—a microcosm of society where force is continually applied by equals and unequals, and one merely reacts to it.³ In this environment he became good friends with female inmate Viniece Walker from East Harlem who called herself “Niece.” She was a high school dropout who finished her diploma in prison and pursued a college degree in philosophy, helping other inmates with problems of family violence. One day Shorris asked her, “Why do you think people are poor?”

Niece looked at him with a cold eye and responded, “You've got to teach the moral life of downtown to the children. And the way you do that, Earl, is by taking them downtown to plays, museums, concerts, lectures, where they can learn the moral life of downtown ... a moral alternative to the street.”⁴ Niece didn't mention jobs or money or God or church or family during any of their talks, he noted. What Niece saw were the humanities. Niece saw an alternative to poverty in the opening up of new worlds to the mind and heart, of new understandings, considering paths outside the surround of force, and entering a wider world in which one sees, reflects, and reacts in new ways. None of that was lost on Earl Shorris.

Taking Niece's observations to heart, the author developed an inner-city experiment to close the gap between those in poverty and the humanities in the

1. “What Are the Humanities?” Oklahoma Humanities, web.

2. Earl Shorris, “II. As a Weapon in the Hands of the Restless Poor,” *Harper's Magazine* 295, no. 1768 (September 1997): 50.

3. Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course for the Humanities* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 54–55.

4. *Ibid.*, 96–100.

same way that Ivy League college courses functioned. This experimental class first met in lower Manhattan at the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center, and Shorris named it the Clemente Humanities Program. It was primarily populated by young people, age 18 or older, whose incomes fell near or below the federal poverty line and who could read a tabloid newspaper. The Clemente program offered the rigor of multiple disciplines by a qualified faculty in literature, art history, philosophy, American history, critical thinking, and writing, with no cost to low-income, urban participants. The course provided funds for the students' childcare, transportation on the bus or subway, and even meals. Shorris was convinced that a course in the humanities centered in Western classical thought would help anchor people in a sense of self and reflect on the world and their role in it. And so it did.

In the years that followed, the success of the course would confirm his belief that "people who know the humanities become good citizens, become active, not acted upon,"⁵ and by 1998, the Clemente courses grew exponentially from New York's Lower East Side to 17 sites across North America. Taking notice, Bard College, a liberal arts college in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, began providing college certificates to all graduates of the course.

INDIGENOUS SPACE

SHORRIS THEN STEPPED OUTSIDE of the Clemente Western model of the humanities and into the Indigenous worlds of the Yucatán and Alaska. In the small farming village of San Antonio Sihó on the western edge of the Yucatán peninsula, Shorris met with leaders to discuss the premise of Clemente and how it might impact the future of the people in the village. Whereas the courses at that time taught comparative histories of Western civilization and classics, something very different was obviously needed in San Antonio Sihó. The villagers themselves identified a need for a deepened understanding of what they called high Maya



ABOVE Chickasaw Clemente Class and Pan-American Indian Humanities Center Organizers. Front row, left to right: Geraldine Greenwood, Lona Barrick, Jay Goombi, Earl Shorris, Leerene Frazier. Howard Meredith in doorway with glasses, ca. 2001.

culture and the restoration of their Mayan language. Among the young people, use of language had deteriorated and very few could read or write it, so Shorris focused on a revised Clemente Indigenous course to develop reading, writing, and spoken K'iché Mayan. Their humanities curriculum focused on Maya culture, grounded in the *milpa*—the small communal farm governed by complex, reciprocal relationships between community members and crops—from which many notions of Maya culture were formed.

This new Clemente course was led by regional United Nations program director Raúl Murguía Rosete, and hosted such notable faculty as Alejandra García Quintanilla (Maya), professor of history at the University of the Yucatán, and poet Miguel Ángel May May (Maya), a Mayero (Maya speaker). Each traveled a difficult trip to the village to teach the young students. They were joined by an anthropologist and an ecologist who related science to Maya literature and Maya life. The beauty of Maya art also became real when students were allowed to work on pyramids recently discovered nearby. At the close of the first year, the course had a zero-attrition rate.

Participant José Chim Kú (Maya) remarked, "The course has brought me knowledge; it has made it possible for me to come closer to the people that I did not value, like the old ones and children. The school has given me courage as a

Maya. It has given me a new life." Ruby Esmeralda Chay Chuk also spoke about her experience: "We had something very beautiful, and that is our history. To speak Maya is to feel strong. Now we know we are Mayas, but when we were born, we did not know it."⁶

In 1999, Shorris traveled to Bethel, Alaska, the center of 56 Yupiit Alaska Native villages, to talk with Alaska Humanities Forum leaders and Yupiit scholars about an Alaska Native humanities course. Among the southwest Alaska Native people, two people groups bear the names of the Yup'ik languages, Yupiit and Cupiit. Funding was available to bring Miguel Ángel May May from the Yucatán to meet the Yupiit leadership and talk about what the Clemente course had meant to the Maya people. Alaska Native scholars and committed individuals then collaborated to propose a course to the University of Alaska for a year-long, multidisciplinary approach focused on Cupiit tradition, language, history, music, dance, art history, and literature. It would also involve Native elders.

To gain a grassroots perspective, some of the collaborators traveled from village to village to explain the course on local radio stations or in town meetings and to gather public feedback. What they heard was astonishing in depth and intellect. These public conversations helped guide the startup of the new Alaska Native course, Yaaveskarniyaraq, the Cup'ik/

5. "The Clemente Course in the Humanities," National Endowment for the Humanities, 2014, web.

6. Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 232–39.

Yup'ik Way, in the village of Chevak, just a few miles inland from the Bering Sea. After only two days of teaching, the students did not want to go home.⁷

LIKELY SPACE

IT WAS A NATURAL FIT when Earl Shorris was invited to a conference in Oklahoma in 1999 to extend the idea of similar Clemente programs to tribal leaders and potential funders in the state. Oklahoma holds the second-largest Native population proportion in the United States (12.9 percent), with 39 tribes now federally recognized.⁸ The conference was hosted by the Oklahoma Humanities Council under the direction of Anita R. May and gave Shorris a platform to talk about the Maya program and his hopes to reach Native American tribes to advance tribal language, philosophies, histories, and cultures. Anita May's determination to introduce Shorris to Howard Meredith (Cherokee descent, 1938–2003), the professor and chair of the American Indian Studies program at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma (USAO) in Chickasha, was nothing short of genius. Meredith grabbed the idea immediately to incorporate into USAO's Native American and liberal arts educational goals. USAO President John Feaver heartily agreed, and within a year Meredith had secured funding to launch the Kiowa and Cherokee humanities courses. A Chickasaw course would follow later.

Kiowa and Cherokee tribal members helped develop their respective curricula. Jay Goombi (Kiowa) and Emily Satepauhoodle (Kiowa, 1955–2011) served as collaborative developers and liaisons between USAO and the Kiowa Indian Tribes. Cherokee language instructor Eli Nofire (Cherokee Nation, 1931–2006) and Cherokee National Historical Society president and interim director of the Cherokee Heritage Center, Mary Ellen Meredith (Cherokee Nation), both assisted Howard Meredith in developing the Cherokee course. At that time,

the planners felt that Shorris's model to understand Western humanities was a "bridge" of interrelationship between Indigenous cultures and Anglo-American thought, so classical works and literature were added for comparative study with the Kiowa and Cherokee material.⁹

Based on the success of these courses and another proposal by Shorris, USAO became the location for a Pan-American Indian Humanities Center. Scholars from two Yucatan universities, a Toronto university, and others from the United States gathered in Oklahoma in 2001 to plan the center's mission and goals. Mary Ellen Meredith fondly remembers a second meeting the following year to continue the work at the Cherokee Heritage Center in Park Hill: "Simon Ortiz (Acoma) read us poetry and we stomp danced with Cherokee dancers from the nearby stomp grounds. We traveled to Spiro Mounds, and May May and Alejandra Garcia Quintanilla translated the Maya codices, reading the stories aloud to us. David Scott [Cherokee Nation] was also with us, and he followed with the Cherokee oral stories that were similar. The symbols that we had just seen on the codex seemed to cover everything, and even the layout of the structure matched the cultural interpretations we had just heard from the Maya scholars."

The Chickasaw Nation was next to launch its Chickasaw Clemente humanities courses, with Lona Barrick (Chickasaw) as the facilitator. Meredith had invited Barrick, the director for the Chickasaw Nation Purcell Area Office, to team-teach the course with him through USAO, and they agreed that the curriculum would offer respect for matrilineal society, the recognition of Chickasaw warrior protocols, perseverance, a strong sense of family, and business acumen. With the support of Chickasaw Nation Governor Bill Anoatubby, Barrick had been involved with arts and cultural tourism initiatives that opened doors to conversation and study of the humanities, the environment, and political structures past and present. Chickasaw language bearers were also hard at work to revive the

Chickasaw language. Shorris wrote about meeting Barrick on the night she launched the first Chickasaw Clemente class when he was traveling across Oklahoma with Howard Meredith. Barrick invited him to attend with Meredith who was scheduled to teach literature. Shorris and Meredith were also eager to meet Chickasaw fluent speaker Geraldine Greenwood and found Greenwood's Chickasaw language fluency and cultural knowledge extremely important in grounding the course.¹⁰

Today, the Chickasaw Clemente Humanities Studies Courses have grown, and East Central University (ECU) in Ada and Southeastern Oklahoma State University (SOSU) in Durant offer three-credit-hour courses each spring and fall. The course has also been taught at Murray State College in Tishomingo, and at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Michelle Cooke (Chickasaw) instructs two courses at ECU, as does Amy Gantt (Chickasaw), the course instructor at SOSU. The Clemente I course explores Chickasaw history and culture as compared with other world cultures and offers basic Chickasaw language instruction. Clemente II examines Chickasaw culture alongside other Indigenous cultures, with a continuation of Chickasaw language. Cooke, a senior staff writer for the Chickasaw Press, coauthored two Chickasaw language workbooks with the Chickasaw Language Committee and has taught the course and language component for four years.

Like other Clemente instructors, Cooke finds that the "seminar style" Clemente model of open discussion of questions from the assignments fosters creativity for thought within the classroom. Her primary concern at the beginning of each semester is developing a circle of trust so that students will become comfortable and honest in their responses. Some of the toughest topics include forced removal, extermination, and Indian identity. Each course averages about ten students and regularly hosts cultural presenters to give students an appreciation for historical, cultural practices. The classes have been conducted for more

7. Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, 240–48.

8. "Demographics: Indian Country Demographics," National Congress of American Indians, web.

9. Anita R. May, "Commendatory Preface," in *ᏍᏏᏉᏏ Kanohelvihi: The Cherokee Humanities Course*, by Eli Nofire, Mary Ellen Meredith, and Howard Meredith (Chickasha: University of Science and Arts, 2003), ix–xi.

10. Earl Shorris, *The Art of Freedom: Teaching the Humanities to the Poor* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 81.

than 15 years under the guidance of the Chickasaw Nation Division of Arts and Humanities and ECU's professor emeritus, historian, and author Thomas Cowger, former Chickasaw Nation Endowed Chair in Native American Studies.

The Chickasaw Clemente classes inspired the annual Dynamic Women of the Chickasaw Nation Conference, now a two-day annual event; the Chickasaw Nation Dynamic Woman of the Year Award; and development of the yearly Lowak Sho'li (Carry the Fire) Humanities Forum, which hosts notable scholars addressing current issues and initiatives affecting Indigenous communities and fostering public dialogue and cooperation across Native and non-Native sectors.

The Chickasaw Nation's language program has also borne much fruit since its earliest days through the work of the Chickasaw Language Committee: 50 fluent speakers, dictionaries and workbooks, a Chickasaw language revitalization program under director Lokosh (Joshua D. Hinson, Chickasaw), 6,000 users of its Chickasaw Rosetta Stone learning system, and 15,000 individuals using online language resources each year.



RADICAL SPACE

THE KIOWA CLEMENTE COURSE in the Humanities began in Clemente's earliest days in Oklahoma and continues today in Chickasha and Anadarko. The course transitioned markedly in 2007 from its original comparative humanities model to a strictly Kiowa course. Its instructor, Rachel Jackson (Cherokee Nation), took notice of students signaling a need to focus valuable time on Kiowa cultural knowledges, so she intentionally let go of institutional methods to meet the changing demands of the course. While she curates the language and cultural lessons with academic texts, the students today study only Kiowa history, culture, other humanities components, and language. The course is centered around Kiowa elders and cultural knowledges, which are captured on a digital platform to preserve the passing on of Kiowa lifeways, oral history, and language fluency. Jackson and a project team that includes

ABOVE, TOP Kiowa Clemente Course participants Chelsea White, Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune, Dr. Jim Kennedy, and Dr. Rachel Jackson, Palo Duro Canyon. The Spring 2019 class hiked to the site where the US Army attacked a Kiowa camp on September 28, 1874, during the Red River War.

ABOVE, BOTTOM Cherokee Humanities Course at the Cherokee Heritage Center, Park Hill, Oklahoma. At far left: Ryan Mackey, Tonia Weavel, and Wyman Kirk.

tribal elders launched the online video archive, *Khoiye Tdoen Gyah*, or *Kiowa Talk*, at kiowatalk.org to close a gap for a younger generation of Kiowas eager to learn Kiowa ways, Kiowa language, and the passing down of songs and stories.¹¹

The Kiowa Clemente Course in the Humanities has defined its own Indigenous space—cultural knowledges, social structure, language, methodology—not just in rewriting former practices and standards or utilizing technology, but in embracing more and more of what it means to be Kiowa. Jackson posits, “This approach makes it a very radical space stemming from the historical resistance that Kiowa people have practiced in the midst of settler colonial policy. They have always resisted, as they should, to the imposition of Western values and

perspectives on their own; the class is a great example of how that resistance continues, both metaphorically and practically.”

Each week the class opens with a prayer and shared meal among those present: tribal elders, six or so Riverside Indian School students who receive concurrent college credit, and anywhere from 10 to 30 other Kiowa participants. Following Kiowa cultural protocols, the headman and elder Joseph Titus “J. T.” Goombi (Kiowa) begins the class and shares a story that captures the purpose and value of the course. He then sits in the back of the room. Dorothy Whitehorse DeLaune (Kiowa) leads language instruction and provides Kiowa perceptions of tribal culture, a role that first began when the course started with Alecia Keahbone

11. *Khoiye Tdoen Gyah*, *Kiowa Talk*, web.



ABOVE A social stomp dance during the Meredith Indigenous Humanities Center conference, Caddo Tribal Complex, Binger, Oklahoma, 2008. Photo: A. Meredith.

Gonzales (Kiowa/Kiowa Apache, 1926–2011), an author, storyteller, and teacher at USAO. The students ask questions, but over time their questions change as they uncover nuances in the language, Kiowa epistemology, and meanings within tribal stories. “It is like witnessing a kind of enlightenment when students learn the old stories, returning to a center that was lost or obliterated by assimilation,” Jackson tells me.

The class revolves around the elders who keep the course stable. All learn ceremonial songs in Kiowa and also Kiowa Christian hymns as they are enriched by a sense of self as being spiritually Kiowa. The sense of community is also evident as participants return year after year. “I follow their lead to learn how the course should go. My responsibility has been to get out of the way and support them in the way they see fit to do things and facilitate that as best we can,” Jackson concludes.

Howard Meredith and others also set a firm foundation for cultural continuance for the Cherokees in the Cherokee Humanities Course in Tahlequah and Park Hill. Sponsored by the Cherokee Heritage Center, grants, and generous donors who fund tuition, student travel expenses, and weekly refreshments, the classes are offered each spring and fall for three credit hours through Northeastern State University (NSU) in Tahlequah. Following the principle that learning the

humanities removes barriers to confidence, develops critical thinking, and broadens interaction with the world, the requirements to enroll in the course include only an ability to read and write. According to course coordinator and Cherokee Heritage Center education director Tonia Weavel (Cherokee Nation), the course’s impact is evident in the cases of at least ten or more Clemente students who completed their high school education after taking the course.

Inspired by the Cherokee course, a group of friends created the nonprofit Cherokee Arts and Humanities Council and published anthologies of Cherokee writing. One student attributes what she learned in Clemente with the courage to graduate with her four-year university degree and become a Cherokee language instructor in the Cherokee Immersion Charter School.

Meredith believed that the heart of the Cherokee Clemente course was in the recovery and revealing of “the rich veins of myth and memory,” the ancient elements beneath the surface of the dark soil of Cherokee civilization and Cherokee state of mind.¹² Today’s Cherokee Clemente course instructors Wyman Kirk (Cherokee Nation) and Ryan Mackey (Cherokee Nation/Muscogee/Delaware/Natchez) still carry Meredith’s original intent and bring that heart and soul into the classroom. Mackey, who

serves as Cherokee language curriculum supervisor, believes that Indigenous languages are the primary vehicle and home for culture.

“To understand our language is to know our culture. Our deep philosophical values are encoded in the language. It is not a cultural expression; it is the agency of the culture,” Mackey explains to me. The course plays a vital role to introduce language, motivate people to learn, and push toward language acquisition. “We give people a taste of the language, and they fall in love with it,” he says.

The Pan-American Indian Humanities Center was renamed the Meredith Indigenous Humanities Center to honor the late Howard L. Meredith. It still supports Native scholarship and encourages the teaching of Indigenous humanities and languages for these and other tribes, such as the Nahuatl, Musqueam, and Ojibwe. Clemente courses have also expanded into prisons and are changing lives for US veterans through the Clemente Veterans’ Initiative. An estimated 1,300 students enroll each year in 62 various Clemente courses worldwide in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Argentina, Australia, and Korea.¹³ The Clemente course was awarded the National Medal for the Humanities in 2000 by President Bill Clinton and has been covered by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and *CNN*, among others.

I became a lover of humanities because I became a lover of Clemente. I facilitated the Chickasaw Clemente courses for five years at ECU in Ada as part of my work with the Chickasaw Nation and then became the course instructor for three years at ECU. I’ve gazed into many tribal faces around horseshoe-configured tables and watched lives change. Like Shorris and Meredith and Niece, I am convinced the humanities offer enlightenment, an epiphany into the joy and love of cultures, preservation of Indigenous lifeways, and languages—a revitalization of people. It is a bridge, a connector to new pathways of life.

12. Eli Nofire, Mary Ellen Meredith, and Howard Meredith, ᏍᏏᏉᏍᏉ *Kanohelvhvi: The Cherokee Humanities Course* (Chickasha: University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, 2003), 25.

13. Cherokee Heritage Center, “Humanities Course,” web.