This is the second instalment of our republishing of a selection of Jimmie Durham’s writings from A Certain Lack of Coherence: Writings on Art and Cultural Politics (1993, see http://www.thirdtext.org/durham-coherence).

Durham originally wrote this text for I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers, edited by Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat and published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1987. As this book’s title suggests, it is one of the most personal and autobiographical pieces of Durham’s writing. In the coda, with its two poems, added two years later, just before publication, he acknowledges the echoes of Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude, with its century of family history and tragedies. He also gives an excoriating version of the timeline over his own hundred years of the federal legislation that has impacted on Native American lives and conditions, exemplified in his cry ‘Do we have the right to be ourselves without US permission…?’ With that in mind, we have added footnotes which did not appear in A Certain Lack of Coherence. Shortly after this period, in 1987, Durham left to live in Mexico, and later Europe. He never returned to live in the US.

Those Dead Guys for a Hundred Years

...“

...”

I want you to hear these words. Now I am speaking to you about our lives.

That is the way we begin speeches in Cherokee, and then we say what we would like to see happen, with a simple statement that begins with ‘I want’, as in ‘I want us to go to Washington and tell them just what’s going on down here’. The way white people exhort in their speeches – such as ‘we should…’ or ‘we must…’ – sounds to us not only arrogant but devious. Is this guy trying to hide from us his thoughts? Then why speak? (They often speak only for the purpose of hiding their thoughts.)

I want us to have an Eloheh Ga ghusdunh di at Dhotsua’s old Ghadjiya in Goingsnake District, because it is now 1984, exactly one hundred years since the Allotment Act when our first new century of trouble began, and also when Dhotsua started the Nighthawk and told us
that the US government had no power to allot Cherokee land.¹ ‘We follow the Bright Path of the One Who Allots each plant and animal and Cherokee and whites to their proper places.’

Dhotsua died fighting. Before him, before 1884, hundreds of brave Otashtys and Beloved Women died fighting. They walked a straight path and they won our lives for us, and I have to tell you that when I ride this New York subway I practically hate them. How the hell did they do it? Could they always find the money for the Con Edison bill or did they eat in the dark?

Sequoyah invented writing, marched on Washington, became the Uku of Arkansas and Texas, and then split for Mexico to make a treaty with Santana. ‘He was never known to make a foolish move.’

But I did, and my brother did, and Larry Red Shirt sure did.

Now here is what happened that makes me call for the combined fires of the Council of Everything, and why I also ask my uncles to prepare for me an Ado dhlunh hi so di so that I can change myself: in 1984 I became forty-four years old, which is the average life span for an Indian man.

Is it a good thing to write about one’s own troubles and worries? Paul Smith, a Comanche guy with a weird history, said, ‘In this century the story of any Indian is a typical Indian story, no matter how different.’ Which means to me that in this allotted century of lives in dispersed parcels we are still the people, with a common thread.

I remember Greg Zephier with his bad heart joking about turning forty-four, and how we all laughed. But last year my brother died a month before his forty-fifth birthday. He was working as a farm labourer in Louisiana and just conked out. It was very hard for me, because we had been on the outs with each other for a few years. Just that month I had finally figured out some things about him and figured out that I really liked him. It was in my mind to come home in November, and he and I would go fishing and I would explain to him how I liked him. He was not happy that year he died; everything was going wrong. But he liked being outside all the time, and he told me how he liked seeing a wild pig in the fields once in a while. The guy who owned the farm or one of his sons would sometimes shoot the pigs and would roast them up. My brother was not invited and they never offered him a pig to take home. I am glad about that, because I can imagine my brother trying to lift a dead pig into the trunk of his car all by himself, or trying to clean it all by himself way over there in Louisiana.

My first memory of him is also my first memory of my father. We were in a creek back home, swimming and running around. None of us had any clothes on, and my mother was also there but I think she had on her dress. My father made a little millwheel in the creek with sticks and magnolia leaves. It really worked.

When we were little we were very thin and not growing well. I had had rickets and my brother had something or other. But we were happy, with our sisters and dozens of cousins, and our parents, aunts and uncles, great aunts and great uncles, and two grandparents, and

¹ Editor’s note: the Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Act, actually from 1887, allocated specific reservation lands to many Native American groups. Any ‘surplus’ lands were sold off to white settlers.
yellow jackets coming up out of the ground to sting us, and diamond-back turtles. My brother and I were like twins and went everywhere with our arms around each other’s shoulders. We slept in the same bed until I left home. As teenagers we often had the same girlfriends. When we were twelve or so we had to go to the doctor because we were not developing right. Some hormone trouble. We had to dissolve bitter yellow pills under our tongues, and he would spit his out, so he stayed little and thin until he was about eighteen. People would call him Midget. In the family we called him Geronimo because he was so wild and because he admired Geronimo so much. He used to tell people that he was part Apache. I would say, ‘Me too!’; and he would say, ‘No you’re not, you’re part coon.’ Once he told some people that I was a dog, but that was only because we were hunting ducks without a license and he was protecting me.

He was my best teacher when we were little because I was selfish and did not like anybody. He was generous and liked everybody, so he would interpret their mysterious actions to me and also ran interference between me and my mother. Once I tried to kill him with a hoe and almost succeeded, which scared us both. My brother was especially kind to me the rest of the day because he knew how I must have been feeling, to almost kill my brother. So we developed some secret bird whistles to signal each other in school if we got into trouble.

In the third grade I pulled a knife on another kid and the teacher took my knife away. The next day, after a family meeting over supper, my brother went as an official delegate from our family of woodcarvers and told the teacher that I had to have my knife back. She gave me and the knife into his custody.

Just a couple of months before he died he told my mother that he had always been afraid of everything, and that was why his life was so bad.

My father is called Son in his family because he is the oldest. He had three brothers and three sisters. One sister died young and the brother next to him died next, at forty-four. My father really took it hard, and I thought I understood. Only I wanted to say, ‘Your sons and daughters and grandchildren are with you.’ When he would look at me it was like partway he was seeing a stranger, even an intruder, and partway seeing his brother instead of me. I did not understand until my brother died. For us, history is always personal. (I remember the Trail of Tears and Sequoyah’s efforts as though I had been there.) History is directly involved with our families and our generations; tied with sacred white cotton string to the sweet and intense memories of our brother or sister is the desperate and intense hope of each generation to change this history.

I knew all along that in my parents’ generation, as in their parents’ generation and in mine so far, the history which began in 1884 has been bad for Cherokee people. It was bad before. What period in human history could be worse than 1784–1884 for the Cherokees? In the 1680s we were first invaded by European armies and settlers, so 1684 to 1784 was pretty bad all right. Two epidemics of smallpox in that time, each wiping out fully half of the population.

But I could not know with my heart what the hope and desperation means to each of us for our own individual lives when the history wastes and lays down in stupid sugar cane fields our own brothers.
You think that they have finally killed you, because part of your life is the plans for redemption, and you cannot do it without all those people, especially brothers, who will give you the courage of their own returning to the battle.

A great Otashy Wahya has fallen dead in the sugar cane fields. An average Cherokee guy died at the average Indian male life span.

And I am forty-four in 1984, the close of a century, so either way I think about dying. Something is wrong with my stomach and my guts – they don’t work. There is something painfully wrong with my throat, behind my Adam’s apple. I don’t want to go to the doctor because either he will tell me things I do not want to hear, or he will say, ‘It is nothing that cannot be fixed up for a few hundred dollars’, which I don’t have.

In 1972 I joined the American Indian Movement and for the next eight years gave my life to it. Then it kind of fell apart and left me feeling bad. Then last year my brother died, and this year I turned forty-four with some ‘physical problems’, as the doctor says.

So, this is why I want my uncles to give me the ceremony of Ado dhlunh hi so di. I need a change. I need to be changed like the old men change Tsola. But those uncles, my grandmother’s brothers, are all dead, and also my grandfather’s brothers.

My uncle Jesse was in those old days about nine feet tall. He was extremely thin and wore overalls with a blue serge coat and a John B Stetson hat, along with whatever shoes he had – sometimes hightop black tennis shoes. He did not always wear shoes. Uncle Jesse’s eyes were fierce black but he was very kind. He gave my brother and me whisky and told us about women. His shotgun was part of his eyes. He made sweat lodges and taught us to go hungry and to use tobacco. For ceremonies he said you could use Camels but no other cigarettes. Camels could be changed into Tsola, medicine tobacco, and when we went fishing we had to spit tobacco juice into the water and on the bait as an offering. He and Tom and Doc were crazy old guys. They were not alcoholic, I guess, but pretty drunk.

Doc had something to do with my grandfather’s death, long before I was born, and people did not speak to him. They said he had been drunk. But my father took me to see him where he lived back in the woods.

This year 1984, is the last of a century that has been different from those before it, which means that next year something even weirder will probably start up. Does anyone know where we have been since the Allotment Act? Now this is how the last hundred years was different: the Allotment Act was the first time they made a legislation affecting all Indians – the first time they completely ignored the treaties and acted as though we were some subminority to be legislated. In their hateful system, then, it was only natural that the first piece of legislation should say that we had to own land privately instead of communally, that we, in other words, had to begin being someone other than ourselves. The mere concept of parcels of owned land is an insult to Cherokees. Spiritually, it is like, what if we were in power and told the whites, ‘This guy Jesus was a stupid, filthy no-good and you have to get rid of all those churches and Bibles, and you Jews have to obey our laws and un-obey your own laws.’ Talking about it is
impossible; in our own language the possessive pronouns can only be used for things that you can physically give to another person, such as ‘my woodcarving’, ‘my basket’.

Communally, and that means physically, that piece of legislation broke us up. Once they got the idea, though, they really kept piling it on. This has been the century of legislation: 1924, 1934, 1954, etc. So we all got confused. Do we have the right to be ourselves without US permission, in spite of US death-and-poison spells?

Hna quu huh? It did something else, too, na? 1884 invented Indians. Before, we were strictly Cherokees or Sioux or Apaches. When they legislated that we were all ‘Indians’ and homeless, they lumped us all together, and this century has seen us trying to pull all those fingers into a fist.

They are not as smart as they think they are. Aren’t they like the bear who got beaten up by a mouse? We know very well that if you put death-words on someone else’s corn, that kernel could wind up in your own soup. They put death-words on us but we are the corn they cannot swallow.

This is the century where we began to be Indians, as well as Cherokees or whatever. I have never believed that for a minute, no matter how much I say it, or listen to other guys’ speeches. My brother never once believed that we would all pull together into a fist. Larry Red Shirt didn’t believe it.

Of course, we know our sorrows and we know our fears better than we know our families. The betrayals and little dishonesties are bushels of kernels of poison corn, but do we know where we are going?

Now I want to say things you may have heard me preach about before, but the words are not empty. I know your brother died last year, or your daughter. It has never been truer than now that your daughter is my daughter, my brother is your brother.

I am not trying to get you to join my movement. I want an Eloheh Ga ghusdun di where everyone shows up. Because Charlene La Pointe just showed me that those battered Sioux women in that shelter she runs on the Rosebud Reservation are my sisters turning to face an old century, then turning to face a new one, and Donna Thunder Hawk and Charon Asstoryer and Phyllis Young just showed me something.

So now I see the lives and hearts of those uncles, and my mother and father, through my brother and his grandson. I am the uncle, I must be the uncle now.

I want us to meet at Dhotua’s Ghadiya, whatever the hell happened to it; they turned it into a stompground or burned it down, but we can find it. Hna Quu, dini yotli! Alia liga! Wait, now. I didn’t get finished yet. I just remembered something else.

How come he wrote it like that?

So here’s what happened: I showed the piece to a woman who is a good critic and she had a lot of criticisms and I agreed with all of them. So then I wrote to the editors Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat and told them I wanted to make some revisions, but I guess I didn’t really want to because this is a last-minute addition. It is almost 1986, two years after the first writing.
In the first place, didn’t they notice that the title is too close to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and anyway, wasn’t the Allotment Act passed in 1887 or something? Yes, it was, and I can offer no explanation for why we always think it was 1884. Maybe that just *seems* right to us.

Then the critic said she didn’t like the ending at all. ‘You’re *still* being selfish; tell us what Donna Thunder Hawk, Charon Asetoyer and Phyllis Young showed you.’ ‘Just leave out the part about preaching; it does sound preachy and we know you can write better than that.’

One guy said that the piece seemed to be written in several voices, no clear style, and that it seemed to be telescoped, as though I had written it in a hurry without taking time to develop the different ideas.

For one thing, my father died this year. But at least he died on a fishing trip with two of my nephews. So when I went back to revise it, all the stories had changed.

But here is the real thing: I absolutely do not want to communicate anything to you. Another woman I showed it to said that I always seem to hold something back, that we never get to see inside, even in my poetry.

So you’re probably saying if he doesn’t want to communicate, why does he write? Here is the real truth: I absolutely hate this country. Not just the government, but the culture, the group of people called Americans. The country. I hate the country. I HATE AMERICA.

Now, if you ever come to my house I’ll invite you in and act pleasant, and we might even become close friends. My hatred is really not as absolute as I need it to be. Why wouldn’t I hate this country? Because you are a nice person? Because it makes you feel bad for me to hate this country? You want me to be properly indignant about ‘injustices’ and still be on the side of you and your friends who are also ‘trying to bring about some changes in this country’?

Don’t ask a white man to walk a mile in your moccasins because he’ll steal them, and the mile, too. Only, just try standing in my shoes for a minute. The *fact* of the US is destructive to Indian country. Every piece of progress, social or material, is more destruction to Indian country. I’m not even going to bother to develop the idea, but why don’t you just think about it – until the sun rises (that means all night long)?

Here is what I don’t understand: how come some many Indians don’t seem to hate this country (or at least don’t admit it)? Simple – we hate ourselves and each other instead, and now there we all are, out there trying to impress the white folks with our one thing or another.

I do not want to entertain you in any sense of the word. I would hate it if you all came to understand me. And I’d really hate it if I wrote something like those ‘sensitive and honest’ novels some black writers are doing, so that any white person with a few bucks could spend a quiet evening being entertained by our sorrows, and gaining in power by ‘a better understanding’ of our predicament, our dreams.

Where am I supposed to go, and what am I supposed to do? Some folks say, ‘Why don’t you go back home and live with your own people and those woods you claim to love so much?’

In the first place, those woods are destroyed. In the second place, I am a human in the world in this century, just like you. It doesn’t matter to me that there are contradictions that are irresolvable, because they *are* irresolvable. To be an Indian writer today means being on no path,
contradicting yourself at every turn, so at least I want to face that condition and not ‘act nice’, pretending it isn’t true.

Anyway, I’m not sure I like Indians all that much, either. Our intelligentsia, the writers and artists, are such a bunch of stuck-up, apolitical, money-grubbing, and flaky ripoff artists, and our political leaders are usually crooks and pretentious bastards or somebody’s puppets. Our regular folks are usually drunk or bad-mouthing their neighbours. Do you know that out on the res we have just as much child abuse and wife-beating as the rest of the country? Alienated, man; this is definitely not the old days. The people who work in offices, they’re the worst: petty, banal, officious, completely distrustful and cynical, and they always have that self-righteous superior attitude and they’re always incompetent. Our elders are all off being gurus to some white weirdos and talking about how some big earthquake or flood is going to solve all our problems.

I didn’t give up hope: I’ve been hanging in. But those other guys. Walking around. AIM-lessly. There is a whole crowd of professional Indians now; folks who wouldn’t lift a finger if they weren’t paid to but come off all concerned about our condition. They know they’d be out of a job if we ever got our act together and changed the conditions.

Let’s see, what else. That’s all I have to say right now, except like I said, hna quu, dini yotli! And I guess I’ll throw in a couple of poems here. Oh yeah, I meant to say that the reason I used several voices, or styles, is that I wanted to experiment with mixing different Cherokee speech patterns as a way of showing confusion and the fight for some clarity without that confusion. I’m sorry if it didn’t work out right. Anyway, here are the poems. One thing, though – I wrote the first part of this piece as though I were writing to Indian people, with one half of my brain; with the other half of my brain, I was writing to the white folks because who reads all these things? The white folks.

If we read – now here is a subtle point – if we read, we read like the white folks. We become like the white folks for the duration of the reading; that is, we read passively, to be entertained instead of to be motivated to organise to take back our land and all of our rights, no bullshit and no stopgap measures. But anyway, how many Indians are reading this? A few of my fellow writers. But maybe, a couple of college students who need to see how crazy it got. So here are the poems.
GUY FINDS TWO DEERSKINS IN MANHATTAN!

Dateline Manhattan Island, April 22, 1984
A man claiming to be an American Indian
Discovered two deerskins today, on a trash heap
At 108th and Columbus Avenue.

The guy said he had no knowledge concerning
The origin of the skins or who placed them on
The trash heap.

‘The hair is thick and shaggy, like northern deer
Have, so I don’t think they were brought here
From Oklahoma, Texas, or Arkansas,’ he said.

‘Immediately upon discovery I consulted
a wise woman from Brazil, who said that I
Should try to tan them,’ he claimed.

The Brazilian woman, who may also be at least
Part Indian, stated that she gave no such advice.
According to her the guy is always finding
Dead animals or remnants and bringing them to
Her apartment, which is furnished with a hammock
And purple walls.
‘He believes that the coyote spirit leads him to
Things like that,’ she said in an interview.

The guy later denied her version of the story.
‘I have no idea what’s going on in Manhattan,’ he claimed.
‘But obviously many animals lived here at one time.
And there were some Puerto Rican dudes hanging out
Close by so I wasn’t sure if I should take
The skins or not. It was Easter Sunday and
Those guys would think I was nuts.’

In the week previous to this incident a near-by
Church burned to the ground, and on Good Friday
(April 20) Russell Means of the American Indian Movement
Spoke at a meeting on Columbus Avenue near 107th.
Means has no known connection to the
Guy who found the deerskins.
I AM ONE OF THOSE INDIANS

I am one of those Indians that fly around.  
When we fall off cliffs we yell AIIIEEE!  
And keep zooming, never hit dust or bounce  
From boulders. (Hi na?)

I am one of those Indians you may see flying  
Around the Empire State Building in late Spring evenings.  
But we are not steel workers or high walkers,  
And our flying does not come from being bucked  
From the backs of rodeo broncos.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs assigned me this special job  
As part of the Termination Act of 1954.  
(Their Acts come in the fours: 1884 was the Allotment Act, 1924 the Citizenship Act, 1934 the Re-organization Act, and in 1984 I turned 44, to Which I reply, Nunh gi! Nunh gi! Nunh gi!  
Nunh gi!)

Ancestral graves and my specific gravity were all Terminated in ‘54 and I act accordingly. I act like a flapping Redskin. We are not stars or birds or ghosts; more like flying peeping toms. I am One of those Indians that fly around witnessing prophetic novas in burnt-out toasters.  
(Ka, ni, hi na?)

1987

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2 Editor’s note: after negotiating with tribal members, the Termination Act (actually from 1953) provided for the removal of the federal status of tribal members, of reservation lands from Indian ownership and the federally protected status of Native Americans. Some groups were later able to regain their federal status and some lands through court actions.

3 Editor’s note: the 1924 Citizenship Act provided for US citizenship for Native Americans, but many such citizen’s rights (such as voting) were not permitted to be exercised until much later.

4 Editor’s note: the Indian Re-organization Act of 1934, sometimes called the Indian ‘New Deal’, provided for federally recognised tribal governments on reservations, but which were to be organised according to largely non-indigenous principles of governance.