Halito. Chim achukma? Sa-hoschifo-ut Lee Hester. Chatah sia hoke! Which is to say "Hello. How are you? My name is Lee Hester. I am a citizen of the Choctaw Nation." I begin my talks in this way to help emphasize the differences between Native American people and others living in North America. This greeting directly exemplifies differences in language and allegiance. To those that know the law, it points toward differences in legal status and the fact that there are laws that pertain only to American Indians. To everyone, it should point toward the deeper differences in culture and with some study, it perhaps hints at basic differences in worldview, or what might from a native perspective be termed "presence-in-the-world." I do not and cannot claim any special authority on these issues, I am neither a medicine-man nor an elder. However, I am an enrolled member by blood, I prefer the term "citizen," of an Indian Nation; I grew up in Oklahoma—which in the Choctaw language means "Red People"—among Indian people, including my own relatives; my main associations are with Native American people. That, combined with a small amount of western philosophical training, may enable me to provide some observations—hopefully presented in a way which makes them meaningful.

The topic "Epistemology and American Indians" is a grand one. One which I undoubtedly don't have all the "answers" to, and maybe don't have any answers to. As I said, I'll mainly present some observations, though my Euro-American philosophical training will drive me to some deductions based on the observations. Throughout this paper, I'll use terms like "Native American" or "Indian" as if my conclusions are readily applicable to the peoples of all the sovereign Indian Nations. This isn't necessarily true, though I do think there are many similarities from nation to nation. As Viola Cordova has said, any Native American has more in common with any other Native American than with any non-Indian. A short story will serve as a jumping point for the rest of the talk. I have used this story elsewhere, so I hope I don't bore those of you that have heard it before.

A few years ago I was the professor of a course called "Native American Identity." I won't say I was "teaching it" for many reasons. One of them is that I tried, as much as possible, to use members of the Native American community—particularly elders—as the real teachers. I like to think it is because I recognize that they are the ones who can truly teach it, not just that I am lazy. One of our speakers was John Proctor, the oldest living Creek medicine man. He is the uncle of Wanda Davis, a good friend of mine—so I was able to persuade him to spend a three hour session with the class one evening. Mr. Proctor is a key practitioner of the traditional Creek religion. He is the medicine man for a stomp ground. "Stomp ground" is the name given to the ceremonial grounds where the Creek practice their religion.

Mostly the students asked the kinds of questions you might expect. Since they thought of Mr. Proctor as a representative of a traditional religion, they asked him
cosmogonic or cosmological questions. I was surprised when one of the students asked the ultimate question… Remember-this was a class on "Indian Identity." The student asked, "What makes you Creek?"

Those of you familiar with the Native American traditions, or those that have attended one of my talks before, would expect the answer to be a rambling narrative that might seem not to be an answer at all. This is just what I expected. I settled back in my chair in preparation for Mr. Proctor's answer. Without hesitation he said, "If you come to the stomp ground for four years, take the medicines and dance the dances, then you are Creek." The answer was completely unexpected and thus even more forcefully illuminating. Mr. Proctor had listed a set of practices which made someone Creek, or more properly in context, a member of the traditional Creek religion.

If you asked a member of just about any Christian religion what made them Christians, you would get a completely different answer. My Missionary Baptist relatives would tell you that to be Christian you have to "Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour." Acceptance, faith-belief, is at the core of Christian religion and not surprisingly at the core of Euro-American philosophy. Just think about how you would characterize different philosophical schools, or different figures in the Euro-American philosophical tradition. This school believed this… the central tenets of that school were…this famed philosopher thought that…Beliefs, beliefs, beliefs. Indeed, in the Euro-American philosophical tradition, it is unclear how one would go about doing epistemology at all without belief. The nature of justification, defeasibility, facticity, truth and a multitude of other issues are up for grabs in epistemology, but there is one thing that is usually not questioned. Whatever knowledge may be, it would seem that it at least has to be a belief.

In the Euro-American philosophical tradition, the centrality of belief is clear. Though we may analyze what we are doing at great length; think up different ways of characterizing it, generally we go about asserting different views of "the way things are." These are generally expressed as propositions. To the extent that we buy into them, we "believe" them. Sometimes, at least according to some epistemologists, we not only believe them but actually "know" them.

John Proctor's answer points to a different way and the more I review my experiences in the Native American community the more I think that his answer is illuminating. It has helped me understand an interesting experience that I had while "teaching" in Canada. Here I put the word "teaching" in scare quotes, because I was more nearly learning than teaching. While in Canada I taught several classes, including an intro philosophy class attended by John Bigbear, an Anishnabe who was a member of the Northern Winds drum group and a practitioner of some of the traditional religion. John Bigbear and I had several interesting encounters, but there was one that is particularly important to this talk.
John came to me one day after class with a very serious demeanor. Generally he laughed and joked as is common among Native American people, but it was clear this time he had something important to say. He talked about the shaking tent ceremony and other ceremonies that a Euro-American might consider "superstitious." He ended by asking me if I believed in these ceremonies. I considered the question very carefully. Just what was my view? I have been trained in the Euro-American philosophical tradition, I've taught symbolic logic and other technical classes that are at the core of western philosophy. Did I really "believe" in the shaking tent?

I told John that I couldn't say that I either believed or disbelieved in them. I have seen and experienced things that I don't comprehend in various traditional ceremonies. They are just part of my experience. I know my experiences, but I can't say what I experienced. He explained that he too, did not "believe" in them, though it was clear from what he said that he also did not "disbelieve" in them. This was one of a couple of turning points in my relation to John. Shortly after this exchange he invited me to come to a traditional ceremony welcoming the bears back after their winter hibernation. As a member of the Bear Clan, this was an important ceremony for John. I was honored to be invited. It was a great experience, one which I shall always cherish.

Now, I think that our discussion, among other things, may have been a test. As a mixed-blood I am often tested. In fact, at least one western philosopher has suggested on the basis of how I look that I'm not a "real" Indian. In the Indian community, the tests are a lot more subtle. If I had answered that I believed, then was I gullible, patronizing or trying to play "real" Indian? The answer was bit more clear and just as negative if I answered that I disbelieved.

The way in which most ceremonies are approached also points to a form of what we might call non-belief. There is always an interesting mixture of reverence and irreverence in Indian ceremonies. Just about the time that things seem most serious, someone will usually crack a joke. Often it will be the very medicine-man or elder that is conducting the ceremony.

A group of four elders, presided over by Freda MacDonald, conducted a ceremony to consecrate a set of two eagle feathers. One was for Lorraine Brundige, the other for me. As a part of the ceremony, we passed around water for everyone to drink in turn. I was the first person to Freda's left, so I was the first to drink. When the water again reached Freda there was still some left. She passed it to me. I looked uncertain. She said, "finish it." I tossed it off at one gulp. Freda started laughing good-naturedly. "Two feathers, two times around the circle," she explained. We all started joking about how I must be real thirsty, how people might think I was greedy for
water and so on. It went on for some time. We finally finished the ceremony without a second circling of the water.

At the end of the ceremony, one of the elders I didn’t know from a nearby reserve began to talk to me in Anishnabe. I had no clue what she was talking about. My Anishnabe is limited to "Meegwetch" which is "thank you" and "Ne’weeznin" which is the closest I can come to pronouncing the phrase for "Let's eat." However, the elder was clearly imparting something of great importance, so I sat and listened to her intently. After a few minutes Freda began laughing again. "Wrong kind of Indian," she said, "he's a Choctaw not an Ojibway."

Though its clear that such joking is partly to alleviate tension, gloss over slip-ups, and maintain harmony and good-will, it also makes sense that this practice is much easier if you do not "believe" in a western sense. Certainly we have all seen humor used for these purposes in Euro-American ceremonies, but I think those that have experienced both would say the jokes flow much more freely and with less provocation, if any, at a Native American ceremony.

At this point it is important to repeat that this does not mean Native Americans disbelieve in our traditions. Far from it. The traditions are approached with great reverence. Indeed, I think the difference in Native American and Euro-American approaches is so basic and subtle that the English language strains to express it. Unfortunately, since most philosophical dialogue in this country is in English it is likely that when pressed to the limit it would be better to say that Native American people firmly believe in our tradition than to imply any less reverence. This is because English has equated belief with truth. Now, I'm doing some Euro-American looking philosophy. I hope you don't mind. Euro-Philosophers express beliefs as propositions and assign them truth values. When we assert a belief we are asserting the truth of a certain picture of the world. There is, on one hand, our worldview... whether we are Native American or Euro-American... and on the other hand the world. What has been called metaphorically, "the map and the territory." I think most of us agree that we all live in the same territory. I think it is also clear that the maps held by the Native Americans and Euro-Americans are quite different. However, the main point of this talk is belief. Belief is our attitude toward the relationship between the map and the territory. Western belief generally implies some kind of correspondence between the map and territory. The most extreme version of this is that we can have a completely clear and correct map, a one-to-one correspondence between the map and the territory. Or to put it in the vernacular, we can have the "Truth." This was clearly the project of the Enlightenment. Even though modern thought has cast doubt on this, the west still clings to it.
I would characterize the attitude of Native Americans as one of agnosticism concerning the relationship between our map and the territory. Though this may seem strange from a western stance, it is actually very practical. Indeed, I would argue that it can even make a great deal of sense given modern western understandings of the limits of knowledge. Think of Heisenberg and Godel. Using the map and territory metaphor, Heisenberg seems to be telling us that the clearer our map of any particular part of the territory, the less clear our map will be elsewhere. Godel seems to be telling us that when our map becomes too broad, it will be incorrect. If we go too far in detail or breadth, our map becomes confused.

The Native American map is not meant to be a high fidelity picture of the territory, but is an action guiding set of ideas. Indeed, the action guiding element is central. Remember the John Proctor story. Particular actions are what makes one Creek. One of the main puzzlements Indian people have expressed historically is how European could assert the truth of our ideas, but act in ways that didn’t correspond to the truths they asserted. Popular sovereignty, religious freedom, the sanctity of property, peace, brotherhood and all the rest seem to be ignored nearly as often as they are upheld. Of course one answer is that there are bad people and bad governments who do not maintain our own lofty ideas. Though this is true, I think it is worsened by western belief. If you are convinced that your map truly embodies the territory, despite the fact that it is necessarily incomplete or incorrect (and probably both…) then you are going to make many false turns. Your actions will be contradictory. When you have mistaken the map for the territory, you’ll continue to claim that you have reached the right destination even when you are hopelessly lost.

Western philosophers are perhaps the best examples of this tendency and it is one that has cost them much in the way of practical influence in society. We have all entertained skeptical ideas, examined odd metaphysical systems and sometimes built careers defending our truth. But what if they are true? Many of the maps we have posited can’t be followed. Just how should a solipsist act? Laying aside the question of truth, if your map can’t be followed, what use is it?

The western rejoinder might be, "How can agnosticism concerning the connection between the map and territory be action guiding?" The answer is that it can’t, but it is an attitude which can be very helpful. Though Native Americans may not know what the connection is between our map and the territory, there are some things that we do know. Key among these is our experience. This includes our own actions and the observed consequences of those actions.

The importance of direct experience and agnosticism concerning belief can be seen in various linguistic elements of the Choctaw language and other Native American languages. In Choctaw there is a marker to indicate
when you are passing on second-hand experiences… a hearsay marker. Such markers are common among Na-
tive American languages. In Choctaw, for example, the phrase "The cat is on the mat," might be translated, "Ga-
tosat shukbo binili." If we say "Gatosat shukbo binili-miha," then we have disclaimed direct observation, we are
saying that someone told us. Without the hearsay marker, the assumption is that what we are saying is a part of
our experience. But the hearsay marker "miha" is just the beginning. There are a variety of markers that de-
scribe our attitude toward the source of the experience, its reliability, or whether that particular experience is
shared. For example "Gatosat shukbo binili-hah?" means something like "Don't we agree that the cat is on the
mat?" Some of the markers can be given rather humorous translations. "Gatosat shukbo binili-cho." has been
translated by one linguist as, "The cat is on the mat, you idiot." The "cho" marker implies that the cat is right in
front of you… that you should open up your eyes.

These markers generally pick out a relationship between the person speaking and the statement, rather than
between the statement and the world. In English, a
statement asserts a particular picture of the world, in
Choctaw you are more nearly relating an experience.

Possibly the most telling example is the kind of response
that a traditional Native person will give in answer to a
question. I don't know how many Indian related confer-
ences I have been to, where some non-Indian academic
will ask a medicine-person or elder a question. The re-
sponse they seek is a statement of the way things are, a
truth, a detailed map of the territory. The answer that
they get is a rambling narrative, of the kind I expected
from John Proctor in the story I related earlier. The nar-
rative is generally a story from their own life, maybe with
a few traditional side stories. At the end, the academic is
usually puzzled. Our reaction is often negative. In the
worst cases, the academic may assert that the elder was
just making up a story because they didn't understand
our own traditions. I've seen this done again and again.
One philosopher in Canada, whom I won't name, has
even told me how he often has to explain Indian tradi-
tions to the Indians themselves. From his perspective, his map is right and they've lost theirs.

Fortunately or unfortunately many traditional values, including respect, will prompt the Indian person to sit still
for an impromptu lecture on their own traditions. Some take mild amusement at the absurdity. You can imagine
the kind of markers they might use in characterizing where they heard this information. Though Choctaw does
not have a marker that means, "I heard this from a non-Indian who thinks he knows more about us than we
do," it is possible that Kiowa does. They have a lot more markers of this kind than we do. Some elders, particu-
larly those that are the most traditional, might just report it as straight news. Respect is a part of this, but the respect is partly born out of epistemic humility. When you do not claim to have a correct map of the world, then you do not claim to have the "Truth." You are willing to accept that other people have maps that are as good (or as bad…) as your own. When your map primarily traces your own path through life, then you are always eager to share stories and broaden your map. A traditional elder might well listen attentively to an anthropological lecture concerning his own customs and traditions. After all, it will be an interesting experience that may provide many insights—if only into the thinking of anthropologists.

Knowledge is narrative of a life lived in the world. The individual stories are what you know. They may or may not provide a map of the world, but they do tell you about the consequences of your actions. You can learn much even if you believe little. You can even be taught. Here another short story might be useful.

After a long day's work I was supposed to help unload a bunch of tables and chairs at the new Choctaw center in Oklahoma City. Mr. Amos Dorsey, an older full-blood Creek and I were going to work together. There was quite a bit of work to do and I wanted to get home, so I threw myself into the work-busily hustling back and forth. Mr. Dorsey began to work too, but a bit slower and only after watching me for a second or two. Indeed, as he worked and watched me, I could almost swear he was actually going even slower. Eventually, it was as if he was going in slow-motion. Of course, part of that was due to my haste. As we worked and I fumed a bit at his slowness, I finally realized that somehow he was actually getting more done than I was. Mr. Dorsey respected the task, understood the context and set about working efficiently. However, I think it was also an instance of teaching. I can't help but think he slowed down as he saw my thoughtless, disrespectful haste and then speeded up as he saw that I had learned my lesson and was working efficiently.

Now, we could assert some "Truths" here. We might say that "Haste makes waste." Yet of course, the "Early bird got the worm." Just about any "Truth" we might assert—particularly action guiding truths—are going to have contradictory "Truths" that seem just as good. Thus we have the contradictory actions. This search for "Truth" is the European tradition. The Native tradition does not abstract truths out of the stories, the stories are often abstract enough in themselves without further removing them from reality. The narrative is as close to the truth as you can get. In the end, I think that the two epistemic systems may converge. As the Euro-American tradition refines its truths, resolving the contradictions by adding more and more exceptions and greater and greater complexity, these truths may eventually more nearly resemble stories. In the meantime, Indian people will be waiting at the fire already telling some good ones.