

REMEMBERING KIN: CONSTRUCTING CREEK  
TRIBAL SITES OF MEMORY

By

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Abstract: This dissertation is a tribally-specific study of Creek texts, Alexander Posey's *The Fus Fixico Letters*, Joy Harjo's memoir *Crazy Brave* and Sterlin Harjo's documentary *This May Be the Last Time*, that focuses on manifestations of Creek kinship memory. Kinship memory reflects the complex systems that define belonging in many Indigenous communities and signifies interdependence and relationality that are at the core of kinship for Indigenous nations. It presupposes accountability to past, present, and future, but also focuses on agency of its carriers. By centering kinship practices, it assists Indigenous nations in asserting sovereignty. For each Native nation, kinship memory serves as the core of their national/tribal identity based on what the nation holds important or chooses to remember/include for the definition of their identity. The dissertation investigates three Creek texts as potential sites of kinship memory reflecting tribally-specific past and present and containing tribally-specific worldviews, histories, cultural, political, spiritual, and everyday practices. Close reading of the three texts revealed that most often the narrators presented their individual experiences through the prism of communal/tribal experiences that constitute kinship memory, which then, in its turn, defines Creek identity. Investigation of the texts showed that the narrators and characters that populate the texts define Creekness through their relationship to their community, tribal history, tribal landscape, Creek oral tradition, music, intergenerational trauma, participation in tribal current affairs, cultural realia such as traditional meals, everyday practices and objects of everyday use, etc. The dissertation claims that these works not only reflect the past, but participate in construction of the future; that is, they not only help remember the past, but actively shape the community's cultural present. The recurring use of memory in these works re-examines historic and cultural pasts, inscribes Indigenous peoples into the narrative of contemporaneity, and resists the western mythology of erasure. Both personal and kinship memories offered by Joy Harjo, Sterlin Harjo, and Alexander Posey in their works have the ability to exercise power over the colonial metanarrative.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
TEXTS AS SITES OF MEMORY .....	6
KINSHIP MEMORY .....	13
STRUCTURE .....	22
II. ALEXANDER POSEY’S <i>THE FUS FIXICO LETTERS</i> AS A SITE OF MEMORY .....	27
ALEXANDER POSEY’S LITERARY AND HISTORIC PERSONA.....	29
<i>THE FUS FIXICO LETTERS</i> AS MIRROR OF THE COMMUNITY.....	33
REVISING STEREOTYPES.....	45
WHO CARES.....	60
III. UNTOLD HISTORIES AND SITES OF MEMORY IN STERLIN HARJO’S <i>THIS MAY BE THE LAST TIME</i> .....	64
INDIVIDUAL REMEMBERING: GETTING TO KNOW YOUR KIN.....	66
COMMUNAL REMEMBERING: KINSHIP CONNECTIONS .....	74
INDIGENOUS DOCUMENTARY: EXERCISING VISUAL SOVEREIGNTY.....	77
REVISING THE METANARRATIVE: ASSERTING INDIGENOUS PRESENCE.....	83

Chapter	Page
IV. REMEMBER YOUR KIN: JOY HARJO'S <i>CRAZY BRAVE</i> AS A SITE OF MEMORY.....	91
FINDING INDIVIDUAL VOICE THROUGH KINSHIP.....	93
EMBODYING MEMORY, SPEAKING IN KINSHIP VOICES.....	106
SPEAKING COUNTER-MEMORY.....	113
SUBVERTING THE GENRE.....	120
V. CONCLUSION.....	123
REFERENCES.....	129

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Postmodern and postcolonial studies have revived scholars' interest in memory. Yet, when it comes to Indigenous memories in the US, much interest has been focused on pre-contact and first-contact tribal memories, their authenticity and the possibility of continuous Indigenous memories due to "high degrees of cultural and linguistic assimilation, physical relocation, and genetic hybridity" (Allen 93). Instead of questioning the validity of Indigenous memories of the past, this study accepts the premise that collective memory is a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon and alters along with the community it memorializes and represents. Marita Sturken insists that "[m]emory is crucial to the understanding of a culture precisely because it indicates collective desires, needs, and self-definitions. We need to ask not whether a memory is true but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present" (*Tangled Memories* 2). Therefore, this research project focuses on individual Creek texts, namely Alexander Posey's *The Fus Fixico Letters*, Joy Harjo's memoir *Crazy Brave* and Sterlin Harjo's documentary *This May Be the Last Time*, and attempts to uncover Creek self-definitions through memory investigations and close reading of the texts.

Unlike the stereotypical representations of American Indians in Hollywood, Native nations are not fossilized in the past and are changing and adapting. In fact, most Indigenous cultures portray change as crucial and view adaptation and borrowing through trade and exchange

of goods as integral parts of perseverance. Therefore, instead of trying to determine authenticity of Native memories, this study aims to focus on the processes of construction of Indigenous memories in Native-generated texts, which reflect contemporary experiences of individuals as well as the community as a whole, and the significance of such memories for Indigenous peoples. Montaña claims that “analysis of the realms of memory contributes to the knowledge of the connections between memory, forgetfulness, identity and the imaginary construction of a nation by means of its national memory” (4). Considering this premise, this research project hoped to uncover some of the values Creek authors hold important for Creek identity as tribal members.

I would like to note that I did not initiate the study with an assumption about what Creek identity should constitute. Instead, the study attempted to discover by what means the authors under consideration defined themselves as Creek and in what Creek identity might be culturally rooted. This research focused on the local and the personal as these have often been left out in studies about Native American nations. I find it important to move away from generalizations and focus on the definitions the texts and their authors provide themselves. While intercultural interaction is present in the narratives of some authors (particularly Joy Harjo), all of the authors clearly identify as Creek. Close reading of the three texts focused on the self-definitions the authors provided and revealed that most often the narrators presented their individual experiences through the prism of communal/tribal experiences that constitute what I term kinship memory, which then, in its turn, defines Creek identity. Investigation of the texts showed that the narrators and characters that populate the texts define Creekness through their relationship to their community, tribal history, tribal landscape, Creek oral tradition, music, intergenerational trauma, participation in tribal current affairs, cultural realia such as traditional meals, everyday practices and objects of everyday use, etc.

The dissertation aimed to investigate Alexander Posey’s *The Fus Fixico Letters*, Joy Harjo’s memoir *Crazy Brave* and Sterlin Harjo’s documentary *This May Be the Last Time* as



potential sites of memory reflecting tribally-specific past and present and containing tribally-specific worldviews, histories, cultural, political, spiritual, and everyday practices. I claim that these works not only reflect the past, but participate in construction of the future; that is, they not only help remember, but actively shape the community's cultural present. I suggest looking at these texts as sites of memory that not merely reflect kinship memories, but also construct them. The recurring use of memory in these works re-examines historic and cultural pasts, inscribes Indigenous peoples into the narrative of contemporaneity, and resists the western mythology of erasure. Both personal and kinship memories offered by Joy Harjo, Sterlin Harjo, and Alexander Posey in their works have the ability to exercise power over the colonial metanarrative.

In this research, I follow Craig Womack's call for tribally-specific studies by examining solely Muscogee-Creek texts at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, in hopes that this approach will allow deeper insights into evolution of tribal views and values, but also perseverance of unique cultural identity. Womack's work is most often considered within the framework of American Indian literary nationalism, which although contentious at times, plays an important role in Native Studies. It prompts scholars to seek answers from the perspective of Native nations, prioritize their voices and stories, and focus on the ways in which particular tribal traditions and epistemologies inform the work of Native authors. June Scudeler, a Métis scholar, supports this approach to Indigenous Studies as it grounds criticism in "the communities' ways of knowing and traditions from which the work grew" (177). This approach does not disregard intertribal or intercultural connections, but prompts the study of Indigenous literatures to be as culturally specific as possible. Therefore, undertaking such approach allows me to focus on discovering how Creek culture influences the works of the authors under consideration, which in its turn allows to pull together some threads of Creek cultural identity into a tentative definition based on these authors' perceptions.

While many scholars have shifted their perspectives into the Trans-Indigenous mode, suggested by Chadwick Allen, to consider what might be gained from examining Indigenous literatures on a global scale, I suggest that tribally specific studies are still valuable. We do not necessarily have to view American Indian literary nationalism in opposition to or in contrast with Trans-Indigenous, but rather explore how these two approaches can complement each other. After all, Allen's purpose in his methodology of viewing authors of various Indigenous nations together is to move away from comparing and contrasting towards Indigenous juxtapositions to affirm diversity and distinction of Indigenous peoples and foreground the rich Indigenous self-representations and complex agency. The latter are the focus of Native American literary nationalism as well. While I think that exploring the texts selected for this study from the Trans-Indigenous perspective may be productive and yield a valuable conversation, at the moment it is beyond the scope of this research and poses a more long-term goal. The first step toward creating that kind of conversation is foregrounding the texts' unique Creek perspective and exploring their tribal specificity.

In addition, I intend to address this study with LeAnne Howe's tribalogy in mind, which prompts us to look for complex interconnections in works by Native artists as well as "cultural bias." I will use Howe's term along with Daniel Heath Justice's definition of kinship to assist me in outlining the notion of kinship memory. Also, I build upon Annette Portillo's study of Native women's autobiographies implementing N. Scott Momaday's notion of blood memory, which provides for an Indigenous centered way of extracting communal histories through the perception of individual bodies. Although many scholars have found blood memory (or memory in the blood) to be a productive way to investigate Native literary works, accentuating ancestral memory, others have expressed concern that it focuses more on one's genetic constitution. Those who do implement the term claim to use it in its metaphorical sense. I find the term somewhat problematic as it oversimplifies the question of Indigeneity. I suggest applying kinship memory

instead as it better reflects the complex systems that define belonging in many Indigenous communities and signifies interdependence and relationality that are at the core of kinship for Indigenous nations. I propose that kinship memory reflects these without focusing on blood quantum, the notion imposed on Indigenous nations. Kinship memory allows us to speak of relationality, strong ties with ancestral history and oral tradition, but also to draw in contemporary individual experiences and future generations as part of the larger story. It presupposes accountability to past, present, and future, but also focuses on agency of its carriers. It can be contained by a variety of sources including landscapes, monuments, texts, and individual bodies. Importantly, it assists Indigenous nations in asserting sovereignty as it centers kinship practices important for Indigenous nations. Each Native nation develops its own kinship memory which serves as the core of their national/tribal identity based on what the nation holds important or chooses to remember/include for the definition of that particular tribal identity (tribally-specific spiritual and cultural practices, political practices, historic events and narratives, oral tradition, landscape, specific tribal experiences, etc.). Yet, kinship memory may also function on a larger intertribal scale when it emphasizes the shared experiences of Indigenous nations in America such as experiences of colonization and resistance to it, continuant residence on the continent, shared origin stories, the civil right movement, etc. When reading Alexander Posey and Sterlin Harjo's texts, it is appropriate to speak of tribally-specific Creek kinship memory; yet Joy Harjo, although mostly speaking particularly of her Creek identity, also establishes the intertribal kind of kinship memory that is grounded in shared experiences with representatives of other Indigenous nations.

Viewing communal histories through the perception of individual bodies, as suggested by Portillo, on the other hand, provides a prolific way to acknowledge the role of the storyteller through which the communal becomes narrated. It allows scholars to consider influences on texts as sites of memory, specifically the oral tradition and individual interpretations of them, as well

as individual experiences and memories of both the past and the present. Individual bodies then not only perform the function of preserving and passing on kinship memories, but also participate in creation of the latter. In other words, I suggest considering storytellers (individual bodies) as part of the metaphorical sites of memory (communal histories) they create. I argue that the personas of the texts under consideration, i.e. the storytellers of these texts, are both the products and representations of the given historic and cultural eras, and in a way serve as cumulative characters to which Creek readers can relate. In discussion of public memory, Nuala C. Johnson mentions the monument to the French-Canadian politician Sir George Etienne Cartier, whose “memorialization . . . was used to embody the idea of a French-Canadian who combined loyalty to empire, nation, and race” (318). Johnson claims that it served as an important unifying symbol for the state at the time. I suggest considering the possibility that the storytellers of the texts of this study may perform a similar function, symbolic of certain Creek national traits and capturing important historic and cultural events and features.

#### TEXTS AS SITES OF MEMORY

Taking into consideration Craig Womack’s urging for tribally-specific studies, this research focuses on the works of three Muscogee-Creek artists in hopes to investigate how a variety of cultural products (here a memoir, a documentary, and journalism), reflect and shape cultural memory and identity. Erll and Rigney point out that memory involves cooperation of different media, especially today: “collective memories are actively produced through repeated acts of remembrance using both a variety of media and a variety of genres” (112). Both literature and film actively participate in production of memory. Erll and Rigney urge that literature is “a memorial medium in its own right” and has great potential in showing how societies recollect their past (112). “By imaginatively representing acts of recollection, literature makes remembrance observable. As such it not only helps produce collective memory, . . . but also cultural knowledge about how memory works for individuals and groups. Seen in this light,

literature might be called a ‘mimesis’ of memory” (Erll and Rigney 113). Film has also become a powerful tool for memory production as it now provides an accessible means of witnessing history, shaping, and sharing it (Waterson 52). Therefore, I propose to examine the suggested texts by applying the theory of sites of memory with the difference that I claim them to be sites of kinship memory. I hope that this approach might yield insights as to the values and processes of history-making of the Creek nation. This decision is also based on the inherently community-specific nature of sites of memory. I aim to investigate what forces influence establishment of these sites of kinship memory and the process that turns creative works into such sites.

The original discussion of the sites of memory was proposed by Pierre Nora who defined a site of memory as "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora, "From lieux de mémoire" XVII)<sup>1</sup>. He claimed that sites of memory are "where [cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (Nora, "Between Memory and History" 7). Thus, sites of memory can be those that acquired the memorial force with the passage of time or where national memory took a specific form and those proposed by community members with a specific intention to rescue historic or cultural elements.

Discussion of Nora’s sites of memory turned into an investigation of “the institutional frames of creating, upholding and transmitting the memory of the past” (Szpociński 246). In this scenario, authorities and institutions shape the ways past is remembered. One could consider public monuments as a means of shaping public memory. Public monuments such as the Eiffel tower in Paris, Kremlin in Moscow, the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, and many

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<sup>1</sup> This is only one of the definitions of the term Nora provided. He kept redefining it throughout his work, but I find this one most suitable for this research. Because of the plasticity of the term sites of memory, I follow Bastillo’s suggestion (as qtd. in Montañó) to consider it more of a method rather than simply a concept, that investigates the relationship of memory to history and contribution of the former to construction of the latter.

others play a significant role in construction of both collective and individual meaning. Of course, not all monuments have such power; yet, as Johnson points out, one cannot underestimate “the role of public sculpture and monumental architecture in framing the geographies of everyday life and in anchoring our collective social memory” (316). Scholars of recent memory studies urge that such monuments cannot be treated as mere aesthetic compositions, but are culturally and politically charged. Johnson highlights that these “sites are not merely the material backdrop from which a story is told, but the spaces themselves constitute the meaning by becoming both a physical location and a sightline for interpretation” (316).

In museums and public spaces across the US, one will find many monuments and other kinds of memorialization of American Indians as they have always played a significant role in the making of the American national mythology. Yet, many of these monuments of Nativeness are problematic as they are misrepresentations of Native nations and mostly reflect stereotypes and misconceptions of the mainstream fueled by Hollywood and mass media. In reality, instead of fostering preservation of Indigenous history in America, they erase it by replacing it with conveniently constructed myths about American Indians as savages or as vanishing, based on American political agendas. Of course, that is not to say that Indigenous nations do not have their own physical sites of memory. Many of these sites of memory are of a different nature as they are connected to spiritual beliefs, oral tradition, and major historic events, and are natural geographic landmarks. Consider, for instance, The Devil’s Tower in Wyoming which has sacred significance for a number of tribes including Sioux, Lakota, Kiowa, and Cheyenne. While President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed the Devil’s Tower the first United States Monument in 1906, for the Indigenous nations this landmark signifies something entirely different. It is part of the belief systems and oral traditions of the tribes named above teaching a variety of lessons. Because of removal, relocation, and land grab, many of such sites of memory are often no longer accessible to Native nations, especially when it comes to religious practices. Yet, they are commemorated in

multiple stories, oral tradition, and written texts, what Szpociński terms metaphorical sites of memory. Szpociński posits that such depositories are “sites of memory” in a metaphorical sense as their materiality becomes of lesser importance. He justifies this interpretation of such sites of memory in the following manner: “. . . both the real (i.e. museums, statues, archives, temples, etc.) and the metaphorical “sites of memory” manifest the same properties: they are the property of particular social groups and they contain some or other values (ideas, norms, behavior patterns) important from the perspective of that group” (249). Intergenerational bonds then become an important aspect of such “sites of memory” (Szpociński 250). Szpociński further argues that “practices related to ‘re-visiting’ (recollection can be viewed as a specific form of visitation) become then a form of remaining true to one’s ancestors and saving for future generations important values, ideas and behavioral patterns” (250).

Landscape holds particular significance for Indigenous memory. In her essay “Interior and Exterior Landscape: The Pueblo Migration Stories” from *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Leslie Marmon Silko suggests that “human consciousness remains *within* the hills, canyons, cliffs, and the plants, clouds, and sky” (27). She emphasizes that Pueblo oral narrative is the medium which maintains the complex knowledge and belief system of the Pueblo people (30). Oral history was and is transmitted through communal storytelling: everyone, both young and old, listened to the stories and was expected to remember at least some specific details. “Even if a key figure, an elder who knew much more than others, were to die unexpectedly, the system would remain intact” (Silko 31). Location and/or place are always at the center of oral narratives; the date of the incident is much less significant. The geographical details usually have an important role or even serve as a turning point in the narrative (Silko 33). To illustrate Pueblo connection to the landscape and its significance for collective and cultural memory, Silko discusses the Pueblo Migration stories to refer to specific places that can still be visited including the ones that lie on the state highway linking Pagate village with Laguna village. As a child,

Silko travelled this route with older Laguna people and first learned the stories of emergence and migration. She calls this landscape ritualistic as it defines Pueblo identity and is “marked with boulders, mesas, springs, and river crossings [that] are actually a ritual circuit, or path, that marks the interior journey the Laguna people made: a journey of awareness and imagination in which they emerged from being within the earth and all-included in the earth to the culture and people they became” (37). Silko confesses that these stories made her feel familiar with the geography of the mesas and made her sense the presence of the participants of the stories at the locations where action took place. Because of the performative aspect of storytelling (the storyteller in a way acted out the narratives), she was able to witness the stories: “So we sometimes say the moment is alive again with us, within our imaginations and our memory, as we listen” (43). This kind of remembering is what Nora refers to as a real environment of memory. In this case, the distinction between the physical sites and the metaphorical sites of memory becomes blurred. The two categories function as a whole to create a more complete memory. The metaphorical allows a closer bond to and a better understanding of the physical, especially in cases when the physical is inaccessible.

Since Nora’s original research, the studies of sites of memory have evolved in two directions: some focus on the past, i.e. what is contained by the site of memory; others focus on the site itself as a means by which the past is transmitted (Szpociński 248). Nora wanted to draw attention to the depositories of memory (i.e. past) that are often overlooked. Such underappreciated sites of memory can include literary works, chronicles, and the language itself (Szpociński 249), on which this study aims to focus. It is important to note that the Creek nation has its own both landscape sites of memory (for instance one of the hymns in Sterlin Harjo’s documentary is devoted to the Mississippi river as an important historic landmark) and public history sites of memory. Among the latter are Council Hill, which served as the original seat of Muscogee government; home of Chitto Harjo near Pierce Oklahoma, the Creek leader who



opposed the breakup of Creek government; Alexander Posey's birthplace northwest of Eufaula; Bacone College, and many others<sup>2</sup>. Yet, investigating these sites of memory and how they came to be is beyond the scope of this study. I would like to focus on what function metaphorical Creek sites of memory perform and in what manner. I argue that while countering the effects of colonization and cultural erasure, Indigenous sites of memory allow Native writers, artists, and filmmakers to inscribe their presence into American and world historical and cultural narrative, but more importantly they preserve and transmit Indigenous experiences and values. Indigenous sites of memory, which extend and integrate the oral tradition of storytelling as memory keeping, become the physical embodiment of living memory that encourage a hybrid conversation across a variety of borders and margins and an inquisition into memory that establishes a base for future-making. Although literary works and film are not traditionally considered sites of memory as they are most often only interrogated for their symbolic meaning, their physical presence is as important as their semiotic interpretation. The Indigenous narratives constructed in them are not merely symbolic, but also literal acts of remembering. They fulfill the purpose of the sites of memory, which is "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting," and exhibit "a will to remember" (Nora, "Between Memory and History" 19).

For a site of memory to be established, Nora requires some distance from the past, although recently scholars have discussed sites that have been consciously established by citizens of nations as opposed to the passage of time. I suggest that community's agency in establishing sites of kinship memory plays a more important role than the passage of time. Two of the texts under consideration, Sterlin Harjo's documentary and Joy Harjo's memoir, are rather recent and some would argue they cannot be considered as sites of memory for that reason. However, I argue that the hymns that are the focus of the documentary are metaphorical sites of kinship memory as

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<sup>2</sup> For a full list of historic sites see Muscogee (Creek) Nation Tourism at <http://creektourism.com/historical-points/>

they contain values of the Creek community and represent its historic past, memorializing events important for Creek cultural and national identity. The film itself poses interest as the community's attempt to preserve these sites of memory in one space, which gives it the potential of a site of memory. In her memoir, in search of her voice, Joy Harjo often reaches out to sites of memory (paintings, oral tradition, etc.) to be able to construct her own identity, in a way to reconnect with her Creekness. Therefore, this text points to some sites of memory that hold importance to the Creek nation, but also allows us to entertain the idea of personal sites of memory and explore further influence of sites on the individual. One could argue that Posey's work is removed far enough from present to be considered a site of memory, especially taking into account many academics' urge to investigate it for historic and cultural value. Fus Fixico's letters capture historic events and changes that happened to the Creek nation during the allotment era and preserve the language, values, references to oral traditions, politics, and cultural realities of the nation. In other words, they contain Creek identity. All the texts engage history in some manner and exhibit a will to remember, which is crucial for a site of memory, according to Nora. Taken together, these texts might allow us an insight into what constitutes Creek sites of memory and what the nation holds valuable for its cultural history.

The texts examined in this project are all differing cultural products, journalism, film, and autobiographical writing, yet equally valid. Memory can be produced through an array of cultural products such as public art, memorials, docudramas, television images, photographs, advertisements, yellow ribbons, red ribbons, alternative media, activist art, even bodies themselves (Sturken, *Tangled Memories* 1). It seems important to consider at least several sources of memory. Although I am claiming that these texts are imbued with memorial significance by the community, one also has to acknowledge that memory is not merely a product, but participates in its own construction. According to Sturken, images, objects, and representations are "technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides"

("Narratives of Recovery" 237). Thus, the text acquires an active and memory-productive role. Such a position assigns literature and film the function of an agent of cultural memory of a community or a nation.

## KINSHIP MEMORY

I propose to investigate Alexander Posey's, Joy Harjo's, and Sterlin Harjo's works through kinship memory because interconnectedness is one of the main values for many Indigenous nations and is vital for understanding Indigenous nationhood. I take my cue from Daniel Heath Justice's (a Cherokee scholar and one of the proponents of American Indian literary nationalism) idea of kinship criticism which proposes kinship as a critical framework for the reading of Indigenous texts. He suggests that it allows scholars to be "fully attentive to the endurance of indigenous peoples against the forces of erasure and determine, in various ways, how the survival of indigenous peoples is strengthened by the literature we produce and the critical lenses through which we read them" ("Go Away Water" 149). He argues that Indigenous nationhood is not merely about politics or a specific cultural identity; it entails "an understanding of a common social interdependence within the community, the tribal web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships" (*Our Fire* 24). Therefore, I propose that the term that defines Indigenous memory should be rooted in Indigenous worldviews.

The terms most widely used in memory studies to approach the collective are cultural memory and collective memory. Both of these terms are non-Indigenous studies generated and are disconnected from Indigenous understandings of nationhood, which is crucial in research about Native American texts. In Native studies, N. Scott Momaday's trope of blood memory (or memory in the blood) has been somewhat popular, yet is also controversial. Arnold Krupat, for instance, opposes usage of blood memory as it invokes racial connotations and, to his mind,

perpetuates colonial imposition of blood quantum. To some, it might suggest that Momaday argues for Indigenous authenticity based on the amount of Indian blood the person possesses, which is a colonially imposed idea. Krupat criticizes blood memory in *The Voice in the Margin* because in his essay “Personal Reflections,” Momaday claims that one’s perception of the universe is based on certain intrinsic variables that “are determined to some real extent on the basis of his genetic constitution” (156). Krupat criticizes the term as “mystifications” of Native American perceptions (Krupat, *Voice* 13-14). Other Native scholars have tried to recuperate the term claiming that Momaday uses blood memory in its metaphorical sense and genetic can be interpreted as ‘narrative’ (Allen, “Blood (And) Memory” 95). Regardless of which side of the argument one takes, it is hard to ignore that the focus of the debate around blood memory is race and authenticity. Kim TallBear notes the dangers of equating “in our blood” with “in our DNA” for tribal sovereignty and determining of belonging. Similar to Krupat, she explains that Indigenous definitions of belonging privilege and are not built on biological characteristics, but also involve historical contexts and tribal social understandings. She insists that “DNA talk” is colonially imposed and political. Therefore, in view of the recent Indigenous theories proposed by Womack, Warrior, Weaver, Vizenor, Howe, and other Indigenous scholars, I suggest introducing the term kinship memory to the discussion in hopes that it will focus the conversation more on tribal self-definitions and the unique tribal voices and pull away from discussion of blood and genetic constitution, which is not the focus of this study.

As mentioned earlier, because each Indigenous nation has unique cultural and historical experiences and has full agency in construction of its memory, kinship memory will be tribally-specific. It may be determined by the tribes’ understanding of the relationship of the individuals among themselves, their place in the community, and the universe. Daniel Heath Justice defines kinship as “a common social interdependence within the community” with focus on “rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic

system of mutually-affecting relationships” (151). Although there might be intertribal similarities, kinship memory for each individual Native nation will also reflect the nation’s unique features.

While being tribally-specific, kinship memory may also function on an intertribal level without contradicting its tribal-specificity because, as suggested by Justice, kinship in Indigenous understanding is the essence of living; it is something that people “do--actively, thoughtfully, respectfully” (148). Thus, kinship memory is awareness of relationality, interconnectedness and significance of all-that-is, i.e. people, environment, and the spiritual realm. It is the Native American “cultural bias” common for Native nations (as proposed by Howe) which reflects a “native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another” (Howe, *Choctalking* 31). LeAnne Howe terms this bias tribalography. She posits that “[n]ative stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history) seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieu” (Howe, *Choctalking* 31). It is important to note that although Howe suggests that all Native stories have this bias, i.e. rooted in the concept of kinship and interconnectedness, they are still informed by the particular storyteller’s tribe, which means they are always tribally specific.

To voice their unique tribally-specific stories, Indigenous writers may employ variety of strategies that are aimed at incorporating their unique tribal and individual perspectives, elements that are tribally-specific to the Indigenous writers under consideration. These may be stylistic or grammar alterations, for instance, which express varying perspectives on language, conversation and its participants, storytellers, speakers, and even ways of knowing (for further discussion see Fiamengo, Godard, Grant). Stylistic variations may be grounded both in personal lived experiences and communal knowledge, tribally-specific epistemologies, and oral traditions. The writers may incorporate tribally-specific themes, tricksters, historic events, foods, etc. that are in

fact elements of kinship memory. Thus, each Indigenous nation constructs and invests in continuity of its own tribally-specific kinship memory. Therefore, for instance, works of N. Scott Momaday or Leslie Marmon Silko will reflect kinship memories that are varied expressing the values that are held important by Kiowa and Laguna Pueblo nations respectively.

If we briefly consider Momaday's autobiographical work *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, we will discover landmarks and characters from oral tradition that are vital for defining Kiowa identity, from Momaday's perspective. In this work, Momaday ties together Kiowa oral tradition, Kiowa history, and his own personal experiences as a Kiowa tribal member. For instance, the work discusses Kiowa emergence story, the spirit being Tai-me, the myth of the arrow-maker specific to Kiowa, the last Kiowa Sun Dance, the disappearance of the buffalo, and much more including important myths and geographic locations that function as sites of Kiowa memory. In further close reading, one might discover ways in which the first two influence and shape the latter and define Momaday's tribal identity. Thus, the text is distinctly Kiowa and reflects Kiowa kinship memory. Yet, in a broader sense, it is also distinctly Native because it exhibits that "cultural bias" of kinship and interconnectedness as identified by LeAnne Howe.

Similarly, Silko's *Yellow Woman*, for the most part, is an amalgamation of Laguna Pueblo oral tradition and personal family history deeply rooted in Laguna Pueblo landscape and ways of knowing that define Silko as a storyteller and shape kinship memory in this particular text. Silko's memoir seeks to reassert the vitality of Laguna oral tradition. Many of the stories are told through the voices of her family members and are tied to distinct Laguna geographic locations. Besides the narrative itself, the memoir incorporates photographs of Laguna landscape and tribal members which serve as Laguna sites of memory as well. And again, although Laguna-Pueblo specific, Silko's text also exhibits the "cultural bias." Therefore, kinship memory constructed by Joy Harjo, Sterlin Harjo, and Alexander Posey is distinct from kinship memories

constructed by Momaday and Silko as they are informed by Creek culture and Creek identity as defined by the authors.

Because relationality is at the core of kinship memory, it functions as a method for remembering and/or reconstructing Indigenous identity and peoplehood. Kinship memory is a form of action, not passive nostalgic remembering, and a fulfillment of responsibility to facilitate continuity. It is central to Indigenous nationhood and decolonization as an expression of “continuity that encompasses resistance while moving beyond it to an active expression of the living relationship between the People and the world” (Justice 150). What Allen expresses about blood memory partially applies to kinship memory as well. Allen insists that “the contemporary Indian writer renders himself coincident with indigenous ancestors and with indigenous history – and makes available to readers both that indigenous past and his contemporary identity as indigenous – through strategies of narrative remembering and transgenerational address” (Allen, “Blood (and) Memory” 101). Kinship memory facilitates such narrative technique. However, in addition to implying aligning with the ancestors, it also includes accountability before future generations. Like blood memory, it is determined by cultural experience relying on oral traditions and tribal history. As product of the collective, it is evoked through creative process and influenced by both individual and collective narratives. It is thus fluid and represents the bidirectional relationship between individual and collective memories. It reflects collective cultural and historic knowledge and assists in re-constructing Indigenous identity while simultaneously functioning as resistance to the mainstream narrative of erasure. It may manifest in cultural artifacts, geographic sites, Indigenous bodies, and other types of texts of cultural significance.

I intend to look at the function of kinship memory in the texts under consideration on the levels of the individual and the communal, and also consider how it may function as a counter-memory revisionary to the mainstream narrative. I will argue that on the level of the individual,

kinship memory assists in constructing individual identity, kinship, and sense of belonging to a specific group of people. For instance, Sterlin Harjo feels a sense of belonging through traditional Muscogee-Creek hymns that serve as a communal body of knowledge. The hymns foster interconnectedness between individuals and the community, and past and present generations. On the communal level, as a social and cultural construct, kinship memory represents beliefs and values of a given community that reflect its cultural core, help build its cultural identity, and serve as a means of cultural continuity. Simultaneously, it is an exercise of sovereignty as the community acts as a determining agent of what becomes internalized by kinship memory. One might consider, for example, the case of Alexander Posey's work: the community of Native scholars claims that *The Fus Fixico Letters* are vital for Creek literary and cultural history, thus giving it memorial force as a site of memory. While some tribal members are still skeptical because of Posey's work for the Dawes Commission and his land speculations, such scholars as Littlefield and Womack argue that Posey was misunderstood and urge for his inclusion in the tribally-significant studies.

The relationship of the individual to communal memory warrants further investigation. The individual and communal levels intersect as individuals (particularly storytellers) reflect kinship memories and incorporate them into personal memories and experiences while also contributing to the general pool of tribal memories from which other community members can draw. Experiences of individual bodies become communal experiences and vice versa; communal experiences are reimagined and become internalized by individual members. The relationship between individual and collective memory is bidirectional: the individual is capable of remembering himself from within the group, yet the group memory persists through individual memories (Halbwachs 40). Through such memories the group gains continuity as the group memory is incorporated into individual memories from generation to generation. Sturken differentiates personal memory from cultural memory and from history, yet acknowledges



fluidity of cultural and personal memories; boundaries between the categories can blur and allow one to penetrate the other or even change categories. She explains that memory objects and memories themselves that originally belong to an individual can move into the realm of cultural memories if their meaning is re-ascribed as socially valuable within a different context. She proves that “personal memories can sometimes be subsumed into history, and elements of cultural memory can exist in concert with historical narratives” by giving an example of survivors of traumatic historical events who, with passing of time, have trouble differentiating their personal memories from those constructed by popular culture (*Tangled Memories* 5-6). I claim that examples of such fluidity can be found in Sterlin Harjo’s, Joy Harjo’s, and Alexander Posey’s works and are culturally specific.

Annette Portillo’s work, *Sovereign Stories and Blood Memories*, is useful to this aspect of my research as well, although she relies on the term of blood memory. In her work, Portillo expands the conversation about Indigenous women’s autobiographical writing by applying the concept of blood memory and contesting that the works she examines are “intricately tied to land and bodies where communal histories are excavated from intersecting colonial spaces and narratives” (2). She claims that “blood memories are tied to the body and provide indigenous-centered ways of experiencing one’s history” (2). Portillo argues that Indigenous memoirs she investigates in her book recuperate memories of ancestral identity that are “rooted within the landscapes and geographies of the body as a place and space that is distinct from national topographical maps” (4). As discussed above, considering Indigenous autobiographical works from this perspective draws closer attention to the role of the narrator/storyteller and what impact they have on the memories being preserved and transmitted. She claims that such memoirs serve as a “form of survivance for their communities” (7). Although Portillo implements blood memory in productive ways that allow her to discuss ancestral memories and communal histories that inform Indigenous identities, I see a need for different terminology that would allow us to focus

the discussion on relationality on a broader spectrum rather than the idea of American Indian authenticity, as well as take into account that communal memory is a socially constructed notion.

I want to build upon Portillo's claim that individual bodies contain communal memories and propose to consider further how individual and kinship memories come into conversation, one often becoming the other. This is significant in the context of Indigenous misrepresentation and cultural erasure. Such works as the ones under discussion not only serve as creative sites of memory that preserve stories ignored or erased by American nation myths and US-state monuments, but validate individual experiences as part of the collective and assert presence of Indigenous bodies in both national history of tribes these works represent and American history. These bodies carry the connection between oral tradition and geographical sites of memory, especially the ones that are no longer accessible due to the establishment of U.S. National monuments.

In addition, I argue, the narratives constructed with kinship memory make revisions to the American settler-colonial mnemonic narrative. Peter Meusbürger et al., who focus on the geographical aspect of cultural memories, claim that "the rise of a self-consciously postmodern, postcolonial, and multicultural society seems to have reanimated memory as a social, cultural, and political force with which to challenge, if not openly reject, the founding myths and historical narratives that have hitherto given shape and meaning to established national and imperial identities" (3). Indigenous sites of memory act as such a cultural and political revisionary force. They form what Michel Foucault calls counter-memories. According to Lipsitz, who further expanded the term, counter memory focuses on the local and the personal and attempts to make interventions into the larger history by offering new perspectives to revisit historic narratives. As Lipsitz posits, counter-memory is a "reconstitution of [history]" (227). In Indigenous works, counter-memory functions as a narrative tool that allows writers, artists, and filmmakers to construct alternative histories counteracting the dominant mainstream mnemonic narratives of

exclusion and erasure. I find it important to let the authors speak for themselves as when it comes to Native American nations, the local and the personal too often remains unheard. That is why this project intended to focus on the self-definitions the texts under consideration offer. While Indigenous histories have common experiences and tendencies and exploring pan-Indian movements and tendencies can be fruitful, these histories are also very tribally-specific and vary Native nation to nation. Acknowledging these differences is vital as it then effectively revises the gross generalizations about American Indian experiences that still perpetuate American public knowledge of history. Sturken's theory as to the processes of memorialization and forgetting being culturally coded (in other words, culturally specific) carries special significance to Indigenous memory in the context of post-colonial studies. Memory of an event is equated with experience, while forgetting is perceived as loss or negation of experience. If memory is perceived as a process of retrieving origins, forgetting is then posited as an act of misrecognition; thus, "[r]emembering becomes a process of achieving closer proximity to wholeness, of erasing forgetting" ("Narratives of Recovery" 243). In the context of colonization, where cultural erasure is performed through forced assimilation, remembering is asserting cultural presence, perseverance, and Native epistemologies. All three texts under investigation construct images of Native people in general and the Creeks in particular as intelligent, present, and culturally perseverant agents, images which negotiate the stereotypical portraits of Indigenous peoples that permeate historic and popular memory of the mainstream. Looking at the relationships and interactions of individual memories and communal memories within a given social structure and outside of its boundaries with those belonging to a different social group is important in order to understand how sites of memory emerge and what function they serve. It is important to note that this study focuses on the texts under consideration as sites of kinship memory. Although other terms have been used such as blood memory (discussed earlier) and re-memory (the term coined by Toni Morrison in her *Beloved*), I give preference to kinship memory because, as explained earlier, it foregrounds an important Indigenous value of kinship (the entire universe is viewed

through kinship), as well as credits Indigenous authors agency; it is not a form of passive remembering, but action aimed at facilitating continuity. In addition, I claim that as a form of action, kinship memory may perform as countermemory when it is revisionary to American national mythology. It is not solely a countermemory, however, as it suggests more than just resistance to colonialism, and its primary function is to serve as a mnemonic device for the community.

## STRUCTURE

Chapter one of the dissertation will discuss Alexander Posey's *The Fus Fixico Letters*. *The Fus Fixico Letters* present opinions of fictional characters who become the embodiment of the cultural and political changes in the community undergoing allotment. I argue that with the memorial force ascribed to them by the community of Native Studies scholars, the collected letters perform as a site of memory of the Creeks at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century capturing the state of the Native nation during one of the most detrimental Federal Indian policies. The characters of the letters are very closely based on real historic figures and discuss actual historic events and political movements both within the tribe and in the US. I argue that the letters serve as a site of Creek kinship memory because they preserve a plethora of cultural realia, contain multiple references to oral tradition, and capture tribal landscape and Creek-English dialect. Furthermore, Posey subverts the western genre of letters to the editor to explore the issues important to his people at the beginning of the twentieth century. Posey's style of writing points to a secure Creek identity. The letters are executed in Muscogee-Creek style and tradition, representing multiple voices of full-blooded tribal members. They are essentially the voice of the community, which allows me to consider them as kinship memory. While critiquing the political situation Creeks found themselves in, Posey managed to recreate the performative aspect of tribal oral tradition. *The Fus Fixico Letters* perform as the site of memory that not only captures the historic past (in this case the turbulent time of allotment), but also cultural aspects of the Muscogee-Creek. These

writings allow us to ‘visit’ historic events, but also the people that lived through them (one can consider fictional characters of the letters as collective of the Muscogee-Creeks). The Indigenous storyteller is of great significance as the one that lives through the experiences, interprets the memories, and allows them to continue; as an active agent of present and participant in the future-making. It is the image of the Indigenous person that is of primary interest in *The Fus Fixico Letters*, the educated intellectual, who reads Iliad and leads an active political life. This image counters the artificially constructed narrative of the submissive, primitive, and vanishing Indian. The letters portray tribal members as active participants in the contemporary world who take agency, or at least attempt to do that, over their life. In such way, the memories preserved in the text serve as countermemory to the narrative of erasure and stereotypical portrayal of Indigenous peoples perpetuated by American settler-colonial mythology.

Chapter two of the dissertation will focus on Sterlin Harjo’s documentary *This Maybe the Last Time* in which the filmmaker investigates his grandfather’s disappearance and the powerful histories of Native American songs that have united Indigenous communities. The documentary meshes together Sterlin Harjo’s own recollections and narrative with interviews with various members of his community, personal stories with the ones that have become an expression of kinship memory. I will argue that the hymns discussed in Harjo’s film, as well as the documentary itself, function as a mnemonic device which defines kinship, reflects perseverance, and fosters cultural continuity of the community. Through the film, Harjo explores and documents his relationship to his immediate family as well as their place in the larger community and preserves communal cultural heritage and epistemology. The hymns are sites of memory that help community members define their identity. In addition, the site of memory constructed in the documentary works as a countermemory as it invites reconsideration of historical and cultural pasts, both mainstream understanding of it and the Muscogee-Creek one, by not only uncovering

the Indigenous truth, but through exercise of visual sovereignty<sup>3</sup>. While learning more about his grandfather's story as well as the hymns, Harjo's documentary uncovers memories that define his familial and communal relationships. In addition, the hymns were instrumental in forming Harjo's identity as a tribal member. The songs function as a body of cultural knowledge, which also lends insight into how they are a site of memory. Harjo points out, the songs are at times individual, at times communal, and at times both. He stresses that although documenting the past, tribal songs define the present through intergenerational ties, which are integral to kinship memory. Additionally, the documentary revises the mainstream music and historic narrative by uncovering the history of Muscogee-Creek hymns and asserting Indigenous presence and adaptability.

Chapter three of the dissertation will investigate Joy Harjo's memoir *Crazy Brave* (2012). I will argue that Harjo's memoir constructs a site of kinship memory as it weaves a complex web of kinship and personal memories, allowing the narrator to shape her individual identity by establishing her relationships with ancestors, her surroundings, the spiritual realm, and her inner self, but also allowing her readers to do the same through Harjo's experiences as a storyteller, to which they can relate. The multilayering characterizes Harjo's memoir as she tells not only the story of her personal experiences as a Creek and as an Indigenous woman, but also stories of her ancestors and peers, family members, historic events, members of other Native nations, and others, which characterizes kinship memory. She simultaneously reflects, fosters, and establishes kinship among the stories she tells as well as with her audience. *Crazy Brave* stresses relationality, the idea of the individual defined through a variety of relationships, including

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<sup>3</sup> I employ Michelle Raheja's definition of the term visual sovereignty, which identifies it as "a way of reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass media" ("Reading" 1164). She explains that by employing visual sovereignty, "filmmakers can deploy individual and community assertions of what sovereignty and self-representation mean and, through new media technologies frame more imaginative renderings of Native American intellectual and cultural paradigms" ("Reading" 1165).

kinship and relationship to the universe and all-that-is. This text exemplifies the fluidity of individual and communal memories, and Harjo refers to such sites of memory as the painting of her great grandfather to help shape her voice as a Creek. Similar to Alexander Posey and Sterlin Harjo, in her work, Joy Harjo creates connections to other sites of Indigenous memory, both metaphorical and geographical. Establishing these ties allows Harjo to identify as Creek. Harjo negotiates her individual identity through communal mnemonic narratives and suggests that is the primary way to read her work. Harjo does not necessarily shape memory for her tribe, but takes on the role of a traditional storyteller who transmits kinship memory, thus allowing us to explore the relationship between the Indigenous body and sites of kinship memory. At the same time, the personal memories of her childhood experiences in Oklahoma, her education at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and life in New Mexico create narratives that challenge the Euro-American portrayal of the time period and locations Harjo addresses, thus working as counter-memories. Harjo fosters specific Creek kinship memory by invoking her tribal ties, Creek history and culture, but also engages in intertribal kinship memory as she recollects her experiences as an Indigenous person in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that she shares with other Native people regardless of their tribal belonging. She contributes to the shaping of an inter-tribal generational memory, which becomes another form of kinship memory where kinship is defined through common lived experiences, not blood. For instance, her recollections of IAIA turn the educational institution into a site of memory for Native American artists who attended it. It becomes a sign post of a generation of artists that gave rise to contemporary Native American art scene and those who followed. It is vital to note that Harjo locates herself in contemporaneity; she both points out that Indigenous traditions are living and not obsolete and focuses on her experiences with modernity. Due to the memoir engaging historic issues, I suggest that the kinship memory it forges is revisionary to the American settler-colonial mnemonic narrative concerning Indigenous peoples. Harjo subverts the genre of memoir to make it contain

Muscogee-Creek culture and beliefs, both tribal and familial, which in its turn makes her work a potential site of memory that aims to counteract the mainstream denial of Indigenous cultures.

The three authors subvert Euro-American genres of memoir, documentary, and letters to editor to make them Indigenous. They seem to follow the “realist nationalism” idea that Scott Lyons calls for in his *X-Marks*, accepting the changes of the contemporary reality and adapting “tradition” to the new context. Contemporaneity and relevance to current contexts is important in the works under consideration. These works contain not only personal histories, but also reflect and help construct kinship memories for their community.

In many of his works, Womack stresses the importance of Indigenous-centered methodologies and the kind of writing that fosters Native tribal sovereignty. Applying kinship memory as a tool to investigate creative Native works allows us to focus on Indigenous values and ways of experiencing the universe. The works under consideration perform as agents of kinship memory taking control over tribal history and tribal representation. When elevated to the state of sites of memory, such creative works help tribes exercise intellectual and visual sovereignty and address the needs of their communities by preserving what the community deems important. The texts reflect Muskogee-Creek historical condition at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, while also recuperating some memories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and all clearly prove Posey’s claim in one of his *Fux Fixico* letters that “the Injin is civilized and aint extinct no more than a rabbit. He’s just beginning to feel his breakfast food” (Posey, 217). The cultural values and historic truths they reveal attest to cultural presence and continuity.



## CHAPTER II

### ALEXANDER POSEY'S *THE FUS FIXICO LETTERS* AS A SITE OF MEMORY

Donald Fixico posits that Alexander Posey is an example of American Indian genius and a vital part of the history of Indigenous intellectualism which has not been given due attention in mainstream thought. When discussing Creek national literature, it is important to explore Posey's work, which constituted short stories, poetry, journals, and *The Fus Fixico Letters* which are the focus of this chapter. Womack urges that Alexander Posey is vital when considering Creek literary history because his works "provide revolutionary narrative patterns with the potential to make us rethink how we approach Indian Studies" ("Nature Journals" 49). Indeed, Posey is an important literary figure to consider when discussing Native American dialect writing, political engagement, humor as a literary tool, oral tradition, as well as journalism. I would add that Posey was a skillful storyteller of his time, and it is possible to consider his storyteller persona with the interpretations it provided a vital site of Creek memory. Because Posey vividly captured the Creek nation at the turn of the twentieth century and heavily relied on Creek oral tradition, which is a form of preservation of collective memory, I suggest his works to be considered a site of kinship memory. In this chapter, I propose to explore how *The Fus Fixico Letters* become a site of memory for the Creek nation. I aim to investigate several issues:

1) relationship of the author embodied in the fictional omniscient narrator of *Fus Fixico* with his community; 2) what *The Fus Fixico Letters* reveal about the Creek nation, what self-definitions of Creek identity they provide, and how they portray the Creek culture; 3) what images the letters create in Creek memory and how they serve as an expression of kinship memory; and 4) how they exercise Creek sovereignty.

*The Fus Fixico Letters* capture the political climate of the Creek Nation and Indian Territory in general at the turn of the century through reports from a fictional newspaper correspondent Fus Fixico who writes about conversations of his full blood Creek friends. Fus Fixico mainly reports what he overhears from the conversations of Creek full-bloods, such as Kono Harjo, Hotgun, Wolf Warrior, and Tookpafka Micco. Most of these conversations reflect on the US Indian policy of the time, but characters also chat about local and global events, eat traditional Creek foods such as sofky, and talk about Creek ways. Fus himself often complains about his personal life and struggles that sometimes prevent him from writing to the newspaper more often, such as bad weather or poor crops. According to Womack, in his work, Posey “attempts to dramatize the smallest details of daily life in regards to exploring their Creek significance” (Red 54). Characters in the letters are heavily based on real people, and most of the names refer to historic figures.

While discussing the nature of sites of memory, Szpociński suggests that metaphorical sites of memory that connote spatiality are rather important, yet often overlooked. He argues that, “these, in the name of people (such as the Margrave of Greater Poland), events (September 1939) and cultural artifacts (The Last Supper), can become – like archeological sites – a source of never ending search, continuously revealing new, overlooked or underappreciated aspects of the past” (249). This seems to be the case with Posey’s *The Fus Fixico Letters*, and the work carried out by Posey’s biographers such as Daniel Littlefield and Carol Hunter, who compiled his works and provided detailed contextual and historic notes for them, suggests that Posey’s writings can be

considered a site of memory for the Creek nation. The amount of culturally-specific information that scholars have been able to excavate from the writings is overwhelming.

*The Fus Fixico Letters* were written over the course of six years and reflect Posey's political views and their evolution as well as disillusionment with US Indian policies. I agree with Szeghi that despite the fact that Posey wrote letters for his contemporaries to achieve specific political ends, they still possess contemporary value by inviting "modern readers to sit around the fire with Fus Fixico's friends and listen in on their discussions about how to respond to the changes being forced upon them" (5). By placing full-blood traditionalists at the center of the letters, "Posey largely eschewed a direct, didactic approach to political activism and showcased the oral exchange of ideas and the process of coming to terms with political realities" (Szeghi 6). Although Posey himself was not a full-blood and not a traditionalist, he sympathized with the latter to an extent. This choice of characters is important because on the one hand, it works against the stereotyping of the Indigenous body by reimagining what it means to be a full-blood traditionalist, and on the other hand, for the Creek audience, adds credibility to characters' opinions and creates complex Indigenous personas who active participants of their present. These personas become the vessel for national culture and interpreters of the cultural, political, and economic changes occurring in the Creek nation at the moment. Womack posits that by means of his writing, Posey actively shaped the political landscape of the Creeks, not merely commented on it (*Red* 147-8). Womack praises the overt political discussion generated by *The Fus Fixico Letters* as unique, and challenges us to find equivalents in contemporary Native literature, which tends to focus more on personal recovery and healing stories or homing-in plots.

#### ALEXANDER POSEY'S LITERARY AND HISTORIC PERSONA

If one is to consider Alexander Posey as a site of memory, one has to discuss his historic and literary persona. Posey is viewed by many as a figure with controversial legacy because of

his work for the Dawes Commission and his land speculations during the allotment era. When it comes to his literary works, scholars unanimously acknowledge his contribution to Creek national literary in *The Fus Fixico Letters*, yet often cannot reconcile much of his poetry with his journalism style. Hence, Posey has often been portrayed as split between the two worlds or an assimilationist, which, however, contradicts the literary personas he created in *The Fus Fixico Letters* and other newspaper publications on vital matters of Indian Territory.

Posey did some important work for the Creek nation, although overshadowed by his land speculations. In his political career, he was a representative of the Wind clan in the Creek National Council and the secretary at the Sequoyah Constitutional Convention. He is believed to have drafted most of the constitution for the Native American State the Convention proposed, although rejected by Congress. In addition, he served as the director of a Creek orphanage and was widely acknowledged for founding the first daily newspaper published by an American Indian (*Eufala Indian Journal*, 1901).

Yet, despite his accomplishments, Posey is much criticized for assisting the Dawes Commission in compiling the Dawes rolls for the Creek nation. The Dawes Act met quite a bit of opposition in many Native nations, especially the Five Civilized Tribes.<sup>4</sup> Kenneth H. Bobroff suggests that while some Native Americans felt that fee patents to their lands would indeed protect them, “the overwhelming majority of Indians opposed dividing tribal lands and breaking up the tribal system” (1604). He provides that less than five percent of sixty seven American Indian tribes who had the choice accepted allotment between 1830 and 1880. Bobroff posits that “despite Indian agents' reports of enthusiastic approval, many tribes opposed allotment both before and after passage of the Dawes Act” (1605). Many Creeks, especially traditionalists, viewed Posey’s work for the commission as betrayal. Posey considered himself a progressive.

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed discussion of Allotment, see Otis, D. S., et al. *The Dawes Act and the Allotment of Indian Lands*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1973.

He, along with some other Creek members, considered allotment inevitable and the best way to survive Euroamerican encroachment on Native lands. As Littlefield puts it, he made the choice “to bow to the inevitable and make the best of a bad bargain” (203). Although he deeply sympathized with and respected the traditionalists, he considered rejection of the allotments misguided. He travelled with the Dawes Commission throughout the Creek Nation helping it enter Creeks into the Dawes tribal rolls, so that they could receive allotments. They were looking for the so-called lost Creeks, who had been recorded before, but were missing. The commission was hoping to enroll as many of them as possible. Posey documented some of his work with the commission in his journals. For instance, he reported on his visit with Chitto Harjo, “Crazy Snake,” leader of the Snakes, the conservative Creek faction. When Chitto discovered the true purpose of Posey’s visit, procuring information as to the lost Creeks, according to the notes Posey took, he had much to say as to the issues of the Muscogee Nation, but Posey’s notes are quite obscured. He struck a lot of portions and seemed to edit heavily. Matthew Sivils suggests that Posey wanted to obscure some of the opinions Chitto expressed about tribal leaders because they might have concerned Posey directly (Posey and Sivils 6). Chitto is said to have accused Posey of having “seduced him with the Creek tongue of his mother and betrayed him with the lying tongue of his white father” (Littlefield 203). On their visit, Chitto did not invite the visitors to break bread with him, which spoke volumes about Chitto’s distrust of Posey (Posey and Sivils 7). Posey drowned at the age of thirty-five in his favorite Oktahutche (“Sand Creek”), and while his friends and family romanticized his death, many Creek tribal members believed it was no accident that he drowned in the river that was home of the Tie-Snake associated with chaos (Womack, *Red* 133). Although many of his writings, especially *The Fus Fixico Letters*, were critical of the changes happening in Indian Territory and sympathetic with the conservative Creeks, his work for the Dawes Commission and his work as a real estate agent selling surplus Muscogee allotments to US citizens are at odds with the voices in his works and are difficult to explain.

Similar controversies can be found in Posey's literary career, which began with Posey writing poetry at Bacone college. Although Posey did publish as a poet and gained some acclaim in his time, much of his poetry was unoriginal. Sivils suggests that the large majority of Posey's poetry "remained rooted in romantic clichés inspired by his emulation of poets such as Shelley, Burns, Whittier, and Longfellow" (Posey and Sivils 29). He further explains that "virtually all of [Posey's] poems address aspects of the natural world, but the nature found in these works exists as an abstract concept rather than the concrete world of Indian Territory" (Posey and Sivils 29). Yet, his journals, for instance, are entirely different. Womack claims that they exhibit thorough knowledge of Creek country and its landscape; detailed descriptions of nature and seasons in Posey's journal prove him an authentic Creek writer. Womack explains that "to write effectively as a Native writer, at least to write toward the end of contributing to an intellectual discourse within one's own tribe, means knowing something about home" ("Nature Journals" 51). Knowledge of home, which can be viewed as kinship memory acquired by the author through his relationships to the surrounding people and the landscape, defines Posey's and consequently Fus Fixico's Creek identity (as will be discussed later in the chapter). As Kosmider duly notes, "the letters link Posey to his Creek heritage as Fus" (4). This establishes the characters' sense of belonging which in its turn assists the readers in asserting theirs.

Additionally, much of Posey's prose writing exhibits a plethora of references to Creek stories. Posey showed particular interest in Creek oral tradition. He saw the stories that abound in the Creek community, especially the ones about Wolf and Rabbit, as a means to understand Creek worldview. He published several stories during his lifetime, such as "A Creek Fable" in *Indian Journal* (Kosmider 65). He even discussed publishing a collection of Creek tales and "having enough material for a thousand of pages" (Littlefield 257). Kosmider argues that "Posey felt a powerful connection to Creek stories – he felt their importance was so integral to his culture that he sought to record them, to make them accessible to a larger audience" (65). His retelling of the

Creek oral tradition shows his understanding of its performative aspect and his understanding of the role of the storyteller and the relationship of the latter and the audience. Kosmider further points out that in his work with Creek stories, Posey was able to capture “the dynamic aspects of verbal performance – the multiple ‘voices’ embedded in a story, including the teller’s voice and his or her commentary and evaluative remarks, the various characters’ voices, and the audience’s anticipated reaction to the story” (66). One can trace the influence of oral tradition on Posey’s writing in *The Fus Fixico Letters* as well, which are multivocal and exhibit characteristics identified by Kosmider above. This influence will be discussed later in this chapter.

Based on his works, one might argue that Posey often appeared self-contradictory and politically ambivalent. Yet, if we consider his persona as a site of Creek memory, Posey encompassed the ambivalences and complexities of his time and the changes that were happening to members of his nation. Regardless of his personal choices, Posey’s writing is rooted in Creek culture and shows his nuanced understanding of the Creek community and the changes they were undergoing at the time. These are what the reader will find memorialized in *The Fus Fixico Letters*. I agree with Annette Portillio who points out that sometimes “one’s very existence and ancestral ties embody sovereignty through blood memories” (11), although my preference lies with kinship memory.

#### *THE FUS FIXICO LETTERS AS MIRROR OF THE COMMUNITY*

Craig Womack urges scholars to consider in their literary studies what the texts they examine do for the community, what value they hold, and how they contribute to the community’s exercise of sovereignty. In *The Fus Fixico Letters*, Posey held the Creek community as his primary audience and wanted to address the immediate concerns of his contemporary readers. Most of the topics that surface in the letters are the issues that would have interested the Creeks at the time, on the larger scale, issues like statehood and Creek chief elections, as well as

everyday life issues such as weather. Kosmider argues that “Posey’s literary success is partly achieved by establishing comic dialogue within a familiar cultural setting . . . Within this traditional atmosphere, talk occurs – talk that mirrors and reinforces tribal solidarity” (80-81). Posey’s characters speak the language most familiar to the Creeks, reference places and cultural matters immediate to them, and incorporate elements of the oral tradition that represent the essence of Creek culture. In other words, *The Fus Fixico Letters* capture the state of the Creek nation at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and, therefore, may serve as a Creek site of memory today as they memorialize people, events, and values of the community and become a vehicle for kinship memory.

As discussed earlier, kinship memory encompasses values important for the community that allow it to build and maintain a national identity. Among such values Posey captures in the letters is importance of listening to multiple voices; the way Posey fashioned *The Fus Fixico Letters* has a dialogic communal character. While Posey tried out several different characters in *The Fus Fixico Letters*, they eventually developed into primarily his reports on conversations between four full-blood Creeks, Hotgun, Tookpafka Micco, Wolf Warrior, and Kono Harjo. These conversations take place mostly around meal times, while men are smoking pipes, or on special feasts. Lowe indicates that these four-way conversations mirror the busk ground, or the communal village square (51), thus also pointing to another possible Creek site of memory, a geographical one in this case. Lowe points to the special significance of this dialogic space as it is considered “communal and ceremonial space for contest and exchange” and stresses the communal nature of the discourse constructed in *The Fus Fixico Letters* (51). Furthermore, as Kosmider suggests, *The Fus Fixico Letters* embody the talk of the Creek community, in this case the full-blood side of it. Although it is predominantly Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco who speak and Wolf Warrior and Kono Harjo who listen, they all participate at least to some degree in the conversation which is an attempt to sort out the changes happening in Indian Territory in the



complicated and troublesome era of allotment. Such manner of conversation points to speaking and careful listening as equally important and both active ways of participating in a discussion. As Kosmider points out, “[Characters’] conversations mimic the way tribal affairs are talked about and discussed among people, with no one person dominating the entire discussion. . . . There is no single distinctive, authorial voice that speaks, but multiple voices participate in the discussions” (Kosmider 97). In such manner, by listening to and reporting multiple voices, Posey mirrors Creek oral tradition. He recreates its performative aspect and uses it as “an effective method to critique the political circumstances of Indian Territory, enabling his full-blooded characters to deride and ridicule the nefarious dealings of white politicians and federal officials as they legislated laws that overruled tribal governments, eroding their close-knit community atmosphere” (Kosmider 97). The power of *The Fus Fixico Letters* is in the comingling of Creek voices which reflect, often with rather strong opinions, on the territorial and tribal events and people. Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco often mirror each other’s viewpoints and finish each other’s sentences, which “makes their words particularly amusing and demonstrates the importance of multiple voices that evolve from Creek verbal tradition” (Kosmider 84). Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco and their friends are collective characters representing the struggles of all Native people, “their talk is the talk of all tribal peoples struggling to survive Euroamerican domination” (Kosmider 98). Such foregrounding of Creek voices and the conversation as important for Creek national identity points to the dialogic character of Creek kinship memory as well as importance of the individual participants of the conversation, i.e. storytellers, in its fashioning.

*The Fus Fixico Letters* are focused primarily on the changes that were happening in Indian Territory at the time of allotment, on how the community was affected by these changes, and are rather political. Fus Fixico is not one of the characters that is captured by exploration of his own identity; neither are Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco. None of these characters doubt who

they are despite their differing political views. It is clear that they are rooted in Creek culture and therefore do not feel the need to find it and reimagine it to make it their own (unlike many characters of contemporary Indigenous writings that have felt disconnected from their ancestors and their cultural heritage). Therefore, the letters zoom in on the immediate needs of the community and its political and historic situation, while the characters of the letters become collective cultural figures of the Creek nation. They are the embodiment of the communal conversation happening at the turn of the century. Yet, they are not passive transmitters, but actively participate in the conversation by providing their personal interpretations and side notes to the news and events with which the community members are likely to be already familiar. Posey's characters do not merely retell what they have heard, but actively shape the conversation, foregrounding certain events while omitting others. In such manner, these characters take on roles of traditional storytellers.

Krupat points out that in Pueblo culture, a storyteller is the one who “participates . . . in sustaining the group” (“The Dialogic” 59). It seems this definition might be appropriate for many Indigenous cultures, including the Creeks. Although a traditional storyteller will never claim any stories as their own and for the most part accumulates and reports tribal oral tradition, he/she does have an influence on the shaping of the story and creates his or her version of a given story depending on the given context and communal needs. Certain versions of the same story become associated with their storytellers, but as Krupat argues, still “remain available for other tellings” fashioned by other storytellers (“The Dialogic” 59). For instance, in her *Storyteller*, Silko explains about her Aunt Susie and Aunt Alice as storyteller that they used certain words and phrases that made the stories identifiably theirs (7) and at times they “would tell me stories they had told me before but with changes in details or descriptions. . . . There were even stories about the different versions of stories and how they imagined these differing versions come to be” (227). As Silko explains, storytellers may often make commentary on the stories or provide their

own interpretations based on their own lived experiences. Then, the persona of the storyteller becomes ever more significant as the storyteller can then be viewed as a vessel of kinship memory. Yet, one can also observe fluidity between individual and kinship memories. On the one hand, through the creative process of retelling the memories of members of the community, the storyteller internalizes these memories making them their own. On the other hand, the storyteller also contributes personal interpretations based on memories of individual experiences to the stories that may survive as part of the community's oral or written history. In such a way, what N. Scott Momaday terms "living memory" and the oral tradition are embodied in the persona of the storyteller. For Momaday, Ko-sahn, one of the elders, became the person where two of these modes of remembering were brought together (*The Man* 42-3). David Murray observes that bringing attention to the role of the storyteller in written texts employing oral tradition was one of Momaday's significant contributions. In such texts, the storyteller "becomes not anonymous but both a creative individual and part of a larger whole which precedes him" (Murray 81). Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco, as well as Fus Fixico himself, as storytellers and vessels of memory, creatively provide interpretations of culture and history while adding their own opinions and experiences. Through their storyteller personas, these characters provide readers access to memories otherwise inaccessible, point to the importance of these memories and allow for their continuity. Through the bodies of the storytellers, the reader is able to internalize such memories as part of their own history and national identity, as does Joy Harjo in her memoir *Crazy Brave*, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

When discussing how *The Fus Fixico Letters* functions as a metaphorical site of memory for the Creek community, reflective of the community and simultaneously a mnemonic device for it, one has to pay special attention to the language, as Posey wrote the letters in Creek English dialect. In a way, through *The Fus Fixico Letters*, Posey constructed a metaphorical monument to Creek English as a part of Creek national identity. The general belief is that dialects are inferior,

so to say, broken English, as they do not adhere to the norms of standard English, but exhibit differences in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. A rather widespread mainstream belief about Native American English dialects in Posey's era was that American Indians were incapable of learning "proper English." English was not Posey's first language as he spoke only Creek until his teenage years, when his father insisted that he switch entirely to English. As evidenced by his numerous writings, Posey had a masterful conduct of the English language, and he chose to write in the Creek English dialect with a specific purpose in mind. Lowe argues that "Posey's columns display a pride in Creek English dialect, along with an awareness that dialect is rich, humorous, laden with metaphor, and therefore, tactile and appealing" (51). He explains that by taking pride in the dialect, Posey subverts the negative stereotype and transforms it "from an oppressive signifier of otherness into a pride-inspiring prism" (52), which allows *The Fus Fixico Letters* to work as a countermemory to the mainstream faulty belief in lack of Native American intelligence. Yet, at the same time, dialect serves as a "protective cloak" that allows Posey to act as a critic freely (Lowe 52). On the one hand, someone who speaks in dialect is less likely to be taken seriously, yet on the other hand, is more likely to reach a wider audience as readers are less prone to take offense in such writing, especially combined with humorous tone.

More importantly, Posey's use of dialect clearly establishes the Creek nation along with other Native nations of Indian Territory as his primary audience and addressing their needs as his primary purpose. (In fact, according to Carol Hunter who wrote the Introduction *The Fus Fixico Letters*, at the height of his popularity, Posey was offered to expand to the national level by incorporating commentary on American national issues and refused as he wanted to keep it local and tribe-specific and thought that the all-American audience would not be able to appreciate his references to local issues and characters (Posey 40). Womack explains that the language of Posey's dialect is immediately familiar to Muscogee Creek readers; it is the "one that resonates with the sights and sounds of Creek country" ("Nature Journals" 50). He insists that "it provides a

vehicle for Creek thought that is meaningful to a Creek audience. It deprioritizes outside discussion *about* Creeks in favour of dialogues within the community toward the end of an evolving Creek intellectual and cultural and political life” (“Nature Journals” 50). In addition, according to Littlefield, Posey’s use of Creek dialect, which his friend Charles Gibson called “este charte” English (or “red man” English), is also a way to work against misrepresentations of Indigenous dialects by white writers (Posey 16). Both Gibson and Posey condemned attempts of white writers to imitated Indian dialects. Posey wrote that such imitations “bear no resemblance to the real article” and was outraged with such cultural appropriation (qtd. in Posey 17).

Use of Creek dialect, along with reliance on oral tradition and Indian humor, to criticize the political atmosphere in Indian Territory makes Posey’s persona letters innovative and unique, yet also distinctly Indigenous. Kosmider posits that they are exactly what helps Posey develop his distinctive voice(s) because “he incorporates specific elements, such as Creek and black dialects, verbal arts, and trickster figures, into his work, all of which are derived from Creek verbal tradition” (2). According to Womack, Posey exhibits unique phrasing in *The Fus Fixico Letters*, an “ability to turn around clichés or well-known aphorisms by subverting them with Creek English, and to represent in dialogue really unusual expressions” (“Nature Journals” 56).

While discussing Posey’s use of language, I find it important to note his references to Creek cultural realia, the everyday details and things that might seem irrelevant, but in fact constitute a vital part of Creek identity and thus Creek kinship memory. *The Fus Fixico Letters* are grounded in Creek everyday life; they are filled with words and expressions of Creek-specific material things that Creek readers will easily detect and relate to. In letter 5, for example, Fus references a traditional way of fishing by adding the fish with roots of the devil’s shoestring plant (Posey 59-60). On many occasions, Posey’s characters speak of traditional food items, such as poke leaves in letter 20, which refer to pokeweed that was consumed in early spring. In the same letter, Hotgun is also concerned with the late heavy frost that devastated the vegetable

crops, so he had nothing left to eat except poke leaves. In letter 26, Tookpafka Micco mentions apusky sacks that were typical for Creek travelers because they could be easily tied to the saddle (Posey 119). Littlefield explains that apusky was “cold flour” produced from corn when it was about to turn hard and mixed with honey, which was added to water and drunk (Posey 111). Yet even a non-Native reader will notice, for instance, that sofky is important to Creek culture based on how concerned Posey’s characters are with it. Sofky (also spelled as sofkey or sofke, from the Creek word safke or osafke) is a traditional dish, usually a drink or a soup, of the five civilized tribes including the Creek nation. According to Wallace, it is almost always served at community gatherings and at homes whenever food is shared. It is considered an acquired taste as it happens to be quite sour. Because of its widespread everyday consumption and its role in social life and customs of the Creeks, many everyday items are related to sofky. In letter 16, for example, Fus Fixico mentions a sofky pestle which is used to pound corn in a wooden mortar (Posey 84). Such cultural realia describe the Creek way of life and traditions, which is the essence of kinship memory. *The Fus Fixico Letters* as a site of Creek kinship memory preserves this way of life by referencing everyday practices and allows contemporary readers to make vital connections between past and present thus fostering cultural continuity. After all, poke sallet exists even today, although not very widely known as it was considered food of poor people who had no other means of survival.

As oral tradition is a metaphorical site of memory of its own, there is a need to discuss Posey’s use of Creek oral tradition. On the one hand, it gives more credibility to Posey’s characters and appeals to his readers’ cultural background; yet on the other hand, by referencing Creek oral tradition, Posey is also preserving it for future generations. Womack summarizes the similarities between Creek oral tradition and Posey’s work: references to races where the less powerful wins, understatement, punning, reliance on the local landscape, and others (*Red* 157-166). References to traditional Creek stories fill the language of Posey’s characters. For instance,

when Fus Fixico discussed Porter's candidacy for chief in the upcoming Creek Chief elections, he makes a reference to a race when he says of Chief Porter, "So it's look like Chief Porter was lose ground bad like coyote when grey hounds was after him on the prairie" (Posey 85). Womack suggests that "each allusion is filtered so that it is rendered as a full-blood would think it and speak it and feel it" (*Red* 154). Posey incorporates many references to traditional trickster stories and his characters often act as tricksters. In addition, he uses a variety of themes common for Creek oral tradition to speak on contemporary challenges of the Creek nation. For instance, he refers to the image of bones picked clean, which is typical of the Creek oral tradition and can be traced back to the story of Buzzard and Rabbit. In this story, when Rabbit is ill, Buzzard offers to doctor him, but instead pecks at Rabbit until there is nothing left but a pile of bones (Womack, *Red* 160). In the letters, there are multiple references to the bones and the buzzard, even one of the caricatures, Charles J. Bonaparte, who investigated the Dawes Commission scandals, but in fact was powerless, is referred to as Bony Parts. The theme of the white man picking off the Indian, like Buzzard off Rabbit, until there is nothing left but the bare bones, without anyone noticing, is also rather prominent in the letters.

Another important characteristic of the Creek culture, and in fact of many Native nations, Fus Fixico letters commemorate is its sense of humor. It allows *The Fus Fixico Letters* to work as a countermemory to the stoic Indian stereotype perpetuated by Hollywood. The kind of humor and teasing Posey implements in *The Fus Fixico Letters* is similar to that in oral stories, which "enable people to cope with disruptive and potentially dangerous events," and helps Native peoples, and Creeks in particular, "to make sense of their world" (Kosmider 81-82). In *Custer Died for Your Sins*, Vine Deloria points out the importance of humor in Native discourse and that discussion of any problem is always saturated with it; yet, this aspect of Native cultures has been too often overlooked by scholars. Louis Littlecoon Oliver (Creek) points to humor being very characteristic of the Creek culture by stressing that Creeks "cannot discuss any serious matters

without allowing humor to intervene” (54). He writes that “where ever the Creeks meet, whether in twos, fours or a crowd, there will be chuckles, laughter, and at times roaring laughter” (54). Donald Fixico suggests that “for the suppressed Indian people of Indian Territory, [Posey’s] "Fus Fixico" letters provided humor and hope that better times were ahead” (55). Kosmider furthers that thought by claiming that “humor binds people together” and counteracts “bitter cultural memories wrought by colonization” (80). Humor allows Posey to discuss the terrible conditions of people in Indian Territory and the things that caused such circumstances freely. Kosmider identifies teasing as a vital element of Hotgun and Tookpafka’s ‘talk’ which allows them to playfully expose Euroamerican politics toward Native nations and makes their contributions valuable to their tribal members. Thus, the truth about white politics lies right underneath the surface of the characters’ jokes and is easily accessible while not seeming offensive. “Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco laugh to survive;” Kosmider argues, “they make jokes to renew themselves and others; their comic vision is to overcome erasure, denial, invisibility, and annihilation. They create humor to encircle and to contain the humiliation and the bitterness that being an Indian encompasses” (92). Some of these jokes are subtle, but Native audiences easily pick up on them and can relate.

As discussed earlier, land and geographical landmarks, i.e. geographical sites of memory, are of special importance to Indigenous nations. Oral tradition and now many written Indigenous texts are closely tied to tribal geographies. Metaphorical sites of memory such as the ones discussed here are inevitably connected to tribal landscapes reminding tribal members of their significance. Tribal land, the landscape of which contains tribal histories and sustains tribal cultures, is one of the essential components of kinship and vital elements of tribal sovereignty. Importance of place is one of the elements that defines tribal sites of memory.

Although Posey does not mention what could officially be considered geographical or other physical sites of Creek memory per se, *The Fus Fixico Letters* are closely tied to the Creek



landscape. Womack argues that Posey is distinctly a tribal author because of his ability “to write about the landscape of his own nation” (“Nature Journals” 50). Although acknowledging the value of contemporary Indigenous authors, Womack laments the pan-tribal direction much of Native literature has taken in recent years. He has reservations about literature that is “tribeless and placeless” and only “vaguely ‘Native American’” as, although it offers a safer and more comfortable reading experience for the non-native audience, it might do little for tribal nations themselves, who should be the primary audience of Native literary works, and tribal sovereignty. Womack urges for the particulars, the specifics, which will indeed create a world foreign to non-Native readers, but will encourage them to learn and explore. He points out that “locating characters in a specific time and place is the very thing that makes meaningful *both* an understanding of culture as well as the very human tendency to deviate from cultural norms” (“Nature Journals” 52). He underscores that it is vital for the tribal author’s integrity to be able to write about tribal land as it directly relates to the tribe’s exercise of sovereignty. He posits:

sovereignty depends on safeguarding jurisdiction and culture over a particular landscape guaranteed by treaty. The land is at the center of everything, not only the legal realm of federal Indian law but the imaginative world of contemporary Native fiction, drama, and poetry as well. Acts of the imagination can and should serve to define, protect, preserve, and renew tribal relationships to the landscapes of the respective sovereign nations of tribal writers. (“Nature Journals” 50-51)

Womack argues that Posey has a skill of specificity and “relating Creek landscape to broader issues of Creek culture and language” (“Nature Journals” 52). He points out that Posey’s writing shows his “commitment to basic competency in Muscogee Creek land knowledge through his ability to narrate the particulars of his Creek environment” (“Nature Journals” 54).

Posey's geographical realism is prominent in most of his writing including *The Fus Fixico Letters*. The letters are filled with local geographical references that ground events in specific locations with which community members can identify. These geographic connections have historic significance as they create a mnemonic map of the Indian Territory land. For instance, in letter 15, when discussing upcoming Creek chief elections and considering who would vote for which candidate, Posey mentions Tuskegee, the tribal town to which he belonged himself (Posey 80-81), and Coon Creek, a significant Creek freedman settlement:

Well, so I read in Injin Journal Charley Gibson was take exercise to run for Creek chief. Maybe so he was make Porter look like he was stand in the big road same as elm stump so wagon was had to go 'round him. All fullblood Injins on Shell Creek say they was vote for Charley Gibson, and lots a niggers on Coon Creek say they was support him, too, like blackjack posts under a big brush arbor. (Posey 80)

In this passage, the geographic specifics Posey provides tie together historic references with the land, politics, and traditional knowledge. Everything his characters report is rooted in the landscape; they exhibit thorough knowledge of the land, its flora and fauna, and its climate. Such writing creates a sense of place, which preserves and asserts the relationship between the tribe and the landscape significant for cultural continuity. If we excavate the passage above, we can find out more about the land itself and its characteristics. For instance, blackjack that Posey mentions when speaking about how the freedmen would vote is a scrub oak that grows in abundance in the hills surrounding Tuskegee (as explained by Littlefield in Posey 81). Womack argues that Posey uses "his knowledge of the specifics of these actual places as the jumping off point for his imagination" and keeps "his writing tied to the earth, through the concrete naming and description of places within the Creek Nation, as well as its families, town histories, and traditional narratives" ("Nature Journals" 59). He urges that such writing provides "clues as to what constitutes Creek critical contexts" ("Nature Journals" 59). Womack explains that such

writing “advances sovereignty through naming and describing concrete, recognizable places within tribal geographies and relating these to the practices of nationhood” (“Nature Journals” 59). Yet in the passage above, these practices also display some problematic racial segregation in the Creek nation. Although Posey’s writing foregrounds strong relationships to a particular landscape, it points to some unfavorable racial Creek attitudes. On the one hand, this passage shows Creek blacks’ ability to participate in Creek tribal politics and government through their right to vote. Yet on the other hand, it displays diminutive and discriminatory language. This passage (along with others that will be discussed later in the chapter) suggest that we consider the problematic political climate that formed in Indian Territory at the time that pushed the Creek nation toward some problematic practices of nationhood.

Vital historic events, Creek landscape, humor, cultural realia, social practices, and oral tradition discussed above are some of the integral parts of what constitutes kinship memory in *The Fus Fixico Letters*. They define Creek national identity at the turn of the century. It is crystallized in *The Fus Fixico Letters* as a site of memory, which provides an opportunity for contemporary tribal members to reconnect with past generations and develop a sense of kinship and belonging by internalizing the memories offered by the text as part of their cultural heritage.

## REVISING STEREOTYPES

Posey’s *The Fus Fixico Letters* also perform the revisionary function of countermemory, working against stereotypes perpetuated in mass media and portraying tribes as complex and sophisticated. It opposes mainstream romanticizing of Indians as victims and noble savages who are slowly vanishing into the past or assimilating into the melting pot of American culture. Instead, it depicts them as agents in Federal-Indian relations and nation building.

Some scholars have argued that Posey himself exhibited assimilationist tendencies to various degrees. For instance, Alexia Kosmider posits that one of Posey’s main characteristics is

biculturalism. Kosmider claims that Posey's work is so powerful because of the collisions and contradictions that permeate it. She insists that "Alex Posey's writing is a journey through conflicting cultural representations," and although his works do "reflect his people's struggle against colonialism, giving substance, authenticity, and power to his work[,] . . . bicultural tension floats just beneath the surface, erupting without warning onto the page" (Kosmider 2). Kosmider argues that Posey attempts "to negotiate dichotomous world-views" (2), which is obvious in his writing. Indeed, one has to admit that Posey was a complex and at times difficult figure to interpret, both in his literary career and political intentions (as discussed earlier in this chapter). His poetry almost makes one support the assimilationist theory about Posey as most of it is an imitation of European poetry and not his best writing. Even when he deals with Indigenous subject matter, he seems to romanticize it. His sympathetic treatment of traditionalists often exhibited much of European-like romanticizing of them. For instance, this can be seen in his poem "On the Capture and Imprisonment of Crazy Snake (January 1900)." He romanticized Chitto Harjo and the Snakes and their ability to defend so passionately what they believed. It is not only admiration one can see in Posey's poem, but some stereotyping as well:

Down with him! chain him! bind him fast!

Slam to the iron door and turn the key!

The one true Creek, perhaps the last

To dare declare, "You have wronged me!"

Defiant, stoical, silent,

Suffers imprisonment!

Such coarse black hair! such eagle eye!

Such stately mien!—how arrow-straight!

Such will! such courage to defy

The powerful makers of his fate!

A traitor, outlaw,—what you will,

He is the noble red man still.

Condemn him and his kind to shame!

I bow to him, exalt his name!

This poem is an ode of sorts to Chitto Harjo and is meant to elevate him as the “true” Indian. Yet, the metaphors and descriptors Posey uses to paint Crazy Snake are rather stereotypical, the ones you will often find in Euro-American representations of Indians. Stoical, silent, eagle eye, stately mien, noble red man – one might argue that these play into the stereotypical envisioning of Indians by the Europeans, the vanishing noble red man who is to be admired because of his tragic destiny who cannot and will not be part of our present. As Sivils points out, Posey’s admiration of full-blood traditionalist Creeks often crossed into romanticism (Posey and Sivils 2).

Yet, one could also argue that he might have just been a bad poet or that his poetry is merely a study of European genres that he successfully appropriated and eventually subverted to make them serve his Creek community (as evidenced by *The Fus Fixico Letters*). However, if one looks at the subject matter of most of his writing, it is distinctly Creek. So, I support Womack’s argument that Posey was not torn between two worlds, but rather solidly grounded in Creek culture (as shown by his journals, stories and *The Fus Fixico Letters*), and his mixed blood heritage, appropriation of European literary genres and strategies, as well as European attire, do not mean cultural confusion (*Red* 137, 141). Womack posits that “Posey’s supposed endorsement of progress may have been a simple recognition that Native people could and would move into the future, that is, a rejection of the vanishing notion” (*Red*, 143). He created complex characters in *The Fus Fixico Letters*, who countered and critiqued dominant notions of American Indians. Womack urges us to consider Posey’s work in terms of transformation (Weaver, *Literary Nationalism* 160). Szeghi further suggests that “Posey’s vision for the Creeks’ future was based

on his ardent, historically grounded belief in his peoples' capacity for adaptation and change as a means of survival" (3). She suggests that Posey creates a model of the "Transforming Indian" which opposes that of the vanishing Indians: "Through his vision of Indian transformation, Posey challenged — and arguably corrected — the myth's premise, that is, that American Indians were destined to disappear (via assimilation or extinction) as a consequence of contact with an allegedly superior Euroamerican culture" (3-4). Posey's belief in transformation is in fact in line with the traditional Creek belief of adaptability. Posey did not suggest assimilation into another culture and disappearing, rather argued for the Creeks active role and agency in selective appropriation of Euroamerican culture in order to preserve Creek culture and autonomy. Yet, it is important not to romanticize Posey or turn him into a "Super-Creek", but "historiciz[e] Posey according to the realities of Creek national life during Posey's time" (Womack, *Red* 138). As Szeghi suggests, in examining Posey as a historic figure and his writings, it is important to reject the binary approach, but see him as a complex figure with certain limitations (5).

In his time, Posey held a unique position as a Native American editor and publisher of the *Indian Journal*, who actively participated in the American newspaper scene. Riley reports that by 1907, there had been close to 600 newspapers in Indian Territory, most of which were weeklies and owned by whites (7). Posey, on the other hand, spoke up for what he considered to be Native people's best interest. His writing showed that Native Americans took rigorous interest in politics and their own fate. As mentioned earlier, Posey reflected significantly on the political situation, especially the question of statehood, and, according to Womack, attempted to influence the outcome of the political situation in *The Fus Fixico Letters*. His changing political views represented the arguments as to what should happen to Indian Territory. Some believed that Indian Territory should be a state separate from Oklahoma, some argued for status quo, and others supported consolidation of the land into one new state of Oklahoma. Posey argued for the latter at first, while later changing his opinion in favor of a separate state. For a while, Posey

believed that the only way for Native nations to survive was to go along with the changes happening in Indian Territory and argued against Indian Territory as a separate state because he did not see a Native leader who could materialize that idea. He wrote,

When the Indians become citizens of the new state, they will be as other citizens. . . . It is the Indian's interest . . . to grow up as an American citizen, just as any other race that has contributed a share toward forming the great American people. The Indian shall be an Indian no longer, but an American. . . . The old ways are gone, and they were times dear to the memory of the old people. The new order is here and the new Indian must meet the new condition not as an Indian, but as an American citizen and work out his own salvation as an individual depending on no fellow citizen, but upon himself (qtd. in Riley 68).

It is easy for the reader to see Posey as giving up on tribal sovereignty based on the statement above. Yet, I believe it is not abolition of Native nations for which Posey is arguing, but transformation and adaptation as pointed out by Womack and Szeghi. He is suggesting that the only way for Native nations to persevere is to actively participate in American politics. It seems he is arguing that if Natives keep waiting for the Federal government to do right by them, nothing will ever change and the only way for Indians to persevere into the future is to become agents of their own fate by appropriating the tools of the mainstream society available to them and asserting themselves as equals. As Littlefield suggests, after the successful convention of tribal leaders in Eufala, when it appeared that Chief McCurtain might become the “hero,” Posey switched sides and joined the separate-state proponents (Posey 98). This change in political views manifested in the letters in the opinions Hotgun expressed. According to Fus Fixico's report in letter 23, Hotgun was rather displeased with Oklahoma's climate and would rather have nothing to do with it:

Well, so Hotgun he say he was for double statehood, 'cause they was too much long-tailed cyclones out in Oklahoma and people was had to live right close to a hole in the ground like prairie dogs to keep out a they way. Hotgun he say he was not used to that kind a living and was get too old to learn to act like a prairie dog. Then he say sometime the people what had a hole in the ground was not out a danger, 'cause the rivers out in Oklahoma had no banks to um and was spread out all over the country when they get up, like maple syrup on a hot flapjack. He say he was druther be where he was had a show for his life. (Posey 103)

Tookpafka Micco resounds Hotgun's sentiments about bad climate and living conditions in Oklahoma and says he would rather have "a sofky patch in Injin Territory than a big county full a debt and chinch bugs in Oklahoma" (Posey 103). It is likely that Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco are not talking just about bad weather in Oklahoma, but also implying its unsatisfactory political climate. Hotgun then concludes that he supported single statehood for a long time because he did not see a better way, but now it seems that Secretary It's Cocked (Secretary Hitchcock) and Chief Make Certain (Chief McCurtain) proposed a feasible plan and the prospects seem bright (Posey 103). (Previously, Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco claimed to have supported single statehood because Oklahoma did not support prohibition). Posey's characters reveal the changes happening in Indian Territory in such a manner where tribes take actions to shape their own futures. They are not mere bystanders and are depicted as complex human beings who evaluate events and circumstances and make decisions based on their conclusions. They sometimes complain, take sides, change their minds, criticize their opponents, in other words, behave like all human beings.

Characters Posey creates deserve special attention because of the revisionary images of Creek full-bloods they create, which counteract the stereotypes that dominated, and still do, the mainstream audience's views on Native peoples. They are the embodiment of kinship memory, the link between the knowledge it contains and the community. They express and transmit



community memory and because all of the narrative in the letters is executed through their characters virtually make *The Fus Fixico Letters* a literary site of memory. Posey's choice to make full-bloods his protagonists is vital, especially in light of accusations that he was an assimilationist and did not see a future for conservative members of his tribe. The characters he creates speak the opposite. Hotgun, for instance, according to Posey, is "an Indian tinkerer of great fame" who is capable of anything: "He was a philosopher, carpenter, blacksmith, fiddler, clockmaster, worker in metals and a maker of medicines" (qtd. in Littlefield 167). Posey's characters are able to critically assess the changes in Indian Territory and make conscious choices to either support or criticize them. They exhibit understanding of both American national and Creek national politics. They are not passive ignorant observers, but well-informed and concerned with issues that engage non-Native American citizens as well. Although speaking in dialect and often engaging in gossip, such characters as Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco often express opinions on larger issues, for instance international affairs. In letter 19, Fus Fixico reports their discussion of tensions between China and Russia, among other things:

Well, so Rush Her was had it in for Chiny like the Mad Mule over in Africky was had it in for John Bul.

Rush Her was wrote a note to Chiny and say, "Well, so you was had to go somewhere else and eat rats."

When G. Pan and old John Bull and President Rooseter Feather was heard about it they was all get mad like hornets that was had a nest hanging in the woods. So they was send word to Rush Her he was had to left the door open in Chiny so they could get in and help they selves too.

Hotgun he say, "Maybe so Rush Her was act that way 'cause Chiny was get too old to fight." (Posey 91)

Posey's characters show awareness of the "Open Door" policy to which the United States, Russia, Japan, and some of the most influential European powers had agreed at the end of the nineteenth century and understand the nuances of the happenings on the world arena. Tookpafka Micco and Hotgun parody the stereotypical Indian, and their 'inability' to understand Euroamerican culture is play and pretense which allow them to subvert the stereotype with laughter. For example, Tookpafka Micco's concern as to where to spit his tobacco while riding in a first-class train car is a parody of the uncivilized Indian whose mind is incapable of comprehending customs of a civilized society. In reality, he is making fun of such customs. Szeghi argues that in such manner, "Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco tease their way into situations, framing their words into 'harmless' observations about various political events occurring in Indian Territory" (85).

Posey paints the Creeks as contemporary, up-to-date, and caught up on the events in their own country, as well as the world, not obsolete or lost in the past as Hollywood would have it. Although longing for the state of things before white encroachments on Indian land and sovereignty (for which Posey criticizes them), even traditionalist full-bloods are well-informed. He opposes the idea of the vanishing Indian and the disappearance of the Creek culture and affirms its ability to adapt and change while still maintaining its Creek essence. In letter 57, when Hotgun speaks about Sequoyah convention, he strongly reaffirms Native presence and agency while arguing that the convention is a declaration of independence and an expression of every Indian's desire:

Well, so," Hotgun he say, "the Injin has spoken. Long time ago he give a war whoop and go on the warpath; this time he call a convention and go on record. Instead a making medicine he make history; instead a chasing the pioneers with a tomahawk, he preside in convention and use the tomahawk for gavel to call the pioneers to order; and instead a swearing vengeance against the pale face, he get up and make a big talk on how to make

a state. The Injin is civilized and aint extinct no more than a rabbit. He's just beginning to feel his breakfast food." (Posey 217)

Littlefield interprets the last line of the above passage to mean that the Indian is just getting started (Posey 220, n.1). This suggests that Hotgun does not speak of assimilation into the Euroamerican ways or replacing Creek culture with the Euroamerican one, but about adapting to current times and needs and adopting some of the tools in order to protect tribal sovereignty and ensure cultural survival.

I agree with Womack that when it comes to Posey's writing, it prioritizes everything Creek. He suggests that "[t]here is a spirit in Posey that cannot be reduced to the clichéd hybridity, mediation, and bicultural composition theories that have dominated contemporary Native literary analysis because Posey's writing often involves transformation rather than mediation as he takes European material and paints over its white background, creating new canvas of his own making" ("Nature Writng" 57). In the passage under consideration, Hotgun is attesting to Creek cultural and political presence and documents the Five Tribes' battle for separate statehood. He reclaims the roles of agents of their own destiny for the tribes and powerfully proclaims: "You could call the movement for separate statehood bosh, or fiasco, or sentiment, and names like that if you want to, but I was call it a declaration a independence that was had its foundation on every hearthstone in Injin Territory" (Posey 218). Furthermore, considering Posey's use of oral tradition in his writing, Hotgun's reference to the rabbit could be an allusion to the Creek trickster, which, in its turn, suggests that despite the dramatic changes that are happening in Indian Territory, Creek cultural ways are alive and well.

Through humor and laughter, Fus Fixico gets into the middle of all political happenings; no matter how delicate, no subject goes untouched. Fus Fixico's conversations with his friends are modeled after Creek speech patterns, yet fall into the category of liminal. They wander on the

verge of funny and dangerous, testing the boundaries of both. According to Kosmider, “Fus is Posey’s own invented ‘fearless bird,’ subverting and exposing the inner workings of the political and economical shifting occurring in Indian Territory” (81). Although performed in a playful manner, this commentary is rather honest, revealing truths at times uncomfortable both for non-Native and Native audiences and a rather fraught history. Yet, this is where the value of Posey’s work partially lies. As Womack points out, it is unparalleled as Native works that criticize Native affairs from the inside are truly difficult to encounter.

He paints Creek life like it is without sugarcoating complicated issues. For example, in much of his writing, he exposes his own prejudice about blacks living in Indian Territory, as in the following joke Fus Fixico tells the editor: “I was raise about two wagons plum full of sofky corn too, and lots of bushels of sweet potatoes, like what the white mans call ‘nigger chockers’ – they won’t choke Injins though, ‘cause Injins don’t eat potatoes that was cooked dry like niggers” (Posey 56). In this joke, Fus expresses a racial view that, according to Littlefield, was quite widespread among the Creeks, many of whom distanced themselves from the black residents of the Nation both culturally and racially, holding opinions that were similar to those of white Americans, despite the fact that many Creek tribal members had some African heritage (Posey 56, note 2). Such comments and jokes from the letters as the one provided here become an integral part of the site of memory fashioned by Posey’s writing, pointing to some complicated Creek history.

It is hard to ignore Posey’s overt racism toward African Americans and Muscogee freedman, which serves as a witness to a rather complex issue for the five civilized tribes that persists even today. Racist remarks are present in Posey’s journals, poetry, and newspaper publications. For instance, in 1905, Posey published “A Freedman Rhyme” in the *Muscogee Democrat*:

Now de time fer ter file  
Fer yo' Freedman chile.  
You bettah lef' dat watermelon 'lone  
An' go look up some vacant lan'  
Fer all dem chillum what you t'ink is yone.  
De good lan' aint a-gwine ter last  
Twell Gabul blow de Judgment blast.  
Hits miltin' like snow  
Up eroun' Bristow;  
Dey'll be none lef' but rocks an' river san'.  
De Injun filin' mighty fast;  
Bettah hump Yo'se'r, nigger,  
An' gin ter kin' 'o figger.

In this poem, Posey is attacking African Muscogees who were granted full citizenship in the Muscogee nation after the Civil War. In 1866, the Muscogee nation, along with the Seminole and the Cherokee nations were forced to sign treaties with the Federal government that incorporated their slaves into the nations and provided them equal social, political, and economic rights (the Chickasaw and the Choctaw resisted for some time and did not accept ex-slaves as citizens until later). According to the new regulations, they were now entitled to allotment as well, which created tension in the Muscogee nation. The African Muscogee rights guaranteed by the new treaty were difficult to fulfill. To an extent, Posey's views expressed through the words of his characters, as well as in his journals and poetry, are rather representative of the time and location and document the complicated history of the Five Civilized Tribes and their freedman (or ex-slaves as they are often called). This history is not spelled out in the letters, yet Creek readers are likely to understand and acknowledge the origins of Posey's opinions, at least partially.

The Five Civilized tribes were known for owning slaves (this tradition predated contact with Europeans, but many started acquiring African slaves after removal to Indian Territory. Pre-contact, slaves were mainly enemies captured in battle.); slave-owning was viewed as one of the 'civilized' characteristics of the tribes in Oklahoma (Yoshitaka 93). Gary Zellar explains that African Creeks, called *Etelvste* in Creek, have a long history in the Creek nation dating back to the early sixteenth century and the first Spanish entradas and have always been a significant presence in the Creek society. While many Creeks accepted Africans as full members of their nation (overall, African Creeks had equal opportunities in the nation, held positions of influence and had access to education, although separately) and, in fact, often had African blood themselves, there were still critics of "Negro influence" such as G.W. Stidham (G.W. Grayson's father). In 1885, G. W. Grayson, Posey's friend, told the Senate committee that "being put on equal footing with African Creeks was "distasteful" (Zellar 162). For a while, African Creeks attempted to maintain their own minority culture, yet the Dawes Act of 1887 complicated matters, and after Allotment, they were mostly treated no differently from other freedmen.

After emancipation, the population of African Creeks increased rapidly and "far outstripped the Creek Indian population and was further reinforced by African Indian intruders from the neighboring Indian nations" (Zellar 162). To complicate matters, the number of freedmen from the South seeking land was rising as well, making it difficult to determine who was entitled to Creek citizenship rights (Zellar 163). In 1880s, these so-called African intruders became the cause for concern for the Creeks; many became "questionable citizen" (Zellar 164). Before arrival of intruders, Creek leaders such as G.W. Grayson often protected and sided with African Creeks when those were attacked by the whites because, despite other concerns, supporting them was a matter of tribal sovereignty, which always came first. If African Creeks were able to prove their established residency as defined by the treaty, they were granted full citizenship rights. Yet, the arrival of intruders combined with all the factors mentioned above

made Creeks wearier of their earlier policy of all-inclusiveness and forced the nation to define Indianness more strictly in attempts to guard their land base and sovereignty. Kosmider concludes, “in effect, Native Americans’ fears and anxieties [were] displaced onto blacks, even though Euroamericans were displacing Indian populations at a greater rate than were blacks” (59). The issue of freedmen has never been fully resolved in the Five Civilized tribes and still surfaces in the present. So, many of Posey’s readers even today might recognize its presence in his works.

Although Posey distanced himself from Creek blacks, close ties with them surface in much of his writing. It becomes apparent in Posey’s works that Creeks have incorporated elements of black culture into their own and that blacks are rather active participants in the Creek community. There are instances when Creeks support the blacks and occasions where their racist treatment is rather obvious. For instance, let us consider Posey’s two short stories “Uncle Dick’s Sow” and “Mose and Richard.” The central characters are black men who speak a black dialect, which Posey renders masterfully. Kosmider argues that in these two stories, “Posey’s discourse with his black characters Uncle Dick, Uncle Will, Mose, Richard, and Aunt Cook represents Native people’s fears, whether real or exaggerated, about the shrinkage of tribal lands and the loss of political power” (56). She explains that in some instances in the stories, Creeks behave like Euroamericans and mistreat the blacks; at other times, they side with blacks. Such depictions show complexity of Creek culture and the duality of Creek treatment of Africans. In “Uncle Dick’s Sow,” action is centered around Uncle Dick’s uppity pig. The pig despises blacks and thinks herself better, but she loves black foods, which eventually leads to her being captured and put back in her “place”. The pig in a way symbolizes the Creeks. It is almost like Posey is warning his fellow citizens about the dangers of both aligning themselves with Euroamerican views and with taking too much to black culture. Creek blacks seem to be kin, but the kind of which many Creeks are weary due to the pressures at the time that caused the Creek nation to

become more exclusionary in their definition of kinship. Such instances in Posey's writing point to the problematic aspects of Creek identity that were caused by Federal Indian policies.

However, Sivils suggests that Posey's racial views cannot be easily explained just by the difficult political climate of the era as his racism is abundant in his writing (Posey and Sivils 4). Sivils further explains that Posey might have derived his racism from his father who was fond of racially inappropriate stories about African Muscogeans (Posey and Sivils 4). It is ironic that Posey perpetuated racism against African Muscogeans because he so strongly condemned racial treatment of American Indians and because his maternal grandmother, according to G.W. Grayson, Posey's close friend, had much African blood herself (qtd. in Posey and Sivils 4). So, it is likely Posey's racism had personal motives, but one still has to admit that he was a product of his time and, therefore, a reflection of the controversies and tensions in the Muscogean nation.

*The Fus Fixico Letters* also document the relationship of white entrepreneurs with Creek tribal members, fraught with deceit and mistreatment. On the one hand, it influences the communal memory that becomes internalized by tribal members and passed on to future generations, and on the other hand, it allows the letters to function as countermemory that depicts an Indigenous side of history. For instance, Hotgun complains about the white salesmen who trick Natives into buying useless things that often do not work properly, such as stoves that do not fit in the houses and burn too much wood or Gale harrows that are too heavy to pull and useless because Indians have nothing to plant except sweet potatoes and "a pint of softy corn" (Posey 168). He laments: "So everywhere you go now you find lightning rod for clothes line and steel range cook stoves for the children's play house, and calendar clocks for ornament over the fire place and Gale harrows for scrap iron and old buggies for curiosities" (Posey 168). Hotgun expresses his dissatisfaction with the whites taking advantage of the Creeks, but he is also upset that Creeks actually fall for it: "Now . . . we was had the land grafter and lots more coming from Kansas and the Injins was still good picking and ready to bite like a bass when you was used



grasshopper for bait” (Posey 168). While exposing the current state of affairs and their own flaws to his Creek community, as his primary purpose was to address their immediate needs in *The Fus Fixico Letters*, he is also painting a picture of how white Americans are treating Native people and creating a countermemory to what the mainstream narrative is attempting to memorialize. This countermemory is one of the aspects of Posey’s letters that make them valuable today.

One of the main issues that concerns Posey’s characters is Chief elections. Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco criticize internal politics and politicians on quite a few occasions, but also exhibit their bias against certain candidates. They openly support Charley Gibson, who was Posey’s friend, and in letter 23, Fus Fixico compares all other candidates to “fleas under a pole cabin in the summer time, or maybe so bed bugs in a dollar day hotel when you blow the light out” (Posey 103). In letter 14, Fus Fixico expresses skepticism about Indian chiefs and their true intentions overall: “So I think Injin chiefs was just want full-blood to turn grind stone so they could wet they old bone ax on it” (Posey 79). In several letters, Posey rather openly expresses his displeasure with Chief Porter, who also ran for reelection. In letter 10, he compares Chief Porter to a buzzard who has an eye on a dead cow in winter time and openly proclaims that he “druther had somebody else for chief” (Posey 70). In this letter, Fus Fixico expressed his frustration with Porter’s behavior that, in his opinion, was not in the best interest of the Creeks, and the delay in distribution of allotment deeds:

Porter was stay too much in Muskogee and St. Louis and Washington and places like that to make good chief. Injins was not like that. Porter he was send deeds by express like he was not want Injins to had it; or, maybe so, he make you come after it to Muskogee. Injuns was not like that neither. It was cost too much hotel bill to get deeds that way. (Posey 70)

Fus Fixico is realistic about Creek politics and Creek people in general; Posey's writing portrays them as complicated people, often noble and devoted to their cause, but also not without flaws.

In addition to creating realistic images of his countrymen and exposing corrupt ways of the Federal government, Posey memorializes certain historic events vital for tribal history and depicts them from the Creek perspective, thus creating a counter narrative. Among such events is the Sequoyah Convention (1905), which was an attempt of Indian nations in Indian Territory to secure a separate state. The purpose of the convention was to draft a constitution for the new Indian state, decide on the capital city, and select the name for the proposed state. Another event, on which Posey provides a counter narrative, is President Roosevelt's (President Rooster Feather, according to Fus Fixico) visit to Indian Territory. Fus Fixico pokes at Roosevelt's western tour, parodies his speech at Chicago when he invoked the Monroe Doctrine, which appears as the "More Money" doctrine in Fus Fixico's report, and generally expresses skepticism of the President and disappointment with his behavior in Indian Territory. Among other historic events, Posey's characters discuss the Loyal ("Royal") Creek claim and payment, over which the Creek National Council had fought for some time with the Federal government and eventually voted to accept the settlement. Smaller events commemorated in the letters are of equal importance, such as John Goat and Chief Porter's visit to the White House, when they expected an invitation to dine with President Roosevelt and never received one. They felt offended as the President had dined with Booker T. Washington, yet would not have dinner with full-blood Indians (Posey 75). As pointed out earlier by Szpociński, texts that incorporate specific historic people and events, as sites of memory, can be a prolific source that reveals ever more details about the past that have previously been overlooked or possibly even avoided. Historic events and personas depicted from the Creek perspective uncover Creek truths that have been omitted in the American national narrative.

## WHO CARES

It is vital to consider who decides whether a text, a place, or an object becomes a site of memory. In general, it is the given community that decides whether to put value in a specific site, whether physical or metaphorical, as in the case of *The Fus Fixico Letters*. There needs to be an agreement in the community that an object has something to say to us about the past and that its goal is to stimulate remembering of the past. The community has to consider the site “to be an integral part of its identity” in order for it to become a site of memory (Szpociński 246). Thus, the question is whether the Creek community puts value in the text under consideration. It is not an easy question to answer. Posey was rather well-known as a journalist in his time and is still recognized as an important historical figure, but, according to Carol Hunter, as a writer, he is not widely read. Posey’s widow who wanted to publish a collection of *The Fus Fixico Letters* had much difficulty finding interested publishers, and only excerpts of Posey’s satire had been published on rare occasions after his death. The letters remained uncollected and largely inaccessible in the archives until Carol Hunter’s project, which aimed to publish such a collection and bring attention to Posey’s contribution. The project that had to be finished by Littlefield due to Hunter’s death saw print only in 1993. In her project, Hunter interviewed Creeks to have a better understanding of Posey and, in her preface reported, that many had heard of Posey, yet were not familiar with his writings. However, the publication of *The Fus Fixico Letters*, which made them widely accessible, also sparked scholars interest in Posey’s work. Scholars like Hunter, Littlefield, Womack, Kosmider, and many others have stressed the historic and cultural value of Posey’s text. It is precisely their work in uncovering historical references, explaining cultural context, borrowings from Creek oral tradition, and research focused on other aspects of *The Fus Fixico Letters* asserts this collection as a site of memory that reveals much about Creek identity and values.

Overall, one can argue that Posey's *The Fus Fixico Letters* are a depository of the past, which is essential to the definition of a site of memory. They capture the state of the Creek nation at the turn of the century including the complications and controversies of the allotment era, its effects on the Creek nation, the opposing political views of Creek tribal members, complex tribal politics and historic figures both of tribal significance and of American national scale. They reflect on Creek attempts to maintain their sovereignty and the Five Civilized Tribe's effort for separate statehood as well as provide other significant insights into Creek history and everyday life grounded in cultural values, some of which have persisted and some of which might have been neglected or obscured over time. What particularly adds to the significance of *The Fus Fixico Letters* as a site of memory is its clear grounding in the landscape that contemporary readers can still recognize and visit, and thus engage other senses that will allow them to reconnect with the past. As discussed earlier, Posey often brings up particulars of certain locations, as for instance, his mention of plants typical for Tuskegee, and his mention of Shell Creek and Coon Creek as identifiers of certain populations and their political allegiances (80). Posey does not necessarily commemorate physical Creek monuments, but rather weaves into his narrative locations of everyday life, cities and towns of Indian Territory that associated with political and economic changes. For example, the way Hotgun recollects the town of Muskogee and compares it to its then present-day state paints a clear picture of the changes it had undergone and what significance it had gained: "Well, so the New Year was made me lonesome for olden times put near twenty-five years ago, when you could go up to Muskogee and hear the cayotes [*sic*] howling in the back ground and yanking up the shoats where they was now talking about putting up a opera house large enough for fifteen hundred people to all get killed in" (Posey 153). Having been founded in 1872 due to the MK&T Railroad construction, Muskogee had become the largest town in Indian Territory with the population of about ten thousand people and had gained both economic and political significance (Posey 154). Realization that certain locations hold past of which we were not aware, "stimulates emotions resulting from a sense of connection

with those who used to live here, who walked the same streets, touched the same door knobs, read the same signs, with people who are long gone and who we know nothing else about” (Szpociński 253). In Posey’s case, much of his characters’ language employs comparisons and metaphors grounded in the landscape of Indian Territory, such as an Indian’s big toe sticking “through his tan shoes like a snag in Deep Fork”, which means that the toe looked like tree limb sticking out of the Deep Fork River, a tributary of the North Fork of the Canadian River (Posey 166). Mostly, Posey renders landscape of everyday life that many of his readers would easily recognize and for which they would not need much explanation, which anchors his writing to his readership, but also signifies the important everyday connections of the community to its landscape. Thus, community members perusing *The Fus Fixico Letters* today will be able to locate history to which they might be oblivious in places already familiar to them.

## CHAPTER III

### UNTOLD HISTORIES AND SITES OF MEMORY IN STERLIN HARJO'S *THIS MAY BE THE LAST TIME*

“I never knew my grandfather, but there’s a story I heard hundreds of times growing up, the story about the day he disappeared. His name was Pete Harjo. He was a Seminole Indian from a small town called Sasakwa, Oklahoma,” Harjo begins the narrative of his grandfather’s disappearance in his feature documentary *This May Be the Last Time* (Harjo, *This May Be the Last Time*). Sterlin Harjo’s film reconstructs the filmmaker’s grandfather’s disappearance after a car wreck through recollections of family and community members. To do so, it uses the lens of the history of Muscogee hymns which accompanied the community search for his grandfather’s body. It explores the power of the songs that have united Indigenous communities and have been passed from generation to generation. I argue that the hymns discussed in Harjo’s film, as well as the documentary itself, function as a mnemonic device which defines kinship, reflects perseverance, and fosters cultural continuity of the community, while Sterlin Harjo himself performs the role of a traditional storyteller embodying Creek sovereignty.

Muscogee-Creek hymns captured in the documentary constitute metaphorical sites of memory; they became such both with the passage of time and the will of the community that keeps passing them on to next generations. According to the interviews Harjo conducted for the film, many hymns have preserved their original form and attest to historic changes that happened

to the community and in the community, such as relocation, for instance. As pointed out by the interviewees, traditionally, they have been a way of remembering and resisting as well as uniting the community. They are an embodiment of a multitude of intergenerational Creek voices that come together to narrate Creek memory. This is the aspect of Creek culture that Posey's Fus Fixico letters capture so well in their dialogic character. Yet, unlike Fus Fixico letters, Creek community members consciously acknowledge Creek hymns as sites of memory. The interviewees point out that there is a danger of the hymns slipping into oblivion as the older generation of the Creeks is passing away; hence, the documentary is partly Harjo's attempt to assist his community in memorializing and reviving interest in them. Importantly, the community is interested in this attempt and willingly participates in the construction of this site of memory with the purpose of passing on this bit of cultural heritage that carries the weight of Creek epistemology.

Simultaneously, by unearthing the history of the hymns and documenting witness accounts of them, Harjo gives voice to the story that has been ignored before, thus allowing the film to function as a counter-memory to the American national mythology. The film claims that the hymns are a vital part of American music history and demands acknowledgement of cultural exchange and Creek contribution to it. In this sense, the film captures individual memories and creates a collective memory that counters the mainstream myth denying Creeks a history of sophisticated musical experience. It asserts Creek experiences and their presence both in history and contemporaneity. It also exercises visual sovereignty (as defined by Raheja) by seizing control of Creek imagery and portrayal of the Creek nation.

While performing important communal functions as sites of memory and acting as counter-memory to the mainstream narrative of exclusion, the hymns are also vital for the Creeks on the individual level. Practice and knowledge of the hymns assist tribal members in constructing their personal and cultural identities. They create a sense of kinship and belonging

that is crucial in Creek worldview. Sterlin Harjo himself admits hymns as his childhood memory and thus culturally identifies as part of the group. At the same time, the hymns allow him to establish even closer connections with his immediate family as they are part of the larger story and significance of the hymns. Thus, as the primary storyteller, to an extent, Harjo influence the way the site of memory is envisioned and constructed.

#### INDIVIDUAL REMEMBERING: GETTING TO KNOW YOUR KIN

The genre of documentary in general lends itself particularly well to discussions of memory. Roxana Waterson claims that

through the course of the twentieth century, film and video became increasingly important vehicles of memory; and as we enter the twenty-first, the digital revolution has made video such a powerful, accessible and affordable medium that it will become more and more vital as a form of witnessing of current events and therefore of future historical evidence. (52)

While many other scholars express reservations about regarding documentaries as absolute truth or accurate historical evidence, Waterson's statement has a point. She suggests scholars take a closer look at "the potentials of mass-produced visual media to change our perceptions of history and value" (52). She agrees with Frank Tillman's argument that "photographic images have entered into social memory, and exposure to them has altered the way that recent generations imagine the past" (52). She claims that photographs and film give us the ability to familiarize ourselves with the events which we did not attend (53). Through visual media, we become witnesses of such events and internalize them as part of our memory through the creative process of imaging and re-imagining.

By means of the visual media that Harjo collects in addition to the interviews and the visual media he himself creates in the film, Harjo becomes witness to his grandfather's story.



Sterlin gathers information about his grandfather, his life and death from the snippets of memories of tribal members. Pete Harjo wrecked his car on the way back from a neighboring town. The morning after the wreck, a couple found his car, but with no body in it. “It’s like he had disappeared,” Harjo explains. The search for his grandfather went on for days and brought the whole community together; everyone was searching for Pete Harjo, “men, women, children, preachers, medicine men, everybody” (Harjo, *This May Be the Last Time*). Everyone was trying to help; people brought out tables and cooked food. It was a big deal to the community. Even when the search seemed hopeless, they were not willing to give up on one of their own, which demonstrates a strong bond of kinship in the community, of accountability to and respect for the living and the dead. Harjo mentions the community even brought out a scuba diver. One of the interviewees assumed that people were really close in those days, “They were serious about it. They weren’t gonna leave him” (*This May Be the Last Time*). They dammed a section of the river and walked it arm-in-arm trying to find the body, and later, as the last resort, the community went to “a fortune teller who can see things” (*This May Be the Last Time*). He threw the grandfather’s hat into the river and followed it to the body. As the searchers carried the body to the ambulance, they sang songs; “you could hear them echo through the forest” (*This May Be the Last Time*).

One could argue that Harjo’s documentary is autobiographical in nature, when we use the term autobiographical documentary in its loose definition as a film “about oneself or one’s family” (Katz and Katz 120). In the documentary, through the reconstruction of his grandfather’s disappearance story, the filmmaker learns more about his family and himself. Through the creative process of filmmaking, the narrative of the documentary becomes personal to Harjo, although he never knew his grandfather and has only heard stories about him. The oral accounts of his family and other community members he collects about both his grandfather and the hymns serve as mnemonic devices that assist Harjo in internalizing the community’s memories of the subjects of his film. Harjo in turn passes on these memories in the film to the viewer; he

confesses, “it’s almost, in a way, like I’m a guide into this world a little bit” (“Meet the Filmmakers”). In a way, Harjo performs the same function Fus Fixico performs when he reports on the conversations of Creek tribal members, that of a storyteller, who also provides interpretation and insights into the Creek world while conveying its cultural truths. At first glance, it might seem that Harjo’s role is subtler than that of Fus Fixico, but in fact, in order for the documentary to work and have its intended impact on the audience, Harjo makes vital narrative decisions as a filmmaker deciding whose voices to make more prominent, how to structure the story of the hymns, what visuals to use, from which angles to shoot, how to work with the community members and what ethical agenda to follow, and many others that allow the story to form. His primary purpose is pursuing cultural continuity and addressing the needs of his community, which allows us to see him as a traditional storyteller (see discussion of the term in Chapter one).

While the filmmaker himself was able to get to know his grandfather as a living person as opposed to a mere figure in a story, the making of the documentary also allowed his family members to re-familiarize themselves with the persona of Pete Harjo. In a way, while discovering certain truths himself, Harjo facilitates the process of remembering for others. When discussing reception of his film in the community, Harjo reported that it prompted the community to relive the memories of his grandfather and reach out to his family. Harjo recalls:

Everyone [talked] about my grandpa and people who remembered [him] would stop my dad and talk to [him] about it. One of my best compliments that I got on my film was when my dad said that he felt like he knew his dad better now. [His] was a story that I always heard, but I never knew my grandpa. It was never anything that emotionally touched me that much; it was just a good story I grew up hearing. But once I made the film and saw how it affected my aunt, my grandma and my dad, I realized that this person

was real. It brought up all of these old feelings—and I think that was the most surprising thing for me. (Bogado)

In his film, Harjo performs a role similar to the one Fus Fixico holds in Posey's letters to editor. He is a reporter of sorts, who provides an insight into community talk while learning a thing or two himself. It is difficult to characterize Harjo's film as using one particular mode of documentary. It is more likely a combination of several modes: expository, performative, participatory, with elements of observational. Bill Nichols discussed these documentary modes at length in his *Introduction to Documentary*. Expository documentaries are sometimes called essay films as their purpose is to explain and educate, for example about ways of life or specific events. To educate about Creek hymn and reveal their hidden history is one of the purposes of Harjo's film, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Like other expository films, *This May Be the Last Time* includes interviews (or more precisely, heavily relies on them), illustrative visuals such as photographs, and employs scripted narration that pulls the story together. One can argue that Harjo's film partially employs the performative mode of the documentary because the filmmaker is involved with the subject of his film. After all, he is a tribal member and is perceived a part of the community which is the subject of his documentary. He portrays certain aspects of Creek historical reality through the prism of his own experiences as he serves as a guide into the community. In addition to the filmmaker's narration of his own experiences with the hymn, his family members and his investment in the story, Harjo's onscreen participation in the documentary situates him within the community positioning him as a credible source as well as affirming his investment in the community's representation on film. Note that this way of Harjo's narrating the story is also likely a borrowing from Creek oral tradition as its performative aspect is one of its main descriptors.

In the title of a film review published in *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody claims that "All documentaries Are Participatory Documentaries," and one could claim that Harjo's film is indeed

participatory. Such documentaries capture the encounter between the filmmaker and the subject of the film where the filmmaker is actively engaged in the situation. Nichols explains that “when we view participatory documentaries we expect to witness the historical world as represented by someone who actively engages with, rather than unobtrusively observes, poetically reconfigures, or argumentatively assembles that world” (116). He further stresses that “the sense of bodily presence, rather than absence, locates the filmmaker ‘on the scene’” (116). This documentary mode creates immediacy and often serves as a vehicle for social commentary. According to Nichols, the technique of a participatory documentary has a specific effect on its audience: the viewers “have the sense that we are witness to a form of dialogue between filmmaker and subject that stresses situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter” (123). The sense of this dialogue is often created by means of a compilation of interviews: “Filmmakers make use of the interview to bring different accounts together in a single story. The voice of the filmmaker emerges from the weave of contributing voices and the material brought in to support what they say” (Nichols 122). This is certainly one of the moves Harjo makes in his film, with a difference that he allows the interviewees and the interviews to shape the film instead of shaping his material to fit a certain story. Although the viewer mostly feels Harjo’s presence through his voice over and commentary, in one of the scenes, Harjo includes himself in the shot, in the kitchen among the community members, where food is being prepared, not distinct from anyone else. He is not interviewing, he is not filming or directing, he is merely receiving food, in line along with others, part of the community. His choice of the location and the occasion for this particular shot is not accidental either. In many Indigenous communities, kitchen space is most intimate, a gathering place where informal sharing of knowledge occurs. Harjo attested to this idea himself at the workshop he conducted at the first Tulsa Literary Festival, Oklahoma. He confessed that many of his ideas came from the conversations with his family members across the kitchen table. This is also consistent with the national values discovered in Posey’s *Fus Fixico* letters. In Chapter One, I discussed how Posey’s characters hold their conversations mostly at

meal times or during special feasts. It was also mentioned that for the Creek community, inviting someone to break bread is a sign of hospitality and trust, an insight into community. Thus, through the kitchen shot, Harjo establishes his kinship, which is significant for the primary audience of the film, and is also a sign of trust.

While Harjo's film seems to be a participatory documentary to a great extent, there is a rather big difference: in Harjo's scenario, he is not merely a researcher who goes into the field to learn more about his subject, but rather is the subject to an extent as he is part of the community he is filming. Therefore, I claim he is a traditional Creek storyteller, which makes his documentary function in a unique Indigenous mode as his primary purpose is not expose, observe, or express his personal opinions, but to foster cultural continuity from the Creek viewpoint. It is his investment in the community and making the film theirs, rather than preserving his authorial self, the responsibility to the subject of his film that differentiates Harjo's filming practices and outcomes. His storyteller persona becomes a vessel for kinship memory making the boundaries between individual and communal fluid.

Harjo is intent on observing community customs and holds the Muscogee-Creek nation as his primary audience. His position as an insider, who understands and respects, allows him special access, but also responsibility to the resources provided by the community. He is responsible for the representation of the community his film fashions. Much has been published on the issues of misrepresentation of American Indians in film (see Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Celluloid Indians*); the widespread misrepresentation perpetuated by Hollywood makes the role of Indigenous filmmakers in self-representation ever more important, which will be discussed later in the chapter. Kilpatrick points out that the current general tendency of Hollywood filmmakers is to portray American Indians with "sympathy;" yet, those filmmakers "who have attempted to portray that sympathy have failed in one or more ways to portray Native people realistically. Their failure can be partly explained by the cultural and communicative gap between

filmmakers and the people they are depicting” (179). For Native filmmakers, their tribal membership and kinship with the community bridges the gap allowing them see with Indigenous eyes and serve Indigenous consciousness, but also places more responsibility on them. Victor Masayesva, Jr. pinpoints that responsibility as the one to be able to differentiate what a filmmaker can and can *not* show:

A critical issue: what’s different about Native filmmakers? Why do we even insist on being the storytellers? It has to do with, I think, that we are in the best position to censor ourselves . . . and what information is to come out of our mouth. . . .

A Native filmmaker has the censorship built into him, the accountability built into him. The White man doesn’t have that. That’s the single big distinction. Accountability as an individual, as a clan, as a tribal, as a family member. (qtd. in Kilpatrick 209)

Harjo resounds Masayesva’s sentiments when speaking about filming in Native communities. He stresses the importance of respect, trust, and understanding of customs: “The way indigenous people live and carry themselves is very different from non-indigenous worlds. You need to learn those rhythms, and you have to learn when something isn’t appropriate—something as simple as asking a question. Or talking” (“Sterlin Harjo on the Dos and Don’ts”). Harjo boils down the rules of creating films in and about Native communities to two simple questions:

Are you making a film that makes outsiders learn things they didn't know about the community you're filming? Are you shedding light on a community to people on the outside? If so, stop. Instead, shed light on an aspect of the community that the community themselves can learn from. After that, people outside can get their fill. But a documentarian's attention should be on the subject, not the audience. That's with any

film, as specificity will in turn make the story more universal. (“Sterlin Harjo on the Dos and Don’ts”)

In other words, Harjo is arguing against what Pamela Yates, a human rights activist and documentary filmmaker known for *State of Fear: The Truth about Terrorism*, *The Reckoning: The Battle for the International Criminal Court*, and *500 Years*, calls “extractive filmmaking” (“Whose Story?”). She compares such filmmaking practice to the practices of extractive industries such as industrial agriculture or mining. Extractive filmmakers “take” from the communities “and never consider collaborating with the protagonists or replenishing what's been taken” (“Whose Story?”). She urges anyone working with Indigenous communities to engage them in collaborative projects, to pay attention to what they have to say, get their approval, and let them take the lead. In addition, Harjo statement falls in line with Craig Womack’s argument for tribal specificity urging that, first and foremost, a Native work should pursue a purpose of assisting its community. In its turn, this will encourage non-Native audiences to become educated while the human aspects of the narrative will make the story universal. Such approach asserts a nation’s sovereignty.

The respectful and collaborative practices described above guide Harjo’s filmmaking. The hymns featured in the documentary appear sung by the community members in the Muscogee language and, with the exception of a few lines here and there, are never translated into English. The community members provide contextual stories for the hymns, but the film values and respects the sacredness the songs hold for the community. The members of the community who practice these hymns on a daily basis recognize them and can often relate to stories told, thus reinforcing the function of hymns as sites of kinship memory among community members. Harjo’s film functions in a similar way to Posey’s Fus Fixico letters – it attempts to address the immediate needs of the community as opposed to catering for the non-Native audience. From both texts, outsiders may get a glimpse of the Creek culture, some

historic events and their significance for the nation. Yet, both texts also hold much that is accessible only to the Muscogee-Creek reader.

#### COMMUNAL REMEMBERING: KINSHIP CONNECTIONS

What always stuck out about the story of his grandfather's disappearance to Sterlin Harjo were the songs that community members sang while searching for his grandfather's body. Harjo admits that the songs did not seem to have tremendous significance to his grandfather's story at first glance, but "it's the thing that everyone remembers. It's the thing my grandma remembered. It's the thing I remembered. So it demonstrates . . . how these songs are used in the community" ("Meet the Filmmakers"). Harjo explains that whenever he heard stories of his grandfather, his grandmother would always bring up the songs. So for him, the story of his grandfather's wreck and Muscogee-Creek hymns have a direct and obvious connection. He further suggests that this is the way storytelling works in his community where bits of stories fit into a web of larger overarching stories, and it is difficult to separate one story from another: "Muscogee people are not going to sit down and tell you the history of these songs, and they're not going to tell you the history of their people, but they'll tell you little bits of the stories they've heard along the way. And that's kind of how making the film was" ("Meet the Filmmakers"). Thus, the narrative of the film reflects Muscogee-Creek epistemology and their way of preserving and transmitting knowledge, which is all part of kinship memory.

Sterlin claims that he knows these songs because he grew up with them. He explains his chosen perspective for the documentary as traditional for his community, which allows him to construct the kind of narrative that leads to discovering the truth of his people:

They were the same songs our ancestors sang on the Trail of Tears. I've wondered where they come from. They just seem to have always been there, in times of death, in times of worship, in times of sadness, and in times of joy. They've always been there. Why do



these mournful songs encourage us? I don't expect to get all the answers. You learn from a young age that it's not how it works here. Our histories are not written, they're spoken through stories, they're told through our songs. And sometimes if you listen, you can find a bit of the truth. (Harjo, *This May Be the Last Time*)

In one of his interviews, Harjo suggests that although the songs do address history, their power is in the personal connection they create for many people ("Meet the Filmmakers"). Harjo stresses that although documenting the past, tribal songs define the present through intergenerational ties. The songs serve as a mnemonic device that helps establish kinship, as a link between the individual and the community. In this regard David MacDougall argues that the artifacts of memory such as photographs and films of historical events, which is what we remember if we did not experience the events ourselves, "may create a commonality of experience more powerful and consistent as social memory than the experiences of many of the actual participants" (30). Then, the film's function is twofold: on the one hand, it records memories of the community, and on the other hand, it creates a common social memory for the community as a whole, based on the fragmented memories of its individual members, thus fashioning a site of memory.

The documentary opens with Jimmy Anderson's experience in Alaska, which showcases the way kinship memory connects an individual to the community. He tells a story of when he witnessed a burial of a young man in Alaska (Athabascan Indians) and offered to sing a song to comfort his relatives as per the tradition of the Muscogee people; he closed his eyes and sang. While he was singing, he claims he heard other voices singing with him, but when he opened his eyes, none of the people present were singing. Whenever he closed his eyes, he heard other voices singing with him again, and then he realized that he had asked his people in Oklahoma to pray for him, and that's what they were doing. Through the creative and imaginative act of singing, similar to how Joy Harjo establishes her relationship with her ancestors through painting

(discussed in Chapter three), Jimmy felt kinship with his community solidified and manifested in the hymn. He activated the memory of similar experiences and re-lived them. Many of Harjo's interviewees point out the connections the songs create among people of the community, the connections that are the essence of these sites of memory. For instance, Wotko (Steven Long) urges that songs are a means to remind of people, often of those who have passed on. He explains that he wanted to learn the songs so he could sing them to his uncles who are now all dead. Sometimes when he sings the songs, he believes he can hear his uncles' voices resonating in his voice. Sterlin Harjo sums up that the songs are often kept up as a way to remember people.

Harjo's documentary preserves the integrity of the songs as they are not translated into English and the viewer often does not get to hear the whole song. Yet, the non-Native audience acquires glimpses of the songs' stories from the singers, whatever they deem necessary to recount. Many of them indeed are connected to people in one way or another, but some are connected to historic events, and it seems some are tied to landscapes and geographical locations. As discussed in detail in Chapter one, landscape is of great significance in Creek culture and certain geographic locations may serve as sites of memory, i.e. reminders of historic occurrences. For instance, Harjo explains that some of the songs date back to the Trail of Tears. In such songs the Mississippi river is mentioned as the river of death because many Seminole and Muskogee people drowned in the Mississippi. In such manner, the Mississippi river becomes the bearer of kinship memory that ties the Creeks of Oklahoma to their ancestors and allows contemporary tribal members to reconnect with their traumatic experiences and heal as a community. As observed in the discussion of Fus Fixico letters, Creek hymns, as well as the documentary itself, do not seem to commemorate any monuments of the Euro-American fashion.

Dr. Hugh W. Foley, Jr. reflects on how those who practice the hymns internalize memories and stories contained within them: "these songs become part of you, and not only part of you, but your experience, your life" (*This May Be the Last Time*). Furthermore, according to

Joy Harjo, the songs are essentially the spirit of things; “they’re all different, but they are all a part of the storyscape of how we came to be. Songs appear when somebody needs them” (*This May Be the Last Time*). To use Joy Harjo’s term, the hymns reflect the storyscape of the community, the relationships of the individuals, their place in the community and culture. They are a means of establishing and preserving cultural and communal ties which guarantee continuity.

#### INDIGENEOUS DOCUMENTARY: EXERCISING VISUAL SOVEREIGNTY

Although many argue that Indigenous art cannot be apolitical (which is likely true in most instances, and I am certainly not attempting to claim otherwise), one has to consider that it is not always primarily reactionary, but more importantly it promotes Indigenous perspectives and asserts Indigenous presence and experience. While Sterlin Harjo, like many other Indigenous filmmakers, attempts to upset stereotypical representations of Native Americans with his films, his work’s focus is always the Indigenous community itself, both as the subject and the target audience, as has been discussed earlier. Harjo notes that many American Indians complain about the misrepresentations of Native people. Many Native scholars have brought up this issue before. For instance, in her work on the “Hollywood Indian,” Kilpatrick extensively questions the distortions of Native Americans in the history of Hollywood that have largely been taken as “reality” by both the reviewers and audiences of the time. Dean Rader also laments the misrepresentations of Indigenous identities in media and the effect such misrepresentations have on the Indigenous peoples:

Where place names and laws and raids robbed Indians of cultural identity 100 years ago, so too have Westerns, team mascots, comics, Tonto and other caricatures stolen Native cultural identity and sovereignty. Contemporary visual culture—movies and television in particular—have erected identities for them. So effective have the modern media been in

altering how Indians see themselves that many Native writers talk about growing up sympathizing with cowboys and ridiculing the Cheyenne and Arapaho. (183)

Rader identifies another important problem, which is lack of appropriate images with which Indigenous peoples could identify. Harjo voices a similar concern when he speaks about the lack of material that would fill the void of positive images of Native Americans; so he attempts to do just that, fill the void of positive and appropriate representations of his community. Steven Leuthold suggests that one of the goals of Native filmmakers is “to control the representation of their own communities rather than depend upon progressive non-Natives to give them voice” (“Rhetorical Dimensions” 59). He posits that film is one of the means of combating voicelessness. According to Leuthold, “Native documentary redefines the ‘voiceless victim’ as a proactive political participant, in turn infusing new life into documentary itself” (“Rhetorical Dimensions” 57). Because so many Native directors and producers reason their film-making choices with “telling our own stories,” one might assume that the primary purpose of Native media is to narrate the perspectives of Native communities (Leuthold, “Rhetorical Dimensions” 56). Harjo, as one of such filmmakers, explains that it is important to show “the truth,” the complexities of Indigenous people as human beings.

Leuthold proposes that documentary is the film genre most readily adopted by Native American filmmakers for several reasons. He insists that “from the perspective of some native directors, documentary acts as a form of truth speaking, a way of accurately recording and presenting both history and contemporary lives in contrast . . . to the distortion and stereotypes found in mass media” (“Representing Truth” 30-31). He acknowledges the financial accessibility of this medium, but also suggests that there are other more significant factors that have influenced this decision of filmmakers, namely “the place of documentaries in education, the relation of electronic media documentaries to traditionally oral cultures, and the desire to document disappearing cultural practices” (“Representing Truth” 30). Documentaries pursue the purpose of

exposing non-Indians to the truth about Indigenous cultures, but more importantly "present role models to young Indians" ("Representing Truth" 30). Leuthold argues that Indigenous documentarians assume their films have particular significance and power because they create portraits from inside of the community and "they are based on direct personal experience" ("Representing Truth" 31). In such case, according to Leuthold, "truthfulness derives from a sense of social responsibility" to the filmmaker's families and communities that granted them special access ("Representing Truth" 31). He sums up that, although many contemporary scholars tend to not view the genre of documentary as absolute truth any longer, Native filmmakers and communities still hold the assumption of truthfulness, which springs from the "interpersonal experience" documented in the film, that is created by the insider access to the community; "the assumed objectivity of images as a form of historical evidence; and the active role of documentaries in creating an objective social reality" ("Representing Truth" 32). Judging from his interviews, Sterlin Harjo aligns with Leuthold's claims about Indigenous documentaries as he urges his viewer that if you listen (and he means active unbiased listening), you may glean some truth about Indigenous nations. This truth has to be collected from various sources and carefully assembled into the bigger picture, as Harjo does in his documentary; yet it will never be entirely complete because, on the one hand, that is how storytelling works in Native communities (the audience only hears the story meant for the occasion), and on the other hand, because not all stories are meant to be told to all audiences.

The appeal of the documentary for Indigenous filmmakers seems to be similar to that of the genre of letters to editor that Posey used in his Fus Fixico letters. The latter, although with a tint of fictional characters, in a way, is an accessible means of truth-speaking that also documents specific events in a participatory mode. Such choices of media for sites of memory may also be connected with the popular belief in truthfulness of newspapers and documentaries in general. Although scholars have long questioned the objectivity of these media, they have a long-standing

history of being used for educational purposes and as the primary source of news. Native American appropriation of these genres then allows them to exercise control over the imagery that is being remembered. Both Posey and Harjo subvert these western genres to allow them to serve as vessels for kinship memory.

Because of the historical and cultural circumstances as well as the purposes the Indigenous documentaries pursue, one could argue that they constitute a separate genre. When discussing documentaries of Canadian Indigenous filmmakers Alanis Obomsawin and Loretta Todd, Jennifer L. Gauthier highlights that Indigenous filmmakers “appropriate the documentary forms as a means to communicate Indigenous history and culture, but they reimagine this fundamentally Western genre” to create a “unique brand of . . . Indigenous documentary” (92). While Gauthier speaks about Canadian Feminist Indigenous documentary, it seems that her argument is applicable to Indigenous documentary overall. One could go further to propose that Indigenous filmmakers subvert the Western genre to make it serve the purposes mentioned above. Ginsburg argues that Indigenous filmmakers are interested particularly “in how [the medium of film] could be indigenized formally and substantively to give objective form to efforts for the expression of cultural identity, the preservation of language and ritual, and the telling of indigenous histories” (“Screen Memories” 51). She insists that despite some dangers of using the ‘master’s tools,’ film has potential for Indigenous communities:

Film, video, and television – as technologies of objectification as well as reflection – contain within them a double set of possibilities. They can be seductive conduits for imposing the values and language of the dominant culture on minoritized people, what some indigenous activists have called a potential cultural ‘neutron bomb,’ the kind that kills people and leaves inanimate structures intact (Kuptana, cited in David 1998:36).

These technologies – unlike most others – also offer possibilities for ‘talking back’ to and

through the categories that have been created to contain indigenous people. (“Screen Memories” 51)

Dean Rader further explains that Indigenous nations have been participating in cultural “engaged resistance.” He defines the latter as Indigenous acts of communication and expression through written, spoken, or visual language which control the depiction of identity and creation of Native image and destiny by linking them to Native cultures, beliefs, and histories (179). The work of Native artists can be compared to that of Wovoka’s Ghost Dance and American Indian Movement. Modern-day artists use contemporary media and the language of popular culture to reconfigure historical perspectives as well as urge for a different future:

[C]ontemporary writers, directors, and painters battle against the near-totalizing forces of American cultural inscription and misrepresentation. The most provocative practitioners of Native discourses resist the imperial colonizing thrust of contemporary culture through participation in it. Their inventive use of the lyric poem, the collage, and the movie transforms both public and private discourses and allows them not only to counter prevailing establishments of identity but also to tell who they are in their own languages. They resist cultural erasure by attacking those armaments designed to annihilate their ability to speak themselves into being. Yet, through art they recoup the performative energies of enactment, ritual, and oration and engage both Anglo and Native discourse. (Rader 180)

Rader further points out that Native artists’ work does not only engage aesthetics, but also addresses ethics; it is thus “both a measure and a means of Indian sovereignty” (180). Rader speaks to how Indigenous artists subvert and indigenize a variety of contemporary genres and media, including film, to assert their presence and give voice to their cultures and communities.

By addressing cultural erasure and the stereotype of the vanishing Indian in their works, Native artists rewrite representations of Indianness in their work.

Discussion of Indigenous visual sovereignty is an important one when engaging the film industry as it directly relates to control over the imagery that becomes part of public memory. Michelle Raheja defines this approach as “the space between resistance and compliance wherein Indigenous filmmakers and actors, revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions, while at the same time operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions” (*Reservation 193*). Harjo subverts the western genre of documentary similarly to how Posey adopts and adapts the genre of letters to editor in his Fus Fixico letters. Both appropriate the genres by filling them with Creek content and narrative strategies and stretching the boundaries of the genre conventions. Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) argues that “the work of Indigenous artists needs to be understood through the clarifying lens of sovereignty and self-determination, not just in terms of assimilation, colonization, and identity politics. . . . Sovereignty is the border that shifts Indigenous experience from a victimized stance to a strategic one” (50-59). Ginsburg suggests that appropriation of western media and genre by Indigenous artists often occurs within the context of activist movements for resistance and self-determination and that they implement the camera both to assert and to preserve cultural identity (“Indigenous Media”, “Mediating Culture,” “From Little Things”). Such was Posey’s appropriation of the genre of letters to editor and indigenizing of the newspaper during the movement for a separate Indian state. Similarly, Indigenous filmmakers subvert the genre of documentary in the movement for cultural sovereignty. Carla Taunton further suggests that viewing Indigenous filmmaking, and art in general, through the lens of sovereignty and self-determination allows us to assert “Indigenous artists’ agency, the autonomy of Native worldviews, and the sophisticated and political artistic strategies of sharing stories and



experiences” (117). She suggests that many Indigenous artists participate in the larger project of “reclaiming and revoicing Indigenous histories” (117).

Part of exercising visual sovereignty is being able to control the construction of identity and memory through visual imagery. Through visual media accessible to a large audience, both Native and non-Native, Native American artists reconstruct their identities by constructing memories that both differ from the pop-cultural narrative prevalent in the white American society and force the pop-cultural memory to be revised. Lipsitz suggests that Native artists engage in counter-memory as “a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal” and builds out toward a larger story (213). Yet, its most important characteristic is that it “looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives” and forces the dominant histories to be reconsidered by providing new perspectives about the past (Lipsitz 213). While collecting material for the documentary, Harjo did exactly that – he excavated individual memories of community members for the untold histories of Muscogee-Creek hymns, at first, to fulfill his own curiosity of where the songs originated. This journey led his film to construct a narrative of Muscogee-Creek music that claims a space for the hymns in the American music history while asserting Creek identity as both historic and contemporary.

#### REVISING THE METANARRATIVE: ASSERTING INDIGENOUS PRESENCE

One has to consider how Harjo’s film fits or rather responds to the larger conversation in Native film studies. In her work on Native film, Joanne Hearne identifies several questions that are important to consider in the discussion of Indigenous visual production: how Native cinematic and photographic projects figure into revitalization efforts of communities; how the tradition of an oral narrative is reflected in these projects; what are the implications of such “cultural and intercultural transmission” (308). One simply has to consider the ethics of documentary film-

making because the issues of memory and recognition are at stake (Hearne 310). The narratives that cinematic images create have the potential to foster both the “vanishing Indian” and the “native presence” narratives. It seems that many discussions of both photographic and cinematic images of Native Americans, in one way or another, bring up Edward Curtis’s work as the images he created contributed tremendously to developing and solidifying the idea and stereotype of the “vanishing Indian,” as well as the authentic Indian “untouched by Euro-American culture” and time (Hearne 311.). Curtis tempered with the original images to remove any signs of modernity and adaptation of American Indians to create a very specific narrative of erasure. Posey’s Fus Fixico letters countered the stereotype of the vanishing Indian by portraying complex characters who participated in contemporaneity, engaged in their political life, capable of adaptation while firmly maintaining their cultural identity. Harjo’s documentary works against the narrative of erasure in two ways: 1) by considering the ethics of filming in an Indigenous community; 2) by narrating the Muscogee-Creek perspective and presenting historical evidence in the form of hymns of Indigenous acculturation, mixing, cultural exchange, yet also persistence and continuity. Although a cultural hybrid and a consequence of contact with the Europeans, the hymns are yet fully Creek and attest both to complete and persistent Creek presence and active participation in the making of history and contemporaneity. Hearne argues that because visual production is linked to the imperialist gaze by means of its history and use, “the very act of bringing the presence of the oppressed into the realm of the reproducible image also conveys the possibility of recuperation in which a new narrative appropriates the power of signification” (309). Native documentarists seize the power to tell their own stories from their perspective.

Like many contemporary Indigenous filmmakers, Harjo is a firm believer that the community should have control over the filming process and its product and the filmmaker should be accountable to the community. Kilpatrick explains that filming in Indigenous communities might limit the filmmakers’ creative freedom as the community decides to what the

filmmaker should have access. As Masayeva puts it, “there’s a point of different value and different viewpoint. . . . Right now, we need to start with stories from Native Americans. . . . we have a responsibility to ourselves first. We need to care for ourselves first” (qtd. in Kilpatrick 210). Harjo holds this perspective true for his documentary, which embodies the multitude of voices of the Creek community. In such manner, his documentary becomes a Creek site of memory that allows tribal members to preserve their cultural heritage in the form of Creek hymns.

Harjo’s film assists in kinship memory processes and formation of community identity, as well as fosters continuity. Hearne suggests that Native filmmakers “work in the delicate balance between retrieval and invention to shape modern identity by deploying a reconstructed past” (311). Such past creates a sense of communal identity serving as common ground for community members. Leuthold argues that “Native cultures have traditionally been formed upon a sense of shared history” (“Representing Truth” 33). If we understand Indigenous documentaries as a means of truth-telling of the “the way it was” (Leuthold, “Representing Truth” 33) or the way it is, they may influence the communities of the documentaries in an important way as they either preserve and reinforce or re-establish the sense of shared history, which then “forms a basis of the continuity of contemporary native communities” (Leuthold, “Representing Truth” 33). I would also note that *Fus Fixico* letters may have a similar function as they, in fact, document a vital period in Creek history and thus offer community members to experience kinship through shared past as well. Leuthold posits that “documentation or filmic integration of traditional expressive forms” (such as the Muscogee-Creek hymns on which Harjo focuses) is an example of how Native film may assist in forming communal identity (“Rhetorical Dimensions” 58). Along with that, representation of contemporary Native lives in documentaries show identity as fluctuating and influenced by changes in the cultural contexts (Leuthold, “Rhetorical Dimensions” 58). Furthermore, Ginsburg claims that the filmmakers’ main interest lies in the “processes of identity

construction,” not retrieval of precontact past (“Mediating Culture,” “The Parallax Effect”). She urges scholars to focus less on film as text for formal interpretation and more on the “processes of production and reception” because of the “cultural mediations that occur through film” (Ginsburg, “Mediating Culture” 259).

Creek community willingly engaged in the production of the film because many tribal members were interested in preserving Creek hymns as a cultural asset which they fear might disappear. In the eyes of the community, these songs constitute a body of cultural knowledge. Through the songs, the community constructs mnemonic sites that commemorate vital events, both communal and personal, and narrate histories largely untold in the mainstream sites of memory. Terence Turner suggests that most of Indigenous films have one common characteristic – they “focus on aspects of the life of contemporary indigenous communities that are most directly continuous with the indigenous cultural past” (77). He insists that “[i]t is often undertaken by indigenous video-makers for the purpose of documenting that past to preserve it for future generations of their own peoples” (Turner 77). Furthermore, according to Ginsburg, Indigenous filmmakers create what she terms “screen memories,” which aim to recover Indigenous peoples’ collective histories, that have been left out of the “national narratives of the dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten within local worlds as well” (“Screen Memories” 40). As Leuthold puts it, Native documentaries “represent what has been lost; what may be regained; and what has been transformed into present realities” (“Representing Truth” 35). Therefore, the Creek community’s participation in creating of Harjo’s film and their will to memorialize hymns as vital depositories of history and culture for future generations makes the documentary a metaphorical Creek site of memory.

As a site of memory that preserves culturally vital elements for the Creek community, the documentary also works as a counter-memory to the American narrative that excludes Indigenous contribution to music history. Harjo claims that one of the purposes of his documentary is to

discover their hidden history. His documentary argues for the Muscogee hymns to be considered vital part of the American music history, thus negotiating the colonial metanarrative for inclusion and rewriting the narrative of cultural erasure. He explains that the songs have a rich history of three cultures coming together, and they “echo throughout our community; they echo throughout our stories, and as long as we keep telling them, they will always be here, in death, in worship, in sadness, and in joy, encouraging us.” (*This May Be the Last Time*). Dr. Hugh W. Foley, Jr., one of Harjo’s interviewees, a professor of fine arts and the author of the *Oklahoma Music Guide II* on New Forums Press, argues that the Muscogee hymns are truly the first American music, the existence of which has been left out of the grand narrative, “written out of the history of American music” (*This May Be the Last Time*). In a way, the hymns memorialize Muscogee history, contact with the Europeans, and later with African slaves, as well as attest to the history of colonization and perseverance on the part of the Native nation. According to the documentary, the Muscogee practice of singing has an undeniable resemblance with line singing which is characteristic of Scottish hymns and is also practiced by religious groups in Kentucky and Alabama. Historically, Scottish missionaries, who were sent to civilize the tribes, brought their style of singing called lining out style to North America. Muscogee hymns developed in the context of such missionary work. This style of singing showing up in a variety of communities attests to the intermixing and mingling of people. The fact that it has survived for so long and is still recognizable is the proof of cultural continuity and perseverance.

In one of his interviews, Harjo confesses that the documentary is titled after his grandmother’s favorite hymn “This may be the last time, we don’t know.” In the documentary, Harjo explains that his grandmother grew up with this song and believed it to be Muskogee. Yet, the hymn originated as a slave spiritual in 1800s and went through gospel and blues adaptations. There is no record of when the hymn was first sung in Muskogee, but it has maintained its original form since that time. In fact, Harjo admits that his grandmother was the inspiration for

the documentary. When he first left home, his grandmother sent him a letter advising to “write a story about some of these Indian churches around here” (*Interview with Writer/Director*). Harjo felt the world she was referring to was truly unique and merited its own story. He recollects,

if you know those Indian Christian churches where I am from, it is such an interesting different world because they are kind of mixed with medicine and traditions and they are just as sacred as the traditional site, and a lot of people do both, and they’re always out in the woods and there’s just such a history to them, and a light and a darkness to them, and ... it inspired me to realize that oh people could be interested about where I am from.”

(*Interview with Writer/Director*)

While the hymns discussed in the film are a product of historic encounters and changes, they are truly unique, as well as the world they create. Before the Removal of the Muscogee-Creek nation to Indian territory, some adopted Christianity and developed the hymns discussed in Harjo’s documentary. Alvin, one of the interviewees, explains that although the missionaries tried to make his people give up their traditional beliefs, many Native Americans integrated them into their practice of Christianity. This is obvious in the layout of the church which resembles that of the ceremonial grounds. “The hymns originally were a tool of assimilation, designed to rid Native nations of their Indianness and break the community, but instead,” as one of the interviewees points out,

they transform all the things thrown at them and make them into instruments [of] Indianness. So, the hymns become Muscogee; they become Creek, even though they were intended to be something else. Those hymns are all about survival because they are taking something that is introduced from the outside, in fact, taking Christianity, which in some sense was designed to break the community, and they are taking them and transforming them into something that sustains community, and twisting it around, taking

its meaning and making into entirely something else. You might say that's kind of like a metaphor for everything that happens. (*This May Be the Last Time*)

Harjo is certain that Muscogee-Creek ceremonial songs have had an influence on Muscogee-Creek Christian hymns because the mixing of Christianity with ceremonial grounds is quite visible in the tribal practice of Christianity. Here, we come back to Posey's idea of "Transforming Indian" (Szeghi 3-4), which proves to be an essential characteristic of the Creek nation as it is rather distinct in the film, similarly to Fux Fixico letters. Posey believed in Creek adaptability that the nation exhibited throughout its history, as also attested to by Harjo's interviewee. The idea of the "Transforming Indian" opposes the stereotype of the vanishing Indian, who either dies off because of their inability to accept change or assimilates without a trace. As evidenced by the Creek hymns and suggested by Harjo's interviewees and Posey's letters, the Creek nation successfully participated in selective appropriation of other cultures without losing its Creek cultural essence, but asserting and strengthening it over time.

Harjo argues that the hymns contain a history lesson about Removal in them as well. There are a number of songs that address this time period in Muscogee-Creek history. Some of the songs people sang on the Trail of Tears were traditional Muscogee songs, others were Christian songs written in the Muscogee language. The songs commemorate the ordeals of the Muscogee-Creek people. In these songs, "people refer to the river as the river of death" (*This May Be the Last Time*) because thousands died on the way to Indian Territory and many drowned in the river. Harjo narrates,

Many of the hymns you hear talk about a journey. There's a spiritual journey of going to an afterlife, but then there's the actual physical journey of the Trail of Tears. They say things like 'I will see my family when I get to heaven' or 'I will see my loved ones when I get to the new land.' They took people in different groups on the trail, sometimes

splitting families apart. Heaven or the new land is sometimes code for the end of the Trail of Tears. They longed to reach Indian territory and be reunited with their loved ones.

*(This May Be the Last Time)*

One of Harjo's interviewees explains that songs were a way to resist and persevere on the Trail of Tears when people felt powerless. He tells a story of the soldiers raping a woman, who belonged to one of the men in the shackles. The man starts singing because he can not do anything to help it, but he also knows he can not give up. Jimmy Anderson, another tribal member, explains that when tribes finally made it to Indian territory, they had nothing there, so these songs represented hope and assurance and gave people comfort.

The documentary argues that while these songs help people persevere and symbolize hope that things can and will change for the better, they also have healing power. Joy Harjo, urges that these songs are especially powerful because "they carry the grief, but they also carry this great love of . . . the creator or however you say the word" *(This May Be the Last Time)*. Within them, the hymns contain coping mechanisms that prompt people to attempt forgiveness (as one of the interviews puts it), although "forgiveness sometimes takes a lifetime." So, on the one hand, the songs speak of the historic trauma experienced by the Muscogee-Creek nation, but also serve as a mnemonic device of Creek culture and traditions.



## CHAPTER IV

### REMEMBER YOUR KIN: JOY HARJO'S *CRAZY BRAVE* AS A SITE OF MEMORY

As discussed in the Introduction and previous chapters, individual bodies themselves may pose as sites of memories. Traditional storytellers in Native cultures are undoubtedly such a case, although they seem to have a difference with the Western understanding of an individual body as a site of memory as their communities in fact perceive them to be vessels for kinship memory and a mnemonic device for future generations. In the previous two chapters, I posited that Alexander Posey's characters (as well as Posey himself) and Sterlin Harjo take on roles of traditional storytellers, thus drawing attention to the importance of storytelling as a means of transmission of kinship memory and the storyteller as a vessel of kinship memory. This idea is ever more explicit in Indigenous life writing. While it is only mildly suggested that Alexander Posey and Sterlin Harjo are traditional storytellers (one has to look for clues), Harjo's memoir explicitly focuses on the author's quest for her storyteller voice. Her opinion about the importance of storytellers and storytelling as a means to keep memory is obvious throughout the memoir. In search of her voice, she brings together stories of her ancestors and peers, family members, members of other Native nations, historic events and movement, along with her personal experiences creating multiple layers that characterize her narrative. To reconnect with her Creekness and shape her individual identity, Harjo defines herself through her relationships and reaches out to kinship memories contained in other Native sites of memory, such as paintings, oral tradition, and others. In such

manner, her storyteller persona becomes an embodiment of kinship memory. Joy Harjo is a prominent Creek writer, artist, and educator, who is also known to be a feminist and a proponent of social justice. It is impossible to talk about Creek literature and not discuss Joy Harjo. Much has been written about Harjo's poetry, yet her memoir *Crazy Brave* adds to the story of her authorship while following the tradition of Indigenous life writing, in the footsteps of N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko. In this chapter, I suggest focusing on the memoir and how Harjo employs sites of memory of the Creek nation to construct both her identity as a Creek and her authorial voice.

Remembrance is one of the most prominent themes in Harjo's work; so, I will investigate how Harjo uses kinship memory to shape her individual identity through her relationships with ancestors, her surroundings, the spiritual realm, and her inner self. The author lays out the journey to her individual voice by calling to such Creek sites of memory as paintings and historic figures, as well as family history. I argue that Harjo identifies herself as a vessel of sorts, absorbing collective memories of the Creek nation and becoming a storyteller whose purpose is to pass them on. In such manner, her persona becomes a site of memory. Her memoir then functions as a complex web of kinship and personal memories that intertwine in moments vital for Harjo's journey as a storyteller and become vital for her life story. Therefore, I posit that *Crazy Brave* is an example of the fluidity between individual and kinship memory. In a way, Harjo relives some historic Creek experiences by internalizing kinship memories and making them a part of her individual self and her own lived experiences. Simultaneously, she makes her personal experiences part of the larger story as many of her generation have had lived through similar events and can relate to Harjo's personal narrative. Additionally, like Alexander Posey and Sterlin Harjo's work, I propose that the kinship memory Harjo's text forges is revisionary to the American settler-colonial mnemonic narrative concerning Indigenous peoples and functions as a counter-memory. It achieves this purpose by providing a Creek perspective on some historical

events and figures of significance to the Creek culture and by discussing issues Indigenous peoples had to face in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### FINDING INDIVIDUAL VOICE THROUGH KINSHIP

It is important to note right away that the memoir is multilayered and multivocal, like much of Harjo's work<sup>5</sup>; consideration of these two characteristics of Harjo's work is vital to its careful reading. It seems Harjo's memoir and the way she fashions her identity through the multiplicity of voices and stories has similarities with Silko's *Storyteller*. When discussing its polyphonic nature, Krupat duly points out that Silko makes sure "to indicate how even her own individual speech is the product of many voices" ("The Dialogic" 60). Krupat further elaborates, "*Storyteller* is presented as a strongly polyphonic text in which the author defines herself – finds her voice, tells her life, illustrates the capacities of her vocation – in relation to the voices of other native and nonnative storytellers, tale tellers and book writers, and even to the voices of those who serve as the (by-no-means silent) audience for these stories" ("The Dialogic" 60). In other words, *Crazy Brave* has multiple threads that one can pull to investigate different layers, such as ancestral voices, the story of being an Indigenous woman in the 20th century, historical trauma, boarding schools' legacy, Institute of American Indian Arts, Federal Indian policies, and others. The main thread of the memoir, which is the most prominent one that requires no particular digging, is the narrator's coming-of-age-like quest for her voice. It is a story of how Joy Harjo became a poet. Harjo defines this journey to finding her voice through her relationships and clearly identifies Muscogee Creek heritage as one of the most defining factors. More importantly, she views her voice as a means to continue telling the multiple stories of her generation, Native people, and her community in particular.

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion of these two characteristics in Harjo's poetry see Lang.

Muscogee traditional beliefs define the structure of the memoir as well, which is shaped by the four cardinal directions. Each chapter of the memoir, East, North, West, and South, represents an era of sorts in Harjo's life, just like cardinal directions represent cycles of life (birth, growth, death, and rebirth) for the Muscogee-Creek. According to Chaudhuri et al., the Creek conception of self includes "four external sacred paths, each with its own values, sometimes represented with colors" (53). Almost like a ceremony, through the cardinal directions, the memoir takes on a more Muscogee traditional shape, starting in the East with the rising sun. Such circular organization allows Harjo both to resist the traditional western notion of linearity of the narrative and simultaneously defines her work as distinctly Muscogee-Creek.

Before Harjo starts each section, she identifies the character of each direction. Because East is where the sun rises, it is associated with birth and rebirth, innocence and childhood, as well as illumination and learning new things. For Harjo, East is "the direction of beginnings" and her origins, both literal birth and cultural roots. Here, she establishes her tribal ties by identifying that East is the direction of Oklahoma, "the direction of the Creek Nation" (*Crazy Brave* 15). Immediately, Harjo determines her belonging and place in the world. Although her journey throughout the memoir takes away from the Creek nation, she reconnects with her Creekness through kinship. In the East section, Harjo recounts her pre-birth story, her ancestors, and her entrance into the world.

Harjo's journey through all the chapters is always defined by kinship, by her relationships with family members, ancestors, tribal heritage, the pan-Indian community, the artistic community, and the universe in general. Yet, it is in the East where she clearly marks kinship as the main characteristic that defines her being and her journey and suggests that her memoir should be seen through the lens of kinship. She writes, "We enter into a family story, and then other stories based on tribal clans, on tribal towns and nations, lands, countries, planetary systems, and universes" (*Crazy Brave* 20). Harjo explains to her reader that the individual is

defined through relationships, which underscores the relationality in the text and sets up a particular lens of Indigenous worldview through which Harjo sees herself and invites the audience to attempt the reading of the text. Harjo urges that every person's spirit is mediated through its relationship to members of the family, ancestors, and place (*Crazy Brave* 26-7). She further explains: "A story matrix connects all of us. There are rules, processes, and circles of responsibility in this world. And the story begins exactly where it is supposed to begin. We cannot skip any part" (*Crazy Brave* 28). While implanting the belief of interconnectedness that should guide her reader through the experience of the text, Harjo simultaneously draws attention to the organization of her work stressing that every part, i.e. every story, poem, piece of memory appears where it belongs, and although consisting of a variety of "memories," should be read as one whole through the lens of kinship. Through such claim, Harjo emphasizes both the relationality and causality of her narrative.

In the East, Harjo establishes her identity through her parents by recounting their origins, her mother's Cherokee lineage (she hears Cherokee stompdancers in the distance), and her father's tribal leadership kin (Monahwee, Samuel Checotah, and Osceola) (*Crazy Brave* 19-21). Yet, Harjo also acknowledges that there are many more voices resounding in her work, some of which she recounts throughout her journey, and all the names connect to certain places: "Each name is a tributary to many others, to many places" (*Crazy Brave* 21). She channels these names and places:

I see the spirit of New Orleans and hear the singing of the spirit of Congo Square. Congo Square was originally a southeastern Indian ceremonial ground. It became a meeting place for tribal peoples, Africans, and their European friends, lovers, and families. They gathered there to dance, to enjoy the music and the food wrapped in cloths and gourds they brought to share. This was a place of gossip, news, philosophy, and history. (*Crazy Brave* 21)

From the first pages of the memoir, to define her self, Harjo refers to people and places that are vital not only for her personal family history, but also for tribal history and could be considered Creek sites of memory (both metaphorical and geographical), thus shaping herself into a conduit for Creek kinship memory that connects many and pulls various story lines into one intricate design. Harjo's individual memories become inseparable from the voice of kinship memory that guides her writing, and at times, it is difficult to tell one from the other. The East section focuses on Harjo's parents, who are also largely defined through their relationships and roots, although have their own characteristics as well. Here, Harjo takes on the role of the storyteller right away as she claims she was able to wander through story realms until she started public school (*Crazy Brave* 46). Her ability to intertwine her own lived experiences with history, past experiences of the Creek community, spiritual beliefs, and oral tradition certainly allow us to define her as such and consider her text a metaphorical site of Creek kinship memory.

In Harjo's narrative, North follows East thus setting the story in counterclockwise motion. The counterclockwise direction is symbolic. According to Howe, many ceremonial dances of the tribes of the Southeast, as well as traditional ball games, are performed in the counterclockwise direction imitating the movement of water and wind in Northern hemisphere, thus showing respect for the forces of nature and simultaneously admitting interconnectedness of things in the universe ("Embodied Tribalography" 75-93). Jean Chaudhuri and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri add that such direction of dances imitates counterclockwise motion of the sun around the earth (8). Muscogee-Creek stomp dance is performed counterclockwise for this reason as the ceremonial fire of the stomp dance symbolizes the sun. It is a "healing tradition . . . [that] links clans with a multitribal community that shares beliefs and values" (Snodgrass 297). Chaudhuri et al. explain that the stomp dances performed in a traditional Creek ceremonial ground symbolize "cultural reaffirmation, despite the loss of lands, and are community social cultural, and religious events;" they are a celebration of Creek traditional values (52). Nene Hutke, a non-profit

organization dedicated to maintaining Muskogee traditions, further explains that the reason Muskogee-Creek stomp dance goes counterclockwise is to maintain balance with the universe, “balance with other people, with the natural world about them, with the spiritual and the secular, and with the Creator himself” (Taylor and Kendrick). This balance is of vital importance. When dancers move counterclockwise, their left side, the side of the heart, is turned to the fire, where the Creator is believed to reside during the dance. Furthermore, “concepts of community, spiritual renewal, reaffirmation of equality and freedom, the blending of the four physical elements of nature, the four mind/spirits, the energy of Ibofanga<sup>6</sup>, the role differentiations, and the revisiting of the entire creation myth are all blended into the contemporary, traditional Creek stomp” (Chaudhuri et al. 52-3). Because Harjo’s memoir is focused on kinship and the community and wanders between the physical and the spiritual realm while relying heavily on Creek oral tradition, we could interpret it as a metaphorical stomp dance, in which Harjo acknowledges all the sources that combine to shape her identity as a Creek and attempts to find balance.

North is old age and wisdom. Sometimes it also means survival, either physical or mental “against loneliness and depression, keeping our spirit and heart strong” (“The Four”). Harjo defines North as “the direction where difficult teachers live” and the direction of prophecy (*Crazy Brave* 55). The section commences with Harjo’s poem which opens with “And whom do I call my enemy?”, which sounds ominous<sup>7</sup> (*Crazy Brave* 56). The point of transition from East to North is Harjo’s mother taking a white husband who married her in a ceremony in which the children did not participate. On the opening page of the section, Harjo narrates that they had to move to a different, alien places, away “from our childhood home with its familiar trees, plants, and creatures. We left our friends, our school, and the memories that were rooted there” (*Crazy*

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<sup>6</sup> In Creek beliefs, Ibofanga is “all the manifestations of energy . . . combined into one single entity, a microscopic atom, . . . the most sacred thing, . . . which covers everything and within which both rest and motion exist” (Chaudhuri et al. 23).

<sup>7</sup> In the poem, Harjo says “I turn in the direction of the sun and keep walking,” which supports the theory that her memory moves in counterclockwise direction following motion of the sun.

*Brave 57*). Such forced alienation and uprootedness characterizes the section. Without the kinship ties that Harjo established in the first section, she struggles to survive in the North. In the house where they settled, on “Independence” Street, Harjo experiences only “nightmares and premonitions of evil” (*Crazy Brave 57*). She calls this house a house of “bad spirits and pain” (59).

Oppressive influence of the stepfather defines most of the North section. Harjo writes that she imagines “this place in the story a long silence. It is an eternity of gray skies” (*Crazy Brave 63*). This chapter covers the period of late elementary school through adolescence. In the South, Harjo described her experiences with music as almost sacred; it was also her mother’s song that coaxed her spirit into being born. The stepfather stifles both Harjo’s and her mother’s voices when he forbids any music or singing in the house. The stepfather plays the role of forced assimilation, a story too familiar to many Indigenous families. He stifles Harjo’s storytellers voice and forces her to forget her Creek ways. For instance, she tells a story of a kissing fish that she kept as a pet, which kept flipping itself out. Once, while cleaning, Harjo accidentally stepped on the fish, which when returned to water, “floated on its side, nearly dead” (64). Harjo prayed for the life of the fish and felt both the fish’s heart and her heart open. When she looked at the fish again, it was healthy. Harjo writes, “In that small moment, I felt the presence of the sacred, a force as real and apparent as anything else in the world, present and alive, as if it were breathing. I wanted to catch hold, to remember utterly and never forget” (64). Yet, she further explains that fear of her stepfather and being too focused in the hard reality of her life made her continue on her “path of forgetfulness” (64). For a moment, Harjo reconnected with her kinship, her Creek identity which felt the spirit of Ibofanga, yet was not able to maintain it due to outside forces.

The teenage years described in the North, the period of individual identity formation and personal voice, are overcast with the state of prey into which Harjo’s stepfather forces the narrator. In this section, Harjo goes through sexual awakening, the privacy of which is violated by



the stepfather, further alienating her from her voice. Harjo's stepfather finds her hidden diary and reads it aloud to the whole family. Because of this humiliating experience, Harjo swears to herself she would "never write anything again" (70). Harjo seeks escape from home which has become a prison, where the only movement possible is movement within the mind. She finds this escape in drinking as it helps her not to care. After the incident when Harjo's stepfather makes her mother play Russian roulette, Harjo considers running away, but is stopped by the knowing, which saves her life. The knowing is Harjo's way to reconnect with her Creeknness, to remember who she is and what principles should guide her life: "the knowing was my rudder, a shimmer of intelligent light, unerring in the midst of this destructive, terrible, and beautiful life. It is a strand of the divine, a pathway for the ancestors and teachers who love us" (81). When she starts listening to her knowing, Harjo is able to find a different passage out of the silence, the Institute of American Indian Arts, where she is able to establish a different kind of kinship, a new pan-tribal kinship with other Native students based on their common lived experiences and traumas. In her review of *Crazy Brave*, Elizabeth Wilkinson notes that "North" is one of the more interesting chapters in the memoir as it allows readers an insight into Harjo's experience at the Institute of American Indian Art and the historic period of 1960's (Wilkinson). Yet, largely this section is about abuse and trauma, loss of cultural belonging, loss of kinship and its effects, loss of Harjo's storyteller voice.

West often represents darkness, but also contemplation of the self, an ability to accept yourself for who you are. Harjo characterizes West as "the direction of endings. . . . the direction of tests. It represents leaving and being left and learning to find the road in the darkness" (*Crazy Brave* 109). On the one hand, in this chapter Harjo briefly finds family in the theater troupe, with which she toured in the Pacific Southwest: "Most of all I remember the troupe as a creative, coherent family. Each of us was young, with tremendous personal, familial, and historical dysfunctions and gifts" (115). In the troupe, she finds kinship she is longing for and a sense of

belonging, but it is short lived. To avoid loneliness, she married a fellow Cherokee student, with whom they try to establish kinship based on the fact that they might have some very distant relatives in common. Yet that kinship also proves false when Harjo gives birth to their son alone in the hospital and feels isolated: “I felt alone. I had no family with me to acknowledge the birth” (122). Harjo feels disconnected during the birth, which she calls one of the most sacred acts of our lives. She confesses: “sacredness appeared to be far from my labor room in the Indian hospital. It was difficult to bear the actuality of it, and to bear it alone” (123). Through the memories Harjo narrates in the West, she appeals to the larger Indigenous audience who can relate to her experiences of poverty, white hostility against Native people, forced sterilization and others, which I will discuss later in this chapter. Through these memories, Harjo establishes a kind of pan-Indian kinship with her audience, which makes her memoir not only a Creek metaphorical site of memory, but also a site of memory of Federal Indian policies of a part of the twentieth century.

Although West seems to suck Harjo in, Harjo’s “abandoned dreams” do not let her live in the West for too long; they chase her on into the South. Her dreams cause racket in her soul, as she puts it, and speak to her: “they wanted form; line, story, and melody and did not understand why I had made this unnecessary detour” (*Crazy Brave* 135). Although at this point in the narrative, Harjo has not found her voice yet, the language she uses to describe her dreams already implies that the voice for which she is searching will have melody, rhythm, form, and story. As Harjo transitions into the South by leaving her first husband and going to college, she moves closer to uncovering her potential and finding the voice she needs to be able to live and tell stories that demand to be told. South represents youthfulness, full strength of life, and preparation for the future. According to Potawatomi, “The South is also a place of the heart, of generosity, of sensitivity to the feelings of others, of loyalty and love. The most difficult and valuable gift to be sought in the South is the capacity to express feelings openly and freely in a way that does not

hurt others” (“The Four”). Although the chapter on South is one of the shorter chapters in the memoir, this period of life is the longest for Harjo. The chapter ends with the author’s entering into poetry and finding her voice of expression, which was the purpose of the journey portrayed in the text. However, it is only in the “Afterword” that Harjo finds peace and love that South represents. Only then, in a canoe off the shore of O’ahu, she is finally able to let go of all the remnants of panic that used to haunt her. She writes: “I let it go in beauty, with love, in the spirit of *vnyketkv*, aloha or compassion. I let my thoughts of forgiveness for myself and for others in the story follow the waves of the ocean in prayer” (*Crazy Brave* 165). She is finally able to embrace herself and others and find peace with her feelings, and thus complete the healing ceremony of the memoir.

Throughout the memoir, Harjo draws her identity from her familial and tribal relations often by reaching into Muscogee Creek oral tradition. On one occasion, she recollects an “ancient memory” (which can be interpreted as a dream) she experiences in her thirties of her father and herself trying to escape a volcano eruption. She then explains that one version of the Muscogee creation story included a volcano. She references a medicine maker of her town who claimed that at that time several Hawaiian canoes joined their tribe and moved with them in the direction of the Southeast to more stable lands (30-31). She concludes that ancestors accompany every soul when it is born, “usually it is an ancestor with whom that child shares traits and gifts” (31). Harjo further explains that she always feels the presence of her guardian who reminds her “of those older generations of Creek people who stayed close to the teachings, like my cousin John Jacobs of Holdenville, my beloved aunt Lois Harjo Ball, and George and Stella Coser, Sr. They speak softly, with kindness. . . . All I have to do is remember them, and they stand in memory in a kind light” (31). Thus, Harjo reinforces the importance of kinship memory for her.

Harjo refers to her ancestors repeatedly, as to sites of memory that help her define her identity. She acknowledges her ancestors throughout the memoir on multiple occasions,

especially Monahwee, her father's grandfather, "six generations back on his mother's side" (*Crazy Brave* 21), one of the leaders of the Red Stick War; Samuel Checotah, another grandfather; and Osceola, the Seminole leader, whom Harjo calls "our uncle" (*Crazy Brave* 21). Some of her ancestors, Monahwee and Osceola in particular, are historic figures who can be considered national Creek sites of memory. Yet, it is important to note that Harjo feels her ties to the non-Creek ancestors as well, whom she acknowledges and incorporates into her identity without reservations. For instance, reflecting on her ancestors, Harjo "sees" Polly Coppinger, Osceola's mother and "sees" her African ancestors:

They gave me a doorway in a dream one night when I was in my very early thirties. It was a waking dream. I was in a village in West Africa. It was another time. I was wrapped in a mat after fasting for several days. I was carried through several realms and saw many things. I was gone for many weeks. Yet I returned the next morning as a young woman with two children living in an apartment in Santa Fe. Some things I remember and some things continue to be kept from me. (*Crazy Brave* 21-2)

In her dreams, Harjo is able to experience "memories" of all of her ancestors, the ones she is related to both directly and indirectly. Their experiences make her who she is, and she does not shy away from them because even when these ancestors are not Native, that does not make her less Creek. Similar to her dreams of her Hawaiian and African ancestors, Harjo sees her white ones as well when she narrates her pre-birth existence as mere spirit in the ancestor realm:

I heard the soul that was to be my mother call out in a heartbreak ballad. I saw her walking the floor after midnight. . . . I heard Cherokee stomp dancers in the distance. They were her mother's people. They danced under the stars until the light of dawn. I saw a young Irishman cross over waters, forced by politics and poverty. He married into the

Cherokee people. He is one of her ancestors. Over in the east I saw a hill above the river.

There was my mother's dream house. (*Crazy Brave* 19)

Harjo's use of dreams as memories may, at least partially, account for what some scholars call the mythic quality of her voice. Harjo travels through many realms in her writing, as evidenced by the passage discussed above. In this vein, Harjo opens her memoir not with the event of her birth, but with her journey through the spiritual realm to her mother, describing why her spirit was drawn to her parents and portraying her birth as a conscious decision to enter the physical world.

Dreams allow Harjo to see vital connections on several occasions, connections that establish ties between past, present, and future. For instance, Harjo recollects the dream she had of her daughter, Rainy Dawn, before she was born, asking her mother to give birth to her. In the dream, her daughter first appeared to her as a baby and then as an adult woman. Harjo includes the poem, "Rainy Dawn," she wrote for her daughter, in which she memorialized the event of her birth. Unlike her son's birth when Harjo felt alone and uprooted in strange territory, Rainy Dawn's birth was not isolated as Harjo stood with her daughter "poised at that door from the east, listened for a long time / to the sound of our grandmother's voices / the brushing wind of sacred wings" (*Crazy Brave* 147). Rainy Dawn was born into her relations, into the ancestral web of being. She was not just an individual, but a product of her relatives and already at birth carried the responsibility of keeping their memory. Harjo writes to her daughter:

I had to participate in the dreaming of you into memory,  
cupped your head in the bowl of my body  
as ancestors lined up to give you a name made of their dreams  
cast once more  
into this stew of precious spirit and flesh. (*Crazy Brave* 148)

Harjo suggests that upon her birth, her daughter became linked to kinship memory at once. She became its embodiment through the naming ceremony in which her ancestors participated. Yet at the same time she was expected to carry it on and fulfill the responsibility of being their memory and continuation. Her existence was already part of kinship memory as tribal history. In other words, Rainy Dawn, like her mother, became memory in the flesh.

In the poem “Rainy Dawn,” Harjo speaks about the creative act of dreaming someone into memory, which leads us to assume that remembering is a creative act and engages all senses. For Harjo, painting is a kind of creative act that triggers experiences of kinship memory, through which she learns about her relations. Harjo explains that through painting she was able to get closer to her ancestors, in particular her grandmother Naomi Harjo Foster, who died long before Harjo was born. Harjo recalls:

I felt close to my ancestors when I painted. . . . I began to know [grandmother] within the memory of my hands as they sketched. Bones have consciousness. Within marrow is memory. I heard her soft voice and saw where my father got his sensitive, dreaming eyes. Like her, he did not like the hard edges of earth existence. He drank to soften them. She painted to make a doorway between realms. (*Crazy Brave* 148)

Harjo draws parallels between her grandmother and her father and her grandmother and herself. Her father and her grandmother not only had physical resemblance, which Harjo learns and studies by painting her grandmother’s eyes, but also experienced life in similar ways, although they coped with “earth existence” differently. The act of painting as knowing and experiencing draws Harjo closer to Naomi Harjo Foster as she uses the same medium to create ties and open connections not only to her immediate relatives, but also tribal history and experiences. Like her grandmother, Harjo uses painting “to make a doorway between realms.” She confesses that she would often draw or paint at night “when most of the world slept and it was easier to walk

through the membrane between life and death to bring back memory” (*Crazy Brave* 150). Through the creative process, Harjo is able to connect to kinship memory and become its embodiment.

As mentioned above, channeling a multiplicity of voices guides Harjo on her journey to discovering her personal voice. Her memories take root in multiple sources, “on a continuum within a metaphysical world that begins deep within [Harjo’s] personal psyche and simultaneously moves back into past memories of her Creek (Muskogee) heritage, as well as forward into current pan-tribal experiences and the assimilationist, Anglo-dominated world of much contemporary Native American life” (Lang 41). All of these sources form her individual memories and individual voice. Harjo claims that without memory “one has no authentic voice . . . and without an authentic voice, one is speechless, hardly human, and unable to survive for very long” (Lang 49). Voice is vital for Harjo because it is a means of articulating memories, i.e. existing, and, more importantly, a way to express her relations and articulate both her personal experiences and those of her peers and ancestors. Finding her voice in poetry offered Harjo a means to tell Muskogee stories and the ability to convert the traumatic memories of her childhood and adolescence into narrative memories.

Acquiring a particular mode of speech expressed in her individual poetic voice enabled Harjo to overcome the chaos of the survival mode she was forced into and initiate a healing process through organized narrative. Therefore, it is not surprising Harjo has a special relationship with poetry, which is prominent in the memoir as she includes multiple poems of special significance to her. In the memoir, Harjo depicts poetry as a spirit that communicates with her. Her treatment of poetry is rooted in Creek worldview that admits agency to more than human beings. Harjo claims that the spirit of poetry found her in her dream and reached out as she “stood there at the doorway between panic and love” (*Crazy Brave* 162). She further informs the reader that the spirit of poetry saved her by teaching her how to listen, speak, and sing because she did

not possess any of these skills until her encounter with it. She explains: “I had come this far without the elegance of speech. I didn’t have the physical handicap of stuttering, but I could not speak coherently. I stuttered in my mind. I could not express my perception of the sacred. . . . I wanted the intricate and metaphorical language of my ancestors to pass through to my language, my life” (*Crazy Brave* 164). The language Harjo implies here is the language that gives the ability to establish ties, express emotions, create a web of being, and reflect upon one’s own self as well as one’s place in the community. In Harjo’s case, it is also the language that provides freedom and allows her to serve as a storyteller for the Creek nation.

#### EMBODYING MEMORY, SPEAKING IN KINSHIP VOICES

Indeed, Harjo’s memoir tells more than just the story of her personal experiences; it is bursting with an array of stories of her ancestors and peers, family members, historic events, members of other Native nations, etc, which find their way into language through Harjo’s voice and are intertwined in what she calls, in her poem “Returning from the Enemy,” “the knot of memory,” which it is time to unwind. She contemplates: “As I write this I hear the din of voices of so many people, and so many stories that want to come forth” (*Crazy Brave* 21). Harjo makes her persona a vessel for memory the one that absorbs all the voices and stories in order to be able to preserve them in the memory of the Creek nation. Valenzuela-Mendoza duly points out that the memoir centers on the role of remembering, both individual and communal, for cultural continuity and “demonstrates the significance of personal memory when it comes to lived experience” (232). She claims that Harjo’s poetics in *Crazy Brave* maintains a “deep concern for the preservation of memory through a specific, personalized lens” working against loss of memory which would lead to loss of culture (230). Valenzuela-Mendoza insists that the memoir’s purpose is “to preserve the personal story of Joy Harjo, which lies within a larger milieu of Muskogee and Native American histories” (232). I would even argue that to Harjo, the larger



context of Muscogee culture and Native American histories are more important than her personal story as she does not separate herself from the collective.

In this respect, the memoir takes form of stories within stories within a story, centering the Native American tradition of storytelling. The borders between all stories, culturally significant stories, stories of ancestors, spirits, Harjo's contemporaries, family members, and her personal experiences are permeable. The boundaries between the personal and the communal collapse allowing them to seep into each other. As discussed in earlier chapters, this is often characteristic of traditional storytellers who internalize stories of their tribes, thus erasing the boundaries between their personal and tribal histories. In such manner, the storyteller becomes a vessel for kinship memory of their culture. While examining the function of memory in Harjo's poetry, Janice May Gould suggests that for the poet "[m]emory is something larger than the individual" (78). Memory uses the individual as its host; the body "brings it forward, but memory does not begin or end in an individual's birth or death. Rather, the individual may serve as a place of connection and knowledge between the personal and collective past, present, and future" (Gould 78-79). Such interconnectedness is the essence of kinship. Leslie Ullman writes about Harjo's role as a storyteller: "her stance is not so much that of a representative of a culture as it is the more generative one of a storyteller whose stories resurrect memory, myth, and private struggles that have been overlooked, and who thus restores vitality to the culture at large" (180). This makes Harjo's memoir ever more significant. The author herself stresses the power of language and utterance and suggests that "there's power in speaking, there's power in thinking, and in dreaming and remembering, because it makes energy . . . And every time you think, dream, speak, or write of someone or something, it gives power and makes connections" (Harjo, *Soul Talk* 12). She implies that if one person remembers, the whole tribe remembers. Eloisa Valenzuela-Mendoza suggests that Joy Harjo "creates a work promoting Native memory and story as central to the resurgence of the individual, the community, and the nation" (259). The

stories narrated in the memoir not only connect Harjo to her heritage, but also forge ties among the stories themselves, the characters in the stories and the communities.

As a storyteller, Harjo is able to incorporate memories of her ancestors, specific historic events and figures of some importance to the Muscogee Creek into her own being in order to be able to pass them on to others and serve as a mnemonic device. She is an embodiment of her ancestors securing their continuity. She understands and honors that “these people, our ancestors, want to be recognized; they want to be remembered” (*Crazy Brave* 21). Harjo recognizes her responsibility to pass the kinship memory on by claiming, “My generation is now the door to memory. This is why I am remembering” (*Crazy Brave* 21). In her memoir, she writes: “I was entrusted with carrying voices, songs, and stories to grow and release into the world, to be of assistance and inspiration. These were my responsibility” (*Crazy Brave* 20). In an interview with Helen Jaskoski, Harjo explains that she feels that “part of what [she does] as a writer, part responsibility, is to be one of those who help people remember” (12). She writes “for a larger community, with a sense of who [she is] and where [she] came from – that spirit of history” (Jaskoski 8). She carries the responsibility to pass on the stories. She lives through the memories she narrates and makes them her own regardless of whether they originated with her. In such a manner, for instance, she is able to become her grandfather at the Battle of Horseshoe Band. She writes about her vision of the battle: “This vision could have been a memory curled in my DNA. The story of my grandfather Monahwee and the people at the Battle of Horseshoe Band was horrific and it made a deep groove in the family and tribal memory” (*Crazy Brave* 28). The latter is part of tribal kinship memory that forged tribal identity, and Harjo is able to access it and become its voice.

Similar to Alexander Posey and Sterlin Harjo, Joy Harjo relies on oral tradition as a site of kinship memory, which defines her as a writer and which she feels obligated to preserve. For instance, on one occasion she retells a traditional trickster story about Rabbit and his unfortunate

creation clay man who becomes greedy and takes over everything in the world. According to the story, this is the time when Muscogee people started forgetting their stories and songs and losing their connection to ancestors. This trickster story, in which Rabbit's trick backfires, is anchored to Harjo's contemplation that her father and she had lost the way, like many tribal members who forgot traditions, but some "hid out and carried the fire of the songs and stories so we could continue the culture" (*Crazy Brave* 28). Although Harjo says that she had lost the way because she was weak and a female Indian born "in the lands that were stolen," once she relays the trickster story, she becomes one of those carrying the tradition forward into the future. She fashions her self as one of tribal cultural keepers.

Earlier, I spoke about Harjo's creative acts of painting as a means of evoking kinship memory for the purpose of shaping her individual identity. Yet, it is also necessary to discuss how such creative acts may reimagine sites of memory for the larger community and establish kinship among generations. Harjo argues that painting to her is an act of creation, which has the power to bring someone or something into existence. Just like speaking, it is an act of remembering and memorializing. As she paints her grandmother, she claims:

As I moved pencil across paper and brush across canvas, my grandmother existed again. She was as present as these words. . . . [Naomi] exists in me now, just as I will and already do within my grandchildren. No one ever truly dies. The desires of our hearts make a path. We create legacy with our thoughts and dreams. This legacy either will give those who follow us joy on their road or will give them sorrow. (*Crazy Brave* 149)

She performs this act of creation the same way her grandmother copied the 1838 lithograph of Harjo's uncle, Osceola, to re-create his Indigenous presence and reassert his accomplishments as a leader. Through her own creative act and the creative act of her grandmother, Harjo dips into the pool of kinship memory which feeds into her own identity as a tribal person: "Just as I felt my

grandmother living in me, I feel the legacy and personhood of my warrior grandfathers and grandmothers who refused to surrender to injustice against our peoples” (*Crazy Brave* 149). Painting her grandmother allows Harjo to connect to the relative’s experiences of removal, become a part of them as well as a medium to pass them on.

I felt sadness as grief in her lungs. The grief came from the tears of thousands of our tribe when we were uprooted and forced to walk the long miles west to Indian Territory. They were the tears of the dead and the tears of those who remained to bury the dead. We had to keep walking. We were still walking, trying to make it through to home. The tears spoiled in her lungs, became tuberculosis. (*Crazy Brave* 148)

The collective “we” and the ongoing process of “still walking” allow the past and the present to become one and permeable, which corresponds to Harjo’s understanding of time and memory as nonlinear, which she expressed in an interview: "I also see memory as not just associated with past history, past events, past stories, but nonlinear, as in future and ongoing history, events, and stories" (Coltelli 57). Again, the boundaries of the personal and the communal collapse, allowing Harjo to live through her ancestors’ experiences, through the tears of her grandmother and also see how future generations of her tribe will be able to connect to these experiences through similar means.

Besides appealing to and reimagining historic sites of memory that hold vital significance for the Creek nation, Harjo also touches upon contemporary places that have potential of becoming sites of memory for Indigenous peoples in the US. By discussing her individual experiences and linking them to those of other Native people, Harjo gives these places the power of a site of memory. For instance, her recollections of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) establish this institution is a site that holds inter-tribal generational kinship memory for Native American artists who attended it. It becomes a sign post of a generation of artists that gave

rise to a contemporary Native American art scene and those who followed. IAIA gathered Native American students from multiple nations; their recollections of IAIA experiences shape their pan-Indian generational memory. She speaks of IAIA as of a home where she found family and was able to flourish as an individual. Harjo was able to find people to who she could relate: “I thrived with others who carried family and personal stories similar to my own. I belonged. Mine was no longer a solitary journey” (*Crazy Brave* 86). The Institute gathered young minds with similar life paths that joined them into a tribe of their own. Unlike other boarding schools, IAIA allowed Native students to not only retain, but foster their individual and tribal identities. Yet it also created a pan-Indian community of like-minded people:

At Indian school we were Inupiat from Alaska, Seminole from Florida, and people from Oklahoma to Washington State. And though we were allied as young artists of a generation, we still contended with our tribal and historical differences. The Sioux students hung together. Their traditional enemies, the Pawnees, tended to avoid them, until they were paired as roommates or spend hours side-by-side making art in studio classes. Then those historical enmities fell away. Most joined with their traditional enemies when they were in the larger context of being a native arts student. All of us found commonality in creativity. (*Crazy Brave* 86)

IAIA allowed Harjo among others to forge life-long relationships, an inter-tribal kinship they found through art. For instance, Louis Ballard, her advisor and a Quapaw-Cherokee composer, was like a father to her: “he was warm, affectionate, and liked having a young Oklahoma Creek around” (*Crazy Brave* 86). She was able to acquire friendship and mentorship through Ballard that lasted until he passed away. To Harjo, ‘tribally specific’ and ‘pan-Indian’ exist simultaneously and do not contradict each other. Of those she met at IAIA, Harjo writes:

We were all “skins” traveling together in an age of metamorphosis, facing the same traumas from colonization and dehumanization. We were direct evidence of the struggle of our ancestors. We heard them and they spoke through us, though like others of our generation, we were bell-bottoms and Lennon eyeglasses. (*Crazy Brave* 86)

Harjo’s IAIA belongs to contemporaneity and depicts Natives as its active participants. When Harjo recalls her student years at IAIA, she points out that Native youth, like others in the time period, listened to Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and the Doors, the Temptations, the Supremes, the Four Tops, country music, Merle Haggard, and Loretta Lynn; they “danced Top Forty in white boots and bell-bottoms” (*Crazy Brave* 85) and participated in contemporary culture like mainstream youth, although “there were also powwow and traditional music practitioners” (*Crazy Brave* 85). Here, Harjo includes ‘contemporary’ memories, which write Indigenous peoples into the present.

Harjo witnessed the transition of IAIA from an Indian school to an Indian art school, from a school that focused on training students “to be low-paid labor for white families in the towns and cities” to a school that became “the opening of an enormous indigenous cultural renaissance, poised at the edge of an explosion of ideas that would shape contemporary Indian art in the years to come” (*Crazy Brave* 87). Harjo was still able to encounter the stoves that kept the memory of the old school and meant to teach “apartment living.” She points out the paradox of the Indian school and its almost overnight transformation from the military camp-like institution to a “unique school for native arts, like the New York City *Fame* school but for Indian students” (*Crazy Brave* 87). Harjo’s IAIA collected many outstanding Indigenous artists and teachers and their students who went on to represent Native art. Among the most accomplished Native teachers, Harjo recalls Otellie Lolama, Allan Houser, Rolland Meinholtz, and Fritz Scholder (*Crazy Brave* 88).

Harjo's memory of IAIA leads us to another important function her memoir and the sites of memory it preserves/suggests perform; like Posey and Sterlin Harjo's works, they work to construct images of the Creek nation and other Indigenous peoples from Indigenous perspective to dismantle the stereotypes widespread in the American national memory. In addition, they at times reveal inconvenient truths, and similar to Posey's letters, urge Native people to change.

#### SPEAKING COUNTER-MEMORY

In many of her works, Harjo engages with the mainstream historical narrative editing and modifying it by means of the memories she embodies and is tasked to preserve. Rodriguez y Gibson explains that "memory stands as a counterpoint to history" (111). The personal memories of her childhood experiences in Oklahoma, her education at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and life in New Mexico intertwine with the larger context of the era and create narratives that challenge the Euro-American portrayal of the time period and locations Harjo addresses. Harjo often speaks of her poems as revising history by adding details that are often deleted from historical records, details such as the dog that belonged to her "great-great-etc-great grandfather, Monahwee," the details that "heighten the meaning and lend context" (Harjo, *Soul Talk* 10).

Inspired by her grandmother's painting of Osceola, Harjo discusses her idea to create a series of "contemporary warriors" to use in her art class at the university (*Crazy Brave* 150). She considers sketching the American Indian Movement leader, Dennis Banks, a Muscogee leader Phillip Deere, and the Menominee warrior, Ada Deer (*Crazy Brave* 150). This idea is triggered by Harjo's desire to revise the American metanarrative of Indigenous histories and cultures. She wishes to write in the warriors that are erased and reimagine the notion of a warrior itself. She notes that the American mainstream always imagined Indian warriors as male and of Plains cultures, thus not only levelling all Native American nations into one, writing them out of contemporaneity, but also excluding "the wives, mothers, and daughters whose small daily acts of

sacrifice and bravery . . . were just as crucial to the safety and well-being of the people” (*Crazy Brave* 150). She points out that as a true warrior Osceola, for example, would have acknowledged all others who fought alongside him, yet again stressing the importance of kinship in Indigenous nations.

The memory that Harjo and her tribe hold is revisionary of the mainstream American historic memory at least in a sense that it re-inscribes Indigenous peoples into the present working against the mainstream tendency of writing Natives out of it. Harjo locates herself in contemporaneity; she both points out that Indigenous traditions are living and not obsolete and focuses on her experiences with modernity. Harjo admits, “I mostly rely on contemporary stories. Even though the older ones are like shadows or are there dancing right behind them, I know that the contemporary stories, what goes on now, will be those incorporated into those older stories or become a part of that” (Bruchac 91). She recollects her experience at Auburn University where she announced that she was a descendant of Monahwee and the audience gasped as if they had seen a ghost. For them, in Alabama, “Monahwee, or Menawa, as they called him there, was a flat figure in history. He was part of the process of colonization. He wasn’t real” (Harjo, *Soul Talk* 11-12). He was a mere symbol of the end of Native presence in the area. Yet, it is different for Harjo and the Muscogee tribe:

where I come from, that particular spirit lives. Your spirit can travel back – or forwards, depending – and connect, because it’s there and part of you. I believe that history contracts and expands, depending. I can see Monahwee’s spirit evident in the children, grandchildren – it grown itself. . . . We’re all grown from each other. We’re part of a process, of a root system. (Harjo, *Soul Talk* 12)

Harjo re-envisioned historic figures in many of her works. In the memoir, she focuses mostly on her own ancestors, as discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, although her poetry



provides multiple examples of colonial historic figures reimagined. For instance, Tracey Watts examines the work of memory and hauntings in Harjo's poem "New Orleans," in which Harjo uses the character of Hernando de Soto. Watts suggests that "memory becomes a dynamic process" in Harjo's poem because "it questions the legacies of historical figures and repositions them within new poetic constructs that reveal history's wounds while working towards more sustainable interpretations of past practices" (108). She claims that Harjo fashions sites of memory that emerge both as places and as figures "who are either implicated in histories of colonial violence, suffering under the weight of these histories, or somehow positioned between these possibilities" (Watts 110). According to Watts, by remembering the places and figures differently from what the metanarrative dictates, Harjo disrupts the official power structure.

Harjo's memoir is rooted in the realities she lived through that characterize the era. Many of Harjo's memories and experiences fit into the pan-Indian web of memories of Federal policies and government failures. Through them, she gains kinship with Native Americans throughout the country. These memories function as counter-memory. They create a specific Indigenous narrative that seeks to intervene in the American metanarrative. Such collective remembering narrates uncomfortable truths about racism, discrimination, and historical trauma.

Historical trauma of Native nations is widely discussed and at the forefront of Native concerns because it still manifests itself in the younger generations in all spheres of life. Harjo reiterates on multiple occasions that Indigenous peoples "had been broken," and that they were "still in the bloody aftermath of a violent takeover of ...lands" (*Crazy Brave* 158). She consistently comes back to the idea of "battl[ing] with the troubled families and the history we could never leave behind," things that "often erupted in violence provoked by alcohol, drugs, and the ordinary frustrations of being human" (*Crazy Brave* 89). Teresa Evans-Campbell defines historical trauma (often also referred to as intergenerational trauma) as "a collective complex trauma inflicted on a group of people who share a specific group identity or affiliation . . . It is the

legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events” (320). Historical trauma is inherently connected to loss in the sense that many community members regard certain events as serious losses and exhibit a traumatic response to them. Evans-Campbell argues that although traumatic events may occur at different time periods and involve multiple generations, they come to be seen as a “single traumatic trajectory” (321). The effects of traumatic events are passed down from generation to generation and continue to influence contemporary communities, their health and wellbeing, and their identity. In Native communities, historical trauma may manifest in “elevated mortality rates and health problems emanating from heart disease, hypertension, alcohol abuse, depression, and suicidal behavior” (Brave Heart 2).

Because loss as part of historical trauma is rather prominent in many Indigenous communities, it has become a part of kinship memory. Every generation passes down memory of loss to the next generation while also incorporating their contemporary experiences of loss as part of the historic traumatic trajectory. In her works, Harjo speaks of loss of land, loss of language and culture, loss of voice, loss of ties with ancestors, and loss of memory itself. The historical trauma of loss creates “broken” communities. Harjo claims that diseases in Native communities stem from loss: “Many of our people died young of tuberculosis and other diseases that took root from loss” (*Crazy Brave* 111). Rodriguez y Gibson argues that Harjo’s “work creates a poetics that embraces loss and the grief that comes from identifying with the survivors of genocide and the dispossessed. What is past is not merely past, but immanent in everyday experience” (107). The loss is remembered, lived and re-lived in Indigenous communities on a daily basis. Harjo seems to suggest that remembering and acknowledging loss is important in order to be able to come to terms with it and heal. That is one of the purposes of sites of memory, to help forge a better future through healing.

Thus, Harjo's memoir in a way becomes a witness to Indigenous historical trauma and its consequences. She blames colonization for the anger and abuse that haunt her people. "We were all haunted," proclaims Harjo (*Crazy Brave* 158). She claims that her father's anger, like other Native fathers', boyfriends', and husbands', rose from frustration with injustices: "He would get angry because his mother died of tuberculosis when he was a baby, because his father beat him, because he was treated like an Indian man in lands that were stolen away along with everything else" (*Crazy Brave* 53). Harjo's partner also abused her, and at one point she felt she had to end the relationship. For a period of time, her house became a safe house for other Indian women in similar circumstances (*Crazy Brave* 158). She recollects the stories these women had to tell while revealing the narratives of domestic abuse in Native families that are too often left untold and ignored. Harjo claims that "there were no safe houses or domestic abuse shelters then, especially for native women. We weren't supposed to be talking about personal difficulties when our peoples were laying down their lives for the cause. We were to put aside all of our domestic problems for the good of our tribal nations and devote our energies to our homes and to justice" (*Crazy Brave* 158). In this instance, Harjo is working to revise not merely the mainstream version of Indigenous histories, but also the Indigenous histories themselves. While she acknowledges the importance of tribal nations' battle for their rights, she also criticizes the hushing of 'domestic' issues and internalized trauma. According to Malcoe et al., intimate partner violence (IPV) is a prominent global issue, yet when it comes to Native women, it is not well researched or documented. They conducted a study to investigate IPV in relation to Native American women and found that "more than half (58.7%) of participants reported lifetime physical and/or sexual IPV; 39.1% experienced severe physical IPV; 12.2% reported partner-forced sexual activity; and 40.1% reported lifetime partner-perpetrated injuries" (1). By remembering her own experiences of abuse and those of women who found a safe haven in her apartment, Harjo embodies the trauma and becomes the voice of many Indigenous women who have been silenced.

Among other traumatic historical events pertaining specifically to women, Harjo recalls sterilization of Native women. She came close to it at the birth of her first child.

During my last visit to the clinic at the Indian hospital I was given the option of being sterilized. It was explained to me that the moment of birth was the best time. I was handed the form but chose not to sign. I didn't think much of it at the time. Many Indian women who weren't fluent in English signed, thinking it was a form giving consent for the doctor to deliver their baby. Others were sterilized without even the formality of signing. My fluent knowledge of English saved me. (*Crazy Brave* 121)

In the 1970s, reports of forced sterilization of Native women, mainly performed through hysterectomy or tubal ligation, started to surface. According to Lawrence, the Indian Health Service was accused of sterilizing twenty-five percent of Native women of childbearing age in the 1970s (400). American Indians accused IHS of coercing women to sign paperwork allowing sterilization, providing misinformation regarding sterilization, and providing incorrect consent forms (Lawrence 400). Lawrence cites examples of two fifteen-year-old girls who received illegal tubal ligation while undergoing appendectomies and a woman who desired a "womb transplant" because she had been told that hysterectomy was reversible (400).

While pointing out the problematic issue of forced sterilization, Harjo is also drawing attention to the disadvantage at which lack of knowledge of English put Native women and Native American population overall. She first brings up this concern while discussing her time at IAIA. Harjo mentions that one of her junior English classes was asked to read aloud from a fourth-grade reader, which felt like an insult. She points out that "many [from her class] were gifted storytellers and speakers, but not in the English language" (*Crazy Brave* 88). The language problem is two-fold, however. On the one hand, as Harjo's admits in her memoir, English gave her the power to protect her rights, although still very limited. Yet, she also admits in multiple

interviews not being able to speak the Muscogee language. Children's inability to learn their Indigenous languages due to boarding school education too often ushered language and cultural loss for many tribes.

Yet besides embracing loss and trauma, Harjo also memorializes Natives not as mere victims and passive observers of the injustices. Harjo represents the generation of what she calls a revolution that rose up with the civil rights movement, "the wave of a giant waking consciousness" that manifested in the occupation of Alcatraz, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, in Washington, D.C., and on a smaller scale, in the Kiva Club, a student organization in which Harjo participated (*Crazy Brave* 139). Harjo writes:

we were on fire with the possibility of peace and justice for our peoples. We stepped forth to take care of the spirit of our peoples, in the manner of the Shawnee leader Tecumseh, whose organized front in the early 1800s fought to protect and renew tribal rights and traditions. Our generation was the seventh generation from Tecumseh and Monahwee generation. Seven marks transformation and change, the shift from one kind of body to the next. Though black America inspired us, Indian peoples were different. Most of us did not want to become full-fledged Americans. We wished to maintain the integrity of our tribal cultures. And assert our individual tribal nations. We aspired to be traditional-contemporary twentieth century warriors, artists, and dreamers. (*Crazy Brave* 139)

Harjo aligns herself with the civil rights movement generation, draws on their memories and simultaneously contributes to them. Yet these contemporary memories rest on the dreams, aspirations, and memories of ancestors. They are inseparable from the other Indigenous leaders, such as Tecumseh and Monahwee, who fought for the rights and the spirit of their nations. The new generation shares in kinship with the ancestors and renews and continues their work.

## SUBVERTING THE GENRE

Last, but not least, it is important to consider the genre in which Harjo fashions a site of memory. Similar to Alexander Posey and Sterlin Harjo, who reimagine the western genres of letters to editor and documentary, *Crazy Brave* subverts the western tradition of the genre of life writing, namely the memoir, to explore modern definitions of indigeneity and exercise intellectual sovereignty. Following in the footsteps of Leslie Marmon Silko and N. Scott Momaday, *Crazy Brave* is not a memoir in the western definition of the term and, as Harjo suggests herself in one of her interviews, resembles more a collection of stories, her personal experiences, and poems under the umbrella of the genre. Yet, it is indeed a unique Native American memoir, which while loosely adopting a western form maintains Indigenous values and situates a personal story within a larger storytelling tradition, tribal worldview, and tribal history. Speaking about the evolution of the genre of Native American life writing, A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff explains that in the history of Native life writing, some American Indian authors borrowed from the Western subgenres of life writing, especially autobiography and memoir, which were popular with white readers; however, they also mixed in elements of tribal narratives “in which personal history was expressed within the contexts of the myths, stories, and histories of their tribes or bands, clans, and families” (251). As discussed earlier, Harjo’s memoir is deeply rooted in oral tradition, and her personal history seems inseparable from the Creek one, as well as experiences of other Native Americans. In an interview with Marilyn Kallet, Harjo points out that her writing is tied together with her family and tribal life and cultural roots (Kallet 57). She identifies “the myths and stories of the people who formed [her] in the place where [she] entered the world” as the beginnings of her as a writer (57). They define her individual identity and her identity as an author, as well as the text under consideration.

Scholars agree that Indigenous writers re-conceptualize the genre of life writing by incorporating oral tradition and repurposing the genre to address needs of Native American

nations. Kurzen argues that Native life writing can be viewed as a form of literary activism that privileges Indigenous worldviews and affirms Indigenous voice and subjectivity (205). Native American life writing is unique as it functions as a response to “a politically sanctioned attempt at extermination and a denial of culture, language, and beliefs” (Turner 109). Harjo’s memoir, similar to many Native texts, attempts to create presence in order to oppose the artificially constructed absence, invisibility, and the myth of the “vanishing Indian.” Raheja and Fitzgerald assert that “personal narratives are employed for a variety of political tools, such as recognition struggles, and foster empowering intellectual discourse around issues of community, gender, race, identity, and history” (2), the issues that surface in *Crazy Brave* as evidenced earlier in this chapter. By employing storytelling techniques that are multimodal and multitextual in nature, Native American writers like Harjo not only subvert western genres, but more importantly, “resurrect and redefine tribal oral pasts in Western written forms” (Wong 10), thus fostering cultural continuity of their respective Native nations.

In conclusion, I would like to return to Womack’s question as to what a text might do for the Native nation and how it might contribute to its exercise of sovereignty. In fact, many scholars of autobiography studies urge us to consider a similar question, “the purpose an autobiographical statement serves in the life and circumstances of its author and readers” (Gagnier 4). Harjo confides that it took her several years to complete her memoir to find the appropriate language for the story to tell itself. It could also be completed only once Harjo finally freed herself completely of the panic that stayed with her for years. In this manner, the memoir serves as a healing mechanism for the narrator, but also as a fulfilling of a responsibility to tell the story. As a writer, Harjo feels she has the responsibility to be the voice for her people as well as for her own being. The multivocal nature of Harjo’s work, appeals to ancestors, Creek sites of memory, and historical events, together with the ties Harjo establishes between past and present Indigenous experiences and bodies convert her personal testament into a form of kinship memory

that has the potential to heal and sustain communal continuity. Gould notes that Harjo's works suggest that memory is necessary to move towards healing of colonial traumas. She explains that "memory is knowledge, a knowledge that resides not just in the mind/consciousness, but also in the body and in the soul/spirit's recognition of its place on the earth and within the universe. With knowledge comes the power to heal and to transform" (75-6). Thus, the ability to remember as the ability to know yourself is vital for tribal spiritual recovery and restoration. So, texts that serve as sites of memory have the power to restore the kind of knowledge necessary for healing of intergenerational trauma, remind Creek readers of their origins, their strengths and values, and similar to oral tradition, serve as support in times of need. They allow the readers to reconstruct and reconnect with their national identity.



## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In this study, I set out to investigate what kinship memory is and how it works in three Muscogee-Creek texts, claiming that these texts could be considered sites of memory for the Creek nation. I posited that we could discover self-definitions of the authors under consideration through such memory investigations, both as Creek individuals and tribal members. Their texts in turn both embody cultural remembering and actively participate in the production of Creek memory that is centered around kinship.

I investigated three different genres (a collection of letters to editor, a memoir, and a documentary) as memory production is a complex process that involves all types of media. Comparing a variety of genres allows to establish interdisciplinary ties and provide for a deeper understanding of cultural memory production. Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney suggest that literature can play three roles in the productions of memory: “1) literature as a medium of remembrance; 2) literature as an object of remembrance; and 3) literature as a medium for observing the production of cultural memory” (112). As a medium of remembrance, literary works participate in memory production by narrating the past. When we consider literary works as an object of remembrance, we often engage in the conversation of canonization of texts, which decides which texts are worth commemorating and which are destined for oblivion. In this case, we are dealing with “afterlives” of literature, which allow us to look at it in a diachronic perspective (Erll 2). When literature

“imaginatively represent[s] acts of recollection, [it] makes remembrance observable” (Erll and Rigney 113). In such manner, it helps generate knowledge about how memory functions both for communities and individuals. Erll and Rigney’s suggestions as to the relationship of literature and memory production seem valid for other media as well. One can easily claim that film may perform the same roles as literature. Documentaries often serve as a medium of remembrance; canonical films allow us to make observations about particular cultures that commemorate these films; and examining cinema for the way it employs memory and recollection techniques allows us to observe remembrance.

The texts under investigation, *Fus Fixico Letters*, *Crazy Brave*, and *This May Be the Last Time*, perform a combination of the three roles. These texts are imbued with memory, but also participate in memory construction. As media of remembrance, they narrate the past, both personal and Creek communal, commemorating historic events, reimagining them, and establishing connections between past and present. Yet, *Fus Fixico* letters also allow us to observe literature as an object of remembrance through the discussion of scholars of both the author’s persona and the text’s significance as one of the most prominent Creek works of literature and journalism. As Joy Harjo’s memoir and Sterlin Harjo’s film are rather recent, their role as objects of remembrance is yet to be observed. However, the documentary does allow us an insight into the production of memory that can be observed through Muscogee-Creek hymns on which the film focuses. Harjo’s memoir also allows us to observe Creek personal and communal production of memory through Harjo’s acts of recollection of personal experiences through the prism of oral tradition and kinship ties.

There are several characteristics that the three texts have in common as to how they perform acts of remembering and what they value as Creek sites of memory. Their narratives prioritize kinship, which is regarded, whether directly or indirectly, as one of the central values. Joy Harjo, Sterlin Harjo, and *Fus Fixico* perform roles of traditional storytellers who focus on

relationality and interweave multiple stories in their narratives. They define their storyteller personas (also themselves as Creek members) through their relations and ancestral ties. Sterlin Harjo defines his identity through the narrative of his grandfather's disappearance and through his knowledge of Muscogee-Creek hymns which in turn bind him to his community and the larger body of cultural knowledge. Joy Harjo invokes the world of Creek oral tradition, calls to her lineage and familial sites of memory in order to be able to shape her Creek storyteller voice. She internalizes Creek cultural memory as her own individual one in order to foster its continuity. In a way, *Fus Fixico* is the embodiment of Creek communal voice and represents the traditional Creek conversation style. Because all three texts in one way or another center kinship, it is appropriate to talk about kinship memory that they reflect and also produce, the one that stresses interconnectedness, balance, responsibility, and respect as active forms of participation in community building. Because that is precisely what the authors engage in, one may even discuss traditional storytelling as kinship memory. Individual experiences presented in the texts are regarded through the prism and in the context of kinship memory. This allows us to suppose that Creek identity is defined through Creek kinship memory. Characters' Creekness is defined through their relationship to their community, the land, oral tradition, recollection of communal past, intergenerational trauma, Creek music, political opinions, participation in communal conversations, traditional meals, and many other elements of kinship memory.

Yet kinship memory is not static, and one of its main characteristics that the texts under consideration seem to commemorate is its ability to transform, adapting to the needs of the community while still maintaining its essence. In *Fus Fixico Letters*, Posey sets forth the idea of the transforming Indian, who selectively adopts from another culture yet maintains his Indigeneity. This idea receives support in Sterlin Harjo's documentary which explains that Muscogee-Creek hymns are a product of intercultural exchange among the Creek, European missionaries, and African Americans. Yet, these hymns are truly Creek as they serve religious

purposes of the community, engage Creek subject matter, and are performed in the Creek language. The Creek community subverted the genre of the hymns (similar to the way the authors of the texts under consideration subverted the European genres with which they are working) to make them Indigenous. In her memoir, Joy Harjo exemplifies the idea of the transformative Indian: she becomes part of the larger Native community, the pan-Indian movement, yet still maintains her Creek identity. As Womack puts it, “contact with other cultures does not cancel out her Muskogean center” (*Red* 224-5). He argues that Harjo’s Creek center is essential for her authorial voice and craftsmanship, even though she lived away from Oklahoma for a large portion of her career, “is pan-tribal in her concerns, . . . moves in many urban landscapes, and is influenced by feminism and other philosophies” (*Red* 224). He claims that specific Creek memories help Harjo achieve pan-tribal vision (*Red* 227), which allows her to draw vital connections among Creek tribal experiences and those of other Indigenous nations in the spirit of kinship.

As embodiment of kinship memory, the storytellers of the texts under consideration foster its continuity by building bridges between generations. Simultaneously, through their role as storytellers, we also get a glimpse at how they forge kinship memory through their personalized narration. For instance, Joy Harjo and Alexander Posey somewhat romanticize their historic pasts (Harjo romanticizes her ancestors; Posey romanticizes full-blood traditionalist Creeks), yet simultaneously they attempt to add to the Creek story by drawing attention to aspects that are often left out. Posey criticizes Creek naiveté while Harjo draws attention to domestic abuse.

More importantly, narrators of all three texts emphasize Creek agency, their active participation in production of kinship memory and establishment of sites of memory. Sterlin Harjo allows community members to shape narration through the interviews of tribal members. The interviewees decide what should and should not be revealed to the filmmaker and the

audience of the film; Harjo is a careful listener who transmits the knowledge acquired in the process of filmmaking. Joy Harjo allows her ancestors and family members to speak through their stories that she incorporates in her narrative. She also often speaks for those who have a difficult time speaking for themselves, such as the abused Indigenous women. In addition, she becomes a pan-Indian voice of her generation. Posey's characters are a collective representation of his community, although many are indeed based on historic figures.

As sites of memory, the three texts commemorate Creek people as active participants of their contemporaneity, intelligent, informed, and capable, not merely victims of colonization and assimilation. This is of utmost importance for the community as they exercise control over Creek imagery and create positive images of their people that are largely lacking in American mythology. This also allows the texts to perform a function of counter-memory, counteracting stereotypes widespread about American Indians and asserting their continuous presence. Posey's letters narrate Creek participation in both Creek and larger American politics, their engagement with the important question of statehood, and awareness of international affairs. Joy Harjo's memoir attests to Creek participation in the civil rights movement and their involvement in world art and American culture. Sterlin Harjo's film speaks to Creek cultural continuity and resilience through history of Creek songs. In the context of cultural erasure through assimilation, remembering Creek nation from such perspectives means asserting cultural presence and persistence. Again and again, it speaks to the community's will to remember and to stop forced forgetting. Sturken explains that presence of bodies is vital to production of cultural memory: survivors, especially of traumatic public events (such as European colonization of the Americas), embody the materiality of memory through their very presence (*Tangled Memories* 12). I would extend this statement to include texts produced by such bodies. Their presence testifies to and resists colonial processes through generations. They have an ability to create what Landsberg terms "prosthetic memory." Looking at museum exhibits, literature, and film, she argues that

these media allow us to “take on” other people’s memories “like an artificial limb” (20). According to Landsberg, prosthetic memory has an “ability . . . to produce empathy and social responsibility as well as political alliances that transcend race, class, and gender” (21). This reinforces Womack’s suggestion that the true battle is “promoting Native literature among [Native] people through our exploration of tribally-specific intellectual legacies” (*Red* 65).

While more studies have investigated physical sites of memory, this study is a reminder of the importance of metaphorical sites of memory for national identity, construction of national memory and commemorating. Along with other studies that focus on literary works as sites of memory, it encourages that investigating metaphorical sites of memory in addition to and in conjunction with the physical ones would allow us to see how the two kinds interact and complement each other and open up productive possibilities for revealing memory making processes.

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