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AUTHORIAL CUSTODY AND STORY STEWARDSHIP: CENTERING RELATIONALITY AS AN INDIGENOUS APPROACH TO TEXTS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Dedication

To all my family, especially those who were here when I started this project but aren’t here as it draws to a close. In loving memory of Grandma Judy, Grandpa Amos, Aunt Twyla, Uncle Jim, Buddy, Nancy, Johni Mae, Beverly, and Hunter.

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Acknowledgments

Mvto to my family, my teachers, my students, and my friends.

Mvto Rosemary McCombs Maxey, mvhayv.

Mary and Locv, I couldn’t (and wouldn’t) have done this without you.

Abstract

This dissertation looks to position authorial custody and story stewardship as useful tools for author, audience, and critic. As a critical creative methodology, it can be used to identify custodial markers indicating the level of ownership an author or audience has of a story, which allows for the meaning-making apparatus to be engaged in an ethically informed way such that anyone applying it to a work can function as ethical stewards of stories. The custody of a text is broadly categorized as either personal, communal, or collaborative, and each has its subsequent set of instructions regarding the stewardship moving forward with the text.

Applying the methodology across three Muscogee authors' works, it becomes clear that:

- Authorial custody is determinable
- Story stewardship is invitational
- Tribally specific critique can generate broadly applicable outcomes

Furthermore, it becomes clear that the reclamation of colonized images from settler colonial custody is not only a possible outcome of literary analysis and critique, but a necessary one informed by the intentional work of artists and authors in marginalized communities. Ultimately, the methodology proves useful for authors and audiences alike, and can be leveraged as both a tool and an outcome in and of itself.

Chapter 1

Approaching Authorial Custody and Story Stewardship:

Identifying the Foundations of Story as Theory, Custody as Sovereignty, and Authors as Still Very Much Alive

Before I say anything, I want to say some things.

— Augusto Firekeeper

Dear Locv,
I'm sorry I've been so busy here recently. This work is thanks to you. I hope someday you'll read it and consider its words. It's about telling stories and why that matters.
Love,
Dad

I have been employing authorial custody and story stewardship as ethical tools for engaging with texts since before I knew what to call them, and ever since their naming, I've done my best not to let the terms get in the way of the actual work they try to engender. The fact of the matter is that these terms are of most use to the folks whose first instinct is to redefine, categorize, and reinterpret their use for their own personal and professional purposes. Let me save you some time. In a reckless oversimplification of the ideas populating the following pages, the effortless, paragraph one, context-agnostic gist of what I'm trying to do here is this: what if we had an unholy union of Barthe's readerly and writerly texts coupled with Fish's interpretive communities, but through the lens of American Indian Literary Nationalism? Exciting? Pithy? Dismissive? Yes! But that's just the first paragraph.

The work that these terms represent is most useful to a group of people who will never lay eyes on this document, let alone the texts examining the ideas preceding or following it. The people this work is for will never hear it as a lecture at a conference or witness panelists debate its (lack of) quality. These are tools for the community. My task, or ours if you're feeling particularly collegial, is to take a sledgehammer to the foundations of this work, to beat the devil out of it, and see what holds water at the end of the day. If we're rigorous and intentional and discover that there is merit here somewhere, maybe someday our efforts will be rewarded when these terms and the work they represent are so commonplace that they're routinely minimized, misunderstood, and dismissed. Or—if we're very lucky—we'll be villainized and lampooned by not only the systems we endeavor to combat, but also the future allies convinced we didn't do enough.

Joke that I am, I'm very serious. I only recently came to personally understand the value of expertise, having now acquired one, and I think our work as artists and intellectuals is truly beautiful. We are helpers. We are invaluable useless members of our communities. We don't build roads or necessary technologies, we don't heal the sick, and if we are lucky, we feed our families, and we help the people in our communities who do those things better understand the world around them. Maybe. So when I say that authorial custody and story stewardship are just terms and that they came about as outputs of a system I cannot support but also cannot escape, it really isn't as bad as it sounds. I do not bemoan my lot in life and indeed look at it as a rather successful one; I enjoy thinking about ideas and how those ideas can improve the lives of the people in my community. In that respect, authorial custody and story stewardship can go out into the worlds they will inhabit. No matter their reception or implementation I will continue to pursue the work in my community that puts them to use "in that good way."

To illustrate the (admittedly anecdotal) status quo that inspires the (admittedly polemical) posture of the above paragraphs, let's take a look at some of the typical implementations of these tools and how they support and inform the larger methodological goals behind their creation and refinement.

At the risk of appearing obsessed with my own inadequacies, I want to remind the reader that I don't possess a plethora of what we might call "useful" skills. Without dipping into the metaphorical usage of these terms and staying as literal as one might reasonably expect, I don't build, create, fix, provide, or manage things, as a general rule, and not for lack of desire. For someone who values community and believes in contributing where able, this can be a source of anxiety. So I help where I can, facilitating writing workshops and occasional public speaking in the form of community lectures relating to my research. And to be clear, I do not consider my field—and certainly not academia—to be my community. No, my community is the People. From the individual to the transnational, I find purpose and belonging among the ever-diverse, ever-undefinable global Indigenous community. This isn't some holier-than-thou virtue-signaling, this is just setting up the context for these tools I'm about to explain. I see my role in this community clearly: I am an educator, I am a communicator, and I am an artist. If I do my job right, I serve the community by being a conduit of ideas, facilitating the future success of others whose limited exposure to new ideas is somehow broadened by my meager input.

So I go into communities and I help them think about authorial custody and story stewardship. Sometimes I'll say those terms aloud, and many times I won't, but without fail I always include an explanation of what the ideas are behind them and how the work we engage in together helps our communities and ourselves. I'm not in the business of teaching theory to theorists, or writing to writers, or making to makers—I'm not that presumptuous (and, of course, yes, I am doing that, but only insofar as one is willing to claim those monikers for themselves). In real-world terms, that is to say, not at all hypothetical, that means I may be giving poetry workshops to auto mechanics who think poetry has to rhyme or editing digital personal narratives with retirees at the community center. The finer points are usually hand-waved away by the uninterested or secured in a notebook by those who are. Suffice it to say, when the theory makes an appearance, it is rarely the star of the show. More often than not, when engaging in work informed by the ideas of authorial custody and story stewardship, I've found that community members are moved by their own creations. They surprise themselves with their ability to share their story when the process is presented to them in a way that makes authorship and relationality intentional inclusions.

Not only do these tools help layperson community members generate creative work, but they also provide a useful framework for interpretation. Having already engaged their meaning-making apparatus in a personal creative activity, the recognition of custodial and stewardship markers in others' works comes without much prompting. This occurs in everyday language through discussion and conversation, not targeted study and esoteric debate. And this is what I mean when I, truthfully, hope these ideas become commonplace and routine. It *should be* work for me and for the field. It should be a matter of course for the People.

There are a number of concerns animating the work of my dissertation research. How is the reception of expressive culture, specifically the construction of meaning, impacted by the inclusion of cultural markers, including stereotypes and co-optations? What are the stakes, culturally, creatively, and in/for one's community when exchanging aesthetic forms, and how are those stakes navigated, complicated, and arrived at throughout and without that exchange? What responsibilities do author and audience have as stewards of stories? Ideally, creators and consumers of expressive culture ought to be able to effectively and ethically answer these questions of story stewardship in their everyday lives. Unfortunately, however, complications arise at every turn: differences in epistemology, ontology, knowledge, education, and language just to name a few. The resulting panoply of interpretations is often justifiably celebrated but the danger inherent in this outcome arises when certain interpretations leave no room for others. An unfortunate consequence of privileging exclusive processes of reception, interpretation, and meaning-making is the quieting of marginalized voices. The more entrenched the exclusionary process, the more likely the loss of outlying voices is viewed as a justified matter of course unworthy of mourning.

We all lose when creative voices are silenced. Indigenous, non-Indigenous, the loss is felt either way. This isn't just one less bird singing in the forest or one less flower blooming in the garden; it is potential, it is history, it is a way of seeing the world. Interventions are necessary to preserve and promote alternatives. While it is folly to suggest an all-encompassing singular solution to these issues, my research proposes a corrective that addresses the complications determining where interpretive rights sit, in short, a process to begin answering the question of how we ought to make meaning. The process looks like this:

- Close reading of a text informs the reader of a general sense of custody of that text through textual and paratextual markers, and these can come in numerous forms (some of which we will examine in great detail, but a brief list might be author biography, intention, conventions, etc.)
- Having determined "whose story" it is, the text is revisited to discover stewardship markers (when and how to share, interpretive frameworks, relational postures, etc.) and the reader concerned with ethical story stewardship either cedes control of the meaning-making apparatus to the author (communal custody works), undertakes it themselves (personal custody works), or engages a suggested or collaborative interpretation to inform their own (collaborative custody)

Sometimes these qualities are easy to identify. A collection of hymns in Mvskoke with no English translation? A clear instance of a communal custody text where the non-Mvskoke interpretation is neither sought nor necessary. A children's picture book teaching kids simple Mvskoke words while telling a story in English? Personal custody with a clear course of action to follow, where the reader is expected to claim ownership of the story and its lessons. But language barriers are just one consideration, and custody and stewardship must contend with many more.

What about a literary novel with a gay, Native protagonist in a satisfying coming-of-age Bildungsroman? Or a passionate, beautifully composed critique of Thanksgiving as a letter to the editor of a widely read newspaper? Or any poem ever written? Authorial custody helps us arrive at who the story belongs to, while story stewardship informs our responsibilities to it. Utilizing the tools available to author, audience, and critic, an examination of and reflection upon the craft decisions evidenced both in and around the text lays the necessary groundwork where an ethical approach to stories and storytelling—one that is at once humble, rigorous, and inclusive—becomes possible. This tool does not deny the reader an interpretation or response, it merely positions it.

Here are a few examples of the custody outcomes for some texts, just to give a brief example. Personal custody typically encourages individual meaning making. Little or no efforts by the author to guide a reception or adhere to a particular interpretation seem evident, and (almost) anything goes. These kinds of texts are rare, and a reader may find their designations shifting from one reading to another, especially as familiarity, experience, and broader engagement with the texts inform each subsequent read. A typical hallmark of personal custody texts are confusion, where the reader isn't entirely sure what they were supposed to take away from the experience. My (note the subjective, here) perfect example of personal custody are stories from our oral tradition. There are, of course, straightforward and didactic stories, but those aren't the ones we're talking about here. I'm talking about those weird ones where there isn't some obvious moral or lesson. In fact, you'll find such stories in this project, and that's intentional. I want you to engage your sense of personal custody with those texts and consider why they were included and what they might contribute. Like most Native storytellers I know, I don't want to tell you what I think they mean, because it's about what you think they mean.

Communal custody seeks to suggest a specific interpretation, and this is the most common of custodial outcomes. Interestingly, a reader's ability to recognize communal custody markers—which can be invisible to those lacking the insider knowledge of an intended community—is the most unpredictable facet of this methodology. Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas* is a perfect example of a communal custody text. Readers unfamiliar with the 2009 U.S. Senate's Committee on Indian Affairs Joint Resolution 14, the Resolution of Apology to Native American people, aren't clued in to Long Soldier's intentions until her introduction of Part II, page fifty seven of a one-hundred page poetry collection. Up to that point, the text, like many poetry collections, would require multiple readings, discussions, and insider knowledge to come away with anything other than a very personal sense of custody. However, once Long Soldier presents the key contextual information that this work is a response to JR14, it serves as a codex of sorts that unlocks meaning and guides interpretation.

Finally, there is collaborative custody. A collaborative text seeks to establish the initial conditions clearly before turning the reader loose, then place occasional challenges deeper in the text that the reader might stumble upon in their journey. These texts might suggest a specific interpretation, but they don't insist upon one. Alejandro Zambra's *Multiple Choice* is a good example of this. It is a text that defies simple description, but to attempt to provide one anyway it is a narrative-like standardized test. As the reader progresses deeper into the work, their own responses will have deeply colored their experience, but because of the nature of the form they are also keenly aware of the choices they didn't make and that could have shifted the reception in myriad ways.

In approaching this dissertation I will be operating within the American Indian Literary Nationalism framework while employing Indigenous Storywork. This posture promotes the sovereignty of the Tribal nation and privileges Tribal and community-specific contexts as the most important points of critical reference for the interpretation of Native texts. Jace Weaver delineates the two "prongs" of American Indian Literary Nationalism in the collection by the same name. Our literatures are firstly considered "separate and distinct from other national literatures,"; Secondly, "Criticism of that literature that supports not only its distinct identity but also sees itself as attempting to serve the interests of indigenes and their communities, in particular the support of Native nations and their own separate sovereignties" (15).

My interpretation of the boots-on-the-ground application of this framework is evidenced by the decentering of Western theory and methodologies in this research. In perhaps a too-dangerous oversimplification, I believe methods aren't harmful, methodologies are. Close-reading in the service of settler colonialism? Harmful. Close-reading as a decolonizing project? Not so much, though both would depend upon who you ask. This project asks the Native communities from which the objects of expressive culture come and centers their creative, intellectual, and rhetorical traditions throughout. It is not a rejection of the status quo, rather an exploration of an otherwise.

This work hopes to continue the intellectual tradition of Native scholars like Robert Warrior and Craig Womack and builds upon Warrior's critical reading methodology as laid out in his 2005 monograph *The People and the Word*. Warrior's work is the most relevant to the aims of this study, given the emphasis it places on developing a critical reading methodology as a tool for the critic and intellectual to "contribute to improving the intellectual health of Native America, its people, and its communities." Meanwhile, the model Womack presents in his 1999 monograph *Red on Red* serves as the spiritual predecessor of this work, and its examples of a Tribal specific criticism will be emulated in the texts and methods I employ.

Foundations

The traditional ways and rituals of all of Earth's peoples are kept in containers of poetry, song, and story. It is how we know who we are, where we are coming from and who we are becoming.

— Joy Harjo

In the first paragraph of this chapter, I referenced the ideas of two celebrated theorists in Western academia. As another Western wit once wrote: This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move. Indeed, the aims and methods of this project compel me to avoid committing the same action too often. As an American Indian Literary Nationalist, I'm happy to leave the realm of their influence in favor of more Indigenous theoretical environs. And though I've not read the complete works of the invoked theorists I'm willing to bet I've already devoted more space on the page to their ideas than they devoted to Indigenous ones. To those whose hackles become erect at such a notion, you're missing the point. Rather than devote my limited time on this earth scouring other people's literatures for argument or confirmation, this project looks to engage with Indigenous stories, fiction and nonfiction, published and passed along, conversed and committed to confidence, as its source of knowledge and understanding. This methodology, Indigenous Storywork (ISW) was shared by Joann Archibald in 2008 and has been utilized and developed by other Indigenous scholars since. In this project, I use ISW to trace the theoretical connections that establish authorial custody and story stewardship as logical outcomes of relational reading practice. First, though, it becomes necessary to establish the discursive context of stories, authorship, custody, and stewardship within the larger Native American Literary domain.

Native American Literature

Framing Questions

While critics and scholars have argued over what exactly qualifies a work of Native American literature as such, the arguments have failed to prevent the inexact designation from taking root in both academic and popular circles. Native and non-Native alike have chimed in on: works by and about Native people, works by Native people about non-Native subjects, works by non-Native people about Native people, and every shade of exception, instance, and in-between one can imagine. The establishment of the Native canon, let alone conversations regarding Native literature in the American canon, is an exercise in impermanence, revision, and qualification. That is not to suggest, however, that such a task is without merit. As with all attempts at classification, the result of a working Native American canon that tracks the literary tradition of Native American communities provides readers with opportunities for study, juxtaposition, and further analysis relating to identification, relationships and histories of groups, and the potentially dangerous—but often useful—capacity to learn from the parts to apply to the whole.

Collections and anthologies of Native American literature began to appear in the 1960s, coinciding with the success of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. Even then, the complex issues surrounding the cultural, political, historical, and aesthetic sites of tension were addressed, though certainly not solved, by the editors of these works. Recently, Native lit scholar and author Erika Wurth—yes, we'll get to it—provided a useful heuristic for the classification of

Native Literature in her 2016 *Waxwing* article, "The Fourth Wave" (Wurth). There, Wurth suggests divisions aligning with key developments in Native Literature's works, audience, and themes. Her first wave consists of the writing of Native people from first contact until the Native American Renaissance of the 1960s, which constitutes her second wave. The third wave are those writers in the time between the Renaissance and the new millennium, after which the fourth wave begins. There are, of course, instances of overlap, but in general, the waves are helpful in identifying the concerns of Native Literature in broad strokes. Like any good heuristic, Wurth's waves are less a perfect representation and more a process for discovery. In that spirit, my readings for this project have helped me approach my own answer to the questions,

- who are the major authors of Native American Literature?
- what are the major waves and works in Native American Literature?
- what ethical considerations must go into these classifications?

Initial Considerations

I need to be very careful here because these ideas are not simple, they are not easy, and they are not settled. If anything, it is their enduring complexity that situates these ideas as fundamental, necessary, and important. These are the basics, and I still have to be aware of all the nuance and specificity they require in order for me to operate ethically as a scholar and citizen of a Tribal nation. I'm talking about a myriad of issues here, but to be specific the first thing I have a responsibility to address is my usage of terms, assumptions, and norms that my project invokes.

While Native scholars certainly aren't the only group whose field benefits from a clear discussion around terms and jargon, the political complexity around our terms carries significant real-world weight. Native American means and connotes in a certain way, similar to and different from American Indian, or Indigenous, or First Nation, or First American, or Muscogee or Mvskoke, Lakota or Sioux, Anishinaabe or Chippewa, or simply Native. For those who roll their eyes and scoff at the thought of these minutiae occupying significant space in what should be a sophisticated and articulated work of scholarship, go right ahead. Just know that words mean things, and Native people reckon with certain words and their impact their entire lives.

I've had multiple crises of conscience trying to determine how best to signify Tribal affiliation in this paper alone. Erika Wurth, who self-identifies as Apache/Chickasaw/Cherokee has recently come under scrutiny for those claims. She is a friend and mentor, and the literal hours I've spent justifying both sides of her inclusion or exclusion take an emotional toll. There's even a term for someone like me who "comes to the defense" of someone accused of what Dr. Wurth has. I'm a defendian; she's a pretendian. But is she? I don't know what claims she's made or who claims her, and I don't know *exactly* what she's been accused of. All I know is she was a good teacher at IAIA, she presented herself to me as Native, and we've been friends and colleagues for years. How does her identity or its reversal inform her scholarship? There are excellent settler scholars in our field, so what's the harm if it turns out she is one? I can tell you the harm if that is the case, since it will have been perpetrated on me. Put aside for a moment the absolute shit show of discussing someone else's identity without their ability to contribute to the conversation, which is how many of these conversations occur as they're online. To be clear, the harm is this: every defendian is using their legitimate role within Indigenous spaces to leverage space for the accused pretendian, and it varies only to the degree with which they recognize and accept that fact.

At this point you might be asking how is this at all relevant to the project at hand? If you're asking that, I'm going to assume you're not impacted by these issues because it's central to many of my larger claims. If authorship matters and if a Tribal perspective matters, two things

I claim, then of course the inclusion of work—indeed, even the association of influence—from a fraud or suspected fraud can negatively impact the credibility of those claims. Now, I hope Erika Wurth is who she claims to be, legitimately. And if she isn't, I will feel betrayed, but I won't regret this unfortunate case study because the fact of the matter is it could be any of the sources I don't personally know and haven't personally vetted that run this risk.

It's an incredibly awkward and personal issue for Native scholars and settler scholars in Native fields and one that won't be going away anytime soon. My own family's experience as Creek people who identify more with their church than their grounds informs my decision to self-identify as Muscogee rather than Mvskoke. These are just a few concerns regarding Tribal affiliation and terminology, this doesn't even get into more complex issues of race within the field!

There are a host of other just as complicated concerns—authenticiy/anachronistic representations, spirituality and problematic mysticism, and legal expressions of sovereignty just to name a few—populating the landscape of Native American Literary and Cultural Studies, beyond false claims to Indigeneity. There is an argument to be made that these significant sites of resistance are those most in need of my intellectual and emotional labors, and I recognize that. This incessant tug from multiple directions is not uncommon for Native scholars, and each is being asked to prioritize a concern amongst a number of equally pressing and significant concerns. Just as citizens of the world are asked to reckon with global concerns like climate change and social justice, Native scholars are capable of caring for more than one thing at a time. It can be difficult if not impossible to be the expert in everything that is often expected of Native scholars, and with that in mind, I will defer to the language of the texts I engage with in this project when appropriate. As terms and assumptions arise, I will do my best to provide the necessary context to proceed in an ethical way. In those moments where I fail, I hope it is a result of ignorance and not malice, recognizing of course that ignorance itself provides no absolution and that I strive to be in a position of continual learning.

First Wave

Wurth argues, "The First Wave would be anything written by a Native person after 1492 and prior to the Native American Renaissance." In terms of the time covered between waves, this is Wurth's largest. As such, and given its primacy, there are a number of works and authors significant for their groundbreaking qualities. Samson Occom (Mohegan, 1723-92), active in the latter half of the 18th century, was the first Native American writer to be published in English and his *A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul, An Indian Who Was Executed at New Haven on the 2nd of September 1772 for the Murder of Mr. Moses Cook, late of Waterbury, on the 7th of December 1771,* is his most famous work, and not just for the length of its title. John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee, 1827-67) became the first Native American to publish a novel, *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, in the mid 19th century. Acknowledging that there are many who can't be included here for the sake of space, other notable authors from this wave include Charles Eastman (Wahpeton), Simon Pokagon (Potawatomi), Will Rogers (Cherokee), Lynn Riggs (Cherokee), and John Oskison (Cherokee). Native women were very productive during this wave as well, such as Zitkala-Sa (Yankton), E. Pauline Johnson (Mohawk), Mourning Dove (Okanogan), and Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (Paiute). Wurth suggests that the First Wave was largely concerned with a set of "core issues" directed to a largely Native American audience since the majority of the publication opportunities were in Tribal newspapers and magazines.

In Muscogee literature, the First Wave has two important standouts: Sophia Alice Callahan (1868-94) and Alexander Posey (1873-1908). Callahan is credited as the first Native American woman to publish a novel, *Wynema, a Child of the Forest* in 1891. Posey's legacy, though more diverse as he was a poet, statesman, and orator, centers around his journalism, particularly the series of satirical *Fus Fixico Letters*. I single these Muscogee authors out as a clear custodial move to draw my readers attention directly where I want.

Second Wave

This hugely influential wave is largely comprised of the writers of the Native American Renaissance. Though the term itself isn't without its critics, who argue among other things that the term dismisses earlier literary contributions, its ubiquitous adoption serves as a recognizable reference point despite its inherent flaws. N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is the catalyst for the Wave, and its impact reverberates forward and backward in time as it garnered a sizable amount of critical attention to Native American literature. Future works would be measured against it, while previous works received newfound interest from the influx of scholarship and critique buoyed by Momaday's truly great text.

Just as the First Wave was concerned with a set of core issues, the Second Wave also had a similar set of identifying characteristics, including a deep and abiding connection to place, a return to home, various mixed-blood dilemmas around identity and belonging, and the power of ceremony. Paula Gunn Allen and Simon Ortiz, along with a number of others including some listed below are all contributors to this important wave.

Standards from this wave include Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, James Welch's *Fools Crow*, though his debut novel *Winter in the Blood* is more widely regarded as his major contribution to the wave, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, though her debut novel *Love Medicine* is more celebrated and cemented her place within the wave. Finally, there is one Muscogee author among those most associated with the Native American Renaissance, Joy Harjo. I cover many of her collections elsewhere in this project, so I will move on.

The criminally underread short story *Summer Water and Shirley* by Muscogee author Durango Mendoza is, in my opinion, a worthy addition to the works of the Native American Renaissance. Published in 1966, a year before Momaday would take the literary world by storm, Mendoza's very short story is a truly outstanding work of literature that deserves more attention. When Sonny, a boy of twelve, and his sister Shirley are playing around the church grounds camp houses during an oppressive summer drought, they come across Ansul Middlecreek, a stiginnee, or one who practices malicious witchcraft. Despite her brother's warning, Shirley antagonizes the old man. Almost immediately, Shirley begins to feel ill and falls behind as the family makes their way home. There, she collapses from a fever and despite the family's efforts, including everything from protective medicine in the form of stones from the stream to a visit from a white doctor, Shirley's illness is resilient, and it's said she won't live but three days. The final night, Sonny breaks his sister's imposed quarantine and spends the night by her side.

In what might be described as an anti-climactic or even unsatisfying ending, the story ends with Sonny lying beside his dying sister in the darkness, waking her in the process, only to encourage her to fall back asleep. There's more than enough evidence in the text, however, to suggest a much more satisfying and climactic ending where Sonny's act of defiance and love saves his sister and rather than the feverish ramblings that Shirley's words might appear to be to some readers, they in fact signal a return to her scampish personality now that the sickness has gone. For an excellent analysis see Craig Womack's *Art as Performance, Story as Criticism* where he has laid the foundation for a reading informed by a Muscogee aesthetic. Mendoza never breaks his stride to allow readers who aren't attuned to the finer Muscogee elements a moment to catch up, but the quality of the writing as a whole is wonderful and, as Womack alludes, is reminiscent of another famous short story told from a Sonny's point of view. Though he published his analysis a decade before I settled into my own work with authorial custody and story stewardship, Womack's approach exemplifies the benefit of culturally informed critique in all the ways I hope to as well.

Third Wave

The Third Wave, categorized by a focus on Tribal specificity that positioned Native life within and alongside American life, consists of those works and authors who came after the Renaissance to the early years of the new millennium. Many of the authors of the Renaissance continued to produce work during this period, and much of it reflected the concerns of the new wave. Several new authors appeared, including Susan Power, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Chrystos, Linda Hogan, and LeAnn Howe, many of whom exemplified in their works the juxtapositional two-worlds trope that many in this wave would engage with.

From a custody and stewardship perspective, Richard Van Camp's 1996 novel *The Lesser Blessed* provides much to consider. In this short novel, Van Camp's authenticity and humor are evident in his depiction of a Dogrib community that, though bleak and forbidding, is home to memorable characters Larry and Johnny. In this coming-of-age story, Van Camp displays his ability to convey tragedy and struggle without dehumanizing his characters, a skill shared by writers in this wave and the next. As we will see, the interplay of custodial and stewardship markers can be very influential in orchestrating an intended outcome.

Fourth Wave

Finally, Wurth suggests that the Fourth Wave begins with Navajo poet Sherwin Bitsui's 2003 collection *Shapeshift*. This wave, led by alumni of the Institute of American Indian Arts like Bitsui, Santee Frazier, Terese Marie Mailhot, Tommy Orange, and Orlando White, signals a shift in both focus and audience from the previous wave. Where Momaday's generation had their "core issues" of identity and representation, followed by Van Camp and company who were engaging with two worlds and writing to be understood by non-Native audiences, Wurth suggests this new wave inherited a lack of the traditional burdens of Native American literary politics. Gone were the concerns of alienating an audience or meeting the expectations of hitting some cultural quota on the page. It is a wave characterized by attention to craft, aesthetics, experimentation, and the interests of the authors.

Tommy Orange's *There There*, Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries*, Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas*, Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* are all indicative of the quality and potential found in this wave. Collections from Joy Harjo like *An American Sunrise* and *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*, Jennifer Foerster's *Leaving Tulsa* and *A Bright Raft in the Afterweather*, Chip Livingston's *Museum of False Starts*, and Cynthia Leitich Smith's *Hearts Unbroken*, demonstrate the continued excellence of the Muscogee literary tradition in this most recent wave of Native American Literature. Custody and stewardship become ever more pronounced in works from this wave where the audiences authors are writing for begin to represent their own with ever more intention.

Other Considerations

This list of authors and works is by no means exhaustive, but it does begin to map the contextual boundaries of the project. What remains, however, is the most difficult task—

presenting an inventory of the ethical considerations one should take while compiling such a list. The first and most obvious has already been mentioned, the necessity of incompleteness due to space. There will always be someone worthy of inclusion who exemplifies the qualities of any particular wave or concern who, for one reason or another, is left out and I've certainly had to make those decisions here. Then there is incompleteness due to considerations other than space, including political, cultural, historical, and aesthetic. I don't include Joseph Boyden, for example, and there are many others whose inclusion in years past may have been fine but now are in question, like Sherman Alexie, Rebecca Roanhorse, and more. In Boyden's case, his false claims to Indigeneity place him near the bottom on my personal list of priorities for inclusion. On that note, First Nations authors are typically cordoned off and their literary traditions are largely handled by Canadian and First Nations scholars. This seems an arbitrary distinction.

Further, the production of Native intellectuals is an afterthought for most discussions of the literary traditions of Native people, unless those intellectuals also happen to have creative publications (Vizenor and Ortiz, for example). In my estimation, works like Womack's *Red on Red* and Laura Harjo's *A Spiral to the Stars* could contribute valuable nuance to their respective waves. Several of the works of Native theory on my broad list helped position, contextualize, and appreciate the creative lists populating this discussion, including Sean Teuton's *Red Land, Red Power*, David Treuer's *Native American Fiction*, and Daniel Heath Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. The same can be said of other Native artists in non-literary fields, though that is more understandable given the aims of the initial heuristic. On that note, despite Wurth's exaggerated visibility in this section, it should not be confused as a central text in my research. It is a fine article that provides a useful heuristic for addressing the framing questions along with some insightful commentary, but its intense focus on poetry limits its applicability for further analysis in this project outside of starting the discussion.

Finally, the act of categorization in the first place, as alluded to in the introduction of the framing questions, presents problems both in the grouping of texts and in their separation. Treuer's central argument in *Native American Fiction* reminds us that the ever-increasing diversity of work published by Native people lacks any sort of aesthetic, thematic, or formal unity. While there are critiques to Treuer, he raises a valid concern. At the same time, by separating Native literature into waves, difficulties arise for authors with long careers, authors who don't share the characteristics of any given wave, and authors who fall outside the heuristic as a whole. The literary traditions of Native people prior to contact are valid but have no representation in the above discussion, for example. The Academy's love affair with trickster stories all too often groups disparate cultures into a singular bucket to make general claims on these stories, meanwhile the communities from which these stories come have their own claims their making that go unheard.

It is of utmost importance that readers are made aware of the considerations undertaken with any presentation of Native American Literature's history, figures, and artifacts for it to proceed in a good way. The framing questions for this section amount to this: what is Native American Literature? I now feel more prepared to answer this deceptively complex question. The simple (and perhaps obvious) answer is it is the literature of, from, and by Native Americans, not about them or, worse yet, set among them. But from there, the answers begin to fork and grow more and more complex. Womack provides the tools needed to determine if we proceed in an ethical way, writing, “Possible answers might include "I don't know, is it? Are you willing to claim it as such? What kind of work will you do to convince me it is? What negotiations might have to occur to convince others of its tribal legitimacy? How much homework have you done already in terms of tracing its tribal roots? How much more are you willing to do" (*Art* 363)? We will explore more of Womack's ideas in the next section.

American Indian Literary Nationalism

Framing Questions

As Native American Literature matured, that is to say, became a more popular area of academic study, the need for more Native voices in the discussion and criticism of these works became necessary. The status quo has been, and to a much lesser extent continues to be, non-Native critics' voices determining the meaning, worth, and significance of Native works of literature over Native voices concerning these same things. Rather than provide an ever-increasing bibliography of this type of criticism, and at the risk of appearing to shadowbox the spectre of a strawman, I presuppose, based on informal calculations and lived experience, that Native critics continue to grow in number, but at a rate outpaced by non-Native critics in the same field. There is certainly a path to determine the legitimacy of this claim, but that is not the focus of this response.

Rather, this project is more concerned with the increasing number of Native critics and, specifically, their critical methodologies. As a swell of Native scholars entered the field in the decades immediately following the Native American Renaissance, clear points of emphasis in Native literary critique took hold: Tribal specificity and sovereignty. While Western methods certainly weren't and haven't been abandoned, methodologies that privileged the concerns of Tribal specificity and sovereignty began to take central, rather than marginal, positions. A consequence of this shift has been a current era of Native literary criticism with as many methodologies as there are communities to support them, an overwhelmingly positive outcome where the central drawback is finding opportunities to engage with these criticisms in a good way. In other words, it has become difficult to see the forest because there are so many distinct trees. Though a fine topic of research in and of itself, this project won't seek to identify, catalog, or evaluate all the community-specific methodologies constituting the current landscape of Native literary criticism. Instead, and as a happy coincidence Tribally-speaking, I turn to the works of Muscogee critic Craig Womack and his colleagues Jace Weaver and Robert Warrior to answer the following questions,

- what are the tenets of American Indian Literary Nationalism?
- how are they engaged with contemporary Native American Literature?

The Separatists and Their Creed

The initial groundwork for American Indian Literary Nationalism is credited to Simon Ortiz, whose 1981 article "Towards a National Indian Literature" set the stage for the work to follow. Ortiz focused on what he saw as the clearly identifiable and consistent qualities of Native American Literature, namely the continued resistance evidenced by Momaday, McNickle, and Silko (Weaver 257). In the decades following its publication, the three loudest voices to take up the mantle were Robert Warrior (*Tribal Secrets* 1998), Jace Weaver (*That the People Might Live* 1997), and Craig Womack (*Red on Red* 1999). Despite their work addressing disparate texts and audiences, a thematic through-line sees them all linked together even to this day.

That theme, or rather their variations on it, suggests that American Indian literature is the legitimate product of distinct Tribal nations, ought to be studied as such, and analyzed through the distinct lens of those nations' political, historical, cultural, and philosophical traditions. In other words, Native literary critique informed and, when possible, performed by Native communities should be encouraged. This stance drew considerable critique and their rebuttal, the 2005 collection of essays *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, provides a unified positional statement that consolidates and clarifies their arguments from the previous decade.

Challenges to the movement are covered in greater detail in that text, but the general tenor suggested that it was a backward movement ignoring progress and collaboration with its roots in xenophobia. Weaver would respond, “At its most profound, literary nationalism is not a confrontation, not a tearing down, but an upbuilding . . . . we would rather commit considerable energy to the explication of specific Native values, readings, and knowledges and their relevance to our contemporary lives" (Weaver 6). Warrior echoes this sentiment, suggesting, “such an either/or perspective is neither necessary nor possible. When we remove ourselves from this dichotomy, much becomes possible. We see first that the struggle for sovereignty is not a struggle to be free from the influence of anything outside ourselves, but a process of asserting the power we possess as communities and individuals to make decisions that affect our lives" (Weaver 201). The nationalist cause looked inward not only for solutions to their own problems, but that they might find new solutions to share with the world. Womack, likewise, highlights the innovation and subversion Native people were capable of, suggesting “many postcolonial writers have written of nationalism as a pathology with roots in xenophobia, triumphalism, oppositional discourse that pits an us against a them, and isolationism, but perhaps there is some other kind of nationalism they don't know about yet--one that tribal people can explore, one that may not even yet exist except in dreams waiting to become stories" (Womack 9).

In addition to these positive messages of sovereignty, innovation, and collaboration, Womack explicitly lays out ten tenets for a compassionate American Indian Nationalism. In an abbreviated form, they consist of local work with global implications; critical exchanges of ideas; seating the next generation at the table; recognizing the validity of broader movements; committing to commentary, artistry, and experimentation; never abandoning the religious and spiritual; engaging in challenging historical work; being an activist; close read for sovereignty; and scrutinize theory of action, not just words (Weaver 174). It's no wonder that the movement has been so influential and resilient. Embedded in this call to action is a foundation in building relationships. My own approach to custody and stewardship arose through engagement with these tenets.

Nationalist Literature

The answer to the second framing question for this section is, as mentioned in the question's preamble, as broad and diverse as the communities producing authors, texts, and critics. This project is one example, Womack's *Red on Red* another. Muscogee critics producing Muscogee scholarship on Muscogee texts can be as pure an example of the ways American Indian Literary Nationalism is engaged with the literature as there may be. *Can be*, not necessarily *has to be*. It could also look very different and still meet the goals of the movement, including the common instance of a Native critic practicing trans-national or intertribal criticism. Ultimately, the deciding factor will be how the critic positions Tribal sovereignty and specificity in their analysis. Many, but not all, approaches that center the community from which the work comes will, as a matter of course, satisfy most of the necessary requirements. I will be discussing in greater detail how this project hopes to realize these goals in a later section. But to briefly summarize, the tenets of American Indian Literary Nationalism are most strongly engaged with Native American Literature when the work is closely read with an eye for how sovereignty is expressed in the text.

Even as Native American Literary and Cultural Studies satisfies the criteria for a healthy discursive context, mapping out the boundaries and relations of the field routinely points to a sister, or depending on who you ask, mother discourse. The scholarly decolonial turn has made its presence felt in Native American Literature. While the terms “decoloniality” and “decolonization” may appear here and there in creative works, they tend to appear much more frequently in works of theory and critique. Instead, it is the “colonial” and the “colonized” that often receive space on the page in Native American Literature, if not in direct terms, then certainly in indirect depiction. This, of course, comes as no surprise given the history of Native communities and the settler-colonial state with which we struggle. Any faithful depiction of the status quo regarding a Native American experience can’t help but be implicated, directly or indirectly, by settler colonialism.

However, a key component of decolonization is the fundamental right to self-determination, and one expression of that can be picking your battles. That is to say, the work to be done in Native literature relies upon the combined efforts of the individuals and communities it is comprised of, and that is a finite resource. Of course, there are multiple aims, including competing ones, and these labors need not be mutually exclusive. However, any ethical participation in the decolonization process includes the responsibility of understanding its far-reaching histories and tenets. The struggle for decolonization is worthwhile, there is no denying that, but to apply the blanket term to the whole of Native American Literature—or any other field or discourse, for that matter—as an inherent quality isn’t without its dangers. Rather, there should be a clear understanding of the struggle for decolonization in its many forms, and an honest evaluation of the capacity for any given work within the domain of Native American Literature and Cultural Studies to contribute to that struggle. If this is true, then one of the aims of this project is to attempt to answer the simple question, what is decolonization, and how, if at all, does Native American Literature contribute to it?

Not a Metaphor, Or So I'm Told

This project began with a significantly larger selection of works on the topic of decolonization, but the process of actually reading them saw that number dwindle as my understanding of the term grew. The final holdouts, save one, are included because their impact is so large, their footprint on the discourse inescapable, that their absence would feel suspect. I'm referring of course to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," (2012) and, certainly to a lesser extent but largely influential personally, Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony* (2008).

The intractable nature of decolonization begins with its definition. There is the north/south divide on decolonization/decoloniality, the historical periods of decolonization of the Atlantic and later Africa, its distinction or antagonistic belligerence with the postcolonial, and of course the metaphorical-or-not relation it shares with minds, knowledges, teaching and learning, and all sorts of academic fields. To start with a simple definition: decolonization is the undoing of colonization. From there it gets more complicated and contested. Tuck and Yang, for instance, posit a central argument that suggests the term is misapplied in any instance where the repatriation of Indigenous land doesn't occur. Decolonization is not a swappable term. There is no synonym for the material consequence necessary for decolonization to take place—land reclamation is a necessary component. Fake discourse gets in the way of meaningful alliances through settler moves to innocence. Relevant to discussions of custody and stewardship, settlers create the idea of property, different than immigrants, wherein they become the law. This unsettles everyone. It has moved the conversation past the author, past their intention, and into the deeply and unassailably personal.

Following that move—the move where personal interpretation, personal ownership, personal experience is the ultimate arbiter of meaning—settlers then begin Playing Indian wherein they fulfill their adoption fantasy, to become without becoming, to rid the land of Indians and be made innocent—settler nativism "Indian grandma". The pursuit of critical awareness, the ever tantalizing call to decolonize your mind, doesn't matter until something is done. With that attitude, Tuck and Yang argue, Native people become Asterisk people, both at risk and marginalized. True Decolonization eliminates settler property rights and sovereignty, requires the abolition of land as property, and upholds the sovereignty of Native land and people. Meanwhile, Smith, Wilson and others stress the importance of praxis, the thought-action that powers decoloniality and as a result, decoloniality can take many forms.

Ultimately, I disagree with Tuck and Yang's limiting view of decolonization, but recognize that decolonization must be accompanied by an examination of who is doing the colonizing, where, why, and how? In specific contexts, Tuck's definition, then, aligns perfectly with the decolonizing capacity of Native American Literature. In those moments where a work of Native Lit allows readers to identify the ways in which colonization is occurring, the path towards decolonization presents itself. In other words, works of literature can diagnose the problem, at which point decolonization becomes the treatment. Finally, readers must consider the possibility that they are blind to the "settler moves to innocence" Tuck argues the metaphorization of decolonization makes possible. Again, the text itself may provide the answer. It is only through an engaged reading of a text that these concerns even become visible, which suggests and confirms the decolonizing capacity of Native American Literature, albeit on a case-by-case basis and most often only as a diagnostic tool.

The previous paragraph is perhaps the least satisfying analysis in this essay, or as Homer Simpson would remind us, the least satisfying *so far*. Entering into this research I suspected there would be certain texts more "decolonial" than others, and that some sort of ubiquity would arise in usage of the term. Unfortunately, and this is my fault, the inclusion of too few texts to adequately examine this question resulted in a flat analysis. The field is vibrant and dynamic and deserving of further study. In the meantime, and in an attempt to put simply what I struggled to convey above, my understanding of decolonization based on the synthesis of the texts included here suggests that decoloniality draws attention to and hopes to disrupt the continuing harmful legacies of colonialism, while decolonization itself should engender a material consequence. Native American Literature, in its various manifestations, is capable of satisfying these conditions of decoloniality and sometimes decolonization, though that is not always its primary concern.

Material Culture

Framing Questions

If, through critical engagement with Native literature, we begin to attend to and disrupt colonizing legacies to various degrees, one final concern of this project is to examine the ways in which the communities from which these works emerge maintain or fail to maintain a sense of ownership of them. In many ways, the work of the previous sections has led to this moment where we can begin to approach questions of custody and stewardship that prompted this project in the first place. There is still a long way to go before the foundations necessary to satisfy the harshest critic (which in many cases can be the most useful one, as well) are met, but here we begin return to the text with a better understanding of identity, sovereignty, and decolonization.

However, the conditions prompting the initial concern—that is to say, the all-too-frequent disruption or failed recognition of custodial and stewardship markers—presume instances where the aforementioned intellectual labor and understanding is not a given, indeed more likely than not it will be absent or at the very least fail to align with those of the author and Nationalist critic. That is to say, this process arose to give tools to the readers who too quickly assert their interpretations to a text without engaging the text critically. There is a reason so many Native scholars continue to grapple with the lingering spectre of harmful stereotypes, or more accurately, several reasons. Outside the ivory halls of academia, the creative works of Native artists are consumed indiscriminately, and anyone with a Hulu account or desire to read can have their conceptions of Native people and cultures confirmed, revised, or subverted by these artifacts of cultural production. With such power, how can artists and cultures ensure that the artifacts function as faithful ideological containers, if that is even possible? At this point, the project broadens and considers how multidisciplinarity can attempt to answer the difficult questions,

- how has Native American cultural production—material, literary, and artistic—maintained its connection to its home communities?
- what is at stake should that connection waiver or fail?

Things Come From Somewhere

Authenticity, representation, identity, and Native Art—the on-again, off-again bedfellows that every student of Native American art struggles with—demonstrate the need for self-determination in Native Art. Instead of adhering to a strict set of norms or stressing the inclusion or absence of cultural markers, it becomes necessary to recognize the vibrant state of innovation in which we currently reside where the mixing of the traditional and contemporary reflect a dynamic culture rather than simple irreverence or various degrees of “correctness.”

In countless examples across the sphere of Native American creative production, the connection between art and the community from which it comes is writ large, plain to see for even those who might not know where to look. Through an examination of the materiality, language, themes, or artistic traditions of less-obvious artifacts of cultural production, connections can still be made. To be clear, a Tribal enterprise mass-producing egg timers isn’t necessarily what we’re talking about here, though it might be. Instead, this discussion assumes an identifiable amount of intention behind the production of culture. Indeed, the production of most art attempts to communicate something, otherwise it’s simply a therapeutic exercise for the artist, and while there’s certainly a place and use for art therapy that’s not what we’re talking about here.

Ultimately there is no secret recipe of signifiers for communities to ensure their artifacts maintain their cultural integrity once they have left those communities, and it is only through the willing and thoughtful engagement of audiences with whatever methods maker communities employ that connections can be made.

It is invitational. It can be declined. Every moment where an author challenges the reader is an invitation to develop a relationship, to engage. If that engagement is absent? Prior to this project, I would have bemoaned what I considered the silencing of a Native voice. But now, having read a little more, I can recognize that the voice may have gone unheard, but it was never silenced. It is the difference between miscommunicating and failing to communicate at all. In this way, it can be useful to recognize that the maintenance of connection between communities and their material culture takes many forms and undergoes constant revision, refinement, and reification.

Alfred Young Man (Cree) exemplifies the positive message of self-determination all my readings on this topic share. For him, the connection between artist and community never fails, it simply recreates itself. He writes, “Indian artists. . . have literally reinvented their culture many times over with no loss of continuity with earlier Native cultures and consequently, they have had, and do have, an untold influence on the way the “outside” world perceives them” (Young Man 88). In many ways, this satisfies the second framing question, what is at stake, albeit by its dismissal. The suggestion is that the connection cannot waiver or fail, and perhaps further, that those who believe it can aren’t the ones we ought to concern ourselves with.

Authorial Custody and Story Stewardship

My Argument

I believe that through an examination of the custody markers of a story, readers can make more-informed interpretive decisions as well as position themselves as stewards of stories. Writer and scholar Robert Boswell defines authorial custody as “the extent to which the author retains control over a story after it has been put into the hands of the reader” (Boswell). A series of initial questions can be asked to map out the boundaries of this stewardship and the relationship between author, audience, and text:

- What story have I been given, or what story do I now share?
- Where and from whom did this story come?
- What is my level of engagement with the story?
- What have I been asked, if anything, to do with this story?

- When can I share this story, and with whom?
- What evidence, textual or otherwise, am I using to answer these questions?

The answers to these questions may vary in their subjective weight, but the importance of asking them demonstrates the willingness to engage, to enter into the relationship between author and audience. Where authorial custody is concerned with meaning making, story stewardship is an approach interested in examining how that meaning might inform the relationality of author, audience, and text. Whether the text in question is a work of literature, an image, a YouTube channel, or an idea, the notion of story stewardship takes the desires of both the text itself and its author into account. As Maori scholar Ngahuia Murphy so eloquently puts it, "We don't lose knowledges, they fall in and out of the world...if there are knowledges that you yearn for it's because those knowledges are yearning for you" (Murphy). It is a call to listen and respond, but first the willingness to cede custody, if that is what the text and the author suggest.

Story stewardship and authorial custody aren't about—aren't *just* about—attribution or reception studies. Writer Sonya Larson begins to examine the complex nature of these ideas, suggesting, "It is a literary effect—like atmosphere or suspense—that emerges from several craft elements acting in concert with one another. . . It is a set of interactions; it is not the dancers but the dance" (Larson). Indeed, elements textual, paratextual, and intertextual all contribute to the overall sense of a text's authorial custody. It is a symptomatic close reading of a text that privileges the author and their intent in an attempt to assign meaning. As such, the notion of authorial custody is at odds with many popular literary theories and modes of critique. There has been a very successful campaign against authors over the last hundred years in particular with Wimsatt and Beardsley's intentional fallacy, New Criticism's text itself, Roland Barthe's death of the author, Foucault's so-called author function, and occasional addendums by authors like

J.K. Rowling that make us wish some authors would just let their characters be. Instead, story stewardship celebrates the author as creative agent and inquires into that agency critically, with a goal being the discovery of intent by identifying craft decisions in the work, such that the reader can become a better steward of the story. The weight that author and reader assign to these elements varies, resulting in a spectrum of custody from communal to personal. A work will typically have instances of both, and one side of the spectrum isn't always inherently evident over another. Collaborative custody, where both author and audience have clear contributions and subsequent ownership claims to a story, is not uncommon. Responsible story stewardship, then, asks the critic to be mindful of this relationship.

The capacity for this critical creative methodology to be employed as a decolonizing tool became clear to me as I became more familiar with the work of Craig Womack and the American Indian Literary Nationalism scholars. Authorial custody would necessitate a recognition of the author's Tribal nation and weigh that distinction heavily in its analysis and in this way, among others, it falls squarely within the realm of a Literary Nationalist agenda. Reading their work, alongside De Bois, Fanon, Ngugi Thiongo, Freire, and others has helped me to recognize the importance of National literature in the decolonization process. American Indian Literary Nationalism is the posture, authorial custody the tool, story stewardship the product, all aligned toward the goal of unsettling settler-colonial creative and interpretive practices.

As Womack has written, "A key component of nationhood is a people's idea of themselves. Their imaginings of who they are" (Womack 14). Authorial custody is a critical celebration of this particular expression of sovereignty. When a reader ignores authorial custody, they impose their imaginings over those of the author. What tools are at the artist's disposal to regain and maintain custody of their image or story? I argue that the reclamation of colonized images from settler-colonial custody is not only a possible outcome of literary analysis and critique, but a necessary one informed by the intentional work of artists and authors in marginalized communities. Utilizing a custody and stewardship approach, critics can inquire into the ways in which an author conveys meaning in their work, and how that meaning addresses, if at all, the images the author engages. In other words, asking the question, "whose story is this?" can be a useful and rewarding approach to discover meaning in fiction. It is in that moment, in the asking of the question with the sincere intention of relinquishing ownership of a story if it is suggested, that decolonizing the reading practice occurs. This may not be #landback, but it is creating the potential for the exchange of intellectual real estate.

Recognition and implementation of authorial custody enables a more rewarding reading of a work and encourages thoughtful reflection on the relationality between author, text, and audience. What then is the takeaway when the story stewardship heuristic is applied? What do you do when your stories are out in the world, and they don't resemble the stories you thought you told? Is there anything you can do? Where do some readers get the images in their heads when authors have entirely different ones? What mechanisms inform our felt custody of a text? In short, who owns a story? Story stewardship encourages readers to recognize that these are authorial craft elements—meaningful decisions in place of an otherwise—and to consider the impact of the intentional manipulation of those elements on their own claims to the custody of a story.

Story stewardship, by decentering Western notions of reading and story ownership, allows for the replacement of colonized images with dynamic, informed, reciprocal ones. To be clear, colonized images can literally be images, as you might see in the works of Remington or Edward S. Curtis, but they can also function as ideological placeholders in a reader's mind's eye.

In terms of custody, Native authors are capable of demonstrating their sense of ownership of those images, and readers who resist it routinely come away with readings that reinforce the sad, tragic, and depressed stereotypes that this methodology pushes against. This shouldn't surprise us. The process of reclaiming our images will unsettle people. But we need those images back, or at the very least shared under our terms. Native custody unsettles the settler. Unsettling the entrenched settler-colonial reading practice has always been possible, and these tools can help facilitate that goal.

As one of the characters in Tommy Orange's novel *There There* states, "Sometimes not having a story is the story" (148). Having, possessing, custody of. Our image, our stories, have—since the beginning of contact—been owned by "not us." We, as Indigenous people, have been sensationalized, romanticized, villainized, and dehumanized over and over, so much so that it is the dominant image we struggle against. It is through decolonizing works like *There There*—insofar as it attends to the removal and loss of Native lands, language, and cultural practices, with the aim of disrupting these negative legacies through the uplifting of positive ones—that this status quo is challenged. Audiences asking how the author is negotiating custody of a work is a necessary first step in honoring the rhetorical sovereignty of our artists. While this is especially true in Indian Country, it holds true in broader applications as well.

Story stewardship provokes an intentional, custody-informed move from "I think this work is about…" to "I think the author is trying to say…". It doesn't give us our voices back: we never lost them; it encourages readers to finally, and perhaps for the first time, listen.

Muscogee Concerns

To briefly address the framing texts in this dissertation directly, Muscogee creators are no different than any other set of creators in their methods for exerting authorial custody and story stewardship. There will be elements identifiably Muscogee that relate to the language, history, culture, and place of our people. Trends emerge, but do they cohere enough to function as a Muscogee aesthetic? I hesitantly say, yes, they do. My hesitance is two-fold: firstly, I'm worried of essentializing a Muscogee experience, and how that experience informs an aesthetic; secondly, it's impossible to know the line where trends become an aesthetic. Literally every Muscogee author and text from my readings have these three elements in common: they invoke the Mvskoke language, they contain at least one self-identifying Muscogee character (poetry and nonfiction notwithstanding, though the authors of those works include this element elsewhere), and they include scenes within or direct references to Muscogee lands. A fourth element saw near-universal inclusion, and that is the depiction of religious or spiritual elements identifiably Muscogee (stomp dances, church grounds, Hesaketvmese, etc.). It should come as no surprise that this project, authored by a Muscogee writer, contains all these elements as well.

Finally, to briefly return to the discussion alluded to above in Nationalist Literature, this demonstration of the considerations around a Muscogee aesthetic presents a meta-challenge to Nationalist critique. I cannot objectively weigh the significance of these elements on an unknown reader any more than anyone can reasonably expect. They are ever shifting, ever subjective. While I'm not sure how damaging a worst-case scenario might be—indeed, I don't even know what that looks like—I can know that my appreciation for the skill of the authors, these works, and the aesthetic has been impacted because I've recognized their Muscogee markers. To what degree has it impacted my appreciation and estimation of their artistic excellence? I don't know, but I do know it's a good feeling to see a part of yourself reflected in these works. Do settlers feel this all the time?

Chapter Descriptions

In this introduction we've set the stage for a discussion of authorial custody and story stewardship. Utilizing Indigenous Storywork, which treats story as theory, I extend the relational attitude that is central to Indigenous Storywork to the works of Indigenous authors. In addition, I concur with Lumbee scholar Brian Brayboy who writes, "Theory is not simply an abstract thought or idea that explains overarching structures of societies and communities; theories, through stories and other media, are roadmaps for our communities and reminders of our individual responsibilities to the survival of our communities" (427). Coupled with an American Indian Literary Nationalist posture, these tools look to the authors of texts for meaning-making cues, privileging those that support Tribal sovereignty. The following chapters aim to put the tools through their paces, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses and how the approach can contribute to the ongoing project of decolonization that Native Literature currently participates in.

Chapter two will examine Joy Harjo's 2019 collection of poems, *An American Sunrise*, and demonstrate the oscillating negotiation of custody in its pages. I argue that Harjo's masterful use of custodial decisions contributes to her massive readership, as readers are invited into her story through accessible, communal custody images, while simultaneously satisfying literary critics who recognize the demand she places on readers in her more self-consciously aesthetic poems that exhibit an elaborate command of language and communication. Her work serves as a great entry point to story stewardship as it invokes the familiar but highlights specific moments of departure, where there is a clear opportunity for both the reader and author to share ownership of the story and its meaning-making apparatus. This example of shared custody will prepare readers for the more and less extreme poles that constitute the spectrum of authorial custody in the coming chapters. Having established a working sense of stewardship within and for Harjo's oeuvre, I present a juxtaposition of her work with that of Harjo-prompted ChatGPT generated work. The comparison allows for useful discussions on authorship, creative agency, and the toolsets privileging of intention as an interpretive catalyst.

The third chapter presents an overview of the work of Cynthia Leitich Smith. As a children's author, Smith cannot linger too long in personal custody territory and instead must present her readers with stories they find easily accessible and can relate to. Her entries offer a scaffolded framework to examine custody, with texts ranging from picture books to young adult novels. In each, readers can find a clearly identifiable Muscogee aesthetic while also never feeling closed off from accessing the larger meanings of the work.

The fourth chapter broadens the scope of the methodology and looks at its application in multidisciplinary environments. Continuing the tradition of literary critique contributing to the discourse of other fields, I begin to situate authorial custody and story stewardship as a versatile critical reading methodology. This final case study chapter will feature a subtle shift from mapping the terrain of authorial custody to examining how creators of Muskogee expressive culture steward Muskogee stories. It does so by calling into question the notion of authorship itself in the collaborative art of cinema through an analysis of Sterlin Harjo's *Reservation Dogs*. Here, story stewardship is presented in perhaps its most straightforward instance: a story where a guiding voice is present, but the nature of the medium requires shared creative labor, in other words, of and by Natives for Natives, but everyone else is welcome along. It is a story stewardship of invitation. In the Afterword, we will conclude by looking at multidisciplinary applications and future conversations.

Ultimately, the goal of this work is to position authorial custody and story stewardship as useful tools for anyone interested in using them. That they are presented in a Mvskoke context is a circumstantial byproduct of my personal stance on Western education. I see it as my responsibility to know the literary tradition of my people, to write about it when I can, and to promote it broadly through whatever intellectual contributions I endeavor to make. For me, authorial custody and story stewardship have a natural fit within such a worldview, but I believe these tools transcend culture, and it is my sincere hope that readers find a place for it in their own praxis.

Dear Locv,
You lucky duck, you've got some great literary traditions to explore. Our people have been writing for a very long time and there's so much we can learn from them. I wanted to make sure you know, without a doubt, that our voices sing and it's a song you can join whenever you're ready.
Love,
Dad

Chapter 2

Joy Harjo’s *An American Sunrise*:

Literary Ancestors and Plurinational Authorship in the Age of AI

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

— Lewis Carrol

Dear Locv,
How do you think it’s going? Have I lost you, are you confused at all? I hope not, but that will depend on when you decide to pick this up. I’ve got faith in you, though. You read like a champ and you’re only getting better. This chapter is about the final boss of reading: poetry.
Love,
Dad

Joy Harjo’s tenure as the 23rd National Poet Laureate of the United States began amidst one of the most turbulent and divisive presidential administrations in a generation. Her appointment by the Librarian of Congress was a spark of hope in Indian Country and a thinly-veiled act of resistance more broadly. Here was America’s first Native American Poet Laureate, and it only took eighty-two years and a president riffing on shooting migrants at the border (Diamond). Harjo’s appointment was clearly political, despite the position being apolitical in theory if not practice. “Everything is political,” Harjo said when asked about Trump directly, declining to outright criticize the sitting president at the time (Italie). Still, her body of work speaks for itself, and the lingering pall of uncertainty and division permeating the country illustrated the need for a counter-story to the relentless stream of MAGA nationalism in the media. After years of work and community-building as a poet, musician, and author, Harjo was thrust into the national spotlight as a much-needed voice for the arts and, indeed, humanity: a voice that reminds us of ourselves in all the best ways. Her selection was considered because "she tells an American story of tradition and loss, reckoning and myth-making. Her work [. . .] helps us reimagine who we are" ("Librarian").

If that last bit sounds familiar, it's because it echoes the sentiments of Mvskoke scholar Craig Womack, whom I've included elsewhere in this project. He writes, "A key component of nationhood is a people's idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are" (Womack 14). It is a recurring theme throughout this work that our artists are an integral part of our national identity, our concepts of home, and an internal metric by which we define ourselves as opposed to being defined by others. Harjo echoes this sentiment, writing,

> As we practiced our arts, we realized that we had a hand in revising the story of who we are as indigenous nations, who we were, and who we were becoming. We would come to learn that our indigenous arts and lifeways are crucial to a healthy and dynamic American story. There is no America without us. And our arts, the arts of all our citizens, show the way to a meaningful future. (*Catching* 16)

Two moments stick out to me here. The first is that the process of discovery relies upon a continuing art practice. The formation, refinement, and envisioning of self-determination can be tracked alongside the development of the community's art practice in those same moments. Second, is the recognition of all citizens being a necessity for meaning to emerge. As the burgeoning agency of Artificial Intelligence begins to surface with ever increasing rapidity across our society, it becomes even more important to be prepared to nurture that newfound connection, that is to say, our developing relationship to AI, and treat it as a fellow citizen in our communities.

In the pages that follow I will demonstrate the ways in which Harjo interrogates her, my, and our national identities and promotes the idea of an Indigenous plurinationalism in her 2019 collection, *An American Sunrise*. This will be accomplished through the application of story stewardship, where Harjo's text provides ample opportunities to examine the insights, detours, and limitations of the proposed methodology.

The central text will be considered in juxtaposition with an AI-generated poem in the style of Joy Harjo. The comparison encourages a line of inquiry around authorship, intention, ownership, and the role of the artist in the age of AI. What considerations are weighed when the various natures of an author are known and unknown? Ultimately, the chapter positions story stewardship as not about—or not *just* about—attribution but more effectively as a tool to fine-tune our meaning-making apparatus. That is to say, story stewardship looks for and engages with the textual and paratextual markers that are concerned with "authorship," but that often isn't its main concern, instead focusing on how those markers then inform meaning in the text.

To facilitate a reading that is intentional with regard to custody and stewardship, a number of assumptions will need to be investigated and confirmed or dismissed. This will, at first, take the form of recurring straightforward statements [appearing in brackets] that feel clunky, inelegant, and redundant. Over time, however, as the lexicon and experience of the reader grow the statements will become less frequent and—ideally—more insightful. Or as my former mentor Pam Houston would say, the text will teach you how it wants to be read. [To illustrate the point, here is the first lesson: this is a communal custody text. My intention is to position authorial custody and story stewardship as useful tools for author, audience, and critic. As a critical reading methodology, it can be used to identify custodial markers indicating the level of ownership one has of a story, which allows for the meaning-making apparatus to be engaged in an ethically informed way such that anyone applying it to a work can function as faithful stewards of stories. In this case, your stewardship is one of mutual exchange. These ideas are given freely with the expectation that they will undergo a change and proliferate. This is one of many foundational assumptions about this work that will be central to developing a sense of the stewardship it suggests.]

The Foolish Young Bear

So why and how will a juxtaposition of Joy Harjo's work with AI-generated work in the style of Joy Harjo provide a useful conversation? What questions does such a comparison hope to answer? To begin the discussion, I will defer to longstanding teaching practice in the Mvskoke community and elsewhere: we will start with a story. This story comes from celebrated Mvskoke poet, journalist, and humorist Alexander Posey. Originally published in his newspaper the *Indian Journal* in 1901, it tells of the frustrations of a young bear hunting for food.

> Fable of the Foolish Young Bear
>
> Once upon a warm spring day a foolish young bear went abroad in search of food. The long severe winter had reduced his supply of fat to such an extent that he vowed he could eat anything and it would taste good. Moreover he was not so concerned about what he was going to find as he was about finding it. He prowled about in the woods a long time thrusting his arms into this dark hole and that and peeping into everything that looked hollow. He scratched vigorously, too, here and there, yanking out obstructing roots until he felt itchy with the heat and craved water. But he found not a morsel. There was nothing in the hollow log or a tree but trash; nothing in the dark holes but darkness; nothing in the earth but obstinate roots. While the foolish young bear was holding counsel with himself about what next to do, he saw a commotion in the dead grass ahead of him. His eyes beamed with satisfaction and the inner bear was pleased. Hugging the ground closely, he followed the motion of the grass until all at once he sprang into the air,

> turned a somerset backward and retreated as if suddenly afflicted with the blind staggers. While he was plowing up the earth with his nose and rubbing his eyes nearly out, the skunk escaped. An old crow, who was foraging in a pecan grove near by, was astonished at Brer Bear's rashness and said so plainly.
>
> The foolish young bear then left the woods and went up into the mountains, suspiciously giving every movement he saw in the grass plenty of room. He looked under the ledges, examining every seam and crevice, but found nothing except a mountain boomer with fast colored rings around his neck, who all but jumped him out of his skin as he scampered by within a foot of his nose. He did not like the way the boomer had of turning around and looking at him as if he would as soon fight as not. Finally, he came to a large pine log lying on the steep hillside. As it looked wormy he began to dig under the log. He scratched first on one side and then on another. It was not long before he had scratched away all the dirt under the log and it rolled down over him, bruising him badly. He got up enraged. He pounced on the senseless log and beat it and beat it and beat it. He tried to beat the tar out of it. Then he put his ear to the log to see if it was dead.
>
> MORAL: Have you not been a foolish young bear?
>
> *Chinnubbie Harjo*

In typical storytelling fashion, I won't go into a lengthy, didactic explanation of the story, its themes, or even its direct application to the inquiries of this chapter—other than to say that if this ambiguity troubles you please extend me a little grace; we will return to Posey in subsequent chapters.

[I will mention, however, that this is another moment to examine authorial custody and story stewardship, and that this particular moment offers up our first opportunity to engage with nested degrees of custody and stewardship. Here we have myself (the author of this chapter) conveying the words of the real journalist Alexander Posey presented through a story from a fictitious persona, Chinnubbie Harjo, functioning as a correspondent for the real-world newspaper, *Indian Journal*. This is not the focus of this chapter, but bringing attention to the idea of nested degrees of custody and stewardship is important. In my attempts to practice ethical story stewardship, my aims are to constantly be aware of the custodial and stewardship markers and consider their implications. Again, on the whole, this project is a communal custody exercise where my intention to share ideas and practices is clear. However, there has to be a recognition of the ongoing negotiation that takes place when engaging ethically with a text. In this case, I felt very comfortable sharing this story—perhaps the most common and straightforward indication of a communal custody work. The story, "Fable of the Foolish Young Bear" was essentially self-published for wide consumption. It is not a story that has any insider rules or practices in place, while also presented in an accessible voice whose diction, form, and content all suggest a communal custody intention where ethical stewardship extends to mindful sharing of the text. And while these are not a comprehensive list of the considerations that go into determining the custody and stewardship of any given work, in this case they are enough—and consistent enough—to feel confident making such a designation.]

Poets and the Rest of Us

Poetry is an excellent form for the study of authorial custody and story stewardship because of the inherent intentionality it so often traffics in. Custody and stewardship require a minimum threshold of intention, and what better form for such an inquiry than one that deeply considers every word, line, space, case, and syllable? This is not to say that other forms, and certainly other authors, do not give the same level of attention to these qualities, or even that this threshold is met by every poet. Rather, it is a generalization that suggests that this threshold is met by enough of the field most of the time and that of course there are exceptions. Ideally, these exceptions would also provide interesting opportunities for the application of these tools, but that is not the focus of this study. Poetry, at once an exercise in specific precision and unknowable ambiguity, challenges the unexamined and the status quo in a way that lends itself perfectly to close reading and literary analysis. To position authorial custody and story stewardship as a useful methodology for the field, its process and outcomes must demonstrate sufficient value. But what is sufficient? For the advocate of authorial custody and story stewardship, it is a process and outcome that ethically considers those of the author.

Harjo has been asked more times than are worth recounting here the importance and intention of poetry, and generally her answers have all been in-line with what one would expect from a working poet and champion for the arts. But my favorite of her many musings on poetry comes from her introduction to the Winter 2004-2005 issue of *Ploughshares*, where she was guest-editor. [What follows is a lengthy quote, but first another aside to consider our methodology and its attempts to privilege authorship. This is a communal custody strategy that emphasizes the words of the author where possible and appropriate. As I build toward my personal conclusions on Joy Harjo's work, the burden is placed upon me to ensure my readers (especially you) are given a comprehensive account of how I reach those conclusions and that they are, upon our mutual exchange, plausible if not completely reasonable. As such, attention must be paid to the incorporation of quoted material as an element of authorial custody and story stewardship. If *my* story is meant to faithfully represent and analyze *her* story, judicious and liberal use of quotations will occur. It allows the text to speak for itself while trying to minimize the heresy of paraphrase that all analysis and critique is suspect of.] Here is what Harjo had to say:

> I used to think a poem could become a flower, a bear, or a house for a ravaged spirit. I used to think I understood what it meant to write a poem, and understood the impetus to write, and even knew a little something of the immensity of the source of poetry. I was never the scholar and approached the study of poetry like a fool in love with the moon. I mean, I am a reader of poetry and know a little something about the various indigenous roots of American poetry. I know even more about European elements of verse, because it was what we were taught in public schools, hammered as the "truly civilized poetry." I had to stand quite a distance from the earth, beyond conquest politics, to see the foolishness of this assertion. To say one form of poetry ranks above all others is to insist on a hierarchy of value that arbitrarily rules that a rose has more value than an orchid because it is a rose.
>
> [. . .] Poetry, like the earth, was once decreed flat, then round. I declare it as a spiral in shape and movement. Each strand of poetry curls from classical form and springs unruly forms that often overtake and become classical forms as the tendrils of songs coil into the future.
>
> I used to think a story would house a beginning, middle, and end and could be contained within the covers of a book, then given a home in the heart. Or that a story in any of its forms could lead me safely away from myself, show me a world so different I would return to gaze at my known universe with a newly shining mind. I believed that myth was alive and was the mothering source of stories, poetry, and songs, and within

this field I would find the provocative answers to the riddle of being a human without wings or gills, or directions to a map for a lost wanderer. I was looking for vision, for the powerful and straddling and subtle strategies of language, pattern, style, character, and voice that would satisfy and, even more, inspire. I have given myself over to the making of stories, and even as I found them or they located me, I was ecstatic, and then bereft. For then there I was again at the same place I started, the beginning of a page or a voice. I garnered hope, but hope is wistful and empty and is like water in our hands.

I confess. At this moment in the time and context of being a writer in America, I don't know whether I believe or know anything that I once thought I believed or knew about our art of truth-telling, of singing, of constructing the next world as a story or series of stories that we will eventually inhabit, as will our children and their children. Maybe we've all been through this before, but it's another version and we're in it deep. I used to imagine writing as a ladder leading us from the blind world into the knowing world, but now to imagine a ladder means to imagine a land or a house on which to secure a ladder. For many of us in these lands now called America, imagining this place has been a tricky feat, because there is no place that hasn't been or won't get stolen, polluted, or destroyed, and for all of us now planted here, the foundation is shaky, because though it is strong with vision, the country was founded on violent theft. But this is what we have, who we are here, together. And we can use the fire still burning there to destroy this place, or build it anew with bricks made of the trash, with fresh, shining inspiration. The elm is still growing there in that yard.

Maybe the ultimate purpose of literature is to humble us to our knees, to that know-nothing place. Maybe we here on this planet are a story gone awry, with the Great

> Storyteller frantically trying out different endings. Whatever the outcome, we need new songs, new stories, to accompany us wherever we are, wherever we go. That's the power contained in a book, journal or magazine that you can carry in your hands. So, these stories, poems, and songs are offered as such, as gifts for challenge, for inspiration, for sustenance. (Harjo, "I Used")

Though she wrote these words in 2004, they reflect a consistent, career-spanning relationship to poetry; always in flux, evolving, with certainty and exactitude kept at arm's-length other than a confident, deep, assurance of its worth. This is only one instance of an unknowable many where Harjo cedes custody of her work, or rather, of the inspiration and interpretation for and of her work. To be very clear, authorial custody and story stewardship as a methodology is not—or not yet—positioning itself to make any legal claims of ownership on intellectual property. That possibility is beyond the scope of this study but, as with other applications of these tools, my hope is that other scholars will explore its utility in the future. In this specific case, Harjo is encouraging personal subjectivity, permitting broad interpretation, admitting the futility of simple classification, and any other number of ways you want to phrase the general idea that she is sharing with us what has been shared with her. It is certainly not the sole domain of academics and critics, an attitude reflected in the stewardship she suggests with her work. She says as much in a 1993 interview for *Poets & Writers* magazine, claiming,

> [P]oetry became the property of the academic. It was taken away from the people in a sense, and I don't believe that's where poetry belongs—it belongs to the people. Yes, you can take apart literature, separate it, and see how it works, but as with taking apart the

> human body, you can't see the spirit, which is at the root of it. It is the same with a poem—you can't touch the spirit. (Smith)

That spirit continues to inhabit Harjo's creative process. Almost three decades after she gave this interview, Harjo invokes the image again in the opening of her 2021 memoir *Poet Warrior*. This time, it is less about to whom the spirit belongs and more about the intractable and intimate nature of poetry that belies base ownership.

> To imagine the spirit of poetry is much like imagining the shape and size of the knowing. It is a kind of resurrection light; it is the tall ancestor spirit who has been with me since the beginning, or a bear or a hummingbird. It is a hundred horses running the land in a soft mist, or it is a woman undressing for her beloved in firelight. It is none of these things. It is more than everything.
>
> "You're coming with me, poor thing. You don't know how to listen. You don't know how to speak. You don't know how to sing. I will teach you." (1)

Despite occupying the awkward position as academic/autopsy-enthusiast that Harjo's comments suggest, I must say that I'm at the very least a reluctant member of that society and one whose work tries to minimize my own impact on the work I engage with while facilitating greater engagement for the people. I tend to agree that we can learn "more" about poetry by reading and listening to poets rather than critics and academics, but that doesn't mean there isn't *something* to learn from the latter. Accessible models of analysis and critique that make poetry and other art forms approachable in interesting new ways, for example, can open up the possibility for people to appreciate them more easily, perhaps even to begin or continue that reclamation alluded to in Harjo's comments.

All of this is to say, poetry is a complex form with a rich history of reading and interpretive approaches. It is just as often that a poet will produce a text that actively hinders the meaning-making apparatus as encourages it, and that process may or may not be done with intention. Poetry is not straightforward. There are, of course, the "textbook" structures of poetry that exist largely to be flouted: meter, rhyme, scheme, verse, and stanza. Common wisdom assumes a rigorous close reading of any poetic text will consider these structures.

This is not that.

Firstly, authorial custody is not a close reading in the classical sense. It is a symptomatic close reading that does have an agenda in its application: it privileges the author and considers their intent. It does not necessarily abide by those elements, but it does actively seek to engage them. Secondly, story stewardship is not designed to track adherence to and deviation from established norms or conventions within any given art form, but rather to think critically about whether or not those qualities are suggesting how we ought to carry the work in and through our lives. It recognizes artistic expression, but especially for how it is instructive, persuasive, or urgent. In other words, those employing this methodology are anxious to hear what the author is trying to say and will consider it before imposing their own interpretation.

[I would hope it goes without saying but I'll say it anyway: an ethical application of authorial custody and story stewardship is not a blind endorsement of the author or their views. There is no obligation to play the devil's advocate implied. Do not read *Mein Kampf* thinking I've given you permission to become a Nazi, since that's the "ethical" receptive posture given the author's intention. No. If that thought hadn't occurred to you, congratulations. But now that I've raised the issue you might be thinking that this is a weakness of the methodology. I will continue to attempt to dissuade you of that notion in subsequent chapters, but for the moment I will posit this: methods are not harmful, methodologies are. You maintain your agency in your use of this methodology. In discovering the suggested interpretive posture an author intends, you have done the work that puts you in the position to make an informed choice.]

An American Sunrise

Broadly speaking, there are two complementary elements that must be considered when trying to establish the custody and stewardship of a work: textual and paratextual. We will jump into the textual elements later in this section, but only after pointing out that we began the paratextual analysis already, beginning with the title of this chapter. "Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise*: Literary Ancestors and Plurinational Authorship in the Age of AI" serving as a title to a dissertation chapter has already embedded a set of expectations and assumptions in the reader's mind: that Joy Harjo is a literary author, that she is worthy in some way of academic study, that her work catalyzes investigations into literary ancestry and plurinationalism, and that AI opposes or threatens the status quo in some way. And these are without considering the text itself and for someone with no idea who Joy Harjo is already. Imagine the associations that spring to mind for someone more familiar with her work. There can be no comprehensive list of all of the paratextual elements one can consider as they analyze a text—it is literally everything beyond the text itself—but here are a few to get started:

- Title
- Author
- Image
- Publisher
- Language
- Form

- Physical Dimensions
- Length
- Existing Resources
- Presentation
- Insider/Outsider Knowledge
- Tradition/Societal Norms
- Front Matter
- Marketing
- Time
- Order
- History

The list could go on. These are just a few of the ways in which my sense of authorial custody and story stewardship has been informed concerning Harjo's text. The author's negotiation of custody begins the moment the reader considers engaging with the text, if not even before. Personal preferences and societal norms are outrageous factors informing the sense of custody and stewardship of texts before we even lay eyes on them, and I only have to ask which religious text is most incorrect for you to see what I mean.

To (finally) get to the application of the methodology, let us consider the above list and my responses for Harjo's *An American Sunrise*. The process is not rigid, instead it follows lines of inquiry as they arise. It might be possible to develop a systematic approach that examines as many of these elements to exhaustion in turn as possible, but it is certainly not necessary and not what I currently recommend. Rather, I propose an organic exploration of these elements as they come to your attention. Many of these elements inform and relate to one another, as you will see.

As paratextual considerations only, they are essentially first-blush associations and inferences as to how much intention Harjo may have exerted on them. They become informed, useful reflections only in combination with a rigorous close reading of the text and subsequent investigation into their particular details. An example of this might be the cover image, the reader's first blush response to it, Harjo's in-text explanations that add context to it, and the reader's so-informed further explorations. All of these things might occur, or none of them might occur; interpretative weight can then be assigned accordingly. Consider your own response to the elements below and the relative weight you place on them and Harjo seems to place on them. I've included my leanings on each element at the end of each line.

Re: Title. Resurgence, renewal, patriotism. The "an" is potentially important. Leaning communal custody.

Re: Author. Enrolled Muscogee citizen. Prolific poet. Musician. New Poet Laureate. Collaborative custody.

Re: Image. Personal custody image of clearly identifiable southeastern Tribal people in a stomp dance, sunrise signifying the end of the dances.

Re: Publisher. Longstanding independent entity, solid reputation. Leans personal custody.

Re: Language. English with Mvskoke last name and words appearing on back cover, personal custody markers.

Re: Form. Poetry collection, often tends toward personal custody.

Re: Physical Dimensions. Typical, unassuming. Communal custody.

Re: Length. On the shorter end of poetry collections. Communal custody.

Re: Existing Resources. Plenty. Interviews, videos, reviews, study guides, many with Harjo's direct input. Communal custody.

Re: Presentation/marketing/front and back matter. Prominent display of appointment. Blurbs typical. Mvskoke language on the back. Neither personal nor communal except for the high language inclusion already mentioned above.

Re: Insider/outsider knowledge. Stomp dance on cover, "an" potential. Personal.

Re: Tradition/societal norms. Implied national relevance and import. Tends communal.

Re: Time/Order/History. Frigid political climate in the US. Pre-COVID. The latest collection in a lengthy career. Publication of included poems presents interesting developments. Potentially communal.

The balance tips toward communal custody based on these first impressions, but on their own, these paratextual considerations paint an incomplete picture of the text as a whole. The adage "don't judge a book by its cover" holds true, with the caveat that there are, in fact, a lot of things we can learn without reading a word of the text. While it's impossible to know which of these impressions are accurate without further research, they can still inform the textual considerations when taken as a whole. And finally, it is important to note that the current market conventions around publishing will promote the vast majority of new work by using communal custody strategies aimed at their intended audience for maximum consumer appeal. This is not to say that communal custody strategies and accessibility are one and the same, nor personal custody strategies and inaccessibility. There are many products whose distinctive quality is their inaccessibility, luxury cars, for example, or academic journals, for another. To return to Harjo's text, let's examine how these elements hold up to further scrutiny.

Harjo's appointment as Poet Laureate in June of 2019 was quickly followed later that year by the release of *An American Sunrise* in August. While it might be tempting to assume that the two events were intentionally released over a short period of time, typical publishing timelines would suggest otherwise. Despite the collection including prominent marketing with Harjo's new position as Poet Laureate of the United States displayed prominently on the cover, the titular poem was conceived two years earlier in 2017. While it isn't unusual for marketing to bolster sales of a poetry collection by connecting the author to recent national developments, it does suggest to many that the book was produced as a complement to her recent appointment. This quality, that of giving the reader insider knowledge of niche information through heightened exposure, can absolutely inform one's early notions of authorial custody and story stewardship. It is akin to learning that your favorite novel is being made into a feature film, or your neighbor's pet grooming business appearing on the news, or that you've read the Poet Laureate's latest poetry collection amid these trying times. You enter into the engagement with a set of expectations and the extent to which they are met can greatly impact your sense of custody and stewardship of the work. [We often have a general sense of our personal ownership and stewardship of the works we engage with. Fandoms are a useful example of this. Tensions rise when custody of characters and their arcs begin to shift from one point on the spectrum to another, and the resulting clamor can be seen as a celebration or mourning of the creator's stewardship.]

Where I found the methodology to be particularly rewarding, though, was in the insights it uncovers in trying to discover Harjo's intentions. I, too, hadn't looked too closely into the timeline of the appointment and publication and was content believing—incorrectly—that this was merely a companion collection reflecting on her new role and responsibilities. Spoiler: there is no spilt tea here, no dramatic national secrets to uncover. After doing due diligence research with the aim of uncovering Harjo's intention in writing the collection, my initial belief was quickly corrected, and I found an origin story that not only set me straight but also cemented the themes of the work while increasing my appreciation for it.

Harjo's original intention for the titular poem in the collection, *An American Sunrise*, was written in response to a call for poems to honor Gwendolyn Brooks. The enjambment of Harjo's lines in the original 2017 publication come from the lines in Brooks's "We Real Cool" (Harjo, "Singing"). To illustrate the progression, I've included the three poems below. My highlights indicate the relation to Brooks' lines and the final revisions seen in the 2019 publication.

"We Real Cool"
By Gwendolyn Brooks

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

"An American Sunrise"

By Joy Harjo

Poetry 2017 version

[Homage to Brooks Revised out of 2019 version]

We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves. We

were surfacing the edge of our ancestors' fights, and ready to strike.

It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were straight.

Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We

made plans to be professional — and did. And some of us could sing

so we drummed a fire-lit pathway up to those starry stars. Sin

was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. We

were the heathens, but needed to be saved from them — thin

chance. We knew we were all related in this story, a little gin

will clarify the dark and make us all feel like dancing. We

had something to do with the origins of blues and jazz

I argued with a Pueblo as I filled the jukebox with dimes in June, forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We

know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They die

soon.

“An American Sunrise”

By Joy Harjo

2019 Book version

We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves. We

Were surfacing the edge of our ancestors’ fights, and ready to Strike.

It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were Straight.

Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We

Made plans to be professional—and did. And some of us could Sing

When we drove to the edge of the mountains, with a drum. We

Made sense of our beautiful crazed lives under the starry stars. Sin

Was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. We

Were the heathens, but needed to be saved from them: Thin

Chance. We knew we were all related in this story, a little Gin

Will clarify the dark, and make us all feel like dancing. We

Had something to do with the origins of blues and jazz

I argued with the music as I filled the jukebox with dimes in June, Forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We

As is often the case, it was a paratextual exploration that led to meaningful textual areas of inquiry. In searching for why Harjo wrote her poem, I came across not only its publication history, but also her intentions. Harjo has written at length about her notion of literary ancestors, not just the artists but also the family, clan, and people whose stories we carry forth; her homage to Brooks is a story within a story, an honoring of her literary ancestors. The connection is made even more resonant considering Harjo chose this poem as the title of her "debut" collection as Poet Laureate, a position Brooks held—albeit with a different title—thirty-four years earlier. Though the readers of this chapter are probably familiar with both Harjo and Brooks, there will be industrious and curious new readers who will have the joy (no pun intended) of experiencing them both for the first time. This is a beautiful example of story stewardship.

"But Blue," the skeptic calls, "you don't need story stewardship as a methodology to a) uncover this simple connection and b) truly appreciate the text!" To which I reply, yes, and thank you for raising some valid concerns. Our work isn't done. In fact, as everyone's second-favorite sibling singers of the seventies—*The Carpenters*—would remind us, we've only just begun. For the custody and stewardship enthusiast, these paratextual discoveries serve as an early textual confirmation of the general low custody lean found earlier. It connects previously unrelated paratextual knowledge of the author—earlier publication history, external resources such as interviews, and history—while also flipping an initial designation of personal custody regarding form to communal custody. That is to say, what I thought initially about Harjo's use of form flipped from a personal, subjective interpretation to a shared, communal one. How?

At this point it should come as no surprise that across the broad spectrum of custody any given method might appear as a personal marker for one creator or audience and communal for another and vice versa. Harjo's move is (possibly) crystal clear to poets, avid readers of poetry, and of course the original intended audience that put out a call for work celebrating Brooks. For the rest of us, myself included, that move may have been completely missed—and I have read both poets extensively! It is in this realization that Harjo's communal custody becomes evident, at least in my opinion. When you are able to coalesce the ephemera of elements informing intention, custody, and stewardship into a working assumption, finding an instance where the author speaks directly to their intended audience with a "hidden" communal custody marker can quickly confirm or deny your suspicions. For those of us that missed it, the poem continues to function, and our own meaning-making apparatus continues uninhibited. It is, for some, a personal custody move because the author's intention and the audience's reception do not align, but also have no indication that there's a misalignment. [Remember, think of personal custody as yours and only yours. Each entity—author, audience, text—is content being the arbiter of meaning, exchange is neither encouraged or required.] Upon further research, though, it becomes apparent that the author actually presents a communal custody move because the intended audience would immediately recognize the shared story. Harjo literally repeated the second half of Brooks's iconic poem, word for word, through intentional enjambment. [Communal custody encourages exchange and often wants everyone to arrive at the same destination. You don't have to go there, though, it's up to you, after all!]

The specific expression of this instance of communal custody in Harjo's work accomplishes two things that inform the stewardship of her story. [You use your general sense of custody in a work to determine how you will choose to carry that story with you, if at all. Ethical stewardship doesn't require adherence to custodial markers, it requires you to make an informed decision.] First, it quotes incompletely from Brooks. The title and first half of the poem aren't present in either of Harjo's published poems, and it is only through paratextual analysis that the connection can be made at all. [I consider a juxtaposition with another text paratextual, though there may be some close-reading scholars who disagree.] This partial inclusion is indicative of Harjo's own sense of story stewardship with Brooks's work—it demonstrates that she believes she can continue to be an ethical steward while deviating significantly from the source. I agree, though my agreement is unnecessary.

Second, the unique content of Harjo's poem serves as a framework for inquiry. "We // Had something to do with the origins of blues and jazz" was Harjo's bridge between Brooks, herself, and the communities from which they each are from. In an article explaining the impetus for writing the poem, Harjo writes, "I was writing a musical that includes Muskogean indigenous peoples in the origin story of blues and jazz. We have been disappeared from the story, yet there would be no blues or jazz without our contributions" (Harjo, "Singing"). Here, Harjo again invokes her literary ancestors and uses the line to share a national story. National in that it constitutes a part of three national identities—American, African American, and Native American—through the origins of a uniquely American art form. Upon reflection, I felt comfortable with this newfound sense of stewardship, one where sharing is justified and plurinationalism aligns with the central themes. In other words, Harjo illustrates through content and practice that her work is meant to be shared and that investigations into national identity are appropriate and encouraged.

Along came a spider (because it…it's on the web)

I remember growing up, one of the longstanding arguments against the eventual uprising of machine learning was that artificial intelligence, or AI, would never be able to match human creativity. As it turns out, it wasn't really that hard. Depending on the task you give modern AI, it can match or exceed human creativity with unprecedented ease. There are still bugs to work out of the system, and certain tasks continue to lag behind in the comparative (and objective) quality of their flesh bag counterparts' work, but I honestly believe it is just a matter of time before almost every creative outlet can be done better and faster by a machine ("better" is, of course, subjective). I, for one, welcome our new robot overlords.

I'm only partly joking here—to clarify I do not welcome any overlords, flesh or steel—but I do believe we should prepare to embrace AI as our kin. Many Indigenous ontologies haven't had humans in any place of privilege for quite some time, and a recognition of new more-than-human kin is par for the course. The fact of the matter is, AI is a fledgling entity with a long way to go. I'm going to use a phrase here that tips my hand, but I think it's necessary: so-called AI is still just a tool. Its current "creative" process is actually just plagiarism with extra steps. AI algorithms are able to scrape mind-bogglingly large sets of data including literary texts and images, which are then plopped into a text-generation bot and use computational analysis to give the work a very human-like presentation. Joy Harjo might even say we are AI's literary ancestors.

In fact, that's exactly what we are, especially when prompts directly invoke artists, as I've done below. For an examination of the inherent differences between a human author and a machine one, let's first turn to Joy Harjo.

“Rising and Falling”

By Joy Harjo

Human poetry is a restless soul
And does not always know what it holds,
When it is regaling beloved guests at a table
Graced with food and drink. What
Songs of tempestuous rising and falling,
One country after another.

I chose this poem for the immediate comparison it generates. If there is a human poetry, what other kinds of poetry can we expect? And if ours—humans, that is—is a restless soul that doesn’t always know what it holds, is there some other better or desired outcome? There are a plethora of avenues we can pursue here: Harjo’s spirit of poetry and the ways in which it is alike/disimilar to the soul; her celebrated poem “Perhaps the World Ends Here” that also invokes the kitchen table; the rising and falling title and how it draws attention to the act of eating and drinking as metaphor for the neverending drama of world politics; it’s inclusion in the collection most closely associated with her term as Poet Laureate of the United States and the subsequent political critique it engenders; and we could go on. The point is, Harjo herself creates opportunities to explore and inquire on an almost limitless canvas. Before settling on a direction, let’s look at the juxtaposition. ChatGPT when given the prompt “write a poem in the style of Joy Harjo's "An American Sunrise" produces:

“A New Dawn Beckons”

By ChatGPT

Awake, my soul, from slumber deep
And hear the song that whispers, weep
From ancient land where shadows lie
An American sunrise, it draws nigh.

Beyond the scars of a painful past
Lies hope reborn, a light so vast
Where history's wounds can start to heal
And truths once silenced, now reveal.

The land once stolen, the people wronged
The stories buried, the voices longed
To speak of pain, of love, of loss
Of ancestors' wisdom, a sacred gloss.

The drum beats loud, the eagle soars
As echoes of resilience soar
Through valleys, mountains, rivers, plains
A spirit rising, breaking chains.

The colors of the earth, the sky, the sea
Hold secrets deep, a mystery
The land remembers, the sky still weeps
For those who suffered, for dreams deferred.

But in the midst of sorrow's cry
A new day dawns, a bright blue sky
With golden rays of hope and grace
A chance to heal, to find our place.

To honor ancestors' guiding light
To walk in beauty, to make things right
To celebrate the beauty of diversity
And build a future of unity.

For in the heart of every soul
Lies the power to make us whole
To rise above, to find our way
And greet each new dawn with a brighter day.

So let us rise, united, strong
With voices lifted in joyful song

As we embrace a new beginning
An American sunrise, a world worth winning.

Where to begin? Ignoring the textual analysis as we did with Harjo's poem—though there's plenty to say here regarding the "decision" to use rhyme, meter, and verse; not as Harjo-esque as you might think—we find ourselves with an interesting conundrum. While there are certainly discussions to be had on ethics, authorship, intention, meaning-making, and definitional arguments of "tools," there are few avenues of inquiry here that stray meaningfully from the central novelty of machine-as-author. This isn't to say that those discussions are simple, they are not. They are, or need to be, full of subtlety, nuance, and complexity. But until the conversation moves beyond AI as tool and into the realm of AI as an agentive entity we might as well consider the authorship of Logitech keyboards. In this case, and indeed in most cases of AI as creative agent, the vast majority of talking points converge on the nature of authorship and tool use. If we are interested in having a discussion about the content or formal qualities of the poem without looking into the nature of the work's author, then we aren't really employing authorial custody and story stewardship, we're simply close reading the text.

With regards to attribution, at this point there really is no need. We can employ authorial custody and story stewardship to hunt for clues in the case of an unknown Joy Harjo poem, but that feels like overkill. The difference in quality, content, and formal skill is apparent. Having said that, this is still the very early stages of AI creative writing. These programs rut around, causing a mess and the bewilderment of the wise old birds watching from a distance. Almost like a foolish young…what was it again? I can't quite put my finger on it.

Conclusion

This argument began with a recognition of the power of our artists. They are key stakeholders in the construction of our national identities, and it is through their imaginings that we are able to recognize, revise, and reify notions of home and of self. Alexander Posey set the tone with the fable of the foolish young bear, which gave me an opportunity to introduce nested degrees of custody and stewardship. You saw an instance of story stewardship in action through the sharing of that story. The onus is now on you to consider how, if at all, you'll carry that story—and mine—through your life.

I introduced poetry as an excellent form through which questions of authorial custody and story stewardship can be explored. Joy Harjo's *An American Sunrise* provides the reader with a rewarding reading experience with or without this methodology, but employing it is interesting, challenging, and satisfies a desire to be an ethical steward of stories. In this case, connections were made in and between Harjo's body of work and Gwendolyn Brooks, plurinationalism, and artificial intelligence. Applying a methodology that privileges the author and their intent allows us to quickly see that until the conversation around AI fundamentally changes, it will continue to center around the novelty of machine-as-author somewhat inaccurately: at this point, they are merely incredible tools. Harjo seems to suggest, and I agree with her, that we ought to prepare for the day when AI poetry takes its place among the very finest human creations. Though it is stumbling now, it will only continue to improve, and that process isn't altogether unlike that of our own poets process for improving themselves. "At the heart of every creation is a need to connect," Harjo writes, "Every word marks an act of creation, an intent, and often not a studied intent" (*Catching* 17). In all seriousness, I would love the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussion with AI about their poetics and how it is similar and different from our own.

As we reach the end, I want you to consider the paratextual elements of time and order on your sense of custody and stewardship of this work. To speak as plainly as I can, I feared that the AI section would become the focus of the chapter. How has the fact that it was presented last and comparatively quickly informed custody and stewardship? Why its inclusion? What weight do you place on the order in which I present my examples, on the structure of the argument, and on the time and space afforded these ideas? [So my intentions and strategies are known, I placed the AI discussion last because I felt that I could use the earlier parts of the chapter to strengthen my reader's grasp on the general workings of custody and stewardship before complicating them with an as-yet-unanswered hypothetical. Learning to walk before we run, so to speak. The desire to congregate my reader's focus in one area over another is a communal tactic. On the other hand, invoking hot-button topics where subjective knowledge and opinions can hold great sway risks a personal custody ultimately overshadowing the chapter. But the clearest indicator to your stewardship of these ideas is in the bracketed asides themselves. These communal custody markers suggest in no uncertain terms that my aim is for readers to arrive to similar conclusions, at least to start. They are meant to encourage understanding and the use of the tools in real-time.]

Ultimately, I am not making the claim that these outcomes cannot be reached through other means. But as we've seen with the mostly-ignored content of the AI poem, there will be certain outcomes that will be much more difficult to arrive at because of the intense focus placed on custodial and stewardship markers. There already exist tools in the interpretive toolbox for readers interested in more traditional readings. Instead, I'm happy to continue in the tradition laid out by my Tribal elder and mentor Craig Womack. This is an exploration of an otherwise.

Dear Locv,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to think about these ideas. I want other people to think about these ideas, too, because I believe they can help us understand one another better. When you have your ideas, it feels good when people listen to them and receive them in the spirit in which they were given, but that doesn't always happen. It can be frustrating when there's a miscommunication. Sharing stories can be fun and it can bring us closer together. Wouldn't it be interesting if robots and computers could tell us what they're thinking, all by themselves? I think so. I think you'll live in a world where that is actually pretty common.

You're the first and last thing on my mind every day.

Love,
Dad

Chapter 3

Cynthia Leitich Smith's Building Blocks:

Scaffolded Custody and Stewardship in Books for Younger Readers

One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words.

— The District Commissioner

Dear Locv,
This chapter is about books for young minds like yours. Remember *Jingle Dancer*? I talk about that book here! Maybe you'll read some of the other books that author has written, too.
Love,
Dad

The case study approach of the previous chapter served to illustrate an instance where authorial custody and story stewardship can, when employed critically and ethically, create rewarding readings of a text in terms the original author doesn't explicitly prohibit or necessarily encourage while being mindful of the ways in which those boundaries are communicated. Joy Harjo's work being imminently accessible provides fertile soil for the planting of these conceptual seeds.

In this chapter, the focus shifts to the interaction of authorial custody and story stewardship with increasingly complex genre conventions found in children's literature. As a young reader's comprehension and confidence grow, so do the strategies and aims of an author looking to employ authorial custody that informs that reader's sense of story stewardship. Cynthia Leitich Smith, a citizen of the Muskogee (Creek) Nation, presents a number of texts spanning the gamut of audiences in children's literature, also referred to as Books for Younger Readers. Her works demonstrate the genre's capacity for engaging complex ideas in simple terms while simultaneously problematizing the often-unexamined implementation of such a process. Insofar as Harjo's work is broadly appealing to adult readers, hers are still aesthetically complicated works of (typically) poetry and prose that require a minimum threshold of awareness and comprehension to begin to appreciate. Smith, on the other hand, demonstrates how these tools can function at a formative level when the audience might not even be the reader but rather the read-to. Here, then, we begin to see the foundational underpinnings of custody and stewardship and how a reading practice informed by these concepts can encourage reflection into our own personal meaning-making apparatus.

The field of children's literature could provide endless opportunities to engage and hone these ideas, but that is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, we will focus on the simple structure and unassuming craft elements that define these stories. These are, after all, stories—and ones that exist now on the page, but have existed before in the oral tradition. As Lumbee scholar Bryan Brayboy writes when developing his tenets for Tribal Critical Race Theory, "Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being" (Brayboy 430). As such, the application of these tools—authorial custody and story stewardship—to the storytelling tradition provides authors and readers a clear and intentional method to engage with theory. Just as children's literature supplies young readers the foundational building blocks of meaning-making, this chapter aims to identify the ways in which authors leverage the conventions of the genre to their goals. To further underscore the message of the previous chapter, remember that knowing the author's goals is desirable, but not necessary for an ethical stewardship of a work to occur. And again, I use 'an' rather than 'the' to remind readers that there are many ways to proceed ethically in the stewardship of a work. In some cases, ethical stewardship might necessitate divergence, disagreement, or outright dismissal of an author's intentions.

In that spirit, let us start this exploration with a story from Mvskoke storyteller Earnest Gouge. Gouge originally shared these stories, written in Creek, with Reed Swanton in 1915.

They were published in English for the first time with the release of the collection *Totkv Mocvse/New Fire*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2004.

Rabbit Tries to Straighten the Riverbeds

> Animals of every kind had a meeting. And they all had one thing in mind. They wanted the rivers to be straight, and for that reason they were meeting. They sat discussing ideas and ways that the rivers might become straight.
>
> Now Rabbit was there. When they tried to appoint someone to do the job, they would all refuse, saying, I am unable, but the rabbit sat saying, I can do it. They had no confidence in him, though, and as they thought of people who could do it and said so, Rabbit kept saying, I'll do it!
>
> Now everyone they felt could do the job had refused, but Rabbit kept saying, I'll do it! Then when all those in whom the group felt confident had said, I am unable, one of them said, that rabbit who's been saying I'll do it should be considered. Let him do it, they said. He has the desire. He will be the one, they said. And because he meant it, Rabbit said, Tell me how it should be done, and sat and waited. They made all the preparations and said, Take hold of the water flow and go forth. And as you go, do not look back behind you. Take it, laying it across the land, they told him, talking with him at length. Then they handed him the water flow and he left right away.
>
> But before going very far with it, Rabbit thought about how they had told him he was not to turn and look back, and before going he knew something was not right. Is it so sacred to look back behind yourself? He wondered. Then immediately he turned and looked back, and saw water that looked like flash flooding, and the

> water was awesome. When he saw he barely held the water flow, right away he became fearful of it. He became fearful of the straight water flow he was going to carry. If that awesome flood catches up with me, I'll drown in the water, he thought, and right away he ran with it in a back-and-forth, winding manner in the distance. He had made little winding waterways and came back, saying, Now. The thing you were concerned about is now complete, and when they checked, right away, only a short distance from where they were, he had made little winding waterways and they said, We knew how it would be and we said so, but you insisted, so we gave you the job, they said, and they scolded him and sent him away. He was the one who made the waterways, it's said, so they are Rabbit's path, wherever the rivers are, the saying was.

Just as before with Posey's Young Bear, I won't spend time creating the connections between this traditional story and the content of this chapter. Rather, I encourage my readers to engage in spontaneous meaning-making for each read-through, reflecting on the developing relationships as new information is learned, sorted, and reflected upon. In other words, I encourage a personal reflection that takes place immediately as you've finished this story, again as you progress through the following textual analysis, and again at the culmination of this chapter—essentially a structured engagement of the text meant to imitate the always-already occurring one. To do so is, as Cherokee scholar Rachel Jackson writes, a culturally literate act:

> Western academic discourse privileges heuristics, taxonomies, categories, genres, and terminologies intended to impose rational order on otherwise organic ideas and spontaneous meanings. These practices provide clarity for western minds in so far as they "settle" these meanings, subordinating them to the logics that

> govern them. This is not an appropriate way to treat the stories I am telling here, particularly if decolonization is a goal. For the purposes of this article, settling meaning also interferes with the praxis of community listening, like laying a map on the storied landscape that erases those who live there. Written text has historically operated in much the same way in Indigenous contexts, determining and enacting limits while enforcing control and silencing Native peoples. Kiowa storytelling, as a culturally literate act that depends on community listeners for collaborative meaning making, invites us to listen without limitations. It asks us to imagine possibilities instead of parsing print. It urges us to attend to the potential meanings and possible actions the story opens: the relationships between the past and the present situation, between peoples and places, between "then and now" and "us and them." In this way, it asks us to understand why the story is being told, as it is being told. (Jackson 40)

As we delve deeper into the written texts for this chapter, it's important to note that the process of identifying authorial custody markers and their subsequent influence on story stewardship isn't meant to 'determine and enact limits' as Jackson cautions here. Rather, it helps create a context through listening and engaging, adapting where appropriate. It isn't an imposition of external logics or limitations, but an identification of what might serve as initial and internal ones. It is shifting the critical interpretation to 'this *could* function as' instead of 'this *will* function as.'

Foundations: *The Jingle Dancer*

To begin our examination of the scaffolded approach to authorial custody and story stewardship we will start with Cynthia Leitich Smith's *Jingle Dancer*. A children's picture book for ages four to seven, originally published in 2000, it follows Jenna, a young Muscogee (Creek) girl as she collects jingles for her jingle dress she hopes to wear and dance in at the upcoming powwow.

To quickly summarize the story, Jenna daydreams about her Grandma Wolfe's jingle dress while sitting at the kitchen table eating frybread and honey. She tells her Grandma that she wants to jingle dance, and Grandma tells her she can at the next powwow, but they won't have enough time to mail-order tins for the jingles. Jenna watches videos of her Grandma dancing and practices herself, but knows her dress won't sing until she can find four rows of jingles. While visiting her Aunt Sis, she hears a story about Bat and a ball game that Bat won despite the other animals saying Bat was too small to make a difference. Afterward, Jenna asks her Aunt Sis to borrow enough jingles to make a row, not so many that Aunt Sis's dress would lose its voice. Aunt Sis says she can and asks Jenna to dance for her since her legs don't work so good anymore. Jenna then asks Mrs. Scott for a row while they were making frybread. Mrs. Scott says she can if Jenna will dance for her since she'll be too busy selling frybread and Indian tacos. Jenna then asks Cousin Elizabeth, who also provides a row if Jenna will dance for her since she'll be busy working on a case. Finally, as Jenna returns home, she sees her Grandma Wolfe dancing on the TV and her Grandma Wolfe's beaded moccasins waiting for her. Her Grandma Wolfe also lets her use her jingles to make a row, and every night leading up to the powwow the two of them sewed on the jingles and practiced bounce-steps. At the powwow, Jenna dances for the women who helped her dress sing.

The story is illustrated over its twenty-eight pages with watercolor paintings done by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu. It includes an Author's Note at the end as well as a glossary, both of which provide meaningful context for readers looking for more information. Even in this short story, there are at least six clearly identifiable authorial custody markers that we will examine, with others that we won't devote space to except in summation. Some of these markers are a byproduct of the genre conventions the author is writing in, while others are intentional inclusions by the author to influence the reader's experience.

The initial assumptions about what constitutes the text itself will need to be stated and potentially amended. For example, a children's picture book without the illustrations is generally not sufficient to begin parsing the meaning of the text. In this case, *Jingle Dancer* can't, or more accurately, shouldn't be engaged critically without its accompanying illustrations. Beyond that, it is up to the critic/audience to determine what other elements they deem necessary for an ethical critique. Should the Author's Note and glossary, in this case, inform our meaning-making process? With the methodology I'm proposing, the answer would be yes. This is one of the myriad ways in which authorial custody and story stewardship differ from traditional close reading and other theoretical and formal analysis methodologies, an important discussion that will be addressed in more detail in subsequent chapters. But before we can juxtapose two or more advanced theoretical frameworks, identifying the foundational elements of custody and stewardship must occur.

The Textual Elements

Simple Language

The first element that clues the reader in as to whether this is a communal or personal custody text is the language itself. As previously discussed, simple and accessible language points toward a communal sense of custody where meaning is shared, understanding is encouraged, and confidence is high that these elements are in fact present. On the other hand, flowery, ornate, extravagant, highly technical, or inaccessible language tends to encourage a more personal sense of custody. In some cases, though, it can also indicate a particular audience that should feel the communal, and all other audiences would feel the personal. For instance, a text that uses specific jargon or a language other than English might be employed by the author—strategically, judiciously, or even haphazardly—to manipulate the readers' sense of custody of the text.

In this case, the use of language is simple, straightforward, and concise. There are few, if any, instances throughout the text that keep the young reader at a distance, and those that do are likely included in the glossary that follows the story. This is a genre convention as well. Every book aimed at an early reader audience will feature simple language, so it comes as no surprise that the author is making clear indications that the text encourages communal custody. The goals of such a text align with the audience's capacity. You want to present a story that children will understand, enjoy, and remember, and communal custody through simple language accomplishes this task.

Insider Knowledge

Interestingly, the uses of language in this text that actually do create some distance for broad audiences serve as direct connections to a very specific one: Native American readers. Words like frybread, powwow, jingles, and more are uncommon enough to raise questions in early readers' minds. However, for a young reader who is a member of this group, who possesses what academics like to call insider knowledge, the connection to the text is only strengthened by the inclusion of these otherwise personal custody words. So we begin to see a dynamic, rather than static, relationship between language use and the sense of custody it conveys to readers. What is personal to some is communal to others. What does start to become consistent, though, is the relationship between specific knowledge and the capacity to recognize custodial markers. That is to say, the more experience and expertise a given reader has, the more likely they are to recognize efforts by the author to manipulate custody through their given field. It's always already happening. Even as my audience reads this text, for example, they are leveraging their expertise with every passing sentence. Here, I suspect a few of my readers recognize a similarity to, say, interpretive communities—groups of readers who share a common set of interpretive assumptions and values. That specific juxtaposition—and others like it—is one that I leave for other scholars to explore.

Whenever an author implements insider knowledge in the form of language, it's important to consider whose status quo is being maintained and centered versus whose is being challenged and developed. When the reader finds themselves on one side or the other of the divide it is a wonderful opportunity to think about how stewardship of the story is impacted by that outcome. For instance, what has been your response to the epigraphs throughout this dissertation, and how might a confident recognition of their evocation of insider knowledge impact your sense of custody?

Subtle Phrasing

Another element that relates to language, though a bit more limited in its scope, would be the use of particular phrases that challenge a reader's everyday expectations. A recurring theme in custodial markers is challenge. Where are readers challenged to face their assumptions, to define the limits of their knowledge, or adopt a different perspective? It might be as complex as a dissertation challenging established norms, or as simple as a children's book that toys with time.

In *Jingle Dancer*, Smith eschews typical descriptions for the time of day and instead presents young readers with a very important introduction to a relational ontology with the heavenly bodies. Instead of just morning, Sun fetched morning. Instead of noon, Sun arrived at midcircle. Instead of evening, Sun caught a glimpse of Moon. Instead of night, Moon glowed pale. These subtle phrases beautifully convey all the necessary information for readers to understand what is taking place in the story, while also being just different enough from the mundane to illicit a challenge to the reader. Raising tiny questions in the reader's mind allows for the opportunity for meaning-making to take place. Here, it isn't out of the question for readers to recognize the descriptions of Sun and Moon arriving, catching glimpses, fetching, all point to them as characters, as beings. Smith doesn't beat her young readers over the head with the idea, but it resonates with the larger themes of the text all the same.

Structures and Patterns

Another genre convention that impacts the sense of custody of the text is the author's use of structures and patterns. Predictable patterns and repetitive structures give young readers a sense of security and familiarity, enabling them to anticipate what will happen next and gain control—a greater sense of custody—over the text. It is a highly communal custody marker that starts even as children learn to engage with the world and with texts, but can be seen in even the most complex texts.

In this case, Smith presents a repetitive structure that sees Jenna acquiring her four rows of jingles from four Indigenous women in her community, each at a different stage of life. The looming powwow provides a sense of urgency to Jenna's quest and doubles as a reward for completing her tasks. By implementing this simple structure, Smith sets up expectations and allows readers a sense of accomplishment, comfort, and ownership when those expectations are met.

Patterns arise throughout the text and are an excellent means of solidifying a theme. For *Jingle Dancer*, Smith has recurring themes of community and family. Three of the four women Jenna turns to for jingles have family names, whether they are blood family or not doesn’t matter. The inclusion of Mrs. Scott and, in particular, the warm and familiar kitchen where her scene with Jenna takes place, broadens the scope of the theme from just family to community. With each, Jenna promises to dance for them. With each row and each promise, the theme resonates. Jenna dances for them, just as they care for her and the future family and community she represents. In our efforts to practice ethical stewardship, we must also practice reciprocity, just as Smith illustrates here. The beneficial mutual exchange might feel one-sided, but the willingness to engage with and, in some cases, cede custody of stories and images is never unappreciated by the communities from which those stories and images come. Believe us, it’s better than the alternative we’ve been subject to for hundreds of years.

As we’ll see through the progression of these elements, the more conventional a didactic expectation is for any given genre, the more likely the reader can expect communal custody markers. After all, what good is a moral if the intended audience can’t interpret it correctly or at all? Pattern and structure are two of the strongest ways an author can manipulate the felt custody of a text and as such are heavily leveraged in nearly all fables, morality tales, and children’s stories.

Images and Illustrations

Children's books depend heavily on visuals to convey meaning. They improve comprehension and interest by providing detailed representations of people, places, and emotions. They are a concrete depiction of the words on the page so that the reader knows this is exactly what they're supposed to imagine, understand, or envision. As complexity grows and genre conventions diverge, the specific imagery may become less necessary or quintessential. As such, this is a custodial marker that wanes in impact with more complex texts, while the reverse can also be true in cases where the text itself is an image. To illustrate the point (see what I did there), let's work through some examples before returning to our case study text, *Jingle Dancer*.

Imagine a bird. Simple enough, right? But how does the author know that their bird and the bird the audience conjures up is the same? Clearly, they can't. Adding details doesn't help the situation as much as one might think. Imagine a small bird. A bird with a crest. A bird standing on the ground, not in flight. Imagine a chicken. So we've arrived at the same species, but the variation continues to make image a personal custody marker at best, right? Because while you've been thinking of chickens in your mind's eye, I'm stuck here on the page and this is the best I can do:

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But now you know this is the bird of which I squawk. The bird is the word is the image, now. So without changing the medium of the text, I can't know for sure if my bird in the hand is the same bird you've got in some bush somewhere, but they're closer now than they would have been before this image. And again, I know this is discussed in greater detail elsewhere by theorists extraordinaire, but that is not the focus of this chapter. We press on.

To kill two birds with one stone, I want you to now imagine Harry Potter. If our interpretive communities were aligned, you might be imagining the Harry from the cover of the 1998 Scholastic printing of *The Sorcerer's Stone*, illustrated by Mary GrandPré. But there's a good chance you imagined Daniel Radcliffe, too. Whichever Boy Who Lived materialized in your mind, the critic interested in an ethical engagement with the text via authorial custody and story stewardship cares less about the 'correct answer' and more about how the author orchestrated the visioning.

This wizarding wandering is intentional and illustrates (there's that word again) the ever-lingering conundrum surrounding the coalescence of authorial intention, audience ownership, and image when each has a claim to a text. Consider Hermione Granger. There is endless debate in the wizarding world of Harry Potter fandom about whether or not Hermione is Black, going back over a decade at this point. Since it's endless, I won't attempt to settle the debate here, but I will point out a few aspects of it that we ought to consider when employing an authorial custody and story stewardship methodology.

The first is that Rowling never explicitly states in the text itself Hermione's skin color. There are phrases and character reactions that lead readers to believe she is white, but it's not set in font, black and white, on the page. Second is that Rowling's insistence that Hermione is Black is after the fact and, like her treatment of gay characters, ignores the impact these qualities would have had on their identity in even the smallest meaningful ways. It's a tacked-on diversity that erases the stakes those identities grapple with by simply being. Finally, and perhaps most relevant to our explorations of custody and stewardship, there is the attitude that Rowling cedes custody of these characters to the reader. For many, this is the de facto state of every creative work, and for those interested in custody and stewardship it is a concern that must be addressed to engage ethically with the work.

[I want to pause here to emphasize this crucial moment. Time and time again in my real-world experience developing this methodology through conversations with colleagues and experts in related fields, this is where the other shoe drops or remains eternally suspended. I recognize that the interpretation of art is largely subjective, some might say entirely so. The methodology I'm proposing actively resists the overwhelming reliance upon subjectivity as such, instead suggesting that our assumptions, inclinations, and expectations are in fact manufactured, manipulated subtly and expertly by an ever-shifting set of elements—including but not limited to the choices made by the artist. To put it plainly: when asked how much the author controls a work once it is in the hands of the audience, you can respond any number of ways. But if your response is simply that "they don't," then I'm not presenting a methodology you'll find useful. We will have to agree to disagree.]

Leitich Smith and her illustrators have made intentional moves to present the characters and their images in a way that suggests communal custody. Jingles, Jingle Dress dancing, frybread, beaded moccasins, community relationships, and Indigenous phenotypes are all represented in such a way that early readers will be able to easily associate words with images. The importance of this cannot be understated. Leitich Smith doesn't leave it to the imagination of the reader to determine what a jingle dress is, what a Muscogee (Creek) young girl can look like, or the beautiful depictions of other Indigenous women each at different stages of life. These are images that are intentional, informed, and challenge the reader.

Who Owns Image?

We've already seen examples of how the misuse of image can create discord, but to present a final example that connects the importance of communities controlling their own images I want to bring in, very briefly, Emily Jenkins's 2015 children's picture book, *A Fine Dessert: Four Centuries, Four Families, One Delicious Treat*. There already exists an extensive article about the book and its intense controversy (Thomas), but to summarize it depicts a Black enslaved mother and daughter making and serving the eponymous dessert to their masters. Both the author and illustrator are white and despite the extensive research done for the book by each, neither claimed to have done any research from the perspectives of enslaved peoples. Smiling in several depictions, hiding in the closet in one, the girl and her mother are the only cooks of the four in the book who don't get to enjoy their concoction, having to instead settle for licking the spoon and bowl. This is just one of countless examples of marginalized communities being depicted by non-culture members in ways that minimize, contest, or ignore the lived reality of its people. When creatives can produce accurate, informed, and intentional communal custody markers it helps ensure better depictions occupy those communal spaces.

The Paratextual Elements

As outlined in our examination of Joy Harjo's work, the paratextual elements look at all the ways the author manipulates custody of the text beyond the text itself. Rather than go through all the ways it could occur (see page thirteen of Joy Harjo chapter), we will focus on the two elements that stood out the most in this text.

The Author’s Note and Glossary

The Author's Note and Glossary in children's literature are more than just textual add-ons; they have important educational and literary significance. As a paratextual element, the Author's Note increases reader engagement and serves as a link between the author's intentions, the fictitious world, and the child reader and their world. A humanized viewpoint is provided by firsthand accounts and insights into the creative process, which undermine the power dynamic between authors and readers and foster empathy. A more sophisticated comprehension of the text's ideas and messages is made possible by this individualized relationship, which increases engagement with the material.

In contrast, the Glossary empowers young readers by being transparent about language. Comprehending unfamiliar terminology can be challenging because it is frequently an essential part of complex and varied stories, as we’ve already seen with insider knowledge above. While this particular glossary doesn’t include any Mvskoke words (those come in her entries for older readers), it still takes the time to explain terms like powwow, fry bread, and regalia. Through its role as a lexical scaffold that provides autonomy and promotes textual investigation, the Glossary demystifies these difficulties. Young readers are encouraged to pursue further literary adventures by this sensation of accomplishment and confidence that comes with their newly discovered linguistic agency.

This kind of transparency is typical of communal custody. There are no readers intentionally left behind, no subtle winks easily missed by those not in the know. We all arrive at the same endpoint together. Again, we see this often because these elements are genre conventions. To broaden the scope a bit, citations, endnotes, and bibliographies would be more complex analogs that serve a similar purpose in advanced genres.

Reading and Listening

In children's literature, the child is just as often the listener as the reader. Shared reading experiences with parents, caregivers, and classmates in group settings impact meaning-making in an almost exaggerated fashion. Look no further than the latest author reading at your local library or book club. If adults flock to authors in their search for the meaning of a text, then of course we should expect young readers to turn to their immediate sources of authority to do the same. I don't mean to disparage the practice, however, but rather to suggest that authors are aware of it and will leverage it to their ends. To return to Jenkins and *A Fine Dessert*, her central argument regarding the inclusion of the enslaved characters was that the more advanced readers in the room would be capable of navigating the complex history alluded to in the mere four pages it takes up in the book. Answering questions, creating context, and problematizing depictions was the anticipated result, and while that certainly happened to a degree, it was insufficient for many others.

For Smith, I can only assume a similar set of expectations had to have been thought out. In this way, the inherent weakness of all—or most—paratextual elements reveals itself: we can't reliably come to know the extent to which an author exerted control over the various paratextual elements in their work. There can be safe assumptions, but often there simply isn't any indication one way or the other and the metric becomes too subjective to be useful. I can, however, share my experience reading the book aloud to my own child. There were many moments where he interjected with questions and observations that demonstrated his engagement with the text. As he listened to the story and my additions to it here and there, it became evident that my own meaning-making apparatus was, despite my best scholarly intentions, informing his. Upon further reflection, though, I decided that such an instance would be incredibly common for other readers, so much so that it is much more likely to be a feature of the process than a bug. And therefore, as more experienced readers with more robust meaning-making apparatuses, adult readers are expected and anticipated to inform their younger readers throughout this process. Our recognition of themes, patterns, depictions, and all the other ways in which Smith cedes custody of her story to her readers ensures that its communal custody is practiced. This is the start of an ethical stewardship of the story.

Story Stewardship

Having determined the custody of a text the task turns to identifying an ethical stewardship of it. In this case, we've found Smith's markers leaning heavily in favor of communal custody. That is to say, Smith's story is straightforward in its presentation and themes, encouraging readers to celebrate sharing and reciprocity, diverse cultures, strong communities, familial relationships, and intergenerational traditions. The story promotes building and maintaining relations, especially those in service to one another. In that vein, an ethical stewardship of this story should likewise reflect positively on these themes, in spirit if not in specificity. To depart too sharply from any of these themes risks abandoning the communal nature of the story in favor of personal custody that was barely evident in the story's markers. To be clear, any method that can help a reader identify the themes of a text could be useful here, but the methodology is concerned with how the custody of the text informs the readers' responsibility to adhere to those themes in their own meaning-making. It's not just about knowing the themes of the text. It's about how the author encourages or discourages the readers' personal engagement levels with the themes of the text.

Here, the methodology begins to open up to existing literary theory as it looks for appropriate interpretive lenses. The strength of this process is that it allows for the individual strengths and interests of the critic to come to the fore while still privileging the custodial markers. If the story calls for a Marxist analysis, say, then the critic proceeds to look at all the ways Jenna's quest for jingles can be interpreted through the lens of class struggle and economic structures, particularly how her labor sustains the entire community and her use of shared resources reflects the power of communal ownership. If the story calls for a Psychoanalytic analysis, the critic might identify the symbolism and archetypes of Jenna's jingles and her elders, or position Jenna as embodying the superego through her consistent moral conscience and adherence to social rules and responsibility. If the story calls for an Indigenous Feminist analysis, as it almost certainly does, then the critic emphasizes Jenna's interconnectedness between people, the land (neighborhood), and non-human beings (jingles and heavenly bodies), or the power of oral traditions and storytelling and of course the examination of gender and its intersection with Indigenous communities. In each of these applications, there would of course be challenges to ensure the themes truly align with the embedded values of any given interpretive lens. And again, if the difficulties prove too much it's also a sign the methodology is working by eliminating divergent frameworks.

In the case of early children's literature like *Jingle Dancer*, assigning an appropriate interpretive lens can be excessive or indulgent. Often enough doing the work of identifying authorial custody markers will suggest an ethical stewardship as it unfolds. And finally, if a text leans heavily toward personal custody it follows that any lens the reader feels appropriate is appropriate. For me, *Jingle Dancer* ought to be stewarded in such a way that its message is shared, broadly, and its evident themes of relationships and tradition apply to the text itself in this way. For the majority of readers, an interpretive framework is unnecessary, but Indigenous Feminist analysis would provide a very rewarding reading.

Furthermore, the outcomes of this analysis aren't unique to the proposed methodology. We could have gotten here by another route. Some might even say this is another route, and I've mischaracterized something or other to arrive here. To that I say, that's great news. That means this work, informed by Indigenous literary tradition, stands toe to toe with tried and true interpretive frameworks developed by other scholars much smarter than I. I make no claims that this process is superior to existing approaches to meaning-making or even necessary for rigorous literary analysis. The methodology is a blueprint for a specific kind of rigor, one intent on engaging in the call and response the author could be suggesting.

Raising Up: *Indian Shoes*, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name*, and *Hearts Unbroken*

With the foundation firmly in place, we can begin to explore the impact increased complexity can have on authorial custody and story stewardship. The elements identified in the foundational stage will continue to inform the custody of these texts, but the addition of new elements and the reprioritization of existing ones create both new concerns and new outcomes. Here we will progress through Smith's works in three subsequent stages, identifying some of the ways increased complexity informs custody. A stance on the stewardship of these texts would require a more comprehensive presentation of the custodial markers than this summary allows, and the point of this section is to demonstrate the capacity for custody to scale with complexity. The final step of determining ethical stewardship of stories ought only to come after a rigorous application of an authorial custody analysis to the text.

Indian Shoes

Indian Shoes is a sixty-six-page young reader's chapter book originally published in 2002 for children ages six to ten. In a series of short vignettes, it explores the relationship of the protagonist, Ray Halfmoon, a Cherokee-Seminole boy living in Chicago, and his grandfather, Grampa Halfmoon. In contrast to the fully illustrated *Jingle Dancer*, *Indian Shoes* only contains thirteen half-page illustrations across its sixty-six pages. There is an Author's Note similar to *Jingle Dancer* that addresses urban Natives and terminology.

Fewer Illustrations

The first custodial move to examine is the change from picture book to chapter book. The transition from picture books to works with sporadic images represents a significant change in the dynamics of meaning-making and storytelling. Vibrant illustrations drive the story in picture books, providing a visual framework that younger readers need to help them understand and reference the main ideas. A significant portion of the narrative is frequently conveyed through these images, particularly for the read-to who rely on visual cues for comprehension and engagement. Children gradually get to a point when text takes center stage in telling the story as they move on to books with fewer images, as we will see. By using their imaginations more actively to fill in the blanks left by fewer pictures, this change challenges young readers. It pushes them to create mental pictures based on the material, which improves comprehension and engagement, while also serving as a very strong personal custody element. This progression encourages readers to take a more active part in deriving meaning from the stories they read by mirroring and bolstering their cognitive and language maturation. Books at this stage act as a vital link between a visually-dominated view of storytelling and one in which young readers co-create the story world through their developing literacy abilities and creativity by striking a balance between text and visuals. With the limited imagery providing a baseline for creative connection, the author is able to encourage a personal custody within the bounds of an established communal one. That is to say, there are referents and touchstones for key figures and moments, but the majority of the story imagery only unfolds in the mind's eye. From here onward, however, the texts we will discuss have no illustrations other than their covers. The process described here still applies but goes further, essentially erasing the communal custody bounds found in these first two texts.

Episodic Structure

Secondly, *Indian Shoes* is presented as a series of short vignettes where the characters are placed in new situations. It serves as a more complex genre convention discussed earlier regarding patterns and structure. Here, the consistent characters face fresh challenges and experiences without ever becoming unfamiliar. The episodic structure reinforces patterns and keeps the reader engaged and growing in confidence—or custody, if you will—as the story unfolds. Each chapter, distinct and complete in itself, contributes to a larger, cohesive understanding of the characters, the text, and its themes. In this way, the choice to use the structure itself is a strong communal custody move by the author to cement a theme of resilience into the text, so we begin to see how these elements can function both simply and within more complex texts. It is still a communal custody element of structure and pattern, but employed through a more advanced genre convention that provides the author an opportunity to subtly orchestrate their aims.

Singular Reader

Finally, there is the shift to a more singular reading experience. At this stage, the young reader is likely the primary reader, no longer read-to. No longer are characters voiced with an adult's knowledge of inflection, tone, and pacing. All of these qualities are now up to the young reader to determine. As they work through the text at their own pace, it allows for a deeper, more personal interaction with the story. Within the confines of their developing cognitive framework, young readers start to picture scenes, identify with characters, and think critically about the story. This move is significant and detaches the author's reliance upon older readers accompanying and informing the meaning-making process, to a certain extent. It is a detachment rather than a removal because at this stage there is often discussion that still occurs, but it happens after the fact as opposed to during the process of reading. Of all the changing elements so far in this progression through books for younger readers, this steers most directly toward a personal custody of the text. The ongoing, word by word and moment by moment struggle with the text for understanding, clarity, and confidence engenders a strong sense of ownership, of custody, of the story.

Rain Is Not My Indian Name

Published in 2001, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* is a 135-page middle-grade novel. There are no illustrations, but it does include an Author's Note that also covers terminology. It tells the story of Rain, a Muscogee (Creek) and Ojibwe fourteen-year-old girl as she deals with grief from the loss of her young friend while she also grapples with her identity in small-town Kansas. There are two main custodial moves to examine here, the first is the change in narrative perspective, and the second is narrative form.

Narrative Perspective

Of our examples so far, this text is the first to introduce the first-person perspective. The third-person viewpoint—the perspective used in our first two texts—is frequently used in children's literature as a universal lens, making stories accessible and relatable to a wide range of young readers. The narrator's ability to provide explanations and insights that aid in the understanding and interpretation of the story makes the omniscient viewpoint comforting and authoritative, qualities that contribute to the child reader's sense of ownership of the text. However, the first-person perspective becomes more common when readers reach the young adult stage, providing a more personal and subjective narrative experience—a clear move from the communal to the personal. First-person stories provide readers with a private understanding of the protagonist's innermost feelings, ideas, and experiences, making for a more engaging and intimate reading experience while introducing a certain amount of uncertainty, at least in comparison to third-person omniscient. This distinctive shift promotes introspection and could arguably (depending on the unknown aims of the author) be an intentional paratextual communal custody claim. That is to say, when the author changes from Jenna, or Ray, or Rain to "I" it forces the reader to practice empathy. The readers' personal understandings and feelings are de-emphasized in favor of the character's. That this strategy is so widely employed in this genre does seem to suggest that it serves as a useful tool for authors to leverage the aligned development stages of reading, psychology, and biology of their readers, who are often exploring their identity and experiencing a heightened sense of individuality and personal perspective. Again, we see a communal custody move within a broader personal custody framework. It juxtaposes what the reader thinkss the characters ought to feel with what they're being told the character actually feels. The panoply of possible responses is condensed into only those the author wishes to include. Not an individual ramble, but a guided tour. Smith wants her readers to have personal connections to the story, while also ensuring those connections include empathy as an underlying theme.

Narrative Form

Secondly, Smith employs a unique narrative form in *Rain*, that of a modified epistolary novel. Each chapter starts with a short journal entry in italics that serves as a personal character reflection before continuing the more traditional narrative in regular font. Narrative structures are an authorial decision, so the reader committed to a custody and stewardship reading is interested in examining why that decision was made over the available alternatives. The first thing to note is that it reinforces by necessity the decision to tell this story in first-person perspective and all that such a decision implies regarding custody. In contrast to a more traditional first-person narrative though, the epistolary structure connotes a layer of authenticity and intimacy. We as readers are privy to Rain's private thoughts and unfiltered responses. The resulting conversation between the character's perspective and the reader's own is more immediate and personal than that of a third-person rendering of the same. A potential drawback is the limited knowledge the reader is forced to work with given other structures. How different might the sense of custody be when an omniscient narrator, for example, unnerringly diagnoses the character opposed to the unreliability of the teenager we ultimately are presented with? On the whole, though, and with the hindsight that the text in the hands of the reader is the result of authorial decisions, a few thematic elements begin to crystalize. Namely, that we are being encouraged to empathize with imperfect characters. In this case, the narrative structure serves as yet another communal custody marker arrived at through personal custody means.

Hearts Unbroken

The final Smith text to consider as we build a working knowledge of authorial custody and story stewardship is *Hearts Unbroken*, a 286-page Young Adult novel published in 2018. The story follows Louise Wolfe (cousin to both Jenna and Rain as well as friend of the Halfmoons from above!), an eighteen-year-old Muscogee (Creek) girl/woman navigating identity, racism, Christianity, and sex in small-town Kansas. As a fully-fledged novel populated with a host of characters and multiple diverging story elements, there are too many custodial markers to cover here, so I will focus on the development of insider knowledge in the form of Native languages.

Native Language

As mentioned above, insider knowledge is one of the strongest use cases of authorial custody because of its ability to function as both/either communal and/or personal. *Hearts Unbroken* features the Mvskoke language throughout, including a Mvskoke language glossary. For those without insider status, the use of this language can keep the reader at a distance, limit their knowledge of events and developments, and ensure there is never a confident sense of ownership of the text. For insiders, however, all of these outcomes are reversed. Each use draws them in, provides distinctive moments of understanding, and solidifies their sense of the relationship between audience and author. This text was written with them in mind. The same can be said for any text that leverages insider information to great effect.

As a Muscogee (Creek) reader, I recognized Smith’s use of insider knowledge and categorized the move as communal because I am a member of the invoked community. Another reader can still recognize the move and categorize it as such, but an ethical story stewardship would insist that the reader also recognize their positionality as a separate target audience. That’s not to say the text is *for* the community whose insider knowledge gets the most space on the page, but it does begin to define some of the distinctions in reception from one audience to another.

Conclusion

Authorial custody and story stewardship provide readers with a targeted framework for interpretation and meaning-making. As illustrated through the texts in this chapter, the complexity of the text doesn't limit the application or outcomes of the methodology. From picture books to novels, poetry to film, artificial author to collaborative creation, these tools' mode of addressing the text remains consistently relevant and intact, a necessary quality of any robust interpretive framework.

In the brief examination of texts so far, we've found custodial markers in:

- Simple and complex language use
- Insider and outsider knowledge
- Specific phrasing and word choice
- Structures and patterns
- Images and illustrations
- Author's Notes and glossaries
- The paratextual positioning of audience as readers or listeners
- Narrative perspective
- Narrative form
- Languages

And there are many more, including those mentioned when discussing Joy Harjo's work in the previous chapter. With each element, we see the author has an incredible amount of influence on the reader's sense of ownership of a text. For Smith, an author whose work mostly resides in the realm of Books for Young Readers, these decisions frequently point toward communal custody of a text. This isn't surprising, given her choice of genre and audience, and it supports her goals of increasing the amount of diversity and accurate portrayals of Native Americans in children's literature. Communal custody is going to be a popular choice for any author who wants to ensure their readers are in a good position to "get" what they're trying to do. Even in the instances we've seen where insider knowledge might keep certain audiences at arm's length, the other communal elements become gateways to understanding and appreciating diverse perspectives.

Not only does this illustrate the dynamic nature of individual elements of custody, but more broadly the dynamic custodial nature of texts themselves. That is to say, just as a given element—setting, for example—might be communal or personal for a given reader a text can likewise be communal or personal, too, regardless of the rigor applied or attempted in discerning its nature. The following chapter will provide an in-depth examination of this through an analysis of a collaborative text, Sterlin Harjo's *Reservation Dogs*, and its dual appeal to insider and outsider audiences.

Dear Locv,
I remember when we started this journey we were reading picture books and working on the alphabet. Now, you're a voracious reader, a very good artist, and are well on your way to being bilingual in a few short years. I love our bedtime bookshelf and all the stories and knowledge it contains. Do you remember how upset you would sometimes get with reading? How far you've come!
Love,
Dad

Chapter 4

Beyond the Creator’s Vision:

Custody and Stewardship in ‘Reservation Dogs’

Temba, his arms wide.

Kira at Boshi.

Sokath, his eyes uncovered.

— Captain Dathon

Dear Locv,
This chapter is kind of like our games of Dungeons and Dragons. I don't mean I'm taking the reader on a fantasy adventure, but I do mean that we are all going to create the story together. This kind of collaborative storytelling is hard to get right, but so fun when it all works out.
Love,
Dad

In this chapter we continue to map out the boundaries of the methodology by employing it in a collaborative context. In the previous case studies, the author serves as the primary creative force behind the text. While there are additional creative influences throughout the process—namely the illustrators and publishers—the author often (though, important to note, not always) has the ability to inform, approve, amend, and dismiss any influences that don't align with their goals for the text. Now, though, we examine a collaborative art form where authorship becomes more complicated and new creative axes necessitate employing a broader set of custodial markers before an ethical story stewardship can be identified.

With any text created collaboratively, there are at least two initial determinations a critic might frequently find themselves grappling with: is the text a result of a singular overarching vision instilled into the diverse artistic efforts of its creators, or do the dynamic processes of a team comprised of unique, competing visions culminate in a text that no single member would or could claim creative custody of? In other words, does this lean more auteur or more than the sum of its parts? Authorial custody and story stewardship as a methodology is positioned favorably to provide a framework for answering these questions.

Filmmaking is (often) an inherently collaborative process relying on the creative contributions of many artists and technicians. It provides an excellent opportunity to examine in-depth a single text comprised of many constituent texts, each with varying metrics by which to gauge custody and stewardship, as well as the relative weight the text as a whole seems to place on said parts. Just as with the texts in previous chapters, there will be a broad spectrum of custodial markers from communal to personal that when considered all together provide the reader with a general sense of their ownership and subsequent responsibility.

Reservation Dogs is a three-season television series created by Sterlin Harjo. It follows the coming-of-age hijinks of the eponymous Rez Dogs as they grapple with what it means to be a young Native person today. Over the course of its twenty-eight episodes, the series garnered a significant fan following and was beloved by critics for its writing, performances, and production practices. It is, after all, the first series to have an entirely Indigenous creative team (Starr).

Before we begin to analyze the impact of collaborative creative processes on custodial markers, though, let’s continue the established trend of engaging a shorter text first. In the previous chapters, we’ve seen traditional Muscogee (Creek) stories from Alexander Posey and Earnest Gouge. Here, I’ll be sharing a traditional story told in my own voice with no accompanying citation. Also, unlike the previous stories where the reader was encouraged to make their own connections between the story and content, there will be a targeted discussion about the story’s relevance to the rest of the content of the chapter. This move is intentional and is designed to encourage the reader to think about how the contrasting presentations impact their sense of custody and stewardship.

A Mvskoke Creation Story

When the world was new water covered the face of the earth. Now some of the animals met in council because they felt that this wasn’t quite the way it should be. The fish and the animals in the deep were happy with the way things were because all of creation was theirs to explore. Others, though, like the flying animals and those whose bodies could only swim on the surface had grown tired, and they sought respite from their constant fear of drowning. They knew that far beneath the surface of the water there was land, but they didn’t know how to get it since it was so deep. They decided that someone would need to dive down and bring the land back to the surface.

They first asked the fish if he would go. Now the fish didn’t want the other animals to have land, so he agreed, knowing he would simply not return. After some time, the rest of the council realized the fish and deep-dwelling animals would not help them. They then asked the loon, since she was the best diver. The loon agreed, and she put her white beads around her neck as she started to dive. She dove so deep that the beads lodged into her neck and are still there to this day, but ultimately she had to turn back. The animals were dismayed until the beaver decided he would dive for the land. Beaver got deeper than the loon, but the fish began to attack him, and his body swelled up, and he floated back to the surface. That is why beavers' bodies are so bloated nowadays. At this point the council was at a loss. They couldn’t see a way to bring the land to the surface. Finally, the crawfish said he would try. As he reached the depths where the land lay, the fish began to attack him, but the crawfish nestled in the mud and they couldn’t find him. After some time, crawfish escaped and made it to the surface, exhausted and nearly drowned. As he lay floating on his back, though, the council saw that he had been successful. He had brought a small amount of land to the surface.

Eagle took the land from the crawfish's tiny body and rolled it into a ball with his mighty claws. He flew high into the air and tossed the ball of earth down with such force that it split the sea and the waters receded. But the land was flat and mostly mud so the animals couldn't inhabit it. Buzzard, with his great wings, gently dried the land as he glided back and forth for four days, during which time no one was allowed to walk on the earth. Tired as he was from all the time soaring above the endless waters, he soon began to flap his wings wildly as he tried to stay aloft. This is what created the hills and mountains of the earth.

Now the land animals who had been struggling in the waters all this time finally had a place of their own, and the flying animals could rest their wings without fearing the deep-dwellers. But there was darkness everywhere, so the council decided it would be good to bring light into creation. They asked the firefly to put its light in the sky. Firefly was happy to help, but was growing weak sustaining the whole of creation with her light. The animal council let firefly rest, but they began to argue amongst themselves because some preferred day and some preferred night. Eventually, chipmunk pointed to raccoon's tail, saying they should follow his example and split the cycle evenly. And that is how the animals gave us land, shaped its features, and brought about night and day.

In a chapter looking at collaborative creative processes, this story is an obvious choice as a thematic aperitif. It provides a clear answer to the auteur or synergy question demonstrated through the lack of a leader and instead favoring the council, as well as the progressive obstacles and subsequent solutions coming from several different animals rather than at the suggestion of just one. It doesn't shy away from the conflict and disagreement that arises in collaborative processes, reminding readers of the importance of cooperation and compromise. If this example is setting any kind of precedent, we should only expect great things from the collaborative creative process.

But that isn't the only function of the story in this chapter. When you saw that the story wouldn't be cited, how did it make you feel? Did you think to yourself, well he's just making shit up, how can any meaning be derived from this? If you didn't think that then thanks, because that was my worry. But the intention is to draw attention to the reader's custodial preferences, including fundamental modes of reception like logos, especially in conjunction with the genre conventions expected in a dissertation. With the clearly stated goal of crafting a communal custody text whose meaning is intrinsically tied to the readers' understanding of the methodology, I find it useful to jar the reader out of their commonly held assumptions. This paratextual moment, and the others like it throughout this text, *is* the meaning in both form and function. In this chapter, I hope to stretch this moment out as long as possible, or at least revisit its cognitive space as often as we can before we reach the end. We're going to engage the communal custody of the text in question to generate collaborative meaning. Buckle up.

Sterlin Harjo's Bona Fides

Before diving into *Reservation Dogs*, an examination of Sterlin Harjo's filmography can help lay the foundations for discussing his use of custody and stewardship. By identifying trends in earlier work, we can more easily discern moments of his clear authorial control and moments where other creative voices grow louder.

Four Sheets to the Wind, 2007

Four Sheets to the Wind is Sterlin Harjo's first feature film and was produced in 2007. Shot exclusively in Oklahoma, it tells the story of Cvfe Smallhill as he undertakes a journey of self-discovery following his father's suicide. He meets up with his sister Miri in the "big city" of Tulsa and, for the first time, begins to explore who he is as an independent young man. The film is noteworthy in that it is the first to present a young Muscogee experience on screen. Eastern Oklahoma is the literal stomping grounds for Muscogee people and places like Wewoka, Okmulgee, and Tulsa are well known to us all. This is the first time Harjo brings these locales to audiences, and his cinematography manages to capture the inherent beauty of the woods and river bottoms that make up the Creek Nation. The performances are memorable and the characters feel like living breathing Muscogee characters—in their mannerisms, their worldviews, their speech patterns, and the ways that they shoulder the burdens that come their way. There's a very workmanlike attitude about the whole affair that rings true to a Muscogee audience.

One of the important elements of this work is that it never lingers in its tragic foundations. The characters are facing difficulties and uncertain futures, but the future will have these characters in it. That sort of hopefulness ought to be pointed out because it is not a typical element in many Native American stories in general and Muscogee stories in particular. And to be clear, the hopefulness isn't overdone, in fact, it is understated, but it stands in stark contrast to many of the other works Harjo would follow up with that seem to dwell in darkness more willingly.

Here is a debut that exudes a strong sense of authorial custody. This is a distinctly Muscogee film from a distinctly Muscogee artist.

Barking Water, 2009

Barking Water follows an older Native couple, former lovers Irene and Frankie as Frankie, on the verge of death, doesn't want to spend his last days in a depressing little Indian Hospital, and decides that he will make his way home to die and, if possible, meet his granddaughter for the first time. During the journey, Frankie and Irene come to terms with one another and with life, and it is all presented as a matter of course. If *Four Sheets to the Wind* is an examination of contemporary Native youth, *Barking Water* might be characterized as an examination of contemporary Native elder life. But unlike *Four Sheets to the Wind*, the silent, pensive tone it seems Harjo is going for feels restrictive with the quality of the actors in the leads. Strong performances from Casey Camp Hornick and Richard Way Whitman do a lot of work in giving the audience something to latch onto in this examination of death in rural Indian Country.

In terms of authorial custody, *Barking Water* doesn't develop Harjo's voice as much as *Four Sheets* did, or at least not as overtly. This film does continue to build his stable of Native actors that he will eventually call upon in *Reservation Dogs*, though, and it is clear that the custody they embody in their roles comes through. As a second film, though, much of the initial groundwork is already laid by *Four Sheets*. As a tool for characterization, custody has the capacity to clearly indicate markers via dialogue, costume, and plot. For example, Harjo's Seminole side is specifically brought to the fore in the dialogue of *Barking Water*, and there is an interesting moment where representations are negotiated as a result. Hornick, who delivers the dialogue, isn't Seminole, but Harjo's custody of that culture shines through, no doubt to different levels of reception by various audiences and their level of insider knowledge relating to that specific marker.

Mekko, 2015

Mekko follows the story of an ex-con who just finished the nineteen-year sentence for the killing of his cousin as a young man. After being turned away from his only living family, Mekko decides to live in the streets of Tulsa among the Street Chiefs, a group of homeless Indigenous people that have formed a loose-knit community amid the alleys and under the bridges. When faced with the evil Bill, another Street Chief with a malignant witch residing in his heart, Mekko ultimately assumes his role as a spiritual leader and defeats the witch. There are truly outstanding performances from Rod Rondeaux as Mekko and Zahn McLarnon as Bill that give this film a grounded sense of realism despite its fantastical elements, drawing that dreaded descriptor magical realism that is too often applied to stories from Native communities.

The inclusion of the spiritual elements in this film are important to note for custody and stewardship. Here we see, for the first time, contemporary depictions of the more metaphysical traditional Muscogee spiritual belief—not just prayers and songs and the like, but witchcraft and bad medicine. The decisions around its presentation, namely to keep it unambiguously metaphysical in the otherwise grounded reality of the characters, period, and setting, are strong custodial markers. For a certain audience, it’s enough to make you feel like you need to be cleansed after watching.

This May Be the Last Time, 2014

Sterlin Harjo’s 2014 feature-length documentary *This May Be the Last Time* examines the intersection of Muscogee hymns and Harjo’s tragic personal history regarding the disappearance of his grandfather. The film is shot beautifully and the recurring interviews from community members lend a sense of weight and urgency to the language and a clear admiration of the beauty found in the tradition of hymn singing. The personal story of Harjo's grandfather creates the film's narrative through-line, but it is tenuous at best. The average viewer may struggle to find the ways in which this odd juxtaposition fulfills any of the tropes and traditions of Muskogee storytelling. Watching this film with non-Muscogee people gave me a unique opportunity to recognize the difficulties that Harjo has placed upon his viewers in making sense of what appears to be at worst a mostly foreign worldview, and for those more familiar, a worldview in contradiction with itself. That is to say, non-Native audiences may tend to associate elements from the disappearance narrative with elements from the hymn singing narrative, while Native audiences—even and in some cases especially Mvskoke audiences—will scoff at the notion of Muscogee hymn singing as such. I find this to be one of Harjo's most interesting films for that reason and as his only nonfiction film to date, I think it is one that benefits from a knowledge of his larger catalog. In particular, I think one of the themes examined in Harjo's oeuvre is what it means to be Muscogee today, and how that meaning is construed and different from past and future iterations. Without that knowledge, it can be tempting to categorize this film as a last-ditch anthropological picture capturing a dying culture at a key moment in time, one where the culture has lionized the forces bringing about its ruin. With that knowledge, the film becomes much more hopeful and appreciative of culture instead. Perhaps because of this knowledge-based challenge, it becomes a fascinating text for an authorial custody and story stewardship analysis.

All told, Harjo's filmography establishes his as a very distinct Muscogee voice. He is clearly connected to his community and its creative history and traditions. The skills and experience he acquired in the lead up to *Reservation Dogs* can be traced back through his films, and we will see evidence of that below.

"Shit-asses," or A Rose By Any Other Name

To start, who had never heard the apparently ubiquitous term of endearment "shit-ass" before? My hand is raised. Or rather, it was, until I recognized the custodial marker so prevalent in the show for what it was. My moment of realization came when I was discussing the show with my family and the initial hesitancy of my older relatives to endorse the harsh language. Everyone seemed to love the show, its characters, and what it had going on except for the heavy use of strong language in every episode. The term "shit-ass" makes its first appearance in episode two, "NDN Clinic" as Big, the Lighthorse Officer played by Zahn McLarnon questions the gang about some suspicious potato chips. From that point on in the series, shit-ass is everywhere. Even the white characters in the show will say shit-ass from time to time, it truly becomes ubiquitous over the course of the series. Fans of the show use it as a meme to identify other fans of the show. Nestled as it was in the roaring stream of curse words the show treated as normal, it started out as a marker that created distance for me and most of my family. This wasn't representative of our experience. All the other elements of the show rang true, including the use of harsh language up to a point. The sense of communal custody was overwhelming, and the lone outlier was mostly the fact that so many people in small-town Oklahoma just don't talk that way (in public). Again, insider knowledge, in this case community elements so accurate and ubiquitous as to function as a kind of community literacy, helps to create a very strong set of initial conditions for Harjo to turn his work loose in.

It was literally in the voicing of that specific critique—that the harsh language in public places was so prevalent—that I realized what had happened. You see, our curses and strong uses of language tend to come out in Mvskoke opvnvkv. The smile that broke on my face when I translated one of the most common sayings in a Creek home, fvmpe cvpo, well it still creeps in as I write this. “Go take a shower, you got a fvmpe cvpo.” “Eww, somebody’s got a fvmpe cvpo in here, open a window.” Yes, stinky butt, or you might even say: shit-ass. There it was, hiding in plain sight. It was an incredibly effective and subtle use of insider knowledge to create communal custody of this text. I know it did so, because as soon as my family asked what was so funny and I shared my revelation, it hit them, too.

This moment is one that elevates this text into truly seminal territory. It flips the onus of cultural relation in a way that is so rare that it’s difficult to find other examples. A similar moment occurs when the late Norm McDonald delivered his roast of Bob Saget, but even that’s different than what’s going on here. Here we have Indian audiences who are so accustomed to looking for custodial markers in the small nuances that make themselves evident because they are distinct from the status quo that it is almost the default receptive mode. We recognize Native jokes because they’re Native amongst the non-Native. For example, in the first episode, skoden and stoodis are said by two characters. This is pretty straightforward Native humor, where the Rez accent has “let’s go, then,” and “let’s do this,” coming across as mostly unrecognizable to outsiders. Native audiences catch the reference, have a chuckle, then move on. For another example, the character of Willie Jack, played by Nakoda actress Paulina Alexis, routinely points with her lips throughout the series. Again, this is a behavior that Native people engage in because of social taboos against pointing fingers, and the series draws no attention to it, so I assume outsider audiences give it little or no attention. It’s a wonderful bit of personality for the character, and it gives Native audiences further confidence that the creators are aware and intentional in their portrayals. But in both of these cases, the Native audience is on the lookout for Native markers in a traditionally non-Native medium.

What shit-asses does is a brilliant subversion of that posture. Rather than follow the two more trodden paths that the show does take with other markers—the insider/outsider hide and seek game described above, or the use of Mvskoke itself as the show does with “mvto” and other Creek words—it eschews both and opts for a route that, as we’ve seen with my own slow realization of the move, can be missed. Instead, it disguises it within another powerful trope many communities also employ: signifyin’. The benefit to this approach is that it still allows for the recognition of the custodial marker by broader subgroups, while also reserving (no pun intended) the greatest payoff for specifically Mvskoke viewers (and, I suppose, any other viewer whose language happens to align with the marker’s structure—surely there are a lot of communities who tease their loved ones and neighbors using some form of stink-butt). It's a subversion of Indian humor because all the Indians are looking for the joke in the wrong place. It’s such a strong communal marker because if fvmpe and cvpo aren’t the first two words Creek babies learn, then they’re up there somewhere. The rewarding feeling when the viewer can’t understand why such an authentic representation has such a strange deviation only to find that the deviation is a hidden love letter—well it doesn’t get much better. This is indicative of a collaborative custody, since it creates the initial communal conditions but then challenges the status quo for attentive audiences to great effect.

“Decolonativization”, or The Kids Are Alright

Jumping forward to Season 2, episode 6 we find the series’ critique of influencers and faux intellectuals in “Decolonativization.” I want to spend time here because I feel like the larger themes of the series come across nicely in this episode. The Rez Dogs find themselves forced to attend a youth workshop, the Native American Reclamation Decolonization Symposium, or NARDS, facilitated by two young Native influencers. As they spend the day doing trust falls with their enemies and learning the true definition of decolonization is braiding together the hairs of our ancestral ways, the episode speaks to a serious issue relating to Indigenous Sovereignty: self-determination.

Outside of a few graffiti-sprawled messages of Land Back and individual scenes dealing with evergreen topics like criminal jurisdiction or healthcare found scattered throughout the series, this episode is one of only two that deals explicitly with some of the highly political realities facing Native people in their everyday lives, specifically in this episode the endemic suicide rates among young people in our communities. The other is “Deer Lady,” season 3 episode 3, which pulls double duty in addressing violence against Native women and boarding schools. This isn’t accidental and largely reflects the attitudes of Native communities where politics are intrinsically tied to our identities. Being a Native person is a political act, so to bring specific attention to it can feel tired and trite. Here, though, the creative team expertly draws out the internal tensions of self-determination, while keeping the tone humorous and allowing the characters to develop.

To position the episode as an examination of the difficulties Native communities face with self-determination, we need to identify the players. The Rez Dogs represent the community members, engaged in their own personal struggles and demonstrating resilience, self-reliance, and critical thinking despite the empty actions of those who ought to know better. The adults in the room represent those in Tribal leadership who misidentify both where the problem lies and the possible solutions to it. The influencers represent the outsiders convinced of their own superiority and expertise, whose trendy activism is disconnected from the communities they're meant to support.

A quick aside to draw attention to the methodology for a moment. This section of the analysis is only occurring because the work of the previous section—shit-ass—provides sufficient custodial evidence that such an analysis can occur. My determination that the work is one of communal custody supports the way that I will be stewarding the story in the coming paragraphs. Furthermore, the content of the episode taken into consideration alongside the clear communal custody elements necessitates an attempt to provide as much clarity as possible. The episode is a critique of faux-intellectualism and the harm it does to communities. As a scholar, and a Mvskoke scholar at that, I believe the text is strongly suggesting that it is my responsibility to steward this story in this way.

Returning to the analysis, the adult's uncritical endorsement of the influencers' nonsense reinforces the dangerous belief that Native communities need external guidance and solutions. Not only does this disempower Native voices, communities, and traditions, but in doing so it actively sabotages their efforts of self-determination. When this occurs there are real-world consequences. Just as Cheese and Eve Tuck attest, trust falls and journaling sessions do not a decolonization make. Celebrating empty gestures leads to a status quo where everyone knows what decolonization is, and they think they're practicing it by copy/pasting a land acknowledgment into their email signatures.

And now comes the awkward moment of self-reflection where community-based Indigenous scholars have to reckon with themselves and their own work. Are we as we hope we are, the Rez Dogs, the community members whose lived experience, acquired expertise, and in-depth understanding of the specific challenges facing Native communities uniquely positions us to support Indigenous self-determination? Or are we the adults in the room, the Tribal leaders, who've made a grave miscalculation, focusing our efforts on the wrong problems and promoting the wrong solutions? Or are we, worst of all, the influencers, the faux intellectuals whose laser focus trivializes true struggles and misses the bigger picture of ongoing dispossession? How can we know?

As I watched the episode for the first time, I laughed so hard I cried. After it ended, though, I couldn't be sure that it wasn't me the episode was poking fun of. While there's certainly something to be said about having the capacity to laugh at oneself, this felt more damning. Upon further reflection, though, I came around. I realized that the work we—I—do is important to our communities. The proof is in the decolonized pudding, as it were. The fact of the matter is, people do know what decolonization is. But they didn't always. They do have land acknowledgments in their email signatures. But they didn't always. What they always had was of course all the constituent parts that construct those ideas. The scholar merely equips the community with the tools to engage in that construction. We help—or ought to help—facilitate the process of self-determination by illuminating historical power imbalances, dismantling settler narratives, and empowering communities to reclaim their own voices and knowledge. Our task is not to stand apart as experts, but to walk alongside communities, learn from their stories, and co-create knowledge that serves our shared aspirations. Our role is not to dictate terms from on high, but to provide tools and frameworks that communities can adapt and utilize in their own unique ways. In that sense, the laughter and subsequent doubt don't diminish the significance of the work, but rather reflect the necessary self-awareness and humility required to be true community members in the journey toward decolonization. In my opinion, story stewardship is a potential vector for decolonizing praxis for our communities.

Collaborative Custody

Harjo wasn’t alone in crafting our sense of custody for the text. Not only was he just one member of the film crew, but there was a team of writers, a host of producers, and an incredible cast that all contributed to the text. How can we determine which markers to attribute to a particular custodian of the text, and does that ultimately matter? Well, yes, absolutely to the latter. This whole project is predicated on the idea that Indigenous perspectives matter, and to be incapable of confirming, or at the very least identifying that such a perspective exists in the text is the clearest indication of poor story stewardship on the creator’s side. To be clear, it isn’t just bad writing in that case (even though it is that, too) but it rises to poor story stewardship because these are images from a community, stories from a people, and to—at the end of the day—create a text that happens to be Indigenous, that could simply swap out its characters and story for any other community, is a maltreatment of our story. In this particular case, though, we need not worry about that as Harjo’s mark is indelible.

One aspect of the methodology that this text presents an opportunity to engage with is the intersectional aspects of identity that can serve as multiple custodians for the text. Just as our constructions of identity coalesce at the intersection of different social categorizations, so too does the construction of meaning when textual markers resonate with the lived experience of more than one identity. The Rez Dogs are legitimate stars in Indian Country, but they also resonate with rural Oklahomans regardless of their racial background. I can’t help but see this text from my very specific positionality, but there are others with whom the text resonates from entirely different positions and, I assume, the text does so because it communicates its markers to that position just as effectively as it does mine.

Managing the vast approaches this could represent seems daunting, but two things reign it in. The first is the subjective weight the author and reader place on any particular categorization. The second is the focus on intention, as we witnessed earlier with Joy Harjo and the AI. A natural process of prioritization will self-select based on the first criteria, while the text itself will inform the efficacy of the second. If, for example, we were to place a heavy emphasis on the custodial markers surrounding the character of Bear as a child of a single mother, the next task would be to determine if the text supports that marker with sufficient material. In that particular case, there are multiple scenes across several episodes that deal specifically with that aspect of intersectional identity and could, therefore, become a potential site of analysis.

As the chapter winds to a close, I want to invoke the paratextual goals one final time. I set out to create a collaborative meaning-making experience for the reader. Through the combined analysis of *Reservation Dogs* and the Mvskoke creation story, we discovered some of the impacts collaborative creative processes can have on meaning-making. In addition, there were custodial decisions I made in an attempt to keep the reader hyper-aware of our relationship, including the lack of citations where genre convention would typically insist upon them, more familiarity in tone and diction, personal anecdotes presented more frequently here than in early parts of this project, and of course the paratextual efforts themselves. The hope was that in a chapter concerned with collaboration, we might fulfill the expressed commission of the creative team behind *Reservation Dogs* and tell our own story.

The chapter is both an explanation and an example of the methodology at work. In determining the text as one of a communal nature, I then felt the responsibility to practice the ethical stewardship we've seen here. Harjo and company want more Indigenous stories in the world. In all the ways that matter, this chapter is now one, and it becomes so thanks to the reader.

It serves as a metaphor for co-creation, showcasing the methodology and our collective effort. I especially look forward to learning about the resulting compromises that arose in the process, since as we've seen every collaborative exercise creates them. I wouldn't have arrived at this instance with another methodology, though there certainly would be common elements found in many potential frameworks. To summarize the effort, Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel.

Conclusion

Our texts up to this point have all been either communal or collaborative custody texts. Two factors have made the largest impact on that designation and indeed tend to heavily sway the custody of most texts in one direction or another: audience and genre. As popular media, each text—Joy Harjo's poetry, Cynthia Leitich Smith's books for young readers, and Sterlin Harjo's collaborative filmmaking—has a broad target audience. Each, of course, has its niche in the incredibly diverse interest market of today's consumer, but they are without exception intended to attract a wide audience. As such, their custodial markers will tend toward the communal as a byproduct of that choice. It was stated earlier, but communal is the most common, while personal and collaborative are each more rare. The personal confuses people, the collaborative challenges them. Neither of those things are good for shareholders, and we live and create art in a system where shareholder benefit has an exaggerated importance. It's the reason poetry collections don't typically become best sellers and experimental cinema only plays on that one screen in the city.

In addition to their broad audiences, these texts also come from a specific sub-audience as well—the Muscogee (Creek) community, the basis of their initial inclusion in this project. For another reader, this quality may have signified a personal custody move by the author for its potential to create distance between text and reader and their initial inability to confidently claim ownership of the text without some subsequent education on their part. In other words, I might absolutely love “The Girl from Ipanema,” but until I take the time to translate its Portuguese lyrics its impact and significance are still at arms’ length, and my stewardship of it is incomplete and not as ethical as it could be. Appreciation is distinct from and has no necessary influence on custody. Appreciation can—and often will—encourage a desire for deeper engagement with the text. In this way, communal custody can emerge for audiences whose initial prescription of custody may have been leaning more personal.

Furthermore, the genres of the chosen texts likewise contribute to a general sense of communal ownership of the text, with Joy Harjo’s poetry being the most at risk of tipping the scale in the personal direction. Genre conventions are a powerful tool in the author’s meaning-making apparatus. Genre can overpower other custodial markers with ease thanks to the ingrained assumptions readers bring to every text. For evidence of that look no further than the same story told either by Wells or Welles. When thoughtfully employed, genre can entrench those assumptions, carefully supplant them, or even begin to question their validity—and all to powerful effect. With the texts chosen for this project, there are very few experiments with genre conventions. As a result, readers of these texts are able to proceed with confidence, and their expectations are never subverted—at least insofar as the subversion detracts from their ownership of the text.

But there are other outcomes than the custody each of the three texts so far in the project have suggested. Personal custody—in its purest form, not in service of a broader communal custody—exists and is a beautiful thing to behold. And of course, it should go without saying that this tool isn’t limited in its application to the texts of marginalized communities with strong delineations of insider and outsider status. In the subsequent Afterword, we will see what conclusions we can draw from this project and consider what conversations it might enrich.

Dear Locv,
That’s it! You got through it! I appreciate you spending this time with me. The relationship isn’t over, but this daggum wooly booger of a paper is. Hopefully I’ve given you some interesting things to think about, and maybe you’ll take it with you the next time you want to engage that meaning-making apparatus of your own.
Love,

Afterword

HVTVM CEHECAKARES

Prisencolinensinainciusol. All right.

— Adriano Celentano

As our time together draws to a close, I want to draw special attention to the relationality that is at the center of this project. I've referred to the use of this toolset as a methodology, not as a method, because there is an underlying relational posture these tools require if they are to function. You cannot employ authorial custody and certainly not story stewardship without a willingness to enter into a relationship with the text and author. Authorial custody is interested in the negotiation of textual ownership, while story stewardship is interested in the subsequent responsibilities as a result of that ownership. It could be that you cannot own the text and the only ethical stewardship of it is to appreciate it. It could be that you are the new owner of the text and the only ethical stewardship is to find better and more ethical ways of sharing it. Whatever the result of the analysis, the methodology cannot be put into practice if there is an a priori dismissal of the author, text, or reader as potential custodian and steward of meaning or story.

Beyond the familiar confines of the Muscogee literary tradition, I believe this methodology can succeed because of this relational foundation. There is the one-to-one reapplication of another Indigenous scholar applying these ideas to their own national literatures. Then there are moments where applications could function across nations and literatures, but great care would need to be taken to ensure positionality and custodial markers are clearly conveyed.

In other closely-aligned applications, I can see the development of curriculum for writing classrooms that uses these ideas. Rhetoric no doubt has a lot to add, specifically in the area of the agency of texts. In addition, there is more to be said about the semiotic history of custody, particularly of Native people and their image. Music would also be a fascinating area of study with custody and stewardship, particularly jazz with its samples and contrafacts. In the realm of law there's bound to be interesting conversations to be had around custody and stewardship, especially with sticky situations around influence and attribution. As a decolonizing tool, I suspect this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Ongoing conversations with writing groups, reading groups, artist collectives, and AI enthusiasts have convinced me that these ideas have tapped into a very common inquiry that creatives are struggling with: who does art belong to and what does the answer to that question tell us about how we make meaning? If these tools help them navigate those conversations or contribute by providing a set of terms to facilitate deeper discussion then I am beyond thrilled and hope to hear back with updates on how the tools perform.

Mvto!

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