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IMAGINING CHOCTAW: SELF-IMAGINATION AND SETTLER COLONIALISM

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my mother, Marvena Osie Bayhülle Sexton, to whom I apologize for not writing about Pawnees. Next time.

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Abstract

As Native American tribes work towards self-determination, they must first fully imagine who they are and who they want to become. Self-imagination, the act of conceptualizing ourselves, is requisite for self-determination. One important way in how we imagine ourselves is through the stories we tell of ourselves and others. The act of Native American self-imagination is enacted within the context of U.S. settler colonialism. U.S. settler colonialism is so prevalent in the lives Indigenous people that it must be scrutinized in how it influences Indigenous self-imagination. This dissertation examines the ways three Choctaw writers—LeAnne Howe, Louis Owens, and Don L. Birchfield—imagine Choctaws and a Choctaw nation and how they respond to settler colonialism through the stories they tell, i.e. their literature. Given the diversity among these three writers, a variety of methods are used including tribalogy, Mixedblood discourse, and regionalism.

Keywords: imagination, self-imagination, self-determination, Indigenous literature, Native American literature, Choctaw, Choctaw literature, Choctaw writers, LeAnne Howe, Louis Owens, Don L. Birchfield, settler colonialism, appropriation, indigenization, tribalogy, *Mixedblood Messages*, mixedblood(s), mixedblood literature, Oklahoma Choctaw, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, removal, OU, Sooners, college football, regionalism, American Indian literary nationalism.

Imagining Choctaw: Self-Imagination and Settler Colonialism

All human beings need to feel the integrity of their own imaginations.
Our imaginative life is another expression of the earth.

~ Roberta J. Hill, "Immersed in Words"

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

~ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*

Detecting settler colonialism and its operation, of course, is not enough,
and the decolonization of settler colonial form needs to be imagined
before it is practiced.

~ Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*

In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson declared: "We must affirm the rights of the first Americans to remain Indians while exercising their rights as Americans. We must affirm their rights to freedom of choice and self-determination." Two years later, President Richard Nixon would state: "This, then, must be the goal of any new national policy toward Indian people: to strengthen the Indian sense of autonomy without threatening his sense of community" (Pevar 8). This ushered in a shift in federal Indian policy: Self-determination. It is a radical departure from the Termination and Relocation era of the 1950s and 60s when the federal government terminated its trust responsibility to over one-hundred tribes and thousands of Indigenous people were uprooted from their tribal communities and relocated to urban areas.¹ Such policies were designed to complete the erasure of the Indigenous presence in the U.S. Terminating the government-to-government relationships negated the sovereignty of those nations. Relocation looked to force assimilation through isolating Indigenous families and immersing them into Euramerican culture. Ever since this shift, however,

¹ In *The Urban Indian Experience in America*, Donald Fixico writes, "more than 100,000 Native Americans were on relocation from 1951 to 1973" (25). It is also important to note that the Relocation program was voluntary.

Congress has enacted laws and policies designed to aid Native nations in determining their own future. Although it is safe to say that the social, cultural, and political conditions of most Native Americans have improved, Indigenous people still suffer high rates of alcoholism, low life expectancy, suicide, and imprisonment, to name but a few social ills—in most cases, these rates are among the highest of other ethnic groups. Federal policy alone cannot save Native Americans, and if we are to determine a brighter future we need to determine for ourselves the type of future we want.

If the history of federal policy regarding Indigenous people tells us anything, it is that U.S. official policy regarding Indigenous people and nations is always subject to change. We cannot assume the federal government will always look to uphold Indigenous rights to self-determination. Moments like the protests against the Dakota Access pipeline in 2016 and 2017 at Standing Rock Reservation demonstrate that Indigenous people need to be ready to fight for sovereignty and self-determination despite whatever the official federal policy might be. The official policy might very well shift, again. Regardless, Indigenous people will continue to struggle for what they have always struggled for, their right to determine their own future. And the settler colonial situation all Native American people and nations face guarantees that encroachment upon tribal land, sovereignty, and self-determination will continue until the goal of settler colonialism is fulfilled: settlement. Settlement requires the displacement and eventual elimination of the Indigenous presence on the continent. And while the settler has imagined our race vanishing for well over a century, Indigenous people continue to imagine other destinies.

The first step in self-determination is to imagine for ourselves what our future will be. When writing about the Kiowa migration to present-day Oklahoma in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa/Cherokee) writes that the Kiowa had conceived “a good idea of themselves,” thus they were able to “imagine and determine who they were” (4). The Kiowa could not know what they might encounter on their migration or how it might change them. Despite what may lie ahead, the Kiowa were resolved to determine their future through conceiving a “good idea of themselves.” If we are to determine our future, we need to determine who we are. We need to imagine ourselves as we are, as we were, and who we want to become. How we imagine ourselves, or *self-imagination*, is requisite for self-determination. Given how relentless settler colonialism is, that self-imagination needs to take Euramerica into account. Indigenous people have been inundated by settler cultures, societies, and politics for so long now that they have had a tremendous impact on who we are and how we imagine ourselves. One important way in how we imagine ourselves as people and as nations is through the stories we tell of ourselves. The contemporary Indigenous strife for self-determination is in direct resistance to U.S. settler colonialism. This dissertation examines how three Choctaw writers—LeAnne Howe, Louis Owens, and Don L. Birchfield—imagine the Choctaw people and nation in their stories and how each confront settler colonialism in his or her own way.

Put simply, self-imagination is how we conceive ourselves. Yet, self-imagination is much more complex than this since we imagine ourselves in a variety of ways. For example, I might imagine myself as a member of the Choctaw tribe or as a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. The former connotes I belong to a group, a

tribe, of Choctaws, while the latter connotes a political dimension of how I imagine myself. Our self-imagination may include other facets that are regionally-based. For example, there are times when I identify as an Oklahoman. It also may include our profession/vocation. I imagine myself to be a scholar and teacher, for example. The ways we imagine ourselves also intersect in interesting ways. For example, I also imagine myself to be Oklahoma Choctaw, but that may not be the same for other Choctaws or other Oklahomans. The writers discussed in this dissertation all claim to be, thus imagine themselves as, Choctaw, but they imagine themselves as Choctaw in different ways.

How we conceive and imagine ourselves is vital to our very existence and our future. Momaday points: “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves. Our best destiny is to imagine, at least, completely, who and what, and *that* we are. The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (“Man Made of Words” 167). Our very existence is based upon our self-imagination. This is to say, if I wish to exist as a Choctaw, for example, I need to first imagine myself as a Choctaw. If I cease to imagine myself as Choctaw, then I cease to exist as one. This might be why Momaday calls neglecting to imagine ourselves fully, or at all, the greatest tragedy, for if we fail to imagine ourselves as we want to be, we become the imagination of others. Without my self-imagination and self-conception as a Choctaw, others then gain control over who I am. One of the mechanisms of settler colonialism is the control of how the Other (Indigenous and Exogenous) is imagined. If the settlers are able to control how Indigenous people are imagined, it can enable them greater control over our future. The need for self-imagination is required for more than

a philosophical existence, it is also needed for Indigenous cultural and political one.

This is why it is important we continue to use our voice to continually assert our self-
imagination.

There is a social component to self-imagination and identity. Self-imagination is not the same as identity, but the two are related. While I may imagine myself as a Choctaw, there are other factors that determine my identity. These factors may be based on heritage/genetics, cultural knowledge, or social acceptance, to name a few.

Recognition and identification as Choctaw by others may not be consistent, as well.²

There are a lot of people who are socially accepted as tribal but are not enrolled and therefore not identified as tribal by the federal government or even the tribe. All of this is based upon how our self-imagination interacts and is accepted, or dismissed, by those around us. When asked what an Indian is, for example, Momaday answers: “an Indian is an idea which a given man has of himself. And it is a moral idea, for it accounts for the way in which he reacts to other men and to the world in general” (“The Man Made of Words” 162). I imagine myself as Choctaw, an idea I have of myself, but that does not determine my identity, *per se*. If I assert my self-imagination as a Choctaw into the world, that self-imagination much account for how it interacts with other people and “the world in general.” All of this is to say that how we imagine ourselves has its own

² Determining identity is complex and often results in struggles between defining one’s self and *being* defined. Postmodernity has elevated the complexity of identity. While there are a variety of ways to determine Indigenous identity, one that seems to be consistently agreed upon is that of heritage/genetics. As Jace Weaver says, “Yet, despite postmodern claims of fragmented, fractionated, and multiple identities, Native identity is not freewheeling and infinitely refracted. One cannot, for instance, dream oneself Indian while possessing no Native ancestry. Not even the most louche critic would contend so” (*American Indian Literary Nationalism* 20).

integrity, but is responsible to the world at large. Our self-imagination interacts and is changed by the social and political world.

A common and important way in how we imagine ourselves is through the stories we tell of ourselves. Storytellers may imagine themselves individually, but the stories they tell also contain elements of the storyteller's tribe. When explaining "tribalography," LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) claims that Indigenous stories "pull all the elements together of the storyteller's tribe" ("The Story of America" 42). If we accept the premise that the stories contain these tribal elements, they must also contain how the people imagine who they are. The stories are more, however, than a repository of tribal elements. As Louis Owens (Choctaw, Cherokee, Irish) pointedly says, "Stories, I learned very early, make the world knowable and inhabitable. Stories make the world, period" (210). The stories are necessary for they not only *inform* us of who we are and the world around us, they help us *understand* it. We may learn of this world scholastically, but we understand how we relate to the world through the stories. The stories this dissertation will focus on are literary but makes no distinction between fiction and non-fiction. As Howe does, this dissertation considers fiction and non-fiction as stories. There is a longer discussion in the first chapter on counting fiction and non-fiction as stories.³

When Howe claims that the stories connect the tribal elements contained in the stories to the past, present, and future milieus, she also states that "present and future milieus mean non-Indians." The reality Indigenous people face, whether that it is a

³ I will discuss tribalography in greater detail in "Choctalking with the Settler." That discussion includes the act of blurring the distinctions between fiction from non-fiction and the impetus and ramifications of such an act.

social, cultural, or political reality, is the dominating presence of Euramericans, or the settler. This dominating presence is a result of settler colonization. This dissertation assumes that, when Indigenous people imagine themselves, they do so in a settler colonial context.

If self-determination is to be achieved, resistance to settler colonization is necessary. It is, therefore, essential that Indigenous people understand their current situation. Settler colonialism is something different from other forms of colonization.⁴ Settler colonialism is a colonial situation in which the colonizer has severed their ties to the metropole with the intention of remaining. Colonial studies scholar Lorenzo Veracini says it is *animus manendi* (“the intention of remaining”) “that distinguishes the settler from other colonists—as the very word ‘settler’ implies, it is the *intention* to stay (as opposed to the sojourners’ intention to return) that contributes the crucial differentiating trait” (53). Eventually, the settler begins to imagine the colonized land as their home, thus establishing their own roots to the land. This requires, however, the eradication of the Indigenous people. After a few generations, the settlers cease to imagine themselves as colonizers and begin to claim a sense of indigeneity themselves. It is important to understand that the colonizers no longer view themselves as colonizers. As just mentioned, settler culture, society, and politics dominate to the point that they are virtually unavoidable and ubiquitous. Needless to say, settler colonialism

⁴ In *Colonial Frontiers* (1971), D.K. Fieldhouse offers a categorization of colonialism that is often cited when describing settler colonialism scholarship. The categories include mixed, plantation, and pure settlement. Deloras Janiewski describes these categories: “In succession, each of the three kinds of settler colonies identified by scholars—mixed settlement, plantation, and pure settlement—appeared as the colonizers shifted from mixed settlement, a colonial structure including European settlers and a relatively large indigenous population, toward a plantation system based upon coerced, imported labor and a pure settlement colony as the indigenous peoples were dispossessed” (59).

is a key component to this dissertation. While this introduction is not meant to be an exhaustive presentation of settler colonialism, it does explicate some salient features that are pertinent to the writers the dissertation discusses.

Before proceeding, a use of a term needs to be made clear. “Settler” is a tricky term since it is broad and signifies those who have settled on Indigenous land. One distinction to be made is that it does not include exogenous Others, those who are non-Indigenous but who also not a part of colonizing forces. A settler colonization involves a population divided between three sets of populations: settler, Indigenous, and exogenous Other. Veracini writes that the “settler colonial situation is thus characteristically perceived as a dynamic environment where different groups are routinely imagined as transiting from one section of the population system to another” (20). Generally those who colonized this continent are imagined as being European, or of European descent, i.e. Euramerican. Since the situation is dynamic and these categories are permeable, the term “settler” will also have to remain open, to a certain extent. For the purpose of this dissertation, “settler” refers to those who are advancing the colonial project who cannot be described as either Indigenous nor exogenous Other. “Settler” and “Euramerican” will sometimes be used interchangeably with full recognition of the dynamic nature of these categories.

Perhaps the most salient feature of settler colonialism is how dominant and ubiquitous it is. “Dominant” is often used to describe the culture of the settler. It is an aptly descriptive term given how settlers have successfully situated their culture(s) as normative and centered. It does not matter if one is considered a “minority,” or “marginalized,” they are still something *other* than the normal, hence the use of the

term “Other.” Yet, Gloria Bird (Spokane) warns us that when we refer to settler culture as “the dominant culture” and refer to ourselves as “Other,” or a “minority,” “we are perpetuating notions of our own inferiority and domination.” Bird calls this “interiorized oppression” and asserts that if we want to get beyond it, “we first have to identify those moments in which we reinforce those useless paradigms and search for new approaches to the way we speak of ourselves in relation to our histories and stories” (6). Interiorized oppression has the same effect as what Kenya writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls a “cultural bomb,” the effect of which “is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately themselves. . . .The intended results are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish” (3). For Bird, and other indigenous people, adjusting our orientation in how we imagine and assert ourselves is a movement toward decolonization. Conversely, Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel warn us there is a “danger in allowing *colonization* to be the only story of Indigenous lives. It must be recognized that colonialism is a narrative in which the Settler’s power is the fundamental reference and assumption, inherently limiting Indigenous freedom” (601). Using terms like “dominant” to describe the settler automatically positions all non-Euramerican cultures as something other and this can create interiorized oppression. This can further lead to Indigenous people positioning the settler as the center of our own lives and tending to dominate Indigenous self-imagination. It is here that the term “ubiquitous” perhaps become a more useful alternative to “dominant,” as it helps to retain Indigenous people and stories as the center but still describes the settler colonial situation.

Decolonization requires that we look inward toward our own indigenous ways, positioning those ways as centered and normalized. This does not mean we disavow over five-hundred years of colonization and the effect it has had on us, although I do not see any danger in that happening given how influential the colonizer is. This is not to say that scholars like Bird, Alfred, and Cornstassel are suggesting that we ignore colonization. Their rhetoric, however, seems to suggest a degree of separation from Euramerica that is impractical to the point that is virtually impossible, as the simple reality is that we cannot escape colonization. We wake up every morning, live our days, and go to sleep in a colonial world. Most of us make our livings dealing with a non-Indigenous/settler colonial world; some of us do so exclusively. The majority of my colleagues, professors, and students, for example, are non-Indigenous. As an instructor of composition, I teach a tradition that is Western in origin. Obviously, this is not that reality for *all* indigenous people but it does pertain to most Natives since most of us live away from our traditional tribal homelands. And the lives of those who live in indigenous communities and/or within their homelands are still greatly influenced by settler colonialism.

As Indigenous critics, writers, activists, and leaders focus their energy inward, we still encounter colonialism. That is, as we attempt to decolonize, we do so within a settler colonial context. The geo-political, social, and cultural borders separating colonizer from colonized are not as rigid as they once were and are much more permeable than they ever have been. This is a definitive characteristic of settler colonialism. This is because for North American indigenous people, Euramerican colonial culture, society, and politics are ubiquitous and permeates everything. If we as

Indigenous people are not cognizant of how pervasive settler colonialism is and how it influences virtually everything we do, our attempts at decolonization will be like trying to dry one's self off with a towel *while* in the shower.

The ubiquity of settler colonialism not only influences indigenous self-imagination, it also helps to prevent the assertion of Indigenous self-imagination into the world. As previously mentioned, what we imagine has an integrity and a moral obligation to the world in which it is imagined. How we imagine ourselves, then, comes into conflict with how we are imagined. Euramericans have considerable control over how the general population imagines Indigenous people, which is a necessary component to settler colonialism. Controlling the imagery of Natives enables the settler to justify the need to eliminate the Native. As Davia Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis write in *Unsettling Settler Societies*: “Several discourses and myths become woven into settler colonization practices to justify appropriation and exploitation of indigenous peoples. These include the racist discourse of *terra nullius* (or barren lands, sparsely populated), the myth of the disappearing indigene, manifest destiny and the doctrine of fatal impact” (11). The settler controls the narrative of the settler nation that is further projected on to Indigenous people and exogenous Others, thus controlling their role in the American narrative and how these people are imagined. Unfortunately, the settler's power to control how we are imagined far exceeds Native Americans' ability to assert their own self-imagination. This dissertation explores how Howe, Owens, and Birchfield contribute to the struggle between how we imagine ourselves and how we are imagined. In their own way, each writer subverts the Euramerican projection of Indigenous people.

By controlling how Indigenous people are imagined, the settler is able to cast the Indigene into whatever role that would help perpetuate settlement. For example, in order to justify dispatching Indigenous people, the civilized/savage binary was employed. Indigenous people were perceived to be a few steps behind in human development, therefore, eradicating their cultures and histories and replacing them with Euramerican culture was considered by settlers as an “uplift.”⁵ As civilized people, settlers imagined the way they used the land to be inherently better than how Indigenous people did. This was evident in settler rhetoric, as Veracini observes that when “settlers claim land, it is recurrently in the context of a language that refers to ‘higher use’, and assimilation policies are recurrently designed to ‘uplift’, ‘elevate’, and ‘raise’ indigenous communities” (20). The dominating image of Indigenous people does change, but the perceived inferiority of Natives does not. I offer a fuller discussion on how this imagery changes in the first chapter, “Choctalking with the Settler.”

While Indigenous people react to such imagery in their own way, they all seem to be reacting to how the imagery tends to control how Indigenous people are imagined and, thus, treated. Louis Owens, for example, resisted being defined by confronting the “Indian.” In fact, in *Mixedblood Messages*, he claims, “I am not a real Indian” (166). He has different reasons and meanings for that statement, some of which I address in the second chapter, “Disrupting Structures.” One of the ways he imagines the “Indian”

⁵ The belief in Indigenous savagery was elevated to social science in the nineteenth-century. Henry Louis Morgan, for example, proposed that the stages of human progress were based on the concept of private property ownership and “corresponded to a particular economic system.” He went on to describe the three stages under the guise of their relationship to land: “Savages were disorganized foragers who owned nothing but tools and weapons. Barbarians (the discoverers of agriculture) owned their farms in common and had no commercial activity. Civilized people prospered through individual acquisition of land, complex machinery and domestic animals. Their wealth produced nuclear families that were flexible yet capable of maintaining rules of inheritance” (Hoxie 19).

is as a marker of settler-imposed identity. That is, a significant portion of his works focused on confronting the controlling nature of the “Indian,” which he claims is an invention of Euramericans and does not have a referent. Owens goes on to say that the “damningly *hyperreal* ‘Indian’” makes it “difficult for actual living Indian people to comprehend survival, and to adapt and change while holding to cultural identities, amidst the still-colonist, dominant Euramerican societies of the Americas” (*Mixedblood Messages* 18). He articulates how dominating this image can be and the task of confronting the “Indian” with our own projections, or own self-imagination. While some Indigenous people, particularly non-academic, still use “Indian” to identify themselves and other Indigenous people, Owens imagines it differently.

Yet, Indigenous people not only react against the potential for the “Indian” to control how they are imagined, they are ultimately reacting to the ultimate goal of the settler’s use of the “Indian,” elimination. As already mentioned, the settler intends to stay having separated themselves from the metropole. This requires the settler to re-imagine “home.” As David Pearson describes: “Subsequently, there is a dualistic, and not necessarily in tension, sense of ‘Home past’ and ‘Home present’, until, eventually, there is a rupture between these conceptions. ‘Home’ becomes firmly identified with where one is, rather than where one was” (11). The settler attempts to establish their own sense of belonging to the land. Focusing on where one is rather than where one was is a means to focus on the present rather than the past.⁶ There was much larger

⁶ Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis discuss the need for a “common destiny,” stating “Implicit in this concept [of common destiny] is the notion of future, rather than just past, orientation. It accounts for the subjective sense of commitment of people to ethnic collectivities and nations, in settler societies or in post-colonial states, in which there is no one overriding shared myth of common origins” (19). While focusing on a common destiny of all people (settler, indigenous, exogenous Other), the past is devalued in order to discount the lack of common origins.

Indigenous presence in the past and not so much in the present, after all. Settlement is hindered by the Indigenous presence, so for the settler to establish the colonized land as “home” requires the elimination of the Native.

The late, foundational settler colonial studies scholar Patrick Wolfe claims that “elimination is an organizing principal of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence” (“Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” 388). Eradication of Indigenous people is inherent in the structure of settler colonialism, since settlement requires the Indigenous presence be wiped away from this continent. This is key to remember if Native people are seeking a moment when the settler will relent and allow Indigenous nations to determine their own fate. Wolfe further claims that settler colonialism “is at base a winner-take-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but replacement. The logic of this project, a sustained institutional tendency to eliminate the Indigenous population, informs a range of historical practices that might otherwise appear distinct—invasion is a structure not an event” (*Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* 163). With a few exceptions, the U.S. policy towards Indigenous people has been one of eradication and has taken different forms. The obvious one is that of violent extermination as manifested in the various military conflicts and slaughters. It has also been manifested through removal policies, like the Removal Act of 1830 that forced Indigenous peoples of the Southeastern U.S. to move to what is now Oklahoma. These policies might today be referred to as “ethnic cleansing.” But perhaps the most prevalent policies of

eradication have been those designed for cultural genocide, i.e. assimilation. In order to justify such policies, controlling how Natives are imagined is necessary.

Controlling the perception of Indigenous people can enable the settler to displace Natives, both literally and figuratively, and claim indigeneity for themselves. While the settler has relied on the civilized/savage binary for justification for genocide, another binary the settler uses is settled/nomadic. Veracini notices that emphasizing “settler fixity encourages the perception of indigenous and exogenous Others as ‘unsettled’. . . [this] dynamic allows a typically settler colonial inversion, where indigenous people are nomadified and settlers can perform their indigenisation and express their nativism” (78-79). The perception is obviously inaccurate. While a lot of Indigenous people were nomadic, not all of them were. And most of those who were nomadic were only nomadic for part of the year. The Pawnee, for example, resided in earth lodges for half of the year. The Euramerican “Indian,” however, is necessarily monolithic to ensure greater control. (In the third chapter, “Oklahoma Choctaw,” I discuss how diversity among Indigenous people hinders control of how Natives are imagined.) If all Indigenous people are imagined to be unsettled, their ties to the land are partial at best. It helps to perpetuate the notion of *terra nullius*, literally “nobody’s land,” the belief that the land was uninhabited upon invasion. If the land can be imagined as uninhabited, if only for part of the year, the land is open for settlement. *Terra nullius* not only helps with justification of invasion, but it helps the settler to imagine a fertile and uncultivated land in which they can establish their roots.

If settlement is to be completed, the settler needs to establish their own roots to the land after cutting ties to the metropole. The first part of establishing such roots is to

create settler origin stories. This requires resetting history, so to speak. History on this continent is set to “coincide with the beginnings of European colonization.” Such a shift obviously “effaces and distorts the complex histories and societies of indigenous peoples which existed prior to and during prolonged periods of contact with Europeans” (Davia and Yuval-Davis 4). The histories that predate colonization, i.e. Indigenous history, are regarded as “pre-history.” Having set their arrival as the beginning of history, the settler is able to imagine certain historical events as origin or creation stories: “Certain crucial moments invested with great symbolic significance form a vital part of the narration of the nation’s construction [e.g. the Boston Tea Party]” (Davia and Yuval-Davis 23). Settler origin stories disregard the centuries of Indigenous stories, or they are often regulated to the mysterious, yet irrelevant, time before colonization. As settlement spreads across the land, like the American figure Johnny Appleseed, so are settler “seeds” that, when cultivated and fully imagined, orient history at the beginning of colonization, thus normalizing the settler.

While these creation stories are something new, those who create settler stories are not. That is to say, the settler creates new societies, cultures, and nations by not only establishing their own “indigenous” roots, but by retaining and transposing their European heritage. As the settler has no intention of returning to the metropole, they must shed what identifies them as being *from* and *of* the metropole, but not totally. They must create a new identity that that, as Philip Deloria states, stems from “wanting to savor both civilized order and savage freedom at the same time” (3). The colonizer relies upon the civilized/savage binary to assert superiority over Indigenous people, thus maintaining a separation between colonizer/colonized, but also wants to create a

new identity based on attributes of both. Settlement, then, requires reconciling “conflicting tendencies”:

. . .one striving for indigenisation and national autonomy, the other aiming at neo-European replication and the establishment of a “civilised” pattern of life. Indigenisation is driven by the crucial need to transform an historical tie (“we came here”) into a natural one (“the land made us”). Europeanisation consists in the attempt to sustain and reproduce European standards and way of life. Both trends remain fundamental features of settler projects. (Veracini 21-22)

The creation of the American identity is based on the reconciliation of this binary. Veracini goes on to say, however, that this project of reconciliation is never completed, calling settler society “a society ‘to come,’ characterized by the *promise* rather than the practice of a truly ‘settled’ lifestyle.” He describes indigenization and Europeanization as asymptotic in which one line approaches another but never touches (23). In this context, the settler comes close to indigenization, but never fully achieves it. As such, the process of settlement is ongoing. Obviously, the persistent presence of Indigenous people prevents the full appropriation of indigeneity for the settler.

Settler colonialism is certainly more vast and complicated than what is presented here. I have focused on only a few of its facets. Indigenous studies scholarship has seen a shift towards settler colonialism in the last decade or so. That is to say, scholars have re-imagined the colonization Indigenous people face today. Terms like “settler,” for example, appear more often today when referring to Euramericans. This is a necessary shift since settler colonialism is the most accurate term for the colonization we face.

This also creates an imperative that we fully understand this type of colonization.

Settler colonial studies is an established discourse in academia. The early scholarship focused on other settler colonial situations around the world. Today, we are beginning to see how it pertains to the situation regarding Indigenous people of North America. I have attempted to clarify how “settler colonialism” and “settler” are to be understood for this dissertation, although both descriptions are not perfect. It might be prudent to clarify a few more terms.

I would like to clarify my use of “Indigenous.” Just as the discourse has seen an increase in the use of “settler,” we have also seen an increase in replacing “Indigenous” for “American Indians” or “Native Americans.” This is a result of another recent shift in the field, one that expands our scope to a global one. Instead of focusing on issues that only Native Americans face, the discourse now includes other indigenous people from around the world who have their own experience with colonization. “Indigenous,” especially “Indigenous people,” refers to the original inhabitants of a given area, most of whom have been colonized at one point or another. There are two concerns, however. First, as Maori critic Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out, “the term ‘indigenous’ is problematic in that it appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different” (6). For example, the US signed nearly 400 treaties with Native American nations from 1788 to 1868, each treaty being unique. The Maori signed only one treaty with the British. There are two language versions, English and Maori, and those are disputed even today. Using “Indigenous” to include Native Americans and Maori in this context, then, is problematic. The second concern is, despite the shift of scope, a lot of scholarship still

focuses on issues pertaining to their specific context. Most of the time when I use “Indigenous,” I am referring to the Indigenous people of North America. As such, I will use it interchangeably with “Native” and “Native American.” If and when the term becomes problematic for the reason Smith describes, I will make it clear.

The second term I would like to address is “appropriation,” but not for what it denotes; rather, I am concerned with what it connotes. Specifically, I am referring to its association with “cultural appropriation,” an issue that is visible beyond Indigenous circles. Cultural appropriation often refers to non-Indigenous people donning Indigenous items, like fake headdresses, as a means of being fashionable. It can also refer to how non-Indigenous people “borrow” from other elements of Indigenous cultures, like spiritual rituals, often without permission. Oftentimes, the appropriation is done with little thought or regard for the people from whom they are appropriating. Social media and blogs have amplified the issue to the point that each utterance of “appropriation” carries this negative connotation. Unless otherwise specified, my use of “appropriation” is not meant to reference this issue. It is used instead to refer to the way Native people “make use of foreign rituals, ideas, and materials” in our own—Indigenous—terms, to borrow from Acoma poet Simon Ortiz (8). The act of appropriation, as it is used here, refers to how Indigenous people have survived the five-hundred year-old colonial onslaught and still continue to exist as distinctly tribal people. If anything, I champion the act. The primary difference between the negative connotation it currently has and the way it is used here lies in the purpose. At times, Indigenous people have voluntarily appropriated Euramerican elements, but more often this is done to avoid total assimilation and complete loss of Indigenous culture.

Euramerican ways have been forced upon Indigenous people as a means of elimination and Indigenous people have responded by adopting them, transforming them by incorporating them into Indigenous culture.

I also use “nations” and “people” when referring to Indigenes. It may seem I use them terms interchangeably, but I do make a distinction. “People” refers to a “community, ethnic or otherwise, [that] implies a deeper solidarism arising out of shared common interests, institutions and cultural mores. If part of the self-consciousness of ethnicity and/or ‘race’ is focused on the project of establishing or reproducing a form of *political* autonomy, unit and identity, then we are describing nationalism” (Pearson 17). The Choctaws, for example, do comprise a “people” and “peoplehood,” as they are a community that shares not just “common interests, institutions and cultural mores,” but also a history and language. “Nation” denotes and connotes a political dimension. This is not to say that “people” cannot also include a political element, but “nation” is more to that point. There is a difference, connotatively, between “the Choctaw people” and “the Choctaw nation.” Oftentimes, “nation” is used when I mean to convey that political aspect.

The first chapter, “Choctalking with the Settler: Tribalography and Settler Colonialism,” focuses on the works of LeAnne Howe. It examines the way Howe enacts tribalography, a concept coined by her, to survive settler colonialism and retain a strong sense of what it means to be Choctaw. The chapter includes an explication of tribalography, a concept that has appeared more often in the Native literary discourse in the last decade or so. It further shows how Howe includes non-Indigenous elements and people into her own self-imagination, as per her definition of tribalography. The

chapter includes a reading of a series of poems from her 2005 mixed-genre book, *Evidence of Red*, that feature Euramerican stereotypes as talking and living characters with their issues and personalities. It also includes a reading of a short story, “Choctalking on Other Realities,” from the same book in which the narrator encounters and deals with not only the U.S. settler world, but the world at large, thus propelling her self-imagination into a global context. In his review of *Evidence of Red*, Mvskoke critic and writer Craig Womack claims that “sovereignty has to be able to see past its own belly button,” referring to the global scope the book takes (Review of *Evidence of Red: Poems and Prose* 160). All the while, Howe maintains a strong sense of being Choctaw. The chapter examines how Howe uses tribalogy as not just a means of retaining tribal sense, but as a form of resistance to settler colonialism.

“Disrupting Structures: Mixedbloods, Nationalism, and Louis Owens,” the second chapter, focuses on Louis Owens and examines the contentious issue of hybridity. Owens resisted a specifically tribal identity, e.g. Choctaw, Cherokee, or even a general Indigenous or Native American one, and instead insisted on a mixedblood identity. Cherokee critic Jace Weaver calls Owens “the unpleasant elephant in the room,” referring to his ideas of hybridity (“More Light Than Heat” 240). Weaver’s works are a part of Indigenous literary nationalism, a movement he says “takes seriously Native sovereignty and survivance, has indigenous self-determination as its core and decolonization, survival, recovery, development, and transformation in its penumbra (*American Indian Literary Nationalism* 73). As I argue in the chapter, Indigenous literary nationalism is a direct response to Mixedblood discourse that perpetuated Mixedblood identity, at times claiming that all Indigenous people are

mixedblood, to an extent. I also argue, however, that if we accept Owens as Choctaw and include his stories as Choctaw stories, his self-imagination as a Mixedblood can disrupt Indigenous nationalism and cultural autonomy. I further claim that when Owens asserts a liminal existence as a Mixedblood, he expresses a reality that a lot of other Indigenous people share and, as such, needs to be accounted for instead of dismissed. In fact, the impetus behind the chapter is to look at how nationalist critics, like myself, account for liminal identities.

The last chapter, “Oklahoma Choctaw: The Works of Don L. Birchfield,” examines how the late writer articulates not only a Choctaw identity, but a specific *Oklahoma* Choctaw identity. It assumes that there is a distinction to be made between Oklahoma Choctaw and other Choctaw people, like the Mississippi Band of Choctaws. The elements that make up this distinction are regionally based, i.e. Oklahoma. In fact, all tribal identities are comprised to a large extent of regional influences. The chapter examines how a region can influence one’s self-imagination and identity. It also shows how Birchfield paradoxically uses Oklahoma Choctaw identity in his writing as a way to resist the very settler colonialism that gave rise to its regionally-influenced Choctaw culture. Birchfield is not as well-known as Howe and Owens but his works are unique and imaginative. The chapter uses two approaches to his works: 1) relational regionalism, an augmented form of regionalism; and 2) a nebulous theory currently being developed by Cherokee philosopher Brian Yazzie Burkhart that asserts a triangulation of land, people, and stories and explicates how the three are inevitably intertwined and influence each other.

If self-imagination is requisite for self-determination, we need to determine how we imagine Choctaw people and a Choctaw nation. Each of these writers is unique in how they imagine themselves, the people, and the Choctaw nation. The settler context cannot be ignored, however, as its ubiquity and penchant for eliminating the Indigenous presence prevents separation between Indigenous people and Euramerica. Therefore, it is important to also consider how settler colonialism influences Choctaw self-imagination and identity. Since these writers present such different images of Choctaw, the larger image of the Choctaw people and nation this dissertation presents is incomplete and imperfect. The stories these writers tell are integral to Choctaw self-imagination, for it is through the stories that we not only understand who we are and were, but also how we imagine ourselves well into the twentieth-century and beyond.

Chapter 1

Choctalking With the Settler: Tribalography and Settler Colonialism

At one point, a part of the curriculum for Freshman Composition courses at the University of Oklahoma is introducing freshmen to scholarly discourse. Since such texts can be challenging for freshmen, instructors are encouraged to develop methodologies that can facilitate this introduction. As such, I include a few articles from Native American literary scholarship into my own curriculum, since it is the scholarly discourse with which I am most familiar. One text I have my students read is Simon Ortiz's 1981 seminal article, "Towards a National Indian Literature." It gives me a chance to instruct my students on what the discourse looked like before the article's publication and how it has influenced the way we approach Native American literature. After a brief lecture on tribal sovereignty and treaty rights and obligations, we discuss various key points in Ortiz's article. During my first year of teaching it, one of my students made a remarkable comment. He said that he found the article interesting and revealing since he did not know that Native people *still* consider themselves to be colonized. He did not make this comment with malice but out of ignorance. It simply did not occur to him to imagine Indigenous people as being colonized.

Throughout Native American literary discourse, we use terms such as "colonialism," "imperialism," "resistance," "decolonize," "indigenize," etc. to further understand the world we find ourselves in and to ensure we survive as Native people beyond the twentieth-first century. Most of the literature we work with and our own criticism of it is predicated upon colonialism and our continued resistance. For most Indigenous people, settler colonialism envelops our social and political realities. This

only highlights my student's ignorance and offers an accurate depiction of what Indigenous people face, settler colonialism.

While this experience may be promising in that my student gained further insight into how many Indigenous people imagine their world, it is also foreboding. His ignorance cannot be ignored for it reveals the reality of settler colonialism, that the settler seeks to control the narrative of history. This includes controlling the ways Indigenous people are imagined by others. For example, most people unfamiliar with Indigenous people and communities often rely on Indian stereotypes when imagining Indigenous people, and that resulting image is an apolitical one. As such, most Americans fail to imagine Indigenous people as citizens of sovereign nations, let alone as being colonized. Another facet of settler colonialism is that it requires the elimination of the Native. While we have faced and survived genocide, the process continues as we struggle to maintain not only our political identity, but our cultural one, as well.

As Indigenous people evolve, we continually find new and inventive ways of resistance to settler colonialism that constantly seeks to control how we are imagined and to eradicate our presence from the continent. LeAnne Howe, a Choctaw writer, poet, essayist, playwright, screenwriter, and storyteller offers *tribalography* as means of resistance. Through tribalography, LeAnne Howe is able to maintain a strong sense of what it means to be Choctaw in a settler world. Instead of focusing strictly on herself, Choctaws, and other indigenous people, she incorporates the non-Indigenous world in her description of tribalography.

While all her works do the work of tribalogy, I will focus my attention on her 2005 book, *Evidence of Red*, a collection that includes various genres including poetry, short stories, and even a play.

To understand how Howe uses tribalogy as a means of resistance, it would be helpful to further understand tribalogy. Tribalogy has been referred to as a theory, methodology, literary praxis, and even a genre. Dean Rader, for example, calls tribalogy “the most significant *theory* (italics mine) of American Indigenous writing to emerge in the last 20 years—maybe ever,” further claiming it is “a theory of how everything comes to be, though localized through Indigenous points of origin, and even more specifically within tribes and communities themselves” (vii). Ojibway critic Jill Doerfler claims that it can serve “an abundantly fruitful *methodological approach* (italics mine) relevant across. . . American Indian studies” (65). When describing how tribalogy can expand notions of Choctaw identity through interactions with non-Choctaws, Channette Romero calls it “a *Native literary praxis* (italics mine), one that uses Native storytelling both to uphold tribal sovereignty and to resist identities, ideologies, and politics based on separatism and exclusion” (22). And Howe has stated that “[o]ral or written, I have called this *genre* (italics mine), ‘tribalogy’” (“Blind Bread. . .” 330). All of these scholars, and many others, have noticed the multiple and useful ways tribalogy helps us accomplish a multitude of goals.¹ Debating how tribalogy is defined and, therefore, labeled, may prove fruitful in helping us to

¹ While the very notion of tribalogy is wide enough in scope to encompass all of these descriptions—none being more “right” than the other—Carter Meland claims that, although these various descriptive definitions are useful, “they ultimately miss the true beauty of the idea. . . Tribalogy is no-ism, and we find its beauty in its motion to story peoples together” (29). While it is debatable whether these scholars have “miss[ed] the true beauty of” tribalogy, Meland does recognize a powerful and attractive feature: how tribalogy can bring people together from across time and space through narrative.

further understand it. These scholars' works show just how versatile it is, which might contribute to how tribalogy has established a strong presence in Native American literary discourse. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, for example, devoted an entire issue to it in the spring of 2014.

The concept of tribalogy, as Howe defines it, might explain how it can be used in such a multiplicity of ways. According to Howe, "Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history), seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus (present and future milieus mean non-Indians)" ("The Story of America" 42).² Howe's description helps us understand three important aspects of tribalogy. First, it helps us understand the way Natives conceptualize narrative by assuming that stories, regardless of their genre and whether they are fiction or non-fiction, are significant. This assumption directly challenges Western structures of narrative and how stories are to be regarded and, thus, understood. Secondly, tribalogy helps us to uncover the content and subtext of these stories when we assume that Native stories include the storyteller's tribal elements. Native stories tend to be grounded in how Indigenous people relate to one another and to the land. The third aspect of tribalogy relates to what the stories do: they connect tribal elements to the "past, present, and future milieus." This notion challenges Western notions of linear time, opening up dimensions in how we tell and regard stories. Native stories

² Howe has used this description of tribalogy in other places with incidental variations, including her contribution, "Blind Bread and the Business of Theory Making, by Embarrassed Grief," to *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, Norman, U of Oklahoma P, 2008; and her book *Choctalking on Other Realities*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 2013.

help us to remember who we were, who we are, and to imagine who we will become. These three aspects of tribalogy are useful in not only understanding ourselves and expressing this understanding, they also help to resist settler colonialism. These three aspects are by no means exhaustive in our understanding of tribalogy and they are certainly not intended to be prescriptive. They do help us to not only understand tribalogy as a concept but also show how open the concept is to be used in different ways.

While tribalogy as a term is new to the discourse, the concepts that help to create it are not. Scholars have long identified elements of tribalogy. In his introductory essay to the special issue of *Studies in American Indian Literatures* on tribalogy, Joseph Bauerkemper observes:

Whether emphasized in relation to its textual, pedagogical, theoretical, methodological, or generative contours, tribalogy evokes a long-standing and enduring tradition of transformative literary and intellectual practice while also emerging as a new critical lens capable of illuminating a wide array of issues within and across Native American and Indigenous studies. While the term is a recent contribution to critical discourse, the sophisticated and multifaceted characteristics of tribalogy have long been prevalent in American Indian literatures. (4)

Tribalogy draws upon the epistemologies that inform most Indigenous literature. It is not a matter of imposing tribal elements into one's reading of this literature. Tribalogy assumes these literatures already contain these tribal elements. This is not to suggest that other distinct literatures (e.g. ethnic, racial, gendered, nationalistic)

do not also articulate elements of the storyteller's respective "tribe." They very well may do, but tribalogy aids in how we define Native American literature.

Tribalogy is founded in principles that underlie elements already present in Indigenous literature.

When Howe refers to "Native stories," she includes a variety of storytelling-genres: "novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history." She makes no distinctions between fiction and non-fiction. Howe deliberately obscures the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, challenging Western settler conceptions of narrative and history. Doerfler says that, when practiced, tribalogy "provides inherent critiques of the conventional dichotomy between both history and fiction" (67). These "inherent critiques" challenge the "conventional dichotomy" between what is generally accepted as factual, i.e. history, and what is accepted as fictional, i.e. novels, poetry, dramas. Western settler conventional narratives are generally either fictional or non-fictional. History, however, is considered strictly non-fiction, lest it lose its credibility. History may sometimes read like a narrative, but Western convention dictates it remains strictly truthful. Yet, Howe claims that "the landscape of Native stories may remain just beyond the grasp of the reader if the stories are pressed into narrow categories of what is fiction and what is historical truth" (46). Doerfler explains that "[o]ne-dimensional constructions of fact and fiction do not allow for the diversity or the complexity of Native experiences or the multidimensional ways in which Natives often construct narratives" (67).³ Indigenous narration does not seek to rigidly delineate lines between

³ When discussing Pueblo storytelling, Laguna writer, Leslie Marmon Silko, says they "make no distinctions between types of story—historical, sacred, plain gossip—because these distinctions are not useful when discussing the Pueblo *experience* of language" (53).

fiction and non-fiction but rather Native stories seek to understand how the two compare and contrast, and how they enhance one another. For example, when discussing myth, legend, and lore—genres considered to be fictional—Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday says they “imply a separate and distinct order of reality. We are concerned here not so much with an accurate representation of actuality, but with the realization of the imaginative experience” (“The Man Made of Words” 168). The “realization of the imaginative experience” found in these kinds of stories is equally important to the stories that seek to express “accurate representation of actuality,” i.e. non-fiction/factual. The act of imagining who we are, then, includes and extends beyond what objective history offers, making our self-conceptions much fuller and more complex. While this may not be unique to Indigenous people, such thinking stands in opposition to Western distinctions between fiction and non-fiction.

This is not to suggest that Indigenous people do not understand the differences between fiction and non-fiction, but Indigenous people tend to disregard this dichotomy as they find “truth” in the stories whether they are fictional or not. The factuality of the stories is oftentimes incidental to the “truth” we find in them. When *history* is relegated to strictly non-fiction, it limits how Indigenous people understand who they are and express themselves to a larger non-Indigenous world. Yet, since we find ourselves in a ubiquitous settler culture, one that continues to adhere to this “conventional dichotomy,” Indigenous history before contact “is rendered irrelevant to the ‘history’ of settler societies,” and this creates “a dichotomy that exists in contemporary disciplinary boundaries between ‘Native (or Indigenous) studies’ and ‘history’” (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 4-5). Thus, Indigenous people often find their stories discarded as “myth,”

i.e. non-historical, fictional, and untrue. Tribalography takes all of these genres of storytelling seriously, whether factual, fictional, or both. It opens up possibilities in storytelling and becomes a means of liberation and a way to retain and develop our tribal sense of who we are in a settler world.

There is liberation when the very idea of *story* includes the variety of forms since it offers Natives choices in how they express themselves and to insure they have that expression taken seriously. In *That the People Might Live*, Cherokee critic Jace Weaver expands his definition of “literature” to “the total written output of a people” (ix). He explains: “Such an expansive definition has the advantage of covering the full spectrum of whatever Natives have produced. For too many non-Native scholars. . .the only ‘genuine’ Indian literature consists of oral myths. It ceases to be Indian when it employs Western forms such as the short story or the novel” (x).⁴ Weaver expresses the limitations of settler conceptions of Indigenous literature. Accordingly, pre-contact oral stories, which are often considered ahistorical, are the only authentic Indigenous literature. Obviously, Indigenous writers and critics continually challenge such restrictive notions of literature. Tribalography opens up what comprises stories, and that further opens up how we understand and go about telling them. Today, there is very little debate that Native American literature includes genres of non-Indigenous origins since appropriating foreign practices and artifacts, like literary genres, is simply how a people and their culture survive and develop, especially when the foreign elements are violently forced on the people through the process of colonization. Before colonization,

⁴ To further define Native American literature, Jace Weaver claims: “Native American literature, it must be said finally. . .is literature of, from, by Native Americans, not *about* them—or, worse yet, *set* among them” (16).

these stories existed orally, but as more Indigenous people acquired literacy, they appropriated genres from Euramerican colonizers to tell their own stories, changing them as they did. In “Towards a National Indian Literature,” Ortiz discusses how the Acoma *indigenize* Catholic ceremony into Acoma ceremony. He says this process is a “nationalistic impulse” and that contemporary Indigenous literature “is a continuation of that elemental impulse” (8).

Howe came up with the term “tribalography” since she did not agree that Indigenous people “tell strictly autobiographical stories, nor memoir, nor history, nor fiction, but rather they tell a kind of story that includes a collaboration with the past and present and future” (“Blind Bread. . .” 333). This might be one facet that differentiates Native American literature from others. Even when Indigenous writers produce works that are deliberately generic, their works, at the very least, are highly informed by the elements of the writers’ tribes and tend to include elements of the storyteller’s tribal culture. In this way, tribalography helps to cultivate the content of Native stories. In his study of the Native American novel, for example, Louis Owens says that the “wealth to be drawn from an understanding of [Leslie Silko’s] *Ceremony*, [Gerald Vizenor’s] *Bearheart*, or [James Welch’s] *Fools Crow* will remain always just out of the reach to anyone who does not take the trouble to learn something about Navajo, Pueblo, Chippewa, or Blackfoot mythology and culture. . .Native American writers are offering a way of looking at the world that is new to Western culture” (29). Gaining further knowledge on the storyteller’s tribe can open dimensions of Native American literatures to novice readers.

Owens also implores “readers [to] be aware of crucial moments in Native American history of the last two centuries” (30). Owens suggests that readers not only learn of the storyteller’s specific tribal culture and history, but also Native American history in general, particularly Indigenous/Euramerican relations since Euramerican policy regarding Natives affected most tribal nations. And since the settler conception of Indigenous people is frequently monolithic, oftentimes Native discourse addresses issues affecting Indigenous people in general. When Howe states that tribalogy connects the stories’ elements to past, present, and future milieus, she includes non-Indigenous people. The tribal elements that Indigenous stories pull together also include their history with Euramerican and other non-Indigenous peoples. Even when Indigenous writers use a particular genre, like the novel, their work also comprises elements of their respective tribes, including the cultural, social, historical, mythological, spiritual, and political.

These tribal elements include those that were once foreign but have been appropriated by Indigenous people. Ortiz speaks of “the creative ability of Indian people to gather in many forms of the socio-political colonizing force which beset them and to make these forms meaningful in their own terms” (8). Indigenous people, or any people for that matter, have survived by not remaining socially and culturally static but by incorporating elements once extraneous to them. This is not a new notion, but it can help us further understand how tribalogy enables Howe to remain Choctaw in a settler world, as expressed in her works. Given our long history of being colonized, it is safe to assume non-Indigenous people and culture has had a powerful influence on who

we are. It is also safe to assume that this means they have also been a part in how imagine ourselves.

This requires focusing a part of our attention on the settler vis-à-vis Indigeneity. When engaging Settler Colonial studies, Lorenzo Veracini warns that we should “focus on the settlers, on what they do, and how they think about what they do” (15). Whether engaging Settler Colonial studies and/or Indigenous studies, this idea seems counterintuitive since most history taught in the US is from the settler’s perspective. While Veracini admits that the settler has been the “traditional subject of historical inquiry,” he suggests that if we focus primarily on Indigenous people, the settler will, ironically, remain the universal subject by which Indigenous people are defined (15). It seems that there is no Indigenous creative or scholarly work that does not in some way allude or reference the settler or settler culture. This is unsurprising given over five-hundred years of colonization and the ubiquity of settler culture.

While I heed Veracini’s warning, I believe that we do not necessarily have to “focus on the settlers” since they already have a significant presence in Native people’s lives. Perhaps he is cautioning against so-called “separatist” and “American Indian Literary Nationalists,” who ostensibly argue for indigenous people to disengage settler culture and focus inward exclusively toward tribal traditions.⁵ And even if we were to take a separatist approach and focus strictly inward, we would still find the presence of the settler. Indigenous writers and critics already display a sophisticated and nuanced

⁵ When discussing indigenous nationalism, Ojibway critic Scott Richard Lyons refers to what he calls “conceptual separatism,” which he describes as “the assertion of radical conceptual differences that are deemed incommensurable with other concepts and systems,” and warns “[we] must be careful not to accentuate our differences to the point of incommensurability lest we drop out of political conversations altogether” (136). *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent*, Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, 2010.

understanding of our relationship to colonization and the settler. As Ojibway critic Scott Richard Lyons says:

One of the great unstated assumptions of our age—by that I mean approaching the realm of myth—is that the idea that Native people are obsessed with spirituality and traditions to the exclusion of nearly everything else in our lives. We’re not real Indians these days unless we “resist” the dominant culture at all costs. If we don’t, then we can be written off as assimilated, acculturated, incorporated, and so on.

Tragically, we go back to the Matrix. (146)

While there are some who do take such a position in their scholarship, most are fully aware of its impracticability. Even critics like Taiaiake Alfred, Craig Womack, Robert Warrior, and Jace Weaver—who are often accused of advocating such an approach—explicitly reject these separatist notions.

Yet, since US history is taught from a settler perspective, there is nothing stopping Indigenous writers and scholars from orientating our perspective to that of an Indigenous one. In fact, Chickasaw critic Jodi Byrd claims that “indigenous critical theory could be said to exist in its best form when it centers itself within indigenous epistemologies and the specificities of the communities and cultures from which it emerges and then looks outward to engage European philosophical, legal, and cultural traditions in order to build upon all the allied tools available” (xxx). As with any people, the stories contain Indigenous epistemologies and tribalogy helps to orientate our perspective with the Native stories being centered. Gaining an understanding of how Indigenous people regard stories will help understand how they

connect these tribal elements to the past, present, and future. Imagining ourselves in a settler world, whether one is Choctaw or Pawnee or anything else, requires we look at how we all have influenced one another.

How Indigenous people conceive of themselves not only relies upon traditional elements, but also on the relationships tribal nations fostered with other nations and people and how each entity influences the others reciprocally through these interactions. Again, Momaday asserts that a Native is the idea one has of him- or herself and that idea is a moral idea as it is help responsible to the world in which that idea is asserted (“Man Made of Words” 162). If I imagine myself as a Choctaw, for example, that imagination is subject to scrutiny of those around me. Claiming to be Choctaw to a group of people who know little to nothing about Choctaws (a situation a lot of us find ourselves in) is different from claiming to be Choctaws to a group of Choctaws. As Mohawk critic Taiaiake Alfred and Cherokee critic Jeff Corntassel assert: “Indigenusness is an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism” (597). Consequently, the general world includes the non-Indian world. Unfortunately, how Indigenous people imagine themselves is often ignored and dominated by how mainstream Euramerica imagines us. And while we see how the political context of settler colonialism is important to Indigenous identity, we cannot forget the social and cultural context.

Other Indigenous writers have shown this, too. For example, when discussing stories in a 1993 interview, Sherman Alexie (Coeur d’Alene/Spokane) shares that his “family we’re heavily influenced by TV and movies too. Just like the larger white culture. That’s all in my stories too” (Bellante 5). For Alexie, what comprises his

stories includes elements influenced by Euramerican popular culture, i.e. “TV and movies.” In a 1998 interview, he gets more specific. When describing the primary influences in his life, he includes his father and grandmother for their non-traditional and traditional “Indian stories.” Yet, these influences also include, as Alexie claims, “Stephen King, John Steinbeck, and *The Brady Bunch*. That’s who I am. I think a lot of Indian artists like to pretend that they’re not influenced by pop culture or Western culture, but I am and I’m happy to admit it” (West and West 69). Alexie includes non-Indigenous cultural elements into his own, as many Indigenous people have.⁶ When most Indigenous scholars, writers, and storytellers regard Euramericans, they often do so discretely. Euramericans and their cultures and societies are often considered something outside and separate from Indigenous cultures and societies. Howe’s description of tribalogy *includes* them. They become an element of who we are and how we imagine ourselves. Instead of continuing to separate ourselves from Euramericans and imagining cultures as something forced upon us, we need to recognize and acknowledge that it has become a part, not apart, of who we are and how we imagine ourselves. Instead of trying to maintain rigid boundaries that separate what is Indigenous and what is not, contemporary writers and artists recognize the ubiquitous nature of settler culture and how it has influenced Native people. And through the process of acculturation are we able to indigenize non-Indian elements.

Attempting to assert some control over or even influence how Indigenous people are imagined is daunting, especially when we not only face such dominance on the part

⁶ Contemporary Indigenous artist synchronize images from Euramerican popular culture with Indigenous imagery. For example, Jeffrey Veregge (Port Gamble S’Klallam/Suquamish/Duwamish) uses Pacific Northwest Indigenous designs to create images such as Darth Vader and Batman. Steven Paul Judd (Choctaw/Kiowa) is another indigenous artist who fuses images that are ostensibly disparate.

of Euramerica, but their continual effort to eliminate indigeneity and claim it for themselves. Colonization in and of itself, however, does not demand or require our elimination. But settler colonization does. What differentiates colonization from settler colonization is that during settler colonization, the colonizer intends to stay.⁷ Patrick Wolfe states: “On the one hand, settler society required the practical elimination of the natives in order to establish itself on their territory. On the symbolic level, however, settler society subsequently sought to recuperate indigeneity in order to express its difference—and, accordingly, its independence—from the mother country” (“Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” 383).⁸ Attempts at exterminating Indigenous people have included physical and cultural genocide. Although some would argue that the physical genocide continues in various forms, the primary and most effective method currently used is controlling how we are imagined. How we are imagined, then, dictates how we are treated. Our reactions to that have varied. They include direct activism and confrontation (e.g. protests over mascots, actors walking off movie sets they consider racist) to further elaboration on how we define ourselves as tribal people.

Some Indigenous people have stated that protesting racist sports mascots, even when such protests are successful and these mascots are abolished, does little to nothing

⁷ In her introduction to *Colonial Frontiers* Lynette Russell writes: “‘Settler colonies’ are those lands where newcomers arrived to settle and colonise rather than merely extract labour or merchandise. The impetus for settlement was land and the wealth that land could bring. In lands already occupied by indigenous people, settlement was premised on ‘the logic of elimination’ which coupled with the concept of a frontier in which the acquisition of indigenous land ensured that ‘spatial coexistence [of invaders and indigenes was] anomalous.’ In attempting to understand the formation and structure of settler-colonies I am informed by the work of Patrick Wolfe who notes: “settler colonialism is an assertion about the nation’s structure rather than a statement about [its] origins” (2).

⁸ In his book, *American Settler Colonialism*, historian Walter Hixson points that without “the colonized other, the European could not define his own identity through manliness, whiteness, godliness, progress, and the civilizing mission vis-à-vis the colonial world” (10).

practical for Indigenous people, and that we have more pressing issues plaguing Indian Country. This seems a bit short-sighted. First, we should not be so forceful in prioritizing our needs that we restrain ourselves from confronting multiple problems simultaneously. We are more than capable of addressing various issues at the same time. Secondly, such thinking demonstrates a failure to fully recognize the detrimental and long-reaching effects such imagery has on our people. Racist sports mascots are manifestations of how Euramerica imagines Indigenous people, even if they are caricatures. When pressed, some Euramericans admit that they realize that these mascots—and other Euramerican imagery of Indigenous people—are not accurate. Yet, they also admit that they unfamiliar with actual Indigenous self-imagination. That is, they usually have nothing else in imagining Natives except for the inaccurate and often racist depictions created by non-Indians.⁹

Addressing such imagery is not only important because of the social and cultural implications, but also the political ones. As Don L. Birchfield points out, because of the “republic that the United States has become, American public opinion regarding Indians (i.e., the habits of thinking of the American people) now controls every aspect of law regarding Indians to a severe degree” (*How Choctaws* viii). Since those charged with creating laws are elected, “American law regarding Indian is controlled by what the ‘average’ American voter thinks about Indians, because those voters elect the

⁹ This is reminiscent of what Momaday says about myth, legend, and lore. As previously discussed, he says they “imply a separate and distinct order of reality” that is not concerned with the actuality but the imaginative experience. While I argue that Momaday’s notion opens up Native stories when we hold fiction and non-fiction in the same regard, relying on settler-generated images of Indigenous people without consideration of the Indigenous self-imagination can be detrimental. That is to say, relying upon the “imaginative experience” created by negative stereotypes while disregarding how actual Indigenous people view themselves has shown to be harmful. Furthermore, following Momaday’s reasoning places these stereotypes within the realm of myth, legend, and lore.

Congress. This means that laws cannot be changed regarding Indians until American public opinion (American habits of thinking) about Indians has changed” (*How Chocotaws* ix). The “average” American has little to no experience with actual Indigenous people, let alone how we imagine ourselves, and has nothing but stereotypes created by non-Natives. Confronting such imagery, then, becomes crucial if we are to maintain the integrity of our own imaginations, and thus maintain our sense of being Indigenous and/or tribal.

Howe confronts a few stereotypical images of Indigenous people in a series of poems in *Evidence of Red*. These eleven poems feature Euramerican-generated images of the “Noble Savage,” “Disney’s Pocahontas” (albeit for one poem), and “Indian Sports Mascot,” as she imagines them in ways contrary to how they are imagined and used by Euramerica. The poems begin with Noble Savage announcing his creation, establishing his nature. Disney’s Pocahontas makes a brief appearance in “Disney’s Pocahontas Longs for Noble Savage,” in which she and Noble Savage procreate “a nation” of imagined Indians: “I will fuck 47 / Make love to thousands more / Birth a nation of sons and daughters. // They will all be substitute for you” (77). Noble Savage visits a therapist where he reveals he does not feel the same for Disney’s Pocahontas as he did and, is, in fact, finished with all women. He even reveals that he is finding it impossible to fulfill his role (78). He meets Indian Sport Mascot throughout two poems where a sexual relationship between the two is revealed, although Noble Savage is reluctant (80). Noble Savage later states he “can’t fall in love with anyone” (81) and eventually Indian Sports Mascot assumes his role, becoming the prevailing Euramerican-imagined Indian. He even goes Hollywood in the poem, “Indian Mascot

Joins The Village People.” Indian Sports Mascot is ultimately confronted by actual Indians who end up assassinating him along with Noble Savage, who has attempted to rescue Indian Mascot at the last second, on a white horse, of course. In the last poem of the series, we find out what happened to Noble Savage and Indian Sports Mascot after the shooting: nothing (85). Stereotypes die hard and people cling to how they imagine their world, even when that image is inaccurate. As previously argued, we are identified, and thus treated, through a matrix of self-imagination and how we are imagined by others, both of which are complex and multi-faceted. Noble Savage, Disney’s Pocahontas, and Indian Sports Mascot represent the Euramerican imagination of Indigenous people. These poems not only confront these images, but re-imagines them.

The series begins with an introductory poem, of sorts, “My Name is Noble Savage” wherein the explicit purpose for Noble Savage’s creation is stated in the first line: “I was built for iconography” (76). Thus, the image of the Noble Savage is created for the expressed purpose of representing Indigenous people. It was a representation Euramerica had plans to control and use to fulfill its purposes, as Noble Savage is immediately commodified: “Wanna rent me for a day? / A week? / A year? . . .As your pet, a mascot / A man. / Since I’m your invention / Everything I say comes true” (76). The last two lines suggests Noble Savage is created to control the narrative of Euramerican-Indigenous history, and generating a narrative more conducive to invasion and settler colonialism. Walter Hixson writes: “In order for the settler colony to establish a collective usable past, legitimating stories must be created and persistently affirmed as a means of naturalizing a new historical narrative. A national myth

displaces the Indigenous past” (11). Noble Savage becomes a mouthpiece for settlers as the Indigenous “voice” in what would eventually become the American creation myth.

Noble Savage would not be the only image of Indigenous people Euramerica would create as they would “reproduce” other icons: “Break my hymen / I bleed and reproduce / Children you sketch / and photograph, / Catalogue, / But soon abandon” (76). Perhaps the first child Noble Savage produces is Bloodthirsty Savage, as both captured the imaginations of early European settlers. Noble Savage’s nobility lies in contrast to his more violent counterpart. While Howe does not include Bloodthirsty Savage in her poems, both images serve the same purpose, to control how Indigenous people are imagined. Euramerican colonizers, bent on acquiring land, creates the iconography of both to socially and politically justify the land that was being unused, as “civilized” people do. Bloodthirsty Savage was used to frighten Euramericans through harrowing stories to dehumanize Indigenous people. Howe reveals Noble Savage’s purpose in the last stanza: “My name is Noble Savage / America’s redeemer” (76). Regardless of how Noble Savage is imagined, he will be used to justify colonization, and Howe’s poem is an indictment of that.

Through these poems, Howe tells the story of how these Euramerican images change through history. Their changes cohere with the story of colonization in America. As Euramerica gains more power, eventually over-powering Indigenous nations, its relationship with Indigenous America also changes, and so do the images being used to control the American grand narrative, i.e. national creation story, whatever that may be. The changes they go through reflect the needs of the settler. Through depicting how these images evolve, Howe treats them as characters. As Howe

imagines these images, they develop as characters would in any novel or play. As Howe re-imagines these images through these poems, they move beyond their intended monolithic and flat characterization and develop into three-dimensional characters with emotions and issues.

As some characters, and people, dealing with emotional issues might do, Noble Savage sees a therapist. At one point in our history, Euramericans depict Natives as Bloodthirsty, a physical threat to early settlers, particularly women. One of the ways this threat is portrayed is through Captive Narrative that presented harrowing experiences being captured by Indigenous people with implication that these experiences includes sexual assault. As Euramerica eventually colonizes and gains control of most of the continent, this particular threat diminishes. Indigenes may still be viewed as a threat, but it is not the same type or ominous as it was during early Euramerican relations. In “Noble Savage Sees a Therapist,” Noble Savage confesses to his therapist, after a brief fling with Disney’s Pocahontas, that “She’s too intense for me. / And I feel nothing. No emotion. / In fact, I’m off all females / —even lost my lust for / attacking white chicks” (78). This confession represents the point at which the physical and sexualized threat Native Americans pose to Euramerica has turned. Euramericans cease to perceive this threat from Noble Savage, thus he becomes impotent and loses his “lust for / attacking white chicks.” All the therapist can do is write “furiously on a yellow pad” and say nothing (78).

As this therapy session continues, Noble Savage shares that he is growing weary of his role and expectations. He knows people expect him to be “Wise, / Stoic, / Without guilt.” He seems to want to break away from this flat characterization, as he

calls himself a “man capable of few symbolic acts. / Ugh—is that what I’m supposed to say?” The therapist remains silent and continues writing on his yellow pad as Noble Savage tells him that he is tired of “Maiming, / Scalping, / Burning wagon trains. / I’m developing hemorrhoids/ from riding bareback,” eventually calling it “an impossible role.” Noble Savage is “conflicted” and doesn’t know who he is. He is no longer needed as “iconography,” and Noble Savage experiences an existential crisis. When he asks the therapist what he should do, the response is, “I’m afraid we’ve run out time. Let’s take / this up during our next visit” (78).

Eventually, the Euramerican-Indigenous relationship changes, and so does Native American imagery. This is represented through the poems as Noble Savage begins to fade and Indian Sports Mascot becomes the dominant character. While both images/characters are suited to their respective historical periods, engendering differences between the two, they are both intended as iconography, i.e. controlling how Indigenous people are perceived by society at large. This intertwines the two in various ways. In “The Indian Sports Mascot Meets Noble Savage,” Indian Sports Mascot tells Noble Savage, “I think of us always as a couple” (79). When Noble Savage questions whether they are or could ever be one, Indian Sports Mascot answers: “But here we are. You with a bow and arrow. Me in a headdress.” Obviously, the “bow and arrow” and “headdress” are both associated with Indigenous people, and they are suited to their corresponding images. The Noble Savage was a prevalent image when tribal nations were much more separated from Euramerican culture, politics, and society than they are today and when there still were military battles between Euramericans and Indigenous people. The “bow and arrow,” being a common military

tool used by Indigenous people, is assigned to Noble Savage. The Indian Sports Mascot often include generalized images, but the headdress seems to be particularly prevalent. The headdress has also become a source of Indigenous frustration when Euramericans, not just sports mascots, don fake headdresses. Both, however, are readily affiliated with Native Americans, and while the images of Indigenous people do have their differences, they still serve the purpose of controlling how Native people are imagined. This is demonstrated when Indian Mascot asks Noble Savage if he ever dreams of the two of them. When Noble Savage says no, Indian Mascot says, “I do. And when I do, you look just like me” (79).

While the two are the same in that both are imagined by Euramerica and are used to control that imagination, they are still separate characters. In fact, a sexual relationship is suggested in “Noble Savage Confronts Indian Mascot.” Noble Savage, however, is reluctant to accept it. Indian Mascot is getting ready for the “big game,” and Noble Savage insists that Indian Mascot take the off feathers he is wearing. When Indian Mascot says, “You said you like my ostrich boa,” Noble Savage says, “Only that one time. I wish you’d forget it.” When Noble Savage tells Indian Mascot that he does not feel the same way, Indian Mascot responds, “Don’t pull that colonizer shit with me, baby. First you say you love me, then you say you don’t” (80). Indian Mascot’s response is fascinating for two reasons. First, his response is oddly self-referential. While he does not show awareness of the author, Howe, or to himself as a character, he does reference colonization. He is aware of “that colonizer shit,” meaning that the character is aware of being a product of colonization. While Howe presents Indian

Mascot as a character, he is based on the very real imagined Indian that is prevalent today, which is a result of colonization.

Secondly, Indian Mascot's response is a tacit indictment of colonization itself. The remark, "First you say you love me, then you say you don't," shows an ambivalence on the part of Noble Savage. While the two represent how Euramerica imagines Native Americans, they expose more about the colonizer than the colonized. Scrutiny of such imagery reveals how we are viewed by most non-Indigenous people, which further reveals the desires of the colonizer, the means of obtaining such desires, and how settler colonials feel about the consequences of their actions. Howe's imagination and characterization of these two images, then, is her critique of settler colonization. As previously argued, Howe goes beyond the flat character of the Noble Savage and Indian Mascot and imbues them with complex human emotions and issues. The result is two characters involved in a sexual relationship with one being ambivalent about how he feels about the other. In expressing his ambivalence, Noble Savage also expresses the colonizer's ambivalence towards Indigenous people whom they *desire* (and fetishize in iconography) to *replace*.

This relates to what Homi Bhabha theorized about the ambivalence of colonization in *The Location of Culture*. In describing Bhabha and this colonial ambivalence in his book *American Settler Colonialism: A History*, Hixson states: "Rather than being fixed or monolithic, colonial identities therefore were constructed, unstable, and required constant repetition and affirmation in order to assert them as

being real” (3).¹⁰ Colonial identity is much more fluid and goes beyond rigid binaries that characterizes colonizer and colonized. Hixon goes on to say that the “persistence of destabilizing ambivalences and uncertainties ultimately could only be addressed through the virtual *elimination* of the indigene. Arriving in massive numbers, Euro-Americans assumed entitlement to the land and demanded total security from the threat of indigenous resistance” (4). As previously mentioned, Wolfe argues that the cultural, social, and, at times, the literal elimination of the Native is necessary for settler colonialism. This ambivalent way of imagining Natives is most important to goals of settler colonialism, particularly the acquisition of Indigenous land.

This creates a paradox in how Euramericans imagine Natives. Nineteenth-century social science articulated the perceived inferiority of Indigenes. Native Americans had yet to achieve civilization and occupied the lower end of the social evolution of human development, i.e. they were savages.¹¹ Yet, settlers also needed to acknowledge, at least politically, that Indigenous people also held the capacity for rational thought. The primary means of acquiring land was through the treaty process. As Maureen Konkle points out in *Writing Indian Nations*:

A treaty is a contract between nations, and a contract cannot be made with an incompetent or an inferior; it requires the free consent of all

¹⁰ Hixon further expresses this ambivalence: “The colonizer desired the colonized other, for example for his attunement with nature or sexual liberation, and yet was repulsed by his primitiveness and the dangers he posed” (3).

¹¹ In his book, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920*, historian Fredrick Hoxie articulates these stages of human development: “Savages were disorganized foragers who owned nothing but tools and weapons. Barbarians (the discoverers of agriculture) owned their farms in common and had no commercial activity. Civilized people prospered through individual acquisition of land, complex machinery and domestic animals. Their wealth produced nuclear families that were flexible yet capable of maintaining rules of inheritance (19).

parties. . .Native peoples' free consent required that they also be free to *refuse* to consent—which carried with it the implication that they must be capable of free will and rational thought as irrational savages could not make legitimate contracts. In political relations, at least the appearance of Native people's consent was crucial in order to establish the legitimacy of treaties and therefore the legitimacy of EuroAmerican control of the land. (3)

On the one hand, Euramericans need Indigenes to be savages, i.e. not yet civilized, to morally justify the eradication of the ancient cultures. On the other hand, in order to legally claim title to the land, Native Americans needed to be capable of rational thought in order to consent to land concession through treaties. Perhaps ironically, this paradox/ambivalence “enabled the colonized other the capacity for agency and resistance because the relations were not as fixed as they appeared to be but rather were inherently unstable and malleable” (Hixon 3). Because they were viewed as being savages, Indigenous people suffered an onslaught of Euramerican assimilative efforts, which proved to be detrimental to Indigenous people. The treaty process, however, also forces the US to acknowledge tribal sovereignty, which has been used as the bedrock for resistance to colonization. Noble Savage and Indian Mascot represent this duality.

In “Noble Savage Contemplates His Fate,” Noble Savage admits that, not only has he lost his lust for women, he cannot fall in love with anyone and realizes that his purpose has essentially sealed his fate: “I’m here to make all men believe / They’re just like me” (81). As he is created to represent the Euramerican imagination of Indigenous people to fulfill the goals of settlement, a means to achieve such goals is for the settler

to claim a sense of indigeneity. The settler has no intention of returning to the metropole and therefore must relinquish whatever identifies them with it. Noble Savage, then, also represents the contradictory and ambivalent attitude towards Indigenes and indigeneity. Philip Deloria identifies this as the “familiar contradiction we have come to label noble savagery, a term that both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and a need to despise and dispossess them” (4). This results in what Veracini identifies as “conflicting tendencies” discussed earlier. And in order to accomplish the goal of settlement, the settler must believe that he is just like Noble Savage.

As the circumstances of colonization changes, so must the image of Indigenous people. As the settler grew in population and military strength, their relationships to Indigenous nations changed. Correspondingly, the prevalent image Noble Savage gives way to a more recent conceptualization of Euramerican image of Indigenous people. For Howe, that image is the Indian Spots Mascot. Whereas Noble Savage represents the colonizer’s ambivalence—one of both reverence and revilement—toward Indigenous America, Indian Mascot is embraced by the settler. In “Indian Mascot Joins The Village People,” Indian Mascot says, “At last, / I’m in step with Hollywood, / No longer a transitory subaltern / On center stage” (82). No longer marginalized, the Indian Mascot has moved beyond its subaltern status and is now “center stage.” He has become the favored representation for Euramerica as they literally cheer him on: “See the stadium crowd / how they jump to their feet in a / Reverent, / Religious, / Fervent, / Fit” (82). They cheer him on because he is strictly their creation and within their control. While Indian Mascot’s predecessor, Noble Savage, was also created by the colonizer, Noble

Savage was much more defined than Indian Mascot. Indian Mascot is much more malleable and has the capability to appear in different forms. He can be a caricature, like Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians Baseball. He can be a stoic, like that of the Washington Redskins. He can even be *sans* face or body, and represented by symbols, like the arrowhead logo of the Kansas City Chiefs. Indian Mascot can be imagined in any form the settler needs or wants, and, in this sense, he reflects the colonizer. And because the basis for the Indian Mascot ostensibly reflects Indigenous people and culture, Indian Mascot has become a part of the settler's claim to indigeneity. This might be a significant reason Indian Mascot is so fervently defended when Indigenous people protest. When Indian sports mascots are attacked, the settler's right to any sense of indigeneity is also attacked.

One common defense non-Indigenous people make of Indian sports mascots is claiming there is a heritage/tradition to the mascot. Obviously, there is an egregious disregard for Indigenous people's history in that defense, and it is insulting comparing it to that of a sport mascot. Because settler colonialism requires the "elimination of the Native," we are either imagined to be extinct or, since authenticity is conflated with static tradition, we are no longer considered to be indigenous. Therefore, our actual history can be utterly disregarded, or at least considered less significant than the created history of Euramerican-fabricated sports mascots. And since Indian Mascot is a means to claim their own native roots, Indian Mascot is a substitute for actual Indigenous people.

In "Indian Mascot Encounters Prejudice (from real Indians)" and "American Indians Attempt to Assassinate Indian Mascot," Howe imagines how Indian Mascot

would respond to Native people protesting his existence. The first line in “Indian Mascot Encounters Prejudice,” is: “My own people hate me” (83). Of course, Indian Mascot believes himself to be Indigenous as he refers to “real Indians” as, “My people.” He is the settler’s substitution for actual Indigenous people and is meant to claim indigeneity for the settler. Indigenous people, however, see Indian mascot for what he is: “He’s white. . .He’s a bestial impersonator,” telling him, “You’re a fiction” (83). In “American Indians Attempt to Assassinate Indian Mascot,” he laments that “Now, / only the whites protect me. / Indians scream, ‘Monster.’ / ‘He inspires disgust,’ they cry” (84). Indian Mascot defends his own claim to Indigeneity by saying he fought with Red Shoes in 1720 and Little Turtle in 1794; claiming he was at Horseshoe Bend in 1814 during the Red Stick War, and actually claims to have killed Custer. Indian Mascot is attempting to write himself into Indigenous history so that he can further assert his own claim to being Indigenous, thus fulfilling the settler’s claim. Indigenous people continue to resist this revision of history and, in defiance, an “Indian boy who will not stand for [this] blasphemy. . .draws his revolver from a backpack” and shoots at Indian Mascot. At the last moment, riding a “white horse,” Noble Savages swoops in and they both take the bullet, dying together: “Mortally wounded, / We sigh together” (84). Howe shows, however, that attacking the image may not accomplish the goal we strive for.

Stereotypes do not die that easily since the process of settlement is ongoing. In the last poem of the series, also the shortest, “What happened to Indian Mascot and Noble Savage—After the Shooting?” Howe simply writes: “Nothing. / They were never real. / This is Hollywood” (85). This poem articulates the endurance of such imagery.

They endure because, as Howe declares, they “were never real.” Wolfe’s assertion that “invasion is a structure not an event,” as previously mentioned, offers us an important perspective on settler colonialism. Imaging settler colonialism as a structure as opposed to as an event prompts us to see the intended permanence of colonization. This helps to explain why Noble Savage and Indian Mascot endure as they do and are not easily dispatched. The settler is not here to exploit the land, its people, and resources. They are here to replace Indigenous people and establish their own “indigenous” roots. And as already demonstrated, Noble Savage and Indian Mascot are manifestations of the settler’s constant negotiation between maintaining a “civilized” nature, by Western standards, and the appropriation of indigeneity. This negotiation, as Veracini observes, “is never complete, and a settler society is always, in Derridean terms, a society ‘to come’, characterised by the *promise* rather than the practice of a truly ‘settled’ lifestyle” (23).¹² Invasion is not only a structure, it is permanent.

It is not enough to just confront these images, but we must also challenge the colonizer’s mindset that creates and cultivates them, i.e. how they are imagined, whether that occurs in a series of poems or protesting outside a sports venue. One way Howe challenges that mindset is by not flat-out rejecting the images, or attacking them, but rather by including them into her own story, *per* tribalogy. While Noble Savage and Indian Mascot may appear to be Indigenous, at least to those unfamiliar with actual Native people, they are very much non-Indigenous. When Howe imagines these

¹² Veracini goes on to say, “Indigenisation and Europeanisation could then be seen as asyndotic progressions: the line separating settler and indigenous must be approached but is never finally crossed, and the same goes for neo-European imitation, where sameness should be emphasised but difference is a necessary prerequisite of the absolute need to at once distinguish between settler self and indigenous and exogenous Others” (23).

stereotypes in the way that she does, however, they become an element of her tribe. She appropriates these stereotypes. Investigating how such images are created, their purpose, and how they operate within a larger structure, i.e. the structure of colonization; not only offers us a deeper understanding of how we indigenize foreign elements into tribal elements, it helps us understand our own relationships to them and develop strategies for effective resistance to colonization.

Given how prevalent settler culture is our everyday lives, acknowledging and understanding the settler is essential. After five-hundred plus years of being colonized, our goal of self-determination and decolonization must include non-Indigenous people. Howe wants to imagine Choctaw, and other indigenous people, into a future that necessarily includes the colonizer. In *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, Alfred proclaims that the “time has come to recognize our mutual dependency; to realize that indigenous and non-indigenous communities are permanent features of our political and social landscape.” (53). We are not separated from Euramerica and haven’t been for some time. The settler reality needs to be included in how we theorize the world around us. Tribalography not only centers on how our tribal elements connect through past, present, and future milieus; but it also explicitly includes the “non-Indian.” As Howe claims, tribalography “is a story that links Indians and non-Indians” (“The Story of America” 46).

In looking at how non-Indigenous people influence Indigenous self-imagination, we cannot forget that the nature of Indigenous-U.S. relations is that of nation-to-nation. A useful theory for examining how tribalography helps Howe maintain her sense of being Choctaw, then, is transnationalism. While this chapter’s focus is not on

transnationalism, some of its tenets are useful. Transnationalism highlights the permeability of social, political, and cultural boundaries, not only exposing potential problems in maintaining the integrity of indigeneity in a transnational reality, but also offering new and productive ways by which indigenous people can continually evolve through acculturation. Historian Robert Gross argues that transnationalism “captures a world of fluid borders, where goods, ideas, and people flow constantly across once-sovereign space” and immigrants entering the U.S. “sustain a cosmopolitan consciousness, while older minorities . . . re-conceive themselves in international terms” (378). Conversely, Osage critic Robert Warrior claims that for indigenous people, “nationalism is born out of native transnationalism, the flow and exchange of ideas and politics across our respective borders” (125). The lines that delineate borders—geopolitical, social, cultural, political—are not impermeable and there is constant transmotion. It is imperative we imagine such borders as not being rigid but acknowledge their permeability. Doing so enables us to continue to resist the settler’s imagined Indian and helps us to maintain our integrity of Indigenous and tribal people.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that that since these borders are porous that they are open borders. The “borders” we use to define ourselves as Indigenous people, for example, are not open so that anyone may claim to be Indigenous. As previously argued, no matter however one imagines him- or herself to be, that imagination is responsible to the outer social, cultural, and political world. On the one hand, these borders are not open; these defining lines do exist and do have “border guards,” i.e. those who determine authenticity. On the other hand, they are also not impermeable. Despite how rigid we imagine them to be, there is transmotion of ideas, politics, social

structure, religion, and culture across borders. In a settler colonial world, this is amplified given how Indigenous people are inundated with settler ideas, politics, social structure, religion and culture, each and every day. Through the process of acculturation, we consciously, and unconsciously, determine what we accept and the manner in which we accept it. This is why it is imperative we include the non-Indian in how we imagine ourselves, our people, and our world.

Transnationalism requires we carefully consider these porous, yet unopened, borders. Examining and assessing the permeability of such borders enables us to further discover and/or establish connections with those foreign to us. Through these connections, we are also able to develop and cultivate relationships. Under the guise of tribalogy, Howe demonstrates this in her short story, “Choctalking on Other Realities.”¹³

The frame of the story includes a narrator who is an “academic tourist on a university-sponsored tour” of Jerusalem in 1992 (44). During the course of her visit, the narrator witnesses a protest by a group of Palestinian women, meets a shop owner who claims Cherokee ancestry, and has dinner with the shop owner at her house where they exchange stories. Some of these events prompts the narrator to “travel” through space and time. Typical of most of her works, Howe conceptualizes time and space as being fluid where characters tend to move from place to place and through different times. There are various places and times the narrator moves through, the predominant ones being an airport café in the Oklahoma City airport where the narrator works and a

¹³ The story is originally published in her 2005 collection, *Evidence of Red*, but is republished in her 2013 book of the same title. Since the variations between the two versions is negligible, all references will be from *Evidence of Red*.

boarding school in Bethany, Oklahoma where the narrator recounts being punished for singing the incorrect lyric to a Christian hymn.

Early in the story, the narrator reflects upon the paradox of Israel. She learns that since Israel has “no indigenous raw materials, apart from stone, [and] the economy has always been supported from the outside. They’re entirely dependent on peace” (44). Israel is dependent upon peaceful transnational relationships for its existence. While what may constitute “the outside” includes nations outside the region (e.g. Israel is allied with the US and receives significant support from the US), the strife within their own borders cannot be ignored. The narrator wonders that, if Israel is dependent on “the outside” for peace, “we want to know why Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Jerusalem have adopted the stance of ‘mobilized society,’” and wonders if “it’s their heritage” given how each group has “made great sacrifices to change the status quo” (44). The nation of Israel, particularly the economy, is reliant on peace for its existence despite having a long history of conflict among the people who inhabit the physical space. These conflicts are created by the need to adhere to rigid boundaries of their respective beliefs and the need to change the dominant culture, i.e. the status quo that challenges those borders.

As the narrator is wandering the city, she witnesses a protest. It involves seven Palestinian women marching down the streets, as the narrator notices that their arms linked “like a chain of paper dolls. I don’t understand what they are saying but I can guess. They want to change the status quo” (44). Being Choctaw, the narrator might have expressed solidarity with, and even empathy for, the protesting women. It

certainly invites exploring similarities between Indigenous people and Palestinians.¹⁴

The narrator may have chosen to seek a connection with these women that is deeper than simply witnessing. The narrator follows the women since she is there to “see who is doing what to whom,” as an academic observer, who “do[es] very little except tell each other what we’ve seen” (44). Claiming the role of observer, as opposed to a participant, she establishes a distance between the Palestinian women and herself. As tourists begin coming out of the shops to see what is happening, however, “[t]he women encourage us to join their protest” (45). This challenges the narrator’s established distance between herself and the women. But before she can react, soldiers show up to break up the protest, which scares the tourists and chaos ensues. One of the protestors breaks away and starts running and the narrator runs after her.

The chaos forces the narrator to shift in time and space, literally. As the narrator runs after the Palestinian woman, the protestor gets behind her and the narrator is suddenly running across the dirt playground at the boarding school she was sent to when she was five. She is running away from the white teachers of the school and toward the WA-HE Café where “Indians are inside drinking coffee and gossiping about the weather” and where she will be protected (45). She is tackled by one of her teachers and then placed in a broom closet as punishment for, as the reader finds out later in the narrative through another shift of time and space, singing the incorrect lyrics to “Jesus

¹⁴ In his review of *Evidence of Red*, particularly “Choctalking on Other Realities, Mvskoke critic and writer Craig Womack claims that Howe’s work insists Native Studies is not parochial, indigenous people have plenty to say about what happens beyond their borders, and tribally specific readings have global implications. Given that it is predicated upon nation-to-nation relationships, “sovereignty has to be able to see past its own belly button” (160).

Loves the Little Children” (she sings “they are *separate* in his sight” instead of “they are *precious* in his sight”) (54).

While these shifts occur frequently throughout her works, for Howe, it is a part of Choctaw epistemology. When asked about this permeability of time and space, of past and present, Howe says it has to do with how the Choctaw language is “always present tense and moving,” and why she consciously writes in the present tense “even though [she is] writing about the past.” Language, particularly the Choctaw language, creates a cosmology and epistemology in which the past and present are connected. She goes on to say that “the past is ever-present whether it’s through the ceremonies, ghosts, or land” (Squint 219). While the past and present are connected, that connection requires an intermediary. We can see how Choctaw epistemology informs Howe’s conception of tribalogy since it seeks to connect tribal element to past, present, and future milieus, within stories.

These shifts allow us to see how these different milieus are connected. When the narrator is remarking on the three warring factions of Jerusalem (Jews, Muslims, and Christians), she observes that these three groups have historically “made great sacrifices to change the status quo” (44). Another section of the story takes place at a café in the Oklahoma City airport where the narrator works in 1970, a “terrible year to be a teenage Indian in Oklahoma City” (48). Her classmates are being killed in Vietnam, with more on their way, and there is unrest among Indigenous people nationally and locally:

This past week there were sit-ins at the downtown department store
where blacks are still being refused services at the lunch counter. For

almost ten months American Indians have occupied the abandoned prison on Alcatraz Island. The word on the streets of Oklahoma City is that we're fed up with colonialism. American Indians are finally going to *change the status quo* (italics mine). (48)

Howe finds a connection between Native Americans during the Vietnam War and Red Power Movement, and the people of Jerusalem. Making such connections is essential to tribalogy, and when such connections are made between different characters, it opens the possibility of forming relationships.

Finding connections and establishing relationships is a crucial part of what it means to be Choctaw, and tribalogy is a means to do just that. Howe has stated that tribalogy “comes from the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another” (“The Story of America” 42). She further demonstrates this propensity when the narrator meets a Jewish shopkeeper who, of course, claims to have a Cherokee great-grandmother. At first, the narrator is understandably skeptical as the narrator explains: “The weary but elusive Indian ancestry, the fawning desire to be related to me, at least my Indianness, is something I’ve experienced before” (50). But then she begins to notice similarities between her and the shopkeeper, beginning with their physical features. Eventually, the narrator says, “The city looms under a delicious haze of smoke from the outdoor falafel stands,” a reminder of where she is in time and space, and then she says, “I want to take this woman away with me. To cross time and the ocean together. To place her past, to put myself in her beginning and intertwine our threads of history—for we are nothing without our relationships.” The narrator certainly recognizes how permeable the

borders of time and space are. She also shows an inclination to make this “foreign” woman a part of herself and her history, her story. The narrator finishes this thought by simply stating: “That’s Choctaw” (50).

Later in their conversation, the narrator tells the shopkeeper about how the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek of 1830 sent the Choctaws to what is now the state of Oklahoma, the first to be removed in the Trail of Tears. The narrator tells the shopkeeper that it is no accident that sixty-six Indigenous nations reside in Oklahoma. She makes another connection between their backgrounds: “Oklahoma or Indian Territory was a forerunner of Israel,” referring to how both places contain disparate people who rely on peace for their existence. The narrator says: “Choctaws were the first to be removed there, other Indian tribes from around the country soon followed. We were supposed to live together in peace. *Form relationships*. It wasn’t easy, but for the most part we did it because we do not idealize war” (emphasis added 53). While relationships are essential to being Choctaw, as is with other Indigenous people, being forced into a limited space with other nations, forming relationships became a matter of survival.

As the narrator suggests, making relationships with other people is not easy. Despite their willingness to accept one another, there are moments of tension throughout their conversation. For example, when the shopkeeper explains her great grandfather migrated to North Carolina before returning to Israel in 1948 and her great grandmother was Cherokee, she describes their relationship as: “He was in exile, she was conquered. They fell in love because they had this in common.” The narrator’s response is simple: “Indians are not conquered” (52). The shopkeeper has a rather

romanticized idea of her ancestors, but from the narrator's perspective, her ancestors are neither in exile nor are they conquered. This tension is a result of settler colonialism, particularly in how Indigenous people are imagined vis-à-vis how we imagine ourselves. Obviously, how we are imagined, i.e. being conquered, has prevailed. Yet despite this tension, there is evidence that they made a connection. After the narrator finishes telling her story, she notices "a strange quiet grips the Jewish woman whose ancestor was a Cherokee. Her face becomes attentive, as if listening to something that penetrated her soul" (54). Both have demonstrated their willingness to maintain fluidity in how they imagine each other and the borders that separate them. This is not the case, however, throughout the narrative.

The narrator seeks connections with other inhabitants of Jerusalem. At one point, while she is listening to the Muslim prayers over the loudspeaker, she is sure that person praying "is praying to the Sun, just like Choctaws once prayed to Hashtali" (55). The narrator notices what she sees as a possible connection between how Choctaw and Muslims pray, but is corrected by a Muslim vendor outside the Al-Aqsa Mosque: "The prayers are to Allah, not the Sun" (55). She mentions that they pray with their palms upward, as if praising the sun, and that the ancient Egyptians worship Ra, the sun god, and suggests that since the Hebrews and Egyptians once lived together that their religions could have "rubbed off each other" (55). She even says that the people pronounce their nation as Yis-RA-el, and that maybe "there's a relationship." The vendor repeats his objections and closes off the possibility of their being such a similarity: "No, no, no, you have been misinformed! There is no God, but the God of us all" (56). His response is ironic since the narrator is seeking a connection that might

suggest that their respected ancestors worshipped the same god, which would be “the God of us all.” The vendor maintains a rigid boundary of how his people imagined God and refuses to even consider the narrator’s idea.

Howe’s works are similar to how the narrator describes Oklahoma and Israel in that they include disparate people occupying the same space. She likes to create a setting in which different people are forced to interact with one another in hopes that they will establish connections and form relationships, which is so important to being Choctaw. It is similar to what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “contact zone”, “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). Pratt’s “contact zone” is ostensibly antiquated given that Indigenous people have been in contact with the colonizer for well over five-hundred years and the colonizer has settled. Yet, as Howe demonstrates in her works, these “colonial encounters” are still occurring. And if Indigenous people continue to insist on not being conquered and continue to resist colonization, these encounters will continue.

Invasion may be a structure, as Wolfe points out, but these encounters are still occurring within that structure. These encounters occur at protests of Native American-themed mascots. They occur when there is a protest to stop an oil pipeline. They also occur in the classroom. Such encounters remind us of the settler colonial world of which we are a part. They remind us that the structure of settler colonialism sets to control how Indigenous people are imagined and thus treated. They also remind us why we continue to resist colonization, whether it is through direct political and social

action, like Idle No More, or how we teach non-Indigenous people. Tribalography becomes key in that resistance as it helps us to maintain our sense of who we are. We imagine who we were, who we are, and who we want to become through the stories we tell of ourselves, and what we learn from those stories. Settler colonialism had been a significant part of our lives as Indigenous people for so long that non-Indigenous people have become a part of how we imagine ourselves. Tribalography seeks to gather our tribal elements and connect them to our world through our past, present, and future.

Chapter 2

Disrupting Structures: Mixedbloods, Nationalism, and Louis Owens

Mixedbloods live in the ebbings of history. The full-moon tide of the future. Water lapping at the gravel and sandbar where spawning is possible, but the increasing situation of clear-cut history a choking death.

~Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages*

I first met Louis Owens in 1997 in his office at the University of New Mexico. I had just transferred from Haskell Indian Nations University to pursue a degree in English. Earlier that year, while still at Haskell, I had taken my first class in Native American literature. A friend suggested *Bone Game* earlier that summer, which turned out to be my introduction to his works. Up to that point, I had not even heard of him. Needless to say, I was rather new to the literature, let alone the criticism. His novel *Nightland* had been published the previous year and he happened to have several copies furnished by the University of Oklahoma Press. After a nice conversation, I got up to leave when he took a copy, signed it, and handed it to me. It reads: “Achuckma. Welcome in Friendship, Louis Owens.” For those who knew him, this kind and welcoming gesture should come as no surprise, as anyone I have met who did know him attests to his giving nature. He was universally liked.

That first visit is emblematic of not only his generosity, but of so much more. I identified myself as Choctaw and Pawnee when I introduced myself, so inscribing the copy of *Nightland* with “Achuckma” makes sense; a gesture between two Choctaws. But is the novel in which he inscribed this Choctaw greeting a Choctaw novel?¹ The

¹ Answering this question would reveal a multilayered discourse on Indigenous identity vis-à-vis literature, a discourse a multitude of people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have contributed to, including Owens. This discourse, however, tends to focus on Indigenous identity, in general, and not upon tribal identity. Even when critics argue that indigenous identity relies upon how one relates to

plot is an adaptation of Cherokee story, the primary characters are mixedbloods—Cherokee and Euramerican—and the setting is in New Mexico. Owens even refers to it as a Cherokee novel: “I wrote the novel *Nightland* for my aunt—my mother’s sister [both with Cherokee heritage]—determined to write a Cherokee novel for her while she was still alive” (Lee 24). What is particularly Choctaw about *Nightland* besides the author, which is problematic, too? As those familiar with his works know, Owens resisted a generalized Native American or tribally-specific identification and instead insisted on a mixedblood identity. A Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish marks a Choctaw greeting in a Cherokee book that he then hands to a Choctaw/Pawnee at the University of New Mexico. The situation is emblematic of Owens’s ideas. As I argue in the introduction, the stories we tell of ourselves reveal how we imagine the Choctaw people and nation. Do we, then, include *Nightland* as one of those stories?

This chapter was conceived by an initial question I had many years ago: how does a nationalist discourse account for one who does not claim a tribally national identity or even a general Indigenous identity? As this chapter has evolved, more questions have arisen. How do we define Choctaw literature? Do we claim someone like Owens as a Choctaw when he insists on a mixedblood identity? Do all of his stories count as Choctaw stories? Do his critical theories count as Choctaw theories? And if we do consider his works, creative and critical, i.e. his stories², as Choctaw, how does that

his/her tribal community, they are often discussing a general Indigenous identity. It goes without saying that if one is identified as being of a tribe, or tribes, they are also generally considered Indigenous.

² When describing what encompasses stories while defining tribalogy, LeAnn Howe includes fiction and non-fiction. When she writes, “Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history). . .” (“The Story of America” 42), she deliberately disregards the distinction between creative and critical, between fiction and non-fiction. For the purpose of this chapter I will follow Howe’s example and do the same with Owens’s creative and critical works, his fiction and non-fiction, i.e. stories.

contribute to how we imagine the Choctaw nation? While these questions are certainly worth pursuing, this chapter will assume Owens and his stories as Choctaw and seek to answer the last question. This chapter argues that if we are to claim Owens and his stories as Choctaw, his self-imagination as a mixedblood challenges our tendencies to construct monoliths of our conceptions of “nation” and “people” and reminds us that the social, cultural, and political borders we construct when imagining the Choctaw nation and people are, as Ojibwa critic Scott Richard Lyons states, “delineated by a dotted line at best” (26).

First, I need to clarify certain terms. The first obvious one is “mixedblood.” In its broadest sense, it refers to one whose ancestry includes two or more different races or ethnic groups. This would include, however, those who are not generally referred to as mixedblood, like myself. While I am Choctaw and Pawnee, and technically a mixedblood, I do not refer to myself as a one, nor do my friends and colleagues. It is not because I hold any negative connotations about the term. Generally speaking, those with mixed but Indigenous descent (e.g. Choctaw and Pawnee) are not considered to be mixedblood, as it commonly refers to those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous lineage, primarily Euramerican. The mixedblood’s Indigenous heritage, however, is usually not specified to his/her tribe(s). Generally speaking, those with mixed Indigenous heritage, like myself, generally do not identify or are not identified as Mixedblood. Yet, not all of those who have Indigenous and Euramerican ancestry, however, identify themselves as Mixedblood. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* has it listed as “mixed blood,” with a space between “mixed” and “blood,” but also states, that as an adjective, it is usually hyphenated. Owens, however, uses the portmanteau, mixedblood. For the

purpose of the chapter, “mixedblood,” with a lowercase “m,” is used as an adjective. One can have mixedblood decent but still identify as Indigenous and/or by particular tribe(s). The capitalized “Mixedblood” is used as a proper noun that refers to either those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous descent and who identify themselves as Mixedblood or as a modifier to “Mixedblood discourse.”

“Mixedblood discourse” refers to the literary movement that dominated the field through the 80s and early 90s. Its primary practitioners are Owens, Ojibwa writer and critic Gerald Vizenor, Ojibwa critic Kimberly Blaeser, and Elvira Pulitano.

“Mixedblood critics,” then, refers to these practitioners of Mixedblood discourse.

“Mixedblood” is commonly used when describing the discourse, but others have used different terms. Vizenor, for example, coins the phrase, “crossblood,” while Cherokee critic Sean Teuton uses “trickster.”³ Teuton’s term reflects “trickster liberation”

originated by Vizenor. For Vizenor, the trickster figure, as expressed in Indigenous oral stories and contemporary literature, “mediates between supposed contradictory forces or elements by retaining aspects of both. . . This mediation becomes the *raison d’être* of the mixedbloods in Vizenor’s prose and central impetus behind much of his writing”

(Blaeser 139). The trickster mediates between these forces, suggesting a dialectic, and, as such, becomes useful in deconstructing the Euramerican imagination of Indigenous people, which Vizenor claims is a simulacrum. In *Mixedblood Messages (MM)*, Owens says Vizenor’s works represent a liberation, “a brilliant attempt to free us from romantic entrapments—especially victimage—and to liberate the imagination,” as Owens likens the traditional trickster figure to Vizenor’s mixedbloods who “militantly

³ Teuton uses “trickster” to refer to Mixedblood discourse throughout *Red Land, Red Power*.

[resist] definition” (MM 86). Ironically, the trickster/mixedblood resolves “all dialectics. . .through a rejection of resolution or closure” (MM 92). This resistance to a resolution between two forces leaves an undetermined space that is in constant flux. Owens will further this notion of an undetermined space through his failed appropriation of the term, “frontier,” which I will discuss later. Vizenor and Owens use postmodern theories to advance the ideas of Mixedblood discourse.

While Owens was generally well-liked on a personal level, he leaves behind a contentious legacy regarding his ideas on hybridity and mixedblood heritage as there is a general backlash against Mixedblood discourse and Owens. While there are a few who have refuted Owens head-on, most take issue with the ideas perpetuated in Mixedblood discourse. In a “state-of-the-field” piece published in *American Indian Quarterly* in 2007, Cherokee critic Jace Weaver refers to Owens’ works as “the unpleasant elephant in the room,” suggesting a reluctance to criticize him. More specifically, he says it is “not so much his work itself as what some too casually take away from it, particularly the unfortunate *Mixedblood Messages*. It is a vision in which hybridity is all and at times seemingly everyone is ‘part Indian,’ and it becomes impossible therefore to assert a distinctive, ‘authentic’ Native identity” (240). While some do take issue with Owens’ ideas specifically, Weaver does stipulate that some “too casually take away from” Owens’ works, i.e. Mixedblood discourse, suggesting that his ideas tend to be conflated with what other Mixedblood critics claim. Weaver concludes that such a vision has potential to bring about “the dissolution not only of NAS but also of our tribal national governments, as well” (240). While there may be a reluctance to engage his ideas head-on, some critics have reached the conclusion that

Weaver does regarding hybridity and Mixedbloods, particularly the use of postmodern theories. I will discuss Owens' ideas on hybridity at greater length later.

There are other issues some critics have with the way Mixedblood critics use postmodern theories. They found it useful in deconstructing settlers' images of Indigenous people that are often racist, but very dominant. Cherokee critic Sean Teuton observes that while "postmodernism theory promises to challenge dominating constructions of Native identity, as a principle, it also necessarily demands the dismantling of *all* identities, those not only external but also internal to indigenous cultures" ("Placing the Ancestors" 628).⁴ When such postmodern theories are applied to their fullest extent, not only are Euramerican-constructed images of Indigenous people deconstructed, but so are our own self-imaginings. Teuton clarifies that postmodern theories accomplish this by "[diffusing] the political force of identity *by detaching identity from social locations*" ("Placing the Ancestors" 632). Location (social, political, or geographic) and defense of Indigenous homelands are of paramount concern for most Indigenous people as we have historically determined our identity by our locations. And to advance such theories to their logical conclusions can, as Teuton says, "undermine the ground on which Indian people recover culture and demand

⁴ This is from an article published in *American Indian Quarterly* in 2001. In 2008, Teuton publishes *Red Land, Red Power* that includes a chapter that appears to be a revised version of the 2001 article. The changes made are significant enough to consider them separate sources, though they make similar points and use similar language. On this particular point, Teuton replaces "postmodern theories" with "trickster discourse." With this rhetorical revision, Teuton presents his ideas from a strictly Indigenous perspective, thus positioning such a perspective as the center. Studying postmodern theories reveals that they operate in a manner similar to that of a trickster, so we can glean Teuton's thinking in making this change. Essentially, he indigenizes postmodern theories in doing so. The two terms, however, may not be synonymous. Whatever elements of Western culture that Indigenous people appropriate can be both Indigenous and Western. That is to say, "postmodern theories" can be indigenized into "trickster discourse" but still retain a strong sense of Western thought. I further discuss the process of appropriation in the third chapter.

redress” (*Red Land Red Power* 84). Such critics, particularly those aligned with Indigenous literary nationalism, are concerned that ideas of hybridity purported by critics like Owens are counterproductive, even detrimental, to any anticolonial movement.

Perhaps those who reacted the most aggressively against Mixedblood discourse are nationalist critics, i.e. those aligned with Indigenous Literary Nationalism. This movement became prominent starting in the mid-1990s and could be interpreted as a reaction to Mixedblood discourse. I, too, had a similar reaction. When I met Owens, I had only started becoming familiar Native American literature and criticism. I quickly noticed just how dominant Mixedblood discourse was. This was a result of the period and the tremendous influence Owens was having on me as a student and how I came to read and understand the literature. However, I felt unable to fully connect with the discourse. If I am a Mixedblood, that mixture of blood is not composed of Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It is Choctaw and Pawnee. I did not suffer what Cherokee critic Daniel Heath Justice identifies as “Mixedblood angst, where the writer/protagonist is torn between the Indian and White worlds.” Justice notices how, in our literature, “blood marks Indigenous identity,” further claiming that these Mixedblood “blood burdens have been seized upon as *the* defining feature of Native identity by many critics and no small number of Indian writers themselves.” Mixedblood discourse seems to insist that “to be fully Indian can thus exist only through the fragmentation of the Indian self by Whiteness” (*Our Fire* 212). I found myself wondering how I was to negotiate my own self-imagination, of one who has no non-Indigenous “blood,” with what was prominent in Native American literary discourse.

The nationalists' reactions to Mixedblood discourse are understandable considering the focus of their attention. Weaver asserts that Indigenous Literary Nationalism, "which takes seriously Native sovereignty and survivance, has indigenous self-determination at its core and decolonization, survival, recovery, development, and transformation in its penumbra" (Weaver, Womack, and Warrior 73). Indigenous Literary Nationalism incites a shift in Native American literary studies to one focused on political realities of Indigenous nations and people. To accomplish this goal, they began using political concepts important to Native nations—sovereignty, self-determination, land protection—as literary concepts. Texts, such as Robert Warrior's *Tribal Secrets* (1995), Weaver's *That the People Might Live* (1997) and Craig Womack's *Red on Red* (1999), helped to usher in this shift. Such critics were harking back to the 60s and 70s when the progenitors of American Indian Studies imagined such academic institutions having a direct connection and responsibility to Indigenous people and nations. These critics began to wonder how focusing on individual identity and "Mixedblood angst" contributed to the goals of self-determination and the protections of tribal homelands. In 1996, Dakota writer and critic Elizabeth Cook-Lynn found Mixedblood discourse puzzling "to those who believe that the essential nature of intellectual work and critical reflection for American Indians is to challenge the politics of dispossession inherent in public policy toward Indian nationhood." Cook-Lynn finds Mixedblood discourse to be "personal, invented, appropriated, and irrelevant to First Nation status in the United States" (71). Nationalist critics shifted Indigenous literary discourse from Mixedblood concerns, which they find to be focused too much on

individual identity, to how the literature expresses a commitment to political realities Native face.

The nationalists reject the bulk of Mixedblood discourse, being dismissive of what critics like Owens purport about Indigenous people. For example, Justice asserts:

Native peoples are never just “Native”: we are Cherokees, Creeks, Cherokee-Creeks, Mohawks, Eastern Miamis-Shawnees, and all distinctions and combinations between and beyond.⁵ Collapsing all these affiliations and relationships into a generic claim of between-the-worlds Native hybridity is yet another act of colonialist displacement that has, as its ultimate aim, the symbolic and physical erasure of Indigenous nations from the very memory of this land. (*Our Fire* 215)

According to Justice, Mixedblood discourse is akin to colonial displacement and eradication of Indigenous people from the land. His first point—that Native people still retain tribal distinctions—is not lost on Mixedblood discourse critics. In fact, while Owens resists a general “Indian” identity, he still identifies himself as Choctaw and Cherokee. Justice then seems to suggest that Mixedblood discourse seeks to collapse such tribal distinctions into some “between-the-worlds Native hybridity.” While some Mixedblood critics intend for their ideas of hybridity to apply to *all* Native people, which has its own set of problematics, they do not advocate erasing all tribal distinctions. In fact, Justice even recognizes this on the preceding page: “No matter how much Vizenor emphasizes crossblood discourses in his writing, he still notes his

⁵ Interestingly, Justice does not include European, or any non-Indigenous nationalities, in this list. As argued before, not everyone with Indigenous and non-Indigenous decent are considered Mixedblood and a large number assume a strict Indigenous identity. While they may not deny their non-Indigenous ancestry, it is seldom include in their self-imagination.

kinship relationship to the Anishinaabe people; although Owens's self-identification was primarily as a mixedblood, not as an Indian, he nonetheless asserted his relationship to Choctaw and Cherokee specificities" (*Our Fire* 214). Justice's reading may be influenced by other nationalists' trepidation about Mixedblood discourse's use of postmodern theories previously mentioned. And if the actual goal of the discourse was to collapse tribal distinction, then it might be appropriate to dismiss it. However, Owens' works does not seek to collapse tribal distinctions and actually seems to expand our notions of nation by articulating what it means to be Mixedblood, a reality for a significant number of Indigenous people.

Others have been as dismissive of Mixedblood discourse, if not more so. As mentioned previously, tribal literary nationalism emerged partly as a reaction to the prevailing discourse led by Vizenor and Owens. In *American Indian Literary Nationalism (AILN)*, Womack expresses the desire for a new approach to Native literature as he explains why he subtitled *Red on Red*, "Native American Literary Separatism"⁶: "I wanted a new story, and I was tired of the one I was stuck to. The meaning of the tribally specific approach of *Red on Red*, and the challenges to such an approach in an era dominated by pan-tribalism and Native diaspora viewpoints, is part of a criticism of difference, rather than sameness, I was searching for" (*AILN* 167-168). As previously described, I, too, felt confined to the Mixedblood approach to our literatures when I began my earnest study of Native literature under Owens's tutelage. This was coupled with the notion that I do not imagine myself as a Mixedblood, nor do

⁶ Nationalist critics are often accused of advocating Indigenous separatism. Such charges are often strawman fallacies given how most nationalists explicitly state otherwise throughout their works. Womack's subtitle, however, probably does not help.

I have non-Indigenous blood.⁷ I further identify with Womack when he concludes: “Tribal literary nationalism allows me to speak as an Indian. Hybridity theory dictates terms of my speech” (*AILN* 168). Regardless, this is dismissive of Mixedblood discourse and is counter to something else Womack claims from *Red on Red*, “I do not believe in a critical approach that preempts or cancels out all those that came before it” (2). This suggests that each generation or era of critical discourse builds off the previous one. Given the temporal proximity of Mixedblood discourse to tribal literary nationalism, however, such dismissive claims and tones are understandable.

While it may not be prudent to discard Mixedblood discourse on principle alone, there is another important reason not to. Womack echoes other nationalists when he states, “One means. . . of evaluating literary theory is scrutinizing how accurately it describes the social world it references. This need not be a naive realism that assumes a one-to-one relationship between writing and reality that negates imagination” (*AILN* 94). Nationalists are prompted by the call to have their Indigenous academic work not only reflect Native social and political realities, but also to be praxis-driven. Womack edifies this when he asks, while some Indigenous people may relate to Gloria Anzaldua’s “borderlands position, what about the Indian mixed-bloods we see so frequently in Oklahoma—and many other places in Indian Country—who, in spite of their various culture and genetic inheritances, identify as Indian rather than hybrids? . . . In all my years in Oklahoma I have yet to meet an Indian who introduced him or herself to me as a ‘hybrid’” (*AILN* 136). When Mixedblood ideas dominate the

⁷ This is not entirely true. My Certificate Degrees of Pawnee Blood states that I am 7/16 Pawnee, 1/16 away from being half. I have been told that 1/16 includes Potawatomie, Kickapoo, and either French or Spanish. I do not know what my Choctaw blood quantum is, but I do know it is not 1/2 since my father is not 4/4 Choctaw.

discourse, such a question needs to be asked, and asked loudly. Not all Indigenous people of mixedblood descent consider themselves to be Mixedblood. This is a social reality that needed to be expressed. Equally, the Mixedblood worldview that Vizenor and Owens work to articulate, however, is another Indigenous social reality.

This is not to suggest that nationalist critics are unaware of Mixedblood social realities. For example, in *The People and the Word*, Robert Warrior acknowledges that “Owens points to important existential conditions for many Native people, conditions that critics and other scholars have too often ignored” (xxvi). While Warrior’s analysis is focused on Owens’s failed appropriation of the term “frontier,” (something I will further discuss later) he does not address these social realities of Mixedbloods.

Similarly, Justice wonders “whether too much attention is placed on the apparent *divisiveness* of mixed-blood identity, rather than seeing it as a realistic and inevitable part of human condition” (“We’re Not there Yet, Kemo Sabe” 260). Obviously, critics like Justice and Warrior acknowledge such realities and that Mixedblood people’s experience as Mixedblood is an experience Indigenous people should account for. However, their approach to Mixedblood discourse, like that of other nationalist critics, focuses on what they perceived as detrimental to Indigenous land redress, coherent Indigenous political identity, and tribal nationhood. Generally speaking, however, literary nationalism has yet to engage directly the social, cultural, and political reality of Mixedbloods.

A part of articulating these realities is to examine how disparate cultures influences one another in creating a liminal space of existence, i.e. hybridity. Justice sees cross-cultural influence as a “natural consequence of being alive in the world,” but

further argues “so too is some measure of internal cultural coherence, the ability of cultures to define and recognize themselves in whatever way seems best to them” (213). That “internal cultural coherence” enables us to imagine and assert an Indigenous tribal nation, with political, cultural, and literary implications. Such coherency also enables us to construct political, cultural, and literary borders that helps to delineate a nation. Construction and maintenance of such borders in a settler colonial context is challenging, to say the least.

In *Mixedblood Messages*, Owens recognizes this effort: “Many Indian people have been strong or fortunate enough to cling to family, community, clan, and tribe through this half millennium of deliberate, orchestrated, colonially and federally designed physical and cultural genocide.” By clinging to such things, Indigenous people find inherent cohesion. Owens, however, follows this sentence with a very simple statement: “But a great many have not” (147). Obviously, Owens is referring to Mixedbloods. This is not to argue that Mixedbloods, by contrast, lack an inherent cohesion, cultural or otherwise. Indeed, there is a cohesion of thought throughout Owens’s theories. Debatable as they may be, particularly those expressed in *Mixedblood Messages*, there are cohesive threads woven throughout, giving the book cohesion of thought and expression. These include Indigenous and non-Indigenous threads. Whatever internal cohesion there is includes both. This can also give rise to Mixedblood angst that they are assumed to suffer.

While some might minimize this angst, some even denying it exists, Indigenous Mixedbloods keep expressing it. Perhaps none have been as eloquent as Cherokee poet Gogisgi / Carroll Arnett’s poem, “Song of the Breed”: “Don’t offend / the fullbloods,

/don't offend / the whites, / stand there in / the middle / of the god- / damned road / and get hit" (14). Interestingly, the angst expressed in Arnett's poem, however, is not internal, as we might expect. Instead, it is a result of how both sides, "fullbloods" and "the whites," react to the narrator. In an attempt to not offend either side, the narrator is forced into a state of betweenness, a dangerous place to be as expressed by metaphorically getting hit by a car while being forced to stand in the middle of the road. Arnett seems to claim that whatever angst he suffers is caused not by something internal but by external social and political forces. Regardless if we agree with Arnett, it is an expression of a social reality Mixedbloods face and should not be minimized or dismissed.

Lyons expresses his own mixedblood reality that is similar to what Arnett expresses in his poem. Lyons grew up "on the border—literally and figuratively," on Leech Lake Ojibwe Reservation. He writes: "Sometimes during my youth I would speak as an Indian and in response be called White Boy. Other times I would speak as a White Boy and be quickly reminded of my Indianness" (ix). He says Indigenous writers, like Owens, have long theorized this "sort of liminality" as the story of the

"half-breed," "mixedblood," and (most regrettably) "part-Indian" (never "part-white"), although today such hybrid terms are viewed as problematic by people who prefer to speak in terms of wholeness. But wholeness has never been my experience, at least not where identity is concerned. Liminality has always best defined me on the inside and perhaps on the outside, too, and I say that without trying to privilege the condition of in-betweenness even one little bit. (ix)

Lyons signals a shift in Mixedblood discourse, and Native literary discourse in general, and how we imagine indigeneity. As mentioned, one idea the literary nationalists were reacting to was the claim that Mixedblood theories on identity applied to all Indigenous people. In *Other Destines*, for example, Owens writes: “For the contemporary Indian novelist—in every case a mixedblood who must come to terms in one form or another with peripherality as well as both European and Indian ethnicity—identity is the central issue and theme” (5).⁸ In-betweenness is certainly being privileged in this statement. Lyons, however, envisions something different. He is explicit that he is not privileging liminality, only that it best describes his lived experience. Lyons proposes the possibility that, while Mixedblood vision of identity may not apply to all Indigenous people, it still does apply to some, like himself.

The appeal of Owens’s expression of betweenness extends beyond Indigenous people. He describes a friend whose father was Iranian and whose mother was from Tennessee. Owens says that his friend “found himself reflected in my own stories and essays. . . There are countless numbers of us, Native American or other, who find ourselves between comfortable, essential self-consciousnesses, and that portion of Americans is growing rapidly” (Lee 32). Most critics acknowledge that Mixedblood consciousness is very real for a lot of people, and many agree that their stories need to

⁸ This may have been what prompted Justice thusly:

These blood burdens have been seized upon as *the* defining feature of Native identity by many critics and no small number of Indian writers themselves. In this model to be fully Indian can thus exist only through the fragmentation of the Indian self by Whiteness. It’s a particularly sadistic (sometimes masochistic) variant of the “vanishing Indian”; the Indians aren’t necessarily gone, but they exist only as dislocated and washed-out halfbreeds—not unlike the grim state of affairs in Lynn Rigg’s *The Cherokee Night*. (*Our Fire* 212)

Owens seems to back off the conviction of this assertion that Mixedblood theories apply to all Natives in subsequent writings. Based on such writings, it is plausible Owens abandoned this notion all together.

be told and that we cannot ignore them. So far, Indigenous Literary Nationalism discourse has been unable to account for this growing portion of Indigenous people.

The intention of this chapter is not to reiterate or summarize how Owens, or other Mixedblood writers, articulate Mixedblood realities. This chapter is prompted by a question: How do literary nationalists account for Mixedblood realities? This question not only guides this chapter, it is also a personal question since, while Owens was my mentor, I align myself with literary nationalism. While critics that have addressed Mixedblood discourse do acknowledge we need to account for such realities, they have primarily focused on what they find dangerous about the discourse. While that is understandable, nationalist discourse has yet to move beyond articulating what is wrong with Mixedblood discourse and should shift toward understanding what it means when we include their realities as a part of Indigenous and tribal realities.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to clarify a critical position this chapter assumes. Owens, and other Mixedblood critics, may have intended for their theories of self-imagination to apply to every Indigenous person, as I demonstrated, but I reject that notion. I envision a pluralistic view of self-imagination and self-identity. An Indigenous person imagining him/herself in tribal terms (e.g. a Choctaw imagining him/herself as Choctaw) carries the same validity as an Indigenous person imagining him/herself as Mixedblood. And while nationalists argue that Mixedblood discourse is detrimental to a distinct tribal nation and people, dispelling with the notion that these theories apply to all Indigenous people changes such arguments. There is no need to challenge Mixedblood discourse in such dismissive terms. Even if the intention is to dispel ideas thought to be harmful Indigenous nationalism, it also discredits the lived

experience of those who identity as Mixedblood. Another position this chapter assumes, as previously mentioned, is to include Mixedbloods as Indigenous and tribal people. When we count such experiences as Indigenous experiences, we also acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous people. As Lyons says, “Indians narrate Indianness in a lot of different ways and in a lot of different venues; this is unavoidable but ultimately a good thing in a world that always veers toward the contaminated and contradictory” (xiii). These critical positions also open up space to imagine Mixedbloods as not so much erasing the lines we create to distinguish ourselves from others, but rather to imagine how they further our understanding of those lines and ourselves.

When we imagine nations, culture, and people, we construct borders or lines that establish what is and what is not. That is to say, we establish lines to mark insider from outsider. The borders, however, are porous as there is a constant flow of ideas, politics, and culture moving across these borders. Lyons offers a great description: “inside/outside is delineated by a dotted line at best. Things get out and things come in, and there seems to be absolutely no way to prevent that.” He says that if the “goals of cultural sovereignty” are to be met, forging stronger doors to prevent such movement will not work, but instead “whenever possible, one’s door should be opened from inside” (26). When we open the door from the inside, we have control in what moves across these borders. Ideally, we decide what foreign elements we choose to appropriate into our own, and what gets shared for similar appropriation. Our experience with settler colonialism, however, has not been ideal. There have been foreign elements forced upon Indigenous people that have caused us great harm. We also have little control over whatever elements of our culture the settler chooses to

appropriate. The settler colonial state, within which Indigenous people exist, seems to have the greater influence on what crosses these borders.

An example of this would be how blood quantum became a significant criterion in determining tribal citizenship. When we base citizenship on the degree of Indian blood, with a certificate even, the settler colonial context ensures the eventual erasure of sufficient blood quantum, i.e. fewer tribal citizens. More and more nations, however, are lowering the required quantum, and others are even dropping it altogether opting for proof of lineage. Bloodline still remains to be a necessary criterion, however, as Weaver states, “despite claims of fragmented, fractionated, and multiple identities, Native identity is not freewheeling and infinitely refracted. One cannot, for instance, dream oneself Indian while possessing no Native ancestry. Not even the most louche critic would contend so” (*AILN* 20). And while the political implications of blood quantum are obvious, there are also social implications. For some, blood quantum also becomes a marker of identity and not just citizenship.⁹ Obviously, degree of blood has been a strand of the matrix of Indigenous/tribal identity.

Indigenous and tribal identity are not straightforward, as anyone with a passing familiarity with Native American issues can attest. There are a variety of criteria people use, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. It resembles a matrix composed of various strands that include genetics, kinship, cultural familiarity, and social acceptance. Obviously this is not exhaustive, but these are the most common ways we all determine who is

⁹ I deliberately make a distinction between citizenship and identity. This distinction stems from acknowledging those who might be considered to be Indigenous and/or tribal but might lack tribal citizenship. Specifically, those who choose to not enroll as a protest to the blood quantum requirements; or those who may be Indigenous culturally and socially but might lack the necessary required blood quantum. This also includes those who do meet the required amount, are enrolled, but have no interest being a part of their tribal communities, some who even don't self-identity as Indigenous or tribally.

Indigenous and who is not. Settler colonialism disrupts this matrix by dominating the way Natives are imagined and imposing their own conceptions of Indigenous identity, such conceptions design for the elimination of the Indigenous people. Owens says that for Natives, “The problem of identity comprehends centuries of colonial and postcolonial displacement, often brutally enforced peripherality, cultural denigration” (*Other Destinies* 4). Colonialism, particularly settler colonialism, has disrupted how Indigenous people imagine themselves and how they establish borders, criteria, for determining citizenship and identity. If the line used to delineate who is Indigenous is already “dotted,” as Lyons suggests, issues of identity are further complicated by colonial imposition. Owens further says the “recovering or rearticulation of an identity, a process dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community, becomes. . . a truly enormous undertaking.” This might be why Owens felt identity was “at the center of American Indian fiction” (*Other Destinies* 5). The thesis of this dissertation is that self-imagination is requisite for self-determination. As Teuton says, “For American Indian peoples to build an anticolonial movement, we must have a clear understanding of the modern tribal self” (“Placing the Ancestors” 627). Working with the matrix of identity—debating those borders—may be convoluted, to say the least, but it is essential.

Mixedblood identity is another factor further complicating this matrix. The Mixedblood, as Owens conceptualizes, exists in a liminal and hybrid state—as they claim all shades of their heritage. Sometimes the Mixedblood is forced into this state by feeling rejected and demeaned by the communities that make his/her background, as expressed in Arnett’s poem. Others feel the pressure to choose one side over the other,

but oftentimes feel resentful for having to choose, and therefore refuse to do so. Regardless if it is forced or by choice, the Mixedblood exists along these borders of identity. Critics like Vizenor and Owens approach this existence in a very critical and personal way. Again, Owens's insistence on a Mixedblood identity does not denote an identity that disregards borders of tribal distinction that seeks to deconstruct all lines of delineation. His identity may have been Mixedblood, but it was not Pan-Indian. It consists of being Choctaw, and Cherokee, and Irish. Yet, while some may imagine themselves clearly on one side, and/or another (for example, I imagine myself as distinctly Choctaw and distinctly Pawnee), Owens moved freely across these dotted lines of tribal and Indigenous identity, never feeling fully settled in a single place. This is key considering the primacy place/location/land has in that matrix of Indigenous and tribal identity.

Again, Owens asserts in *Other Destinies* that the process of recovering and rearticulating identity in settler colonial world is "dependent upon a rediscovered sense of place as well as community" (5). Ironically, critics of Owens and Mixedblood discourse claim their theories separate themselves from the community, focusing instead on the individual. Abenaki critic Lisa Brooks, for example, argues that one "of the central problems with the way hybridity theory has been applied to Native texts is that it does not seem to account for the relationship between community and land" (240). According to Cook-Lynn, the "mixed-blood literary movement" is "an Indian identity which focuses on individualism rather than first Nation ideology" (67). She further claims that Mixedblood discourse is "signaling that a return to tribal sovereignty

on Indian homelands seems to be a lost cause, and American individualism will out”

(69). In response, Owens writes:

Should the stories of such people [Mixedbloods], the products of colonial America’s five hundred years of cultural wars against Indigenous peoples, not be told because they do not fit the definition of what one Lakota critic thinks is tribally ‘real’? Are their stories not ones that ‘matter’ or have ‘meaning’? Contrary to what Cook-Lynn asserts, this is a powerful literature of resistance, a countervoice to the dominant discourse that would reduce Indians to artifactual commodities useful to tourists industries. (*MM* 158-159)

This speaks to a previous point that those who do imagine their world as liminal, existing along the lines of demarcation, are still very Indigenous. For Mixedbloods, the “sense of place as well as community” is multivalent (for some it is ambivalent). Not only do they transverse borders of identity, they also literally move across land and across tribal homelands. This not only describes the social realities of Mixedbloods, it also describes tribal people.

In his classic book, *God is Red*, Vine Deloria, Jr. discusses how Western religions are temporal, that their structure relies on a series of events, suggesting such religions are based on an evolutionary process. Indigenous religions, on the other hand, are “taken directly from the world around them, from their relationship with the other forms of life. Context is therefore all-important for both the practice and the understanding of reality” (65). Deloria is speaking of religion, but the same principle also applies to most Indigenous cosmology, culture, epistemology, worldview, and

identity. When the land changes, or rather when tribal people move across the land, so does their sense of who they are. They do maintain connections to their original environment, as Deloria explains: “Regardless of what subsequently happens to the people, the sacred lands remain as permanent fixtures in their cultural or religious understanding. Thus, many tribes now living in Oklahoma, but formerly from the eastern United States, still hold in their hearts the sacred locations of their history, and small groups travel to obscure locations in secret to continue tribal ceremonial life” (66). The point remains: Indigenous people move, and when they do, their sense of who they are necessarily changes, too.

Most Indigenous tribal histories include movement. N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa/Cherokee) offers a unique chronicle of the Kiowa migration from present-day Yellowstone National Park to present-day southwest Oklahoma in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. In Choctaw creation stories, the people migrate to present-day Mississippi, where they finally settle. The place of origin changes depending upon the version of the story. Some say we emerged from the Gulf of Mexico, while others say we migrated from the U.S. Southwest. Lyons discusses the migrations of the Ojibway in *X-Marks*, and in doing so explains how a change in land facilitates a change in the people: “What does migration produce? As we can see in the story of the Great Migration, it produces *difference*: new communities, new peoples, new ways of living, new sacred foods, new stories, and new ceremonies. The old never dies; it just gets supplemented by the new, and one result is diversity” (4). The fluidity of such movement creates diversity among Indigenous and tribal people and further challenges static ideas of Native people.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Choctaws experienced another movement in 1830 when they were forcefully removed from Mississippi to present-day Oklahoma, as did a lot of other tribal nations. Oklahoma’s Indigenous

Such movement has profound effects on how people imagine themselves. The Kiowa were different people when they reached Rainy Mountain and decided to settle. Those Choctaws who were removed to what is now Oklahoma have become something other than their relatives who stayed in the U.S. Southeast. As environment changes so do the people, but there are other factors involved with Indigenous self-imagination and identity. Whenever there is movement, whether if it is forced or not, the people carry with them their sense of who they are as a people. Understanding how such movement changed us further helps us to assert those dotted lines of identity, to assert who we are as a nation and as a people.

Just as tribal people move, so do individuals and families. Until he was seven, Owens's family moved back and forth between Mississippi and California with trips to Oklahoma during each trip (*MM* 171). Even when his family settled in California, they "were so extraordinarily different from everyone else" (Owens qtd. in Lee 30). Later in life, Owens would continue this movement, spending time in Arizona as a Hotshot Firefighter, in the Pacific Northwest working on a trail crew and as a forest ranger, and in California and New Mexico as a professor. At the time of his death, he was still in transit, working as a professor at UC-Davis while maintaining his residence in Tijeras, New Mexico. This explains the variety of settings for his novels as they include Mississippi, New Mexico, Arizona, California and Washington. Furthermore, the land

population consists mostly of Native nations who were removed from their homelands and forced to settle in Indian Territory. On migration and removal, Lyons says: Removal is to migration what rape is to sex, and while the original political policy was concerned with actual physical removals like the Trail of Tears, the underlying ideology of removal in its own way justified and encouraged the systematic losses of Indian life: the removal of livelihood and language, the removal of security and self-esteem, the removal of religion and respect. Bit by bit, change by change, loss by ever-exacting loss, removalism has been as much a legacy of our history as migration, and colonialism was its cause. (8)
Movement includes migration and removal.

has tremendous such a tremendous presence in his novels and Owens writes about it with such intimacy that the reader might assume that Owens was writing about his homeland. Regarding his first novel, *Wolfson*, he says the true protagonist “is the so-called wilderness itself, a place I felt and still feel that I knew as well as anyone alive” (MM 22). The reverence for the land he expresses in his writings suggests Owens’s relationship to the environment is more multivalent. Instead of Mixedblood angst, the feeling of not belonging anywhere, Owens seems to have felt he belonged to a variety of environments.

While the land is essential to how Indigenous/tribal people imagine themselves, they rely on other factors in determining insider/outsider, i.e. identity. The people’s relationship to community is another important criterion, as is kinship. There is a distinction to be made between “self-imagination” and “identity.” The people’s relationship to the land plays a key role in developing our cosmology, epistemology, and worldview. How Indigenous people relate to the land helps the people to imagine who they are as a nation and as a distinct people. The land, then, becomes the context for how we determine identity. Self-imagination is more concerned with how we imagine ourselves. Identity refers to how such imaginings interact with the world around us. Anyone can imagine one’s self to be Indigenous, or Choctaw, or Cherokee, but it is how others regard that imagination that determines identity. While self-imagination and identity are distinct concepts, they are inevitably intertwined.

As previously mentioned, one point of criticism several scholars have of Owens is his ideas tend to focus on the individual. For example, Weaver finds that for Owens the novels he discusses in *Other Destinies* “are concerned with a search for identity, the

recovery of a personal identity by the books' protagonists. I have contended that Native literatures are, ultimately, quests for community. Such readings, however, are not mutually exclusive. Native peoples find their individual identities in the collectivity of community" (*That the People* 161). But Owens's "collectivity of community" wasn't consistent throughout his life. If Owens's works seems focused on the individual rather than the community, it might be because Owens was not raised in a consistently tribal community: "I was always conscious of being Indian when I was growing up, but my only real contact with Indianness was ephemeral" (Lee 30). Given his mixed heritage and how often he moved, Owens grew up away from a stable Indigenous, or non-Indigenous, background. Individuals might very well find their identity in a "collectivity of community," as Weaver contends, but that becomes complicated when one's community is multivalent.

Understanding how Owens articulates his past helps to illuminate his theories on Mixedblood existence and on hybridity. This might be why he included autobiographical writings with his critical essays, as he does in *Mixedblood Messages* and *I Hear the Train*. In fact, in the preface to *Mixedblood Messages*, Owens writes:

My wish that together these essays should present a consciousness—my own—that arises out of and is concerned with two issues: questions of mixed heritage and how we articulate those questions, especially in fiction, and the ways in which we relate to the natural world. The autobiographical writings, I hope, will provide a context for the critical and environmental musings, and vice versa. (xvi)

How successfully he intertwines his critical theories with autobiographical writings is subjective, of course. For example, Teuton claims that, in *Mixedblood Messages*, Owens “struggles to ground his theories with the experience of his own life” (*Red Land* 246). Teuton is correct in that Owens fails to make explicit how his autobiographical writings act as context for his theories. That is, he does not interject personal narratives into the critical chapters themselves. I contend, however, that Owens does not so much struggle to ground his theories in his personal narrative as he purposely restrains from making such connections.

When Owens refuses to connect his personal narrative with his critical theories, he creates gaps. We have to assume creating these gaps is a deliberate rhetorical move. It is a technique Vizenor also employs, which is not surprising considering how their ideas cohere. When discussing Vizenor’s use of gaps and ambiguity, Kimberly Blaeser draws on Chris Anderson’s ideas on “rhetoric of gaps,” which “can involve implied absence, suggestion of a connection to something beyond the text, or an obvious allusion to another level of meaning” (170). The “implied absence” of meaning is intentionally left unfulfilled. Ultimately, the idea is to invite the reader, or audience, to participate in the production of meaning, similar to the interplay between storyteller, story, and audience in oral traditions. The audience/reader is invited to explore these gaps. In fact, meaning is created when we explore the interplay, i.e. the gaps, between storyteller/writer, story/text, and audience/reader. His critical works and his personal narratives convey his consciousness as a *Mixedblood*, though they do so differently.

Exploring and filling in such gaps became important for Owens. He says that as a child he was “always trying to figure out who I was and who my parents were, and I

had to piece together bits of the mystery from knowledge of my grandparents and the bits of story coming from my mother” (Lee 30). He attempted to fill the gaps between the stories he had been given. His mixed heritage, however, made for a hodgepodge of stories that originated from different cultures. As already mentioned, Owens did not grow up in either a stable Indigenous or non-Indigenous community. His task, then, was to seek connections between these disparate stories in order to compose his own story. When his family moved to California permanently, he noticed how astonishingly different they were from others: “I tried to comprehend that difference by putting together what I knew of my family history. The result was a kind of constantly shifting story of self” (Lee 30). Thus, delving into the gaps—seeking connections for the sake of a complete story—renders Owens with an unstable story of self, i.e. identity. Owens would live with this “indeterminate sense of self,” wishing he could be “one thing or another. Only as an adult did I come to realize how rich that unstable life was” (Lee 32). Indeed, it is clear to see how this shifting and liminal sense of self feeds into the way Owens theorizes about Native literature. Eventually, Owens ceases wishing he was “one thing or another” and instead embraces his mixed and dynamic heritage as he finds existence in the liminal state of in-betweenness.¹¹

Since this Mixedblood space is dynamic,

to be what is called a mixedblood is never to rest. One may opt for this side or that, but one is always balanced on a thin line between ways of

¹¹ Owens articulates coming to terms and eventually embracing this unstable identity: “Now I know better, and in life’s midpassage I have learned to inhabit a hybrid, unpapered, Choctaw-Cherokee-Welsh-Irish-Cajun mixed space in between. I conceive of myself today not as an ‘Indian,’ but as a mixedblood. . . I am the product of liminal space, the result of union between desperate individuals on the edges of dispossessed cultures and the marginalized spawn of invaders” (*Mixedblood Messages* 176). This description sounds like a far cry from Mixedblood angst.

knowing. A choice is there, in every day and moment. But only because cultures insist upon choice. . . One is Indian or one is not Indian. The mixedblood is forced to choose, to check a single box on every form.
(MM 197-198)

The Mixedblood angst Owens seems to imagine is having to choose a single box, wondering why he cannot check more than one. He express this pressure to choose one or the other through his fiction. In *Dark River*, his last novel, Atkinson turns to Stroud and says, “You the man, so you tell the brother he got to be Injun or white, he got to choose. He can’t be no in-between” (123). This is a direct indictment of those who refuse to choose, insisting that one “can’t be no in-between.” Obviously, this insistence upon choosing does not sit well with Owens as he also imagines another way of self-imagination in his second novel, *The Sharpest Sight*. The protagonist Cole and his father Hoey are both mixedblood, but Hoey chooses to focus on being Choctaw. Cole asks him, “Why do you have to be just one thing or the other?” Hoey responds: “I been trying to remember more things, and read things that are Indian. I guess if I grew up over in Ireland, and knew more about being Irish, I might choose that” (59). This expresses how our environment influences, even sometimes determines, how we imagine ourselves. Yet, there is also a choice. Hoey chooses to “read things that are Indian,” not things that are Irish. Many mixedblood Indigenous people choose (i.e. focus on) one over the other. The personal choice to focus on one over the other tends to ground critical theories, as we see in tribally-specific scholarship. Hoey’s words

suggest one is able to choose one over the other. Cole's words, on the other hand, seem to suggest that one does not have to.¹²

This refusal to choose one over the other and, instead, accept all aspects of his heritage expresses a key aspect to Owens's critical theories: resistance to being defined. A significant part of his theories confronts resisting the imposition of the Euramerican imagination of Indigenous people. Owens states that in "literature by contemporary Indian authors, we find characters who constantly face this dilemma of an identity constructed within the authoritative discourse of the non-Indian world. In order to be recognized, to claim authenticity in the world—in order to be seen at all—the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from the outside" (MM 12-13). Just as Owens refuses to be pressured into choosing one aspect of his identity over others, Owens also refuses to conform to an image, thus an identity, imposed by the settler. Resistance to such in an imposition is also resistance to settler colonialism.

In particular, Owens and Vizenor used postmodern theory and Indigenous epistemology to deconstruct the "Indian" that Vizenor calls a simulation and is absent "of the tribal real" (4). "Indian" is a simulation in that it points to a referent that does not exist. It is "a figment of the Europeanized imagination. There are no real 'Indians' in that sense" (Lee 31). And while the signifier "Indian" may shift, i.e. most non-Indigenous people today may use "Native American," it still signifies a referent that does not exist. Yet, despite this, the "Indian" persists, as it is a means to control how

¹² Lyons also articulates in *X-Marks* this pressure to choose. When discussing feeling the need to "take sides," he writes: "Naturally, this was impossible for me to do—as the half-breed/mixed-blood/part-Indian always asks, which side do I take?—and then the ambivalence of my identity took firm root. I was never given an adequate language to describe the experience of Being Me, racially speaking. . . (x). Mixedblood critics would give Lyons a language to describe his experience.

Indigenous people are perceived, an aspect of settler colonialism. Not only does the “Indian” not exist, it is detrimental as it is used to control the image of Indigenous people and confine Indigenous people to that image. Owens observes that “Euramerica remains involved in an unceasing ideological struggle to confine Native Americans, within an essentialized territory defined by the authoritative utterance ‘Indian.’ Native Americans, however, continue to resist this ideology of containment and to insist upon the freedom to reimagine themselves within a fluid, always shift frontier space” (27). As Owens asserts, the resistance to being confined and defined by the “authoritative utterance ‘Indian’” is a concern for all Native Americans, whether they be concerned with mixedblood identity, Indigenous sovereignty, or decolonization. Owens opts to find a space that allows for multiple ways to imagine ourselves.

Owens calls the fluid and shifting space in which Indigenous people are free to imagine themselves the “frontier.” In *Mixedblood Messages*, Owens suggests an “appropriation and transvaluation” of “frontier” (26). Chris LaLonde, for example, claims that Owens invites us “to see the frontier not in terms of the mastering narrative of the Nation and Manifest Destiny, but as a contact zone of possibility and play” (57). Owens likens the frontier to what Mary Louise Pratt calls “contact zones,”: “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 4). Given his Mixedblood identity and his refusal to choose one over the other, it is no shock Owens would find such a space inviting. From his birth, Owens was always in transit, meaning there was no stability in his environment and culture. Owens views the frontier as “unstable, multidirectional, hybridized, characterized by heteroglossia, and

indeterminate.” The frontier stands in opposition to “territory,” which is “clearly mapped, fully imagined as a place of containment, invented to control and subdue the dangerous potentialities of imagined Indians” (26). The frontier, then, becomes a space in which Indigenous people can resist Euramerican “imagined Indians.” Owens envisions the frontier as a space where Indigenous people interact with others but is undefined, enabling them to resist being defined. And since the space is open, it allows Native people to imagine themselves in a multitude of ways. “Territory” is settled and defined. It prescribes and does not allow room for imaginative play. If the Mixedblood refuses to choose parts of their heritage over other parts, the open space of the frontier is necessary.

Owens’s attempt at appropriating “frontier,” however, fails. While imagining such a space that resists definition is attractive to Mixedbloods, it is not without its flaws. As previously mentioned, Womack suggests that one way to evaluate literary theory is to determine how it references the social world, though it need not be a one-to-one relationship (*AILN* 94). In between what one writes and the social-political world such writing references (i.e. gaps), there is room for imagination. This enables Owens to assert such imagination into the world. The nationalists, however, imagine this space differently. Indigenous Literary Nationalism has infused a political dimension into the discourse, initiating new ways of thinking about our literature and developing our theories. When borders are imagined, then, we must take into account how these ideas of borders interact with such nationalist concepts and how they reference the social/political world. Warrior illustrates this shift when he argues that Owens “eschews the clear differentiation of political boundaries, while history of

Native struggle at nearly every turn seeks in some way to establish them” (*People and the Word* xxvi). When we imagine our space and borders as being fluid, it has potentially detrimental effects on our political borders. Mark Rifkin offers a very real and political issue with imagining fluid and porous political borders: “What remains unclear, though, is how a scholarly emphasis on the permeability of the nation and its imbrication in transnational processes can chart or challenge the force exerted in the ongoing reaffirmation of U.S. jurisdiction” (23). Rifkin articulates the potential danger of Mixedblood discourse when imagined politically that other Nationalist critics see.

Another reason Owens fails at appropriating “frontier” is how it ostensibly ignores the history associated with that term. Warrior continues his criticism by arguing Owens “endorses the use of a term, *frontier*, that has heralded unmitigated disaster in the history of Native America, revisiting it as if it is simply a convention to be employed, rather than an ideologically imbued term that has served as a primary weapon in the material oppression of Native people in the Americas” (*People and the Word* xxvi). Warrior’s point might have to do with Owens’s rhetoric, criticizing the manner in how Owens proposes this appropriation rather than Owens’s own awareness of history. Owens is well-aware of this history, claiming the term bears “burden of a discourse grounded in genocide, ethnocide, and half a millennium of determined efforts to erase indigenous peoples from the Americas,” calling it a “deadly cliché of colonialism.”¹³ Yet, Owens proceeds, arguing that “appropriation, inversion, and abrogation of authority are always the trickster’s strategies” (*MM* 26). While the unstable ground of the frontier may be attractive to Mixedbloods, it does not account

¹³ Additionally, in a later chapter, Owens mentions the difference between “territory” and “frontier,” he says: “And I want to recuperate the history-laden term ‘frontier’ in the process” (44).

for the history associated with the term. For others, like Warrior, there is too much attached to this “deadly cliché of colonialism” to simply appropriate. Obviously, Owens believes we can overcome the burden of colonial oppression and “unmitigated disaster” it brought upon Indigenous people. However, when dealing with how we overcome this history, he simply relies on “trickster’s strategies.” And while Owens and Vizenor have shown how useful such strategies are, particularly in confronting dominating Euramerican racist stereotypes, the weight of history that “frontier” carries appears to be too much to simply appropriate.¹⁴ Owens’s failure at appropriation is his failure to fully deal with that burden.

There is also an issue with how Owens orients Indigenes and Euramericans vis-à-vis the frontier. Again, Owens’s notion of the frontier is based on Pratt’s “contact zones” where different cultures clash with one another. Since Owens views this space as a “shimmering, always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into questions,” (*MM* 26) it is easy to see why he is attracted to such a space as it best fits how he envisions his own existence, along with other Mixedbloods like him. From the settler’s vantage point, the frontier exists adjacent to but also outside their own borders, beyond their own base. There is distinction between the space the settler occupies and where they clash with Indigenous people. For the settler, that space extends all the way through Indigenous land, for whenever the settler encroaches on tribal homelands, such lands necessarily

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that “appropriation” in and of itself is the problem. In fact, nationalists rely on Indigenous peoples’ ability to adopt foreign elements that they find useful, a practice Simon Ortiz calls as a “nationalistic impulse” (8). Weaver further states: “Native showed themselves adept at adopting and adapting anything that seemed to be useful or to have power. Yet each new item, tool, or technology was used to strengthen, not weaken, their people. The question remains unanswered: at what point did they become incapable of expressing a separate cultural/national perspective (*AILN* 29)? Weaver’s claim describing appropriated elements as hybridity.

become a contact zone. Indigenous space, as imagined by Indigenous people, is not a frontier where different cultures clash one another. That space is Indigenous homelands.

Owens, however, fails to account for the space Indigenous people inhabit, where there is no clash between disparate cultures. This is not to suggest that Indigenous communities themselves are monolithic, but for Owens, his life, theories, and stories inhabit the frontier as he constantly negotiates the disparate cultures and traditions that make up his own heritage. The frontier is a natural space for him to inhabit. Problems arise, however, when Owens asserts such an existence for all Indigenous people: “For those of us who, like most of the authors we recognize as Native American, are mixedbloods, the hybridized, polygot, transcultural frontier is quite clearly internalized” (*MM* 27). While it is safe to assume that many Indigenous people do have mixed ancestry, most do not orient their self-conception in this “hybridized, polygot, transcultural frontier,” but rather as Indigenous, or tribal. While the settler will view all spaces beyond their own borders as a contact zone, including *all* Indigenous lands, this does not account for the Indigenous space Native people inhabit who do not view their spaces as such.

Owens’s frontier, however, should not be dismissed outright. Though it does not describe the space most Indigenous people inhabit, it does help us to further understand the space wherein cultures meet, the gaps Owens spent his life trying to fill, what happens in that space, and its potential ramifications. Understanding what Owens articulates about the frontier helps us to further understand U.S. settler colonialism. The unstable frontier offers agency in self-imagination whereas the territory is “a region

bounded by discourse, articulated and controlled” (MM 45). To move from the frontier to a territory is to contain our self-conceptions. Owens understands the value in having agency in self-imagination and the right to express it. He also understands how this space, ironically, enables the settler to reimagine themselves, as well. As Owens finds the unstable frontier a place to defy being defined, the settler uses it to reimagine themselves as the rightful owners of the land and to claim indigeneity for themselves.

In fact, the settler has no option but to claim a sense of indigeneity for themselves. The pivotal aspect of settler colonialism that distinguishes it from other forms is that the colonizers extinguish the bonds that still identify them with the metropole. As settler colonialism studies scholar Lorenzo Veracini states: “as the very word ‘settler’ implies, it is the *intention* to stay (as opposed to the sojourners’ intention to return) that contributes the crucial differentiating trait” (53). They extinguish their alliance to the metropole and plan on settling. The colonizer then seeks to shed their identification as a colonizer, one that is neither European nor Indigenous, but one that could best be described as hybrid.¹⁵ While they seek to retain Old World civilization, they also covet the freedom the frontier represents. The unstable conditions of the frontier offer the settler the space in which to accomplish this transformation and establish their own “indigenous” roots, to settle.

¹⁵ In many ways, Owens’s frontier resembles Homi Bhabha’s Third Space. For Owens, the frontier is a zone where “every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put in to question” (MM 26). For Bhabha, the Third Space “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning of symbols of culture have no primordial unit or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (37). All referents and cultural symbols are unfixed and debatable. This is the mechanism that allows Owens to resist being determined but also lets the settler claim such indigeneity.

Owens recognizes that one way to establish their roots is for the settler to gain control over and establish connections to the land. Patrick Wolfe convincingly argues settler colonialism requires the elimination of Indigenous people, enacting a variety of methods to accomplish this. He further argues that whatever “settlers may say . . . the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (“Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” 388). While acquiring and control of territory is a key element of settler colonialism that must be realized and understood, the settler also desires “nothing less than the indigenous relationship with place” (*MM* 124). As Owens states:

If that pure, original relationship represented by the Indian can somehow be claimed, the American imagination believes, the morally tainted invader may be reborn from the womb of landscape in all innocence, sparing from his own Platonic conception of himself as the great American child-man like James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, the self-imagined Walt Whitman, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Gatsby, or any of the numerous film characters played by John Wayne. (*MM* 124)

The settler not only seeks to control territory, but also must forge a new identity through imagining a creation myth based in the land. They do so through self-imagination, i.e. the stories they tell of themselves.

These American characters (e.g. Bumppo, et al.) embody the settler’s self-imagination and transformation through the appropriation of indigeneity. Owens plays particular attention to John Wayne and what he represents in his chapter “The Invention

of John Wayne” in *Mixedblood Messages*. The closing of the nineteenth-century saw the literal closing of the frontier (thus, acquisition and control of territory), as declared in Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” with Euramerica winning the West.¹⁶ The twentieth-century saw this replayed in the Euramerican imagination through narratives featuring characters portrayed by John Wayne. Ojibwe film critic Jesse Wente explains that John Wayne embodies “the idea of the unstoppable American, that the true American wasn’t Native. Native Americans were the ones that stopped real Americans from settling their own county” (*Reel Injun*). While John Wayne symbolized Western expansion, i.e. Manifest Destiny, he further symbolizes the settler’s own “indigenous” claim to the land. As Owens explains, “[e]mbedded in John Wayne’s role is America’s five-hundred-year-long desire to become Indian, that unconscious but oft-articulated yearning to empty the space called Indian and reoccupy it” (*MM* 106). Owens expresses this desire another way, albeit a bit more starkly: “American loves Indians so much it has tried to kill them to the last mother and child so that it might inhabit the empty skin” (*MM* 198). If our efforts to resist colonization are to continue, it is essential we understand the settler’s efforts go beyond the elimination of our presence to claiming indigeneity for themselves. Owens imagines the frontier as a place best suited to express and understand Mixedblood consciousness and resist settler colonialism. Ironically, the conditions of the frontier also enable the settler to advance the goal of settlement, literally and figuratively.

¹⁶ Lyons echoes this notion that the frontier as a place where the settler reimagines themselves to enact this transformation. He writes: “[Fredrick Jackson Turner] thought the significance of the frontier was its transformation of old Europeans in new Americans, a process that must have happened at the frontier line, as it produced characteristics that seemed specific to American identity: individualism, self-sufficiency, distrust of authority figures, lack of culture and arts, and a propensity for violence” (16).

The discourse of resistance has seen a shift in the last decade. Indigenous scholars and writers have taken to calling the invader the “settler,” obviously referencing that we face settler colonization, as opposed to other forms of colonization. The concept that invasion is structural rather than an event has resonated throughout the discourse. This shift prompts us to reimagine invasion and the invader, and our relationship to both. It is imperative we understand how we fit into that structure if we are to disrupt it. Specifically, understanding invasion as a structure prompts us to reevaluate the usefulness and potential dangers of elements of our discourse, i.e. Owens’s frontier, hybridity, and Mixedbloods. It is imperative that we not only continue to imagine what Mixedbloods mean for who we are as tribal nations and Indigenous people, we also must scrutinize what place the Mixedblood has in that settler structure.

The Mixedblood, and other forms of hybridity, disrupts the structure of invasion. In *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Veracini describes the settler colonial state as having a triangular population economic system composed of Indigenous, settler, and exogenous Others. He goes on to say that the “settler colonial situation” is “characteristically perceived as a dynamic environment where different groups are routinely imagined as transiting from one section of the population system to another” (20).¹⁷ The triangular structure of the settler colonial state does allow for

¹⁷ Veracini further claims that these three sections of the population are not equal. The settler places themselves at the center:

True, immigrant exogenous Others often benefit from the dispossession of indigenous people, even as their incorporation within the structures of the settler body politics remains pending (they are implicated; however, their positioning is distinctive). On the other hand, this triangular understanding of the settler colonial situation underlines the constitutive hegemony of the settler component: even if indigenous and exogenous subalternities are dialectically related to it, indeed, exactly because of these relationships, it is the settler that establishes himself as normative. (18)

movement across the borders of each populations, but the populations themselves must remain rigid. As already argued, the Mixedblood refuses to choose one side over another and actually exists on the borders. This is to say, hybridity “also structurally upset[s] a settler population economy.” Veracini goes on to say:

Hybrid forms disturb the triangular system of relationship inherent in the settler colonial situation, and ultimately reproduce a dual system where two constitutive categories are mixed without being subsumed. In the end, as hybridity reproduces a constituent dual logic, it relates to colonial forms rather than settler colonial ones. (On the contrary, settler colonial representational regimes need a triangular system of relationships: if the settler self is both indigenous *and* exogenous, it needs two dialectical counterpoints, not one—an indigenous and an exogenous one.) (30)

The persistence of Mixedbloods unsettles the structure of settler colonialism. Owens seems to recognize this, stating that “the tortured and torturing ‘breed’ has served as a matrix for the conflicted terrors of Euramerica, the horror of liminality that is the particular trauma of the colonial” (*MM* 25). This is not to suggest that the disruptive nature of hybridity is a reason in and of itself to accept Mixedblood self-imagination as Indigenous/tribal self-imagination. The reason for that inclusion, as already argued, is Mixedblood discourse offers a language to express how so many Indigenous people imagine themselves. Their presence alone is reason enough for their inclusion. The cause of this disruption is the Mixedblood’s refusal to choose one over the other, which

would help to maintain rigid populations. The Mixedblood, instead, chooses to acknowledge all facets of their heritage when imagining their identity. They refuse to identify solely as Indigenous, Euramerican, or an exogenous Other.

While the settler continues the effort to maintain the triangular structure of the settler colonial state, the ultimate goal is the erasure of the actual Indigenous presence. This is why the American myth of the Vanishing Indian persists, despite our continual presence. The primary means by which Indigenous people persevere is our ability to appropriate foreign elements into our self-imagination. Acoma poet Simon Ortiz claims that the Catholic religious rituals brought to the Indigenous populations of the U.S. Southwest, like the different Pueblos, are no longer Spanish but “are now Indian because of the creative development that the native people applied to them.” He goes on to say that “every case where European culture was cast upon Indian people of this nation there was similar creative response and development” (*X-Marks* 8). Indigenous cultures today include elements that were, at one time, foreign. Lyons, for example writes about how he assumed Euramerican cultural elements he grew up with, like Mr. Spock from *Star Trek* and the Young Adult writer Judy Blume, were Indigenous. Obviously, he eventually learns that they were not Native, but that does not prevent Lyons from including them into his self-imagination since they played a role in his upbringing: “I’m not saying that Mr. Spock and the great Judy Blume are Indians; I’m saying that this particular Indian has Mr. Spock and Judy Blume as part of his interior landscape” (xiii). The act of appropriating foreign ideas and artifacts is by no means a novel concept as it is how any culture persists, but it becomes even more essential when living in a settler colonial world, at least if we are to maintain our social and political

integrity as tribal nations and people. By appropriating such elements, Indigenous people are able to survive *as* Indigenous people, which further resists hybridity.

Through the late 90s and early 2000s, Native literary discourse can be characterized by the rejection of Mixedblood discourse and hybridity, opting for Indigenous nationalism, thus establishing a binary with Mixedblood and Literary Nationalism on opposing sides. While I have discussed particular problems nationalist critics have with Mixedblood discourse and hybridity, Lyons succulently summarizes their primary concern: “[hybridity] calls into question the possibility of discrete cultural boundaries and makes the case for political nationalism a bit more difficult to sustain” (*X-Marks* 101). Through the act of appropriation, Indigenous people are able to claim Euramerican ideas, rituals, and artifacts as Indigenous, thus maintaining “discrete cultural boundaries” and “political nationalism.” And, yet, hybridity persists. It persists because those of mixed ancestry who see no need to appropriate elements one way or the other persist.

When we imagine ourselves culturally, socially, and politically, we establish demarcating lines. These lines separate Choctaws from Cherokees, for example, or, more broadly, Indigenous people from Euramericans. We develop our own structures of identity, culture, and polity. The Mixedblood, and other metaphors for those who exist along these lines, resist choosing one side over another. They disrupt these structures since such structures rely on demarcation. Hybridity is disruptive since, when we imagine something as being hybrid, it ceases to belong to either side. It exists on the dotted line, and is “*neither the one nor the other*,” to use Bhabha’s description (25). It becomes something separate from Indigenous or Euramerican. Just as the Mixedblood

disrupts the structures of settler colonialism, they also disrupt our own structures, especially when those structures are erected to resist colonization. After all, to resist colonization is to insist upon the integrity of who we are as distinct peoples and nations culturally, socially, and politically. Such demarking lines, dotted or not, are important.

We cannot outright dismiss Mixedblood discourse or those who identify as Mixedblood. These ideas help to articulate the social and political reality that a lot of Indigenous people experience, as previously argued, and we have an obligation to recognize the integrity of such self-imagination. We should, instead, opt for a more pluralistic approach to how we imagine ourselves as a people and as sovereign nations. As LaLonde suggests, an “attention to mixedblood identity and an attention to nationalism and sovereignty need not be exclusive” (57). It might be a matter of uncovering discourse that already has accepted both perspectives. For example, Lyons suggests that “hybridity haters” should reread Ortiz’s, “Towards a National Indian Literature” (157). As Lyons points, Ortiz’s article lacks any attack on hybridity but, instead, claims that the protagonist in Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony*, Tayo, is a Mixedblood and like “many Indian people *of whom he is a reflection*, [faces] circumstances which seemingly are beyond his ability to control” (Ortiz qtd. Lyons 157). Lyons concludes this point by claiming: “Hybridity is in fact a decent metaphor to describe the ways all cultures change, and the same can be said for ‘mixed’ identities. The thing to do is not protest the claim that a Native writer or culture evidences hybridity, but simply to point out the continuity that carries forth nonetheless” (157). Mixedbloods are nothing new. They “represent a crucial period in the histories of America and of mixed-blood peoples in this country, a period that is often either unknown or misunderstood by Americans,

Indian and non-Indian alike” (*Mixedblood Messages* 147). Instead of discounting Mixedblood discourse and hybridity, we need to reimagine how they fit in our own structures, or, more accurately, we need to imagine structures that account for such disruption, if possible.

Chapter 3

Oklahoma Choctaw: The Works of D. L. Birchfield

Oklahoma's Indians, overwhelmed, and ignored, trying desperately to save their cultures from extinction, are still there, still pointing to the treaties, still waiting.

~D. L. Birchfield, *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*

Our ancestors promised that their descendants would be part of the modern world while continuing to maintain that activist sense of community that Jace Weaver has called "communitism." Sometimes that means adopting new ways of living, thinking, and being that do not necessarily emanate from a traditional cultural source (or, for that matter, "time immemorial"), and sometimes it means appropriating the new and changing it to feel more like the old. Sometimes change can make the old feel new again. Sometimes a removal can become a migration.

~Richard Scott Lyons, *X-Marks*

In his 2006 novel, *Black Silk Handkerchief*, Don L. Birchfield presents a Choctaw protagonist, Hom-Astubby, a nature photographer (something Birchfield once aspired to be) who drives a cream-colored four-ton truck with a crimson-colored camper. Yet, Hom-Astubby is not *just* Choctaw. The novel takes place in Devon Country, Colorado and opens with Hom-Astubby meeting Sheriff Klewlusz. When Klewlusz asks Hom-Astubby if he is an "Oklahoman Indian," he responds, "I'm Choctaw. . .As for where I come from, the tags on that truck shouldn't be your only clue. Didn't you notice that the paint job on that cream-colored truck and that crimson camper happen to be the exact precise shades of the official school colors of the butt-kickingest football team in the history of college football? And I'll whup anybody who says different" (15). Instead of simply saying that he is an "Oklahoma Indian," he offers a much more specific answer. Not only does he claim to be Choctaw, he references his tags, which are Oklahoma tags. He also points to his truck's color scheme that matches the official

colors of the University of Oklahoma. Hom-Astubby wants Klewlusz to know that he is not only Choctaw but is *Oklahoma* Choctaw.

There are different implications when using “Oklahoma” to modify “Choctaw.” “Oklahoma” can be used as a political distinction, as in The Choctaw Nation of *Oklahoma*, which is a different political entity than the Mississippi Band of Choctaw. It can be used to signify the special history and status that indigenous nations of Oklahoma have with the U.S. government, as Stephen Pevar writes, “The United States has so drastically interfered in the way of life of the Oklahoma tribes that they acquired a unique relationship with the federal government” (257).¹ This further assumes Oklahoma Choctaw history differs from that of other Choctaw people and that different history is spurred by the removal of the Choctaw people from Southeastern U.S. in 1830. “Oklahoma” can also point to cultural and social traits that distinguish Oklahoma Choctaws from other Choctaw people. Using “Oklahoma” as an adjective assumes two things: 1) there is a distinction between Oklahoma Choctaw and other groups of Choctaw people (i.e. Mississippi Band of Choctaw, unrecognized bands) and therefore is something separate, and 2) the characteristics of Oklahoma Choctaw that make such distinctions are influenced by the region that encompasses the state of Oklahoma. This chapter makes such assumptions. Furthermore, it pursues the question: what is Oklahoma Choctaw?

¹ *The Rights of Indians and Tribes* is a handbook put out by the American Civil Liberties Union and is an excellent general reference resource. One of the chapters, “The Special Status of Certain Indian Groups,” focuses on different indigenous people who have a special relationship with the federal government. Such groups includes the Pueblos of New Mexico, Alaska Native, New York, Oklahoma, and non-recognized groups.

Throughout his works, Birchfield asserts a distinctly Oklahoma Choctaw identity. This might be most evident with the title of his first book, *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test: New and Collected Elementary, Epistolary, Autobiographical, and Oratorical Choctologies* (1998), a mixed-genre text that includes essays (personal and historical), short stories, poetry, and a multiple-choice test, the book's namesake. His first novel *Field of Honor* (2004) has an Oklahoma Choctaw protagonist and most of the plot takes place literally underneath Southeastern Oklahoma, the regions originally set aside for the Choctaws after Removal. His last book, *How Choctaws Invented Civilization and Why Choctaws Will Conquer the World* (2007), which he calls a "hybrid of academic scholarship and creative non-fiction," covers general Choctaw history but includes elements that are distinctly Oklahoman (vii).² While there is no mistake that his works are unmistakably Choctaw, they are also very Oklahoma Choctaw. Broadly speaking, this chapter seeks to understand how region influences how Choctaws imagine themselves and how the U.S. settler colonial context influences that imagination. More specifically, this chapter seeks a profound understanding of what it means to be "Oklahoma Choctaw" as articulated by Birchfield who illuminates an important tactic for survival and resistance to settler colonialism: appropriation.

There is a variety of approaches in seeking that understanding. Instead of listing and describing certain cultural, social, and political traits of Oklahoma Choctaws and comparing that list to the traits of other peoples, e.g. Mississippi Choctaw, this chapter

² By "general Choctaw history," I mean Choctaw history that is shared by all Choctaws. It is meant to be different from Oklahoma Choctaw history that includes general Choctaw history but branches into its own history as a result of Removal. At this point, the Choctaws were separated and the different Choctaw people (those that were forced to move and those who evaded Removal and stayed) began different experiences, and thus experienced a different history.

focuses on how the region, Oklahoma, influences Oklahoma Choctaw self-imagination and identity. Assuming there are characteristics of Oklahoma Choctaw that distinguish them from other Choctaws, the political, social, and cultural dimensions of Oklahoma Choctaw can also be assumed to be influenced by the region. Admittedly, calling “Oklahoma” a “region” is problematic given that “region” commonly refers to a large area of space that often encompasses several states (e.g. Southern, Midwestern, West Coastal). Referring to “Oklahoma” as a region, to a large extent, is a term of convenience. Doing so enables a regional approach to be employed, “regional” here referring to the characteristics of the American literary period, also referred to as local color, and the criticism it prompted. Regionalism, in this sense, has its problems vis-à-vis indigenous literatures, which I discuss later, but it also has its usefulness. I will try to negotiate the problems and usefulness of regionalism using *relational regionalism*, an approach first articulated by Mvskoke critic Tol Foster in his contribution to *Reasoning Together*, “Of One Blood: An Argument for Relations and Regionality in Native American Literary Studies.”

Oklahoma Choctaw are not unique in how their surroundings influence their self-imagination and identity. The self-imagination of any group of people, indigenous or otherwise, is influenced by their region (“region” here is understood to include not only the humans, flora, fauna that cohabit the space, but also the landscape). The self-imagination and identity of all tribal people includes elements that are regionally based. Such elements are very particular to those people. For example, the kiva is central to the Pueblo people in New Mexico and is particular to them. No other group of people in the region have this element. There are other elements, however, that some cultures

share with other regional cultures. Green chile, for example, is definitely a part of Pueblo culture, but it is not exclusive to them. Not only is it found among other indigenous groups of the region, e.g. Diné and Apache, but it is also a part of non-Indigenous New Mexican culture. As Native American studies has embraced a global indigenous scope that has changed the field and how we go about our studies, we should also remember that Indigenous people are still very much a product of their surroundings. Any expression of a tribal voice will be steeped in the tribe's region.

Some of the tenets of American regionalism and the literary criticism it spurred will be of use. Regionalism refers to a genre of literature popular at the latter end of the eighteenth century, and is widely recognized as being a part of the larger movement, American realism. Writers of realism sought to present life as it is, or how they saw it, rather than what was ideal. Regionalism not only attempted to present a realistic portrayal of life, writers also sought to portray the characteristics of the region where the stories take place, which often coincided with the author's origins. These characteristics includes the region's people, language, cultures, politics, and geography. Delving into these regional characteristics helps to delineate tribal self-imagination and identity, thus contributing to our understanding of ourselves. Foster, for example, sees a "connection of the tribal and the regional to be acts pursuing the same project of knowing ourselves and the world" (270). Paying attention to such regional characteristics in how Indigenous people express themselves along with those tribal elements that are particular to that tribe opens up how we imagine ourselves.

While the literary period ended at the turn of the twentieth century, the focus on such regional aspects continued into the twentieth century. Following the civil rights

movement, there was a surge of area studies departments at universities as “academics came together to form regional associations for literary critics” such as the Society for the Study of Southern Literature, Western Literature Association, and the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature (Wells 116). As regional approaches were “disregarded by others in the academy. . .the regionalist’s opening to study region came on the heels of other groups finding a place to study themselves” (Wells 116-117). As Jennifer H. Holly Wells writes: “With the discovery that the United States was not a melting pot came an opportunity for those disenfranchised from the overarching national narrative to study their own stories” (117). Put another way, focusing on regional concerns helps to resist being overcome by larger national narratives. In the Indigenous context, that larger national narrative is detrimental. There are several problems with how Indigenous people are portrayed in these national narratives that are destructive, but perhaps the most destructive is how we are portrayed as the vanishing race. Furthermore, such national narratives lump the different Indigenous people into a single image of the “Indian.”³ Indigenous people have devoted significant energy and focus on combatting such monolithic depictions of Indigenous peoples. Regionalism persisted through twentieth-century by incorporating voices that are resistant to the national narratives and monolithic depictions. Focusing in on regionalist’s concerns can promote diversity, which is necessary in resisting colonization.

³ One way this lack of recognition of Indigenous diversity manifests is through an imagined “Indian” language. While there are well over 250 indigenous language in the US and Canada alone, there is still the belief that there is a single Indian language. In fact, just recently a friend asked me if I knew the meaning of a word she had heard. The word was unfamiliar to me and when I asked what language it was, my friend said, “You know, Indian. . .Native.” She looked confused and even disappointed that I didn’t know the word.

One of the most alluring aspects of taking a regionalist approach is how it resists sameness. In order to illustrate resistance, Wells uses Wal-Mart and McDonald's as an example. The goal of both is to present the customers with the same product regardless of where they happened to be shopping: "The Egg McMuffin in New York will be, for all intents and purposes, identical to those in Chicago and Los Angeles" (Ritzer qtd. in Wells 120). When we patronize a McDonald's, or any other "McDonaldized island," like Wal-Mart, it disconnects us from "experiencing local flavors, thereby undermining the individualizing experience provided by regionalism. . . the alienation and autonomy. . . when walking into a McDonald's or a Wal-Mart severed ties to spaces that made a region special" (120). Sameness, as illustrated by these "McDonaldized" islands, tends to disconnect us from what makes the different regions unique. Just as regionalism might help in resisting overbearing national narratives that still insist Indigenous people have vanished, or are at least on their way out, regionalist's concerns might also help to fight sameness in how we are imagined by most non-Indigenous people. How Indigenous people are imagined by the majority is crucial in determining if the ultimate goal of settler colonialism settlement is fulfilled. Sameness in how Indigenous people are depicted and imagined regardless of locale and time helps that goal.

As widely acknowledged, regional literature "resulted from the desire to preserve ways of life before industrialization dispersed or homogenized them" (Baym 12). The impetus to resist sameness, or "homogenized" "ways of life," has always been a part of regionalism. By focusing on and celebrating regional people, culture, society, language, and politics, regional writers resist homogeneity. This might be where

regionalism loosely intersects with contemporaneous Indigenous people and nations. Both were fighting an existential threat to their “ways of life.” However, the existential threat Euramerican writers were resisting was being conveyed by industrialization, which accounts for why regional texts predominantly features rural settings, people, and culture. Indigenous people were not staving off industrialization so much as they were fighting against invasion. While regional writers may have been facing a threat to their way of life, they were not facing a threat to their American identity. As Gary Totten argues, “in glorifying prototypical American regions, manners, and characteristics, regionalism celebrates the stability and timelessness of local American values as a projection of national values” (96). The U.S. was founded on the tenets of pluralism, a nation composed of culturally and socially disparate groups of people. Homogeneity is antithetical to American national values. Regional writers were fighting to keep those founding principles of the U.S. However, Indigenous people, were fighting, and still are, against U.S. settler colonization. While both faced an existential threat, there is huge difference between the conveyance of those threats and the possible consequences both people faced.

As one might expect, these differences manifest in incongruences between regionalism and Indigenous texts. For example, when discussing including Indigenous texts in the regionalist canon, Totten points out that inclusion is “crucial, but without a change in critical paradigms, such as an effort ignores the dissonance between Indigenous texts and traditional critical categories” (84). One of these incongruences Totten identifies is how regionalist criticism has failed to account for the dynamic nature of Indigenous cultures and identity, stating that regionalist criticism presents

“local life as knowable (i.e. stable and timeless) and ethnic difference within a region as simply another fixed idea” (88). This suggests that even if regional Indigenous people exhibit characteristics different from how the “Indian” (i.e. the Euramerican imagined Indigene) is imagined, that image is “another fixed idea” that renders Indigenous people a static entity. As a static entity, Indigenous people and their cultures, societies, and politics are not allowed to progress or change. This only contributes to the Vanishing Race myth, particularly when Indigenous people do not resemble these static images. Regionalists may express the diversity of Indigenous America by presenting images of Native peoples from their regions, but it does little good for Indigenous people if that expression presents an antiquated and static image. Totten goes on to discuss numerous inconsistencies between regionalist’s criticism and Indigenous texts, asserting that “[i]f issues of race and culture influence readings of regionalist writers, then theories of regionalism must reflect that influence as well” (87). Regionalism is not without its issues regarding Indigenous texts, but the incompatibilities are not so numerous and severe that they render it useless. An augmented form of regionalism can contribute to our understanding of Indigenous tribal self-imagination. There are tenets and approaches of regionalism that can help us understand how Birchfield imagines Oklahoma Choctaws, for example.

As previously mentioned, Tol Foster offers an augmented regional frame that he calls “relational regionalism.” To help explain relational regionalism, he offers two quotes, a hundred years apart, one by Thomas Jefferson in 1808 and the other by Mvskoke Chief Pleasant Porter in 1906. Both are speaking about intermarriage between Euramerican settlers and Natives, but they differ in perspective. For Jefferson,

intermarriage would establish the “American settlers the just inheritors of the land,” whereas, for Porter, intermarriage “would ensure the survival of tribal people within the national body.” Foster goes on to say that, although they were “working from different power relations and positions” they both suggest “amalgamation and adoption as the solution to struggles between Natives and settlers, and that is what has happened on the cultural and historical level.” This suggests that Indigenous identity and self-imagination is intertwined with non-Indigenous elements as a result of settler colonization. Relational regionalism enables us to “mediate and engage the claims of these very different speakers [Jefferson and Porter] and their positions against and in dialogue with one another. Thus engaged, we can understand the relation between *Native* and *America* in a way that privileges the local and the tribal” (268). Thus, relational regionalism assumes that Indigenous and Euramerican histories and cultures are inevitably intertwined.⁴ By focusing on how Indigenous people *relate* to the other people who cohabitate their region and teasing out the relationship between *Native* and *America*, Indigenous people are able to further understand themselves. I would like to extend in scope what Foster discusses to include how Indigenous people relate to the land.

For most Indigenous peoples, their epistemologies, ontologies, cosmologies, and self-imagination is rooted in how they relate to the land and all that inhabits it.

Indigenous cultures, societies, politics, and philosophy can also be assumed to be based

⁴ This does not necessarily mean, however, that all things Indigenous are actually hybrids. The process of appropriation, which I discuss later, enables the adaptation and indigenization of foreign elements, enabling Indigenous people and culture to change but retain their tribal integrity as they progress through history.

on that relationship, if not derived from it. When helping “Western thinkers grapple with Indigenous philosophy,” for example, Cherokee philosopher Brian Yazzie Burkhart suggests they examine “the manner in which language, knowledge, and being might be shaped by people’s experiences with land. . .or examining the manner in which language, knowledge, and being might be evolutionarily shaped by the land” (“The Grounding of Philosophy. . .” 1).⁵ While Burkhart mentions how land might influence Indigenous “language, knowledge, and being,” stories could also be included. At a conference proceeding at the 2017 Native American Literature Symposium, Burkhart suggested one way of looking at stories is to focus on how they are related to the people and the land, creating a trifecta of land, people, and story (“Tsalgi Gagoga Elohi. . .”). The three are inexorably intertwined so that an understanding of one requires an understanding of the two others. To fully grasp Indigenous stories, the reader must also understand the people and how they relate to the land. It also means that a change to one causes a change in the others. When the people move, for example, it will also affect the people and their stories. The nature of that movement, by removal or migration, determines the kind of change it has on the people and the stories.

Burkhart’s work on the land-people-stories triangle is still unpublished and still being developed, but the idea itself hardly seems new. Indigenous’ connection to the land had been written about extensively, as has Native American storytelling. The triangle seems to underlie Indigenous literature, oral and literary. That is to say, Indigenous people’s relationship with the land is foundational in how they imagine themselves and

⁵ I would like to thank Brian Yazzie Burkhart for sharing his unpublished chapter, and for the ongoing conversations about his ideas.

their world. The stories are an important way in how people imagine themselves. The stories are also an expression of that relationship to the land and how we come to understand ourselves and the world.

Understanding Oklahoma Choctaw, particularly within a settler colonial context, requires that we understand the element that make the people distinct from other Choctaws—Oklahoma. Put another way, we should examine how Oklahoma Choctaw relate to their surroundings: the land, the different people, flora, and fauna that cohabitate the region; the different cultures' languages and shared experiences. Relational regionalism assumes that indigenous cultures are intertwined with the Euramerican; therefore, it should be further assumed that what makes up Oklahoma Choctaw would include elements that were originally non-Choctaw, and this further requires understanding the process of appropriation. That is, to understand Oklahoma Choctaw is to understand the process of appropriation. Such an understanding would also seriously regard the settler colonial context. Burkhart coins a term, *locality*: "Put simply, in the context of being, my being comes out of the land but also must at every moment still be fully rooted in it. I call this originary and continual manifestation that is the foundation of Indigenous philosophy locality" ("Tsalgi Gagoga Elohi. . ."). The people and the stories originate from and are at all times rooted in the land; therefore, Oklahoma Choctaw locality is a result of settler colonialism. Removal was directly responsible for the origins of Oklahoma Choctaw, forcing them to establish new relations with and within their new region. The eventual settler invasion of the land and statehood in 1907, i.e. settler ubiquity, has influenced how Oklahoma Choctaws have evolved and survived. Oklahoma Choctaw's relationship to the land and all that inhabit

it has been a result of settler colonialism. Relational regionalism allows me to tease out the connections between Choctaw and Oklahoma, thus further our understanding of Oklahoma Choctaw. Considering how inevitably connected land, people, and stories are, we must consider the effects of forcible relocation had on the people and their stories.

Understanding Oklahoma Choctaw means to engage Removal, the trauma it caused, and how Choctaws deal with it to survive. Since the Choctaws' relationship to the land serves as the foundation for what it means to be Choctaw, being forcefully removed from the land damages the very core of Choctaw. Yet, Choctaws were not unfamiliar with movement as one of our creation stories tells of a migration that led the people to the sacred mounds, Naniah Waiya. In fact, a lot of Indigenous nations have stories of such movement. Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, for example, chronicles the Kiowa migration to what is now Oklahoma. Movement of the people is not uncommon and not always harmful. Movement means new land that prompts new stories and a change in the people's self-imagination. Richard Scott Lyons says migration creates "new communities, new peoples, new ways of living, new sacred foods, new stories, and new ceremonies. The old never dies; it just gets supplemented by the new, and one result is diversity" (*X-Marks* 4). Choctaws in the Nineteenth Century, however, did not migrate. They were forcefully moved.

The Choctaws suffered traumatic loss because of Removal. Birchfield not only views Removal as an act of settler aggression, he calls it an act of betrayal. He claims that the Choctaw story is unknown in the U.S. since it "does great violence to the American Myth. It is the story of America's betrayal of its most critically important

Indian military ally in all U.S. history—the strategically located Choctaws” (*How the Choctaws* 2). He is referring to the Choctaw’s alliance with the U.S. during the War of 1812. Birchfield argues that if the Choctaw had decided to join Tecumseh’s alliance, who sided with the British, it would have tilted the war in Britain’s favor: “the British would have had little trouble finishing the job of crushing the life out of the pathetically weak United States, if the British could have had nothing more than the additional tipping of the balance of the massive military power of the southern Indian nations behind them” (21). Fifteen years after the war, the U.S. forcefully removed the Choctaws from their lands. This betrayal cost the Choctaw a debilitating loss of life. When a people suffer that kind of loss, there is always much more that is lost. As Birchfield writes, “The cost to the Choctaw people, among many other things, was the loss of most of their old ones, the great, living repositories of ancient Choctaw knowledge, knowledge that spans many of what Americans call ‘academic disciplines,’ and knowledge that spans many things for which Americans have no name, being ignorant, to this day, of almost all of it” (*How Choctaws* 43). While the Choctaws suffered such loss of people, they also lost an unknown amount of ancient Choctaw knowledge, i.e. their stories.⁶

Despite the loss, the Choctaws did recover. While who they are is rooted in the land from which they were being removed, they carried with them their self-

⁶ Similar to the previous chapter, my use of “stories” includes more than what might be usually considered a story. I am relying on how LeAnne Howe describes stories when she is explaining tribalography: “Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history). . .” (“The Story of America” 42). Such an approach allows me to approach Birchfield’s poetry, fiction, and non-fiction equally. I offer further explanation in my discussion of tribalography in the first chapter.

imagination. The people would continue to imagine themselves as Choctaws, only their stories and who they were as Choctaws would change. That change would be driven by having to establish their own roots to the land. Similarly, Craig Womack writes that when the Mvskoke arrived to what was by then Indian Territory, they were left alone for the first two decades and that enabled them to establish ceremonial grounds and the town system, “two of the most important aspects to Creek life” (*Red on Red* 180). They were important in how they help mediate social, spiritual, familial, political, and cultural aspects of Mvskoke way of life. While Womack refers to the Mvskoke, every nation that is removed follows similar steps to establish a connection with their new surroundings. Change in the land also means a change in the people and the stories they tell of themselves and others. That change would accumulate and give rise to a distinct Oklahoma Choctaw.

Removal was prompt by settler colonialism. Removal is often described by Indigenous people as an act of violence against Indigenous people. As Lyons argues:

Removal is to migration what rape is to sex, and while the original political policy was concerned with actual physical removals like the Trail of Tears, the underlying ideology of removal in its own way justified and encouraged the systematic losses of Indian life: the removal of livelihood and language, the removal of security and self-esteem, the removal of religion and respect. Bit by bit, change by change, loss by ever-exacting loss, removalism has been as much a legacy of our history as migration, and colonialism was its cause. (*X-Marks* 8)

Just as understanding the Oklahoma Choctaw requires engaging Removal, it also requires we understand settler colonialism. The impetus of Removal is to acquire Indigenous land, not Indigenous labor. As Patrick Wolfe claims, “The primary object of settler-colonization is the land itself rather than the surplus value to be derived from mixing native labour with it” (*Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* 163). The physical Indigenous presence is removed, for the most part, because of Removal. Upon arrival, the Choctaws established their own structures and develop new relationships with the land and all that inhabit it, thus Oklahoma Choctaw was created. Settler colonialism created Oklahoma Choctaw, in a sense, by forcing the Choctaws into this situation where they have to adjust how they imagined themselves and that adjustment resulted in Oklahoma Choctaw.

But because of the nature of settler colonialism, it also imbues itself on the development of Oklahoma Choctaw. If the primary object of settler colonialism is the land, the primary goal is settlement. While the removed nations were left alone for a while, the settler, who Birchfield might call “American imperialist,” eventually invades the land they initially set aside for the removed nations. Choctaws again find themselves having to stave off invasion but are ultimately unsuccessful as the land is settled and statehood is established in 1907. Euramericans, along with other non-Indigenous people, establish their own roots and presence on the land. And just as they have in other places they have invaded, the settler begins to dominate the region. Just as the Choctaw had to adjust to the land upon arrival, they eventually had to adjust to this growing non-Indigenous presence. Choctaws are still dealing with Euramerican imperialists, as Birchfield points out, “The clash of civilizations in North America

between the continent's oppressed, ancient, distinguished peoples and the recently arrived, still Medieval-minded, still proselytizing, still cultural genocide waging, European colonizer is still a contemporary event" (*How Choctaws* xii). And since the ultimate goal is settlement, the settler's presence is intended to be permanent, even claiming a sense of indigeneity. The ubiquity of the settler forces the Choctaws to adjust to a degree that involved changing their sense of being and self-imagination.

By asserting an Oklahoma Choctaw identity, Birchfield resists settler colonization. While settler colonialism is directly and indirectly responsible for the creation and development of Oklahoma Choctaw, ironically its existence is also antithetical to settlement. Erasure of the Indigenous presence is necessary for settler colonialism to fulfill its goal. While policies like Removal were successful in erasing the Indigenous presence, for the most part, from Southeastern region, controlling how Native people are imagined is a means to assert further control so that the erasure of the Native could be accomplished. As discussed before, Euramericans tend to imagine Indigenous people as a monolith since it is easier to control the imagery. Even when tribal names are used and imagined, like Choctaw, they also tend to be monolithic and not too different from the imagined "Indian." For example, people may very well acknowledge that I am Choctaw and Pawnee, further understanding that they are two distinct people, but not too many people in the population at large will be able to make that distinction. Oklahoma Choctaw is something distinct from other Choctaws and that adds even more diversity, the opposite of a uniform image of "Indians." "Oklahoma Choctaw" is a marker of resistance to settler colonialism.

We may never know if it is Birchfield's intention to resist colonization by asserting such an identity, but we can see how he resisted in other ways. He also demonstrated a clear understanding on how settler colonialism operates. For example, he understood that controlling how Indigenous people are imagined helps to influence public opinion about Natives. Birchfield argues that "American law regarding Indians is controlled by what the 'average' America voter thinks about Indians, because those voters elect the Congress." He explains that when the Supreme Court recognizes the "plenary power" of Congress regarding treaty rights in *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock* (1904), the Court "put sovereign nations of North America at the mercy of American public opinion by declaring the U.S. Congress can unilaterally abrogate any clause of any Indian treaty" (*How Choctaws* ix). Treaties, interpretations of those treaties, and Supreme Court cases have been a mechanism through which power is asserted. The words expressed by the Court in *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock* authorizes Congress to abrogate treaties. The words "domestic dependent nations," the words John Marshall used to describe Indigenous nations in *Cherokee v. Georgia* (1831), have been used to erode tribal sovereignty. All of this is to say that U.S. imperialism is facilitated on the level of language. Birchfield is well aware of this.

In *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test (OBIT)*, Birchfield shows how subtle use of language coupled with widespread ignorance on U.S. history, let alone Indigenous history, furthers the cause of settler colonialism. He begins by citing the entry for "Choctaw" in the *American Indian Almanac* that states: "After being forced to cede their lands in Mississippi and Alabama and to move to Oklahoma, the Choctaw established their own government." The problem, as Birchfield explains, is that while

Alabama and Mississippi existed at the time of removal, Oklahoma did not (23). He mentions another similar error in the *Columbia-Viking Desk Encyclopedia* that states Choctaws were removed to Indian Territory in 1832. Indian Territory did not exist in 1832 and was not established until 1834 through the Indian Intercourse Act. He then cites the *Basic Everyday Encyclopedia* that states that as settlers “poured into the Gulf area” after the Revolutionary war, the Choctaw “moved to a reservation on the Red R in SE Oklahoma, where they set up a US-style government.” Birchfield responds: “Sounds like they just decided to pick up and go, doesn’t it? And it sounds like there was already a place called Oklahoma and that the good people of that place made room for the Choctaws by letting them have a reservation in the southeastern part of it” (24). The false history (Oklahoma and Indian Territory existing before it did) and the rhetoric (“moved to a reservation”) work to obscure the traumatic effect Removal caused and the cover up of that event. Those seeking general knowledge about the Choctaw are often presented with the settler version of history, one that projects the settler’s presence into the past in order to establish their own indigenous roots.

Given the contemporary state of telecommunications technology, it would be safe to assume that the recent generation of Americans would not turn to hard copies of dictionaries and encyclopedias to find general information about Choctaws. They would more than likely seek that information from *Wikipedia*’s entry on “Choctaw,” which is quite extensive and presents a more thorough account than the sources Birchfield critiques. This type of imperialism occurs in other formats that may be just a bit more influential than traditional reference works. Perhaps one of the most influential mediums today is film. And one of the most iconic figures of Euramerica is John

Wayne. Birchfield quotes Wayne's Davy Crockett from the *The Alamo* (1960): "Just speak right up and call me Crockett. Don't bother using my title. Old drunken General Flatford gave it to me in the Choctaw Indian War" (*How Choctaws* 52; *OBIT* 126). Not only does this create a fictional event, the Choctaw Indian War, it casts Choctaws as adversaries of the U.S. Throughout his works, particularly *How Choctaws*, Birchfield repeatedly asserts the Choctaw have been the best ally to the U.S. After offering a list of times Choctaws allied the U.S, dating back to providing scouts to American generals in the Revolutionary War, Birchfield says that their "reward" was being removed from their lands, having their new land resettled and taken away from them, and then they are mocked by Hollywood (*OBIT* 126). This mockery presents a distorted history that is widely accepted. Upon hearing "Choctaw Indian War," "American audiences did not gasp at hearing those words, at hearing the memory of their Choctaw allies mocked in *that* manner. American audiences did not even notice" (*How Choctaws* 52). And while the influence of John Wayne may be waning as we move further into the twentieth-first century, there is quite an extensive discourse on how Indigenous people are portrayed in cinema. That is to say, John Wayne is but one example of many others.

Birchfield's critique of how Choctaws are imagined in reference books and films is largely rhetorical. Birchfield's critiques also combat what Lyons calls *rhetorical imperialism*, which he defines as: "the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of debate. These terms are often definitional—that is, they *identify* the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways" ("Rhetorical Sovereignty" 452). Choctaws like Birchfield confront imperialism at a textual level, which makes sense considering he was a writer, poet, and had a J.D. He understood that

by controlling the “terms of debate,” American imperialists are able to control how Indigenous people are not only imagined but defined. To combat rhetorical imperialism, Indigenous people insist upon and enact what Lyons calls *rhetorical sovereignty* that he defines as “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (“Rhetorical Sovereignty” 449-450). Native people retain the right to determine for themselves the best way to communicate amongst themselves and with others. If Indigenous people want to have influence over how they are imagined and defined, to have influence over the terms of debate, they must continue to imagine themselves through whatever means they choose. After all, Momaday reminds us that “The greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (“Man Made of Words” 167).

Indigenous people imagine and enact sovereignty in a variety of ways in their struggle to resist settler colonialism. Lyons’s rhetorical imperialism and sovereignty are just two examples. In *Red on Red*, Womack argues that Native people have the right to present images of themselves and discuss those images, e.g. Indigenous literature and criticism. He claims this is a part of sovereignty, explaining that:

While this literary aspect of sovereignty is not the same thing as the political status of Native nations, the two are, nonetheless, interdependent. A key component of nationhood is a people’s idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation and give

sovereignty a meaning that is defined within the tribe rather than by external sources. (14)

Womack's *Red on Red* was a key text in the rise of Indigenous literary nationalism that helped to take traditionally political concepts, like sovereignty, and reimagine them as literary concepts. This prompted a reimagining of Native literature as national and political literature.⁷ The tribal voice expressing the self-imagination of the people is also a political and national voice. Such an approach enables us to express different ways in how Indigenous people relate to their world. As much as sovereignty pertains to how a people conduct their own affairs, it also has a relational aspect to it.

Sovereignty is complex and its meaning has changed through history. Lyons asserts that despite these shifts in meaning “the concept nonetheless has carried with it a sense of locatable and recognizable power. In fact, the location of power has depended upon the crucial act of recognition—and vice versa” (“Rhetorical Sovereignty” 450). While this can pertain to how different sovereign entities acknowledge the sovereignty of others, it can also pertain to how the people recognize and locate the internal power to rule. Not to be too reductive, but in a monarchy, for example, the power to rule is recognized and located within the monarch. The U.S. Constitution locates the power to rule within the people. The same could be said about most Indigenous nations. However, given the inextricable link between the people, the land, and the stories, sovereignty is also located in the land and the stories. As already

⁷ In his contributing chapter to *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, Womack writes: “Like tribes, American Indian literature has a unique status, different from any other ethnic literature in the U.S. canon. It is the product of legally defined political entities that exist in government-to-government relationships with the United States” (163). When we consider the influence a region has on Indigenous self-imagination, we must also consider how our political status might change our relationships.

argued, Indigenous people conceive of themselves through imagining the land. The stories also contain the people's self-imagination, their conception of themselves and how they relate to their world. If the people's self-imagination is rooted in their relationship to the land, the stories then can also be said to be derived from that same relationship. Indigenous sovereignty's power is not only located in the people, but also in the land and in the stories.

Birchfield tells Oklahoma Choctaw stories. The stories come from the people and from the land, and people of the land. As Choctaw history demonstrates, invasion is persistent and settlers are ever encroaching. Given the non-Indigenous presence on our lands, the people of the land include non-Choctaws. Therefore, Choctaw self-imagination includes non-Choctaws. I would propose an augmentation to Womack's claim that Indigenous people have the right to present and discuss images of themselves. Indigenous people also have the right to imagine non-Indigenous people and to discuss them. They have the right to reimagine U.S. history, for example, in their own terms and to present a counter narrative, one whose focus and vantage point will be Native. Birchfield tells some unique and humorous counter narratives about Euramericans.

In *Field of Honor*, Birchfield imagines how Choctaws might have evolved if they separated themselves settler colonialism. The novel opens with an Oklahoma Choctaw P. P. McDaniel, who is hiding out in the backwoods of Southeastern Oklahoma. McDaniel believes the U.S. Marine Corps is looking for him for desertion. He stumbles upon a secret military operation being conducted in the area and is tricked into reenlisting so that he may help. When he tries to escape, he hides in a cave. As his

pursuers close in on him, it forces him to go deeper into the caves. He gets lost and eventually stumbles upon an underground civilization of Choctaws. The entire civilization is centered on the game *ishtaboli*, or stickball. In fact, the name of the underground society is called Ishtaboli, which is divided into sections according to the older Choctaw town system. Their social and political systems, however, are based on game theory. Through a lucky accident and remarkable athletic maneuver, McDaniel finds himself thrust into one of the highest social positions, a Lighthorseman of Ball Play. McDaniel eventually discovers a conspiracy to militarize the population using drug-induced hypnosis in order to mount an attack on the surface. McDaniel knows the attack will be unsuccessful and most of the Ishtaboli Choctaws will be killed. He is successful at thwarting their efforts, but ends up back on the surface. He is recaptured by the military where he learns a national conspiracy dating back to the Coolidge administration involving secret military oil reserves, one being in Southeastern Oklahoma. The military operation was designed to find it before a group of Texans do.

Through the portrayal of Ishtaboli, Birchfield presents an alternate view of Euramericans. McDaniel learns about Ishtaboli from a young Natchez boy, Little Ejay. He explains to McDaniel that Ishtaboli is a Choctaw civilization, but there are also a small population of Natchez and Germans who were kidnapped from the surface: “[Ishtaboli is] all pretty much run by slave labor, mostly by unemployed Germans who get kidnapped and brought down here from the surface” (108). Little Ejay elaborates on his view of the German people: “The Choctaws say the Germans don’t share with each other, that they compete with one another for everything, even for food, so nobody misses the unemployed ones,” which is why it is easy to lure “unemployed Germans,”

like engineers and scientists, through classified ads (109). Later in the novel, McDaniel is given a tour of the Academy of the Little Choctaws, a school for children. He is able to sit in on a few classes, one of which is “German History,” where the teacher explains, “As you know, in 449 some of the European-Germans began invading the English Islands and became the English-Island Germans. In 1607, some of the English-Island-Germans began invading North America and became North American Germans” (123). If the reader hasn’t figured it out before this point, it is revealed that Ishtaboli Choctaws refer to Anglo-Saxon Americans as German.

In *How Choctaws Invented Civilization*, Birchfield continues this idea. He explains that “no anthropologist has ever had any difficulty in classifying Americans as Germans, for two simple, fundamental, and irrefutable reasons: that English is a German language, and that their race, commonly called ‘white people,’ is the German race” (140). Birchfield lays out the logic in referring to “white people” as Germans. As some have pointed out, the term “white people” is problematic because it is a vague way to classify people. The term does nothing to denote the people’s origins, beside Europe, or specify their ethnicity. Instead, Birchfield suggests classifying these people based using anthropological markers of a people, language, and race. And while the term “American” does denote at least a political identity, it has the same problem with vagueness of origins and ethnicity. Reimagining Euramericans as North American Germans (NAGs), however, infuses their name with their origins, language and ethnicity. The name also tracks the movement, i.e. the imperial history, of the “German” people. Birchfield goes on to say that the Romans had to invent a word for these people from Germania, “barbarians.” He wants the reader to understand that the

Germans “are not the people who invented the wheel. They are not the people who invented agriculture. They are not the people who domesticated farm animals. They are not the people who invented writing. They are not the people who invented metallurgy” (140-141). This clarification of those who invaded, the “Germans,” undermines the supposed superiority of their race and undercuts the civilized/savage binary on which this country was founded and used to justify exterminating the Indigenous presence.

The German History teacher then explains that the Germans have had three civil wars that “had a great impact on Choctaw people”: the NAGCW (North American German Civil War) I that occurred 1776-1784, NAGCW II that was 1812-1815, and NAGCW III that happened 1861-1865 (*Field of Honor* 123). These civil wars are obviously the American Revolutionary War, The War of 1812, and the American Civil War, respectively. First, claiming that Euramericans have had three civil wars is disconcerting to those who were taught American history in American schools. This is because we have been taught to view Americans, British, and Germans as separate people. The first two wars were wars between foreign nations, but from Birchfield’s view, they are not separate people. They do have their own subcategories: North European Germans (NEGs), British-Island Germans (BIGs), and, as already mentioned, North American Germans (NAGs); and when the NAGCW III happened, NAGs were further broken down Northern North American Germans (NNAGs) and Southern North American Germans (SNAGs) (*How Choctaws* 141-142). While each category can be said to be something separate from the others, they are all still German. Just as Oklahoma Choctaw may be something separate it is still Choctaw. Settlement requires severing the settler’s connection to the metropole and America has spent over 230 years

trying to do so. Birchfield's taxonomy, however, shines a light on that connection. Second, while these wars were instrumental in shaping the U.S., the reason these wars are taught at the Academy of the Little Choctaws is because they have "had a great impact on Choctaw people," not necessarily because they were important to Euramericans. The Academy's curriculum is Choctaw, for Choctaws, and is about Choctaws. The curriculum may include Germans and German events, but it is not German centered.

With *Field of Honor*, Birchfield imagines a whole new people, the Ishtaboli Choctaw and while they are still Choctaw, the Ishtaboli Choctaw is something different from other groups of Choctaws, like Oklahoma Choctaw. The way "German history" is taught in Ishtaboli, for example, is one of those cultural elements that make them distinct. After all, not too many Oklahoma Choctaw are taught history in this manner. To understand Ishtaboli, or Oklahoma, Choctaw, we must consider those distinguishing elements. One premise this chapter asserts is those distinguishing characteristics are regionally based. To understand Oklahoma Choctaw requires also studying Oklahoma and the Choctaw's relationship with Oklahoma, to understand how the region changed the people. When the Choctaws arrived, if they were to remain Choctaw, they would have to adapt to the new surroundings. Choctaw people survive the way any other people survive, through change and appropriation.

The process of appropriation is what enables Choctaws, or any other people, to survive as Choctaws. Perhaps the most cited source on this matter would be Simon Ortiz's 1981 article, "Towards a National Indian Literature." He claims that the Christian ceremonies the Spanish brought with them are no longer Spanish because of

the Acoma appropriated them. Another term to describe it is “indigenize.” While appropriation is widely understood and discussed, we often do not discuss the actual process. That is, if the Christian ceremonies the Spanish brought over are now Indigenous, at what point did the ceremony cease to be Spanish and become Indigenous? And what did the Pueblo people do to indigenize those ceremonies? And how do we know when those elements that were once foreign are now Indigenous?

A part of the process of appropriation involves how Indigenous people relate to it. When discussing the Ghost Dance being syncretistic, Jace Weaver writes: “The movement also borrowed elements of Christianity—perhaps the ultimate hybrid collaboration. Yet these were choices made by Native themselves. They were wholly in their hands to define. And by doing so, these choices, events, experiences, ceremonies, texts, bodies, and languages *became* indigenous, regardless of their origin(s)” (*American Indian Literary Nationalism* 35). Obviously, foreign elements that Indigenous people find useful will be appropriated. Yet, the process of appropriation requires more than use. The horse, for example, was at one time a foreign element but Indigenous people quickly saw its usefulness and adopted it. Doing so, however, changed the people. For example, the Kiowas not only found the horse useful, it quickly became a crucial, even defining, element of the Kiowa. The horse became a part of how the Kiowa imagine themselves. This suggests that indigenizing a foreign element occurs when it enters the self-imagination of the people.

The “Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test,” a multiple-choice test, is a humorous test filled with actual information that most people may not even know about Oklahoma, including some Oklahomans. For example, the reader learns that Oklahoma

“now has a higher ratio of water to land than Minnesota,” and also “has one lake with the shoreline length roughly the equivalent of the round trip distance from Oklahoma City to Denver” (13). When explaining these answers, Birchfield writes that “Okies hate running water, unless it comes out of a tap” (18). This is a quip at Oklahomans’ fondness for damming rivers to create many man-made lakes. Oklahoma has over 200 lakes, most of which are man-made. These man-made lakes are created by backing up a river by damming it. These lakes “were made for flood control, water supply, recreation, fish, wildlife, and/or hydroelectric power” (Oklahoma Historical Society). Oklahoma may have a higher water-to-land ratio than Minnesota—the land of 10,000 lakes—but those lakes are not natural.

Such changes to the land, even when the intention is altruistic, also changes the stories and the people. In an essay, “Roads to Nowhere,” Birchfield describes a time when he wanted to go bow-hunting for deer in Southeastern Oklahoma. As he is looking at USGS maps to find a hunting spot, he laments the march of progress: “Our long-cherished deer hunting woods at the western edge of the Ouachita Mountains in southeastern Oklahoma, where my Choctaw ancestors had hunted for generations, were being buried beneath McGee Creek Reservoir” (73). Since his family’s traditional hunting grounds are under water, he decides on an area he knows to be secluded. He hikes to the area and, after finding a suitable spot, decided to make camp. The next morning, he begins to hike but quickly comes across “all kinds of trash, candy wrapper, pop bottles, and old mattress, piles of complete and utter yuck.” As he continues, he remarks: “Then I heard traffic, the unmistakable whine of automobiles whizzing by at high speed. Then I heard the voices” (*OBIT* 78). He discovers that his camp site is

within sight of a turnoff of a scenic highway where tourists have gathered. The highway disrupts an area the narrator believed to be secluded. To make the situation worse, the purpose of the highway seems unnecessary since it “doesn’t go anywhere. It’s just a scenic drive, and a long one at that, along the crest of Winding Star Mountain, and other mountains, from near Talihina, Oklahoma, to near Mena, Arkansas” (78-79). The McGee Reservoir and Talimena National Scenic Byway are projects conceived and sold as progress, but the disruption it causes is unseen. It has kept the narrator from hunting on the lands his ancestors did because Oklahomans have damned the McGee Creek and his ancestors now are underneath a man-made lake, and the alternative spot is interrupted by a highway that is ironically designed to help humans enjoy the region. Progress is encroaching and Oklahomans are changing the land faster than the narrator can keep up with.

The McGee Reservoir appears in another story of Birchfield’s, *Field of Honor*. While there are altruistic reasons for damming a river, like flood control (ironic since it creates a large permanent flood), water supply, and hydroelectric energy, Birchfield imagines another reason. After McDaniel emerges to the surface, he is captured by the military again. When he is alone with Colonel Fay, Fay informs him of a conspiracy theory that was prompted by the Teapot Dome Scandal. According to Colonel Fay, after oil was discovered in Wyoming, President Harding and Congress set aside as a military reserve but “Goddamn Texans bribed government officials, even got a cabinet member sent to prison. They drilled slant-hole into oil from adjacent land” (234). After another huge oil field is discovered, Coolidge, Harding’s predecessor, decided to keep its location secret by designating three hundred seventy-nine other sites in rural areas

throughout the U.S. as the reserve but only one of them was the correct location. Coolidge left specific orders that the future presidents could be told about the site but not its location in fear that “some day a Texan might become president” (226) and the only time the location can be revealed is during a time of war or a dire national emergency. After Lyndon B. Johnson, a Texan, hears about the oil reserve after being elected president, he demands its location but is refused. Knowing that one of the conditions required to reveal the reserve’s location is a war, Johnson starts the Vietnam War. Each time he requests the location, the Army refuses, and Johnson escalates the war. Fay tells McDaniel that he was able to cover each location with water by damming rivers as means of discouraging oil exploration. Fay says, “Hell, most of the big dams that have been built since World War II have been built specifically to put as many of these sites as I could get underwater” (229).

The time of *Field of Honor* is never explicitly established, but Fay talks about the current presidential campaign between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, which was in 1976. Fay tells McDaniel: “I’ve already got the wheels in motion to put the McGee Valley underwater” (229). The McGee Creek Reservoir would be created two years later in 1978. This means that Birchfield experienced the flooding of the valley, a place with which he and his ancestors had a relationship. Needless to say, the reservoir’s creation has impacted Birchfield. The Choctaws were forced to establish relationships with the new land. Obviously they did as Birchfield’s ancestors hunted in the valley. While the reasons for these kinds of projects are supposedly benevolent, they are disruptive as people are forced to relocate, as was Birchfield and his ancestors. The conspiracy theory in *Field* imagines the reasons for such projects as not being so

benevolent. That is, the narrative sold to justify this disruption and the manipulation of the land is a narrative of progress. Birchfield offers a counternarrative. It is a narrative offering a different perspective that is based on a history of *being* removed in the name of progress. The way Birchfield imagines the McGee Creek Reservoir offers an illustration of his relationship to the land and how changes to the land influence that relationship. It also shows how Choctaws appropriate the land, even when they have little to no control in what happens to it.

Just as the physical environment and changes to the land influence how Choctaws and other Indigenous people imagine themselves, those that inhabit the land also have their influence. For the Oklahoma Choctaw, this includes Euramericans and other Indigenous people, most of whom share a similar history of removal with the Choctaw. This makes for complex web of influences. For example, the after-powwow tradition of the 49 originated among the Kiowa, but it has spread and is common among most Indigenous people in Oklahoma, and beyond. While it is likely that there are some Euramericans who have participated in a 49, it is not an element of non-Indigenous Oklahoma culture. Then there are traits that are shared among Choctaws and Euramerican Okies, but not with all Indigenous peoples. There is a strong affiliation, for example, that Oklahoma Choctaws have with the University of Oklahoma football that is not shared with Pawnees, for example. Pawnee, OK is only thirty miles from where the other major state school, Oklahoma State University, is located. As such, Pawnees are typically Cowboy fans and have a severe hatred for the Sooners. While discussing what Oklahoma tribes support which college football team may seem

insignificant regarding appropriation of Euramerican culture, Birchfield took it seriously, in his humorous way.

Birchfield has an affection for OU football that is shared among a lot of Choctaws. It is a passion that is unlike a passion some fans have for other college football teams because of how intertwined OU football history is with Oklahoma history. A great deal of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma cheers on the Sooners every Saturday in the fall, so much so that it has become a part of Choctaw culture. That is to say, Oklahoma Choctaws have appropriated OU football. Through his stories, Birchfield imagines a deep, even spiritual, relationship between Choctaws, ball games, and OU football. He also reveals a key component of the process of appropriation.

The idea that any Indigenous person, let alone Choctaws or Birchfield, would find an affiliation with OU football can seem contradictory, to say the least, considering the history behind what OU football stands for. For example, Oklahoma fans have a call-response cheer, “Boomer” followed by “Sooner.” While the university’s nickname is the “Sooners,” both allude to the settler history of Oklahoma. After years of trying to open up “surplus” land in Indian Territory, the Indian Appropriations Act of 1889 made it possible. What followed were seven land runs, the first one being April, 22 1889, a day that is still celebrated throughout the state today. On the day of those land runs, a cannon would be fired to indicate that the run had begun, prompting several settlers to rush their schooners across the plains to stake their claim. They would become known as “Boomers,” since they are the ones who waited for the “boom” of the cannon. But there were some who snuck out early and hid, and once the cannon had been fired, they would sneak out from their hiding places to claim their new land, posing as though

they, too, had followed the rules. They would become known as “Sooners” since they sneaked out “sooner” than they were supposed to. “Sooner” would not only become the nickname for the University of Oklahoma, home to one of the greatest football programs in the country, it would also become the official nickname of the state itself, which is why Oklahoma is often referred to as the Sooner State. Essentially, a Sooner is one who cheated those who were stealing land, a cheater cheater.

Earlier in the introduction, I describe the opening to *Black Silk Handkerchief* when the protagonist, Hom-Astubby meets with Sheriff Klewlusz. When Sheriff Klewlusz asks if Hom-Astubby is Oklahoma Indian, he gives a detailed answer that alludes to his fandom to OU with a warning of violence (“And I’ll whup anybody who says different”). This may seem like an overreaction since most people are not looking to declare their love for OU football with a threat of violence when meeting people, especially when meeting with a sheriff to discuss a possible homicide (Hom-Astubby calls Sheriff Klewlusz after discovering a dead body at a nearby creek). In order to understand Hom-Astubby’s reaction, the reader has to know a little OU football history. What prompts this response is Hom-Astubby notices something on the back window of Sheriff Klewlusz’s Bronco as he drives up: “He didn’t need to encounter any of his bad omens at this moment. . . There, barely discernible, being dust-covered and seen in reverse, was a faded Notre Dame Fighting Irish football logo” (12). As they get to know each other, Hom-Astubby reveals that he went to OU for photojournalism and law school: “Hardly ever missed a game. They don’t let you graduate down there unless you can say who ended our forty-seven-game winning streak. They’ll be a payback for that one of these days. If a big game ever comes along that might be worthy of being

that payback” (15). From 1953-1957, spanning five seasons, Oklahoma went on a forty-seven game winning streak, an NCAA record that has yet to come even close to being matched, let alone beaten. The team that ended that streak was, of course, Notre Dame. It’s too bad that Birchfield did not live to see that “payback” in 2013 when the Sooners went into South Bend, Indiana to beat Notre Dame, 35-21.

The passion Birchfield expresses for OU football through his stories is the same passion most fans have for OU. As already mentioned, it is different from other fans of other schools because of the connection between OU football and the state’s history. During the Dust Bowl of the 1940s, the morale of the state was low. Oklahomans had very little to be proud of, as the word “Okie” was a derogatory term, used primarily by Californians who were witnessing an exodus to California of Oklahomans seeking work. In fact, the first question of the “Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test” asks for possible reasons why “‘Okie’ has been a derogatory term in California ever since the Dust Bowl days” (11). In 1945, in an attempt to boost the morale of the people of Oklahoma, OU Regent Lloyd Noble, an oilman and philanthropist, proposed the university build its football team to a championship level to give Okies something of which to be proud. Five years later, in 1950, Oklahoma won its first national championship. By 1957, they had their forty-seven-game winning streak and three national championships, including back-to-back championships in 1955 and 1956. And with the exception of the 1990s, they haven’t stopped. Oklahoma had something to be proud of. In fact, George Lynn Cross, OU’s longest serving president (1943-1968) is famous among the OU faithful for having once said, ““I would like to build a University of which the football team could be proud” (Pittman). For most fans,

cheering for OU football is much more than rooting for their home team. Considering the impetus behind OU's rise to prominence in the college football world, OU football becomes a part of our pride in being an Okie. As that rise became something Okies could be proud of during the worst time of the state's history, Sooner football essentially becomes intertwined into Oklahoman identity, although I am certain that fans of that other state college would adamantly disagree.

To further understand the relationship between Oklahoma Choctaws and Oklahoma football, we might consider a crucial time in Native American history, the Red Power Movement. The change the Red Power Movement evoked among indigenous people cannot be overstated. In fact, Womack asserts that "[a]mong Native people themselves, a shift of consciousness had occurred from an integrationist tendency that had been inculcated in the boarding-school generation to a view of the inherent worth of Indian identity that became a part of the Red Power movement that rejected assimilationist notions." Womack goes on to say that, "Without this change of consciousness, the conception of the Indian artist is nearly impossible" ("A Single Decade" 12). A lot of scholars have examined how the Red Power Movement changed Indian Country as a whole, but it is also worthwhile to see how it influenced individual nations, or how these nations responded to what was going on.

In *How Choctaws Invented Civilization*, Birchfield remarks that during the 1970s, when the Red Power Movement was reaching a "frenzy that exploded into that phenomenal period of intense and attention-commanding, in-your-face Indian activism, the Choctaw train got uncoupled and sidetracked from all of that" (89). He goes on to explain that it was not as though Choctaws had suddenly lost interest in politics or had

forgotten the “litany of the long list of complaints that Choctaws have against those shifty-eyed Okies, or that Choctaws weren’t capable of getting riled up to the point of running those Okies right out of here, all the way to Texas, or some place worse, if there could be anyplace worse” (89). To understand how Choctaws came up absent during such a crucial time in Native history, Birchfield says we must understand that Choctaws are “fundamentally and profoundly, an ancient gaming people. Specifically, one important aspect of that continues to be that Choctaws are a particular kind of ancient gaming people—a ball playing people” (90). Something appeared during the 1970s that drew the attention of Choctaws that was “so magically mesmerizing, and so embarrassingly frightening, that, for a time, nothing else mattered. It was called the Wishbone” (90). The Wishbone refers to a football offensive formation that highly contributed to three of Oklahoma’s seven national championships.

Birchfield’s proposed reason for the Choctaw absence during the Red Power Movement may seem frivolous and we can simply assume it is Birchfield being funny. It is a good example of his unique sense of humor that he displays throughout his writings. The connections Birchfield makes between OU football, ball games, and Choctaw culture, however, are not frivolous. They help us understand a key element in the process of appropriation.

The first step when confronting and appropriating foreign practices, like football, is to understand the practice, or elements of it, through a known counterpart. Birchfield finds a remarkable connection between the Euramerican sport of college football and a Choctaw practice. When referring to the Wishbone, he writes: “With their very own eyes, the Choctaw people, especially their *alikhis*, could see that their

enemy had suddenly begun doing something that was very sobering to see—displaying tactical battlefield skills of a level of genius” (90). The first connection here is to the “tactical battlefield skills” of the Wishbone to the Indigenous game *ishtaboli*. Using the metaphor of war to describe American sports is not uncommon, but Birchfield is referring to something else. *Ishtaboli* is also called “Little Brother of War” since it was sometimes used to settle disputes between other Native nations *in lieu* of going to war. As Little Ejay tells McDaniel, the religion of *Ishtaboli* “is games theory. It is the foundation of [*Ishtaboli*’s] civilization, and it is the ancient region of the Choctaws” (104-105). Little Ejay tells McDaniel that because of all the civil wars that Choctaw have had: “They try to make sure that they thrash them out only on the Field of Honor. You want my opinion on the matter, it’s why nothing is more important to them than the games, and why nothing is bigger than the national championship game” (147). Given the devastation war has wrought on the people, especially civil war, an alternative to war would be preferable. That is, Birchfield imagines a Choctaw world whose self-conception is based on a game that is meant to prevent warfare among the people.⁸

This connection takes on a spiritual characteristic when Birchfield evokes *alikchis*. *Alikchi* can be loosely translated as a doctor. Choctaw author and storyteller Tim Tingle describes *alikchis* as “good doctors who try to restore balance; by singing certain chants, or by smoking a certain person, place, or object with burning cedar,

⁸ To further understand this perception of *ishtaboli* and its importance, Birchfield says the Choctaws wonder “why Old World people, instead of trying to kill other people for carrying around different religious conceptions in their heads, don’t spend their time putting together good *ishtaboli* teams and finding out on the Field of Honor who gets to have the bragging and the braying rights for a while. It’s called civilized behavior” (*How Choctaws* 81).

sage, or other herbs or barks” (42). While physical healing was a part of what they did, their role was more holistic that included the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health of the Choctaws. They also had in a role in *ishtaboli*. This might be why Choctaws, including their *alikchis*, were mesmerized by the Sooners winning national championships in the 70s and 80s—another thing that caught the Choctaws’ attention—with help of the Wishbone.⁹

Birchfield makes an interesting connection between *alikchis* and football coaches. Again, a part of appropriation includes finding a known counterpart. What OU football coaches were doing on the college football field might have looked familiar to what *alikchis* do on the Field of Honor. In describing this connection, Birchfield refers to the observations Horatio Bardwell Cushman made of an *ishtaboli* game, saying that “Cushman keenly discerned that it was the most venerated *alikchis*, the ones who were at the height of their powers, who were guiding those contests with the greatest wisdom, care, and skill at their command, occasionally casting what have been characterized as ‘magical incantations’ to influence the course of the game” (*How Choctaws* 80). Birchfield then observes that:

In American ball, those decisions, those attempts at magical incantation, are ordinarily made by what Americans apparently regard as sorts of *alikchis*-in-training, which Americans call “offensive and defensive

⁹ McDaniel has to take the Lighthorseman’s exam. The question involves telling the improbable successful season the 1743 Okla Hannali *ishtaboli* team that, despite dealing with severe injuries, won each of their games, except for the national championship. The question is: “Regarding the Okla Hannali Ishtaboli team of 1743, what is the most significant thing that can be said about those athletes?” McDaniel’s answer turns out to be the correct one: “The bums didn’t win the national championship” (207). Given OU’s history of championships, most fans measure success on championships, which is a high standard. Birchfield infuses this standard into *Ishtaboli*.

coordinators.” At critical moments of high drama, when some really serious wisdom in the realm of magical incantation is called for, the decision in American ball is made by a full-fledge *alikchis*, which Americans call the “head coach.” (80)

In Birchfield’s imagination, the actions of college football coaches during the 70s and 80s was as impressive as what some *alikchis* do on the Field of Honor. And while the connection can be described as spiritual given the nature of *alikchis* and reverence from *ishtaboli*, it speaks to the nature of Choctaw self-imagination. That is to say, there is little separation between the secular and religious. In comparing college football fields with the Field of Honor and coaches with *alikchis*, the inclusion of the spiritual is unavoidable. Yet, this is also a key element of indigenization. By establishing such connections and appropriating, or indigenizing, OU football, Birchfield further establishes his connection to Oklahoma, thus adding to his articulation of an Oklahoma Choctaw.

To understand something called “Oklahoma Choctaw” also means to understand this process of appropriation. If Choctaws were to survive the trauma from the loss Removal caused, they were going to have to change. Obviously, as they moved westward, the land changed. That was the first element they had to adapt to. But they also had to adapt to the various cultures found on that land. As Daniel Heath Justice claims, “[c]ultures affect one another, and they intersect in unexpected and often complicated ways—this is a given and natural consequence of being alive in the world, whether the cultures are human, four-legged, winged, plant, stone, or otherwise defined” (213). When Justice includes the cultures of human, four-legged, winged,

plant and stone, he reminds us of the various relationships Indigenous people had to establish when they moved. Adapting to the new environment often means adopting foreign elements. In a settler colonial world, where Euramerican culture dominates and is hard to avoid, this process becomes even more necessary for survival. The existence of something called “Oklahoma Choctaw” is a testament of the Choctaws’ perseverance to survive and ability to adopt foreign elements.

Birchfield writes about Oklahoma with the affection one writes when writing about home. The Choctaw stories he tells are not just restricted to Oklahoma, but he certainly expresses an Oklahoma Choctaw identity. He probably best expresses this in a poem from *Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* called “Born There.” He opens the poem by relating how his grandmother, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather were all born near Muddy Boggy, which is in Oklahoma. He then writes, “We no longer yearn for *Nanìh Waiya* / Time took care of that / It was their plan / Move us, get us out of their way / In time we would forget our old home / We have forgotten it / Home became the Muddy Boggy” (90). The origins of his family are no longer imagined to be at *Nanìh Waiya*, the Choctaw sacred mound in Mississippi and from where one of our creation stories tell us we emerged into this world. The narrator goes to say that while he was born at Muddy Boggy, his siblings were not. And while they know the river (“Dad saw to that”), the narrator imagines their offspring will not. He even notices on a “big map at the Oklahoma highway department” that the symbol for Muddy Boggy is the symbol for a dam site, perhaps in the future. The narrator ends the poem by stating: “We must go back to old Boggy / We must live there, fish there, be there / We must make fat babies to be born there / That is my plan” (91). While the origins of the

narrator's family has shifted from Mississippi to what is now Oklahoma, he imagines a future where we retain whatever origins we have. This poem expresses the loss that Removal caused the Choctaw but also their perseverance and how they imagine the future.

If we are to determine our future, we need to imagine what and who we might be. This includes looking at who we imagine ourselves to be today and who we once were, and how those changes came about. Birchfield's self-imagination of an Oklahoma Choctaw tells the story of who the Choctaw were, who they are now, and how those changes came about. His self-imagination also shows how a significant part of who we are, our identity, is regional. All tribal identities are regional to an extent. If Indigenous people are to continue basing their self-conception on the land and all that inhabit it, our self-imagination and identity, will inevitably be regionally based. But, just as important, we must continue to imagine Choctaws, and other Indigenous people, in the future. As Birchfield writes: "The mushrooming technological advances of the past half-century have changed everything. That's when everything suddenly started looking very bright for the future of the sovereign Indian nations of North America, more than half a century ago" (*How Choctaws* xii). He is not specific as to why or how our current technology will help Indigenous people and nations to survive, and it is possible Birchfield did not know himself. And I am sure those that agreed to move from their homelands to a strange place did not know how Choctaws were to survive into the future, but they did.

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