

QUEER INDIGENOUS RHETORICS: DECOLONIZING THE SOCIO-SYMBOLIC ORDER  
OF EURO-AMERICAN GENDER AND SEXUAL IMAGINARIES

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the rhetorical function of creative writing being written by queer/two-spirit identified indigenous authors. The rhetorical function being the way these stories politicize the various ways gender and sexuality were foundational tools of settler colonialism in de-tribalizing and assimilating indigenous folks. The literary perspective often elides politics in favor of deconstructing aspects of creative writing such as genre, syntax, and themes instead of the socio-political potential such works produce. The three works I examine all have something to teach rhetorical scholars about the need to politicize the socio-sexual and gendered imaginaries of settler colonialism in discourses of the founding fathers, manifest destiny, westward expansion, land purchase, statehood, American exceptionalism, democracy promotion, and many more. They fundamentally challenge rhetorics that posit static notions of American identity and/or purpose that represses the historical and ongoing genocide of indigenous culture and life. In this way, they intervene in the very notion of communicability itself within the socio-symbolic economy of settler colonialism and its attendant hetero-patriarchal gendered and sexual imaginaries.

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# Chapter 1 - Towards a Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Communication Studies

Queer Theory and Native Studies are two disciplinary formations that are not necessarily foreign to the communication discipline but, nevertheless, remain marginal to the predominant research interests of scholars in the field<sup>1</sup>. Although direct academic engagement between Queer Theory and Native Studies is only in its infancy<sup>2</sup>, compared to the long individual histories of each disciplinary formation as distinct fields of research, it would behoove communication scholars to proactively engage the emergent field of *Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies*<sup>3</sup> to ask (1) how it challenges our understanding of communication theory and practice as well as (2) how Communication Studies might contribute to the struggle to decolonize psycho-social, cultural, and physical spaces as they have been and continue to be subject to the predominant European political, economic, religious, and sexual imaginaries. Such a theoretical move demands that, despite our legitimate desire to derive the basic structural dynamics that are, perhaps,

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<sup>1</sup> Queer Studies—understood as structural criticism challenging normative understandings of subjectivity—being one element subsumed in a division of the National Communication Association (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer Communication Studies Division) that—much like the politics of LGBT social movements—often privileges the subjective and ethnographic study of sexuality rather than the pervasive structures of heteronormativity. Additionally, while individual divisions exist to represent the interests of African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latin@s, Native Studies seems to be only tangentially related to the discipline by means of the International and Intercultural Communication Division.

<sup>2</sup> Beginning with a disparate series of articles and special issues published in journal such as *Studies in American Indian Literature*, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, and *The American Indian Quarterly*, and, most recently, in the anthology *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* co-edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen

<sup>3</sup> A term coined by Michael Hames-Garcia in his essay prescient essay *What's After Queer Theory? Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies*

fundamental to human communicative practice (whether from transcendental, phenomenological, existential, or empirical traditions), we must also foreground the physical, cultural, and psychological sites where queer indigenous performances present themselves. In other words, *Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies* incites an ethico-political, ontological, and pragmatic challenge to Communication Studies as a discipline (alongside many other disciplines) in need of recognizing that our object(s) of study—communicative performance—predominantly take place within the socio-historical context of settler colonialism; a central element of which is colonization of the psycho-sexual imaginary through the erasure of indigenous gender and sexuality diversity by assimilation into normative binaries emerging from the imposition of Euro-Western culture, values, and institutions. This challenge does not discriminate in applicability to any particular faction—social scientific or the humanities—within the discipline. Instead, it demands that our scholarship be ever vigilant in relating itself to “a politics that marks *all* identities and their relationship to the fields of power in which they are imbricated”<sup>4</sup>: settler colonialism and its attending sexual imaginary.

While the study of communication certainly yields important theoretical and pragmatic insights into communicative practice, and these insights certainly warrant the designation of Communication Studies as a distinct academic discipline, it is equally (if not more) difficult to dispute (especially in a time of interdisciplinary research) the many advantages of letting our scholarship weave itself into other disciplines while welcoming the opportunity for others to weave their insights into ours. This latter conceptual framework for studying communication, however, has not always been the norm and, in fact, faces a series of constraints that either

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<sup>4</sup> *Queer Theory and Native Studies*, pg. 61

marginalize it or undercuts the more radical elements of its critical point of departure<sup>5</sup>. Scholars in the field have long sought to ward off the intrusion of other disciplines and excise those elements deemed to be irrelevant to the discipline in order to maintain their desire to preserve a particular distinctiveness for the study of communication.<sup>6</sup> It matters not whether the goal was (or even still is) to establish *disciplinary sovereignty* or to *disciplinarily colonize* those fields deemed by communication scholars to be subsumed under the purview of Communication Studies, the consequences have been the same. Namely, strict disciplinary demarcations either shut out legitimate criticism in order to maintain intellectual a false sense of distinctiveness or they divest such criticism from its origins resulting in token inclusion rather than genuine intellectual engagement.

A number of sub-disciplines within communication (rhetoric, performance studies, intercultural communication, communication pedagogy, to name a few) are uniquely situated to open themselves up to the significant progress being made by interweaving Queer and Native Studies. These sub-disciplines offer frameworks that take language and communication as one of

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<sup>5</sup> Here I am referencing institutional constraints that pressure disciplines to justify themselves on the basis of a neoliberal economic model that emphasizes the pragmatic skills as such theoretical frameworks and objects of study offer research programs and student in terms of departmental funding and student career outcomes. It is important to recognize that these pressures are not always antithetical to—and often actually contribute to—the interdisciplinary integration of cultural studies and the humanities for the purposes of expanding disciplinary horizons for the purpose of rendering culture a commodity for entrepreneurial economic advantages (a concept termed *neoliberal multiculturalism*) rather than a critical theoretical apparatus for radically challenging and rethinking politics, economics, history, and society.

<sup>6</sup> Referencing (1) early debates regarding the distinctiveness of speech communication as a unique discipline that need not be subject to the decision-making authority of English departments and (2) debates about the proper research methodologies (from internal debates about what empirical methods or meta-theoretical debates regarding social scientific methods or the aesthetic theories of the humanities) for conducting research in communication without relying on the frameworks established by other disciplines. For more in depth analysis, look into *A Century of Communication Studies: The Unfinished Conversation*.



the—if not *the*—primary way(s) human beings relate to each other. Nevertheless, even as fundamental as the creation, use, and exchange of symbols within a broader symbolic order has been to critical research and writing in the field, it has—as will become apparent in the following sections—consistently failed to interrogate the *genocidal rhetorics*<sup>7</sup> sustaining settler colonialism. What is most problematic for activist scholarship in the field regarding the failure to confront such rhetorical performances is that it comes at the high price of understanding how they functionally assimilate, erase, and/or appropriate indigenous gender and sexual diversity by privileging a European hetero-binarism of atomistic familial units. It matters not whether one pledges their affinities to social scientific investigation or aesthetic interpretations found in the humanities, the settler state is too often treated as a taken-for-granted institution and communicative performances are rarely, if ever, interrogated as embedded in the settler colonial rhetorical situation. What is most disturbing about such silence is the horrifying realization that, given the history of European colonization spanning nearly the entire globe, almost any rhetorical performance can be analyzed and criticized from this perspective. Although repression of our shared colonial history seems to be the social norm, avoidance doesn't mean that the most seemingly unrelated rhetorical performances are completely devoid of a relationship to settler colonialism and the genocidal erasure of indigenous sexualities and gender constructions. This is especially true in the context of the United States nation-state. Every single rhetorical artifact—from mundane conversations among friends to the most celebrated speeches in the American oratorical canon—has a relationship, in one way or another, to settler colonialism for the mere fact that they are performed on stolen land. From the moment European colonization of the

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<sup>7</sup> A term I wish, in this paper, to use in reference to those communicative performances and rhetorical tools that erase, minimize, or obscure the history of settler colonialism

Americas began there has been built a vast rhetorical archive of speeches, books, diaries, letters, decrees, etc. that have catalyzed actions foretold by ideologies spanning from manifest destiny and westward expansion to contemporary debates over the definition of marriage and even border security. Whether explicitly acknowledged in these earlier rhetorical artifacts or implicitly underlying contemporary socio-political discourses, due to the undeniable facts that they have functioned to justify, repress, or even erase the diverse psycho-sexual imaginaries and gender constructs of indigenous folks as a key mechanism for the dispossession of land through genocide and assimilation, it is important that the study of communication take up such an understanding as a fundamental element of the way we conduct research and interpret rhetorical performances as they relate to such violent histories.

In order to understand the structural dynamics at play underwriting the study of communication, I will begin with a genealogical examination of the relationship between Queerness, Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism and the Communication Studies discipline as a precursor to outlining a series of concepts useful as tools for rhetorical analysis. These concepts are chosen for their applicability in challenging the intellectual blind spots present in even the most liberatory and queer-friendly margins of various disciplines—including communication studies—as they relate to contemporary conversations and debates in Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies. These concepts include *recognition*, *witnessing*, *disidentification*, and *shifting sites of queer enunciation*. Rather than engage these concepts for the purpose of critically deconstructing the three rhetorical artifacts that comprise this study, I wish to demonstrate how each piece of these artifacts exemplifies a distinct rhetorical modality that function as a form of rhetorical criticism, establishes frameworks for conducting intercultural communication, and influencing communication pedagogy. The selected works of creative

writing in this study are produced by queer and Two-Spirit identified Indigenous writers who utilize both form and content (from Fantasy Fiction, Tribe-Specific Cosmologies, and Mixed Media) to decolonize the normative socio-sexual principles and values lending coherency to settler society. In their attempts to establish *intellectual* and *rhetorical sovereignty* as well as a *literary separatism*, exploring the distinctiveness of the structural positioning demarcated as queer and indigenous, in the socio-sexual imaginary of settler colonialism, these authors have bestowed upon Communication Studies a series of tools to begin the difficult work of decolonizing rhetorical artifacts, disciplinary norms, and society writ-large.

As the following section will demonstrate, this thesis attempts to intervene in an already established conversation happening in the field of queer communication studies. Through an analysis of the following rhetorical performances I hope to contribute to these conversations by demonstrating how a critical framework that explicitly acknowledges the relationship between queerness and indigeneity can be used to expand disciplinary horizons and sharpen the focus on activist work as it politicizes the contemporary and historical violence of settler colonialism. Interventions such as these are necessary not just because they broaden the research agenda for scholars in the field but, more importantly, because they serve to identify and demystify works that are implicated in the socio-symbolic economy of settler colonialism despite claiming to be aligned with the goals and values of queer ethnic and indigenous critique.

### **Queering Communication Studies: A Brief History**

It has been over a decade since Gust A. Yep prophetically wrote in an introduction to the groundbreaking volume, *Queer Theory and Communication: From Disciplining Queers to Queering the Discipline(s)*, that despite “its preeminent role in the formation and constitution of

human subjectivity and experience in modern Western cultures, sexuality has been, until recently, largely a neglected area of inquiry in the communication discipline.”<sup>8</sup> Noting that it took 61 years (1915-1976) for the most influential journal in the discipline at the time, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, to broach the topic of homosexuality, Yep also cites a study by Corey, Smith, and Nakayama<sup>9</sup> revealing a grand total of only 66 articles having been published in communication journals in the three decades that followed (1973-2001) that addressed LGBT issues in the field of Communication Studies. While *Queer Theory and Communication* may have “systemically brought queer critique to the study of human communication,” Karma Chávez remarks that, since it was published, “no journal of the National Communication Association has previously hosted a special issue or forum dedicated to queer studies.”<sup>10</sup> In 2013 the dry spell on substantive journal space being allotted to exploring the intersection of queer theory and communication found reprieve in a special issue of the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, edited by Dr. Chávez, highlighting important theoretical advances in queer theory and their uptake in the various sub-disciplines of communication scholarship over the last decade.

As such, it is apropos that communication scholars begin by recognizing how certain sub-disciplines within communication have been more receptive than others to the insights and developments taking place within queer theory: most notably rhetoric, performance studies and intercultural communication. Additionally, while the allocation of journal space is certainly an important political issue that must be a critical part of understanding how the discipline receives and contributes to studying queer issues, it should not lead us to undervalue the pedagogical and

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<sup>8</sup> *Queer Theory and Communication*, pg. 14

<sup>9</sup> *Bibliography of articles and books of relevance to G/L/B/T Communication Studies*

<sup>10</sup> *Pushing Boundaries*, pg. 83

activist work of queer scholars in the field. While embedded and reactionary interests may leave much to be desired in the discipline as a whole, the uptake of queer issues by activist scholars in queer-friendly sub-disciplines and emerging spaces of communication scholarship should give a healthy dose of hope to even the most ardent pessimists among us that our scholarship can, in fact, affect the discipline in a positive way.

An honest assessment—that is, an understanding that isn't overly optimistic or fatalistically pessimistic—regarding the queering of communication would conclude that its uptake and dispersion in and throughout the discipline has been a story of leaps and bounds rather than one remaining in constant dialogue with the developments taking place in queer studies. This is not to suggest that queer communication scholars have fallen behind in their area of expertise. It is, however, meant to suggest that the academic study of communication has been lackluster in its reception, interrogation, publication, and politicization of these advances. In the decade between the publication of *Queer Theory and Communication* (2003) and the special issue of the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* (2013) Queer Studies did not wait for the communication discipline to catch up. Just like other disciplines and socio-political and cultural issues, it evolved over that time and was subject to internal debates and external criticism. It has only just recently been in her groundbreaking article, *Pushing Boundaries: Queer Intercultural Communication*, that Karma Chávez brings these dynamic shifts to the fore and boldly attempts to reignite dialogue about the status of queer and trans issues in the field. In addition to putting these issues on the research agenda, she forcefully attempts to forge a new space for these theories to critically intervene in the discipline: intercultural communication. The most significant aspect of *Out of Bounds* has been the way this special volume has brought the communication discipline up to speed regarding the advances

being made in other disciplines regarding queer issues as they have developed through internal criticism of many normative elements defining traditional queer theory. While some scholars rightly question the utility and efficacy of “queer” as a representative term for referring to the series of criticisms responding to such normative elements, many have found the title of “The New Queer Studies” as a useful nomenclature for separating their work from the under-theorized, unquestioned, and often violent aspects of early queer scholarship.

*Out of Bounds* systematically introduces the “new” queer studies to communication by means of the theoretical moves taking place in *queer of color critique* and *trans theories* as they decenter, what Susan Stryker terms, the “homonormative” aspects of queer theory that privilege white, upper class, cisgender, able-bodied, gay men as the prototypical queer subject. While issues such as globalization, imperialism, and nationalism have long been a part of the conversation in Intercultural Communication, Chávez incorporates these shifting terrains within queer theory to challenge scholars to rethink these topics from a perspective that is critical of the sex and gender constructions of *queer liberalism*. In his addition to this special volume, Gust A. Yep challenges the communication discipline to return to the body “as an important site of knowledge and analysis”<sup>11</sup> by using the practices of *queering*, *quaring*, *kauering*, *crippin’*, and *transing* the way bodies are constructed, read, and translated in communication research. Analyzing advertisements supportive of same-sex marriage, C. Riley Snorton demonstrates the utility of *Queer of Color Critique* for the study of media by unpacking how blackness is often constructed “as a site of hyperbolized homophobia.”<sup>12</sup> In her article on the rhetorical construction and criminalization of CeCe McDonald, Julia R. Johnson exhibits the utility of concepts

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<sup>11</sup> *Queering/Quaring/Kauering/Crippin’/Transing ‘Other Bodies’ in Intercultural Communication*, pg. 118

<sup>12</sup> *Marriage Mimesis*, pg. 128

developed in transgender studies (cissexism, cisgenderism, cis privilege, etc.) for analyzing discourses that criminalize, demonize, and erase the perspectives and experiences of trans folks through hate speech, misgendering, and rhetorical framing. In the final essay of this special volume, Megan E. Morrissey demonstrates the analytic usefulness of *disidentification*<sup>13</sup> for understanding rhetorical strategies responding to immigration policy in Citizen Orange's "DREAM Now" letter-writing campaign. These five essays and the additional dialogue that comprise this special volume of the *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* has essentially "updated" the theoretical and analytic vocabulary of the communication discipline. The terms, concepts, and methodologies developed therein are by no means exhaustive of what the "new" queer studies has to offer communication scholars but it is an indispensable leap forward politicizing queer issues in the field and demonstrating the analytical usefulness of queer theory in the study of human communication.

While the publication of this special volume has given visibility and renewed legitimacy to queer issues and perspectives in the communication discipline and, in its own right, is an event worth celebrating, a healthy dose of criticism is in order. Where *Queer Theory and Communication* fails to broach the intersection of queerness and indigeneity, *Out of Bounds* merely pays Queer Ethnic and Indigenous studies lip service. Decolonial scholarship relating the body to the land is functionally absent and Two-Spirit folks are mentioned only once in a flurry of examples demonstrating the concept of transgenderism. Reflecting the failure of the "new" queer studies to interrogate intersections with colonialism and indigeneity, the uptake of queer theory in communication has similarly minimized such intersections and it has not done so for lack of communicative artifacts and performances to study. *Out of Bounds* made a giant leap

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<sup>13</sup> A concept developed in Performance Studies by José Estaban Muñoz

forward in queering the communication studies discipline but it is imperative that communication scholars similarly learn from the those omissions that led to a decade-long hiatus regarding the visibility queer issues and their being placed at the center of analysis. Rather than wait another decade for the next cycle of communication scholars to incorporate the insights of those who criticize the blind spots of the “new” queer studies, this thesis attempts to remain in continued conversation with scholars outside the field of communication to bring Queer Ethnic and indigenous Studies into the theoretical vocabulary for analyzing rhetorical artifacts. Demonstrating the meta-theoretical framework (that is, an overarching critical edifice) of Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies as a key paradigm determining the usefulness of specific concepts and their application three distinct rhetorical artifacts, I will explore how the use of *Two-Spirit Criticism* in the study of communication can render the violence of settler colonialism intelligible as it permeates disciplinary and social formations.

### **Rhetorical Sovereignty, Two-Spirit Critique, and the “New” Queer Studies**

I am suspicious of emergent queer critiques, as valuable as they might be, because of the startling absence of Native people and the colonization of Native nations in these theories. Native people must *disidentify* with the very critiques that claim to be decolonial and counterhegemonic interventions for queer people of color in order to make them viable for our communities. Through disidentification, other critiques emerge that centralize Native peoples, nations, identities, land bases, and survival tactics, which can be called Two-Spirit critiques. Two-Spirit critiques emerge from this disidentification to create theories in which Two-Spirit people and decolonization are centralized. These critiques not only serve to disidentify with queer of color and queer diasporic critique; they also create more robust and



effective interventions in systems of oppression from which both Native studies and queer studies can benefit.<sup>14</sup>

The term *Two-Spirit* is a rhetorical device denoting a pan-tribal coalition of indigenous peoples whose tribe-specific constructions of gender and sexuality cannot be assimilated within the contours of the hetero-binary constructed and privileged within the Euro-Western sexual imaginary. It is notable that this term, *Two-Spirit*, is an English construction that attempts to represent the traditions and interests of over one hundred historically documented traditions of diverse genders and sexualities within various Native American cultures and societies.<sup>15</sup> As documented in an anthology of gay American Indian writing compiled by Will Roscoe (1988), *Living the Spirit*, nearly every documented tribal construction of gender that exceeds the limits of the European binary has its own historical linguistic and conceptual construction within specific tribal cultures that predate the colonization of the Americas. Although these distinct terms are incredibly rich, important, and valuable in their own right and deserve to be studied and understood in their uniqueness (not to mention a thorough criticism of their rhetorical coalescence into the term *Two-Spirit*), umbrella terms, such as *Two-Spirit*, gain powerful intellectual, cultural, and social currency as “academic discourse often demands clearly defined terms in order to have a discussion.”<sup>16</sup> As Qwo-Li Driskill points out, “[l]ike other umbrella terms—including *queer*—it risks erasing difference. But also like *queer*, it is meant to be inclusive, ambiguous, and fluid.”<sup>17</sup> Alongside the risk of erasing difference is the problematic privileging of a rhetorical marker in the colonizing language of English: a practice that has a long

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<sup>14</sup> *Doubleweaving Two Spirit Critiques*, 79

<sup>15</sup> *Living the Spirit*, 217-222

<sup>16</sup> *Sovereign Erotics*

<sup>17</sup> *Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques*, 72

and violent history of being forcefully imposed on indigenous folks through the boarding school system functionally suppressing and erasing indigenous tongues.

My use of the term *Two-Spirit* should not be mistaken as an unproblematic deployment of such a rhetorical construction but, rather, as an academic appropriation of the term that does not deny or even refute the potential for failing to acknowledge tribal specificities or the reality of linguistic colonization. I use this term with cautious attention to the linguistic complexities and situational identification and disidentification with the term by indigenous folks.<sup>18</sup> Attentive to the problematic usage of such umbrella terms constructed in a colonial language there are important benefits to their use. The choice to use such a term as Two-Spirit shouldn't be treated as a zero-sum decision where one must be either absolutely for or against its usage but, instead, be evaluated in relation to the rhetorical context and situation. My decision to use the term Two-Spirit reflects the academic context in which I am writing and submission to the *rhetorical sovereignty* of indigenous folks to define the terms of discussions about them.

According to Scott Richard Lyons, who coined the term, *Rhetorical Sovereignty* is “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination” and “requires above all the presence of an Indian voice, speaking or writing in an ongoing context of colonization and setting at least some of the terms of debate.”<sup>19</sup> Given the historical context in which this term was constructed and by whom it was forged, it is clear that the term, Two-Spirit, is an act of *rhetorical sovereignty* in the sense that it is “[d]eploying power and seeking recognition at the colonized scene of writing.”<sup>20</sup> Elaborating

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<sup>18</sup> For a more thorough analysis of these complexities see *Cherokee Two-Spirit People Reimagining Nation* in *Queer Indigenous Studies*, pgs. 97-112

<sup>19</sup> *Rhetorical Sovereignty*, pg. 462

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 458

on its origins, Anguksuar (Richard LaFortune) explains in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*:

The term *two-spirit*, which has come into recent popular usage, originated in Northern Algonquin dialect and gained first currency at the third annual spiritual gather of gay and lesbian Native people that took place near Winnipeg in 1990. What we who chose this designation understood is that *niizh manitoag* (two-spirits) indicates the presence of both a feminine and masculine spirit in one person. [...] In no way does the term determine genital activity. It does determine the qualities that define a persons social role and spiritual gifts.<sup>21</sup>

Reflecting a conscious and collective decision on the part of gay and lesbian Native folks to identify as Two-Spirit, usage of the term in academic work seems to be an appropriate response demonstrating submission to the rhetorical sovereignty of indigenous folks. While this doesn't erase the legitimate criticisms of the term raised by other indigenous individuals and groups, it should temper the degree to which scholars would be reticent to use it (especially given its historically used alternative).

This act of rhetorical sovereignty, staking a claim to identity as *Two-Spirited*, responds to a very particular rhetorical situation within the colonized scene of anthropological and ethnographic research and writing. According to Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, anthropological writings appropriated the term *berdache* to refer to "transvestism, homosexuality, hermaphrodism, and transgenderism as institutions viewed positively in Native American cultures."<sup>22</sup> Given the etymological origins of the term (referring to a "kept boy" or "male prostitute" and its appropriation by non-Native LGBT folks falsely projecting a pan-tribal

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<sup>21</sup> *Two-Spirit People*, pg. 221

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 4

“primordial bliss” of “supposed acceptance” of queerness), “it should come as no surprise that many Native American gay, lesbian, transgender, and other two-spirit people consider the term “berdache” derogatory and insulting.”<sup>23</sup> The rhetorical work of anthropological and ethnographic literature attempting to render indigenous sexualities intelligible by means of this European construction is, itself, a form of violence worthy of its own rhetorical analysis. Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, academic discourse often demands a series of clearly defined terms in order to render subject matter intelligible. Where the term *berdache* represents, what Lyons would call, “rhetorical imperialism”<sup>24</sup>, the term *Two-Spirit* demonstrates indigenous rhetorical sovereignty as “both a term for contemporary communities and identities and as an alternative to colonial terms such as *berdache*.”<sup>25</sup>

While use of the term Two-Spirit demonstrates rhetorical sovereignty as an act of resistance to violent rhetorics of anthropological and ethnographic (mis)identifications, it also provides an incredibly important theoretical perspective from which a “framework for interrogating and analyzing normalizing logics within disciplinary formations as well as academic institutions themselves”<sup>26</sup> can develop. What makes Two-Spirit critique unique is that it *disidentifies* with both Native Studies and the “New” Queer Studies. According to José Estaban Muñoz, “[d]isidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, in that it neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”<sup>27</sup> Qwo-Li Driskill describes the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pgs 4-5

<sup>24</sup> *Rhetorical Sovereignty*, pg 452: “The ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of the debate.”

<sup>25</sup> *Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques*, pg 72

<sup>26</sup> *Queer Theory and Native Studies*, pg 46

<sup>27</sup> *Disidentifications*, pg 11

disidentifications of Two-Spirit Critique as a rhetorical strategy of *doubleweaving* “in which two seemingly disparate theoretical approaches exist concurrently.”<sup>28</sup> The doubleweaving metaphor refers to a unique artistic process for weaving baskets in Cherokee culture where a single basket is produced from “two complete baskets, one woven inside the other, with a common rim.”<sup>29</sup> Doubleweaving as a mode of disidentification with Queer Theory and Native Studies takes the independent designs of each and weaves them into a “methodological approach that draws on and intersects numerous theoretical splints.”<sup>30</sup> A two-Spirit Critique gestures beyond the plateau that communication has reached with respect to the new queer studies. It weaves together a criticism that is inclusive of concepts developed in Queer of Color, Queer Diasporic, Trans\* Critique but it disidentifies with the abject failure of these critiques to confront the rootedness of hetero-patriarchal violence in settler colonialism.

Two-Spirit Critique is not a monolithic theoretical framework but it does incorporate various concepts and themes out of which particular theoretical configurations can be woven together. In his prescient work on Two-Spirit Critique, *Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies*, Qwo-Li Driskill explains that such criticisms

... are not necessarily about sexuality; they are about gendered experiences and identities outside dominant European gender constructions. No understanding of sexual and gender constructions on colonized and occupied land can take place without an understanding of the ways colonial projects continually police sexual and gender lines. Two-Spirit critiques, then, are necessary to and understanding of

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<sup>28</sup> *Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques*, pg 74

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

homophobia, misogyny, and transphobia in the Americas, just as an analysis of queerphobia and sexism is necessary to understand colonial projects.<sup>31</sup>

This quotation demonstrates how Two-Spirit critiques distances itself from much of the early and still salient elements within queer theory and mainstream LGBT politics. It is certainly inclusive of criticism grounded in sexual practice and genital activity but it does not define one's identity or politics as entirely constituted by it. Anguksuar (Richard LaFortune) emphasizes the spiritual and cosmological substructure influencing what constitutes Two-Spiritedness as an identity and a theoretical framework explaining that it refers “to the fact that each human is born because a man and a woman have joined in creating new life; all humans bear imprints of both, although some individuals may manifest both qualities more completely to others.”<sup>32</sup> As such, equating Two-Spirit to homosexuality would be a gross misrepresentation of the spiritual aspects informing how gender and sexuality are constructed and related in many indigenous cultures. Perhaps even more violent than cultural misrepresentation is the fact that such equations decontextualize indigenous sexualities and gender constructions from histories of colonial abjection and erasure by subsuming their uniqueness under the European concept of homosexuality. This is what separates Two-Spirit critiques from their Eurocentric counterparts.

Two-Spirit critiques diverge from other queer critiques because they root themselves in Native histories, politics, and decolonial struggles. Two-Spirit critiques challenge both white-dominated queer theory and queer of color critique's near erasure of Native people and nations, and question the usefulness to Native communities of theories not rooted in tribally specific traditions and not thoroughly conscious of colonialism as an ongoing process.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pg 73

<sup>32</sup> *Two-Spirit People*, pg. 221

<sup>33</sup> *Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques*, 71

Two-Spirit critiques privilege theoretical concepts and paradigms that center analysis of contemporary social formations in the Americas on psycho-social abjection, land theft, and genocide via normalizing socio-symbolic systems of values forged with the tools of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and queerphobia. Scholars in fields spanning from Anthropology to Urban Studies (everything in between and beyond) will fail in their theoretical and empirical enterprises to fully comprehend or resolve the contemporary violence and historical trauma of being subject to and interpellated within normalizing ideological regimes.

In terms of rhetorical criticism and studies in intercultural communication, it is imperative to ground our analysis and pedagogy with attentiveness and accountability to the histories, politics, and decolonial struggles of indigenous folks. The following section will articulate less of a methodology than a series of concepts forged from the tools of Two-Spirit criticism to make sense of the intellectual, psychical, and activist labor present in the creative rhetorical work of Two-Spirit/Queer Indigenous scholars/artists. It is my intention that these concepts will offer productive pedagogical, personal, and social insight into how we read, interpret, and teach the specificities and uniqueness of Queer Indigenous Rhetorics. A secondary goal is to advance the disciplinary engagement of communication by continuing the discussions started in *Out of Bounds* in order to gesture beyond the stagnancies that have haunted the degree to which scholars in the field have remained attentive to the shifting terrain of Queer, Trans\*, and Ethnic studies. As has been explored, much of the critical scholarship surrounding the intersections of queer theory and communication have elided, minimized, or appropriated understandings of our rootedness in a settler colonial history despite the best intentions of its practitioners. Without an uptake of queer ethnic and indigenous critiques the unfortunate task falls upon researchers and activists in the field to acknowledge that we have failed the ethical

obligation to confront the ways in which we are implicated in an ongoing genocidal present. It is my hope that communication scholars engage these conversations sooner rather than later.

## **Recognition, Witnessing, and Shifting the Site of Queer Enunciation**

There is no single strategy for decolonizing psychic space that will, once and for all, eliminate the anti-queer superegoic demands—moral and ethnical prohibitions and inhibitions—of colonial abjection.<sup>34</sup> There is also no single strategy of resistance that will eliminate the daily manifestations of systemic violence against Indigenous folks in one fell swoop; a realization that should constantly “[push] us to more radical possibilities for decolonial activism that can transform all of our lives.”<sup>35</sup> Acknowledgment of the fact that the multiple and intersecting aspects of identity—subject position and subjectivity—will have always already differentially related each subject to the Euro-Western colonial and sexual imaginary must affect the way we construct theory and perform criticism. “We may need a politic that marks *all* identities and their relationship to the fields of power in which they are imbricated.”<sup>36</sup> While queer theory offers a broad set of critical tools for evaluating and rethinking heteronormativity, it is only in the relatively recent development of a new framework—what Michael Hames-García terms *Queer*

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<sup>34</sup> Driskill, Qwo-Li, Chris Finley, Brian Gilley, and Scott Morgensen. “The Revolution is for Everyone: Imagining and Emancipatory Future through Queer Indigenous Critical Theories.” In *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, 213. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, Andrea. “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010): 64.



*Ethnic and Indigenous Studies*<sup>37</sup>—that explicitly acknowledges the “articulation of indigeneity as an erotics... taking the kinds of physicality, intersubjectivity, and vulnerability categorized and cordoned off as “sexuality” within dominant discourses as a starting point for mapping the ongoing management of Indigenous polities.”<sup>38</sup> Whereas a large portion of the LGBTQ movement has been built upon the civil rights model<sup>39</sup> demanding rights and recognition, “Queer Indigenous critiques... seek to imagine other queer possibilities for emancipation and freedom for all peoples.”<sup>40</sup>

One way of imagining the potentiality for queer Indigenous critique to intervene in and contribute to rhetorical theory and criticism is by way of two important theoretical perspectives: *recognition* and *witnessing*. They can help us to conceptualize the various means by which different rhetorical modalities function within to the socio-symbolic order of settler society as methods for disarticulating our affective ties to the colonial imaginary and reclaim psychic space. These devices concern the various ways in which Indigenous subjectivity is rhetorically constructed (by demands for recognition beyond liberal democratic rights) and interpreted (on

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<sup>37</sup> Hames-García, Michael. "What's After Queer Theory: Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies." *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 384.

<sup>38</sup> Rifkin, Mark. “The Erotics of Sovereignty.” In *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, 174. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> The large majority of the LGBTQ movement is involved in campaigns to find legitimacy from the institutions that abject them rather than deconstruct, challenge, and dismantle them—this is what I am referencing when I discuss the civil rights model. The difference is between compromise for the sake of inclusion and politicizing ones exclusion as a mechanism for critiquing the very framework that has produced ones exclusion to begin with.

<sup>40</sup> Driskill, Qwo-Li, Chris Finley, Brian Gilley, and Scott Morgensen. “The Revolution is for Everyone: Imagining and Emancipatory Future through Queer Indigenous Critical Theories.” In *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, 213. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011.

the part of those bearing witness). Additionally, an expansion of Ernesto Martínez's notion of *Shifting the Site of Queer Enunciation*<sup>41</sup> may provide critics with a useful method for conceptualizing demands for recognition and the act of bearing witness in queer Indigenous rhetorics. Once established, I will attempt to illustrate how this theoretical framework provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding how three distinct rhetorical modalities (fantasy fiction, literary separatism, and mixed media) can function as devices for decolonizing psychic space in *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles* by Daniel Heath Justice, *Drowning in Fire* by Craig Womack, and *Bad Indians* by Deborah Miranda. These were chosen because they represent contemporary efforts to produce an erotics of sovereignty. They relate bodies, identities, peoples as well as their individual and collective ways of imagining themselves to the land. Decolonial struggles to reclaim land represents more than pragmatic political program. Sovereignty is, at once, about physical space and psychic space; the land and the body. Through their distinct rhetorical modalities, these works relate the bodies to the land by means of engaging, interpreting, and reinterpreting histories, cosmologies, and subjectivities erased, obscured, and repressed by settler society.

"Rhetorics of recognition,"<sup>42</sup> as Daniel Heath Justice terms them, are both seductive and dangerous. While acts of recognition hold transformative potential, they also carry with them the risk of both accidental and intended forms of *misrecognition* that, wittingly or not, maintain, rather than challenge, unequal relationships of power. The concept of recognition often implies a position of authority from which one may exercise the power to affirm or deny a politically, economically or culturally qualified existence to another. When positioned within the Euro-

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<sup>41</sup> Martínez, Ernesto. "Shifting the Site of Queer Enunciation." In *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*, 112-136. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. "Rhetorics of Recognition." *The Kenyon Review* 32, no. 1 (2010): 236-61.

Western cultural imaginary, recognition of Indigenous subjectivity is filtered through a set of values, images and historical narratives that project an understanding of Indigeneity often implying an unchanging archetype of Indigenous purity. This rhetorical construction of Indigeneity is institutionalized and enforced most explicitly in the form of tribal recognition policies and blood quantum measurements. These rhetorics literally determine the politically qualified existence of entire Indigenous communities as well as the conditions for membership within them. They are epistemological devices of destruction that underpin a juridico-political discursive matrix where one may only distance themselves from the colonial terms of identification as “recognizable phenotypical qualities gradually contract.”<sup>43</sup> Instead of privileging the cultural currency afforded these colonial rhetorics of recognition, it is important to examine rhetorical constructions of indigeneity produced by Native folks on their own terms reflecting their own unique histories; a concept Craig Womack calls *Native American Literary Separatism/Nationalism*.<sup>44</sup> In order to explore the emancipatory potential of recognition as a conceptual tool it must reflect an attempt to decolonize approaches to literary and rhetorical canon(s) as a prior step in process of confronting the colonization of psychic space. This means exploring texts and speech acts that interrogate what it means and feels to occupy the physical and psychical spaces of colonial abjection through aesthetic creation; what Qwo-Li Driskill calls a *Sovereign Erotic*.<sup>45</sup> This means taking seriously the literary and rhetorical performances of indigenous folks as paradigmatic examples of the struggle to disentangle the web of colonial

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>44</sup> Womack, Craig. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

<sup>45</sup> Driskill, Qwo-Li. “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no. 2 (2004): 51.

abjection by relating creative attempts to articulate the experience of such a subject position by means of aesthetic expression in creative writing. It means understanding these discourses as occupying a position of rhetorical criticism that can inform how we conduct rhetorical criticism, practices of intercultural communication, and the teaching of communication as a discipline.

The problem of recognition outlined by Justice is precisely what is at stake in Kelly Oliver's attempt to develop a psychoanalytic social theory of oppression in the article "Witnessing and Testimony" and her book *The Colonization of Psychic Space*. Oliver turns to the works of Fanon, Lacan, and Kristeva as a way to interrogate and explore the productive tension between subject position (finite historical contexts) and subjectivity (the ethical dimension of meaning as infinite addressability and response-ability).<sup>46</sup> From the very moment one is thrown into existence they begin to develop a sense of "self" in relation to "otherness." As Justice demonstrates in "Notes Towards a Theory of Anomaly"<sup>47</sup> and Womack displays in *Red on Red*,<sup>48</sup> this confrontation with otherness need not be, as it is in the colonial imaginary, based on the mutual enmity of, for example, a Hegelian master-slave struggle for recognition and domination. This doesn't mean that we should, however, rid ourselves of recognition as a valuable concept for analyzing literature and rhetoric. It does mean, by contrast, that a reevaluation of the concept is in store. As Kelly Oliver powerfully states, "The victims of oppression, slavery, and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witness to horrors beyond recognition."<sup>49</sup> In other words, recognition isn't about

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<sup>46</sup> Oliver, Kelly. "Witnessing and Testimony." *Parallax* 10, no. 1 (2004): 81.

<sup>47</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. "Notes Toward a Theory of Anomaly." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010): 220-221.

<sup>48</sup> Womack, Craig. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. 245.

<sup>49</sup> Oliver, Kelly. "Witnessing and Testimony." *Parallax* 10, no. 1 (2004): 79.

tribal acknowledgement, special designations of rights, or even a correct assessment of the historical record. It involves something at the very core of individual affective registers that reach into the heart of how one is interpellated into socio-symbolic economy of settler colonialism. Institutionalized recognition does not bear witness to the horrors of colonization but, instead, merely acknowledges them. Bearing witness is an altogether different type of recognition that accounts for the affective dimensions of identifying with and recognition of the psychical toll historically exacted and contemporarily manifested in the bodies, families, cultures, histories, and societies of indigenous folks. Whereas institutional recognition manifests itself as a depoliticizing move to accommodate the status quo in order to maintain power in the hands of the settler state, recognition as an act of bearing inner witness politicizes the relationship between physical and psychical violence, past and present, that questions the very legitimacy of dominant institutions and the values the depoliticizing maneuvers enforce.

Expanding the conceptual horizons of recognition in order to separate it from the risk of reifying the abjection inherent to the colonial imaginary, Oliver theorizes that the interiority of psychic space is developed through the interplay of being and meaning—subject position and subjectivity—that, ultimately, comprises a space for “inner witness.”<sup>50</sup> “If the inner witness is on the one hand the ability to address oneself or to be self-reflective that is ‘learned’ through addressing and being addressed by others, and it is learned in a particular historical and social situation, then it is going to be both a prerequisite for a sense of agency per se and a governing factor in the particularities of and restrictions on that sense of agency.”<sup>51</sup> From this perspective it is possible to comprehend the process of world-making in creative writing as the sublimation of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

an “inner witness.” In other words, the rhetorical function of these works is found in the way they politicize the tension between an author or a character’s historically constituted subject position and the struggle for the reclamation of psychic space in the various ways they work to forge a felt sense of agency. Furthermore, rhetorically shifting the site of enunciation politicizes this “inner witness” addresses itself to others as a mechanism for altering and, potentially, reconstituting the “inner witness” of others (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) in their own complex and dynamic interplay between being and meaning. Translating historical fact into a fantasy and/or disidentificatory spaces mimics that very tension by demanding addressees interrogate their own socio-symbolic situatedness in the colonial imaginary via the rhetorical modality challenging their subjective psychic space.

This is exactly how the three creative works analyzed in this thesis construct unique, first-of-their-kind, *Sovereign Erotics*. They offer frameworks for decolonizing the hetero-patriarchal social imaginary by *shifting the site of queer enunciation* beyond mere historical record into the fictional space of high fantasy, historical fiction, and mixed media. In his book *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*, Ernesto Martinez describes *shifting the site of queer enunciation* as an rhetorical approach to literature that “astutely decenters queer speaking subjects, doing so in a manner that not only equitably distributes narrative responsibility for queer experience and identity, but that also enables a deeper understanding of the intersubjective and social contexts in which queer subjects come into being.”<sup>52</sup> Although Martinez envisions this rhetorical framework as a way to transfer the location from which queerness is articulated away from those who embody queer identities to non-queer folks

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<sup>52</sup> Martínez, Ernesto. “Shifting the Cite of Queer Enunciation.” In *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 113.

narrating queer experience, I wish to broaden the concept and explore how *literary genre*<sup>53</sup> can also shift the site of queer enunciation to achieve the shared goals of expressing the complexities queer subjectivity and bear witness to the affects of colonial abjection that exist beyond mere recognition.

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<sup>53</sup> Here I am referring to the way Fantasy Fiction, Literary Separatism, and Mixed Media can contribute to the decolonization of psychic space

## Chapter 2 - *Wyr* Here, We're Queer: Queering Indigenous Fantasies in Daniel Heath Justice's *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*

“One does not possess a resonance... one *shares* it. That is how literature, and all arts written or visual, serve to empower us: by sharing a vision, an experience, a resonance, that communicates and *teaches us understanding*—of each other, our connections with the planet, our flaws and beauty as alive beings, in ways no one else can.”<sup>54</sup>

Is it possible to conceptualize fantasy fiction as a decolonizing rhetorical modality—in the sense that it offers a potential avenue for exploring sublimation via literary creation and witnessing by means of aesthetic experience—for critically examining and reclaiming psychic space from the libidinal economy of colonial abjection? More specifically, can the process of world-making, on the one hand, and immersion within such fantasy spaces, on the other, functionally separate people from their internalized systems of value by suspending those unacknowledged defense mechanisms that tie them to the socio-sexual imaginary of settler colonialism? Might there exist, within the pages that construct these alternate spaces of identification, the potential for awakening the radical possibility of disarticulating the desires that maintain a perverse sense of enjoyment generated through identification with the ideological coordinates of the Euro-Western sexual imaginary? If so, we might also ask how rhetorical strategies that shift the location from which queerness is articulated—and, more specifically, its relationship to settler colonialism—serve as a coding device for memorializing the historical

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<sup>54</sup> Miranda, Deborah. ““Like Melody or Witchcraft”: Empowerment through Literature.” *The American Indian Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2004): 105.



trauma of Indigenous removal and genocide in a way that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects might utilize as a mechanism for rereading and reconstituting the socio-symbolic and material life-world in which we are all, at this very moment, imbricated. As Andrea Smith forcefully declares in the concluding sentence of her article, “Queer Theory and Native Studies,” “the logics of settler colonialism *and* decolonization must be queered in order properly to speak to the genocidal present that not only continues to disappear indigenous peoples but reinforces the structures of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy that affect all peoples.”<sup>55</sup> Following Smith’s demand, it seems possible (if not necessary) to consider queer rhetorical performances of indigeneity as such an intervention into the logics of settler colonialism and strategies for decolonization.

This analysis will build upon the work of Lisa Tatonetti in her article “Indigenous Fantasies and Sovereign Erotics: Outland Cherokees Write Two-Spirit Nations.” From a literary perspective, she argues that *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* attempts to decolonize the genre of fantasy fiction as it is implicated in colonial imaginaries of nationhood.<sup>56</sup> Through a close reading of characters, settings, and events, she compares the literary construction of fantasy spaces in Tolkien and Justice to reveal the colonial roots of fantasy fiction as a genre and the decolonizing possibilities that exist for disidentifying with them. While her primary goal is to explore the possibilities such a decolonial intervention has in literary theory—as well as American Indian studies—I am primarily concerned with analyzing how fantasy fiction, as a

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<sup>55</sup> Smith, Andrea. “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010): 64.

<sup>56</sup> Tatonetti, Lisa. “Indigenous Fantasies and Sovereign Erotics: Outland Cherokees Write Two-Spirit Nations.” In *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, 163. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011.

distinct rhetorical modality, offers a method for decolonizing psychic space. Building upon the work in Queer Indigenous/Two-Spirit literary criticism, a psychoanalytic approach to rhetorical theory offers an additional perspective on the decolonizing potential of fantasy fiction in a “first-of-its-kind” trilogy allegorizing the anti-queer underpinnings of colonization. By analyzing the construction of colonial abjection and anomalous figures of queer Indigenous resistance in *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*, this essay will demonstrate (1) a psychoanalytic rhetorical theory for analyzing fantasy fiction, (2) the need to expand disciplinary horizons to encounter queer rhetorics of indigeneity, and (3) how allegorical retellings of Indigenous abjection and resistance can, through fantasy fiction, function as a tool for decolonizing psychic space. The ultimate goal of this undertaking is to develop building blocks for theoretical and pedagogical approaches to queer rhetorics of indigeneity. I hold the same hope as Lisa Tatonetti that this essay may hold the potential to create intellectual and pedagogical alliances that “introduce American Indian history to entirely new audiences.”<sup>57</sup>

### **An Allegorical Retelling of Cherokee Removal**

“The memory of the world is short, and death rides hard in the forgetting, so I hold these teachings and share them, mindful that only the stories weave our past into our future. The memories of those days are clear, though the pain sometimes give shape to joy. But I suppose that all important stories are like that, if they’re told truthfully. Everything that endures seems so much more precious when you’ve suffered thorn and thunder to keep it.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>58</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011. 1.

While it is an incredibly rewarding experience to read *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* as an allegorical retelling of Cherokee removal—such is the reading offered by Lisa Tatonetti—I wish to broaden this scope of application and suggest that it can also be read as a rhetorical performance attempting to expose the violence inherent to the entire edifice of colonial socio-sexual imaginary. This perspective demands that the reader interrogate the ideological currents of socio-sexual abjection undergirding acts of land dispossession and cultural erasure through genocidal violence and programs of cultural assimilation. Utilizing the fictional space of fantastic creation, Justice allegorically represents the anti-queer relationships of power operating at the very core of colonial and colonized subjectivities. The trilogy explores the foundational beliefs that structure the collective unconscious of settler colonialism as a constitutive element of psychic space in the Euro-Western social imaginary. Representing a queer spatiality, the Everland, and the cultural celebration of gender and sexual diversity, the Folk, *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* bears faithful witness to various types of social organization and erotic experience that affirm a cherished sense of queerness at the heart of many indigenous cultures and subjectivities. Just as the livelihoods, cultural values, sexual practices, gender performances, and social organizations of those who are Indigenous to North America were forcefully excluded from the European social imaginary, the livelihoods embodied by the Folk of the Everland in Justice's fantasy world are, at best, unintelligible within the social imaginary of Humanity and, at worst, violently assimilated or exterminated. However, despite the malicious efforts of Humanity to erase the queerness of indigeneity, the trilogy bears witness to the power and pleasure of queerness that refuses to be exterminated. Instead, it is a powerful site of resistance to more than just a repressive system of sexual normalization; it is a critical element of any effort to decolonize both physical and psychic space.

### *Animality, Kinship, and (Anti-)Queer Spatiality*

In his article, *Romancing Kinship*, Mark Rifkin attempts to expand the theoretical purview of queer studies by interrogating conventional understandings of queerness with “questions of kinship, residency, and land tenure” as they structure “the unspoken center of the heteronorm” that is “always already bound up in racializing and imperial projects.”<sup>59</sup> He argues that expanding our attempts to map the contours of normative heterosexuality to include an analysis of indigenous social formations offers a more complex understanding of queerness and colonization. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* depicts Rifkin’s argument with incredible clarity; the homo/hetero binary is insufficient to explain queer abjection in the colonial social imaginary. Its attempt to “rehabilitate tradition” in order to illustrate “the layered quality of the heterosexual imaginary” offers insight into the ways that “the bribe of normality can lead native peoples to disavow the elements of their communities deemed most perverse by the white power structure.”<sup>60</sup> In this vein, the communal organization of the Folk reflects Indigenous social formations that do not fit into (and continue to resist) the Euro-Western sexual imaginary as they embody queer ways of being in the world (including, but certainly not limited to, non-normative heterosexual identities).

The Folk of the Everland are depicted as other-than-human beings with physical, emotional, and spiritual qualities that intimately connect them to one another as well as the land that they occupy. Whereas a humanist perspective might challenge the equation of indigeneity with animality, Justice embraces this divide only to give such relatedness to the non-human

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 30.

world a positivity that only a queer relationship to the natural world can seemingly access and enjoy. Alternatively, disconnection from nature, embodied by Human culture, is depicted as the problem. The rootlessness of Human culture and industry is displayed in depictions of Eromar—the political seat of of Lojar Vald, prefect of Eromar and the story’s primary villain—as an industrial wasteland where the natural world and social relations are only valued to the extent that they contribute to the unlimited production and extraction of wealth. What is missing—what has been exploited, commodified, and erased in this dystopian space—is the most fundamental element preserving the social relationships, environmental attentiveness, cultural traditions, non-normative sexual identities and gender performances of the Folk; that is, their shared relationship to, what Justice calls, the *wyr*.

The *wyr* is the “heart-fire” of the Folk that presents itself as an enigmatic spiritual force giving life and power to the queerness that the Folk and their various ways of being-in-the-world embody. The different ways affirming their relationships to *wyr* represent the fundamental markers of queer indigeneity in the trilogy itself. The *wyr* is the very core of queer subjectivity in the sense that it is precisely what the Human gaze can only register as absolute alterity or an “otherness” that cannot be assimilated within the ideological or spiritual coordinates of Human society. For those whom the *wyr* is unintelligible—Celestials and the Dreyd—it is either a savage force connecting a people to a primitive past (and, as such, elicits shame and self-hatred) or a barbaric object of anxiety that can only be read as a threat to “civilized” life (as it constantly produces and renews a sense fear, jealousy, and anger). What makes a relationship to the *wyr* a marker of queerness is its connection to the ways of the Eld Green; a system of intelligibility prior to the Melding (Justice’s allegorical reference to European and Indigenous first contact)

connecting the Folk to the land and each other that in a way that resists assimilation into the repressive Human social imaginary.

The anxiety in confronting such unassimilatable otherness is illustrated within the first cycle of the story where Human culture and subjectivity is represented as having been constituted upon a primary repression of queerness. This is depicted quite succinctly in, what appears to be, a newspaper fragment from the *Reach-wide Journeyer's Gazetteer*, mimicking the rhetoric of manifest destiny in North America. Attempting to produce a sense of public legitimacy for extending the political authority of Men over the Everland, the rhetor, Abrosian Dellarius of the Peoples Academy of Alchaemical and Mechanical Arts, constructs a queer spatiality out of the Everland calling it *lawless*, tainted by *savagery*, and prone to *unhuman license*.<sup>61</sup> This rhetorical construction is juxtaposed against the virtues of *civil society* (the rule of law, social order, economic productivity, etc.) manifested in the juridico-political order of the Reach States. Where queerness is perceived as a potential threat to the institutional and psychical structures that render the social reality intelligible to Humanity, queerness loses its positivity and comes to be rhetorically constructed as an object that must be tamed or eliminated. The newspaper fragment concludes, "It is the destiny of all lands to be tamed by Men of virtue and strength, without fear of the difficulties of such an undertaking. The plowshares and mercantile virtues of Human civilization will long endure and bring credit to their cultivators."<sup>62</sup> The sense of self-transparent purpose and self-understanding masks the multifarious and profound ways in which Human subjectivity perceives itself and its coherence as threatened by the queerness of the Folk. It eschews a constitutive element of racialized anti-queerness beneath the rhetoric of virtue.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 29.

Further establishing the incommensurability of settler subjectivity and the colonial imaginary with the queer sociality of Indigenous kinship bonds is a conversation between Vald and the Kyn diplomat, Daladir Tre'shein. It demonstrates the divide between social formations based on notions of atomized selfhood—*homo economicus*—and kinship bonds of mutual responsibility. In this discursive exchange, Vald's worldview comes to demonstrate what Mark Rifkin refers to as “productive individuality”; a worldview that “presupposes the installation of a political economy in which land tenure, subsistence, and residency have been reorganized in ways that break down extended social networks and break up shared territory and in which affective ties have been rerouted from larger communal formations to the nuclear family.”<sup>63</sup> Success, according to Vald, is tied to the entrepreneurial spirit of individuals; wealth is the supreme measure of progress. “The only solution [to chaos] is to lower those impediments to a nation's success, and the swiftest course is to start with the foundation of all wealth: land.”<sup>64</sup> Daladir retorts that the Folk measure success in a very different—quite incommensurable—way than Men. In a telling statement concerning the very heart of what constitutes the kinship bonds of queer indigenous sociality, Daladir proclaims to Vald:

[The Folk] are linked to one another, and to the rest of the world, by bonds of kinship and history. To follow my own desires at the unthinking expense of others would be an act of gradual suicide, for those actions would always come back again to me. It's a philosophy of responsibility to all things, not just unfettered freedom for oneself.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Rifkin, Mark. “Romancing Kinship: A Queer Reading of Indian Education in Zitkala-Sa's American Indian Stories.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 1 (2006): 32.

<sup>64</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011. 148.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

Without concern for kinship bonds and responsibility to the land—as well as the histories that illuminate the deep interconnections between the two—Daladir illustrates to Vald the potential for unrestrained violence against those deemed outside social norms and subject to the harsh letter of the law.<sup>66</sup> More than merely revealing the vast differences defining the cultural, economic, political, and social organization dividing Humanity and the Folk, this conversation bears inner witness to the anti-queer underpinnings of colonial abjection as it disavows the intersubjective bonds of kinship that sustain the Folk.

It comes as no surprise, given these differences, that the migration stories—where the Folk cross the borders of the Everland into the Reach States—reflect an internal struggle of cultural intelligibility among those subjects forced to endure the contradictions between two very different worlds. Crossing into the land of Men it seems that queerness begins to lose its cultural capital when the Folk begin to feel their connection to the *wyr* (as a positive affirmation of kinship ties) fade away.<sup>67</sup> It is as if, what Qwo-Li Driskill might say, the *wyr* is quite literally being “stolen from their bodies”<sup>68</sup> as they move into spaces where those who affirm a connection to the *wyr* provoke anxiety, fear, and hatred among Men.

The journeys of Tarsa (a Wielder, Redthorn Warrior, and the story’s heroine) and Quill (a Tetawa Dolltender) into the land of Men reflect the physical pain and emotional struggle of trying to, on the one hand, survive and, on the other, not succumb to the fear and anxiety that the anti-queer spaces of Eromar and Chalimor impose upon them. In the land of Men (read: civil society) the *wyr* (queerness) does not merely fade away; it is murdered, poisoned, and left to rot.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>68</sup> Driskill, Qwo-Li. “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no. 2 (2004): 50-64.



As Tarsa passes through Eromar she “could still feel the deep, burning ache that radiated off the waves, the soil, the bloated bodies of fish so poisoned that not even insects sought sustenance.”<sup>69</sup> Nowhere is the physical and emotional trauma of abjection in the trilogy’s series of queer migration stories among the Folk more visible than during Quill and Dennara’s crossing into Chalimor.

The wagon seemed to spin, moving from its slow, uneasy movement to a wild rush of vertigo in the span of a heartbeat. A bitter spasm of bile filled [Quill’s] mouth, and she vaguely heard Denarra fall moaning to the floor beside her cot as the entire world descended into thunderous madness. Horses screamed, people shouted, Quill sobbed, and above everything roared the piercing shriek of the spirits on the Threshold of the Everland, torn and twisted in the Melding-made barrier between the worlds. She couldn’t breathe—the very air itself bore down on her lungs like a crushing weight of stone.<sup>70</sup>

Eerily similar to an experience of the unpredictable onset of a panic attack, this passage reflects an “erotics of abjection” as moments of emotional distress (in this case, the experience of forceful separation from the positivity of the *wyr*) within anti-queer spaces translate into torturous physical pain as a seemingly ontological condition of being queer in a space premised upon your erasure.

The division between the Folk and Men is also complicated by the internalization of Human values and spirituality in the split between the traditionalist Ancestrals (Greenwalkers) and the assimilationist Celestials (Shields) among the folk. The Celestials were a product of the Melding where Human values systems and beliefs began to encroach upon the Everland and lead

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<sup>69</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011. 209.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

many within the Kyn—a clan within the Folk—to divest their ties to the Eld Green and the *wyr*. The shame and internalized self-hatred of any perceived relationship to the *wyr* on the part of the Celestial shields is reflected in almost every aspect of their lives. It manifested itself in everything from their appearance—refusal to tattoo their bodies (35), their white powdered faces,<sup>71</sup> modest clothing,<sup>72</sup> and human-influenced fashion<sup>73</sup>—to their ascetic relationship to erotic life as “they scorned the flesh and its joys and pains.”<sup>74</sup> If Lojar Vald bears inner witness to the psychic structure prescribed by the symbolic order of settler colonialism then Neranda Ak’shaar is a paradigmatic example of assimilation into that same symbolic space.

Reflecting efforts in the United States to “straighten” Indigenous folks through off-site boarding school, Neranda—educated in the Reach States’ Capitol, Chalimor<sup>75</sup>—and her Celestial Shield followers functionally divide the Folk internally on the question of whether to resist Human colonization of the Everland or accept their offer of western “sanctuary.” According to Lisa Tatonetti:

The clarity of this allegory is both painful and instructive. In this way, Justice’s deployment of the now-traditional forms of epic fantasy provides an effective way to address the years before and after the signing and congressional ratification of the Treaty of New Echota in 1835 and 1836: in Cherokee history of this period, as in epic fantasy, there *are* heroes and orphans, a difficult and dangerous journey, and a life-changing struggle between a multitude of opposing forces. Thus, despite its sometimes problematic history of representation, fantasy fiction offers Justice a particularly appropriate genre within which to imagine this fraught

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 58.

moment in Cherokee history, when the very fabric and definition of nationhood was being pulled from every direction.<sup>76</sup>

After the Sevenfold Council of the Everland votes to resist Lojar Vald's attempt to colonize their land, Neranda secretly signs the Oath of Western Sanctuary—allegorizing the decision to sign the Treaty of New Echota by Major Ridge, John Ridge, Elias Boudinot, and Stand Watie—giving Vald a “legal” basis among the other Reach States to invade the Everland. This moment bears powerful inner witness to the almost impossible decision among folks subject to the threat of colonial invasion to either resist or surrender. Much like the Indigenous folks who have little or no ties to their cultural heritage or traditions due to the assimilationist policies of American Indian education in the U.S., Neranda's betrayal of the Folk is a decision that cannot be separated from her interpellation into Human notions of “progress” and “survival” during her education in Chalimor. It reveals how the internalization of colonial values can “divide and conquer” a people through the *colonization of psychic space*.

Thus far I have ventured to explicate how *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* rhetorically constructs a settler subjectivity constituted by the repression of queerness and the attendant symbolic order that lends it coherence. It functions as an interpellative force that colonizes the psychic space of both indigenous (Celestials) and non-indigenous folks (citizens of the Reach States). The demarcation of Indigenous spatialities as savage and sexually deviant alongside associations of Indigenous folks as animals existing outside the boundaries of Human culture comprises the support beams structuring the political unconsciousness of settler society. Justice makes a powerful argument for understanding the emergence of civil society, the anxieties

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<sup>76</sup> Tatonetti, Lisa. “Indigenous Fantasies and Sovereign Erotics: Outland Cherokees Write Two-Spirit Nations.” In *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011. 166.

manifested in borderland spaces, as well as the underlying motivations for the dispossession of land, forced removal, and genocide as being rooted in a racialized and anti-queer social imaginary. However, the trilogy is not solely focused on issues of loss, trauma, and abjection. In order to depict the complexities of colonial abjection, Justice confronts it with *anomalous figures of queer Indigenous resistance*.

### ***Anomalous Figures of Queer Indigenous Resistance***

Attempting to both recover a historical sense of queer belonging as well as forge a more inclusive sense of tribal belonging in the future, Daniel Heath Justice posits a “theory of anomaly”—drawn from Mississippian cosmology—to “encourage a more intellectually and emotionally generous understanding of queer desire and identities within tribal communities.”<sup>77</sup>

Quoting the anthropologist Charles Hudson, Justice states:

Anomalies are those beings *and states of being* which fall into “two or more of their categories,” and which are “singled out for special symbolic values.” Historically, the most numerous anomalous entities were rather conventional creatures whose habits, appearance, or behaviors marked them as deviated from categorical clarity.<sup>78</sup>

Anomalous beings are an “embodiment of difference”<sup>79</sup> that is “constitutive of the norm”<sup>80</sup> “The anomalous body, then, functions as both a personal and communal “interpretive occasion,”

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<sup>77</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. “Notes Toward a Theory of Anomaly.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010): 220-221.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 221.

placing into an ever-contextualized relationship all that we assume to be “traditional,” “human,” “other-than-human,” and “natural.”<sup>81</sup> The concept of an “anomaly” offers a theoretical baseline for understanding how queerness operates in both Indigenous literature and rhetorics of indigeneity. More specifically, it offers insight into the way that queer Indigenous folks performatively resist the imposition of a colonial sexual imaginary in tribal contexts. Bearing inner witness the anomalous figures of the *Redthorn Warriors*, *Mixed-Blood Strangelings*, *Wisdom-Bearing Wielders*, and *Two-Spirit zhe-Kyn* in *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* directs the reader to attribute a supreme positivity to the queerness that is excluded within the symbolic order of colonial abjection.

At the very beginning of the trilogy, readers are introduced to Tarsa’deshae: a she-Kyn Redthorn warrior. Despite their affinity for the Eld Ways of the Folk, Tarsa and her Redthorn comrades find themselves living in a place—Red Cedar Town—controlled by those espousing the Celestial way of life. The only reason the Celestials tolerated the Redthorn presence was due to their “unrivaled skills in battle and defensive strategy.”<sup>82</sup> What makes Tarsa an anomalous figure is her identity as the female-bodied warrior-heroine of the story who navigates the traditionalist teachings of the Redthorns while living in a Celestial dominated society. Additionally, her *awakening* to her role as a *Wielder* only adds to the complexity with which her identity is shaped. Wielders are the wisdom-keepers of the Eld Green. Their connection to the *wyr* is more pronounced than that of the other Folk. Wielders are an integral part of maintaining the kinship bonds that sustain the Folks’ way of being in the world. They assist in births and funerals, love-bondings, counseling, as well as a host of rituals and ceremonies to ensure good

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011. 21.

harvests and social harmony.<sup>83</sup> While the Celestials of Red Cedar Town tolerated her presence as a Redthorn warrior, her awakening to the spirit-language of the *wyr* as a Wielder was an unforgivable offense that—just like her Wielder aunt, Unahi—cast her out of any sense of belonging in her community. Having grown up Celestial, taken the vows of a Redthorn warrior, and been awakened to the role of a Wielder, Tarsa bears inner witness to a unique form of colonial abjection internalized within her own community (even among the her Redthorn comrades). What renders Tarsa an anomalous figure of queer indigenous resistance is her positionality as a female-bodied warrior-heroine as well as her embrace of an awakening that shocks her “body out of its understanding of itself”<sup>84</sup>; two aspects of her identity that are unthinkable within the anti-queer socio-sexual imaginary of Men.

Discussion of the traditionalist Redthorns also introduces another anomalous figure of queer indigenous resistance that recurs throughout the trilogy; the *zhe-Kyn*. “The *zhe-Kyn* straddled the male and female worlds in all things, garbed in blouse and skirt, head tattooed and shaved but for a braided topknot, moving between the blood of war and the blood of the moon without fear.”<sup>85</sup> *Zhe-Kyn* occupy a position of central importance in *Kyn* society; they are healers and storytellers as well as warriors and ceremonial leaders.<sup>86</sup> Two paradigmatic *zhe-Kyn* figures are Fa’alik and Averyn. Fa’alik serves as link to the stories and knowledge of tradition and rituals. This is especially significant for the Redthorns of Red Cedar Town because “those who might have been able to tell them [about the Eld Ways] no longer lived in Red Cedar

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Town.”<sup>87</sup> Averyn, on the other hand, assumes a central place in Kyn society while also acting as one of the story’s hero/ines. Within Kyn society Averyn enjoys a position as counselor, advisor, and lover to Garyn Mendiir, Governor of the Kyn Nation and speaker of the Sevenfold Council. This position bears witness to the acceptance and even reverence for third-gender folks in Kyn society; mirroring the significance of Two-Spirit folks in many Indigenous cultures as well. However, the truly decolonizing potential of the zhe-Kyn is reserved for the role Averyn plays in the climactic confrontation with Vald near the end of the story. Having been betrayed by Neranda, driven away from their homeland, and caught in a battle that will determine the fate of their very existence, Averyn’s connection to the *wyr* as “between-worlder”<sup>88</sup> occupies a central space of responsibility uniting the folk through a “memory song”<sup>89</sup> Just as Two-Spirit folks occupy a psychic and symbolic space “between and among others,”<sup>90</sup> the zhe-Kyn exercises that power to defeat Vald and catalyze the rebirth of the “Eternity Tree”; “the pulsing heartbeat of the *wyr*” and the “spirit of the Everland.”<sup>91</sup> Fa’alik and Averyn—and their embodiment of Two-Spirit identity—represent the psychical need to bear inner witness to “the relationships between sexuality, gender, colonization, and decolonization.”<sup>92</sup> These anomalous figures of queer Indigenous resistance remind us of more than the mere existence of genders outside European binaries; it demands recognition of the positions of central significance Two-Spirit folks have

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 575.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 575.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>92</sup> Driskill, Qwo-Li. “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances Between Native and Queer Studies.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (2010): 70.

performed in many indigenous cultures and their continued efforts to revive and evolve those traditions as an important method in the struggle for decolonization.

Averyn's relationship to Garyn also introduces a fourth anomalous figure of queer indigenous resistance: Strangelings. They are mixed-blood folks "born of two worlds;" a unique entity only made possible by the Melding of worlds between Human and Folk. Denarra Syrene, like Garyn, is a Strangeling of central importance in the story. She proclaims, "My father was Kyn, my mother Human. Love worked its sweet, sweaty magic, and not long thereafter I was born."<sup>93</sup> While the queerness of the zhe-Kyn relates to gender and sexual diversity as well as their central importance maintaining the kinship bonds of the Folk, the queerness of a Strangeling relates to their bridging the divide between different—and often opposing—species and worldviews. They are the flesh and blood embodiment of an antagonistic clash between two worlds. Denarra's character bears witness to a nomadic queerness that while "born of two worlds" is "welcome in none."<sup>94</sup> As part of "Mother Baraboo's theatrical company" she finds an occupation where she can explore her relationship to both the Human world and the Everland; highlighting a central psychical issue confronted by Indigenous folks of mixed lineage. However, Denarra's significance to the plot is, just like so many other anomalous figures, illuminated by her connection to the *wyr* through her power as a Wielder. Just as Tarsa's connection to the *wyr* gave her the spiritual and physical power to survive her heroic journey, Denarra's *wyr*-given powers gave her the strength to survive in the midst of Vald's colonial violence protecting Quill and defeating agents of the Dreydcaste.

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<sup>93</sup> Justice, Daniel Heath. *The Way of Thorn and Thunder: The Kynship Chronicles*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2011. 314.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.



While the previous section explored the psychical structure and violence of colonial abjection, the present section has sought to explicate how the story rhetorically constructs a series of *anomalous figures of queer Indigenous resistance*. These characters bear inner witness to the struggle of navigating the forces of colonial abjection and fighting to decolonize both psychic and physical space. Although these characters occupy non-normative identities within their own communities, it is their anomalous being that sustains and enriches an understanding of the norm within them. What separates the symbolic order of the Folk from that of the Human world is that their subjectivities—that is, the subjectivities of the Ancestral Folk—are not constituted by the repression of queerness but, instead, celebrates the healing power that their connection to the *wyr*—queerness itself—brings them. Justice’s vibrant world of gender and sexual diversity, juxtaposed with a struggle for cultural continuity and nationhood, functions as rhetorical device for disidentifying with the colonial imaginary by *shifting the site of queer Indigenous enunciation* to a fantasy space that not only exposes the traumatic experience of abjection under colonization but also recognizes anomalous figures of queer abjection.

### **Queer Indigenous Rhetorics: Decolonizing Disciplinary Horizons**

What makes aesthetic creations political is their rhetorical function. Fantasy fiction is no exception. As Marshall Alcorn, Jr. states, “In reading, projection has a boomerang effect: projective moments become introjective moments as the self invests itself narcissistically in the particularity of the signifiers it encounters. Words in their material presence assume certain energies from the projective forces working upon them, but in doing so they defile those energies by entrapping them in a particularity of words. Words in this manner absorb projective forces

and deflect them, thereby exerting “rhetorical” pressure upon self-functions.”<sup>95</sup> Translating the traumatic experiences of colonial abjection into an secondary world with an alternate history in order to reimagine, reconfigure, and intervene in it by constructing anomalous figures of queer Indigenous resistance offers the reader more than an entertaining story. It shares a host of *feelings* as an inherently *erotic* experience intended to redirect our affective investments in a symbolic order founded on anti-queer and racialized abjection of indigeneity. It offers an opportunity for *recognition* on the terms of Indigenous folks as well as an invitation to bear inner witness to the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality at the heart of settler colonialism. Rhetoric, as an encounter with literary creations, “always bears witness to power whereby social and psychological forces in language “position” selves in relation to affect.”<sup>96</sup> I have sought to explicate how different characters, settings, and events in *The Way of Thorn and Thunder* functionally map the rhetorical construction of normative heterosexuality and the subjective investments it elicits on the part of colonial and colonized subjects. It is clear that it serves a literary function by decolonizing fantasy fiction as a genre but it also functions rhetorically as it challenges the reader to reconceive the socio-sexual imaginary of settler colonialism as well as how it has constructs the interiority of ones own psychic space. It is an invitation to encounter the possibility of a symbolic order unconstrained by a racialized heterosexual binarism. This is perhaps the most radical decolonizing function of queer Indigenous rhetorics and should direct critics think the concept of rhetoric as “a theoretical juncture where literary theory, rhetorical theory, and psychoanalytic theory should converge.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Alcorn, Jr., Marshall. “Rhetoric, Projection, and the Authority of the Signifier.” *College English* 49, no. 2 (1987): 147.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

Rhetorical scholars would be well advised to seriously consider Beth Brandt's proclamation that "Story is meant to be spoken" and "The written becomes the spoken whether by hands or mouth, the spoken enters the heart, the heart turns over, Earth is renewed"<sup>98</sup> as an argument for treating queer Indigenous literary creations as a distinct mode of public address. That is to say that rhetorics of indigeneity contain within them an inherently political dimension that yearn for public expression and demand an affective response. They have the power to heal historical trauma, construct alternative histories, empower Indigenous and non-Indigenous folks alike to activism while otherwise intervening within the dominant socio-symbolic order. Rhetorics of queer indigeneity are performances that, when taken seriously, challenge the very structure of psychic space by creatively exposing the public sphere as having been—and continuing to be—rooted in the theft of Indigenous land and the genocide of Native peoples. These literary creations are not passive objects to be consumed or nostalgic yearnings for a return to a more pure past; they are *stories that are meant to be spoken* as they do speak to our deepest understandings of self, nation, and the land we occupy.

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<sup>98</sup> Brandt, Beth. *Writing as Witness: Essay and Talk*. Ontario: Women's Press, 1994. 82.

### **Chapter 3 - Beyond “*the same damn Bakhtin quotes*”: Queer Indigenous Contemporaneity in Craig Womack’s *Drowning in Fire***

Maintaining adherence to the expanded interpretation of Ernesto Martinez’s notion of *shifting the site of queer enunciation* developed in the previous section, this chapter explores a different rhetorical site from which queer indigeneity is articulated. Moving from the imaginative space of fantasy fiction as a vehicle for allegorically retelling the story of Cherokee removal, this chapter examines the rhetorical strategy of *literary separatism* in Craig Womack’s novel *Drowning in Fire*. The novel is unique because its power relies upon the deceptiveness of its rhetorical modality. Its important elements are virtually unintelligible within the canonical, cultural, and political paradigms lending comprehensibility to a society steeped in the epistemic and ontological frameworks governing psychic space in settler society. Weaving traditional Creek figures, histories, and stories that were traditionally (and to a large extent, still are) developed, transformed, and transmitted orally (long before colonization) into a creative literary work depicting the struggles and triumphs of a uniquely Creek contemporary socio-political landscape, *Drowning in Fire* is a far cry from the prototypical novel narrating hegemonic or homonormative (read: white, male, settler, etc.) queer subjectivity.

Since the rhetorical modality of literary separatism deprioritizes the consumerist notion that a novel must appeal to a generalized mass audience, a critical framework that begins with such an assumption will fail to recognize the communicative, pedagogical, cultural, and political power contained within *Drowning in Fire*. For example, a framework that presumes a mass audience would begin with the problematic assumption that the standards that such an audience might use to interpret and evaluate it should construct the critical lens that renders its values and

meanings intelligible. The danger in these interpretive maneuvers is revealed by how they elide the underlying cultural specificities of the novel, its function as a tool to imagine Creek nationalism, and its value as a means to advance a broader decolonial agenda. It would be easy for the untrained eye to unwittingly prioritize the queer elements of the story at the expense of understanding how queerness and indigeneity intersect historically and in contemporary Creek society. This homonormative perspective might highlight the queer romance of existing in an anti-queer symbolic order as the characters struggle in a coming-of-age story where they gradually come to terms with their sexualities culminating in rekindling a long-lost love. Another interpretation might incorporate the novel into a genre narrating queer subjectivity in the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Such perspectives may not sacrifice indigeneity wholesale but, instead, function as token inclusion of indigenous folks into literary genres that sacrifice the specificity of indigenous experience by subsuming it within queer themes that allow settler voices to dominate the narration of queer subjectivity.

These are only a few examples of how critical frameworks that assume assimilationist standards of a mass, generalizable, and/or neutral audience risk decontextualizing the rhetorical function of the text and depoliticizing its content. Such frameworks demonstrate how a lack of attention to theoretical, aesthetic, and political specificities of queer indigenous rhetorics sacrifices not only the tools to comprehend literary significance but depoliticizes the critical agendas these rhetorics support. In the pages to come such concerns will be highlighted by the need to understand *Native American Literary Separatism* as a rhetorical modality that breaks from the homonormative logics adhering to the canonical, cultural, and political standards and interpretations of an LGBTQ movement steeped in settler colonialism. Understood from the perspective of *literary separatism*, Craig Womack's novel *Drowning in Fire*, offers a

paradigmatic example of how this rhetorical strategy politicizes theoretical debates within the academy by translating them into an aesthetics for (re)imagining community and decolonizing settler society.

## **Literary Separatism and the Question of Communicability**

According to Alexander Hollenberg, *literary separatism* is a concept that implies an understanding of sovereignty “when it is transposed into the realm of the imagination.”<sup>99</sup> It implies a notion of *imaginative sovereignty* that, according to Craig Womack, involves the “ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature” as it “contributes to keeping sovereignty [as a political status of Native nations] alive in the citizens of a nation.”<sup>100</sup> The rhetorical separation of distinct bodies of literary work from the traditional Euro-American canon rightly (and purposely) problematizes the very ability to “reconcile the notion of separatism with that of communicability.”<sup>101</sup> It seems fair to ask, then, whether or not separatism implies a rejection of the idea that communicability is even possible regarding the theoretical concepts and aesthetic creation of meaning between western and indigenous rhetorical performances. Does it problematize the very notion intercultural communicability itself? In order to explore potential answers to these questions it is incumbent that one first make clear what is meant by use of the term *literary separatism* and the relationship of it to other types of separatism.

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<sup>99</sup> *Speaking with the Separatists*, pg. 1

<sup>100</sup> *Red on Red*, pg. 14

<sup>101</sup> *Speaking with the Separatists*, pg. 3

When most people think of separatism—if they think of it at all—the first thing that comes to mind is usually its invocation as a pragmatic political strategy. Depending on one's socio-cultural upbringing and, perhaps, racial identification, it may evoke specters as ideologically disparate as Confederate Succession to the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement. In its political manifestation, separatism has historically implied a demarcation of a specific group identified as having sole authority to make decisions affecting the livelihoods of persons with ties to an articulated set of relations based on social, cultural, economic, geographic, etc. similarities. Whereas political separatism involves questions of inclusion/exclusion regarding decision-making authority over policy, literary separatism distinguishes itself as it politicizes the question of communicability itself. In other words, to distinguish literary separatism from its invocation as a political program is to understand it as a series of rhetorical modalities used to politicize the unique *context* from which the lines of communication are forged by folks whose social location cannot be rendered intelligible in the dominant symbolic order. According to Daniel Heath Justice, “the challenge [of literary separatism] comes from [understanding Native literature and conducting criticism] in a way that doesn’t simply subsume literature into politics but places the text into constructive tension between its various contexts and its content.”<sup>102</sup> In this vein, the primary purpose of literary separatism “is not to argue for canonical inclusion”<sup>103</sup> since such efforts would shift the terms of the discussion away from the goals, purposes, and standards of indigenous communities to the gatekeepers of the Euro-American canon. This maneuver, according to Hollenberg, inevitably shifts our critical faculties to focus on the “primacy of content over context” in determining the “relevancy” or

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<sup>102</sup> *Currents of Trans/national Criticism in Indigenous Literary Studies*, pg. 337

<sup>103</sup> *Red on Red*, pg. 6

“significance” of a text.<sup>104</sup> Reading queer indigenous texts from the framework of literary separatism outright rejects this depoliticizing move starting from Womack’s bold statement, rhetorically marking the task of redefining terms of the symbolic order, when he claims not a *place* in the canon but, instead, that “we *are* the canon.”<sup>105</sup>

Acknowledging that there is any number of minute distinctions to be made between competing theories of separatism, it is possible to discern two broad conceptual understandings of the term. Hollenberg uses the terms *rejectionist* and *self-communicative*<sup>106</sup> but I prefer to call the *isolationist separatism* and *politicized separatism*. The reason for choosing these terms rather than borrowing from Hollenberg will soon become clear but for now these terms will suffice. It is important to note that, despite an isolationist perspective inevitably being politicized by refusal to acknowledge or relate to any external influences (that is, rigidly enforcing borders preserving a sense of authenticity), there is a key gap between these two concepts. A separatism that prioritizes its function as a politicized form of communicability is distinct from isolationism in that it stakes a claim to a strategic understanding of identity as a method for disrupting the dominant symbolic order that renders it powerless. Instead of merely pursuing a sense of literary purity without reference to the Euro-Western canon, Native literary separatism distinguishes itself as a direct confrontation with the colonizing socio-symbolic order of settler colonialism by outright rejecting the notion that its communicative frameworks can render the relationship of a text to context and content intelligible. In other words, a framework that shifts the site of queer indigenous enunciation can only render such rhetorics intelligible through strict separation from the dominant socio-symbolic order governing theory, aesthetics, politics, and culture. Rhetorical

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<sup>104</sup> *Speaking with the Separatists*, pg. 2

<sup>105</sup> *Red on Red*, pg. 7

<sup>106</sup> *Speaking with the Separatists*, pg. 4



sovereignty is shifted to the terms developed within the tribally specific social formations responsible for creating and interpreting these texts as they demand the audience—whether indigenous or non-indigenous—rid themselves of colonizing epistemological frameworks in favor of those forged with a strictly decolonial agenda.

### **Refusing to Assuage Liberal Guilt: Separatism Against Multicultural Appropriation**

In an article surveying the “state of the field” in literary studies as it relates to indigenous literature, Daniel Heath Justice masterfully frames what is at stake when forging one's place on the spectrum ranging from literary nationalism to postmodern multiculturalism. Setting aside, provisionally, his immediate attempt to highlight contemporary efforts to reconcile these two extremes, it is useful to rehearse a series of questions that reach to the very heart of this often-contentious debate. Justice asks:

While the resulting commentaries regarding these two schools and their presumed incommensurability have at times been quite heated, they have also been rigorous and necessary, engaging important questions of literary, historical, social, political, and increasingly moral concern. For example, is literary nationalism exclusivist and rejectionist? Is cosmopolitanism just assimilation in another guise? Does nationalism presume an essentialist stance? Does cosmopolitanism assume inevitably compromised hybridity? What is the moral/ethical relationship of the critic both to the literature itself and to Indigenous communities at large? What is the role of interrelationship between peoples, nations, traditions, and cultures, and how do either the nationalist or the cosmopolitanist positions

articulate these connections, influences, and expansive enactments of relationality?<sup>107</sup>

These questions are important because they frame the theoretical debate that *Drowning in Fire* is forged out of and to which it responds. While I suspect that the addition of this paper to the debate will bring no definitive answer to these questions, I do hope to offer insight into the rhetorical modality of Womack's literary separatism as a vehicle for simultaneously queering and decolonizing psychic space. Having already defined what is meant by the term *literary separatism* and prior to examining what makes *Drowning in Fire* a paradigmatic example demonstrating its rhetorical power, it is necessary to explore what is at stake in the choice to embrace literary separatism and how it forges the (re)imagination of community for affirmation of identity beyond a fatalistic victimhood or compromising assimilation.

The purpose of separatism is precisely to avoid theoretical and pedagogical models that privilege a vision of social and theoretical harmony rather than discord. Here it is useful to return to the concept of *recognition* outlined in chapter. How one understands the rhetorical work of recognition has important theoretical, political, and practical implications. Queer indigenous rhetorics are not seeking recognition by means of a feigned liberal inclusion motivated by the guilty conscience of a repentant settler subject. Womack's separatism implies a shared commitment among Native rhetorics to resist the smugness of critics, politicians, businesspersons, and activists who offer avenues for integration (assimilation) into settler culture. These rhetorics are antagonistic to settler colonialism and antithetical to the idea that their creative expression can be rendered intelligible from a decontextualized and ahistorical perspective steeped in the values, culture, politics, and theoretical frameworks of whiteness.

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<sup>107</sup> *Currents of Trans/national Criticism in Indigenous Literary Studies*, pg. 338

The issue at stake in deciding whether to comprehend indigenous rhetorics from the perspective of the postmodern multicultural scholar or the literary separatist is an understanding of the relationship of these rhetorics to materiality. The relativism that permeates postmodern theory treats dominant historical narratives as a social constructions influenced by a series of multifaceted power relations. This does not so much deny materiality as much as it privileges the immaterial dynamics of these relationships of power. In other words, discourse becomes the primary site of political and cultural contestation and the goal is to decenter, deconstruct, and demystify authoritative, objective, or scientific accounts of history in favor of a cosmopolitanism<sup>108</sup> or hybridity.<sup>109</sup> In an effort to deconstruct and disrupt binaries and essentialist identity, the postmodern critical turn fails to understand the value of strategically embracing certain essentialisms and the provisional political tactics of constructing useful binaries. For example, Womack describes the importance of tying identity to the land “because the land provides a constant against cultural deterioration. No matter what happens with language and culture, the land remains if jurisdiction over it is protected, which means that tribes always have somewhere to return to as a people.”<sup>110</sup> Andrea Smith states the importance of tactical binary analysis, “since not all peoples are in a postcolonial relationship vis-à-vis the state, a binary analysis can sometimes be helpful in highlighting the current conditions of settler colonialism.”<sup>111</sup> This doesn’t risk reductionism to a series of trans-historical aspects exclusively defining indigeneity but it does, however, open the possibility of embracing historically situated

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<sup>108</sup> Referencing Arnold Krupat in *Nationalism, Indigenism, Cosmopolitanism: Critical Perspectives on Native American Literatures*

<sup>109</sup> Referencing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin

<sup>110</sup> *Red on Red*, pg. 171

<sup>111</sup> *Queer Theory and Native Studies*, pg. 55

aspects of indigeneity as strategically essential identities that cannot be assumed or coopted by the fluidity of whiteness afforded to settler subjects.

The importance of materiality is highlighted in the rhetorical strategy of literary separatism because of its relationship to sovereignty of Native nations. The relationship that one maintains to the land is both material and symbolic. Likewise, one's relationship to institutions of the settler state is both material and symbolic. Preserving an analysis that acknowledges that any attempt at politicization of these relationships must involve more than the deconstruction of relationships of power but also relating them back to the materiality of genocide, land theft, policies of assimilation and allotment, etc. provides the basic building blocks for reconceptualizing the sovereignty of Native nationalisms. In other words, sovereignty over one's imagination, implied by Womack's understanding of literary separatism, is the precise means by which "he is able to build a Creek community that defines and evaluates itself internally by reimagining its own borders."<sup>112</sup> Beyond mere *re*-imagination of these borders, the idea of sovereign control over those borders—implicit in the idea of separatism—constructs a communicative model that "dissolves the simplistic notion of the general, mass audience waiting to connect and instead argues from the premise that, to be truly relevant, a literary history must construct a community that speaks *for* and, even more importantly, *to* itself."<sup>113</sup> The symbolic work of rhetorical sovereignty and literary separatism is important because of its relationship to the material constitution of indigenous communities. The symbolic economy is tied to the materiality of the land, political institutions, economic processes, etc. Efforts to reconstitute the

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<sup>112</sup> *Speaking with the Separatists*, pgs. 1-2

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 2

symbolic order are, from the perspective, inevitably tied to a politics of materiality that focuses on (re)imagining and (re)building community and nationalism.

Thus is the central theme in this rhetorical analysis of *Drowning in Fire*. The strategy of Native literary separatism is certainly an attempt to reconfigure the symbolic order but it does so by bridging the gap between oral tradition and literature in order to materially affect Creek nationalism. Focusing on power relationships alone risks depoliticizing the text and focusing exclusively on materiality might preserve problematic elements of the symbolic order in deference to the political expediency of elements within the decolonial agenda. Native literary separatism demands that any literary analysis of the story be tied directly to the novel's rhetorical function in (re)imagining Creek community and nationalism.

## **Forging a Tribally-Specific Queer Indigenous Symbolic Order: The Price of Silence and the Healing Power of Speech**

### ***Breaking with the Colonial Imaginary***

*Drowning in Fire* powerfully depicts how the multifaceted ways that the Creek landscape—physical and psychical—remains haunted by the specters of settler colonialism: specters that, as the narrative demonstrates, can be vanquished through the healing power of story as it re-imagines the very heart of Creek community and nationalism. Josh Henneha, the story's main protagonist, establishes early in the text that his struggle is situated against a racially inflected anti-queer social imaginary that denies him the very words and symbols to articulate his desires. The difficulty in translating the raw affective dimensions of his attraction to Jimmy

Alexander—a mixed-blood Creek boy with “black blood and features”<sup>114</sup>—into a language that renders those desires intelligible and self-affirming is made clear from the outset. The “resentful inclusion” of a “sissy” like Josh among his Creek peers—Jimmy, Lenny, and Sammy—on a summer day at the lake would be met with a host of adolescent quips directed his lack of physical prowess naming him “pussy” and “faggot.”<sup>115</sup> The highly charged nature of such anti-queer language only stoked Josh’s desire to not only prove his physical vitality during a diving competition but also framed the means by which he hoped to impress Jimmy; a star athlete whose skill at sports far outpaced his peers.

Outlining the conditions of the competition, Lenny—Josh’s cousin—proclaims “the first one to bring up a rock from the bottom of the lake would win.”<sup>116</sup> In determining the diving order there is a shared perception among the boys that Josh should go last since his effort, according to Sammy, “ain’t no count nohow.”<sup>117</sup> Having been the first to try and the first to fail, Sammy’s brazen attempt to ward off the presumed emasculation he was sure to receive angered Josh as Sammy proclaimed to have “dropped the rock shortly before reaching the surface.”<sup>118</sup> The dual desire to emasculate Sammy within his own anti-queer imaginary while simultaneously trying to elicit Jimmy’s affection by means of his success, Josh demands to immediately enter the competition rather than wait to go last. This decision, coupled with Josh’s less-than-athletic physical frame, contextualizes the primary incident that would catalyze Josh’s uniquely queer *and* indigenous coming-of-age story where he must confront the specters of colonization--physical and psychical—that will require of him (if he wishes to preserve his culture, renew a

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<sup>114</sup> *Drowning in Fire*, pg. 12

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 10-11

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 15

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 16

sense of belonging, and perhaps even survive) that he find, forge, and (re)imagine a symbolic order where his identity is rendered an intelligible and vibrant part of the Creek landscape.

Having reached the bottom of the lake and retrieved the prized rock that would surely surprise his peers, Josh swims to the surface only to find that he has emerged in a space beneath the boat rather than beside it. In an effort to bolster the perceived difficulty of his achievement, he decides to remain under the boat a while longer to give the impression that he could not only retrieve the rock but also hold his breathe for an extended period of time. As will become a common rhetorical theme throughout the novel, the narrative unexpectedly shifts to a story told by one of two characters—Grandpa and his Aunt Lucy—that serve as the conduits for gradually introducing Josh to the traditional stories underlying Creek cosmology and the narratives historicizing his familial ties. In this instance, the memory of a fishing trip with his grandfather intervenes in order to introduce the traditional Creek story of the tie-snake; a multi-colored creature with horns like a deer living in large bodies of water.

The intervention of this story is neither haphazard nor unrelated to the aforementioned incident, as it would come to structure the way Josh comes to understanding his tribally specific relationship to the intersection of queerness and indigeneity. Instead of articulating a story about the origins of the tie-snake, Josh's grandfather leads into his mention of the creature by means of the history by which the very lake where he and Josh were fishing—and, subsequently, the lake where the diving competition takes place—had come into being. In the process of illegally establishing Oklahoma statehood, the politics of allotment and land theft eventually led to the construction of a dam that left the tract of land where Josh's grandfather once lived and farmed submerged under water. The figure of the tie-snake, then, emerges out of a renewed spirit of resistance when Josh's grandfather responds to the seeming erasure of his relationship to that

land by stating “There is something white man has never saw or caught... something in the water... White man never did catch this tie-snake.”<sup>119</sup>

No sooner are we introduced to a few brief details of the tie-snake (it has the power to pull people certain people into the water and its horns are useful for medicine and hunting) than the story transitions away from this memory and back into the predicament in which Josh has found himself. Realizing that he may overplay his hand if he stays under the boat for too long, Josh decides to return from the depths of the lake with the prized rock in hand. However, foregrounding the unique interplay between the stories told by Aunt Lucy and Grandpa and Josh’s memory of and participation in them, Josh snags his leg on a fishing line keeping him submerged in the lake. He struggles to hold his breath he begins to panic and starts choking on water as he tries to free himself and swim to the surface. As he opens his eyes his grandfathers’ story comes to life in both the physical setting and his imaginative faculties. As he scans the lakebed he begins to see the underwater world his grandfather had described as having been submerged by the building of the damn. As he looks down at his legs, however, he begins to see that a “balled-up coil of snakes had wrapped themselves around him, from ankle to knee, and moved in and out of each other, swaying in the lake bottom current.”<sup>120</sup>

The rhetorical intervention this figure--the tie-snake—foregrounds a central element of the colonized psyche: a struggle at the very core of any discussion surrounding theoretical terms like *recognition* or *bearing witness*. The story of the tie-snake offers a tribally specific catalyst for framing the transformation of psychic space and how one might bear inner witness to that process. This underwater world, seemingly forgotten and erased by the actions of white settlers,

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, pg. 19

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, pg 22



is rhetorically repurposed as a space drawing Josh into the physical and emotional crisis of his drowning. He is drowning in a space that is unintelligible to the settler subjects who flooded the area in order to make a reservoir. It is also, as Josh's reaction demonstrates, unintelligible to the colonized psyche finding itself alienated or cut off from the stories that animate the continued cultural and political vibrancy of culturally specific tribal landscapes (in this case, the Creek landscape). Beneath the water is a completely different world—governed by a completely different symbolic order—that, having been unwittingly pulled into, has rightly left Josh with the literal and symbolic sensation of the he is *drowning*.

It is tempting to think of this sudden and traumatic exposure to an underwater landscape teeming with a key figure from the Creek cosmology as being frozen in the past; that Josh's literal experience of drowning in a flooded landscape and his imaginative immersion in a story handed down by his grandfather merely give historical context and symbolic meaning to a time vanished long ago. This would, however, be a mistake when considering the rhetorical work of literary sovereignty. According to Womack:

The idea... has to do with the way narrative shapes communal consciousness: through *imagination* and *storytelling*, people in oral cultures *re-experience history*. The concept of ancestral memory relates to nationalism in that sovereignty is an intersection of the political, imaginary, and literary. To exist as a nation, the community needs a perception of nationhood, that is, stories... that help them imagine who they are as a people, how they came to be, and what cultural values they wish to preserve.<sup>121</sup> (emphasis added)

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<sup>121</sup> *Red on Red*, pg. 26

While Josh is literally being held underwater by a fishing line, he is imaginatively beholden to stories handed down through the oral tradition where his re-experiencing of history marks the nascent work of reconstituting his subjectivity. Beyond the literary elements of the story is the rhetorical work of this literary modality where “within the telling [of Josh’s story], the event is re-experienced so that the people are reconstituted as a nation as they hear about their origins in ancient stories of creations and journeyings.”<sup>122</sup> The underwater world and the imaginative immersion in the story of the tie-snake are not mere artifacts of the past but they narrate the process of transforming Josh’s transforming subjectivity while animating literary sovereignty as a way of bearing inner witness to the rhetorical decolonization of psychic space.

### ***Speechlessness and the Unintelligibility of Queerness in the Colonial Socio-Sexual Symbolic Order***

Given the fact that the novel starts with Aunt Lucy telling the Creek creation story to a much younger Josh Henneha, it is safe to assume that he has, his whole life, been told quite a few other stories from the Creek tradition. It is not, however, until the moment of his near drowning that he confronts the power of this alternate symbolic universe by means of its absolute unintelligibility to his heretofore-colonized psyche. The distinction and differences between these two worlds becomes even clearer when Jimmy notices a fury of bubbles in the water presumably rising from Josh as he struggles to resurface. In Josh’s imaginative experience of this even, Jimmy becomes a tie-snake himself. Traversing the surface and depths of the water to rescue Josh, the tie-snake (Jimmy) wraps himself around Josh and pulls him to the surface.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid

The internalized homophobia of the world above the surface becomes painstakingly clear when Josh, now unconscious and turning blue, is pulled onto the raft alongside Jimmy and Lenny. Jimmy directs Lenny (Josh's cousin) to begin mouth-to-mouth; a demand that is immediately dismissed by Lenny's declaring, "I ain't kissing no guy."<sup>123</sup> Concerned for Josh's life and noticeably angered by Lenny's refusal to look past his homophobia to save the life of his own cousin, Jimmy performs mouth-to-mouth and, much to his delight, revives Josh.

As Jimmy helped swim Josh from the raft to shore, Sammy (who had been watching the event unfold from there) seizes the opportunity to project queer motives onto Jimmy's heroic efforts in order to shame him for his life-saving actions. Watching Jimmy pull Josh onto shore, Sammy says, "I didn't know you liked teaching little girls to swim. Yeah, I seen you lean over and kiss him on the raft. What's the matter, Jimmy? Ashamed of your new girlfriend?"<sup>124</sup> Afraid of having, perhaps, just outed himself, "Jimmy suddenly realized the way he was standing with one arm around Josh's waist, helping him to remain on his feet. He looked down at his arm with revulsion and let go; Josh sagged to his hands and knees in the grass."<sup>125</sup> Realizing that he not only failed to impress Jimmy but created a situation in which Jimmy had to deny and disavow having any motives besides saving Josh's life (a nervous, fast-talking, and exasperating scene clearly indicating Jimmy does, in fact, have feelings for Josh), Josh angrily dismisses the idea that he needed help and then begins to weep out of the seeming betrayal of Jimmy's denial.

After waiting for Sammy and Lenny to walk out of earshot, Jimmy's well-meaning attempt to reconcile this betrayal seems only to make matters worse. Jimmy says to Josh, "I didn't really mean it. I just didn't want them to think, well, you know how they tease you if they

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<sup>123</sup> *Drowning in Fire*, pg. 23

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 26

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*

think you like someone too much.”<sup>126</sup> While Josh’s unwitting submersion in the underwater world and his grandfather’s stories seems to have catalyzed his imaginative re-experience of the Creek socio-cultural and physical landscape, Jimmy’s betrayal forces Josh to confront the abjection, unintelligibility, pathologization, and unspeakability of queerness—especially as it intersects with indigeneity—in the colonial symbolic order. Switching from the first person perspective of Josh to a third person narrative voice, the novel states:

Josh couldn’t find the right words for his rage. He felt all the words flaming up before his eyes and burning away like stubble before he could use them. In church he had heard Jesus’ words to the centurion: Speak the Word and you shall be healed. He no longer believed. He wished he could pick up words like stones, rub them to make them smooth and polished, and put them in his pocket to save and use during moments like this one. He longed for the comfort of those stones. He wished he had collected all kinds of them—agate streaked with red lightening, hard quartz pounded into indissoluble rage, blood-red hematite formed around secrets, yellow amaranth rained down by tears. He would put all the rocks in his mouth and find his voice in their swirled streaks of sky, fire, water. But there were no such rocks and none of them contained secret messages and there was nobody to send them to even if they had.<sup>127</sup>

The speechlessness confronting Josh seems to mimic the rhetorical situation expressed in the creative work of other queer indigenous and two-spirit folks. In the literary construction of this text, however, Womack demonstrates the particular struggle confronting queer Creek subjects and, more importantly, a pathway towards reconciling such speechlessness by the recovery and revitalization of politicizing the Creek oral tradition as a way of reconstituting contemporary

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, pgs. 27-28

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, pg. 28

Creek nationalism. This early event in *Drowning in Fire* demonstrates the decolonial framework of literary separatism and rhetorical sovereignty by re-politicizing the story of the tie-snake as provoking a shift in the constitution of psychic space. Centering the relationship between Josh and Jimmy in the context of this decolonial imaginary produces a unique setting for queering this rhetorical strategy by (re)imagining a symbolic order that renders queerness intelligible and speakable. The remainder of the novel documents, in general, familiar struggles of queer indigenous folks in decolonizing psychic space and, in particular, employs a unique rhetorical strategy offering Creek folks a tribally specific path for reconstituting community and nation.

### *Aunt Lucy and the Creek Oral Tradition*

“I, Lucille, smoking words on my tongue, dreaming of whippoorwill calls, casting swirled memories on the waters, has stories too dark to tell. A life of talking, and I ain’t told some of them to anybody. Sometimes I’ve hidden my light under a bushel, covered my meanings with smoke and fog. But in my stronger moments I know how to make them laugh by holding back; I can bring them to the brink of themselves. I play my words like a trumpet, let the space between notes fill in the meaning. [...] I can step in an out with my stories just like that; the band rests, and I take my chance to solo, play my words against the piano bass, guitar, drums of the rhythm section while everybody else falls quiet. And if they’re listening right now, if they take in the words, not just hearing them with their ears but soaking them up through their body openings, when it’s their turn to stand up and sound out, they’ll play all the better themselves for it.”<sup>128</sup>

As the plot of *Drowning in Fire* progresses it becomes clear that one character, in particular, plays an especially important role in the story (regarding the decolonization of Josh’s

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<sup>128</sup> *Drowning in Fire*, pgs. 111-112

psychic space) and in Womack's rhetorical strategy of literary separatism. While Josh's grandfather imparts his share of Creek cultural influence over him, Womack reserves a special place for the story of Aunt Lucy and the stories told by her to the reader and to Josh. Whereas Grandpa's character and his stories are always recounted through Josh or told in the third person narrative form, Aunt Lucy is often portrayed in her own narrative voice rather than constructed exclusively from the perspective of others. It seems inevitable that folks like Josh would have, at the very least, intermittent contact with Creek traditions, stories, and other cultural artifacts but the significance of someone such as Aunt Lucy stems beyond their anthropological, ethnographic, and genealogical knowledge of their culture. Aunt Lucy's character taps into the affective dimensions of decolonization through her transference of a uniquely Creek symbolic order that refuses to be rendered an artifact of the past. Instead, she bears witness to the ongoing efforts to revitalize a nation and reimagine community where queerness is not merely tolerated but afforded a place where they can affirm their identity. In describing perceptions of Aunt Lucy, Josh states:

*Everybody always thought of her as a kind of local encyclopedia. She knew the history of families in Weleetka and Eufaula, all the way back to who settled where after Indian Removal in the 1830s and then all the white families and when they had come to the area, as well as when the illegal ones had snuck into Indian Territory. I'd always thought of her as kind of loopy, the way all this stuff poured out of her all the time, yet it was a tremendous body of knowledge, if only in terms of its volume... Around Lucy, at least, I never had to worry about coming up with something to say, unlike others always trying to get the shy kid to speak. For this same reason, the fact that she never shut up, she drove a lot of people crazy*<sup>129</sup> (emphasis added).

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<sup>129</sup> *Drowning in Fire*, pgs. 163-164

The transition from describing how *everyone* thought of Aunt Lucy to how *I* (Josh) thought of her masterfully depicts just how significant the affective dimension of decolonization is to the rhetorical modality of literary separatism and the broader political strategy of decolonization. Aunt Lucy may be a “local encyclopedia” about Creek culture and history but her significance branches far beyond merely recounting or, perhaps, even disputing the historical record. She isn’t just a source of genealogical information and her stories aren’t transmitted as artifacts to be laid to rest in an archive. Aunt Lucy is a witty, tobacco smoking, jazz club hopping, trumpet playing, mixed-blood Creek woman with a traumatic history of sexual and psychological abuse who preserves the Creek cosmology through the oral tradition even if her nonstop storytelling leads you to insanity. What better counterpart could there be to transform the speechlessness of anti-queer colonial abjection embodied by Josh than an outspoken advocate of Creek culture who demonstrates the value of Creek nationalism in her preservation of the oral tradition through storytelling?

Considering the significance of Lucy’s character to the plot and her function within the broader rhetorical strategy of the novel, it is fitting that her storytelling is presented as an act of healing within the very first pages of the book. As a young child, Josh is introduced as suffering from an earache keeping him from falling asleep. Noticing Josh’s predicament, his uncle reassures him, “Don’t worry, son. Your Aunt Lucille knows what to do when it hurts.”<sup>130</sup> Once sitting upon her lap, Aunt Lucy lights a cigarette and exhales it into Josh’s ear: “breathing smoke and stories into [it].”<sup>131</sup> Demonstrating Josh’s early immersion in Creek cosmology, she breathes the Creek creation story into his ear and, in doing so, she ties together nomadic journeying, clan

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, pg. 3

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, pg. 4

membership, modern historical inflections, and a personal account about her husband that helps weave each of those elements together. Through the plumes of smoke, the rhythmic pace of the story, and its power to draw his mind away from the pain in his ear, Josh recounts:

Then it was me in her lap again, and I felt silence enveloping me once more as my uncle lifted me away, carrying me into the bedroom. I felt him pull the covers over me, but he already seemed far off, as I retreated back to the safe place inside my mind.<sup>132</sup>

Given the sometimes memoir-like format of the novel, one might speculate this chapter to be told as a reflection by Josh regarding his first memory of the healing power of his aunt's storytelling. Whereas this may be his first recollection of words helping numb his awareness of a physical pain, it certainly foreshadows the role the Lucy's storytelling would play healing the psychological wounds of Josh and, potentially, of the Creek Nation.

While the unspeakability of Josh's near drowning introduces an encounter with the anti-queer colonial imaginary of internalized homophobia, Lucy introduces a crucial distinction within the Creek nation that hits at the very heart of the conflict and debate between assimilation and tradition: the stop grounds and the church grounds. Lucy was born mixed-blood to a white father and a Creek mother. Sister to an orphaned full-blood boy, Dave, who was adopted through her white father's petition to the court (as a means to secure the allotment assigned to Dave), Lucy's first encounter with Creek tradition was atrophied by father whose power was legitimized through the privatized violence of the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, pg 9



Daddy didn't like him much 'cause when Dave and Mama talked that Creek, he didn't understand all of it. Sometimes Daddy said he never woulda married an Indian woman if he'd a-known she'd be whispering secrets all the time. One time he said to me, "Lucille, what does that boy tell you about being over at his grandmother's? What are they messing with over there?" I just told him, "Aw, he just goes to hep that old woman chop wood. She's too old to do it herself." Letting on like I didn't know much. He said, "Lucille, don't turn your back on that boy 'cause you can't trust him. You know him and that old woman are Wolf Clan. Way out there away from everybody, don't even come out of that hole in the woods of theirs to go to church. We try to help him when all the time I reckon he's over by the spring with that old woman, where no one can see them, making medicine against me."<sup>133</sup>

The meanness of her father and his attempt to separate Lucy and her mother from Creek culture led to an escalating trend of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The first depiction of him in the novel portrays him violently waking Lucy by hitting her across the mouth. Later we learn that Lucy was not only victim to sexual assault and subject to terrifying dreams with allusions to the violent imagery of Christian doctrine, but she also witnesses her own father sexually assault a friend of hers too. Through depictions of the interpersonal and familial violence exacted by her father (situated within the violence of forced removal, land theft, de-tribalization, and treaty violations) it is not difficult to discern why Lucy would keep the limited contact with her Creek cultural ties hidden from him.

'Course, I may have forgotten now and then to tell Daddy one or two things I overheard Dave and Mama saying. Like this one time I heard Dave telling her about a couple of men he seen over at the stomp dance. These two men live

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, pgs. 34-35

together way back in the sand hills, away from everybody, without any women. Dave said, “Mizzus Self,” on account of Daddy made him talk to Mama like that—“Mizzus Self,” he says, “my Uncle Tarbie comes down to the stomp dances, and he’s always with the same man. The young boys giggle when they see them two in camp, but the old ones always frown and tell them to show respect.”<sup>134</sup>

Describing her fathers violently immature embrace of the adolescent boys giggling at the thought of two men (Tarbie and Seborn) living together and having genuine affection for the other, Lucy states:

[Daddy] knows about them men Dave was asking Mama about because he’s heard the white men at the store whispering and talking about them. Sometimes Daddy grabs up Mam’s broom and pretends to be those fellers doing women’s work around the house. When he takes to prancing about and making fun of them like that, Mama gets real scared and says, “*Thi*, show some respect. You don’t know what you’re doing.”<sup>135</sup>

Witnessing the violence wrought by a man who professed adherence to the teachings of Christianity, being unable to comprehend the mockery of Tarbie and Seborn by whites and Creeks alike, and noticing the fear in her mothers demeanor at rebuking her husband for his infantile gestures, one cannot blame her when, at his funeral, she begins sobbing because she “was so happy that sonofabitch was dead, and [she’d] never see him again.”<sup>136</sup> The circumstances surrounding his death, however, significantly influence the figure she will become in her

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, pg. 35

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, pg. 36

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, pg. 115

community and the role she exerts as a rhetorical figure for (re)imagining contemporary Creek nationalism.

Recognizing her early interpellation into the complementary social imaginaries of settler colonialism and white Christianity, it isn't difficult to comprehend the cautious awe she demonstrates upon witnessing a ritual involving Tarbie, Seborn, Dave, and Dave's grandmother. Earlier, her father's meanness boiled over to such a degree that his anger at the stubbornness of a mule, Sally, translated into him dousing her in kerosene and lighting her on fire. It was not enough that this act of total depravity occurred at all but it took place in the midst of Dave's horrified screams pleading not to do it. Having certainly witnessed far too many acts of such gratuitous violence and unfounded anger, Dave seeks reprisal in Creek ritual among the company of Tarbie, Seborn, and Dave's grandmother.

As Lucy watched the four of them, she noticed that they were feeding the fire centered among them with objects that each had some sort of relation to her father: a razor strap, a pocket watch, fingernail clippings, a broken plow line, and an effigy of her father. As the ritual progressed and the flames grew, Lucy experiences a vision—perhaps even a projection of her own desires—that foreshadows the circumstances of her father's death as he gets trapped in a burning building (a fire we eventually find out was likely set by Dave himself). The significance of this event, however, is in the connection Lucy makes between the beauty of the barn set ablaze and the story Dave once told her about the Green Corn Ceremony conducted every year as a traditional part of forging and recreating Creek communal ties:

I gasped as I stood still as a fencepost, watching the fire from out there in the cattails. The flames show out of the roof of the barn and cast a hazy glow that lit up the ground all around, so I could see it framed brightly, like a painting, against

the dark woods, and Lord it was beautiful. I remembered Dave saying that his people purified everything by starting a new fire at the beginning of the year in July. They kept the fire sacred and rekindled it before eating the corn harvest. They done that at their Green Corn ceremony. That was a lot to talk about for somebody as young and quiet as him, but that's what I remembered. Someone like that, what little they do say you tend to take note of.<sup>137</sup>

The last line of this passage clearly demonstrates that both the meaning of the Green Corn Ceremony—purification and renewal—as described by Dave and the connection she forges between that meaning and the circumstances of her father's death each form a significant influence over her identity. More powerfully foreshadowing the transformation she would undergo (from an anxiety stricken child beholden to fearful Christian imagery to a jazz-playing Creek woman) is the juxtaposition in her affective disposition while witnessing the fire and making the connection to Dave's story about the Green Corn Ceremony:

Daddy never let us go to any Green Corn, but Mama had told me plenty about it. All that church stuff commenced to running through my head like weeping and gnashing of teeth and unquenchable fire where the worm perisheth not, but I felt peaceful-like as a I stared into the flames and listened to the cicadas singing off in the trees.<sup>138</sup>

While Aunt Lucy may have “stories too dark to tell,” some of which she “ain't told... to anybody,” she will end up spending “a life of talking” and “smoking words on [her] tongue.”<sup>139</sup> Her stories of creation, the stomp grounds, Seborn, Tarbie, and Dave, and her encyclopedic

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, pg. 47

<sup>138</sup> Ibid

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, pg. 111

knowledge of Creek history become vital elements illuminating Josh's imagination, decolonizing psychic space, and affirming queer identity by making the intersection of queerness and indigeneity something that is speakable and intelligible within the symbolic order governing a renewed Creek community. The rhetorical power of Lucy's function as a catalyst for (re)imagining Creek nationalism as inclusive of queer identity comes from the way her character politicizes the oral tradition as a tool for forging a new symbolic order where queer indigeneity is a celebrated element of Creek community rather than the abject underside of assimilationist efforts to gain recognition in the socio-symbolic order of settler colonialism.

### ***Bearing Inner Witness to the Decolonization of Psychic Space***

At night I dreamed the devil's shadow, a burning weight that pressed me down. The devil was think in the air of my room, hovering and trying to suck out my spirit like my grandma had told me a cat could steal a baby's breath. I knew *I had to find the right words to come awake, to cast off the dream with the flutter of my eyelids*. I would begin spewing forth a litany of Bible verses, all the ones I'd faithfully committed to heart as a kid, my Sunday school verses. It was a vital matter to chant them without pause, to throw up a shield of words between myself and the devil looming over me. *I would exhaust my memory and find myself still writhing and weighted down and lapsing into speechlessness, unable to form words*. I would wake up groaning and terrified. All my life I'd been searching for the right words to wake up from a bad dream. I could not distinguish my own voice from the voices of others which swirled around in my head<sup>140</sup> (emphasis added)

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, pg. 107

The psychological toll at stake in the ongoing manifestations of anti-queerness as a tool for the enforcement of settler colonialism is demonstrated by bearing witness to the absolute terror experienced by Josh and the multifaceted struggle he must wage in his effort to translate the raw affective energy surrounding the intersections of his queerness and indigeneity something speakable. The influx of Christian missionaries coupled with the politics of Oklahoma statehood, spearheaded by allotment policies, are at the heart of a symbolic order that not only legitimated the outright genocide of those who resisted but enforced an internalized set of values often making assimilation seem preferable. While Josh's experience makes it abundantly clear that the excising of traditions, politics, and social formations—such as the celebration of queerness—has taken a toll on the psyche of so many folks in Indian Country, his story also bears witness beyond the tragic victim narrative as it forges an alternative to the colonial socio-symbolic order and the internalized homophobia of assimilationist Creek folks by celebrating the speakability and affirmation of queerness.

The novel transitions from Josh's sense of being betrayed by Jimmy that day on the lake to the inability to enjoy the moment when Jimmy actually does express his affection for Josh through both word and deed. Despite his feeling of betrayal, Josh would fantasize about Jimmy in his awoken imagination and in the dreams that would befall him in his sleep. It was no more than a year later that these fantasies would no longer be confined to scenarios conjured in his mind but, instead, translate into an unexpected sexual encounter evoking a debilitating sense of anxiety rather than pleasure he fantasized about. Having been invited to a sleepover at Jimmy's house, along with Lenny and Sammy, a limited supply of sleeping bags created a situation where one of the boys would have to sleep with Jimmy in his bed. While the homophobic fear of merely sleeping in the same bed as another man would deter both Lenny and Sammy, Josh was

left without any choice in the matter. While he had, certainly, fantasized previously about lying in the same bed next to Jimmy, once everyone else had fallen asleep the reality of the situation forced Josh to confront the tension between his Baptist upbringing and his queer desire for Jimmy. He started to recall Sunday sermons demonizing such desires and he began thinking to himself, “I knew I was a freak, a grotesque, a rampant sinner, and as I lay in Jimmy’s bed, his body against mine, I burned, I burned, I burned.”<sup>141</sup> As if the evocation of this internalized self-hatred were not enough, what happened next would prove to be even more devastating.

After a long while I finally began to drift off. I was awakened later when I felt a heavy arm across my chest and Jimmy’s fingers moving. He must have thought that I had fallen asleep. I knew I should act like I was coming awake to ward him off, but I wanted to just lie there. His hand began to explore, creeping down my stomach towards my shorts. My heart was pounding; I began to sweat. His fingertips slipped beneath the elastic band, and I felt a fire, a hot blue flame lapping and dancing over the surface of my skin when his hand grasped me, hard as a rock. I gasped and rolled over, afraid of the hot rising of my blood, afraid of the unknown, afraid of hellfire, afraid of what thrilled me. I lay there motionless, and I could feel him throbbing against my ass. I pretended to be asleep, and I rolled all the way over on my stomach, staying on my far side of the bed, paralyzed with fear<sup>142</sup>

He would spend the rest of the night awake with panic racing through his mind about how he could even face Jimmy in the morning or what would happen when they got out of bed. He had “stood on the shore of betrayal” that day at the lake but despite his wildest fantasies and the

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid, pg. 64

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, pg. 64

subtle signs by which he tried to convey his affection, he had “never planned what [he] would do if the messages worked.”<sup>143</sup>

In the days following, the terror and confusion wrought by this unexpected act produced a recurring dream evoking the figure of his grandfather coupled with Aunt Lucy’s stories of Tarbie and Seborn. Continuing the theme of Josh’s alienation from Creek tradition represented by the unintelligibility of the underwater world in the story of his near drowning, his grandfather appears to him in his dream as the embodiment of that same unintelligibility as he speaks to Josh exclusively in Creek; a language that Josh cannot comprehend. Suddenly, an axe appears in his hands and his grandfather points at tree for him to begin chopping. Unable to make a dent in the tree, Josh’s father appears in a brazen attempt at queerbaiting, declaring to Josh, “You swing that ax like a little four-year-old girl.”<sup>144</sup> Swinging the axe again it the tree becomes a black Bible now torn asunder as the pages turn to fire. Understandably fazed by such a sacrilegious deed, he pleads with his grandfather to stop encouraging him but, refusing to respond in English, he continues to speak only in Creek. Suddenly a community of folks begin showing up, among them Aunt Lucy, Tarbie, and Seborn, in a scene that sets the stage for Josh to recognize just what is at stake in the decision to continue down his fathers path of assimilation or to embrace a sense of belonging within a symbolic order governed by Creek tradition.

One of these men says, “Seborn, help the boy out; he’s never done this before,” and he motions for me to step within the circle. I think I’ve heard Aunt Lucy mention this man’s name before, but I’m none too sure, and since he’s a stranger, I shout back at him, “Leave me be. I told you! Leave me be,” and I throw up my hands in front of my face to block out the flames. Instead of falling in with the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, pg. 65

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, pg. 73



rest of them, I begin to shout Bible verses back at him, a rapid-fire succession of every writ of scripture I can think of. [...] I yell, but this man has endless patience; obviously he's willing to wait until I step forward. The fire in the middle becomes a round orb, the sun itself, and, though I fear harming my eyes, I cannot resist gazing upon it. The sun is the face of an aged old woman, hollowed cheeks sunken over orange embers that glow beneath her skin. Its rays are fingers making shadows on the people gathered around it. *I know I have to find the right words to shake off the dream, to come awake, to put out the flames*; my scripture verses have no effect. The more I quote, the more muted my voice becomes until, at last, I wake up groaning, unable for several minutes to articulate words<sup>145</sup> (emphasis added)

The heretofore unconscious confrontation between the latent homophobia internalized by the assimilating socio-symbolic order of settler Christianity and the stories handed down by Josh's grandfather and his Aunt Lucy have, in this powerful passage, manifested themselves in the content of a recurring dream. Nurturing fantasies of lying together, limbs intertwined, and sharing the others warmth were now consciously confronted the felt need to "pray and ask Jesus to forgive" as he found himself, mind adrift, imagining himself "in Jimmy's arms where he held [Josh] endlessly."<sup>146</sup> Despite his bearing witness to these unconscious forces—vivid as they may be—they remain piecemeal; leading Josh to reflect, "Every place I touched Jimmy in my mind flared up between my fingers and became *words I could not say*."

After having grown apart from—and skillfully avoided—Jimmy, Josh eventually convinces himself that he just has something akin to the "spiritual flu" that would go away if he had "enough faith" and "a little more commitment."<sup>147</sup> Much like their first encounter, however,

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, pg. 74

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, pg. 75

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, pg. 107

an unexpected set of circumstances brought the two of them back together as Josh found himself being pulled into giving Jimmy a ride to and from a basketball game. On the way home, Jimmy convinces Josh to postpone the trip home and let him take Josh to an undisclosed location. Jimmy—always the one to be relatively comfortable about his sexuality—had discovered a cruising spot that he had long fantasized about visiting with Josh rather than participating in the pursuit of anonymous sex. Despite having conjured up his “spiritual flu” defense mechanism, the situation provokes a slightly different perspective than their prior encounter. He states:

I wanted to look into Jimmy’s eyes one time without dropping my gaze to the floor, afraid of the glance that lingered a little too long, the smile that remained a fraction of a second more than it should, uncertain of what Jimmy might do if anyone noticed me looking. Sometimes I felt the words rising within me, about to break through to the surface, as if I could almost reach down and help yank them from their depths. I felt them just within reach, when the words sink back down before I could speak. If I ever brought forth these words, what would I first utter?

Rather than merely reacting to the unintelligibility of his desire for Jimmy, this passage hints at a movement towards taking responsibility for and ownership over it. Instead of being caught up in the trap of a symbolic order that renders such desires unspeakable, Josh feels the words being forged in his throat and, rather than lamenting their absence, he asks what those words might be were they to ever be spoken. What had previously been made manifest symbolically in the content of his dreams was now being consciously brought into confrontation with how he understood the forces at work rendering his desire (un)speakable.

I could see a war of words, and it was going on inside my head. I hadn’t thought that much about Grandpa’s stories, or Lucy’s, because the church stories were

always at war against them, and I'd heard the church stories more often, every Sunday since I could remember anything at all. The church stories were a barrage in my head that never let up and blasted over my grandpa's and Lucy's voices. The stories I heard Sunday after Sunday in the white Southern Baptist church my parents had taken me to. The stories I needed because they held off the devil. I could sometimes feel them coming at me from all sides like rounds of gunfire. I couldn't protect myself from the words dropping all around me, so fast, when I least expected them. [...] It never let up, these other stories, constantly advancing, riddling me with sharp stabs of pain, yet I was terrified of the prospects of not believing them, so I lived with their chaos<sup>148</sup>

While there has certainly been a shift between the sleepover at Jimmy's house and his cruising adventure following Jimmy's basketball game, it is not until nearly thirteen years apart after that night that the stories handed down from Grandpa and Lucy would no longer incite chaos but offer Josh an avenue for (re)claiming responsibility and ownership over his desire. These stories would become more than a war of words battling it out in the unconscious recesses of Josh's mind: occasionally manifesting themselves consciously when Josh finds himself in sexually charged situations. They would produce more than reactionary responses to the unspeakability of his desires. They would, instead, become the primary avenue for rendering intelligible the intersections of his queer desires and indigenous identity.

### *The Speakability of Josh's Desire*

Some might say a Tar Baby isn't born, he's made, fashioned from human hands, to scare off crows and other thieves. But he's born, all right, shaped out of words. An invented history, a history of invention. A choice to invent your own history.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, pgs. 105-106

As early as birth, there's the danger of getting stuck to a bad story if you stick your hands inside the wrong words. You could wake up inside the belly of a whale, boiling in a black kettle of sin, instead of glued to a Tar Baby. Or you could come unstuck and just float away without changing anything. And there's the real Tar Baby, too, stuck to a Rabbit, but he's a little more tricky to locate. Tar Baby talks Rabbit into a boiling pot by telling him a story. Now, you might ask, given our story inside a story, or stories inside stories, who is the inventor and who is the invented? You might even wonder which parts I made up and which actually happened. I didn't know the answer. I only knew that I wanted out of the kettle, especially if someone else was going to be throwing logs on the fire. The way out wasn't by leaning over the side and spitting on the flames. *I'd have to climb out, up over the words, and into a new story.* I was still here, Jimmy was still in Weleetka, and Creek land was still waiting for us to take it back<sup>149</sup> (emphasis added)

Following the night cruising with Jimmy, the novel picks up thirteen years later. We learn that Josh has graduated college, becoming a statistician for the Department of Agriculture, and Jimmy has remained in Weleetka working as an auto mechanic following high school. Having moved away from Weleetka, Josh lost contact with Jimmy and the two of them had grown apart. While Josh's internalized self-hatred had prevented him from enjoying that night with Jimmy despite his desire for him, Jimmy was the one "spooked out" by Josh's reaction. Over the passing of those thirteen years, Jimmy had done his best to distance himself from that night with Josh. Reflecting on that night, Jimmy states, "I'd relived that night on the river, the night I'd first trusted another person with the truth about myself, over and over again. I'd hoped for much more."<sup>150</sup> It is later revealed that the more fundamental reason for these feelings happened to be

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, pgs. 246-247

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, pg. 157

that, once Josh moved away, Jimmy had temporarily relocated to Tulsa where he spent most of his time drunk and “picking up tricks.”<sup>151</sup> A series of decisions that resulted in him contracting HIV; a condition that made him *afraid* to seek Josh for fear that he might transmit the disease to the person for whom he cared the most.

Nevertheless, a series of circumstances would eventually bring the two of them into contact once again starting with Josh’s decision to accompany his grandfather to visit Lucy at the Senior Citizen’s Center. The quick onset of Alzheimer’s often left her speaking in Creek and, upon their arrival, thinking that Josh was not her nephew but, instead, Crazy Horse himself. In a brief moment of lucidity, however, she recognizes him to be her nephew, Josh, whom she had long suspected had an affection for Jimmy. Having mentioned Jimmy, Lucy asks Josh, “Do you still miss him?” A question Josh was unprepared to answer so he replied with the lie, “I haven’t thought about him in years.”<sup>152</sup> A question that, from anyone else, would not, perhaps, have reignited his imagination the way it would later that same evening.

Lying on the bed in his grandparents’ spare bedroom, he began to gaze upon the old photographs that decorated the walls until he spotted a photograph of Lucy. The combination of having encountered Lucy that day and, now, recognizing his solitude and loneliness, Josh closes his eyes and draws himself into the photograph as he, crucially, begins to imagine himself as a *participant* in the stories that Lucy has told him rather than merely an *observer*. This move is a turning point for the plot *and* the successfulness of Womack’s rhetorical strategy as it demonstrates a newfound sense of agency for working through contemporary barriers to the speakability of the intersection between queerness and indigeneity and towards an affirmation of

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, pg. 262

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, pg. 171

it in a renewed sense of community. Josh's imagination begins to bears inner witness to the way Lucy's stories have influenced him in such a way that he might forge a way of working through the compulsory homophobia of colonization and his internalized self-hatred.

Paralleling the cathartic moment when Lucy witnessed Dave in the woods with Tarbie and Seborn, Josh finds himself transported backwards in time to a similar situation as he eavesdrops on a conversation among them in the woods. Following a conversation between Tarbie and Seborn declaring their deeply held affection for each other they then decided to take Dave along with them on a picnic. This moment produced, for Josh, a brief moment of elation that quickly turned to panic as he reflects:

And then, crouched down in the cattails by the spring, listening to all that, something just broke in my mind and came flooding in on me. Those two men loved each other. They loved me. I knew if I ran fast enough, *I could tell my story before I floated away, share the good news before I lost it*. There was no time to lose, not a moment to spare by staying there and thinking until *I got scared and changed my mind*<sup>153</sup> (emphasis added)

Panic-stricken, Josh runs to inform Lucy's mother that Dave was in need of help as he had been associating with these two men who he had observed expressing a shared affection for each other. Clearly afraid of the influence their affection might hold over Dave, he reports what he had witnessed to Lucy's mother. Noticeably shaken by Josh's reaction to the situation, Lucy's mother suggests that Josh "should go visit the *hilis heyya*, the medicine woman, Becky Katcha" since "she might have some notion about what to do with Dave."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, pg. 180

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, pg. 181

Having detailed what he had witnessed in the woods, Josh is stricken when Mrs. Katcha informs him, “There is nothing I can do for Dave. [...] I can’t help him... because there’s nothing wrong with him.”<sup>155</sup> She then instructs Josh that the reason for Dave’s association with Tarbie and Seborn is because they understand him. She asks Josh, “Who do you talk to?” Unsure, Josh replies that he is still looking for someone: an answer that leads him to reflect, “I’d never considered the possibility that the world might be crooked, and I might be okay.”<sup>156</sup>

Having returned from his imaginative participation in this story he reflects, upon witnessing a few eagles flying overhead while on his drive back to Eufaula, “I knew by their movement that I had seen other worlds beyond words, other languages inside circles of motion. I wanted to learn that language.”<sup>157</sup> Marking a newfound sense of agency derived from his participation in—rather than passive observation of—Lucy’s stories, Josh demonstrates that he is no longer afraid of his speechlessness because he has now witnessed that there are words, worlds, and languages beyond the colonial symbolic order that render his desires intelligible. Interpellation into the symbolic order of settler colonialism and white Christianity had “got him stuck in a bad story” where he was unable to claim his desires because he had not, until now, had the tools to step outside the anti-queer ideological coordinates of settler society.

Two years later, following the death of Lucy, Josh recollects just how significant of an influence she had been: tying together his entire transformation in a single line. “She had interrupted my years of silence with three long and piercing notes: smoke blown in my ears, stories breathed into me, words held up like mirrors.”<sup>158</sup> After her funeral, Josh would, once

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid, pg. 184

<sup>156</sup> Ibid

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, pg. 187

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, pg. 218

again, come into contact Jimmy; this time filled with the words that rendered his desire intelligible. Following a party that Josh's cousin, Lenny, had led him to, Josh finds himself at Jimmy's house and able to bear witness to the transformation and decolonization of his psychic space:

Most of the sex I'd known had been quick and anonymous and *without speaking*. With Jimmy, though, I'd instigated much of the encounter myself, poured fuel on the fire, fanned the flames. I longed to love Jimmy, even from here, his brown body, his wide-eyed gaze, his bold stride. I wanted him to touch me again. I wanted to lie in the dark and listen to his breathing. I wanted back inside his room within the bare walls of his house. When I go back home, I told myself, I will have forgotten nothing. I said this to myself, over and over, I will *remember*, until I eventually fell asleep.<sup>159</sup>

Having realized a place within the symbolic order created within the stories told by Lucy, Josh determines that it is his place to take up the role she once served for him and continue to forge this space by means of his own (re)imagination of Creek community and nationalism. He declares:

So Dave and me were going to be alright, near as I could tell, judging by Becky Katcha's explanation. The last time I'd found my way in through a photo, but I began to wonder if I needed anything other than time to think and speculate. Why rely on stuff you might not always have around? There was a lot of medicine in a person's brain, I figured, if he could collect his thoughts, consider the things he'd heard, make up stories to suit himself. Lucy told them, why couldn't I? I'd always been my own best listener. So I put my mind to work, recollecting as best I could. I thought about Tarbie. About Seborn. Dave and Lucille. Family and friends to

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, pg. 215



each other, just like I'd known. I didn't have all the facts, so I did the most sensible thing and proceeded without them.<sup>160</sup>

Returning to the story of Rabbit and Tar Baby, Josh has recognized more than just the simple fact that we are, from the moment of our birth, shaped out of words. Words are, certainly, the symbols that are projected upon us as well as the tools with which we find ourselves in a socio-symbolic order giving them meaning and value. Josh's story bears inner witness to the interplay between a subject position that we are born into (a socio-symbolic order not of our choosing) and the process of subjectification (the process by which we find, identify with, and perhaps forge a place within the symbolic order by either assimilating to or manipulating it). Born speechless, we are subject to our interpellation into the symbolic order by the speech of others. Raised in a community split between the stomp grounds and the church grounds, abjected by the state and white Christianity, Josh's transformation bears witness to and demands recognition of the ongoing traumatic effects that colonization has visited upon indigenous communities and the way they imagine themselves as sovereign nations. In particular, *Drowning in Fire* advances discussions surrounding the rhetorics of colonization, genocide, land theft, sovereignty, nationalism, and separatism by placing queerness into conversation with indigeneity. Beyond the trauma wrought by colonization, however, the novel eschews any notion of letting itself be defined exclusively as a victim narrative. On the contrary, not only does the plot demonstrate the power of stories in transforming the way that Josh understands himself and the Creek nation but Womack's rhetorical strategy produces a powerful text with contemporary relevance for politicizing the intersections of queerness and indigeneity as an essential part of Creek national identity and the processes of decolonization.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, pg. 220

## **Drowning in Fire and Native Literary Separatism**

The rhetorical modality of Native Literary Separatism is not a strategy that advances nor can it be coopted by the homonormativity of white queer subjects. The purpose of this rhetorical strategy is, in fact, quite the opposite. It is not *for* queer settlers, it is a criticism of the socio-symbolic order governing the culture and institutions that continue to make the intersections of queerness and indigeneity unspeakable. Queer Indigenous Literary Separatism is not for a generalizable queer subject and, with respect to *Drowning in Fire*, it is a rhetorical tool that, on the one hand, may certainly insight pan-tribal discussions about the way queerness is abjected in both the colonial imaginary and their tribally specific symbolic orders but, on the other, is primarily a mechanism for reconstituting and reimagining Creek community, nationalism, and sovereignty. For example, returning for a moment to the story of Josh's near drowning, the distinctiveness of this rhetorical maneuver, Mark Rifkin demonstrates its unique power by separating it from the "conventional coming-out story" trope pervading large bodies of queer rhetorical theory and literary analysis. Rifkin states:

The snake trope initially provides a conceptual hinge through which the novel recontextualizes Josh's queer desire from Christian sin to Creek tradition, not only neutralizing the stigma of the one in favor of the sense of transformation implicit in the other but opening up Josh and Jimmy's relationship to signify other kinds of potentiality as well. Their exploration of their attraction for each other appears not as a conventional coming-out story, the recognition and acceptance of a stigmatized personal identity, but instead as the contemporary site of a longstanding struggle over the form and future of Creek peoplehood. Following the logic of the story of the king of the tie-snakes, serpent figures in the text help

signal social and political formations that lie hidden and then become visible in moments of crisis in ways that radically alter and remap the political landscape, with Snakes appearing as the most prominent historical example of that pattern. Through the snake imagery the novel illustrates the capacity of the oral tradition to link seemingly disparate struggles across time as a means of conceptualizing Creek nationality<sup>161</sup>

This rhetorical return to Creek traditionalism (via the continuation of the oral tradition demonstrated in the novel) implies, according to Michelle Henry, “an active engagement with history, in which the Creek person is acting politically within the same time frame and cultural frame as his or her ancestors.”<sup>162</sup> *Drowning in Fire* is a rhetorical participant in culture that refuses to become a historical artifact but, instead, one that is “continuously engaging stories and histories that inform their political actions in the “present.””<sup>163</sup> Returning to Rifkin:

If Lucy is cast as an inheritor of Creek critical memory, Josh’s storytelling shows him to be its latest keeper. [...] Preserving the past, rendered “secret” by the institutionalized erasure of Muscogee traditions and the naturalization of Euroamerican norms, works to keep alive the potential for the kinds of collective identity submerged beneath U.S.-regulated bureaucracy<sup>164</sup>

I’d add the following: if Tarbie, Seborn, Dave, Lucy, and Grandpa can forge a symbolic place for Josh to render his desire for Jimmy speakable, the Josh’s story—that is, the novel itself—teaches contemporary Creek folks a way to render the intersections of queerness and indigeneity intelligible in the constant processes of (re)imagining nationhood.

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<sup>161</sup> *Native Nationality and the Contemporary Queer*, pg. 454

<sup>162</sup> *Canonizing Craig Womack*, pg. 37

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>164</sup> *Native Nationality and the Contemporary Queer*, pg. 452

## Chapter 4 - Disidentifying with the Nostalgia of Mission Mythology in Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians*

In the realm of nostalgia building, worldviews and events that do not fit are ignored in favor of narratives that privilege the past and gesture at a happier, halcyon time. In this way nostalgia functions as a theory of knowledge and structures the way that knowledge will be imparted in the museum setting. California Missions are icons for this type of nostalgia. [...] Ironically, these sites that attract thousands of tourists every year are the sites of death and cultural devastation endured by Native Californians. The first of many blows to the fabric of Indian life and cultures in California was the Spanish Mission project. It was so destructive perhaps, due to Spain's plan to obliterate Indian lifeways to effectively harness a labor force in service to the Crown. Today, 19 of the 21 Spanish Missions tell the story of California Indian life, cultures, and the colonization of Alta California. Providing the foundation of Native and colonial history for California's fourth graders, Mission museums are central to education in the state.<sup>165</sup>

Since museums are, to such a high degree, an ingrained element of the social fabric throughout much of the Western world, it isn't entirely surprising that their ideological function as repositories of cultural memory is rarely questioned. These institutions are often thought of as depoliticized spaces that neutrally depict their objects (whether art, history, sports, technology, etc.) in order to document, educate, or even entertain observers. This assumption of objectivity is, however, more often indicative of the *desire* for an officially sanctioned narrative or authoritative voice regarding these objects and events rather than their representation as such. Cultural memory, much like individual memory, is far from seamless, neutral, or transparent. It

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<sup>165</sup> *Negotiating the Master Narrative*, pgs. 118-119

is subject to, in a certain sense, unconscious forces that repress, neglect, forget, inaccurately reconstruct, or outright misrepresent what it tries to narrate. Cultural memory is certainly not equivalent to individual memory in every respect but it is related if not for the sole reason that it is forged from a critical mass of individuals claiming to understand the objects or events in question. While, perhaps, subject to varying degrees of ideological appropriation<sup>166</sup>, the mere fact that museums function for the purpose of legitimizing a narrative about their object means they risk depoliticizing the multifarious ways feigning a sense of wholeness inevitably subjects memory to both conscious and unconscious dynamics of dominant ideological forces at play in constructing it. Therefore, it is useful to examine rhetorical performances of ideological interpellation at work in artifacts that depoliticize the ways in which a master narrative is constructed through these institutions in service to the broader socio-symbolic order in which they are embedded.

When cultural memory and the nostalgic yearning for a narrative unencumbered by details that could complicate the way that one thinks of themselves as they relate to the collective (be it a group, community, organization, nation, etc.) meet, one can be fairly certain the discursive maneuvers at play will be of great rhetorical significance. *Mission Mythology* is such that it employs a high degree of ideological appropriation, disseminated through multiple sites of influence, which nostalgically construct the collective cultural memory about the foundations of the United States and the identity of the prototypical American subject. In California, the interpellative function of mission mythology is particularly pronounced. Its rhetorical force is not limited to a chapter in a history textbook or the occasional street named after a priest or an

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<sup>166</sup> For example, a natural history museum may not be as ideologically charged as, say, a Confederate museum somewhere in the American south

explorer. It is also a visual rhetoric that has literally transformed the Californian landscape in renovated Spanish Missions attracting tourism and their inspired “Mission décor” that adorns everything “from restaurants to homes, apartment buildings, animal shelters, grocery stores, and post offices.”<sup>167</sup> To say that Californians are interpellated into the rhetoric of mission mythology “that glorifies the era and glosses over both Spanish and Mexican exploitation of Indians, as well as American enslavement of those same Indians during American rule”<sup>168</sup> would be a gross understatement. Museums that have been constructed out of the Spanish Missions are more than mere tourist attractions or sources of architectural inspiration. They appropriate the rhetorical deviousness of nostalgic cultural memory to erase the history of colonization and genocide while simultaneously by hiding the ongoing violence against indigenous folks, literally, *in plain sight*.

As human beings are want to do, they recollect and try to make sense out of a multiplicity of past experiences through the use of language, symbols, and discourses that they have learned to represent them. In the process of being interpellated by the various rhetorics that compose the dominant symbolic order, we find ourselves desiring to make sense out of the symbolic order itself. This is the work of ideology as it, among other things, narrates the collective cultural memory about the events, objects, symbols, etc. that existed long before any of us were born. Often uncritically and, in many ways, unconsciously we come to accept a master narrative by means of our immersion in the dominant rhetorics circulating in our upbringing and throughout or daily lives. These rhetorics are made manifest in stories, schooling, politics, museums, popular culture, etc. However, one specific, and unique, rhetorical modality that is visited upon every fourth grade student in the California public school system, is the target of Deborah Miranda’s

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<sup>167</sup> *Bad Indians*, pg. xvii

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*

chapter, “The End of the World: Missionization,” in her book titled, *Bad Indians*. Her use of the “Mission Project” form, as an act of *disidentifying* with the interpellative function of mission mythology it yields, will be the subject of this chapter’s rhetorical analysis. I will begin with a brief description of California’s fourth grade “Mission Project.” Following that I will elaborate on the theory of disidentification produced by Jose Esteban Muñoz and how it has been appropriated by Native scholars to serve the decolonial agenda. Finally, I will explore a couple of the ways Miranda’s own “Mission Project” performs an act disidentification and its communicative significance as a critical framework for rhetorical criticism.

### **California’s Fourth Grade “Mission Project”**

Part of California’s history curriculum, the [Mission Unit] is entrenched in the educational system and impossible to avoid, a powerfully authoritative indoctrination in Mission Mythology to which fourth graders have little if any resistance. [...] the Mission United is all to often a lesson in imperialism, racism, and Manifest Destiny rather than actually educational or a jumping off point for critical thinking. *Can you imagine teaching about slavery in the South while simultaneously requiring each child to lovingly construct a plantation model, complete with happy darkies in the fields, white masters, overseers with whips, and human auctions? Or asking fourth graders to study the Holocaust by carefully designing detailed concentration camps, complete with gas chambers, heroic Nazi guards, crematoriums?*<sup>169</sup>

It is one thing to try and minimize the history of colonization and indigenous genocide by confining its documentation to a paragraph or two (maybe a section, if you’re lucky) in a history

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid (emphasis added)

text book but standardizing its glorification with a designated school project required for students when they are at an impressionable age and who are steeped in a culture that, as a rule, conveniently forgets such violence reaches a whole different degree of offensiveness. As should be the case in any educational curriculum, the Mission Project is part of a way to introduce students to a historical understanding of the land upon which the state in which they reside has been founded. As tools for politicizing the relationship one has to the land, its inhabitants, and the institutions that govern over it, projects like this *could* serve as an avenue for developing critical perspectives about history, politics, education, religion, economics, etc. This potentiality, however, has to be actively cultivated by those in charge of developing and administering the curriculum. The California “Mission Project,” unfortunately, demonstrates how even one of the most progressive states remains culturally embedded some of the most reactionary values.

The Mission Project places emphasis in the hands-on experience of visiting one or more of the 21 Spanish Missions littering the California landscape and constructing a diorama to be displayed alongside some version of a visual report relating to their history. Constructing a diorama will certainly help students develop spatial reasoning and the process of translating research conducted on a field trip into a visual display for observers will offer students a chance to learn how to organize information for effective communication, but what does it do to develop their critical faculties for understanding colonization and the ongoing genocide of California’s indigenous tribes? According to Zevi Gutfreund:

The emphasis on diorama and field trips teaches children a great deal about the missions’ physical form but very little about what happened inside. The pastoral appearance of the renovated missions, as well as representations in dioramas and children’s books, has left generations of California children with the impression that the missions were idyllic sanctuaries for the Catholic padres and Indians who



lived there. In fact, this idealized image of a Spanish fantasy past was a conscious creation by Anglos—an image that southern Californians have continually developed and reshaped since the first bucolic mission paintings by William Keith and Edward Deakin in the 1870s and the popular novel *Ramona* by Helen Hunt Jackson in 1884<sup>170</sup>

The restored missions are certainly beautiful and one need only look at photographs to imagine the sublime sense of serenity these idyllic pastoral spaces might offer a weekend escape from crowded life in a city. In fact, given the absolute transformation of these spaces from their function as “massive conversion factories”<sup>171</sup> it isn’t entirely difficult to understand how a fourth grade student would leave a field trip to one of the Missions with a sense of awe and admiration. Then again, it is much easier to appreciate the architectural beauty when your task is to make a diorama out of sugar cubes rather than being forced into the labor that produced the adobe bricks that would become a sort of genocidal aesthetic erasing any traces of indigenous habitation. You know, like Californian Indians had to do.

The Missions themselves and the Mission Projects glorifying them are, in an uncanny way, a demonstration of the psychological work at play in what Marx called *commodity fetishism*. As Gutfreund hints toward, you learn a lot about the form but you learn very little about the process. Commodity fetishism is the idea that when one gazes upon a commodity they are so consumed with the purpose it will serve them (say, remedying hunger, altering appearance, increasing efficiency, etc.) that they fail to comprehend the process that went into producing said commodity. When folks visit the Missions—especially impressionable fourth grade students—it isn’t too difficult to get swept up in the aesthetics and neglect the processes

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<sup>170</sup> *Standing up to Sugar Cubes*, pg. 163

<sup>171</sup> *Bad Indians*, pg. 16

that produced them and the purposes they served: “80% of California Indians dead in a sixty-year period”<sup>172</sup> from forced labor, violent suppression of resistance, disease, murder, starvation, malnutrition, suicide, etc. Aside from the mystification of these renovated death camps, the Mission Project has help facilitate new lines of revenue for both the public and private sectors. Since students are required to visit a one of the Missions for their project they will incur any required fees to visit and inevitably encounter a well-stocked gift shop. Third-party vendors also have found a niche market where they sell kits with instructions and materials for building dioramas and piecing together a visual report. Whereas the Missions once served to profit to Spanish crown and the Catholic Church, it seems fitting that they be repurposed to profit the colonizer of today (i.e. private business and the state of California)!

On the off chance that students do acknowledge the violence beneath the architectural and narrative veneer, it is often represented as an artifact of the past rather than an ongoing feature of the genocidal present. Submerged in narratives that focus entirely on victimization (what about those who resisted or the ways they held onto pieces of their culture even against the odds?) is the idea that California Indians have, at best, integrated into the “melting pot” of American culture or, at worst, completely disappeared. “Generations of Californians have grown up steeped in a culture and educational system that trains them to think of Indians as passive, dumb, and disappeared.”<sup>173</sup> However, as Miranda’s book attests, this violence is not merely an artifact of the past and California Indians have not disappeared.

That’s why it’s time for the Mission Fantasy Fairy Tale to end. This story has done more damage to California Indians than any conquistador, any priest, any

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, pg. xviii

*soldado de cuera* (leather-jacket soldier), any smallpox, measles, or influenza virus. This story has not just killed us, it has taught us how to kill ourselves and kill each other with alcohol, domestic violence, horizontal racism, internalized hatred. This story is a kind of evil, a kind of witchery. We have to put an end to it now.<sup>174</sup>

## Disidentifying with Colonial Fantasies

Whereas Craig Womack has made a strong case for separatism as a rhetorical strategy for rendering speakable the intersections of queerness and indigeneity in order to re(imagine) community and politicize a contemporary notion of Creek nationalism, he certainly does not dismiss the need to explore and engage a multiplicity of strategies aimed at decolonization. Remarking in the very first pages of his prescient book, *Red on Red*, he acknowledges that his theory of literary separatism is “merely a point on the spectrum, not the spectrum itself.”<sup>175</sup> Jose Esteban Muñoz, however, is skeptical of the political efficacy of such strategies as they risk failing from the outset (and, perhaps, even reinforcing the dominant order) due to lack of contact and contestation with dominant culture. He remarks, “People of color, queers of color, white queers, and other minorities occasionally and understandably long for separatist enclaves outside of the dominant culture. Such enclaves, however, are often politically disadvantageous when one stops to consider the ways in which the social script depends on minority factionalism and isolationism to maintain the status of the dominant order.”<sup>176</sup> If we understand ideology as “the

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid, pg. xix

<sup>175</sup> *Red on Red*, pg. 2

<sup>176</sup> *Disidentifications*, pg. 14

imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,”<sup>177</sup> then it is of legitimate concern to suggest that literary separatism, while useful for transforming this relationship within the Creek community, may be less effective a decolonizing the Euro-American literary canon and, by extension, the settler state itself. Whereas assimilation reinforces the dominant ideology and separatism risks failure to disrupt it, Muñoz articulates a third possibility for “dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”<sup>178</sup>

In his groundbreaking work, *Aberrations in Black: Towards A Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson suggests that disidentification “decodes cultural fields not from a position outside those fields, but from within them, as those fields account for the queer of color subject’s historicity.”<sup>179</sup> While it would be entirely wrong to assume that separatism, especially as Womack identifies it, seeks to recover or articulate a “pure” queer, indigenous, or queer of color subject unencumbered by colonization, Ferguson is right to suggest that the cultural fields that constitute the various social formations of the settler state are an inevitable part of the subject’s psychical makeup. Separatism, in its more extreme invocations, may acknowledge this historicity but, nevertheless, believe that it can be severed in its entirety which, as Muñoz suggests, atrophies the imaginative horizon for a number of alternative political strategies. According to Andrea Smith, “Native communities are frequently called on to reject the modern trappings of colonial society to build indigenous “decolonized societies.” [...] Calls for political and cultural purity then contribute to a political vanguardism in which the indigenous cultural elite govern

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid, pg. 11

<sup>178</sup> Ibid

<sup>179</sup> *Aberrations in Black*, pg. 4

improperly decolonized subjects.”<sup>180</sup> In this sense “decolonial projects can quickly become very colonial in their implementation.”<sup>181</sup>

Disidentification, however, is not without its own complications. Among the most pronounced risks is queer of color critique’s overdetermination of degree to which the concept of hybridity—meaning the degree to which a subject navigates multiple intersections of identity spanning multiple races or cultures—“contributes to the erasure of the specificity of Native claims to land and to the particular relationships Native people and Native nations have with Euro-American colonial governments.”<sup>182</sup> Focusing on the hybridity as a “minoritarian” subject position may also unwittingly prioritize a politics that dismisses the aims of separatism for the political expediency of gaining recognition in the short term. However, “Native struggle is not necessary centered on trying simply to carve out a minority space within the settler state; it may try to dismantle the settler state completely.”<sup>183</sup> Therefore, it is useful to return to Womack’s understanding of where the project of literary separatism fits into the decolonial agenda. It is a point on the spectrum, not the spectrum itself. Disidentification, too, should be understood as another point on that spectrum as a useful strategy contributing to the literal and rhetorical sovereignty of indigenous folks. Each strategy comes with its own risks but where one leaves off the other picks up the slack. “Disidentification forces us to admit that we cannot organize from a space of political purity, that we have been inevitably marked by colonialism.”<sup>184</sup> Separatism, however, teaches sovereignty over the imagination, demonstrating the

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<sup>180</sup> *Queer Theory and Native Studies*, pg. 56

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>182</sup> *Doubleweaving*, pg. 76

<sup>183</sup> *Queer Theory and Native Studies*, pg. 57

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 58

distinctiveness of indigenous critiques and nationalisms. Qwo-Li Driskill's elaboration regarding the usefulness of disidentification for realizing the goals of the separatists when s/he remarks:

Native people must *disidentify* with the very critiques that claim to be decolonial and counterhegemonic interventions for queer people of color in order to make them viable for our communities. Through disidentification, other critiques emerge that centralize Native peoples, nations, identities, land bases, and survival tactics, which can be called Two-Spirit critique. Two-Spirit critiques emerge from this disidentification to create theories in which Two-Spirit people and decolonization are centralized. These critiques not only serve to disidentify with queer of color and queer diasporic critique; they also create more robust and effective interventions in systems of oppression from which both Native studies and queer studies can benefit. By pulling together splints from both disciplines, we can doubleweave Two-Spirit critiques that challenge and sharpen our scholarship and activism<sup>185</sup>

I would like to suggest that this is precisely what Deborah Miranda accomplishes in *Bad Indians*. She uses the form of the Mission Project—a framework for epistemic colonization of Californian youth—to disidentify with the traditional way these projects are conducted. By “decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy.”<sup>186</sup> The representational hierarchy of this colonial imaginary is used against itself in order to both expose the ideological function of such rhetorics while shedding light upon the ongoing appropriation of the Missions themselves to erase queerness and indigeneity from the Californian landscape.

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<sup>185</sup> *Doubleweaving*, pg. 79

<sup>186</sup> *Disidentifications*, pg. 25

## Mission (De)Mythologization

### *Adobe Bricks*

Given the heightened focus on architecture in students' mission projects, Miranda leads with her own take on the "recipe" for building a mission. "Gather your Indians," she declares, "Tell them to dig a big round basin in the ground, soak it well with water, throw everything in."<sup>187</sup> Describing the process through which the adobe bricks were forged must involve, for Miranda, repetitive references to the forced labor as a crucial "ingredient" of their making. This rhetorical maneuver accomplishes a couple of subtle but notable performances of disidentification. Unlike Mission Mythology (which often solely attributes credit for these architectural feats to the ingenuity of Europeans) Miranda claims the work that has been, in a sense, cured every adobe brick for California Indians. The "recipe" framework allows a unique type of "ignorant observer" perspective that doesn't so much make value judgments about the process as it, instead, informs the reader, in sort of detached way, what resources one would need to create a mission like the ones scattered across the California landscape. The very last line of the section on adobe bricks most powerfully illustrates how the "recipe" perspective manipulates the form of the Mission Project to politicize the violence baked into every brick. She remarks, "All in all, adobe is cheap—the ingredients free for the taking—but you will certainly go through a lot of Indians."<sup>188</sup> Without outright dismissing the fetishistic burial of forced labor beneath the veneer of a sublime architectural awe—the primary means for depoliticizing the process of

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<sup>187</sup> *Bad Indians*, pg. 7

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 8

building missions—Miranda utilizes it to expose the repressed underside of this ideological fantasy.

### *Bells*

“The voice of the bell is the voice of the padres.”<sup>189</sup> Bells, an unavoidable feature of the California missions, are not framed by Miranda in relation to the overall architectural scheme so much as they are described as a sort of invasive force disturbing the fabric of Native life. “Shaped by hands of unseen beings,” “Made in their own lands,” “Soldiers brought them from the ships.”<sup>190</sup> In this rhetorical move, Miranda disidentifies with the awestruck deference given to the aesthetic the bells add to the missions and, instead, names them as a colonizing “voice” akin to the “voice” of the padres.

Bells at dawn, keening. Bells order us to prayer; the *alcaldes* stand over us with cudgels and long canes, invoke silence. Bells direct us to breakfast, gruel of *atole* quickly swallowed. Bells tell us to scatter to our work, we women to laundry and looms, grinding corn or acorns or wheat, the gardens, harvesting, storing, preparing, cooking; men to the fields to plow, plant, slaughter cattle, adobe, plaster, tile, paint our designs inside the church. [...] Bells for midday meal. *Atole* again. Bells return us to our labors, bells demand prayers or instruction in prayer, bells determine evening meal, maybe *posole* with meat. Bells give us permission to sleep.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid, pgs. 9-10

<sup>190</sup> Ibid, pgs. 8-9

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, pg. 9



The shift in perspective from the detached recipe for adobe to describing the colonizing “voice” of the bells from the position of a California Indian subject to their demand lends a sense of agency over storytelling often not afforded to them in prototypical mission projects. Additionally, any other perspective would seemingly fail to capture the psychological impact these features of the missions had on indigenous life. I’d also venture to suggest that Miranda names the bells, as well as the padres, as an anti-queer feature of the colonized California landscape. Disciplining indigenous populations into a daily routine marked by segments of time determined by bell tolls, the seeds of destruction aimed at the queerness of indigenous kinship networks and collective land tenure are sown.

### *Discipline*

Tracing the genealogy of mission violence from the voice of the bells to the disciplining practices of the padres, the next section of her project catalogues the horrifying punishments for violating the political, cultural, social and/or religious codes of Spanish “civilization.” “Due to their animal-like natures, California Indians often made mistakes or misbehaved even when they had been told the rules.”<sup>192</sup> “Like good fathers everywhere, the padres believe in firm discipline and consequences.”<sup>193</sup> Flogging, the cat-o’-nine tails, corma and cudgel were among the most widely used implements used “civilize” their “animal-like natures.” “Records left behind tell us how the Indians lied, stole, cheated on their spouses, killed their own babies, ran away from the missions, tried to avoid their work, practices pagan witchcraft, gambled, or snuck off to gather or hunt extra food for their families without getting permission from the padres first.” This kind of

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid, pg 10

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, pg. 11

ethnographic perspective (i.e. “records show”) produces yet another rhetorical performance of disidentification as it, in a way, mocks the ignorance with which ethnography has historically constructed indigenous identities and communities. This perspective is likened to that of the fourth grade students who routinely construct these projects when she remarks:

Those must have been very bad Indians, as the padres did not want to injure the Indians but teach them to behave. It is a common falsehood that any Indian was ever beaten to death by a padre.<sup>194</sup>

Without stepping outside the ethnographic frame in order to criticize it, Miranda disidentifies with it by manipulating the form. One could imagine a study or a mission project documenting these disciplinary tactics as reserved for transgression of the order imposed by civil society but such a tactic depoliticizes the gratuitous violence employed as a vehicle for colonization. In other words, it is far more idyllic to imagine such violence in service of imposing the foundations of law and order rather than wrought from a racialized sense of superiority and an anti-queer socio-symbolic imaginary.

### *Genealogy of Violence*

The very end of the project connects the historical violence of colonization to the contemporary livelihoods of many remaining California Indians. The “Genealogy of Violence” that Miranda constructs weaves together a story from her childhood with interjections taken from the missions themselves. She tells the story of her little brother crying after having lost a tooth.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid, pg. 13

As her father demands that he stop crying he begins to mock his child asking if he is a baby since “only babies cry!” The mission writings that interject at various moments in the story document a view on child rearing that demonstrates ones love for a child requires the “courage to [violently] punish their children’s wrongdoings and knavery.”<sup>195</sup> One of these interjections from Mission San Miguel documents the “extravagant love” for their children demonstrated by the California Indians as a fault to be corrected. It reads, “Toward their children they show an extravagant love whom they do not chastise. Nor have they ever chastised them but allow them to do whatever they please. We know now, however, that some are beginning to chastise and educate them due to the instructions they are receiving.”<sup>196</sup> Miranda then picks up on her own story with her father asking little Al (her brother), “You want something to cry about? You want the belt?”<sup>197</sup> Having been raised in a culture demanding submission to the specificities of Euro-American masculinity, “tears break every rule my father ever learned about surviving in this world.”<sup>198</sup> It demonstrates the ongoing legacy of colonial violence in the interpersonal violence of the home. The statement from Mission San Antonio reading “Some parents who are a little better instructed punish their children as they deserve” is given new meaning upon Miranda’s reflection that:

Flogging. Whipping. Belt. Whatever you call it, this beating, this punishment, is as much a part of our inheritance, our legacy, our culture, as any bowl of acorn mush, any wild salmon fillet, *pilillis* fried and dipped in cinnamon and sugar, cactus fruit in a basket. More than anything else we brought with us out of the

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid, pg. 34

<sup>196</sup> Ibid

<sup>197</sup> Ibid

<sup>198</sup> Ibid

missions, we carry the violence we were given along with baptism, confession, last rites. More than our black hair, brown eyes, various hues of brown skin flecked with black beauty marks, our short stubby fingers, our wide feet and palms, our sweet voices and tendency to sing, to dance to make music and tell stories. In this trailer in the woods, just outside a small town called Kent in Washington State, hundreds of miles from California, where the three of us were each born, my father's arm rises and falls in an old, savage rhythm learned from strangers who came with whips and attack dogs, taught us how to raise our children.<sup>199</sup>

It is nothing new to hear someone remark about being able to trace their heritage back to the first Europeans to colonize the Americas. The romanticization of familial lineage as a means of depoliticizing the violence of colonization is not lost in these Mission Projects. In their effort to earn high marks, some students will include genealogies in their projects to trace their relationship to earlier settlers. In her disidentification with this rhetorical obfuscation, Miranda offers a genealogy of violence rather than lineage to expose how colonization is not an artifact of the past but a key feature in the present.

Demonstrating an indigenous appropriation of disidentification as a rhetorical performance for decolonizing psychic space, Miranda powerfully manipulates the form of a key feature in the ideological interpellation of California public school students. While the reference to queerness are far less pronounced in this section than they have been in the previous two chapters it is important to note that their subtlety is part and parcel of the rhetorical strategy. Anti-queer violence is present in each aspect of her Mission Project as she describes the processes by which political and religious order is established in order to erase tribal culture, governance, and livelihoods. Whether through labor, the toll of a bell, punishment, or child

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, pg. 35

rearing techniques, the legacy of this racialized and anti-queer socio-symbolic imaginary continues to this day and is nostalgically romanticized in the renovated mission museums, the mission décor, the fourth grade projects, and in the lives of surviving California Indians constantly forced to navigate it.

## **Chapter 5 - Concluding Remarks: Decolonizing Disciplinary Horizons**

My hope is that these three chapters exploring the rhetorical work of queer indigenous rhetorics will continue to expand the boundaries of the critical turn in Communication Studies. As mentioned in the introduction, the saliency of queer critique has too often waxed and waned, advancing in the leaps and bounds of a few scattered special volumes, rather than maintaining a core presence in the discipline. Despite the recently renewed focus on queer critique and the introduction of the “new” queer studies (queer of color analysis, trans\* critique, queer diasporic studies, etc.), the convergence of queer theory and native studies has, at best, remained on the periphery; Two-Spirit criticism receiving only lip service as a fleeting example of trans\* critique rather than a distinct theoretical platform for conducting rhetorical criticism or engaging intercultural communication. The critical turn in Communication Studies and Rhetorical Criticism gestured the discipline in the right direction but it shouldn’t be left at that. It is time to pull the discipline towards engaging communicative practice from queer and decolonial perspectives forged in the emergent field of Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Studies.

This paper demonstrates three examples of queer indigenous/Two-Spirit rhetorical performances, and this analysis points to how they could be paradigmatic examples of ways to theorize and perform Queer Ethnic and Indigenous Rhetorical Criticism. Daniel Heath Justice exemplifies how rhetorically shifting the site of queer enunciation can utilize the construction of fantasy spaces to not only decolonize the genre of fantasy fiction but also politicize the anti-queer abjection of indigeneity at work in Cherokee removal. Craig Womack, on the other hand, demonstrates the power of a separatist rhetorical mode for not only recovering and preserving

Creek traditionalism but to engage the dynamic forces shaping contemporary Creek identity and nationalism through efforts to decolonize the canon, collective consciousness, and the land. Finally, Deborah Miranda masterfully illustrates the rhetorical performance of disidentification when taken up for the purposes of queer indigenous critique by using the form of California's fourth grade "Mission Project" to expose the racialized and anti-queer ideological underside that is repressed beneath its nostalgic mythologization.

The demands of rhetorical sovereignty are clear: it demands the dismissal of a politics of recognition that forces assimilation to the racialized and heteronormative logics of the US nation-state and, instead, gestures toward recognition on terms established in the decolonial agendas of Native nations. I've maintained throughout this paper that the concept of "bearing inner witness" is a useful way make sense of what is at stake in these rhetorics in terms of the affective transformations they elicit. As a theoretical concept it offers rhetorical scholars, activists, and artists a way of understanding how these rhetorical modalities attempt to transform the visceral and affective relationship that folks—indigenous and settler—maintain to the land, the institutions that govern over it, and the values that circulate in the dominant socio-symbolic order. Bearing inner witness to the way psychic space is (re)constructed through decolonizing rhetorical acts of sovereignty has the power to lower the defense mechanisms of settler subjects by shifting the site of enunciation to a fantasy space; to (re) imagine tribe specific communities through literary separatism; and, to politicize the processes of ideological interpellation visited on Native and non-Native folks in settler institutions like the public school system.

In order to adequately conclude this project there are two final issues that should encourage reflection and direct future developments of the discipline. First, I will outline the broader implications of queer ethnic and indigenous criticisms as they relate to the state of the

field in rhetorical theory, intercultural communication, and communication pedagogy. Second, I will offer preliminary remarks regarding possibilities for future research. In summarizing the relationship between these two concluding remarks I hope to end with a more optimistic tone than that with which I started this paper. When you are passionate about a subject it is much easier to discern the various ways that it has been rejected or altogether overlooked. However, I hope that by outlining the implications of this study on the discipline and focusing on areas for future research that I may show that a great many possibilities lie in wait to transform our scholarship and translate it into effective pedagogical practice.

### ***Implications for Current Scholarship***

As outlined in the first chapter, the discussions, dialogues, and debates happening within the exchange of ideas between queer theory and native studies have broad implications for the uptake of queer issues in communication and the critical turn that has largely made it possible. Rather than rehash what has already been articulated I would like to broaden the discussion beyond implications tailored to queer communication studies as a sub-discipline and explore what it means to queer and indigenize communication itself. Despite the best efforts of logicians, linguists, and positivists to derive a language and grammar with mathematics-like precision in terms of its one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified, the phenomena of communication has consistently resisted reduction to such a simplified model. This is why the affective dimension of communication is becoming ever more important in the field. The difficulty in sublimating the raw affective energy of feelings, emotions, and drives into perfectly intelligible discourses is expressed in the aesthetic creations of those subject to the violence of



racism, queerphobia, abelism, colonialism, sexism, classism, etc. These works call into question the very idea that communicability is grounded in—or could ever be subject to—neutrality, transparency, and/or rationality.

How does one communicate the erotic experience of a body marked by and queered within the socio-symbolic economy of settler colonialism and its attendant hetero-patriarchal imaginary? Is the analytic practice of merely recovering and correcting the historical record from the most violent to most mundane details enough to heal the historical trauma passed down through ancestral memory, the physical and psychical wounds manifesting themselves upon the bodies of contemporary indigenous folks, or find respite in the return of land and practices of restorative justice? Is there a rational/analytic model for communicating the experience of being subjected to such violence in a way that would even begin to low the defense mechanisms of settler subjects and affect the way they understand the foundations of the U.S. nation-state, the values structuring civil society, the ongoing genocide of indigenous folks, or the ethical responsibility to disarticulate the symbolic and material ties they maintain to settler society? These questions have implications that span far beyond the boundaries of any niche within the discipline or department within the academy itself. The need to critically examine the taken for granted assumptions of something as fundamental as communication and as far-reaching as the purpose for which we participate in the academy as students, teachers, and researchers is made particularly acute by these questions. The main implication of this study is that it challenges the very basic premises of communicability in that these texts utilize a series of rhetorical modalities that target the affective registers of their readers to challenge the way one *feels* about settler colonialism and the way they attempt to render those feelings *intelligible*.

Undoubtedly there is an affective and erotic dimension to subjectivity that cannot be reduced to mere rational analysis. These aspects have enormous bearing on how one experiences the subject position into which they are born and the process of subjectification where one forges a sense of agency (however limited it may be) within the symbolic order. How folks come to conceptualize and recognize something as fundamental as their sense of self is a product of communication. If the academic study of communication does not take seriously the process of interpellation as it unevenly distributes communicative agency within the symbolic order of settler colonialism it will remain an unwitting partner in the ongoing violence exacted upon the bodies and psyches of indigenous folks. At stake is more than merely broadening disciplinary horizons or expanding the research agenda of scholars in the field, queer ethnic and indigenous critiques fundamentally challenge the ethical frameworks governing the impact those of us who consider ourselves activists and scholars wish to have in the academy and society writ large.

### ***Sharpening the Research Agenda***

In the introduction to this paper I outlined in a brief genealogy of the relationship between queer theory and communication studies the advances and shortcomings of queer intercultural communication and rhetorical criticism. In that section I also identified the implications of the lack of attention being paid to queer ethnic and indigenous criticism in the way rhetorical performances spanning from manifest destiny to modern conceptions of American identity in immigration debates and the war on terror are rooted in the anti-queer socio-symbolic order of settler colonialism. This paper has sought to offer insight into the way three distinct rhetorical performances to demonstrate the applicability queer ethnic and indigenous critique to

the study of rhetorical criticism and intercultural communication. Additionally, the opening section of this chapter explored the way this critical edifice can contribute to the emergent study of affect as it relates to communicative performances. In this section I would like to identify an additional area in which future research can (and should) be conducted with regard to queer ethnic and indigenous rhetorics: psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalytic rhetorical theory is not an entirely new addition to the discipline but, with the works of Josh Gun and Christian Lundberg<sup>200</sup>, has gained contemporary visibility in the field. Although their efforts certainly help to provide a solid foundation for understanding the relevance of psychoanalytic theory to rhetorical performances, advances in psychoanalytic theory such as those offered by Kelly Oliver in her attempt to produce a psychoanalytic social theory of oppression<sup>201</sup> have not found their way into the discipline. This is an important development that has taken place outside the field of communication and rhetorical criticism with significance akin to the transformation of queer theory and native studies by means of criticisms emerging from queer ethnic and indigenous studies. I have sought to demonstrate how one significant aspect of a psychoanalytic social theory of oppression—bearing inner witness to the transformation of psychic space—can be useful for understanding the communicative aspects of settler colonialism. Undoubtedly the study of affect and emotion as it relates to rhetorical performances of epistemic, ontological, and psychical colonization must confront concepts forged by contemporary theorists in the field of psychoanalysis. Given the high degree to which the uptake of psychoanalysis is having in the field of communication, it comprises a fruitful space to explore its intersections and implications with queer ethnic and indigenous critique.

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<sup>200</sup> For a more thorough genealogy of psychoanalytic theory in the field of rhetoric check out *Lacan in Public* by Christian Lundberg

<sup>201</sup> *The Colonization of Psychic Space*

These rhetorical modalities and the specificities of queer ethnic and indigenous/Two-Spirit critique offer the discipline far more than fodder for broadening the research agenda and developing novel theories for understanding contemporary social formations. They offer pedagogical frameworks for teaching ethical, epistemological, ontological, and psychical concepts that found and challenge the discipline itself. The history of colonization and the ongoing legacy of indigenous genocide play a part in each of our lives. Early in life when many of us are taught to represent and symbolize the world through a colonial language we are, by extension, interpellated into a socio-symbolic order founded upon anti-queer colonial abjection, as well as our retroactive reconstitution of our relationship to it via identity, institutions, labor, etc. As such, it is important to recognize that—as educators, students, researchers, activists, etc.—that we have an ethical responsibility to engage the epistemic and ontological issues at stake in the communicative performances sustaining settler colonialism.

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