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Activism, Community and Cultural Heritage: “Communitism” in Creek Literature

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**Activism, Community
and Cultural Heritage:
“Communitism” in Creek Literature**



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Tereza Szeghi, Ph.D.

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Abstract

"Communitism" refers to literature that encourages activism by celebrating and promoting American Indian communities. This thesis investigates how the literary works, *The Fus Fixico Letters* (1902 – 1908) and *Drowning in Fire* (2004), are communitist by supporting specific political and social changes in Creek communities. Through *The Fus Fixico Letters* Alexander Posey promoted his progressive political convictions, including that Creeks should embrace land allotment and endorse the creation a separate state for American Indians. *Drowning in Fire*, by Craig Womack, takes place throughout 1904 – 1993 and relates traditional Creek stories and practices to modern life. The novel delves into issues such as homophobia, racism, and the negative repercussions of land allotment. These literary works' use of communitism elucidates how the writers responded to their particular political and social challenges by addressing different specific communities within their tribe, while still supporting the survival and continuance of their Creek culture in general.

Dedication or Acknowledgements

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Introduction: Communitism in Creek Literature

We came pouring out of the backbone of this continent like ants. We saw for the first time a great ball of fire rising out of the earth in the east. We were astounded at the phenomena, but we had no fear of it. We held council and made a decision to go and find the place that it lived. All the world was new to us and before us lay a great plain with much grass. We discussed how we should travel in a straight line and one of the prophets said: "Let the seed arrow show us the way, we will shoot it as far as we can and if we find it standing straight up, we will continue to do this until we find the home of the ball of fire." (Oliver 3)

Thus Louis Littlecoon Oliver's (Creek)ⁱ recounting of the Creekⁱⁱ creation story begins by describing the early people on a journey to find the "ball of fire." Craig Womack (Creek-Cherokee) interprets this version of the traditional story as a representation of a "national search for knowledge" and celebration of Creek intellectualism (*Red on Red* 187). However, the invocation of the Creek people travelling from one place to another also alludes to a different, more painful aspect of their history: forced relocation during the late 19th century under Andrew Jackson and the modern-day experience of Creeks who must regularly move between their homes in Oklahoma and work in California. Womack states, "We are still living out the migration story, reaching the coast, turning back. The Creek migration story has served us well in explaining our history" (*Red on Red* 191). Through the recognition of Creek tradition and intellectualism as well remembrance of the significance of remembering Creek creation in light of

historical and current political situations, Oliver's retelling of the Creek creation story can be understood as what Jace Weaver (Cherokee) describes in *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* as "communitist": "Communitism is, as the word itself implies, communal. It is part of a shared quest for belonging, a search for community. It is the valorization of Native community and values and a commitment to them that may be, in part, politically unconscious" (Weaver 45). Oliver's version of the Creek creation story is communitist by connecting traditional Creek stories with Creek historical and political situations as well as with a search for tribal knowledge and consciousness.

In this thesis, I will examine how Weaver's communitism functions in the Creek texts *The Fus Fixico Letters* by Alexander Posey and *Drowning in Fire* by Craig Womack. Communitism is a portmanteau word formed by the combination of "community" and "activism"; works that are communitist empower Native communities by encouraging activism (Weaver xiii). Both texts encourage greater agency and self-determination of Creek communities as well as political and social activism, but achieve these results by promoting different policies and through different forms of literature. *The Fus Fixico Letters* by Alexander Posey are a series of 72 fictional letters written in Creek-English dialect and published in the *Indian Journal* in Eufaula between 1902 and 1908. Fus Fixico, the persona Posey assumes, is a full-blood Creek who writes about the conversations he overhears among his American Indian friends as they discuss matters of political and cultural importance, especially Native land reform and the Dawes Act. The letters were written at a time of political and social transformation for the Creek Nation, which included the dissolution of the Creek government as well as the beginning of land

allotment (Littlefield and Hunter 11). As Womack, a prominent Posey scholar, writes, “Posey had a much more important set of concerns than his personal marginalization and angst over identity—he and his people faced the imminent dissolution of tribal government under the very real threat of Oklahoma statehood” (*Red on Red*, 148). Posey directs his letters to his local community, evidenced by his refusal to publish his letters in other newspapers because he believed they would not understand the local humor, and his frequent references to specific local sites (Littlefield and Hunter 40-42). The writings are specifically intended for members of the Creek community at Eufaula who are grappling with the cultural and political changes that would accompany Oklahoma statehood. He advocates for the survival for the Creek nation through separate statehood as well as eventual encouragement of the traditionalist Creek’s plans to immigrate to Mexico, as he feared they would not be able to survive the great cultural changes the Creek nation would be sure to undergo in their near future.

Drowning in Fire by Craig Womack was published in 2001. The book follows Josh Henneha, a modern-day member of the Creek Nation living in Indian country in Oklahoma. He struggles with accepting his sexual identity and discovering more about his tribal history. Through dreams and visions, he is able to experience first-hand his people’s histories, ceremonies, and rituals, he learns to ground his identity within his tribal community. Womack chooses to focus on often neglected or overlooked in Native communities and literature: sexually abused women, queer individuals, and black Creeks. *Drowning in Fire* is the first novel by an American Indian author about the experiences of openly gay/queer American Indian men (S.Teuton 224). By writing about the queer community, Womack brings the openly queer American Indian community to the

forefront and becomes an active part of creating that community. The political changes Womack advocates for are greater acceptance and awareness of the unique challenges faced by disenfranchised individuals within American Indian communities, including gay/queer, black, and sexually abused individuals.

Significance of Community

American Indian communities are often understood as a core defining feature for the identities of the constituent members. Weaver writes, “Natives define their identity in terms of community and relate to ultimate reality through that community” (Weaver 32). However, it is also important and necessary to distinguish between different Native communities in order to avoid the risk of essentializing American Indians:

Community is a primary value, but today we exist in many different kinds of community—reservation, rural, urban, tribal, pan-Indian, traditional, Christian. Many move back and forth between a variety of these communities. Our different locations, physical, mental, and spiritual, will inevitably lead to different conceptions of what survival, liberation, and communitism require. (Weaver 45)

The Creek communities addressed in the *Fus Fixico Letters* and *Drowning in Fire* are very different, and therefore embody different communitist visions. Posey writes for his community at Eufaula, and the characters represented in the letters are full-blood, conservative Creeks. His main purpose is to convince his local Creek community to support progressive values. His writing is geared specifically for his community at Eufaula, where the letters were published, to the extent that he turned down offers for national syndication. Womack, however, writes specifically about the experiences of

Creek who are queer and/or black, and sexually abused women. The narrative mostly takes place during the 1970s through 1990s, nearly a century after Posey's writing. However, in both instances, by writing about their respective communities and their needs, Posey and Womack encourage self-determination.

Empowerment through Self-Definition

The dominant, privileged (white) society has the power to define and “exoticize” a minority population as a means of exerting power and “Othering” that population.ⁱⁱⁱ However, literature is a means for American Indian communities to reclaim their identity, which has been publicly defined in U.S. mainstream culture by Euro-Americans for centuries. For instance, Weaver explains that “Narrative is a means that colonized people employ to assert their own existence and identity.[...] Communal, identity-producing potential exists in any contemporary Native text” (Weaver 41, 43). The very act of writing from an American Indian perspective is an empowering political and revolutionary act against the dominant power. Weaver further elaborates that communitism within American Indian communities requires reflection on the results of approximately 500 years of colonization in order to recover self-determination. He writes that “to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them” (Weaver xiii). Communitist literature is not only a means for providing American Indians with a voice to comment upon their own lived experiences, but can also function as a conduit for “healing,” or beginning to heal, the scars left by years and years of discrimination, death, and attempted cultural genocide.

Colonization succeeds when the colonized interpellates the ideology of the colonizers' (in this case, Euro-Americans') superiority. Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's comments about language and oppression, although not directly tied to communitism, are useful in interpreting the significance of literature in fighting colonization. Freire writes, "To exist humanly is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*" (Freire, emphasis in the original). This "naming" of the world lends the speaker control over the situation; once a thing is named, it can be addressed. Once American Indians are able to name, to write about, their lived experiences, they can more easily identify and address the obstacles their communities face on a regular basis. Once literature exposes these problems, the community now has a concrete difficulty they can work together to overcome.^{iv} Gloria Bird (Spokane) reflects this sentiment as she writes, "Writing remains more than a catharsis; at its liberating best, it is a political act. Through writing we can undo the damaging stereotypes that are continually perpetuated about Native peoples. We can rewrite our history, and we can mobilize our future" (Bird 30).

Communitism and Activism

In communitist fashion, Womack asserts:

Are tribal literatures merely a salve, or should they engage in active critical political commentary? Should they concern themselves with tribal history and politics? Should they be a means of exploring more radical approaches to sovereignty? Should they seek the return of tribal lands? [...] the answer to such questions is a resounding "yes." (*Red on Red* 149)

Communitist texts do exactly what Womack suggests: seek particular forms of activism to encourage American Indian sovereignty and empowerment. Weaver suggests that communitist literature ought to “reflect on” and “shape” American Indian identity. Therefore, literature must not only describe American Indian communities, but proactively support specific action and/or activism in response to the needs of these communities. Both “reflecting” and “shaping” can be better understood in relation to theory developed by Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) and Freire. Although Deloria and Freire do not specifically interact with the theory of communitism, their own writing and criticism provides useful insights into understanding communitism.

Deloria and Freire explain the need for political activism to be inspired by critical reflection in order to create meaningful and lasting (political and social) change. Deloria states that American Indian activism “won a temporary visibility with the media recognition of their problems. The price of that victory for all of us was the missed opportunity to understand the nature of the deep gulf separating Indian and non-Indian” (Deloria, “Religion and Revolution” 13-14). Deloria is not arguing against activism, but, as Robert Warrior (Osage) comments, instead suggesting that effective political activism must also include “critical reflection and constructive strategy” (Warrior 97). Likewise, Freire writes in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the *praxis: reflection and action* upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, emphasis mine). The two facets of praxis, as defined by Freire, are “reflection” on a certain issue and “action” to resolve the issue or fight for an improved situation. Deloria also discusses the need for “critical reflection and

constructive strategy” for “political activism.” Communitist literature can be understood as a form of praxis, as it should examine the identity and consciousness of its American Indian community as well as promote activism to further empower that community in the social and political spheres. The *Fus Fixico Letters* encourage reflecting on the current political situation while supporting specific praxis, such as embracing land allotment. *Drowning in Fire*, likewise reflects on Creek community; however, it accomplishes this by examining which identities are and are not consistently recognized in Creek communities and literature. By writing one of the only texts by a Native author about openly gay Indian men, Womack’s praxis encourages the widening of Creek identity and tradition to embrace queer individuals.

Furthermore, literary critic Christopher Teuton (Cherokee) stresses the importance of communitism’s allowing for a variety of political ideologies. He writes that “Weaver’s communitism avoids judgements based upon the explicit political ideology of a text, instead expanding his interpretive apparatuses to include a definition of Native literature that is inclusive of multiple diverging viewpoints and voices, both from the past and the present” (C. Teuton 207). Communitist literature need not adhere to some set standard of a political agenda for activism; all voices are welcomed as long as they promote a form of political activism that supports the wholeness and welfare of its respective American Indian community. Posey and Womack do not support the same political positions: for instance, while the *Fus Fixico Letters* support land allotment, *Drowning in Fire* celebrates the conservative Creeks who opposed it. While the *Fus Fixico Letters* focuses on characters who are conservative full-blood Creeks, *Drowning in Fire* describes the experiences of queer and/or black and sexually abused individuals.

Although the texts espouse different political opinions, they both are communitist by encouraging the empowerment of their respective communities.

The Fus Fixico Letters and *Drowning in Fire*

Posey and Womack both employ communist techniques to advocate for change within their communities within their particular political climates; Posey uses his work to guide the Creeks through a time of political and cultural upheaval by seeking to actively influence the political landscape by promoting separate statehood. His literature is communitist in that he develops a uniquely Creek voice located specifically within his community at Eufaula and he advocates for the betterment and promotion of preservation of Creek cultural and political autonomy. Womack's novel, similarly, is communitist because it expands the body of literature written by American Indians to give voices to queer American Indians and focuses on identities that are often overlooked, including black Creeks and sexually abused women. Through moments of sharing stories, celebrating their Creek background, and experiencing Creek history through dreams, characters Womack's novel are able to empower themselves as members of their Creek community.

Although these works examine different Creek communities and endorse different forms of activism, they both texts encourage transformation as necessary for the survival of the Creek Nation, as well as that the Creek community is active and capable of change. Posey accomplishes this through support for the Dawes Commission, while Womack encourages expanding Creek tradition to include queer identities. They both define and redefine what they believe Creek community should be, whether through embracing land allotment or redefining Creek traditional values to be more inclusive. Together, both two

texts together describe Creek community as an on-going process that is shaped and reflected by Creek literature.

Notes

ⁱ I have chosen to, wherever possible and appropriate, note the tribe of each scholar when I first reference them; as Weaver notes, tribal designation has historically been the best form of self-identification for American Indian individuals. Weaver writes, “a Native person’s primary self-identification remains that of his or her own tribe” (Weaver xiii).

ⁱⁱ As this is an oral history that has been passed down through generations, not each version of the story is necessarily the same, though they share common elements, such as the Creek as migratory people.

ⁱⁱⁱ Edward Said explains the exoticization of the “Orient” in his book *Orientalism*: “The relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony, and is quite accurately indicated in the title of K.M. Panikkar’s classic *Asia and Western Dominance*. The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could be*—that is, submitted into being—*made* Oriental” (Said 5). American Indian culture, like “Oriental” culture, was othered because of the hegemony exerted over them by European and Euro-American powers. The colonizers had the power to define, to “submit into being,” what they believed about the other culture.

^{iv} It is important to note that Freire also mentions that “no one can say a true word alone”—implying that this work of renaming the world cannot be done in isolation, but must be done in community. Literature is written for an audience. Also, he states that

“nor can she say [a true word] *for* another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words.” Naming the world must be an act of fighting oppression and not further oppressing or colonizing others through language.

The Fus Fifico Letters: Historical Background

Locating American Indian literature within its respective historical and social context is an integral aspect of interpreting the texts within a communitist framework. Weaver explains: “Only when we relate Native literatures to, and situate them in, Native history and the changes in Native cultures can we begin to understand them” (Weaver 165). Alexander Posey published the Fus Fifico Letters during a period of dramatic change and political uncertainty for the Creek Nation. After a slew of broken treaties, the tribe faced the possibility of forcibly losing their title to a legitimate tribal government, of the allotment of traditionally communal land, and of the encroachment and intrusion on their land by outsiders. Posey sided with the progressive – as opposed to traditionalistⁱ – Creeks and hoped to demonstrate to the Nation that Creek heritage could be maintained even in the light of a changing political and social climatesⁱⁱ. Posey sought what he perceived as a plan that would enable the Creek Nation to survive as a tribe and distinctive people during a politically tumultuous time.

Pre-Fus Fifico: Indian Removal

Although President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act into law in May 1830 – forty-three years before Posey’s birth – it was a significant event that initiated the Creeks’ move to Indian Territory. The Act furthermore functions as a precursor to the U.S. government’s eventual control of American Indian land by power of the Dawes Act and Commission. Through the Indian Removal Act, Jackson gained the authority to negotiate for the federal government’s ownership of tribal ancestral lands in exchange for the tribes’ moving to the land west of the Mississippi River (Carlson and Roberts 486). Jackson described his removal policy to Congress in December 1830: “It

gives me great pleasure to announce to Congress that the benevolent policy of the Government, steadily pursued for nearly thirty years, in relation to the removal of the Indians beyond the white settlements is approaching a happy consummation” (“Indian Removal Act”). The so-called “benevolent policy” certainly did not produce any “happy” results for the American Indians.

The Creeks and the Cherokees resisted moving to new land (at the time, the Creeks lived predominantly in Alabama) and chose not to meet with the president to treat about the matter. Remaining in the land they and their ancestors had inhabited for generations was of great importance for many members of the tribes.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the tribes faced numerous obstacles to living peacefully and undisturbed. White individuals settled in their lands, leading to racial clashes. The government promised the tribes that American Indians would be safer if they moved west (Foreman 109). In March 1832, the Creeks signed a treaty with the United States, relinquishing most of their lands east of the Mississippi to the federal government (Foreman 111). Many Creeks died during their journey to Indian Territory in 1835 (Foreman 127 – 8). The first census conducted after the removal, in 1859, revealed that the Creek population was about 13,537: a decrease of approximately half their population prior to the move (Womack, *Red on Red* 25).

Land Allotment: The Dawes Act and Dawes Commission

However, the Creeks had not settled in their new land for long before the U.S. federal government intervened in American Indian affairs again. The Dawes Severalty Act, or the General Allotment Act of 1887, redistributed American Indian land such that each family and unmarried adult received an allotment.^{iv} People who received allotments became U.S. citizens and therefore had to adhere to federal, state, and local laws.

Congressman Henry Dawes of Massachusetts sponsored the legislation (Otis). Dawes believed in the dissolution of American Indian tribes to hasten their assimilation into (white) mainstream U.S. culture. The allotments were intended to mold American Indians into independent farmers, like their white counterparts^v (Debo 319, Otis). Furthermore, white farmers and settlers could purchase the remaining allotments. However, the Dawes Act initially exempted the Creeks and the rest of the so-called “Five Civilized Tribes”^{vi} from land allotment (“Transcript of Dawes Act” (1887)).

Meanwhile, the Creek Nation was publicly portrayed as ineffective and in need of reformation. The popular press, federal bureaucrats, and reformers generally expressed a belief that tribal governments were corrupt, inefficient, and incapable of curbing (or responsible for) the lawlessness in Indian Territories. The Creeks contended that this lawlessness was due not to the American Indians themselves, but instead due to the farmers and settlers intruding on their land. However, the tribal government was unable to exercise legal might against these intruders (Littlefield 73). The Bureau of Indian Affairs and the federal courts enabled these trespassers by refusing to take action themselves (Littlefield 80). Several Commissioners of Indian Affairs described the land system of the five tribes as “degrading communism” and requested that Congress utilize force to remove the existence of the tribes (Debo 345).

On March 3, 1893, the U.S. Congress established the Dawes Commission, chaired by Henry Dawes, specifically to negotiate plans for allotting lands on the reservations of the five tribes. In addition to having the power to allot land, the Commission was also authorized with the power to abrogate treaties, dissolve tribal titles, and liquidate tribal assets (Littlefield 73). Following the creation of the Commission, the Creek Council

adopted resolutions stating they would not give up their tribal status and that they hoped the United States would “prove true to her many pledges and keep perfect faith with our people” (Debo 346).

An intertribal council met in February 1894 in the Creek Nation’s territory to listen to members of the Dawes Commission to discuss the future of the tribes’ statuses. Dawes stated that the tribes should accept the nullification of their treaties, since conditions had changed dramatically since the treaties were created; he also stated that the tribes should submit to land allotment, as the tribes would be unable to protect themselves from the whites who desired to take their land without the “help” of the Dawes Commission. If the tribes did not voluntarily agree to the abrogation of treaties and accept land allotment, Dawes said, Congress would employ force (Littlefield 74). The American Indian delegates requested that Congress not interfere with the tribes’ situations until they were fully prepared for statehood. They explained that although educated and progressive American Indians would be able to adapt to the new political and social system under the Dawes Commission, it would devastate the more conservative and traditionalist American Indians (Littlefield 74). The delegates wrote:

If the United States, having put the Indian here to prepare himself for the duties and responsibilities of Territorial government and ultimate Statehood, and out of mere impatience and to satisfy the clamor of the boomers, cuts the Indian off when he is coming to the state of civilization when he will be ready for Statehood, it will be in the eyes of every lover of common justice, guilty of common robbery.” (Littlefield 74-75)

These American Indian delegates argue that if the Dawes Commission were concerned with the welfare and empowerment of the American Indians, the commission should heed the concerns the American Indians present rather than caving to the interests of the “boomers.”

Congress directed the Commission to take a roll of the members of the Creek Nation in 1896, which was the first step toward allotment. Not long after, the Creek National Council created a commission to negotiate with the Dawes Commission (Littlefield 81, Debo 369). Although the Creeks, Choctaws, Chicasaws, and Seminoles created commissions to negotiate with the Dawes Commission, in 1898 Congress passed the Curtis Act (Littlefield 109). The Curtis Act required the five tribes to accept allotment, even if force was necessary (Womack, *Red on Red* 130). On May 25, 1901, the Creeks ratified an allotment agreement. According to the agreement, the Secretary of the Interior (Ethan Hitchcock) had to provide the Creek Chief (Pleasant Porter) with blank deeds, which would then be returned to Hitchcock for approval. However, Porter had not issued any deeds by the end of 1901, because any surplus land would be available to non-Creeks.^{vii} Congress, the Creeks, and President Roosevelt agreed to a new contract by August 1902. The agreement stipulated that no sales of allotments could take place for five years (Littlefield 149). Creeks began to receive their allotments in the beginning of 1903.

By the summer of 1903, however, it became increasingly evident that federal officials and members of the Dawes Commission were involved in land speculation. A government investigation revealed that several officials and members of the Commission at fault (Littlefield 176). Charles Bonaparte, who led the investigation, ultimately

recommended the abolition of the Dawes Commission (Littlefield 183). A separate investigation by the Indian Rights Association charged all but one member of the Dawes Commission with graft (Littlefield 177). In the Fus Fixico Letters, Posey addresses this corruption among the Dawes Commission:

Then Hotgun he say, “Well, so they [members of the Dawes Commission] was do it all the time, like putting 1,800 [18,000] Creek Injins on the roll when they was aint that many, counting the Seminoles too. ’Sides that they was get together and form big trust companies so they could get a corner on good times and drink Bud Wiser in they summer homes on the Grand River.” (Posey 121)

In this passage, Posey explicitly criticizes the Commission for enrolling an incorrect number of Creeks and Seminoles so that the Commission members could accumulate greater wealth.^{viii} By referencing this act, he helped other Creek community members become aware of the fraud and thereby hold those in power accountable.

Snakes vs. Progressives

The Snakes, a faction of full-blood conservative Creeks led by Chitto (“Snake” in English) Harjo, chose to recognize only the Creek tribal government and promoted the observance of the Treaty of 1832 – which had been effectively abrogated by the Dawes Commission and the Curtis Act (Womack, *Red on Red* 37). The group formed in 1901 with their first meeting at Hickory Grounds (Womack, *Red on Red* 37). The Snakes sent out Lighthorse policemen to punish Creeks who hindered the groups’ objectives by signing up for allotments, renting their land to white individuals, or hiring white laborers (Littlefield 143-144). While Alexander Posey sympathized with the Snakes’ desire to

return to Creek traditional lifestyle without the interference of the federal government, he ultimately viewed their agenda as impractical (Littlefield 143). He did, however, write a poem in praise of Chitto Harjo: “On the Capture and Imprisonment of Crazy Snake.” In this poem, Posey refers to Harjo as “A traitor, outlaw, --what you will / He is the noble red man still” (Posey)^{ix}. However, Posey was not always so generous in his description of the Snakes. He later wrote, “They are the most ignorant among the Indians. And, like the most ignorant among the white people, they believe the party in power makes good or bad crops at pleasure” (Littlefield 145).

In 1902, the Snakes met at Hickory Ground and the U.S. marshals took some of them to jail in Muskogee.^x After their release, the Snakes met again in fall 1902. Posey wrote of this meeting in the *Fus Fixico Letters*: “I think maybe so if they don’t quit their monkey business the white man will round them up and put them back in jail for about ten years next time” (Posey 56). “Monkey business” is mischievous behavior that is often associated with children. By describing Snake activity as “monkey business,” Posey trivializes and ridicules the Snake platform. Furthermore, suggesting that the Snakes’ actions could land them in jail for ten years could be a commentary on the U.S. police’s often unfair treatment of Snakes by placing them in jail without a trial. However, the long jail sentence also implies the fruitlessness of the Snakes’ resistance to the Dawes Commission. The Snakes’ protestations would only land them in jail, rather than provide material benefits for the Creek people.

Posey identified as a progressive Creek. Like many of the other progressive Creeks of his time, Posey believed that allotment was the best, most practical course of action for their tribe (Littlefield 75). However, this opinion was often an unpopular one

among Creeks. As of 1895, the majority of the Creek Nation did not want to negotiate at all with the Dawes Commission (Littlefield 76). At a campaign rally for the election of 1895, Posey gave a speech in support of Isparhecher for chief. During this speech, Posey elucidated his opinions that the Creek Nation should cooperate with the U.S. government: “Can we be blamed for not wanting to treat with this Commission? Can you continue to trust the man who has never kept his promise with you?...Hold on to this country, is my watchword. Trust to the honesty of the United States and stand by the man who will protect and guard the interests of the people—Such a man is Isparhecher, the patriot, statesman and warrior” (Littlefield 76). Posey both acknowledges Creeks’ reluctance to work with the Dawes Commission, but also encourages them to trust not only the United States to be “honest” but also to trust Isparhecher to protect Creek interests.

Separate statehood: Autonomy for Indian Territory

At the 1904 Sequoyah Convention, delegates from the five tribes developed a constitution and proposed separate statehood for Indian Territory (separate from Oklahoma Territory). Separate statehood would have enabled the tribes to maintain greater cultural integrity and sovereignty over tribal matters. However, Congress chose not to take this proposal seriously due to competing interests of the railroad industry and whites who wanted the land in the territory (Womack, *Red on Red* 37-38). In December 1902, a Senate subcommittee drafted a bill for admitting one state: Oklahoma (Littlefield 152).

Posey initially opposed the separate statehood movement, as he believed American Indians should strive to be as equal as possible to other citizens rather than creating a space apart for themselves (Littlefield 150-151). He supported single statehood

as long as American Indian voices were considered equal to white Americans (Littlefield 152). In 1903, however, Posey changed his position. Although the precise reason for this change is not known, Littlefield speculates that a turning point may have been Posey's May 1903 meeting with Secretary of the Interior Ethan Hitchcock. Hitchcock did not seem as interested in American Indian rights as Posey might have hoped, and expressed the opinion that the development of Indian Territory required attracting farmers (non-American Indians). American Indians' fading support for the single statehood movement and Chief Porter's appointing Posey a delegate to the Eufaula separate statehood convention may also have contributed to Posey's changed opinion (Littlefield 152-3).

Posey's characters in the *Fus Fixico* Letters also come to support separate statehood. After one of the characters asks whether they think the tribe is ready for separate statehood, Hotgun replies:

“Good and ready. We was ready for the Government to keep its promise and fence us off to ourselves. We was give up all our bad habits, like wearing breech clouts and feathers on the head. We wear hand-me-downs now all the time and live in box shacks with a side room to it instead of log huts daubed with mud.” (Posey 214)

Posey indicates that the U.S. government's responsibility is “to keep its promise” by providing the American Indians with their own land, as designated in the Treaty of 1832. Furthermore, Hotgun insinuates that American Indian assimilation into white society has been detrimental to the tribal peoples—they wear “hand-me-down” clothing and “live in box shacks.” Living apart from white society would enable American Indians

to maintain autonomy and avoid further assimilation, which would produce similar hardships for the Native people.

Alexander Posey: Creek Writer

Posey established the staples of his writing that would be so iconic in the Fus Fixico Letters during his college years at the Indian University at Bacone. These stylistic devices include dialect writing, humor, and use of a persona.^{xi} The persona “Chinnubbie,” much like the persona Fus Fixico that Posey later adapted, was a “witty, casual outside observer whom Alex carefully constructed” (Littlefield 54).^{xii} Posey also began to utilize his writing to comment on the political climate. For instance, he used his Chinnubie persona to respond to the February 1894 intertribal convention with the Dawes Commission by suggesting Creeks should take the deal the Dawes Commission offered (Littlefield 75).

Upon leaving Bacone, Posey briefly entered Creek politics. In 1895 Posey was elected as a representative from Tuskegee to the House of Warriors. He was later appointed as superintendent of the Creek Orphan Asylum, and then superintendent of public instruction for the Creek Nation (Littlefield 79, 101). Although Posey eventually gave up his career as a politician, he continued to express his political beliefs through writing. In 1902, Posey became editor of the *Indian Journal*, a local newspaper that reported on events in or near Eufaula. He refused to publish editorials in the paper and was dedicated to making the paper independent and unbiased—at least at first (Littlefield 138). Eventually, the *Indian Journal* developed into a vehicle through which Posey “promoted the idea of social, political, and economic process in the Indian Territory, particularly the Creek Nation” (Littlefield 139). He used the newspaper to present

allotment as the most practical way forward for Creeks, and that the Eufaula District was prepared to begin the process and be an example for other cities in Indian Territory^{xiii} (Littlefield 139). In June 1902, Posey bought the *Eufaula Gazette* and combined it with the *Indian Journal* (Littlefield 139). By the end of 1902, Posey realized the need for the *Journal* to include an editorial voice and began writing the Fus Fixico Letters.

Outsiders recognized the political influence of Posey's writing and requested he use his sway to support specific policies. For instance, Greenwood McCurtain, Principal Chief of the Choctaw Nation, suggested that Posey use his newspaper in favor of separate statehood. He told Posey that "you have the ability to handle this sentiment with much force, and I hope to see you take hold of the matter and present it to your readers in the attractive form with which you are capable" (Littlefield 154-5).

Posey sold the *Indian Journal* in 1903, and instead became the city editor of the *Muskogee Times*. He viewed Muskogee, rather than Eufaula, as the new hub of political activity. However, Posey left the *Times* in 1904 to work for the Indian Office and the Dawes Commission as the official interpreter (Littlefield 159, 186). He became directly involved in real estate dealings, even cheating other American Indians out of their allotments (Womack, *Red on Red* 132). Herein lies the mixed legacy of Alexander Posey: a progressive Creek who advocated cultural survival and later committed the very fraud he criticized the Dawes Commission of. This fraught legacy is symbolized by Posey's untimely death by drowning in the Oktahutche (Canadian) River 1908. His death has been interpreted both as the river he loved bringing him home, as well as his just recompense for cheating his tribal people. While Posey's later actions are certainly reprehensible, his literature, written prior to his involvement in the Dawes Commission,

remains as an enduring example of communitism in Creek literature. Weaver writes that “it is, however, as a writer that Posey remains familiar” (Weaver 94).

Notes

ⁱ During this time in Indian Territory, being progressive meant accepting allotment in order to facilitate progress for American Indians under the Dawes Act. On the other hand, being traditionalist meant rejecting the Dawes Act and instead only recognizing tribal authorities (Littlefield 139).

ⁱⁱ However, as will be discussed in the analysis of the Fus Fixico Letter, Posey cannot be described as a “pure” progressive. He expressed sympathy for many of the traditionalist, full-blooded Creeks and the Snakes. Furthermore, at various points throughout his writing, he praised conservative Creeks and mocked progressive values.

ⁱⁱⁱ As Eneah Micco told the secretary of war, “...our aged fathers and mothers beseech us to remain upon the land that gave us birth, where the bones of their kindred are buried, so that when they die they may mingle their ashes together” (Foreman 108).

^{iv} An allotment was typically 160 acres per head of household, and 80 acres per unmarried adult.

^v However, Dawes and his collaborators perceived their actions as benefitting American Indians. Dawes himself was a part of the “Friends of the Indians,” comprised mostly of white Americans who held ethnocentric and condescending views towards American Indian culture, and encouraged the assimilation of American Indians into mainstream American society. They believed the Dawes Act would “lead Native peoples to embrace the American values of thrift, hard work, and self-reliance” (Joy).

^{vi} “The Five Civilized Tribes” refers to the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes. The federal government gave them this name because these

tribes appeared to adopt Euro-American norms, such as Christianity and literacy. Because the phrase implies that the tribes could only be considered “civilized” if they assumed aspects of Euro-American lifestyles, as well as that other tribes were not “civilized,” I will refer to the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes together as the five tribes.

^{vii} Posey, however, was frustrated with the delay of issuing the deeds, which he perceived as a delay of progress for the Creek Nation (Littlefield 148).

^{viii} Creeks, such as Posey and Charles Gibson, believed the Commission’s enrollment of 18,000 Creeks was fraudulent and called for an investigation (Posey 122 n.8).

^{ix} Weaver describes this poem as “indicative of the communitist solidarity Posey felt” (Weaver 91).

^x Although Littlefield does not explain why the Snakes were arrested, he precedes the description of the 1902 meeting by mentioning that Snakes were arrested in early 1901 for sending their Lighthorse police to punish other Creeks (Littlefield 31).

^{xi} Posey also spent much time writing poetry in predominantly Euro-American style, which Littlefield described as a hindrance to Posey’s developing his uniquely Creek voice (49).

^{xii} After Posey’s years at Bacone, he only published one poem under his name (Littlefield 59).

^{xiii} Posey wrote that the *Indian Journal* “[espouses] always the cause which it believes will rebound to his betterment.” He also wrote that “The Indian that falls in line with progressive movements and manifests a cooperative disposition will not fail of

recognition in the councils of his white brethren. But the pull-back Indian, as well as the unregenerate white man, will not survive the sentiments and traditions which have been outgrown” (Littlefield 141).

Transformative Progressivism in The Fus Fixico Letters

The Fus Fixico Letters were written in the persona of Fus Fixico, a full-blooded conservative Creek.¹ However, as the letters continued and the characters developed, Fus Fixico himself faded into the background and grew into a reporter on the conversations of Hotgun, Cholea, Tookpafka Micco, Wolf Warrior, and Kono Harjo, several of whom were named for and based on local figures (Littlefield and Hunter). The letters begin with a strong emphasis on local affairs, though as time progresses and Oklahoma statehood and the Dawes Commission comes to the foreground of the national conversation, so too do national topics begin to emerge in the letters. Through these letters, Posey promotes his vision that the Creeks should adapt to the changing social and political landscape of the early 1900s by embracing progressive values, such as collaborating with the Dawes Commission. All the characters besides Fus Fixico in the text are conservative, full-blooded, Snakes, who typically would oppose such progressive measures. However, by presenting his own progressive stance through the conversations of conservative Creeks, Posey makes his political ideals more palatable to Creeks more traditionalist than he.

The Fus Fixico Letters are communitist in that they encourage the continuation and survival of the Creek Nation. The Fus Fixico Letters define and redefine the American Indian experience by presenting a Creek-centric narrative to oppose the mainstream white descriptions of American Indians. The Letters also encourage what Posey perceived as necessary transformations to Creek social and political structures in order to collaborate with the Dawes Commission—while still being critical of the Commission's fraud—to ensure the Creek Nation would endure.

Defining and Redefining the American Indian experience

During Posey's time, many texts regarding the American Indian experience privileged Euro-American voices. Whites defined American Indians through their involvement in collaborative autobiographies about American Indian subjects, or biographies written without American Indian inputⁱⁱ (Womack, *Red on Red* 154-5). However, Posey's writing reflected American Indian experience from an American Indian point of view; he gave his community its own voice. Weaver agrees that this form of self-definition is necessary for greater communal empowerment: "American Indian writers help Native readers imagine and reimagine themselves as Indian from the inside rather than as defined by the dominant society" (Weaver 5). Womack elaborates on this concept: "The Indian with his own articulate voice—the Indian who can speak for himself without the mediation of the colonizer—is an oppressive culture's worst nightmare" (Womack, *Red on Red* 155). Through self-definition during a time in which white writers were defining the American Indian experience and the federal government was undermining tribal authority, Posey encouraged Creek autonomy.

To establish a strong Creek perspective to counter the competing narratives, the Fus Fixico Letters rebuke established myths and descriptions about American Indians. For instance, Posey subverts the well-known phrase, commonly attributed to General Philip Sheridan, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian." Posey writes, from the perspective of Fus Fixico, "Well, so I was tell you bad news about my old friend Choela. He was gone to be good Injin, like whiteman say when Injin die. It was look like all old Injins die now and make good Injin that way. Maybe so pretty soon Fus Fixico was make good Injin, too" (Posey 76). Posey's reference to the "whiteman's" perception of American Indians indicates he is well aware of the racist maxim about American Indians

prevailing in American society. However, Posey undermines the use of the phrase not to mock American Indians and their supposed inferiority to white culture, but rather to meditate on the life of an admired community member and reflect on the passing away of the older generation. Since Posey refers to Choela's passing as "bad news," the narrator does not perceive the concept of a "good [and therefore dead] Injin" as something to be celebrated. The whites' depiction of American Indians is rejected.

Distinctly Creek Language

Beyond dispelling mainstream myths about American Indians, Posey also empowers his local community by making specific references to the community in his text. The use of particular forms of language determines how a particular culture is represented. Weaver writes that "language is both a shaper and a reflection of culture," and that "as part of its attempt at cultural genocide, the concerted assault on Native cultures and personhood, the dominant culture also sought to eradicate tribal languages (Weaver 13). Communitist literature relies on language that accurately represents the community it is representative of and furthers the continuation of that culture. Posey writes in dialect and includes untranslated words in the Fus Fixico Letters to signify that the truthful portrayal and endurance of Creek culture is central to the letters.

Este Charte

Posey authenticated his writing as deeply embedded in the local American Indian community by writing in the local dialect. Through dialect, the letters are directly associated with Indian Territory and the Creek tribe. This dialect is known as "este charte,"ⁱⁱⁱ or "red man," English, named so by Posey and his Creek friend Charles Gibson^{iv} (Littlefield and Hunter). "Este charte" includes "the use of the verb 'to be' to

determine tense [...] use of nominative personal pronouns as reflexives or possessives [...] use of the characteristic expression *maybe so* to indicate conditional action or possibility” (Littlefield 18). Posey also infused his letters with slang, understatement, metaphors, colloquial and Creek expressions (Littlefield and Hunter).

The use of dialect is exemplified as Hotgun and Tookpafka Micco discuss Charles Bonaparte’s arrival in Indian Territory to conduct his investigation into the Dawes Commission:

“Well, maybe so,” Hotgun he say, “When Charley Bonaparte was land here from Washington and saw how it is, he was looked grand, gloomy and curious, like he was smelt something dead a long time and no buzzards flying ’round.”

And Tookpafka Micco he say, “well so he was not deceived in his looks if he was got wind a Muskogee, where the grafters was skinning the Injins and burying the hides. But, maybe so, he was looked that way anyhow, ’cause he was a chip off a the old block.” (Posey 136-7)

Not only does the passage demonstrate the dialect used in the Fus Fixico Letters, but also reflects Posey’s inclusion of political events in his writing. Bonaparte’s look of disgust is deemed to be appropriate if he knew about the fraud that was taking place in Muskogee (“got wind a Muskogee”). Furthermore, this fraud is equated with “skinning the Injins,” a deeply violent act. Posey decries the Dawes Commission’s participation in fraud and its negative implications for American Indians, while expressing his hope that a thorough investigation will expose these illegal activities to the federal government.

This use of these generally American Indian and specifically Creek rhetorical techniques points towards what is described in *The Empire Writes Back* as the appropriation of a colonial language (in this instance, English) to better suit the needs of a colonized people. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe appropriation as placing the language of the colonizer “under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language, or even the evolving and distinguishing local English of a monolingual society trying to establish its link with place” (39). Through writing in dialect, Posey validates an American Indian mode of speech separate from the speech of the colonizer and creates a separate, autonomous space for American Indians to define themselves.

Womack agrees that Posey’s use of dialect enables him to better connect with the Creek people: “by presenting Indian language, even if Indian English language, is anti-assimilationist in the sense that it represents a refusal to become something else—that is, proper English or English more accessible to white readers” (Womack, *Red on Red* 135). Posey’s writing in an appropriated form of “proper English” creates a space particular for American Indian readers that may not be entered into as easily as white audiences. Unlike the narratives created by white writers about American Indians, this was a uniquely American Indian space.

Untranslated Words

Posey also uses certain untranslated Creek words in his text. For instance, he includes terms and phrases such as “hombux che,” “Cen hesse mahhe, Fus Fixico, ekis ce,” and “E-mak-pof-ket” (Posey 152, 59, 68). These terms are, respectively, a Creek invitation to eat, “I mean your real friend, Fus Fixico,” and “blow it in for him”—

meaning “like making medicine, blowing through a small cane with a hole, into the bucket of medicine” (Littlefield and Hunter 68, n.2). Furthermore, the use of these terms locates the text specifically within Creek culture. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note that using untranslated words “not only registers a sense of cultural distinctiveness but forces the reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have meaning” (65). Although Posey’s main audience was Creek and likely already familiar with the phrases, the use of the untranslated phrases reinforces the authenticity of the representation of Creek life in Eufaula. In doing so, Posey establishes his writing as emblematic of the Creek community, a key component of communitism. When elaborating on the link between language and communitism, Weaver quotes Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s work *Decolonising the Mind*: “Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world” (Thiong’o 16). As Thiong’o suggests, language and community are intrinsically related. Posey’s use of untranslated words leads to a greater sense of Creek community and creates an entity that brings the community together, something outside of the reach of the colonizers. By creating a unique space for Creek language and community, Posey empowers the Creek Nation.

Posey’s Transformative Progressivism

Posey identified as a progressive; however, as Womack notes, he does not fit neatly into that box. Posey admired many of the Snakes and other traditionalists he references in the letters, and occasionally parodied his own progressive opinions (Womack, *Red on Red* 131). Although Fus Fixico himself endorses progressive stances such as allotment, his companions he reports on are conservative Snakes. The Fus Fixico

Letters reflect a diversity of opinions and ultimately support the Creek community by supporting change in order for the tribe to survive, while still being critical of assimilation and fraud. To better explain Posey's changing opinions, I will examine his progressivist support for collaboration with the Dawes Act and support for allotment with his criticism of the fraud within the Dawes Act.

Promoting Progressive Values through Allotment

As a progressive, Posey supported changes to Creek politics and society. He did so not to support assimilation into mainstream white American life, but to enable the survival of the Creek Nation during uncertain times. Tereza Szeghi notes in "Transformation and Transnationalism in Alexander Posey's *Fus Fixico Letters*" that Posey favors what she terms the "Transforming Indian," rather than either the traditionalist American Indians or the "Vanishing Indian" myth (Szeghi 3). As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the Creek Nation has a long history of adapting to change and incorporating different aspects of other cultures into their own lifestyles. Szeghi writes, "Posey draws on Creek historical practice in his suggestion that Creeks take an active role in selecting which aspects of Euroamerican culture they can usefully appropriate in order to participate in U.S. social systems while retaining Creek cultural autonomy. His Transforming Indian is distinctly Creek and is an active agent in the process of acculturation" (4). The Transforming Indian is not assimilationist; this trope encourages the altering of Creek lifestyle to fit the needs of their own community, rather than to meet the expectations of the colonizers.

The Transforming Indian is communitist through their support of the survival of the people by redefining how their community operates, while still respecting their

cultural and traditional values. A key concept of communitism is representing a tribal community as able to transform and adapt to changing circumstances: “Native writers, in their commitment to Native communities, write to and for Native peoples. They take cultural endurance as a priority and provide an ‘abiding sense of remembrance.’ They write that the People might live” (Weaver 161). This cultural endurance is reflected in the *Fus Fixico Letters* by a commitment to presenting an alternate, progressive means of survival for the Creek Nation. The means of endurance would require intense change for Creek society—even involve cooperation with the Dawes Commission—but would ensure survival for the tribe.

Posey represented the communitist vision of the “Transforming Indian” through his support for land allotment, which he perceived as beneficial for the tribe and necessary for progress to continue among American Indian society. When Creek Chief Pleasant Porter delayed issuing land deeds, Posey wrote in the *Fus Fixico Letters*:

Well, one thing I like to know is if Porter was quit trying to issue them deeds. I guess maybe so he was had so many deeds to sign up he was just give out of breath and quit. [...] I don’t know what I do if I don’t get my deed pretty soon. The land buyer say he can’t give me but 15c for my land if them deeds don’t show up. So you see I was in a bad fix for Christmas times with nothing but sour sofky to make me feel good. (Posey 56)

Fus Fixico states that he has a “land buyer” who will offer him “15c for [his] land,” which indicates that he could achieve economic progress through the freely choosing to sell his land. Private ownership of land—and the subsequent selling of that land—was not a commonly held idea among the Creek tribe, or most of the other tribes in

Indian Territory. However, by representing private land ownership as something to be desired (“I don’t know what I do if I don’t get my deed pretty soon”) encourages accepting this new concept of land ownership. Furthermore, that Fus Fixico is being paid for selling his land is an example of progress, of new opportunities Creeks can make with their land. However, Porter’s delaying the dissemination of the deeds is portrayed as a negative, as the chief is portrayed as a weak individual not up to the important task of issuing deeds. Also, the reference to “sour sofky,” a traditional Creek dish, links the Creek with progressive ideals with Creek tradition, reconciling the two together.

However, Posey understood that not all Creeks were prepared to make the transition to living in a more progressive society, and used the letters to promote the idea that Snakes and traditionalist Creeks emigrate to Mexico, where they might be able to continue living without the continued interference of the U.S. government (Szeghi 2).

Posey writes:

[...] them Snake Injins was hold council and talk about what good times they could had in Mexico, or, maybe so, South America. [...]So Wacache was great prophet and he was told about big flood, like bible people was had to ford in olden times. Wacache he say his old swimming hole was hide everything so you can’t see Bald Hill floating ‘round in it. And so he was send Hotgun word he was had to go to work and don’t quit till he was make a ark and put all Snake Injins in it. Wacache he say Dawes Commission was had to save other Injins like me and Charley Gibson.

(Posey 73)

The reference to the Snakes' plan of moving to Mexico demonstrates Posey's commitment to the entire Creek community, not only those who agreed with his political ideals. Also, he uses Wacache, a very conservative Creek, as a mouthpiece for describing the separate plans for conservative Creeks and progressive Creeks. According to Littlefield, Wacache was a "follower of Chitto Harjo who had quit farming and turned prophet" (Littlefield 168). In the passage, this Snake prophet endorses both the moving to Mexico for conservative Creeks and that progressive Creeks ("me and Charley Gibson") remain in Indian Territory. This is a communitist suggestion because it encourages the empowering of all Creeks. The conservative Creeks can leave, so they can further their self-determination, while the more progressive ones would remain in the area.

Posey writes that a big "flood" is imminent for the Creeks; this flood could represent various future political and social changes that would take place through involvement with the U.S. federal government, such as through statehood and land allotment. The best chance for survival the conservative Snakes have is to flee the area, to immigrate to Mexico. However, the Dawes Commission would "save" the more progressive Creeks. This implies that Creeks would be overcome by assimilationist tactics to incorporate themselves into American mainstream if it were not for the assistance of the Dawes Commission. The Commission offers an opportunity to not be overwhelmed by assimilation, to carve out a space for autonomy. The most rational decision for progressive Creeks would be to transform and to embrace the Dawes Commission.

Criticisms of the Dawes Commission

Posey was not unilaterally progressive and offered quite a few criticisms of the Dawes Commission, although he ultimately supported cooperating with it. As Weaver states, “In discussing federal policy and Creek affairs, Posey reveals a consistent communitist stance. Disaffection with Amer-European material culture [...] and federal government paternalism emerge as major themes” (Weaver 92). Although Posey supported collaboration with the Dawes Commission, his primary goal was the survival of the Creek tribe, not the comfort of the federal government. Therefore, he was able to criticize the Dawes Commission insofar as he perceived it to weaken his tribe.

During the summer of 1903, various rumors circulated regarding the fraud and graft involved in the Dawes Commission. The press in Indian Territory called for Secretary Hitchcock to look into these allegations, and Hitchcock fired Clarence Douglas, one of the officials, and paused land sales and leases (Littlefield, *Alex Posey* 119). Posey utilized the Fus Fixico Letters to encourage increased investigation into the fraud accusations:

And Tookpafka Micco he say, “Well, so the newspapers say Secretary It’s Cocked was raking up more leaves to smoke out some more old stayers like J. Bear Sho’-am-fat and Tams Big Pie.”

Then Hotgun he say, “Well, so I hope Secretary It’s Cocked was singed they hair so the people could smell it. Maybe so that was made ’em quit running up good hands for theyselves instead a giving the Injin a chance to shuffle the deck after ’em.” (Posey 120-121)

The puns on the U.S. officials’ names and the hunting metaphor in the passage serve to emphasize the criticism of the Dawes Commission. Referring to Secretary Hitchcock as

“Secretary It’s Cocked” suggests that “the hesitating Interior Department secretary was like a pistol ready to fire but never fired.” Also changing the names of officials such as Tams Bixby, the chairman of the Dawes Commission, and J. Blair Shoenfelt, the agent to the “Five Civilized Tribes”, as “Tams Big Pie” and “J. Bear Sho’-am-fat” “reflect the grasping, avaricious, greedy behavior in which these men were engaged” (Littlefield, “Introduction” 38). By changing these names, Posey places the officials involved in the Dawes Commission as objects of ridicule, which offers the American Indian audience some measure of power over the officials.

Throughout the passage, Posey utilizes a hunting metaphor to describe the process of searching for people engaged in fraud against American Indians. The “raking up more leaves to smoke out some more old stayers” refers to a hunting technique in which leaves would be burnt to create smoke to scare game out of a hollow tree (Littlefield and Hunter 122 n.6). Describing the officials as game to be caught dehumanizes them, makes them seem more ridiculous and less threatening to the American Indians.

Reconciling both sides: Trickster

Posey’s being a proponent for change, while criticizing some of the organizations he seems to support can be analyzed through a trickster lens. Tricksters often include stories of weaker individuals using their wit to overcome a larger, stronger opponent; in the case of the Fus Fixico Letters, a speaker from the Creek Nation is attempting to reclaim power for the tribal governments and subvert the U.S. government through humorous letters. By resisting social norms, the trickster indicates which social norms must be respected and which can be broken.

Womack encourages reading Posey as a political trickster: “At the very least, there is a strong subversive element in these statements rather than outright faith in white progress. Posey’s supposed endorsement of progress may have been a simple recognition that Native people could and would move into the future, that is, a rejection of the vanishing notion” (Womack, *Red on Red* 143). Through the Fus Fixico Letters, Posey encouraged a critical look at the progressive values he believed would be best for the Creek Nation. As a trickster narrative, the Fus Fixico Letters consider different perspectives to encourage Creek survival in the face of a seemingly stronger opponent: the U.S. government.

The Praxis of the Fus Fixico Letters

Communitism requires praxis, the encouragement of some form of activism. As Weaver indicates, “Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community” (Weaver 43). Posey’s Fus Fixico Letters have a “proactive commitment” to his community, since he used the texts to intentionally sway political opinion in Eufaula. Womack describes the Letters as a form of political discourse and highlights that they dramatically influenced events in the Creek Nation and throughout Indian Territory (Womack, *Red on Red* 131, 147, 149). He comments, “All of this goes beyond some kind of early postmodern intertextuality; Posey is using his editorial voice to sway events and his column as the format” (Womack, *Red on Red* 151). The dialogue format of the Letters encourages the readers to become involved in the text and involve them in critical thinking regarding politics (Womack, *Red on Red* 153).

The letters often promoted critical thought by developing a more nuanced conclusion than they started with. One letter published in August 1903 opens with

Secretary Hitchcock's need to find an honest person to investigate allegations of fraud within the Dawes Commission and then progresses to defying whites' exoticizing American Indians by instead othering members of the commission. The historical context for this letter is that in 1903, S. M. Brosius of the Indian Rights Association completed an investigation—prior to the federal government's investigation—implicating all but one of the members of the Dawes Commission in fraud.

The letter begins: “Well, so Hotgun he say Secretary It's Coked was trimmed the wick in his lantern and stuck a match to it, like old Diogenes, and was set out to see if he could find a man that didn't had his breadhooks hung up under his coat tail for boodle” (Posey 128). Diogenes is a Greek philosopher who is said to have walked around during the day, with a lantern, to search for an honest man. Hitchcock's engaging in such a prolonged search implies that there are few honorable or honest politicians, an idea later reiterated as Hotgun says, “They [honest men] was put near all extinct in politics” (Posey 128). Referring to “honest politicians” as “extinct” turns the myth of the “vanishing Indian” on its head and instead implies that honorable politicians are instead on the decline. This empowers American Indians, while disempowering politicians.

The topic of the conversation then shifts to Brosius's investigation. The group arrives at this new topic through asking questions and engaging in dialogue, exemplifying what Womack describes as “community-based multivocal discussions” in the letters (Womack, *Red on Red* 169). The characters' posing questions for one another encourages the audience to interact with the text by considering the questions themselves. Posey writes:

And Tookpafka Micco he say, “Well, so what do you guess Brosius was barking at?”

Then Hotgun he say, “Well, so I think it was lots a coons he was chased out a the Injin’s sofky patch.” (Posey 129)

The “coon,” or “raccoon,” symbolizes the Commission members engaging in fraud, and the “sofky patch” symbolizes Indian land. By describing the federal agents as destructive animals that would destroy crops, Posey others them and emphasizes that their actions have had devastating effects on Indian Territory. Furthermore, by posing a question about Brosius’s report, Posey involves the readers and invites them to consider their own perspectives on scams within the commission.

As the letter comes to a close, the federal agents are further exoticized and mocked because of their illegal activities. Discussing officials in this manner allows Fus Fixico and his companions to empower their local community while condemning the Dawes Commission:

And Tookpafka Micco he say, “Well, so what Secretary It’s Cocked do with ’em [the Commission members engaged in fraud] when he was shaked ’em out?”

Then Hotgun he say, “Well, maybe so he was put ’em in the zoo so everybody could take a look at ’em.” (Posey 130)

Putting the Commission members in a “zoo” implies that they are animals to be observed and/or gawked at for the audience’s enjoyment. It implies that the members are “other,” that they do not belong in Indian Territory. Furthermore, saying that “everybody could take a look at ’em” indicates that their crimes will be made public and that the public can

join in the mockery of the officials. Posey others the commission members, which is notable in light of the mainstream culture's attempts to exoticize American Indian culture. This letter places the Creek community in a position of power by offering questions for the audience to consider, as well as providing criticism of federal officials for dishonest and illegal activities. By framing the letter as a political meeting, Posey advocates a communitist outlook by encouraging the Creek audience to become more actively aware of political events in Indian Territory, and for the Creeks to consider these events from a perspective that empowers their community.

Conclusion

Posey's work is communitist in that he used it to reflect on and actively shape his community at Eufaula. To convince people of his progressive views, he used traditionalist and Snake characters in his letters, even referencing other local Snake figures (such as Wacache) to espouse his opinions. Furthermore, by writing the letters as a dialogue he promoted the communitist vision that community building is a process, not didactic. In the letters, he does not explicitly state what he thinks Creeks should do, but allows the characters to engage in a dialogue and thereby arrive at conclusions regarding politics. These dialogues encouraged the audience to be engaged in the letters, to draw their own opinions. The Fus Fixico Letters promoted ideals Posey believed would enable the survival of the Creek Nation, "that the people might live."

Notes

ⁱ However, the persona of Fus Fixico reflected Posey's deep education of Western literature, including several references to classical history, English and American literature, and the Bible. The conservative Creeks Posey seeks to portray in the letters would likely not have been familiar with these allusions.

ⁱⁱ Womack notes that exceptions to this statement include "Native-authored autobiographies by Sam Occom, William Apess, George Copway, Sarah Winnemucca, and others" (Womack, *Red on Red* 154-155).

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of the first recorded examples of what would become known as "este charte" English are evident in personae developed by Cherokee writers in letters to the *Cherokee Telephone* between 1890 and 1893 (Littlefield, "Introduction" 26). It is very likely that Posey read these writings as well as the writings of his contemporaries who utilized "este charte" English (Littlefield, "Introduction" 29). Although Posey was not the only American Indian writer to write in "este charte" English, Littlefield contends that the *Fus Fixico Letters* were the "foremost example" of that particular writing style; Posey also received the widest longest-lasting recognition from an outside audience (Littlefield, "Introduction" 30-31).

^{iv} In communitist fashion, Posey claimed "Este Charte" only for American Indians: he heavily criticized white writers who attempted to write in that dialect (Womack, *Red on Red* 145).

Drowning in Fire: Historical and Social Background

Introduction: “A Perpetual People”

Despite the prevalence of the “Vanishing Indian” myth, the Creek tribe continues to survive in the present-day United States, and the “Official Guide to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation” published by the Nation’s official website refers to the Nation as “A Perpetual People”. The Nation’s Complex is located in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Creek Nation boundaries exist across 10 counties in East Central Oklahoma, and state-recognized Creeks also live in Alabama and Florida (Womack, *Red on Red* 25, “The Official Guide”). Twenty-five chartered Muscogee communities exist within the Nation’s boundaries in Oklahoma, and another one is outside the jurisdiction in Oklahoma City. Today, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation is the third largest federally-recognized tribe in Oklahoma and the fourth largest in the United States; there are more than 79,000 enrolled Creek citizens; approximately 45,000 live in Oklahoma and 34,000 live outside Oklahoma (“The Official Guide”).

The Nation elected a Principal Chief in 1971 without Presidential approval for the first time since the partial dismantling their government. A new constitution was drafted in 1974 and then ratified in 1979 (“Muscogee (Creek) Nation History”). The constitution includes the stipulation that citizenship depends on having a direct ancestor on the 1906 Dawes Roll and that the Nation’s jurisdiction “shall be as it geographically appeared in 1900 which is based upon those Treaties entered into by the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and the United States of America” (“Muscogee Constitution”).

Craig Womack’s novel *Drowning in Fire* takes place primarily during the 1970s—1990s in Oklahoma, around the time the new constitution was developed. The

novel also contains some narrative from and some flashbacks to the early 1900s, when land allotment was underway. The novel follows Josh Henneha as he comes of age during the 1970s and his subsequent adult life as he discovers more about his Creek heritage, embraces his queer identity, and develops a romantic relationship with Jimmy, a Creek who is black. Although not central to the novel, there are references to the American Indian Movement (AIM), which helps to further situate the political moment of the text.

The American Indian Movement advocated American Indian civil rights and originated in 1968 in Minneapolis, but quickly became national as it attracted attention for widely publicized acts such as the occupation of Alcatraz Island, the Trail of Broken Treaties and the subsequent (unplanned) takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the takeover of a site at Wounded Knee before disbanding in 1978 (Wurtzburg).

Jimmy owns an AIM jacket his father passed on to him. However, his father did not have a positive experience with AIM members—he stole the jacket from AIM members when he confronted them about abandoning him to deal with the law enforcement after they stole a car together (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 53-54). When Josh imagines what Jimmy's father said as he gave his son the jacket, he interprets AIM as a group of college students out of touch with the real-life, practical needs of American Indians:

“Yeah, who needs an AIM jacket, anyway? Those guys come around here mostly just to make trouble. They don't know anything about us, and they want us to take up with them and raise hell across the country. They can't understand the way we think. We got enough problems of our own

without worrying about manning an occupation off somewhere else with a bunch of college kids who don't know their butts from their gun barrels."

(Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 68)

Creating a "them" and "us" dichotomy between the AIM members and other American Indians establishes AIM as not representative of the needs of American Indian communities as a whole. AIM is presented as an ignorant group, who does not "know anything about us," "can't understand the way we think," and "who don't know their butts from their gun barrels." Furthermore, referring to the group as "college kids" suggests that they are naïve about what they will achieve and are immature, unaware of the experiences of older American Indians. Also, saying that "we got enough problems of our own without worrying about manning an occupation off somewhere else" suggests that these occupations are for unserious American Indians with nothing else to do with their time; it also suggests that that the occupations cause more problems that help with other American Indians. There is a split between the publicly politically activist American Indians in AIM and the others simply living out their lives. Although they live in a time where American Indian activist groups were fighting for their rights, these groups were alienated from the groups they claimed to serve.ⁱ

Queerness in Creek Communities

Josh's queer identity and the development of his romantic relationship with Jimmy is central to the plot of *Drowning in Fire*. The book also features a same-sex couple who are conservative Snakes during the early 1900s, linking homosexuality with traditional Creek values. Same-sex marriage was made illegal in the Creek Nation in 2001, the same year *Drowning in Fire* was publishedⁱⁱ ("Title Six"). Mark Rifkin explains

in *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*, “While not responding to the issue of same-sex marriage per se, given that it was published before the actions of the Cherokee Nation and the Navajo Nation [making same-sex marriage illegal] and that the Creek Nation already had a similar statute, the novel can be understood as reconfiguring the discourse of tradition by illuminating how it has been reconceived and edited in response to the pressure to conform to U.S.-endorsed forms of sociality and subjectivity” (277). As Rifkin notes, *Drowning in Fire* will proceed to argue that historically, traditional Creek society accepted queerness; however, it was not until the interference of mainstream white influences, such as white-dominant Christian Churches, that Creeks began to reject homosexuality. The novel itself is political because it furthers the visibility of same-sex couples in the Creek Nation.

The book also increases the visibility of queer individuals in American Indian literature: it is the first novel by an American Indian to delve into the lives of openly gay American Indian men (S. Teuton 224). In “Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel,” Sean Kicummah Teuton writes that “few works in Native literature take the Native gay male experience seriously enough to devote literary space for its exploration in sexual, emotional, and romantic life, in history, religion, and social organizations, and in artistic pursuits” (S. Teuton 225). Teuton also describes various contemporary American Indian novels in which “homosexual behavior is used to code moral corruption,” such as in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* and James Welch’s *Heartsong of Charging Elk* (S. Teuton 225). By writing about the experience of gay American Indians, and representing them in a positive light linked with tribal history

and tradition, Womack creates a space for the gay experience to be celebrated instead of viewed with hostility.

A major point of contention regarding whether or not American Indian tribes should permit same-sex marriage is whether or not these unions align with traditional tribal values. Some American Indians claim that same-sex marriages are not in line with their traditional tribal values; others argue that their tradition values love between any gender or sex, and that the emphasis on heterosexuality and the nuclear family is the result of colonization and centuries of Christian Europeans imposing their beliefs on American Indian communities (Rifkin, “Native Nationality and the Contemporary Queer” 444). Womack represents the latter perspective in *Drowning in Fire*; Josh predominantly experiences homophobia in white spaces. For example, his family attends a majority-white Baptist church, where the pastor strongly condemns homosexual relationships:

“Know ye not that neither liars, nor adulterers, nor fornicators, nor murderers, nor the effeminate shall inherit the kingdom of God? As the apostle Paul says, they give over the natural use of their bodies for that which is unseemly. Men with men, lying together, women with women. Not considering their eternal destiny, the wages of their sin, their inheritance in Gehenna, the lake of fire.” (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 63-64)

Josh’s parents were “especially proud” to attend the church because it was “one of the very few white Baptist churches that allowed Indians who looked like us, like full-bloods” (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 63); Rifkin argues that Josh’s family chose access to the privilege of whiteness through their affiliation with the church (Rifkin, “Native

Nationality” 459). However, this desire to be associated with whiteness also led to Josh’s repressing his queer identity. The pastor equates “liars” and “murderer” with “the effeminate,” displaying a condemnation for people with different gender identities. To be “effeminate” is for a male to display what are traditionally considered female characteristics—these are often associated (though often incorrectly) with people who are queer. The pastor further claims that gay sex is “unseemly,” indicating that it is deviant and unnatural. He also explicitly states that homosexual activities will inevitably result in people going to “Gehenna.” “Gehenna” is a Hebrew term that is often used in Christianity to describe Hell. Therefore, being queer is an ultimate sin. The predominantly white Church teaches that homosexuality is a grave sin and admonishes Josh chose to repress his sexual identity. Assimilationist tendencies are the reason for the rejection of homosexual couples in the Creek tribe.

Seborn and Tarbie, the homosexual couple living during the early 1900s, are teased and viewed with suspicion by progressive Creeks – who are described as assimilationist – and whites. However, the couple is accepted by the conservative and traditionalist Creeks: “But [Tarbie] was here among the full-bloods, some of whom, like Chitto Harjo, a great spokesperson and intellectual among them, remembered the homelands in Alabama, and here Seborn and Tarbie were pretty safe” (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 222). Homosexuality is accepted by traditional Creeks but rejected by the “assimilationist” progressives, which supports the view that the rejection of homosexuality in American Indian communities is the result of Euro-American influences. According to Rifkin, “Creeks against homosexuality experience ‘cultural amnesia,’ an inability or unwillingness to reckon with the enforced imperial restructuring

of Creek life, and an attendant ‘progressive’ tendency to treat imposed sociopolitical ideals—including the ideological structure of straightness—as given” (Rifkin, “Native Nationality and the Contemporary Queer” 452). Creek “cultural amnesia” regarding queerness implies that members of the Creek Nation have forgotten that their tribal heritage accepts queer identities. In *Drowning in Fire*, the homosexual couple Tarbie and Seborn are only safe among the conservative Snakes, which indicates that traditionalist Creeks have a history of welcoming queer people. Moreover, Rifkin contends that perceiving “straightness” “as a given” is the result of “enforced imperial restructuring of Creek life.” Likewise, the people in *Drowning in Fire* who reject Tarbie and Seborn are labeled as assimilationist, people who have accepted some imperial values. Queerness is linked with Creek traditions, while homophobia is assimilationist. Womack supports the reinterpretation of Creek history to be more accepting of queer identities, while arguing that assimilationist tendencies that have led to queer erasure and rejection.

Christianity and American Indians

The rejection Josh experiences of his queer identity in the predominantly white Christian church is representative of what Vine Deloria describes as the assimilationist tendencies of Christianity. As Deloria explains in *Custer Died for Your Sins*, European Christianity has been used to assimilate American Indians since the early missionaries in North America:

While the thrust of Christian missions was to save the individual Indian, its result was to shatter Indian societies and destroy the cohesiveness of the Indian communities. Tribes that resisted the overtures of the missionaries seemed to survive. Tribes that converted were never heard of

again. Where Christianity failed, and insofar as it failed, Indians were able to withstand the cultural deluge that threatened to engulf them. (102)

The American Indians who are able to survive the assimilationist tendencies of Eurocentric Christianity are able to better maintain their cultural identities. Resistance to these religions is necessary for tribal empowerment; however, Christianity that is not Eurocentric is also acceptable.

Although Deloria does advocate for a return to tribal religions, he mentions that “an Indian version of Christianity could do much for our society” (Deloria, *Custer Died* 112), which could be accomplished through Native Christian denominations. Weaver notes that “The issue, as always, is one of power and self-determination” (Weaver 131). *Drowning in Fire* features such a Native Christian denomination. This denomination makes no value judgement on queer relationships and, although Jimmy and Josh are not open about their relationship, they are able to communicate affectionately and sit together during the service. At the church service, Josh feels that his sexual identity is affirmed in the community, and that he follows in a line of other queer Creeks in a similar situation: “Surely this had happened before. Two men had sat next to each other, in church, or out under the arbors, who had once been lovers or still were” (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 257).

Snakes and Allotment

During Josh’s visions, he is able to travel through time to the early 20th century, when land allotment was occurring. He encounters conservative Snake Creeks fighting against allotment, and these Snakes are portrayed as defenders of Creek traditions in the face of the U.S. government’s attempts to destroy American Indian culture. Their

mission, as described in *Drowning in Fire*, is to “Hold on and salvage whatever was left. Don’t give up anything else. Sell no more land” (224). Tarbie is a member of the Lighthorsemen, who were Creeks who searched for and punished Creeks who signed up for allotments and/or rented their land to white people (Littlefield 143-4): “[...] Tarbie had been riding the countryside with the Lighthorsemen, looking for those who’d committed treason against the nation by signing up for allotments, leasing lands to the *’stihuktis*, or hiring whites as laborers” (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 224).

Conclusion

Craig Womack’s *Drowning in Fire* is historically and politically situated both within the early 1900s, when land allotment was taking place, and the 1970s-90s, during which time organizations such as the American Indian Movement advocated for greater civil rights. Furthermore, the book addresses queer identities, which are often underrepresented in American Indian literature; same-sex marriages are illegal in the Creek Nation. This text focuses on strengthening the bonds between queerness and traditional Creek values. Although *Drowning in Fire* and the Fus Fixico Letters are both about the Creek Nation, they address different communities within the tribe: *Drowning in Fire* focuses on making Creek communities more inclusive to queer identities, while the Fus Fixico Letters seeks to convince Creeks in Eufaula to endorse politically progressive actions. Because the two pieces of literature concentrate on different communities and deal with different historical and political circumstances, they embody communitist values in separate ways. Despite these disparities, though, they both suggest that the transformation of Creek community is necessary for its survival.

Notes

ⁱ However, many critics, such as Jace Weaver and Vine Deloria, have praised AIM.

ⁱⁱ The text also examines the lives of other populations who are often overlooked in American Indian literature, such as black American Indians and women who have been sexually assaulted. However, in the interest in space, I will not have the opportunity to address all these identities in the thesis.

Communitism in The Fus Fixico Letters and *Drowning in Fire*

Introduction

Communitism, a combination of “community” and “activism,” is literature that demonstrates a proactive commitment to the empowerment of American Indian communities. Works that are communitist are often located within specific communities, advocate for political or social activism, and identify community as a constantly evolving entity. The Fus Fixico Letters by Alexander Posey and *Drowning in Fire* by Craig Womack are both communitist pieces of literature that address Creek societies. The Fus Fixico Letters focus on Posey’s local community at Eufaula, support collaboration with the Dawes Commission, and encourage the Transforming Indian in favor of the Vanishing Indian. *Drowning in Fire*, on the other hand, redefines Creek history so it is inclusive of queer identities and upholds the anti-allotment Snake faction as the epitome of American Indian activism. These pieces of literature focus on the survival and development of the Creek Nation, either by embracing allotment or making the community more accepting of queer identities. Both texts are communitist because they promote the survival of the Creek Nation in their respective situations.

Specific Creek Community in *Drowning in Fire*

Drowning in Fire expands Creek discourse to be more inclusive of queer identities. For Womack, “queerness” encourages the acceptance of multiple forms of identity rather than assimilating into the dominant culture. He elaborates on this point in *Red on Red*:

The term ‘queer’ works for me because it acknowledges the importance of cultural differences and the usefulness of maintaining those differences

rather than simply submitting to dominant-culture norms. In other words, it is an anti-assimilationist term and bears a relationship to the kind of radical possibilities I wish to discuss. Also, the thinking behind the term ‘queer,’ which seems to celebrate deviance rather than apologize for it, seems embodied with trickster’s energy to push social boundaries. (301)

Queerness allows for the exploration of various aspects of an identity without these different aspects having to cancel one another out. Because queerness is so inclusive, Josh Henneha is able to fully embrace his queer and Creek identities without conflict. Womack describes queerness as “anti-assimilationist,” and Josh was initially instructed at a predominantly-white church to reject his homosexuality. He is not able to accept his sexual identity until he learns more about his tribal heritage. The symbolism of snakes within *Drowning in Fire* demonstrates, as Mark Rifkin acknowledges in “Native Nationality and the Contemporary Queer,” that the Creek community accepts queer identities.

Initially, due to Josh’s involvement in the white Baptist church, snakes represent malicious temptation that would lead to an eternity in Hell. Jimmy, Josh’s love interest, becomes associated with snakes. As Josh, Jimmy, and their friends hang out on a raft in a body of water, Josh observes Jimmy with fascination: “As Jimmy pulled himself aboard he seemed to rise out of the lake in an unending succession; his wiry arms and upper body kept coming and coming, followed by his swimming trunks and long legs, like a snake uncoiling” (11). Mark Rifkin suggests that because Josh is firmly embedded within a white Baptist church that regards homosexuality as a sin, Jimmy’s representation as a snake is associated with the devil: “these serpentine images imply the presence of

something satanic, casting Jimmy as a perverse influence leading Josh toward a fall from grace” (Rifkin, “Native Nationality” 447-448). Josh’s attraction to Jimmy becomes directly correlated with sin and hellfire. When he lies in bed with Jimmy directly prior to their first sexual encounter, Josh experiences a flashback to the pastor at the white Baptist church his family attends condemning homosexuality. Josh reflects: “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” (64). Josh disparages himself as a “freak, a grotesque, a rampant sinner,” demonstrating that he has interpellated the white Church’s disapproval for homosexuality. The repetition of “I burned, I burned, I burned” indicates Josh’s associating his homosexuality with sin and, eventually, hell. Association with the white Church leads Josh to feel ashamed of his queer identity and fear some form of supernatural punishment for his desires.

However, through the retelling of Creek traditional stories, snakes are redefined in light of Creek culture, rather than white assimilationism. The traditional Creek story of the tie-snake is represented as free of white influence. Josh’s grandfather tells this story:

“There is something white man has never saw or caught,” he went on, “something in the water. Their head is shape like a deer. If you are by water it has a power and will pull you in. It don’t pull just anyone in water, just certain people. If you ever see a whirling water in the river you better get out of there. It makes a sound like a big snake then rises up on a sheet of water. If you ever see the strange monster, someone dies. White man never did catch this tie-snake. They have horns like a deer and all kinds of color, kinda greenish and red.” (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 19)

Thus, snakes are associated not with the Christian imagery of Satan, but instead are located within Creek tradition. The iteration and reiteration that the “white man has never saw or caught” the tie-snake indicate the tie-snake is untainted by white culture. Almost immediately following this story, Jimmy is represented as a tie-snake when he saves Josh from drowning: “Jimmy dove headfirst toward the troubled water. Josh saw a snake, with horns, swimming toward him” (22). Jimmy’s representation as a tie-snake relates him back to Creek tradition. Furthermore, the tie-snake story notably discourages assimilation, and so Jimmy as the tie-snake would reject the white Baptist church’s condemnation of homosexuality. Queerness is accepted through association with Creek tradition.

Finally, the conservative Snakes accept queer individuals, further establishing homosexuality within Creek tradition. Tarbie and Seborn, a same-sex couple living in the early 1900s, are members of the Snake faction. The couple only feels safe from discrimination when they were with the Snakes (222). Also, Seborn reflects that homosexuality is so accepted within the Creek tribe that he does not even have to explain it; however, his sexual identity is not recognized by whites: “Sometimes he thought about Tarbie and him, what people thought of the two of them together. He didn’t have an explanation for it, never heard of such a thing in English and didn’t have to explain it in Muskogee” (223). Since Seborn is unable to describe his sexual identity in English, this suggests that white culture does not tolerate homosexuality. Furthermore, that Seborn “didn’t have to explain it in Muskogee” suggests that Creeks during his time were so accepting of homosexuality that no explanation was required of him—he did not have to

defend his sexual identity. As Snakes, Seborn and Tarbie's relationship indicates that queerness is in fact deeply related to Creek traditions.

Later on in the text, Josh and Jimmy take Tarbie and Seborn's place among the Snakes: "Me and Jimmy had gathered at Chitto's house, about a mile from Pierce, along with the other Snakes, because we had planned on going to the council grounds before all the trouble broke out" (242). Both Josh and Jimmy are firmly established within traditionalist Creeks. This affirms their sexual identities as accepted by Creek traditions.

Womack establishes queer identities within Creek tradition by rewriting Creek history. Josh reflects that his and Josh's inscription into Creek history is a means of redefining and accepting his queer identity. At the end of his journeying with the Snakes, Josh muses, "An invented history, a history of invention. A chance to invent your own history. As early as birth, there's the danger of getting stuck to a bad story if you stick your hands inside the wrong words" (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 246-247). By envisioning himself with the Snakes, Josh is "inventing his own history." Josh had previously been "stuck to a bad story," in which white assimilation encouraged homophobia. However, by rewriting history, Josh was able to reclaim his queer identity as located within Creek history.

Comparison

While both *Drowning in Fire* and the Fus Fixico Letters address Creek communities, they focus on different aspects. Posey concentrates on his community at Eufaula and seeks to influence contemporary politics; Womack centers on making Creek culture more inclusive of queer identities. By emphasizing alternate facets of Creek community, these texts together highlight the importance of empowerment within the

Creek Nation. The authors use different techniques to locate their literature within Creek culture: Posey employs “este charte” dialect while Womack relies on traditional Creek stories and reimagining Creek history. In both instances, the authors seek to influence and empower Creek society by presenting a certain political or social perspective. Both writers demonstrate that defining and redefining Creek community leads to empowerment.

Allotment in *Drowning in Fire*

In *Drowning in Fire*, resisting allotment is portrayed as an honorable act that supports Creek autonomy. Seborn and Tarbie in *Drowning in Fire* join the Snakes in fighting allotment. Seborn describes the Snakes’ mission:

Hold on and salvage whatever was left. Don’t give up anything else. Sell no more land. Uphold the Treaty of 1832, its promise of unbroken land tenure and Creek national government in Indian Territory into perpetuity. Keep the faith that what had been lost would someday come back. Purge yourself from bad white influences. Stick with the grounds and the medicine and the dances. This had been the full-blood position now and always. (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 224)

The term “salvage” implies that the American Indians already were having many rights revoked from them. Under their historical circumstances, the tribes had lost their autonomy. “Salvage,” however, means to recover what is left, to continue to survive, even under horrible circumstances. Doing this would require to “sell no more land,” a statement directly against the Dawes Commission’s emphasis on land allotment. The phrase “keep the faith” suggests holding on to sacred beliefs; these beliefs in this case are

in Creek autonomy and the Treaty of 1832. By trusting in Creek tradition, the Snakes and other Creeks could ensure the survival of the tribe.

Furthermore, Chitto Harjo is celebrated as an individual who supports Creek traditions and fought for the survival of the Nation. Josh narrates:

Most important, the resistance he [Chitto Harjo] started continued on long after his death and continues today. In 1924 there were still sixty families living at Hickory Grounds under the old tribal law, and they sent delegates to D.C. until 1930, nineteen years after Chitto passed away. None of us layed down like whupped pups, and I want future generations of Oklahoma Indian kids to know that many tribes, including ours, had these strong holdouts against state government. This is what they ought to teach in Oklahoma schools instead of the history of the boomers, Sooners, and criminal politicians, in other words the glorification of land theft. You tell me which group makes better heroes for young people. (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 245-6)

Here, Chitto Harjo is vaunted as the epitome as an American Indian activist, an ideal “hero,” whose legacy continues today. He is a “hero” for the Creek tribe because he resisted allotment and the attempt to destroy the tribal government. He is directly identified with other activist American Indians who sent delegates to D.C. in 1930, relating him to continued resistance among the Creeks. Josh inserts himself in the narrative of resistance against mainstream white culture and assimilation by using the pronouns “us” and “I,” indicating that he himself carries on the activist tradition of Chitto Harjo. Josh also suggests further activism that can be taken in the future through

education, by increasing teaching about American Indian national figures. Continued American Indian activism can take place by teaching new generations of Chitto Harjo and his support for the Creek tribe. Anti-allotment activism is representative of the enduring Creek battle for greater empowerment and autonomy.

Comparison

The different perspectives regarding allotment are perhaps the most noticeable differences between the Fus Fixico Letters and *Drowning in Fire*. However, the most important aspect of communitism is that it enables self-determinism empowerment, not that it promotes a specific political point of view. Christopher Teuton notes that “[Jace] Weaver’s communitism avoids judgments based upon the explicit political ideology of a text, instead expanding his interpretive apparatuses to include a definition of Native literature that is inclusive of multiple diverging viewpoints and voices, both from the past and present” (C. Teuton 207). The Fus Fixico Letters and *Drowning in Fire* promote different political standpoints, and, as Teuton mentions, presents voices from both “the past and present.” The Letters are pro-allotment and were written as allotment was taking place, while *Drowning in Fire* depicts the anti-allotment Snakes as keepers of Creek tradition, but was written nearly a century after allotment.

The Fus Fixico Letters support allotment as what Posey perceived as the most practical way forward for Creek survival. Posey writes, from the perspective of Fus Fixico, “[the Snake prophet] Wacache he say Dawes Commission was had to save other Injins like me and Charley Gibson” (Posey 73). The Dawes Commission is portrayed as not only beneficial for (progressive) Creeks, but also necessary. The term “save” suggests the Creeks are in imminent peril, and their only way to avoid this danger is through

allotment. Posey, unlike Womack, depicts the Dawes Commission as advantageous and essential for the continuation of the Creek Nation. However, both texts promote forms of activism that would enable the continuance of their tribe, which is integral to communitist texts.

Transformative Community in *Drowning in Fire*

Transformation is reflected in *Drowning in Fire* by the expanding of Creek community to include queer identities. Several Creek characters make homophobic comments in the novel, such as referring to Josh as “the fag” (66) or claiming “I ain’t kissing no guy” (23) when asked to perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Both of these examples serve to “other” queer Creeks and exclude them from Creek communities. However, towards the end of the novel, Josh arrives at an acceptance of his queer identity by linking it with his American Indian identity. Josh and Jimmy discover that they both enjoy Hank Williams’ music, and they strike up a conversation about how meaningful “I’m So Lonesome I could Cry” is to both of them. Jimmy says:

“Those songs have everything to do with being Indian, everything to do with being queer. I don’t know quite how to put my finger on it, but it’s about loneliness, a shitload of pain, not being able to speak to the one you love, remaining hidden and silent in the shadows for a lifetime, being an outsider everywhere you go. That’s some powerful shit, huh? You reckon Hank was queer?” (Womack, *Drowning in Fire* 276)

Stating that a piece of music could have “everything to do with” being “Indian” and “queer” indicates that both identities have shared experiences. However, the shared relationship between the two identities is built on experiencing “a shitload of pain.”

Queer identities have been overlooked and suppressed within Creek culture, just as American Indian cultures have been repressed through assimilation. The comment of “being an outsider everywhere you go” could refer to either American Indian identities or queer identities. Being American Indian means consistently being in the minority and being queer means likely also being in the minority; both identities incur discrimination and stereotyping from people with the accepted “normal” identities (i.e. white and/or heterosexual). Queerness evolves from something to be ashamed of and teased about by fellow Creeks to an identity that can co-exist with being American Indian.

Comparison

Communitism espouses the idea that community is adaptive, is flexible, and is a process. As Weaver states, “It is not an ‘immemorial...and static’ character that has been the strength of Native culture and community but, rather, its lability—its persistence [and] vivacity’ as Natives themselves change but remain Native nevertheless” (Weaver 43). In order for communities to “persist,” they must actively adapt—but not assimilate—to their environments. The Fus Fixico Letters and *Drowning in Fire* suggest that their communities must transform in order to survive. Posey supports adjusting cultural practices to accommodate changing political systems, particularly land allotment, while Womack maintains that Creek community should become more inclusive and recognize queer identities as rooted in their tribal heritage.

Posey believes the Creeks in Indian Territory should embody what Tereza Szeghi terms the “Transforming Indian.” Transforming Indians actively choose to engage in aspects of Euro-American culture so that they can “participate in U.S. social systems while retaining Creek autonomy” (Szeghi 4). For instance, Posey advocates for Creeks to

cooperate with the Dawes Commission. He writes, from the perspective of Fus Fixico, “I don’t know what I do if I don’t get my deed pretty soon” (Posey 56). Fus Fixico excitedly anticipates receiving his land deed, which suggests that other Creeks should likewise welcome allotment. Fus Fixico also has an offer of “15c for [his] land,” which is an example of economic progress that comes as a result of participating within this aspect of the U.S. socio-political system. Posey and Womack both argue that the Creek Nation can continue to survive through transformation.

Conclusion

The Fus Fixico Letters and *Drowning in Fire* espouse communitist tendencies by supporting specific sections of the Creek community, endorsing specific political action, and encouraging survival by tapping into their community’s capability for transformation. While the texts address different communities in different eras and endorse separate political opinions, both pieces of literature represent community as an active entity that is capable of change. Transformation is reflective of and necessary for survival, whether this means making Creek community more inclusive or changing the Creek socio-political structure in order to cooperate with the Dawes Commission: communitism in the Creek Nation shifts as the needs of the community changes. Creek community continues to evolve, because of and evidenced by the written word.

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