Natural Metaphors and the Written Word

"I was to Muskogee last week and buy heap stuff on my land," Fus Fixico wrote in his first letter to the editor of the Indian Journal. "Next time I go to Checotah, or maybe Eufaula, and buy stuff the same way." It was October 1902; the enterprising correspondent had appeared on the scene at a time when the greatest challenge facing citizens of the Creek Nation was the allotment of their national territory. Not everyone supported the work of the Dawes Commission, but for those who did—or who had resigned themselves to such a fate—the allotment process turned on the issuance of fee simple deeds. "I don't know what I do if I don't get my deed pretty soon," Fus Fixico added a month later, the holiday shopping season fast approaching. "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."[1]

Fus Fixico was a tribal pragmatist, but he also admired the courage of opposition leaders such as Chitto Harjo and Latah Micco, who were refusing to participate in allotment. In December he reported on the activities of Wacache, a religious prophet popular among Creek traditionalists in recent months. "Wacache he says he was had a talk with God and knows lots of things like wise mens of old times in the Bible. He says the Creeks was not live right now like before Columbus and Dawes commission," which is a succinct statement of colonial lineage. In response to this timely revelation, Wacache had

announced his opposition to the allotment process by dismantling his own home and burning it piece by piece in a ceremonial fire. "So God was tell him to make medicine for Creeks," Fus Fixico continued, "and make them wash off in the branch, too, and rub lots sand on their hides and dance stomp dance and play ball game. This way they was get strong and quit renting land to white folks and let the country get wild and have lots game like long time ago." Chitto Harjo, Latah Micco, Wacache, and many other Creeks were insisting that the United States honor the communal title stipulated by earlier legal documents.[2]

Treaties were the parlance of European diplomacy, while deeds were the practical expression of American imperialism. In this particular instance, blank deeds were printed in Washington and shipped to the Creek Nation capital of Okmulgee, filled out by tribal officials and returned to Washington, signed by the secretary of the interior and sent back to Okmulgee, then countersigned by the principal chief and handed out to new individual landowners. Fus Fixico was among those who were critical of Creek leaders for dragging their feet in the process. "It will be good thing when we get deeds," he noted in his first letter, though the sentiment had little to do with the pride of home ownership many today associate with the so-called American dream. "Like I say all time," he later wrote, "fullblood Injin was not want nothing any more but deeds, but seem like big man at Washington and big man in Creek nation was hold him down so he couldn't get it and he was had to trade it out in due bills." Fus Fixico was not the only Creek who found humor in the

situation, or who used the written word to subvert those who place their faith in the written word. He inspired his readers—then and now—to appreciate the ironies and ambiguities of the literate worldview.[3]

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We crawled out of the earth, the old ones say, cold and hungry. The people had been living in a land of darkness until they ventured through a hole in the ground, discovering a new world of possibility and peril. Marveling at the ball of fire overhead, they warmed themselves and looked around for the first time. It was a beautiful land full of living things. They had emerged beside a great mountain chain, the backbone of the earth, from which they could see the rising and setting of the sun. Others decided to stay in the world below, but the Mvskokvlke were borne into the light by a restless spirit.[4]

Generations of Mvskoke elders have narrated these events, passing down through oral tradition the history of their people. In recent centuries ethnologists and other travel writers have documented a few such performances, with mixed results. The oldest ethnographic rendering of this particular tribal narrative was recorded in the Christian year 1735, when a large group of Mvskokvlke journeyed to Savannah and met with James Oglethorpe, governor of the colony of Georgia. It had been two years since they signed their first treaty with the British, pledging alliance, commerce, and a small cession of land, and this follow-up meeting had been arranged so they might elaborate the terms of the treaty. The Mvskoke diplomats brought with them a buffalo-skin manuscript containing their origin account written in red

and black pictographic characters. At one point in the proceedings Chekilli, leader of the visiting delegation, related the Mvskoke genesis; it was simultaneously translated for Oglethorpe and his colonists and transcribed by a British clerk. "And they believe the coming of the English to this place is for good to them and their Children," the clerk wrote as the oration concluded, "And will always have Strait Hearts towds them." Chekilli then presented the buffalo-skin manuscript to Oglethorpe, who forwarded it to the Georgia colony office in London. It was hung on display and the transcript was filed with colony records; both documents were later misplaced. The English transcription was rediscovered and published nearly two centuries later, when it surfaced in the Fulham Palace archives, but the Mvskoke manuscript—an ironic artifact of American history—is still missing.[5]

The emergence of the Mvskokvlke was a revelation, but it was only the beginning of the long story of the people. Soon after they arrived in this world a thick fog descended on the land, so dense it obscured their newfound vision. They wandered around blindly, searching for food and calling out to others in the confusion. Soon the people drifted apart in small groups. The individuals in each group clung to one another in fear of being isolated and completely lost. Even the animals lived in terror, and cries for help could be heard throughout the land. It was a time of infamous grief and suffering.[6]

Finally, after a great while, Hesaketvmese had mercy on them. A current of air from the east gradually cleared away the fog. The people rejoiced at regaining their sight and offered thanks to the Master of Breath. Within

each group they marked their collective survival by claiming one another as kin, swearing eternal allegiance to these extended families. The group closest to the sunrise was the first to be rescued by the wind; they became the leading clan among the Mvskokvlke, calling themselves the wind clan. As the fog receded each group took the name of the first animal they encountered: bear, panther, deer, bird, beaver, alligator, and others. These ancestral clans became the bedrock of Mvskoke civilization, supporting a complex system of social organization regulating interpersonal contacts, town governance, subsistence practices, diplomatic relations, and ceremonial responsibilities. The various clan designations evince the primordial bond between humans and other living things. Taken together, they also constitute a microcosm of creation, reflecting the organic diversity inherent to the natural environment. Solidarity within clans enacts a tradition of sharing among relatives, an effective strategy for surviving hardship. Proscribing marriage between clan members extends this practice of cooperative interdependence to outsiders as well, simultaneously safeguarding the biological welfare of the people.[7]

Now reunited, the Mvskokvlke realized their need for fire and set out to find the home of this strange, holy power. They descended from the mountains toward the sunrise, crossing a grassy plain covered by immense herds of animals who shook the earth when they ran. Soon one of their leaders fashioned an arrow; the people used it to break a trail, shooting the arrow toward the sun each morning and following its trajectory through the day. Their eastward migration eventually brought them to the banks of a wide,

muddy river. They stopped and rested for a while before crossing the water and plunging into the forest on the other side. This was an abundant land, well watered and full of game. In time they came to a second memorable river that ran with the color of blood. Here they erected two earthen mounds, one long and one round.[8]

Their arduous journey to the source brought the Mvskokvlke into contact with other peoples, both adversaries and allies. Hesaketvmese provided guidance and protection along the way and also revealed knowledge that proved essential to their survival. The people were given rules to live by, helping them regulate the spiritual power pervading the world. They were instructed in the use of four sacred plants and other herbal medicines for curing and purification. They were directed to build each of their towns around a square ground, where an annual green corn festival and other ceremonies could be held. Most importantly, they received the gift of sacred fire, which became the centerpiece of community life and allowed the Mvskokvlke to communicate with Hesaketvmese, so long as the fire was kept burning.[9]

The people lived near the red river for some time but then moved on, continuing their search for the home of the sun. They followed a white path until it brought them to an immeasurable body of water, where they found the arrow pointing back at them. The next morning they stood in silence as they watched the sun rise from the ocean. Unable to pursue their quest for knowledge any further, they turned back and settled along the rivers and

streams behind them. This bountiful region would be the Mvskoke homeland. The people maintained their religious traditions and became skilled at agriculture and diplomacy. The Mvskoke confederacy grew in size and power, claiming an expansive territory in the southeastern part of the continent. The first estehvtke appeared in recent times, beginning with a light-skinned explorer who trekked through the lands of the Mvskokvlke and their neighbors on a long journey toward the sunset. When the British arrived a few decades later, establishing coastal outposts and offering new opportunities for trade, they began referring to the Mvskokvlke as "Creeks," an allusion to their preference for locating their towns next to waterways. The newcomers thus unwittingly commemorated the prominence of water in Mvskoke cultural history, though this colonial signifier also glossed the ethnic, linguistic, and political diversity present within the remarkably heterogeneous confederacy.[10]

Each tribal town kept its fire burning and the Mvskokvlke were a dominant power in North America for countless generations, until Great Britain lost control of its colonists. After an aeon of Mvskoke civilization in the southeast, U.S. imperialism brought about their dispossession and removal to Indian Territory, beyond the Mississippi River. Town leaders carried the sacred fire with them, but this westward movement meant a reversal of history for the Mvskokvlke, backtracking their ancient migration. Bayonets at their backs replaced the arrow that had led them across the continent. They watched their homeland disappear over the horizon as foot soldiers and cavalrymen drove

them from the east, home of the sun and source of the wind that had delivered them. The people were cold and hungry once again.[11]

The Mvskokvlke survived the trauma of removal and also weathered the American civil war and the statehood of Oklahoma that followed. Beginning in 1911 they were visited by anthropologist John Swanton, representing the Bureau of American Ethnology. It was the heyday of salvage ethnography and he hoped to document the cultural traditions of the "Creek Indians" before they grew "obsolete," seemingly unaware that human experience cannot be preserved, only lived. Written texts are durable acts of invention, just as oral tellings are more performance than recitation. Swanton worked closely with several Mvskoke leaders including George Washington Grayson, Zachariah Cook, Jackson Lewis, William McCombs, Legus Perryman, and Ellis Childers along with dozens of other informants, nearly all of them male. To his credit, he supplemented his field work by assembling all of the relevant historical sources he could find, and several of his publications on the Mvskokvlke are handy compilations of the documentary record.[12]

Swanton's study of these oral and written renditions of Mvskoke origins led him to observe that "the origin legends of these people differed to some extent in the several Muskogee towns, but there was a harmony between the various versions." His detailed analysis of these origin accounts begins with the narrative attributed to Chekilli. "The astonishing thing about this entire narrative," he concluded, "is the closeness with which the movement can be followed" across extant geographic features. "We must either suppose that the

line of migration had been relocalized by later story tellers or that the Creeks were able to record historical events in some relatively permanent manner." Citing the fact that the Mvskokvlke used "mnemonic devices" to outline historical events, he conceded it is "possible the movement took place along the line laid out." This is an enigmatic admission, given his earlier contention that "the so-called origin or migration legends contain but few facts of real historical value and must be assumed to apply only to a relatively recent period." Like many social scientists after him, Swanton approached antiquarian work wary of "internal sources," preferring to rely on "the archeological record left by the tribes as interpreted through an intensive study of the ethnology of their living representatives."[13]

As Swanton's research demonstrates, the line between myth and history is a hard one to draw through the sources on Mvskoke origins. Fact shades into fiction, evidence into conjecture, in any attempt to construct a coherent account of the past. Swanton's attention to harmonizing the various renditions of the story, and to identifying the geographic references contained therein, disclose his justifiable concern with questions of canonical mediation and veracity. But this textual approach to oral narratives largely misses the point that Chekilli and others have tried to make. Too many literates read tribal oration as scripture—either sympathetically, as fount of countercultural dogma, or antagonistically, as target for secularist deconstruction. The scriptural worldview underestimates the creative power of story, neglects personality and relationship, and eventuates in religious conflict.

Chekilli saved the best for last in his oration at Savannah. After narrating the Mvskoke origin account he closed with a diplomatic flourish, heralding peaceful relations between the Mvskokvlke and the British. "I am glad I have been Down and Seen things as they are," he declared, "We Shall go home and tell the Children and all the Nation." His final recorded words were probably the most important comments he made that day, suggesting a broader context for their negotiations and demonstrating a keen awareness of the contest between wisdom and power: "I am Sensible there is one who has made us all And tho' Some have more knowledge and others the Great and Strong must become Dirt Alike." And then Chekilli handed the buffalo skin to Oglethorpe.[14]

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In fourteen hundred ninety-two, so the story goes, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. On May 12 he left the royal encampment at Santa Fe de Granada, bearing a lucrative contract signed by the Catholic monarchs. On August 3 he left the shipyards of Palos, commanding a merchant ship and two caravels outfitted for a long voyage. On September 6 he left Gomera in the Canary Islands, bound for the Indies by a fabled western route. Many of his crewmen wept when they finally lost sight of land several days later. The three vessels were surrounded by water for weeks; fear was their greatest challenge as trade winds drove them toward the sunset. Their adventure had begun with an invocation, "In the name of our lord Jesus Christ," and now every hint of

landfall was taken as a sign of divine favor. Leaving their homes behind, the españoles were borne across the sea by a restless spirit.[15]

Generations of storytellers have narrated these events, passing down as scriptural tradition an origin account for the European colonization of the Americas. Of course, Cristóbal Colón and his crew were preceded in this new world by Norse settlers five hundred earlier, and possibly by explorers from Africa and Asia as well; Colón was not the first Old World adventurer to set foot here. His arrival did, however, enact the beginning of a new era in American history. Convinced of the novelty of this voyage, he resolved to leave a record of his exploits in hopes of promoting español navigation, trade, evangelization, and imperialism. "I thought of writing on this whole voyage, very diligently, all that I would do and see and experience," he wrote in the ship's log shortly after sailing from Palos. His daily entries during the seven-month expedition marked nautical progress, described exotic flora and fauna, documented encounters with various people, and speculated on the prospects for español supremacy in these lands. Returning to Barcelona, Colón reported on their accomplishments and presented the ship's log to Isabel and Fernando. At least one copy of the log was produced by royal scribes soon thereafter; both copy and original were later misplaced. The 1571 translation of a Colón biography by one of his sons, claiming "to tell the story of the Admiral's life only from his writings and letters and what I myself observed," was the definitive authority on the first voyage for more than two centuries. In recent times this source has been superseded by a draft paraphrase of the ship's log, probably written in the

middle of the sixteenth century, that was discovered in 1791 and published in 1825. But the original manuscript—an iconic artifact of colonial history—is still missing.[16]

The passage of the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María was an ordeal, but it was only the beginning of the story. By October 10 "the men could no longer stand it; they complained of the long voyage," so Colón reminded them of their royal commission and assured them of success. The next day they saw birds overhead and found green vegetation and lumber floating in the water, and "with these signs everyone breathed more easily and cheered up." Even Colón felt certain that land was near. At evening vespers on October 11 he admonished his crew to keep a good lookout during the night. A few hours later he spied a faint light, "like a small wax candle that rose and lifted up, which to few seemed to be an indication of land." He watched apprehensively until two hours after midnight, when the Pinta fired the signal for landfall. Hauling down the sails, the three ships tacked back and forth under the cover of darkness, waiting for daybreak. After wandering westward for more than a month, Colón had finally found his promised land.[17]

As the sun rose behind them the españoles marveled at the shores of a peaceful island. It was a beautiful land full of living things, including a number of curious onlookers watching the three ships from the beach. Colón and his officers "went ashore in the armed launch" displaying the royal standard, a flag bearing the Christian cross flanked by crowns and the initials of the king and queen. Rejoicing at their good fortune, they fell to their knees

and kissed the ground and offered thanks to Dios. Then they stood up and looked around for the first time. It was a fogless morning and they could see "very green trees and many ponds and fruits of various kinds." With the liturgical assistance of his scrivener, Colón proceeded to administer a verbal ceremony before a growing audience on the beach. He gathered his men around him and, in the words of the paraphrased log, "said that they should be witnesses that, in the presence of all, he would take, as in fact he did take, possession of the said island for the king and for the queen his lords, making the declarations that were required, and which at more length are contained in the testimonials made there in writing." Renaming the island San Salvador in honor of his holy savior, he planted the español banner in the sand.[18]

Having dispensed with the formalities of colonial dispossession, Colón turned his attention to the residents of this new español territory. "In order that they would be friendly to us," he wrote that evening, "to some of them I gave red caps, and glass beads which they put on their chests, and many other things of small value." In return, the islanders "brought us parrots and cotton thread in balls and javelins and many other things, and they traded them to us for other things which we gave them, such as small glass beads and bells. In sum, they took everything and gave of what they had very willingly. But it seemed to me that they were a people very poor in everything." This brief account of diplomatic trading gave way to a more extensive passage of ethnographic description. Colón was especially interested in the physical attributes of the scantily clad indios, comparing various parts of their bodies to

Canary Islanders and to horses. "They should be good and intelligent servants, for I see that they say very quickly everything that is said to them; and I believe that they would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to me that they had no religion." Speculating these were "people who would be better freed and converted to our holy faith by love than by force," he ended this entry in the ship's log by anticipating that, if it pleased Dios, "at the time of my departure I will take six of them from here to your highnesses in order that they may learn to speak. No animal of any kind did I see on this island except parrots."[19]

The ships remained anchored offshore on October 13 and entertained visitors throughout the day. The españoles and the indios engaged in conversation and barter, relying on physical gestures to communicate. Noticing that some of them wore jewelry fashioned from a yellow metal, Colón "was attentive and labored to find out if there was any gold." The indios brought a variety of trade goods to the españoles, "little things that it would be tiresome to write down," but could produce only stories of the coveted element. Colón interpreted his informants' gesticulations as directing him to "a king who had large vessels of it and had very much gold," though they refused to lead the way. "And so I will go to the southwest," he wrote, "to seek gold and precious stones."[20]

The next morning Colón explored the coast of the island before setting out in search of fortune. October 14 of the Christian year 1492 was the first Sunday in American history, and people gathered on the beaches as the españoles passed by, "calling to us and giving thanks to Dios." Some swam out

to greet them, "and we understood that they were asking us if we had come from the heavens. And one old man got into the ship's boat, and others in loud voices called to all the men and women: Come and see the men who came from the heavens. Bring them something to eat and drink." Amidst ambiguous gestures and unintelligible utterances, Colón somehow divined that he and his crew had become objects of religious devotion. Spiritual concerns were quickly overshadowed by imperial considerations, however, and the ship's log became a monologue between Colón and his royal benefactors. The españoles arrived at a natural harbor with room enough "for as many ships as there are in the whole of Christendom, and the entrance to it is very narrow," Colón remarked. "I bestirred myself this morning to see all of this, so that I could give an account of everything to your highnesses, and also to see where a fort could be made." Earlier he had tried to persuade the indios to guide him to the gold and "saw that they had no intention of going," so instead he acted on his observation that "these people are very naive about weapons, as your highnesses will see from seven that I caused to be taken in order to carry them away to you." He also assured Isabel and Fernando that "whenever your highnesses may command, all of them can be taken to Castile or held captive on this same island; because with fifty men all of them could be held in subjection and can be made to do whatever one might wish." After exploring the harbor Colón set sail for one of the "numberless" islands his captives described to him, lands he understood to be "very fertile and all populated."[21]

The next three months of the expedition were mere variation on the themes of its first three days. The españoles toured the islands in their quest for gold, remapping the earth as they laid claim to an expansive territory far from home. They bestowed a Christian name on each island they visited, glossing the human diversity already present in the remarkably heterogeneous Americas, and at every stop they erected a cross, the Christian sign of sacrifice and redemption. Colón was awed by the diversity of flora and fauna and in his log he detailed the natural resources they encountered. He commented repeatedly on opportunities for religious and economic proselytizing and mentioned recurring problems communicating with the indios, along with some annoying escapes and several additional kidnappings. The español explorers also struggled against the elements, which sometimes resisted their advances. At one point Colón observed that "to go around these islands there is need of many kinds of wind, and the wind does not blow just as men would wish," and later he complained when the wind turned "contrary" to his desires. Unable to proceed, he sent ashore six men "to see if they might be able to talk" to someone; they returned "having found neither people nor houses. They did find, however, some shelters and very wide paths and places where many fires had been made." On Christmas Eve the Santa María lodged on a coral reef and had to be abandoned, an auspiciously timed accident that might be interpreted several ways. Colón concluded "it was great luck and the particular will of Dios that the ship ran aground so that he would leave people there" to "found a settlement" and locate a gold mine reputed to be nearby. The ship's cargo was

salvaged through the efforts of local indios, whom Colón praised for being "faithful and without greed," especially their leader. "They love their neighbors as themselves," he sermonized. "And the memory that they have!" Colón left thirty-nine men at the outpost he named Navidad, ordering them to erect a palisaded fort complete with tower and moat. It was the first español settlement in the Americas. Like the Norse villages five centuries earlier and the first English colony at Roanoke a century later, it would not survive.[22]

The Niña and the Pinta sailed for home on January 16, first heading northeast to avoid the trade winds. The return voyage was slow going and after a month of calm seas the españoles were caught in a mid-winter gale that tossed them about for days. "Each one made his own special vows, because no one thought to escape, all regarding themselves as lost because of the terrible storm that they were suffering." Fearing that news of his discoveries would be lost, Colón "took a parchment and wrote on it all that he could about everything that he had found," sealed it in wax, and had it thrown overboard in a large wooden barrel. The next day they spotted land, which turned out to be the island of Santa Maria in the Azores. Cold and hungry, the españoles had been rescued from the wind.[23]

On March 4 the two ships dropped anchor at a Portuguese port outside Lisbon. Colón immediately wrote another summary of his achievements and sent it to Isabel and Fernando; this historic letter is one more colonial document for which the original manuscript has been lost. "Most Christian and lofty and powerful sovereigns: That eternal Dios who has given your

highnesses so many victories now gave you the greatest one that to this day he has ever given any prince," Colón announced. "I come from the Indies." He reported on his discoveries and asked the king and queen to reward him accordingly. "All of Christendom should hold great celebrations," he wrote, "for the finding of such a multitude of such friendly peoples, which with very little effort will be converted to our holy faith, and so many lands filled with so many goods very necessary to us in which all Christians will have comfort and profits, all of which was unknown nor did anyone speak of it except in fables."[24]

The Catholic monarchs responded immediately. They first obtained a papal bull securing their claim to this new western trade route and the lands it opened, then promised to finance subsequent expeditions led by Colón and others. Within several decades the españoles had conquered vast territories in the Americas. Among the earliest español explorers in North America was Hernando de Soto, who trekked across the southeastern part of the continent beginning in 1539. His three-year journey took him through the homelands of various indios, including one large and powerful confederacy whose towns were located along rivers and streams.[25]

A few years later Bartolomé de las Casas penned his abstract of the ship's log from the first voyage. Las Casas had lived in the Americas as an español colonizer and missionary priest as early as 1506, but by 1531 he had experienced an ideological conversion and become "Protector of the Indians." His version of the ship's log, which today is commonly referred to as the diario,

combines direct quotation, condensed paraphrase, and commentary by Las Casas. This manuscript, currently the most reliable source on the first voyage, was composed as a working draft, part of his ambitious effort to document "the History of the Indies" in defense of the indios. The diario alternates between first- and third-person pronouns, a literary device demarcating quotation from paraphrase and commentary. On at least one occasion, however, Las Casas used a first-person construction to voice concern about the integrity of his source, wondering "if the text from which I took this is not corrupt." Since its discovery more than two centuries ago the diario has been subjected to repeated attempts at transcription and translation, most of them characterized by careless, ideological editing.[26]

Recent Latino and Anglo critics have detailed the manifold interpretive challenges posed by the diario in its role as colonial scripture. A particularly vexing dilemma has centered on the nautical distances recorded during the outward voyage. The diario portrays Colón himself admitting to deliberate misrepresentation; on the day they lost sight of the Canary Islands the ships "made fifteen leagues" and he "decided to report less than those actually traveled so in case the voyage were long the men would not be frightened and lose courage." The geographic references in the diario during the first two weeks after land was sighted are especially unintelligible. With nearly a dozen islands hypothesized to be San Salvador and an even greater number of possible itineraries defended by various modern interpreters, the landfall controversy brings to mind the unending hermeneutical debates among biblical

scholars—and the violent conflicts their theological disagreements sometimes provoke. The most illuminating aspect of this controversy, however, is not the remarkable diversity of opinion but the very orientation of the debate. Resolving the technical minutiae of navigation and geography will change the tourism industry in the Caribbean and not much else; scholars preoccupied with the landfall have demonstrated a striking disregard for the more compelling passages in the diario, those describing cross-cultural interactions between the españoles and the indios. There is hardly a topic with greater historical significance, or bearing more revealing insights into contemporary affairs, than the quality of interpersonal relations at the beginning of the European colonization of the Americas.[27]

Colón arrived at Barcelona in mid-April of 1493. He had sailed from Lisbon to Palos and then crossed the Iberian Peninsula overland; word of his discoveries spread like wildfire and crowds gathered along the way to watch the triumphant procession. A young Las Casas saw him in Seville as he passed through bearing ecological and ethnological novelties: parrots, fruit, plants, gold, textiles, masks, and a few indios who had survived the voyage. Colón was received at the royal court in Barcelona in a solemn and heroic ceremony attended by the highest nobility, who showered him with praise. At one point during the voyage he had expressed concern that he "may be judged to be an excessive magnifier of what is true," and in Palos he had written his final entry in the ship's log, offering this manuscript as evidence of divine sanction for his discoveries: "Because certainly, beyond knowing and holding firmly and

strongly and without reservation, that his high majesty brings about all good things, and that everything is good except sin, and that one cannot praise or think anything which is not his consent, I know that, in the circumstances of this voyage, he has miraculously made this manifest, as one may understand through this writing, through the signal miracles which he has performed during the voyage and for me, who, much of the time that I was in your highnesses' court, met with the opposition and contrary opinion of many important persons of your household, who were all against me, alleging my enterprise to be ridiculous." Standing before the Catholic monarchs, he elaborated on his hope that the voyage "will be the greatest honor to Christianity that, unexpectedly, has ever come about." And then Cristóbal Colón handed the ship's log to Isabel and Fernando.[28]

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Every journey is a rite of passage, a liminal venture in conception, motion, narration. Stories of self-discovery invoke natural metaphors of trauma and deliverance: mountain and forest, fire and water, wind and fog, flesh and blood. The verbal fragments that survive these earthly labors are umbilical cords to meaning, tenuous lifelines translating pasts into presents. Making sense from the cacophony of voices laying claim to history can be a vexing task; interpretation tends more toward politics than epistemology. Our dilemma is embedded in the medium: cryptic evidence encoded in the sound and look of language, phonemes and characters with their inflections and diacritics. Language enables but also obscures, especially in translation, even

more so when invoking the sacred. English, for example, can render only clumsy approximations of Mvskokvlke and Hesaketvmese, of españoles and Dios, resorting to theocultural glosses that reimagine these peoples and powers. Indeed, whole worlds begin and end in editorial letters, buffalo skins, ship's logs, and even scholarly articles.

Or so it seems when comparing Creek and Columbian origin accounts. The obvious parallels between these indigenous and immigrant narratives highlight the mythic quality of their influence on social organization, and perhaps betray an archetypal ethnocentrism as well. Yet the striking contrast in how these two civilizations approached diplomatic relations suggests that their paradigmatic myths are freighted with very different ideological cargoes. Fus Fixico must have had this contrast in mind as he watched the dissolution of his national territory and government and the imposition of Oklahoma statehood. The political vice and folly that accompanied the process provided ample fodder for satirical letters he contributed to area newspapers; Indian Journal editor Alexander Posey called him "our fullblood literary genius." Creek and Columbian histories had first intersected three-and-a-half centuries earlier, and now Fus Fixico was bearing witness to the latest chapter in imperialist dispossession.[29]

His last letter appeared on May 22, 1908, less than a week before he was pulled into the North Canadian River with Posey, his amanuensis and alter ego. The Creek deeds had been issued and Fus Fixico had turned his attention to other pressing matters, including the operation of the new state government.

"Ever'thing was different since statehood," his old friend Hot Gun observed. "Instead o' busk groun's we got county seats; instead o' stomp dances, we got rallies; instead o' green corn feasts, we got primaries; instead o' fish frys we got the initiative and referendum; an' instead o' fifty lashes on the bare back we got sixty days on the rock pile." The first legislature of Oklahoma was a notorious exercise in political corruption and incompetence, and in the written word. "So it was while the rain was comin' down on the clapboards an' Shell Creek was getting' out o' its banks an' the cocklebur was gettin' a good start in the sofky patch," Fus Fixico reported, "Hot Gun an' Tokpafka Micco an' Wolf Warrior an' Kono Harjo was sit roun' the fireplace an' smoke slow an' spit in the ashes an' talk. What a Injin say on a rainy day was had meanin'." Hot Gun and company were struggling to make sense of this new world order. "Well so," Tokpafka Micco said, "I think we need some more fullblood Injins in the legislature. They could give the law-makin' body more dignity an' less insurrection." Hot Gun remained ambivalent: "A nimble mind don't count for anything in the Oklahoma legislature," where debate sometimes degenerated into violence; the literate worldview run amok. "So, before you run for the legislature you better consider how hard you could lan' on the enemy with your fist," he warned, "or how straight you can hurl the ink bottle."[30]

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