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04

Transnational Debts: The Cultural Memory of Navajo Code Talkers in World War II

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Even 70 years after it ended, World War II continues to endure in the global imagination. In the United States, images of the "Good War" prevail, and memories of the soldiers have been widely translated into displays of national heroism and glorification. At the same time, the celebratory narrative of national unity and democratic triumph is undercut by the counter-histories and experiences of the 44,000 Native American soldiers who served in this war. Their experiences and memories—in oral histories, interviews, as well as in fiction and film—challenge the narrative of a glorious nation in unison, especially in light of the historical conflicts between American nationalism and Native American political sovereignty. This paper investigates the specific memorial debt owed to the Navajo Code Talkers of World War II. Focusing on John Woo's film *Windtalkers* (2002), Joseph Bruchac's novel *Code Talker* (2005), and Chester Nez's memoir *Code Talker* (2011), I will inquire into the field of tension between tribal, national, and transnational identities and explore the ways in which these tensions are negotiated at different sites of commemoration, especially in contrast to the distorted, consumer-oriented memory produced by the Hollywood industry. Through codes of orality, communal identity, and historicity, I argue, counter-strategies of narrating and remembering World War II not only decisively shape a revisionist writing of recent history and enrich the multicultural narrative of 'America' by Indigenous voices, but they also substantially contribute to current debates about transnational American identities.

When Navajo (Diné) Code Talker Chester Nez passed away in June 2014 at age 93, his death marked "the end of an era," according to CNN reporters AnneClaire Stapleton and Chelsea Carter: he was the last remaining of the original group of 29 Navajo soldiers who had been recruited to sign up with the U.S. Marine Corps in 1942 in order to develop a communications code based on the Navajo language (cf. Aaseng 27–37, Paul 23–33).[1] Long ignored by the public, over 400 Navajo code talkers, along with hundreds of other Indigenous American communications specialists from nations as diverse as the Comanche, the Seminole, the Hopi, the Assiniboine, or the Cherokee (cf. "Native Words"), substantially complicate and diversify the discourse of the so-called "Good War" and its debts. And while the Navajo code talkers were at least publicly recognized after 1968 (when the code and its developers were declassified), it took until 2013 for Congress to acknowledge the contributions of 33 other Native American nations to the war effort (Vogel).

Fig. 1: Bus of the Comanche Code Talkers parked outside the National Museum of the American Indian in November 2013. Photo by the author.

The National World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington D.C. presents a (quite literally) monolithic commemoration of the soldiers and war veterans of World War II. “Symbolic of the defining event of the 20th Century,” as the Memorial’s official website specifies, “the memorial is a monument to the spirit, sacrifice, and commitment of the American people” (“National”). This combined discourse of sacrifice, commitment, and especially of a homogeneously unified American people has been developed, since the 1980s, into a “reputation” of World War II as a “Good War” (cf. Terkel; Doss 239). The memorial holds a firm place within this label: it “replaces dialogue with dogma, and recasts war on triumphal terms” (Doss 240). At the same time, it silences other memories of the war, a selection of which are addressed by the contributions in this volume. These memories, including, for instance, the Port Chicago Naval Magazine explosion and its consequences, the policy of Japanese internment, or the commemoration of the Tuskegee Airmen, are interlaced with issues of cultural difference, racial and ethnic inequality, as well as strict social hierarchies.As such, they alsocontest the strategic label of national unity that the official memorial triumphantly claims.

Among the 16 million American soldiers who served in World War II, 44,000 were of Native American descent (a number that constitutes more than 10 % of the total Native American population at the time, with another 150,000 “participating in the industrial, agricultural, and other nonmilitary aspects of the war” [Ono 501]), and their presence profoundly complicates both the dominant narrative of the “Good War” and the contested issue of its commemoration. While it is ironic that so many Indigenous soldiers enlisted to fight for precisely the nation that had dispossessed and colonized them far into the twentieth century, most of these never questioned their loyalties. As Chester Nez puts it in his memoir, “as protectors of what is sacred, we were [...] eager to defend our land” (87). Motivations to enlist were diverse: many testimonies point to affinities with warrior cultures and a sense of patriotic (or rather matriotic, in the Navajos’ case) duty, but the reasons for Native Americans to join the army also included the incentive of escaping from conditions of poverty, of cultural alienation (mostly inflicted through compulsory attendance of boarding schools), and of reservation life (see also Ono 502 and Townsend 78). The historical legacy of physical and cultural genocide is thus firmly imprinted in the memory of World War II, and for the 400 Navajo Code Talkers, who worked from within the U.S. Marine Corps to clandestinely communicate ac the Pacific theater, the irony was even more striking: their native language, which had been subject to systemat attempts of extermination and which they were forbidden to use, was now turning into a crucial device to win the

war. As Veteran Chester Nez puts it: “A code based on the Navajo language? After we’d been so severely punished in boarding school for speaking it?” (102).

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Even 70 years after the end of the war, the commemoration of these code talkers is still a highly conflicted issue. Not only were the benefits of the GI Bill out of reach for many Navajo when they returned to their home reservation (cf. Paul 111 and Aaseng 101–04),[2] but their special task was strictly confidential, so they could not be publicly honored for their achievements. It was not until 1968 that the code and its developers were declassified, and in 1982, President Reagan acknowledged the code talkers with a certificate (Nez 255, Gilbert 60). The “Honoring the Navajo Code Talkers Act” of 2000, initiated by Senator Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, “called for the recognition of the code talkers, and authorized the awarding of gold medals to the twenty-nine original code talkers and silver medals to the ones who followed” (Nez 256). However, it took another eight years until they were officially honored with Congressional Gold Medals in 2008 by The Code Talkers Recognition Act (Public Law 110–420). In November 2013, another round of Congressional Gold Medals was being awarded to hundreds of previously overlooked code talkers.

Besides this governmental acknowledgement, the more recent “efforts [...] to include all Americans in national war memory” (Doss 230) have also resulted in memorials, films, documentary books, memoirs, and novels. The first memorial, a monumental bronze statue by Assiniboine/Anishinaabe artist Doug Hyde in downtown Phoenix, is entitled “Tribute to Navajo Code Talkers” (1989) and shows a larger-than-life Native American boy sitting on the ground with a flute in his hand. In 2004, Navajo/Ute sculptor Oreland C. Joe’s “Navajo Code Talker Monument” was dedicated at the Navajo Nation’s Veterans Memorial Park at Window Rock, Arizona—a bronze sculpture of a code talker during a combat situation, holding onto his helmet as he talks into a radio. An identical version of this monument was also later positioned in Wesley Bolin Memorial Park in downtown Phoenix and dedicated in 2008, but these locations are barely known to the general public.

Fig. 2: John Fowler, “Navajo Code Talker Memorial.” Copyright 2014, John Fowler. Licensed under Creative Commons. No changes made.

A much wider audience has been reached by John Woo’s 2002 movie *Windtalkers,* which featured Hollywood actor Nicolas Cage and made the story of the Navajo code talkers known around the globe. However, whereas th movie’s dominant memorial discourse focuses on the exoticism of the Native soldiers, on their physical resemblance to the Japanese, and on the protection of the code by non-Native Marines, alternative and much more

accurate forms of commemoration are developed in lesser-known Native-authored memoirs, such as the collaborative autobiography *Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir by One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WW II* by former code talker Chester Nez (written in cooperation with Judith Avila), and the fictionalized memoir *Code Talker* by Abenaki novelist Joseph Bruchac.[3] These texts accentuate rather different parts of the story: instead of reducing the contribution of the code talkers to fragments of an exotic language, they contextualize the war effort within the longer history of Navajo-American relations. Also, they leave more room for the agency and the merits of the Indigenous soldiers.

In spite of assumptions raised by its title, and even though it does feature a few Native American actors for its fictional Navajo characters (especially Canadian Saulteaux actor Adam Beach and the only Navajo to play in the movie, Roger Willie), *Windtalkers* is not a film about the Navajo. It is a film about a traumatized Italian-American Marine, Joe Enders, (played by Cage) and his various sacrifices for his country. Shell-shocked from combat on the Solomon Islands, but eager to fight on, Enders is assigned to serve as a bodyguard for the Navajo character of Ben Yazzie. A scene about 27 minutes into the film establishes the conflicted relationship between both characters: When Sergeant Enders runs out of a meeting during a training phase, reliving his battle trauma in a fit of nausea, Yazzie follows him outside and offers help. The older soldier, however, is hostile and condescending, interrogating the Navajo Marine about his motivations for wearing the uniform in the first place. “This is my war too, Sergeant,” Yazzie replies, “I’m fighting for my country, for my land, for my people” (*Windtalkers*). Enders, however, does not take him seriously and—to the sound of flute music which signifies cultural Otherness—remains reserved and unsympathetic.

This hostility is in line with the film’s emphasis on the Navajos’ resemblance to the Japanese. One of the more racist characters, Private Chick from Texas, uses Ben Yazzie’s outward appearance as a pretext for insulting him as a “slanty-eyed savage.” One morning, when Yazzie has taken off his uniform in order to wash his upper body in a pond, Chick threatens to “just take you for a Jap” and beats him up. This scene, probably inspired by the historical case of Harry Tsosie, who went out of cover at night, was “mistaken for a Japanese suicide warrior” (Nez 166) and killed by friendly fire (see also Bruchac 124–25), contributes to the semantic conflation of the code talkers with the enemy: even Enders warns him that “you do look like a Nip” (*Windtalkers*). From the point of view of differentiated observation, however, this associative tie is solely based on ideology rather than fact, as code talker Chester Nez emphasizes: “the two races—Japanese and Navajo—looked nothing alike” (203).

Furthermore, whereas the historical code talkers worked in teams of two without personal bodyguards and were usually “just behind the front lines” (cf. Nez 146), the movie suggests that the Marines were there to kill their Navajo comrades if necessary to prevent the code from being broken. “The Navajo has the code,” the subtitle on the movie poster reads dramatically, “Protect the code at all costs.” Consequently, the film’s central conflict revolves around this assignment: when Charlie Whitehorse, one of the other fictional code talkers in the platoon, is about to be taken captive by Japanese attackers, his body guard, Sergeant Pete Anderson (played by Christian Slater), looks at him hesitantly, misses his chance, and is killed himself, just as Whitehorse steps in and shoots the Japanese soldier. The audience is left with the impression that Anderson deliberately saved Whitehorse’s life—whereas Sergeant Joe Enders dutifully enters the scene to assess the situation and throws a grenade, effectively killing the code talker and his captors.

Even though Enders eliminates Charlie Whitehorse—and thus a fellow Marine—he ends up morally justified and is even celebrated as a hero by Ben Yazzie, who returns home in the end to tell his son the story of the great white man who protected him. The figurative monument in the end, doubly reinforced by the magnificent landscape of Monument Valley, is erected to the film’s central individual, the war hero Joe Enders. “He was a fierce warrior, a good Marine,” Ben Yazzie tells his son in the end while celebrating Enders’ memory to the sound of folksy flute music: “If you ever tell a story about him, George, say he was my friend” (*Windtalkers*). Even the folksy flute music—previously used to signify cultural Otherness—is here appropriated for the honoring of the white soldier: In the end, the picturesque New Mexico scenery offers no room for the Indigenous veterans’ own stories, their traumatization and difficulty to heal, their economic problems or their lack of recognition. The potential danger of a code talker being captured and tortured by the Japanese (which historically never happened) is turned into the central conflict of the film and thus into a major part of the official memory: if the national American cause demands sacrifices, the Indian needs to make way, once again, for the greater good. *Windtalkers* thus reduces the intricate dynamics of cultural difference to exotic decoration and dramatic risk scenarios. It demonizes the Japanese enemy all the more, turns the code talkers into objects of conflicting desires, and buries the unique contributions of the Navajo under the sensationalist effects of the action genre.

Yet the danger of being caught and tortured for the code, on which the film so dramatically capitalizes, is—historically speaking—completely irrelevant: The only actual Navajo prisoner of war was Joe Kieyoomia, who had been in the Bataan Death March and was indeed tortured by the Japanese. He was, however, both unwilling and unable to give up the code: since he was no code talker himself, he would know the individual Navajo words, but because of their double encryption, their context did not make sense to him (cf. Nez 208). The memoirs by Chester Nez and Joseph Bruchac also debunk the myth: Bruchac makes no mention at all of the danger of being captured, and Nez emphasizes that if there were bodyguards, which is still debated, they were "making sure the code talkers were safe" (208), and "no code talker was ever executed by his bodyguard" (209). Instead of repeating the Hollywood film's clear-cut dividing line between Native and non-Native soldiers, Nez and Bruchac employ three alternative codes to embed and transmit the memory of the Navajo veterans: the codes of orality, communal identity, and historicity.

As for the codes of orality, the fact that the Navajo language had not been written down by the 1940s ensured the success of the code itself: only Native speakers could master the language, but even Native speakers would not be able to decipher the exact references of the encodings. Since it was "one of the hardest of all American Indian languages to learn" (Bruchac 74), it provided an ideal basis for the development of a military code. The encryption vocabulary, specifically invented for the purpose of stealth communication, "became solid and unshakable," Chester Nez remembers, "embedded in our minds as firmly as childhood memories" (9). As one of the central pillars of cultural identity, the language of the Diné thus became the instrument to turn "a war that had once seemed unwinnable" (Nez 201) into a success for the entire Allied Forces. Furthermore, in the memoirs, oral traditions and storytelling become a central mode of commemoration: both texts feature ancestral stories and myths. "In Navajo life," Nez explains early on, "everything has a story, narratives that are significant both in ceremonies and in everyday life" (35). Accordingly, he embeds his war-time experience within the larger story of his family's life on their ancestral land, in "the wide-open country, thousands of unfenced acres" (24) during his childhood. Landmarks, such as the four sacred mountains of the Navajo nation, bear cultural memory and give meaning to Diné life. In accordance with storytelling traditions, his account also includes the Navajo creation story as related by Nez's grandmother (36-37). In Bruchac's *Code Talker,* the protagonist additionally makes sense of the horrific war experience by contextualizing it within his mythical knowledge of the world:

> Our ancestors saw what war does to human beings. […] Long, long ago, even the Holy People suffered from this. It happened that way after the Sacred Twins were given the Thunder Bow and the Arrows of Lightning by their father, the Sun. Monster Slayer had used those arrows to destroy the monsters that had been devouring the people. […] The only terrible beings that even Monster Slayer was unable to kill were those that still attack us all. Those ones are Poverty, Old Age, and Hunger. (Bruchac 161–62)

Even though it has been edited and restructured by Judith Schiess Avila, Nez's account retains its character of orality through the use of personal pronouns and a conversational style. Joseph Bruchac's narrative situation is that of a code talker as well (again a fictitious one named Ned Begay), telling his story to his grandchildren as "not just my story, but a story of our people and of the strength that we gain from holding on to our language, from being Diné" (214). It is, to reverse a quote by Toni Morrison, a story to pass on. The practice of storytelling and the cultural memory that is embedded within these tales position the war experience within the larger communal identity of the Navajo nation, across different continents and periods of time. Storytelling not only provides knowledge and appropriate modes of remembering, but it also empowers both tellers and listeners, ensuring survival and safeguarding the "Right Way" to live, which requires "balance […], not only between individuals, but between each person and his world" (Nez 5).

As for the aspect of communal identity, the film highlights an individual hero whereas the texts emphasize the dynamic spirit of community central to many Native American cultures. This also explains the motivation to enlist for the war in the first place: "No Navajo […] would be surprised," Chester Nez writes. "We have always felt a deep allegiance to our motherland, our Navajo Nation, and our families" (85). In contrast to the lines of dichotomous difference that are foregrounded in *Windtalker* (through the conflicts between the homogeneously white soldiers and the Navajo), Bruchac's and Nez's memoirs offer a much more differentiated perspective on their identities. Instead of reducing their affiliation to categories of regional origin or birth, they develop fluid, adaptable, and dynamic modes of subjectivity: the first person pronoun "we," for instance, refers alternately to the code talker the Marine division, and to America at large. This polyvalent form of identification also effectively creates a transnational sense of allegiance: when, upon being dispatched, Chester Nez prays "[l]et me make my country

proud" (10) and "[l]et me live to walk in beauty" (10), he firmly positions himself within the privilege of American citizenship while simultaneously asserting his cultural affiliation with the Diné. For the Navajo, as both texts make clear, cultural difference is an enrichment rather than a drawback. Chester Nez summarizes his experience as profoundly transformative in a positive sense, especially when he relates the interaction with his "buddies" (213): "I had been accepted by the other Marines as a competent combatant. I had been respected and treated as an equal by men who—I'd been warned on the reservation—might look down on Native Americans. And I had seen the world outside the Checkerboard" (213). For Bruchac's fictitious narrator, too, the group that he sums up into "we Marines" (191) is not divided by internal conflict: "I have not said enough about how many of the white men who fought in the Pacific became my pals. I had many friends" (191). In line with this conciliatory stance, both narrators respond to the fact that they are generically nick-named "Chief" by fellow soldiers with practicality and humor: "The title 'code talker' had not been coined yet," Chester Nez concludes, "[s]o 'Chief' stuck" (203). In Bruchac's novel, a Native character reacts to the nickname of "Chief" by systematically responding, "What, Mr. President?" (171).

Most crucially, both narrators return home into communities that uphold and sustain them: "although I had no victory parades," Ned Begay concludes, "I had something else. I had my family and our traditional ceremonies" (211). Chester Nez also capitalizes on the importance of his family and friends in helping him heal the trauma of battle: a "sing" is organized by a neighbor upon his return—a large community ceremony "conducted by a medicine man or woman" (219) which restores natural balance and "benefits all who attend in good heart" (220). In contrast to the individual heroism surrounding John Enders in *Windtalkers* (for which Ben Yazzie serves as a mere stirrup holder), Indigenous memoirs of the code talkers' contributions privilege the community and thus makethe cultural memory of World War II available to a wider audience and across different kinds of boundaries. In Indian Country, in other words, there is no "greatest generation."

Third, and finally, whereas many monuments isolate their historical reference into a position of exceptionalism—as is clearly visible in the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.—the memoirs by these Native American authors explicitly position World War II within a larger historical framework and thus defy its stylization into a "Good War."[4] In their focus on historicity, they contextualize the Navajos' military service within a history of colonial injustice: the first chapters of both texts recall Kit Carson's "war against the Navajo" (Bruchac 9): he "burned Navajo crops, uprooted our trees, killed our livestock, and warned all Navajo to surrender and gather together at Fort Defiance" (Nez 38). In the long history of colonization and removal, the Navajo Long Walk particularly stands out: In 1864, more than 8,000 Diné were forcibly relocated from their homelands to Fort Sumner (Bosque Redondo) in New Mexico, a place some 350 miles away (cf. Nies 269–70, Denetdale 48–95). "Our people had no houses, but lived in pits dug in the earth," Ned Begay describes; "[w]e were kept there as prisoners for four winters" (Bruchac 10). In addition to this deportation, which also sets the tone for Chester Nez's account (38–39), other "great tragedies of Navajo history" are discussed (39), including the Livestock Massacre of the 1930s. Nez witnessed this extremely traumatic event as a child, having to watch as the employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs moved in, herded together thousands of sheep and goats and burned them alive. Even "a historical perspective on the politics of this disaster doesn't soften the blow still felt by the families who were deprived of their livelihood," Nez summarizes: "The program may have been well intentioned, but like many other political decisions, the results proved disastrous" (76).

Another crucial aspect of colonization is the forced removal of children to boarding schools, which takes up substantial space in Joseph Bruchac's novel: Ned Begay describes the physical abuse of children and the violations of their rights in detail, including the cutting of hair as well as the dispossession of jewelry and personal belongings. But he also remains firm in his sense of resistance: "If anything, rather than taking my language away from me, boarding school made me more determined never to forget it" (27). Even as they enter the military, with their language ironically turning into the United States Army's most valuable instrument for the war, neither of the two recruits is safe from racism. Even the drill during their recruit training seems continuous with the institutional violence of the non-Native educational system that had been forced upon them: "Being Indians, we were used to having white men shout at us and tell us we were worthless and stupid" (Bruchac 61). Nez notes that they "joked about how the Marines gave us the same haircut we'd had in boarding school" (94).

While *Windtalkers* ends with the consolation of having returned home safely, both narratives take a wider angle by addressing the aftermath of the war, thusproviding an outlook on the soldiers' legacy. Joseph Bruchac gives voi to the story of Ira Hayes, the Pima Marine who is pictured in Joe Rosenthal's iconic photograph, "Raising the Flag at Iwo Jima." Bruchac criticizes the way Hayes was turned into a celebrity against his will, and explains his descent

into alcoholism within a larger context. Furthermore, Ned Begay recounts instances of social injustice after the war (210), ranging from racial slurs to the inefficiency of post-war benefits for reservation-based Native Americans: "It was not easy. In some ways that G. I. Bill was not fair to us Navajos. Other ex-servicemen could use it to help them build or buy their own homes, but not us" (213). Chester Nez also does not fail to mention the inequality of war veterans back home, especially since Native Americans did not even have the right to vote in New Mexico until 1948 (Nez 218). At the same time, however, there is no bitterness in either of these texts: the cultural memory of the code talkers remains open for intercultural exchange and reconciliation, which—in Navajo culture—is simply part of "trying to live the Right Way" (Nez 265). This stance also replaces any monument to the past with a commitment to future generations: the memory of the veterans is not upheld for the sake of their fame, but for its educational value to others.

Instead of monolithically freezing their cultural memory into a nationalist agenda, both these texts honor the soldiers in a framework of what Udo Hebel terms "transnational American memory," that is, "the recognition of the boundless and creative transnational flow of commemorative energy in and out of the cultures grounded in or associated with the space of what today is the United States of America" (3). Within this larger angle, Chester Nez's and Joseph Bruchac's memoirs constitute much more efficient memorials than those mimetically carved in stone: their multi-layered narratives acknowledge the commemorative debt to the code talkers but simultaneously highlight the necessity for nuance, for intercultural dialogue, and for historical differentiation. As the memory of World War II continues to be handed down, it also continues to be rewritten in new and alternative forms: open for different perspectives, inclusive rather than exclusive, and focusing on narrative variants rather than authoritative closure. In this process, and even as the last veterans have passed away, Indigenous American memories substantially diversify the story of humanity's deadliest war.

NOTES

1 The other 28 original code talkers were Frank Pete, Willsie Bitsie, Eugene Crawford, John Brown, Cosey Brown, John Benally, William Yazzie, Benjamin Cleveland, Nelson Thompson, Lloyd Oliver, Charlie Begay, William McCabe, Oscar Ilthma, David Curley, Lowell Damon, Blamer Slowtalker, Alfred Leonard, Dale June, James Dixon, Roy Begay, James Manuelito, Harry Tsosie, George Dennison, Carl Gorman, Samuel Begay, John Chee, Jack Nez, and John Willie (Paul 12).

2 This was the case when they returned to reservations, where low-cost mortgages and free college education were not available. Ed Gilbert, however, also mentions that "the educational benefits of the GI Bill opened a new world" (60)—at least for those veterans willing to leave the reservation.

3 Another novel entitled *Code Talker: A Novel of the Navajo* was published in 2012 by non-Native author Ivon Blum.

4 The code itself is also historically contextualized: refraining from an exceptionalist or triumphant stance, both narrators mention that the Choctaw and Comanche (Nez 91) and the Cherokees and Chickasaws (Bruchac 74) had developed codes before.

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Windtalkers. Dir. John Woo. Perf. Nicolas Cage, Adam Beach, Peter Stormare, and Roger Willie. MGM, 2002. Film.

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