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Research article

The Native Uncanny and Sustainable Survivance: The Land as a Spirited Site of Historical Trauma, Indian Ghosts, and Indigenous Resilience in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed*

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Abstract

In Indigenous epistemologies, places are imbued with identity, meaning, and even agency, acting as a dynamic force in the lives of both humans and non-humans. This concept is integral to the spiritual and cultural framework of many Native American communities. The novel, *The Removed* (2021) by Brandon Hobson, who has won the Pushcart Prize and the Western Heritage Award, addresses the theme of how physical location holds a kind of memory, encapsulating the history of those who lived, thrived, and suffered there. This resonates with characters like Tsala in *The Removed,* who transcend mere haunting to become agents of historical remembrance and cultural survivance. These spirits do not linger as remnants of loss but actively guide the living, ensuring that Indigenous histories, marked by resilience and trauma, are acknowledged, preserved, and sustained. Through the critical analysis using the concept of the uncanny and Gerald Vizenor's theory of survivance, which delineates how Indigenous peoples have resisted colonisation and maintained their culture, this study explores how Native uncanny aligns with some of the Sustainable Development Goals, like reduced inequalities and the sense of justice and peace, by resisting the dominant narrative of systemic exclusion as positive discrimination. The study finds that the spirit in *The Removed* functions as an active agent of cultural memory and indigenous resilience rather than a passive symbol of the loss. The research highlights the potential of Native American literature to foster healing, cultural reclamation, and social justice in a contemporary context by showing how indigenous characters, rather than being passive subjects of trauma, assert cultural continuity and transform haunting experiences into empowerment, thereby reinforcing indigenous identity as an enduring force of preservation.

Keywords: Native Uncanny, Resilience, Identity Crisis, Native American Trauma, Survivance.

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Introduction

Native American literature serves as a vital medium for preserving, transmitting, and revitalizing indigenous knowledge systems, collective memories, and cultural identities. Drawing upon oral traditions, mythologies, and lived experiences, it bridges ancestral wisdom with contemporary realities of Native American life, with displacement, colonisation, and resilience. Historically, however, American literary representations of Indigenous peoples have often been shaped by spectral imagery. In the seventeenth-century Puritan writings, Native Americans were portrayed as demonic manifestations of spiritual and moral anxieties. During the Enlightenment period, Euro-American authors continued this trend by invoking Native Americans as symbols of the irrational and the primitive, embodying the darker recesses of the human psyche. As American literature evolved, particularly in the nineteenth century, historical novels and romanticised accounts began portraying Indigenous characters as "vanishing American" figures destined for disappearance, often represented quite literally as ghosts. Authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Lydia Maria Child, and Edgar Allan Poe, among others, contributed to this discourse, embedding the motif of the Indian ghost within the significant narrative of American expansionism and manifest destiny. This spectral tradition, rooted in colonial narratives of erasure and displacement, is subverted in contemporary indigenous literature, wherein writers like Brandon Hobson reconceptualize the haunting as a strategy of survival, cultural continuity, and decolonial resistance.

In *The Removed* (2021), Brandon Hobson weaves a haunting yet hopeful narrative that embodies what Gerald Vizenor (2008) terms "survivance", a dynamic presence that refuses victimhood and reclaims Indigenous memory and identity. Central to Hobson's narrative is the land itself, which operates not merely as a setting but as a spirited site carrying the residue of historical trauma and ancestral presence. This spiritual ecology becomes a conduit through which ancestral voices re-emerge, challenging linear temporality and colonial forgetting. The ghost of Tsala, a Cherokee ancestor executed during the Trail of Tears, in the novel exemplifies what Sigmund Freud termed the "uncanny" (Freud, 2003, p.5)- that which is both familiar and estranged, resurfacing from the repressed past. However, within the Indigenous framework, this "native uncanny" (Boyd,2009, p. 710) transcends the Freudian concept of transforming the ghost into a bearer of cultural wisdom and political agency. In this reimagining, the spectral presence becomes a relational force bridging memory, land-based knowledge, and the unfinished work of historical justice.

Renee L. Bergland in *The National Uncanny* (2000) further argues that Indian ghosts are not just literary motifs but "essential supplements" (Bergland, 2000, p.5) to American national identity- phantoms that emerge whenever the myth of progress clashes with the reality of genocide and dispossession. Hobson's Tsala exemplifies this national haunting but reclaims it through an Indigenous lens: he is not the spectral residue of the domed race but a carrier of ancestral knowledge, resisting erasure through spiritual continuity. Animating the landscapes with memory, pain, and healing, *The Removed* reclaims the land as a sacred archive of Indigenous survivance. Hobson's narrative repositions haunting not as a symptom of trauma alone but as a strategy of resistance, a reminder that the past is not dead and the land itself continues to speak. This paper critically explores Hobson's engagement with the concept of the Native uncanny, positioning the Native American ghost not as a mere emblem of loss but as an agent of cultural continuity and resistance. Central to this reconfiguration is the spectral figure of Tsala, through whom Hobson mobilises Indigenous epistemologies of memory and

survival. This is in contrast to the Euro-American framework that associates ghosts with psychological rupture or passive mourning. He positions the ghosts as sovereign agents of memory, identity, and historical continuity, thereby reaffirming the vitality of Indigenous knowledge systems within contemporary discourse.

Analysis

Land as a Spirited Site of Historical Trauma

In the novel, *The Removed*, Tsala, a historical Cherokee, who tried to protect his family during the Trail of Tears by hiding them in caves of the sacred Cherokee mountains, resisting the forced removal from a land, is a deeply embedded figure with spiritual and ancestral significance. Despite his defiance, he was executed in 1838, alongside his wife and two children- a brutal act that underscores the violent ruptures inflicted by colonial displacement. Yet, Tsala's presence endures beyond death; his spirit remains inscribed in the land, embodying both the trauma of removal and the enduring resonance of ancestral memory. The connection between his spirit and the Native American land is significant here as the land, within the indigenous epistemologies, is not conceived as an inert or commodified space but as a sentient, relational entity that is alive with a spirit, history, and cultural meaning. Tesla's spirit returns in the form of a hawk- a recurring symbol of vigilance and ancestral continuity reaffirms his role as a guardian figure whose presence vitalises the landscapes. As Joy Porter aptly states, "Indian approaches to land and place tend to see space invested with meaning through lived experience" (Porter, 2012, p. 44). Within this cosmological framework, land emerges as a sacred extension of the self, a site wherein cultural continuity and spirituality converge. As Margaret Rodman argues, "They are not inert containers; they are politicised, culturally relative, historically specific, local, and multiple constructions" (Rodman 1992, p. 641). For Tsala, the land becomes both a repository of ancestral memory and a medium through which intergenerational identity remains unbroken and resistant to colonial erasure. At the novel's outset, Tsala communicates from the spirit world: "My beloved son: time among the dead is mysterious. Time among the dead does not exist the way humans experience it during life. Time may be felt: U-di-tle-gi, u-have-dla"(41). This Cherokee phrase, which translates in English to "look to the sky, there it is", affirms the continued presence of ancestors in the natural world. It resonates with Vine Deloria Jr.'s insight that Indigenous conceptions of time are "shaped by spatial relationships to sacred sites rather than linear chronology" (Deloria, 2003, p. 70). Deloria challenges Euro-American assumptions of progress by emphasising that for many tribal cultures, sacred geography structures history and spiritual continuity. In this context, Tsala's statement evokes a non-linear temporality rooted in the earth, sky, and ancestral return. Hence, in *The Removed* the land becomes a sacred axis where spirit and time collapse. As Tsala asserts:

> Look to the sky, and there we are, soaring like hawks, circling in the air. We are the birds appearing like a string of red berries against t2he clouds. We are all around, the deities to cover every expansive body of land. We are bathed in rainwater, flying together. We are a sparkle of blue light inside rocks, the swift rising of smoke and dust forming the hazy outlines of bodies. (41)

This vision encapsulates an Indigenous cosmology wherein human and non-human, living and dead, are inextricably interconnected through elemental forms. Tsala's people inhabit birds, clouds, water, and even dust. The transformation of ancestors into aspects of the natural

world reflects what Paul Allen calls a "spiritual ecology", where "we are the land"—not metaphorically, but ontologically (Allen, 1986, p. 119). Irving Hallowell similarly affirms the concept of "spirit land" (Hallowell, 1992, p. 171), populated by ancestral beings who maintain relational ties with the living and remain integral to "life and thought" (171). In this worldview, the spirit is inseparable from the place, and survival is predicated upon remembering and reinhabiting sacred spaces. Reflecting on this traumatic memory, Tsala states, "In 1838, the firing squad killed you before they killed me." (41) This line evokes both personal and collective suffering, positioning death not as an end but as a transition. Tsala recalls the teachings of his ancestors, who told him not to fear death, for it signifies not disappearance but a return-a spiritual homecoming to the land. This cyclical view of life and death resists colonial erasures of Native life and culture and affirms cultural survivance through sacred geography.

Further deepening this connection, Tsala recounts why he chose to resist relocation: "That is why he died. I refused because it was not fair treatment, and I was willing to sacrifice my life for you, our family, and our people. Yes, I know an old man's mouth full of thunder. So does an old spirit" (42). His act of resistance is grounded in a profound responsibility to protect ancestral space, an obligation that transcends generations and affirms the continuity between indigenous identity, land, and cultural memory. This generational responsibility is rooted in an indigenous ontology that conceives land not as an object of ownership but as a "sentient, relational entity," not as property to be processed (Porter, 2012, p. 44). His sacrifice, then, is not only a personal gesture but a cultural imperative to defend the spiritual and communal integrity of a place. The sacredness of the land is also reflected in a vision experienced by a boy in Tsala's village, who sees people walking wearily through a snowstorm, some falling to their deaths. The boy warns the villagers, "They will force us from our land, he said; a cold winter full of death is coming" (42). This vision becomes a prophetic embodiment of the impending trauma, tying the land directly to the suffering that was soon unfolding, as he states:

> The river was frightening for many people. There was a rock to walk across the water, like a bridge. People stood on the rock and fished in the river until they noticed a long red snake that kept itself rolling into a ball. Whenever it sensed the presence of a human, the red snake unrolled itself and leapt out of the water onto the rock, then dragged the people into the water and ate their faces. Their bodies were found drowned along the bank, with their eyes and noses eaten off their faces. One person said these dead people had no tongues. (43)

This disturbing passage functions as a symbolic expression of the trauma inscribed onto the Cherokee land. The river, once a source of substance and serenity, becomes a site of fear and violence, embodying the deep scars of colonial intrusion. The red snake represents the destructive force of historical trauma, turning a life-giving river into a site of terror. As Margaret Rodman suggests, places are not neutral but layered with "physical, emotional, and experiential realities places hold for their inhabitants" (Rodman, 1992, p.641). In this formation, Hobson in *The Removed* constructs the land not as a neutral spatial backdrop but as a conscious and affectively charged presence that registers the structural violence, dispossession, and intergenerational trauma enacted by settler colonialism, positioning it simultaneously as both mourner and victim. The river, once a place of sustenance, becomes a site of terror, suggesting how colonial forces have corrupted not only the social and political

world but the environment itself. Hence, in *The Removed*, the ecological description becomes spiritual. As Tsala laments, "There was drought. The summer solstice had burned up the soil, and one could taste the dust in the air. The wind rose up and howled. Beloved, it was crucial we paid attention to these warnings. We knew the time was near." (101) Here, nature itself becomes an active communicator of indigenous grief and foresight. Joy Porter contends that when the sacredness of land is violated, "trauma occurs not only when land is taken, but when its sacred character is denied." (46) Tasla's sensory recollection of dust, wind, and drought thus reflects both ecological imbalance and cosmological rupture. As soldiers approach, he becomes both witness and narrator of impending cultural catastrophe. His recollection of prophetic warnings and spiritual visions underscores the psychological and communal rupture inflicted upon the Cherokee people, as he recalls:

> Our prophets, too, had warned of the soldiers coming to remove us from our land. This was a terrifying time. We were frightened but ready to defend our home. Our people would refuse to leave, even though we had been tricked by the government with their fraudulent treaty. We did not trust them. It was a time, too, for hope. Some of the missionaries introduced us to the Christian religion and read from the book of Matthew as it had been translated by one of the men from New Echota. We discussed peace and sacrifice. We also talked about the treaty and our humility. During this time, I saw visions of the dying before I understood what it means to die. (101)

This passage reflects how the land in *The Removed* serves as a sacred witness to colonial betrayal, resistance, and cultural rupture. Tsala recalls the warnings of the prophets and the deception of the U.S. government, situating the trauma of forced removal not only in memory but within the very soil of Cherokee homelands. Thus, in *The Removed*, the land becomes a space where political injustice, spiritual conflict, and emotional suffering converge. While Christianity is introduced as a foreign presence, it is the land that continues to ground Tsala's visions and understanding of death—revealing that knowledge, grief, and foresight are embedded in place. His visions of dying, even before knowing what death truly means, suggest a spiritual intimacy with the trauma to come. In this way, i*n The Removed*, the land becomes both a carrier of ancestral knowledge and a vessel of grief—preserving the unresolved pain of a people tricked, uprooted, and spiritually scarred. As David Jeyaraj Franklin affirms, "Land is a crucial aspect of an individual's identity. It assumes bigger proportions when it represents a society. The fact that every person's identity is tied to the land of birth attests to this fact" (Franklin, 2022, p. 43). Parallel to this, Brave Heart defines historical trauma as "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma" (Heart, 2011, p. 283). Tsala's recollections—anchored in land, memory, and prophecy—resonate precisely with this conceptualisation, framing grief not as an isolated event but as a transgenerational legacy carved into the land itself. Hence, in Hobson's *The Removed*, the land becomes a living witness that absorbs historical violence and sustains ancestral memory. Tsala's recollection reveals how trauma is inscribed not only in collective memory but within the very rhythms of the natural world. Thus, Hobson's *The Removed* affirms that land is the enduring ground of indigenous survival and cultural continuity through the fusion of spirit, memory, and place.

The Native Uncanny and Indian Ghosts

The concept of the Native Uncanny and Indian Ghosts invites a deep exploration of how ghosts, the uncanny, function as potent rhetorical devices capable of traversing boundaries—whether generational, temporal, regional, cultural, national, or disciplinary. Scholars such as Thrush (2007), Weinstock (2004), Richardson (2003), Brogan (1999), and Derrida (1994) have recognized ghosts disrupt linear time, effectively "bringing the past into the present" (Brogan, 1999, p. 1) and enabling the exploration of individual, ethnic, and national memories. Western scholars, when they engage with the concept of ghosts, often view them as subjective or even anachronistic social constructions. Some suggest that ghosts facilitate theories of self-in-place, providing a means for "modern" to transform abstract space into lived experience. In this sense, "We give ghosts to places. . .. [They] connect us across time and space to the web of social life" (Bell, 1997, p. 832).

Ghosts give voice to the parts of the collective that have been forgotten, including the "unspeakable" acts of colonisation, dispossession, and violence. In Tsala's case, it is evident that even after his death, he continues to narrate how he was killed and how mass killing occurred. He says, "You are aware that this was a terrifying time for us. We were frightened but ready to defend our home. Our people would refuse to leave even though we were tricked by the government with their fraudulent treaty. We did not trust them." (135) His spectral narrative continues with a visceral recollection of his final moments, emphasising not just the brutality of the attack but the deep family bonds that persisted amidst the violence. The Trail of Tears, the removal of Native Americans, brought the mass killing of Native Americans, highlighting the brutality of colonisation. Through the spirit of the Tsala, Hobson emphasises how, in the name of the treaty, the trust of Native Americans was broken- a betrayal that Tsala himself articulates when he states:

> It was raining the night we rounded up a few families and quietly snuck away to hide in a cave in the mountains. I told the other people in the Cherokee language, What *we do will affect our people for years to come.* I thought of all my visions, our visions, the prophecy of the coming migration, and hoped they would be proven false. That night, in the cave, one of the wives was so afraid for her new baby that she ran out into the rain with a tomahawk, yelling, "Kill! Kill!" She felt the presence of a spirit's strength so powerfully that she threw the tomahawk into the night sky in the rain, and it never came down again and was never found anywhere. That night it hailed large ice pellets. (135)

This narrative vividly captures the fear and foreboding felt by a group of Cherokee people during their forced migration. The rain and hail symbolize the violence and turmoil they face, while the narrator's warning highlights the gravity of their actions and their long-lasting impact. The wife's desperate act—throwing a tomahawk into the sky—reflects the powerful connection to the spiritual realm and the intensity of the moment. The tomahawk's disappearance suggests that spiritual forces, tied to land and identity, are intertwined with their physical displacement. As Buse and Stott note, "where there are disputes over property, we find ghosts, or . . . where we find ghosts, there are bound to be anxieties about property" (Buse & Stott, 1999, p. 9). Indeed, it is evident from the Native American part that wherever Europeans took root in unfamiliar landscapes, stories of Indigenous ghosts prevailed, serving as a kind of barometer for measuring intergenerational guilt and cross-cultural anxieties associated with the "multiple and/or diasporic identities of immigrant and settler cultures" (Goldman and Saul, 2006, p. 645–46). This is evident in how indigenous ghosts represent the

unresolved conflicts over land, identity, and cultural survival, reflecting the ongoing trauma and displacement caused by colonization.

In the chapter titled "Resurrection, Beloved: Regarding My Death" in *The Removed*, Tsala talks about his death: "I do not understand why I awoke when I died. The soldier had taken my life and your life from us, from our family. We were no longer of this world" (163). This line delves into the uncanny, where death is not an end but a transition to a space between realms. As the title suggests, "Resurrection signifies not just revival but a continuation of the presence in another form. Supporting this Indigenous worldview, Murray asserts that "ghosts of the dead and nonhuman spirits are authentic beings significant and specific to Indigenous life-ways that are a part of shared reality" (Murray, 2009, p. 702).

Tsala further describes, "In death, as we slept beneath the earth with the worms and the cold mud and rocks, hearing the soulful howl of the coyotes and the drumming of our people, as we slept beneath the feet of those who stomped the ground and shook the heavens, I felt your mother's aching." (163) Tsala's testimony becomes a reclamation of voice and land, asserting that even in death, the oppressed resist forgetting. Tsala states:

> I felt her suffering as if it were my own, a suffering so great I felt my spirit move restlessly in an unfathomable darkness. How long was I dead? Surely not long! I crawled out of the earth like a beast in the night, with necklaces made of bear claws and gold, with wet mud and worms matted to my hair, which hung to my chest. I crawled out of the grave and felt as strong and mighty as a horse, even though I knew I had died. I remembered the story of the tribe of root eaters and acorn eaters whose wives were buried in the same grave as their husbands, and I feared I would look down into the grave and see my wife. (163)

His spectral return in the novel unsettles the Cartesian binaries between life and death and past and present and emerges as a distinctly Indigenous articulation of the uncanny. While conceptualising the uncanny as "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 2003, p. 220), Tsala's resurrection—mud-caked, blood-tinged, and draped in sacred adornments evokes not horror but ancestral resurgence. His reanimation does not simply signal a disruption of ontological certainty; it challenges colonial temporality by asserting the persistence of Indigenous presence beyond physical death. Avery Gordon's notion of haunting as a "social figure" that "registers the harm inflicted or the loss of sustained" (Gordon, 1997, p. 8), provides a compelling framework to understand Tsala's voice from the other side not just as ghostly residue but as epistemological resistance.

This spectral voice is exemplified in the prophetic intensity of Tesla's reflection-

> And here I stood, not of flesh but of spirit, not of bone or skin as I had known. In this world around me, I saw a great fire right there in the same world where I had lived. A great fire spread across the sky, heavy in flames, flashing and blinding, and I saw animals running to the trees and birds flying in the sky. (164)

which draws attention to a moment of corporeality, Tsala speaks from a liminal space where life and death, vision and memory, converge. His spectral observations dissolve the settler-imposed binaries between presence and absence through and beyond catastrophe. His visions of "the birds changed into children and then disappeared into the flames. […]columns of smoke leading to the heavens. […]snakes with their heads chopped off; their mouths were still biting. Their bodies slithered into the ground and turned into dust. The dust rose into more columns of smoke" (164) summon a haunting symbolic landscape. Here, transformation becomes testimony: from birds to children suggests generational assurance, the

dismembered snakes, still biting, embody unresolved violence, and the rising dust signals a cyclical return of memory and pain. Through these apocalyptic metaphors, Hobson's renders Tala's visions as a site of cultural haunting where the natural world registers colonial devastation, and the spirit, land, and history are inextricably intertwined. This moment in *The Removed* is not one of mere mourning, but of ancestral resurgence through prophetic witnessing.

Tsala's confusion reflects a deeply uncanny state, where he cannot grasp what has happened to him:

> I saw boys from my childhood dragging their dead mother around so that corn would grow. They were wailing in fear. I called out to them, but they couldn't hear me. Most of our people were at stockades, waiting to be moved west. Our people were being forced out of our land; this I knew, but I could not understand why. My thoughts were cloudy and confused as they can be in sleep (164).

Caught between life and death, memory and vision, Tsala experiences what Freud defines as the uncanny, where the familiar becomes distinctly strange. His inability to speak, remember his name, or intervene evokes what Renne Bergland calls the "Indian ghost"—a figure that haunts the settler nation not as a loss but as a persistent presence (Bergland, 2000, p. 5). As Colleen Boyd asserts, such spirits are not metaphors but "authentic beings" rooted in Indigenous worldviews who "anchor and authenticate the past". (Boyd, 2009, p. 717) Tsala's ghosts are not seeking release, but they demand historical recognition. As he states:

> But when I spoke, I heard no language, no sounds of words. Instead, I heard from my mouth a tiresome moan. The soldiers must not have heard me, as I was very far away. I shouted again: "Ani-yun' wiya!" and this time again, a weary moan. Nobody seemed to hear me. I became frightened of myself, and for a moment I wondered if I had changed form or identity. As I examined myself, I saw I wore a buckskin, and I could not feel my skin. Clearly, I was a spirit now. I felt the earth beneath my feet, but when I stomped, I heard nothing. I tried to adjust to the elements, breathing deep. I did not hunger or thirst. I cried out in Cherokee like a wounded dog. (Hobson, 2021, p. 164)

This moment in the novel encapsulates a profound encounter with the uncanny, wherein Tsala, aware of his experience yet alienated from his bodily functions and language, confronts the disorienting reality of being both present and absent. His attempts to speak are reduced to "tiresome moans"(Hobson, 2021, p. 164), signalling a collapse of communicative agency and a transformation of self that is no longer anchored in the familiar. Freud's concept of the uncanny—the return of the repressed or the estrangement of the familiar—resonates here as Tsala experiences his own identity as both known and terrifyingly altered (Freud, 2003, p. 241).

In this spectral journey, Tsala encounters a wounded wolf, "the skin of the wolf's neck ripped out, exposing blood and bone" (165). Responding instinctively, he kneels and places his hand on the wound, an act of reciprocal recognition that calms animals. In that moment of shared pain and intuitive communication, the wolf meets Tsala's gaze and communicates not through speech but through an intense, wordless exchange: "He spoke to me through his eyes". (165) Though initially uncertain of the meaning, he gradually discerns the wolf's message: "There is a great sadness coming to the people and this land, he said. Your people are being forced to leave, to move west, and many will suffer and die". (165) Tsala's meeting with the wolf resonates with the Native American belief system. Among many Native American tribes, the

wolf is revered as a spiritual guide and ancestral representation of both survival and sacred kinship. As Brady R Fogg et al. affirm, "wolves are described as 'teachers' of humans in hunting, allowing people to survive and thrive in new environments. [… .] Humans and wolves may have moved into parts of the Americas as cooperating species that worked both together and independently to adapt to new ecological situations" (Fogg, 2015, p. 264). This encounter situates Tsala within an ancestral continuum where spiritual insights flow through non-human beings, affirming the wolf not as a symbol of fear but as a sacred interlocutor in the unfolding trauma of forced displacement. As he states:

> For this, I will protect your family. For this, because you are a spirit, you should know that you can transform yourself into a creature for eternity. The wolf turned and walked away, and I shouted to him: "Wolf, how do I change my form?" He turned his head and looked back at me: Believe you have wings, and you fly. Believe you are an animal, and you roar. Believe you are dead in the mud, and you sleep with the worms in the mud. No matter what you decide, provide counsel to your people as they are removed. (166)

Hobson in *The Removed* presents Tsala not as a lingering ghost but the one who seeks advice and clarity from other spirits and becomes a spiritually empowered ancestor whose transformation becomes a sacred act of protection. Moreover, the wolf's call to "believe" is not merely metaphysical- it is a directive grounded in indigenous worldviews, here the spirit world is active, relational, and inseparable from lived reality. His ability to change shape according to what he believes himself to be at a moment reflects a distinctly Native understanding of identity as something fluid, communal, and spiritually animated. His transformation marks not an escape from death, but a return, with a purpose to guide his people through a moment of historical rupture. This moment echoes the trauma of the Trail of Tears, directly referred to in the novel's title "*The Removed*", and reframes the haunting not a source of dread, but as a spiritual imperative. Rather than signalling psychological disruption, the uncanny here in the novel becomes a means of indigenous continuity where the dead does not disappear but return with knowledge and responsibility. Hence, Tsala's spectral journey in *The Removed* redefines the indigenous ghosts as a mobile agent of kinship across generations, species, and elements-erasing the settler-imposed boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. Thus, in Tsala's spectacular guardianship, Hobson reclaims the uncanny as a sacred presence that resists historical erasure and keeps Native memory alive through transformation and counsel.

Sustainable Survivance and Resilience

Tsala's story in *The Removed* exemplifies a layered form of sustainable survivance rooted both in physical resistance during life and in spiritual endurance after death. His resilience is first seen in his effort to protect his family and community from colonial violence. As he recalls, when the soldiers arrived, they decimated everything; they slaughtered their chickens, hogs, and cattle. "They prodded our wives and children with bayonets as they forced them out of their homes and stockades. By the end, many of our people had nothing but their clothes—everything else was gone". (136) This material loss is not just a consequence of warfare but a deliberate dismantling of Indigenous self-sufficiency and cultural life. Even while in hiding, Tsala resisted defending his son and confronting armed soldiers: "I lunged at him with my knife, cutting his arm. The other soldier pulled me off and held me down. They tied us with

rope. I told them to kill me first, but they did not agree. I closed my eyes and lowered my head as they pointed their rifles at us" (136).

The resistance extends beyond death. His spectral voice embodies what Gerald Vizenor calls "an active sense of presence, the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, or a survival name". (Vizenor, 2004, p. 1) Tsala's testimony transforms from memory into enduring presence. Even as a spirit, it continues to witness the horror of colonial displacement:

> I saw that disease, not exertion, was the enemy to many. Dysentery and vomiting, head colds. There were very few white doctors on the march. The medicine men attended to children and babies who had intestinal cramps. I saw unclean campsites, bowls wiped with rags, and sickness spreading rapidly. (166)

Tsala's ghostly observation converges with Avery Gordon's concept of haunting as a "social figure that 'registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained" (Gordon, 1997, p. 8), as in Tsala's endurance, the past is not silenced; it lives on as a call to remember, witness, and resist forgetting.

Moreover, his ghost does not seek closure but continuity. Wandering towards the stockades where Native people are imprisoned, Tsala encounters the very soldiers who destroyed his family. Though disembodied, his spirit still emanates presence and power. As he approaches the guards, he realises his spectral form still carries weight: "But I knew they could hear me, knew my sound was threatening, or at least fearful, because one of the guards responded to me. Listen to that, he said to another. I do not see anything. But did you hear it?" (167). Tsala's presence disrupts the colonial space not through visible violence, but through a haunting sound that unsettles the soldiers' sense of security. He chooses action over vengeance. As he nears the guard, he restrains himself: "For a moment, he glanced around to see whether anyone was watching him. Though I wanted to attack him, I knew it was not the right time; still, I moved in his direction out of the darkness until he turned and saw me". (167) The purpose of his spirit is not to haunt randomly but to safeguard memory, resist colonial amnesia, and uphold the intergenerational continuity of Indigenous life and land. As Naomi Marshall notes, survival resists "continued silencing and insists upon an active Indigenous presence that defines victimhood by transforming pain into testimony". (Marshall, 2008, p. 16) In Hobson's fictional world, Tsala's afterlife is not a withdrawal—rather, it is a return: During the Trail of Tears, Tsala remains with his people, not as a passive observer but as a spectral guardian. He follows them along the forced march, witnessing their suffering and sharing in their pain. As he states:

> I walked beside them until an elder man fell. Then another fell, followed by many others. Many people were falling behind, trying to help others, but the soldiers yelled at them to keep walking. People were crawling, crying out. You do not want to hear the voices of the ones who were crying out. Their voices linger. (168)

His memory becomes a conduit through which trauma continues to echo across time. His description of voices that "linger" positions the cries of the past not as distant events but as present hauntings—proof of survivance through remembrance. Even more jarring is Tsala's recounting of the cruelty inflicted by the soldiers, as he states, "I heard the laughter of soldiers. Laughter![…] How badly they treated them. I watched it day after day. I heard their laughter over the cries of pain and wondered how their souls could be so corrupt and without empathy. Where was their sense of humanity?" (168) Hobson creates this juxtaposition of laughter and agony to capture the inhumanity of settler colonialism and the spiritual

endurance of Native peoples. Besides, as Tsala observes the dissolution and transformation of other spectral figures around him, his narrative transcends grief and gestures towards an aesthetic, spiritual resilience. As Tsala states:

> I saw figures in that dust, figures whose faces I did not recognize but whose bodies were strong, who rose up and drifted away as dust. They rose up and drifted as dust, falling into the great fire, and this sight was beyond anything I had ever dreamed. I saw the winged bodies of others forced into a vortex of wind and smoke, disappearing into the great fire. Yet I was not afraid. (164)

Empowered by his ancestral visions and spiritual transformation, Tsala ultimately resolves to help his people as a spectral guardian of survival. His voice affirms a commitment to communal endurance: "and I would be alongside them, through the temperamental winter, to help them walk they felt they could not". (164) As he states:

> I placed my palms on both eyes and when I opened them this time, I saw the spirits of those who had died before me, warriors, hundreds of them. I saw their sleek figures and raven-black hair and a thick, swirling dust building behind them. They wielded black and red clubs, the colors of courage and blood. They were watching me from a distance—for what reason I do not know. And I could hear them calling out: Ayanuli hanigi! Ayanuli hanigi! Walk fast! Walk fast! (164)

Here, Tsala's vision of ancestral warriors serves as a radical act of decolonial imagination, affirming Gerald Vizenor's theory of sustainable survivance, a concept rooted in active presence, ancestral guidance, and narrative resistance. The Warriors, wielding red and black club emblems of bloodshed and bravery, do not appear as ghosts of defeat but as a figure of intergenerational strength. Their chant, "Ayanuli hanigi! Ayanuli hanigi! Walk fast! Walk fast!" (164) functions as both a directive and a metaphysical call to endure. In this moment, Hobson dismantles static representations of indigenous survival as mere endurance, and instead, makes *The Removed* assert that Native survival is animated, community-guided, and future-oriented as Tsala's spectral encounter is not a mourning but a ritual of resurgence, a reclamation of agency through embodied memory. This vision helps position indigenous resistance as not only alive, but divine-sanctioned cultural continuities. Besides, in reanimating the land through spectral, Hobson's novel dissolves western binaries of life/death, history/ myth, and human/ nonhuman, forging a narrative form that is itself a ritual of survivance.

Beyond its spiritual dimension, Tsala's endurance also operates as a powerful political commentary that aligns with global justice frameworks, specifically SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). His journey through the landscape of historical violence—marked by sickness, forced removal, and governmental betrayal—exposes the embedded structural injustices of settler colonialism. By invoking the Trail of Tears and the deception of the Echota Treaty, Hobson grounds the narrative in real historical atrocities, making Tsala's spectral presence a form of ethical testimony. Survivance here transcends cultural preservation—it becomes a demand for institutional accountability and truth-telling. Hence, the novel asserts that justice must be historically aware and culturally specific. Besides, through Tsala's voice in *The Removed*, Hobson crafts not just remembrance but also a framework for justice that confronts erasure, reclaims Indigenous stories, and redefines survival as resistance.

Moreover, by converting land into a spiritually charged location wherein Indigenous presence, historical trauma, and ancestral memory come together, Brandon Hobson's *The Removed*

enacts the Native uncanny and sustainable survivance. The novel breaks down Western divisions between the visible and invisible, and the myth and memory through Tsala's visions of warriors, ceremonies, shapeshifting spirits, and intergenerational knowledge. Thus, the land remembers, breathes, and bears witness to both removal and return, making it an active agent. What Vizenor refers to as survivance—not just survival, but active resistance on a cultural and spiritual level—is embodied in this sacred geography. Hence, Indian ghosts in *The Removed* are not signs of the lost but are agents of perseverance who never stop speaking, guiding, and protecting. These ghosts create a counternarrative to settler-colonial erasure by making Native people stay in rather than haunting them to move out. Thus, Hobson portrays the trouble of the Native as a restarting of the journey toward a revitalised connection with land, narrative, and spirit rather than as a destination.

Conclusion

The Removed presents a profound meditation on Indigenous spectrality, memory, and resistance by reconfiguring the ghost as an active agent of cultural survivance. This story strikes a deep chord in the current context, claiming that Indigenous presence is alive, embodied, and visionary despite historical displacement. The Native uncanny in Hobson's present novel suggests that ghosts carry the future and never give up. Through Tsala's embodied resistance and the sacred geography of Cherokee homelands, the narrative enacts a form of sustainable survivance that affirms both cultural sovereignty and relational accountability. Tsala's spectral presence embodies the Native uncanny—not as a remnant of unresolved trauma but as a force that disrupts colonial temporality and affirms intergenerational continuity. His journey through the spirit of the world becomes a narrative of return and resilience where haunting functions not as closure but as continuity. The spectral voice challenges Eurocentric frameworks that reduce ghosts to metaphor or psychological rupture, and instead grounds them in Indigenous cosmologies of presence, agency, and testimony. As Native American literature often adopts non-linear, cyclical, or spatial conceptions of time, where past, present, and future co-exist, As Native American literature often adopts non-linear, cyclical, or spatial conceptions of time, where past, present, and future co-exist, in *The Removed* ancestral voices, prophecies, and visions become narrative mechanisms that resist colonial chronologies and reaffirm the living presence of history. Within this framework, the Indigenous ghosts emerge as a political statement—a refusal to vanish or be absorbed by settler narratives. The novel also reframes land as a sentient archive of historical trauma and ancestral endurance. The physical environment is not merely symbolic but spiritually animated, bearing the imprints of colonial violence, ecological degradation, and prophetic vision. The interweaving of spirit, land, and memory in *The Removed* offers a decolonial vision rooted in care, kinship, and resilience, which is an enduring force, resisting erasure, reclaiming space, and shaping futures through the power of story and spirit.

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