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Nation of Mechanics: Automobility, Animality, and Indigeneity in John Joseph Mathews's *Sundown* (1934)

Daniel Bowman

1 From the earliest decades of American automobility, advocates of the car were keen to emphasize the link between ideas of civilizational progress and their literally progressive machine. In 1900, one E. P. Ingersoll, editor of the first ever automotive periodical in the English language—*Horseless Age*—claimed that while the United States had "once been a nation of horsemen," it was now "pre-eminently a nation of mechanics" (Ingersoll, "Evolution" 9). In the same article, tellingly titled "The Evolution of the Industry," Ingersoll explicitly connects the mastery of machines with the advancement of the United States as a country, while association with the nonhuman figure of the horse, once a potent symbol of American identity in itself, risked labelling one as old-fashioned or even less evolved. Despite the fact that the automobile was a European invention, it was American mechanics, Ingersoll asserted, who completed "the work which in many respects, it was admitted, the foreign engineers had failed to carry to a satisfactory conclusion" (Ingersoll, "Horseless Age" 8). While it may not be surprising to hear the editor of a periodical entitled *Horseless Age* attempt to relegate the horse to the past, the notion that the transition from literal to mechanical horsepower was bound up with American national identity (itself in transition) presents a largely unexplored route into questions of inter-species relationships, technology, and national identity at the dawn of the motor age.

2 The key literary junction between these themes is the 1934 novel *Sundown* by Osage American writer John Joseph Mathews (1894–1979), which demonstrates how Indigenous inter-species connections factor into an emerging notion of American national identity, increasingly defined by use of machine technology and against proximity to nonhuman animals. Not only does *Sundown* present one of the earliest environmental critiques of automobility in American literature, but in doing so it reflects the multi-layered violence inflicted not only on the land but on the animals

who inhabit it, human and nonhuman, in both material and symbolic senses. Following on from Hanna Musiol's contributions on the subject (Musiol), most recent criticism of *Sundown* has also focused on the novel's formal structure as a *bildungsroman*, a genre "bound to the rhetoric of the forward march of 'progress'" (Anson 440), and even research which draws attention to the interplay between human and nonhuman consciousness in the text does so as a way to comment on Mathews's disruption of the "normalizing rhythms demanded by the traditional Western bildungsroman" (Steele, 230). As such, while this article tracks the progress of *Sundown*'s protagonist, Challenge "Chal" Windzer, its focus is on the inter-species connections he grapples with from his Osage upbringing, through his exposure to the white American side of his identity at university, and on his return to Osage County where he becomes a rich man after inheriting his father's oil rights. As the circumstances of his father's violent death demonstrate, however, the dangers of automotive culture are never far from the picture, as his father is found in the hills with a bullet in his head, his new car stolen (J. J. Mathews, *Sundown* 237—henceforth cited by page number only). Through a combination of literary historical sources, including Mathews's novel, contemporaneous automotive periodicals and newspapers, and traditional stories of Osage inter-species connections, I will demonstrate the literal and symbolic violence enacted upon Indigenous and nonhuman populations during the transition from a nation of horsemen to a nation of mechanics in the United States, from horse to horsepower. To this end, following a brief introduction to *Sundown* and the Osage Nation, I will discuss how technological advancement at the turn of the century enabled the automobile to become a symbol of national identity in the United States, before moving on to demonstrate how this automotive culture perpetuated myths of the "ecological" and "vanishing Indians." As my analysis of *Sundown* will show, the symbolic co-opting of Indigenous identities into car culture in some ways reflected that of the horse, at once somatically denied and figuratively coveted.

3 Throughout the twentieth century, including its earliest decades, automobility in the United States maintained a symbolic relationship with both Indigenous and nonhuman animal identities, from the founding of the Geronimo Motor Company in 1916 and the subsequent Pontiacs, Apaches, Cherokees, Cheyennes, Dakotas, Navajos, and Winnebagos, to the Mustangs, Impalas, Colts, Broncos, and Pintos, to name but a few car brands. Such symbolic reverence, however, serves only to disguise the very real material violence inflicted on both Indigenous Americans and nonhuman animals in automotive culture, by simultaneously equating one with the other, and disregarding the somatic existence of both. By the 1930s, the (colonial) history of the automobile in the United States had Indigenous Americans positioned not in the driving seat but in the background, as primitive people who made up part of the scenery (as we shall see in *Horseless Age*). Mathews's Osage American protagonist, Challenge "Chal" Windzer, may appear fittingly named, as he drives a "long, powerful red roadster" (245) and serves as a night-flight instructor in the military, seemingly challenging colonial stereotypes of Indigenous technological ineptitude. However, in *Sundown*, Mathews demonstrates the inherent difficulties faced by his Osage characters in separating the symbolism of the automobile from its material ecological consequences, questioning whether merely adopting colonial symbols of civilization is in fact a challenge to anything but Chal's own Osage traditions. The difficulties Chal faces in reconciling his own dual national identities become bound up with the transition from animal to mechanical horsepower in Osage County, as the inter-species bonds he naturally develops during his Osage

upbringing are tested against his need to prove to his new white friends that he is "not some animal" (153).

4 Despite the fact that many Indigenous communities participated in automotive culture from its very outset (P. Deloria 153), a colonial idea of Indigeneity was expressed in literature of all kinds (including automotive periodicals such as *Horseless Age* and high-profile newspapers, as discussed below), which presented Indigenous people as incompatible with machine technology or anything representing the modern in the early twentieth century. Along with this assumption of technological disinterest came the recognition of the less anthropocentric relationship to nonhuman animals observed by many Indigenous cultures, a relationship based on respect more than domination and control, placing them firmly in Ingersoll's category of "horsemen" as opposed to "mechanics." Colonial representations of Indigenous peoples within automotive culture frequently drew on dangerous stereotypes of the "ecological Indian," presenting them as either so close to nonhuman animals in terms of societal evolution as to be regarded as no different (see Krech) or, alternatively, simply not existing at all within the dialogue of automobility, as the "vanishing Indian," thereby clearing the way for road building projects across Indigenous lands without the need for moral deliberation (see Sturgeon; Banerjee).

5 *Sundown* records how the Osage upset the racist ideological barriers between mechanized, forward-thinking citizens of the United States and the supposedly animal-based, slower-paced Indigenous population. When a deluge of oil was discovered beneath Osage lands in the early decades of the twentieth century, the lives of the Osage were drastically altered forever by both the ensuing financial wealth and the influx of white settlers keen to take what they could to redress the balance. Having been forcibly removed from their homeland in Kansas by the US Government in 1870, the Osage tribe had no choice but to settle on the new reservation in Oklahoma, on land which, in Mathews's words, "no white man would have" (J. J. Mathews, *The Osages* 776). The Dawes Allotment Act followed in 1887, by which the Government attempted to impose land ownership onto Indigenous individuals rather than tribes as a whole (allocating land so as to bring Indigenous peoples under federal laws, encourage farming, and make it easier for others to "legally" purchase land from Indigenous communities). The Osage opposed the Act, and while they failed to prevent its passing, they succeeded in securing a clause which stated that only the surface of their land would be privatised—the Osage nation maintained communal ownership of any mineral resources below ground. Thus, when vast swathes of oil were subsequently discovered beneath the supposedly worthless land the Government had forced on the Osages, the tribe became not only "the richest Indian community in the world" ("Oil Makes Osages" 1) but the richest people, per capita, anywhere in the world (McAuliffe 42), with each member of the Osage nation (as listed on the 1906 Census) and their descendants receiving royalties on every barrel of oil removed from the ground—"one sixth of every forty-two-gallon barrel of oil" (78) as Mathews records in *Sundown*. In May 1923, there were 8,360 oil wells on Osage lands, only five of which were dry, "the smallest proportion ever known in oil drilling operations" (P. Deloria 138).

6 Prior to the Osage oil boom, the "fullblood" (7) Osages, whom Chal refers to as Indians, are explicitly associated with equine culture in *Sundown*. Chal, too, enjoys a strong bond with the pintos he frequently rides through the Osage hills as a young man—a true nation of horsemen. This all changes when the vast oil payments begin to roll in, "as

sure as death" (271), as flashy cars, now within financial reach of every Osage, become must-have commodities. When Chal returns to Osage County from the white space of the university, he first considers checking in on his ponies, who "were out in the country," before acknowledging that "no one rode horseback any more except the Indians, and many of them were buying cars" (162). As Chal learns the hard way, however, while he may drive his car, shun his connections to the nonhuman world, and do everything to integrate into white society, colonial symbols of success and civilization do not serve the Osage and come at a price much greater than money. Like Mathews, my intention is to challenge the logic of technological progressives such as Ingersoll for whom inter-species relationships between humans and other animals are considered signs of primitivism.

1. Nation of Mechanics

7 Ingersoll was, at the time, not alone in his reverence for those who worked with machines, as demonstrated by Cecelia Tichi's study of the engineer as an American cultural figure between the 1890s and 1920s. The engineer, for Tichi, is "in Emerson's sense the representative man for the era, a symbol of efficiency, stability, functionalism, and power. In the imaginative literature of industrialized America, he figures as a new hero who enacts the values of civilization" (Tichi 98). As if confirming Ingersoll's assertion directly, Tichi goes on to claim that in this new age of technological advancement, "power was in the realm of the engineer and not the equestrian" (Tichi 154), a notion Chal encounters in *Sundown* when he ultimately shuns his ponies in favor of his flashy car. More specifically to my argument, the automobile was itself identified as a symbol of the new age in the *New York Times* in 1924. Following the assembly of the ten-millionth Ford Model T, one reporter claimed that "many serious-minded people" now recognized the automobile as "the fullest embodiment of contemporary American civilization" ("The Gasoline Age" 16). Cultural historian Cotton Seiler would go on to assert "automobility as essential to shaping the dominant meanings of 'America' and 'American' in the twentieth century" (Seiler 7). While Seiler's study is primarily concerned with the spread of automobility in the mid to late twentieth century, the roots (routes) of such automotive citizenship were certainly laid in the century's early decades.

8 Seiler also takes pains to explain that the individualism and supposed freedom symbolized by the automobile actively required that such freedoms be denied to certain people who did not conform to progressive definitions of modernity. As Saidiya Hartman has argued, the "universality or unencumbered individuality of liberalism relies on tacit exclusions and norms that preclude substantive equality" (Hartman 122). In order for modern American citizens to be considered civilized, there needed to be "uncivilized" groups against which they could be defined—a nation of horsemen against a nation of mechanics. By claiming that such technological mastery was evidence of higher civilization, the United States government was able to justify the "disappearance" of more "primitive" societies, such as Indigenous groups, in the same way that the automobile must inevitably lead to the passing of the horse. The nation of mechanics relied not only on the association of Americans with technological aptitude, but also the association of Indigenous communities with technological ineptitude.

9 However, neither Indigenous peoples nor nonhuman animals were completely excluded from automotive culture. Like horses and horsepower, Indigenous people have also been key symbolic elements in constructing "American" identity. In his study of Indigenous engagement with technology, historian Philip J. Deloria draws attention to the interconnectedness of automotive and Indigenous symbolism in the twentieth century. "Symbolic systems surrounding Indians (nature, violence, primitivism, indigeneity) and automobiles (speed, technological advance, independence, identity, progress)," notes Deloria, "continue to evoke powerful points of both intersection and divergence" (P. Deloria 141–42). Why automobility evoked such ideas is clear from the evidence presented thus far, but to understand the relationships between Indigeneity and ecology, it is necessary to draw on the scholarship of Philip J. Deloria's father, Vine Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux), and the notion of the "ecological Indian."

10 For Vine Deloria, this notion exists in opposition to the "scientific American," and is maintained by progressive faith in technological and scientific truth. The goal of Deloria's work, however, is to expose the oxymoron inherent in the notion of *faith* in what is supposedly indisputable *fact*. Vine Deloria argues that the stereotypical symbolism surrounding Indigenous Americans identifies them in the Euro-American mind as "superstitious creatures" and as: "a subhuman species that really has no feelings, values, or inherent worth. This attitude permeates American society because Americans have been taught that "scientists" are always right, that they have no personal biases, and that they do not lie, three fictions that it is impossible to defeat" (V. Deloria 7). Once the notion that modern human beings evolved from apes became established, Deloria continues, it became "imperative" to arrange the various different human societies on an evolutionary timeline, on which "tribal people with crude mechanical technology illustrated the early kinds of human societies" (V. Deloria 49). With the evolution of mechanical technology used as a yardstick for human evolution itself, Indigenous people were (and are) consistently regarded as animals, being *less than human*, while the supposed evolutionary step up from horse to horsepower defined white Euro-Americans as citizens of the modern industrial state.

11 A relationship to the ecosphere based on sustainable regulation and mutual benefit rather than aggressive expansion and dominance identified "Indians" (from a colonial perspective) as indistinguishable from nature itself. Such a view, Richard White has remarked, is demeaning to Indigenous peoples because it "makes them seem simply like an animal species" who leave no mark on the land they inhabit (White cited in Krech 26). As Michael Harkin and David Rich Lewis explain, this logic was "the basic justification for conquest of Indian lands," in that by denying Indigenous people their status *as people*, there existed only a wilderness ready to be civilized (Harkin and Lewis xxii). Significant to this chapter's analysis of *Sundown* and Indigenous automobility is the colonial history of equating Indigenous populations with nonhuman animals on the basis of their supposed technological ineptitude.

12 The notion that Indigenous Americans were a past phenomenon (or a *passed* phenomenon in terms of the race for civilization) represents another dangerous fiction of Euro-American society. Perpetuating the idea of the "vanishing Indian"—that the Indigenous communities who once occupied certain lands had already disappeared—can be regarded as a further process of colonialization. Michelle Boyer has noted that with the expansion of towns, cities, and road networks came the suggestion that Indigenous populations "would soon disappear from the new western landscape,"

enabling encroachment and dispossession of Indigenous lands to proceed without the need for empathy (Boyer 56–57). Both this notion and that of the "ecological Indian" can be seen in the literary representation of Indigenous people in *Horseless Age*. The word "Indian" first appears in Ingersoll's periodical in 1905, in an article celebrating the construction of a road—"the first special automobile road in the world"—through the Uintah reservation in Ohio ("First Special Automobile Road" 201). The article does not even mention the current inhabitants of the land, but rather anticipates the "thousands who will go to enter the rich Uintah lands that have been held in Indian reservation" until an act of congress in 1904 "prepared the way for their settlement" (202). Articles such as this perpetuate an image of uninhabited wilderness just waiting for settlers to arrive by car, even as it acknowledges that these lands were part of an Indian reservation until mere months ago. With total Indigenous populations in the US estimated to be just under 280,000 in 1910 (*1910 Census* 10), it was not too difficult for white colonisers to imagine that the end of the Indigenous trail was not far away. Following centuries of efforts to that end, it appeared to Virginia Mathews (daughter of John Joseph Mathews) to be the "fervent hope of the federal government that Indian people would simply disappear entirely..." (V. Mathews v).

13 In a 1910 article by Millard H. Newton, who set out from New York City in his automobile, determined to stay "off the much travelled routes" and venture along the network of roads through the "landscape maze" of Long Island, where the deeper the driver goes, "the greater is his desire to penetrate its mysteries" (Newton, 710). Upon alighting from his car, Newton reports: "Scarcely a dozen yards away I picked up a real Indian arrow-head, and before I could believe myself I met an aged native who told me that wild turkeys were... found in the adjoining woods, and the tribe of Long Island Indians, now almost extinct, regarded the place as the nearest thing to their Happy Hunting Ground" (711). Dubious as this encounter may seem, it reveals much about the expectations of white automobilists who ventured out to "penetrate" the landscape. Newton's discovery of a "real Indian arrow-head" takes the form of an almost archaeological find, a relic of an ancient civilization (lacking in technology). The tribe themselves are described as being "almost extinct," terminology usually reserved for endangered nonhuman animals as opposed to human groups existing in the present. As historian Richard Drinnon has argued, however, the suggestion of an impending Indigenous extinction is another of "those deadly subtleties of white hostility that reduced native peoples to the level of the rest of the fauna and flora to be 'rooted out' in the name of so-called civilization" (Drinnon quoted in Hutchings 68). They are just more natural "mysteries" hidden from those who do not possess an automobile.

14 While these examples may seem isolated and geographically disconnected, the fact that "Indians" are identified as such regardless of location or tribal identity, and are represented according to the myths of the "ecological" or "vanishing" Native in a technological publication, lends validity to these ideas within a white colonial society with an underlying faith in technology. In the following sections on *Sundown*, I will demonstrate how the inter-species relationships that played such a formative part in Chal's upbringing threaten the anthropocentrism at the core of American technological modernity. Such relationships, like that between Chal and his ponies, must be denied and replaced with the one-sided, imagined symbiosis between driver and horseless carriage.

2. Becoming Coyote

15 While many of the Osage in *Sundown* were prepared to make the transition from horse to horsepower, taking advantage of the practical benefits of the car on the reservation, it is the white Euro-Americans who insist on maintaining a dichotomy between the technological and animal worlds. Rather than denying and taking great pains to conceal our shared animality, many traditional Indigenous stories, as Brian Hudson (Cherokee) indicates, "teach us that we should realize with humility our place as one of many species" (Hudson 230). In this sense, Indigenous stories go further than simply refuting the notion that Native Americans are less human than their white counterparts; they offer an alternative to the anthropocentric logics which determine Western ways of relating to the nonhuman world.

16 This willingness to embrace our commonality with other animals is a strong feature of Chal's childhood, and his relation to the nonhuman world of the Osage hills shapes his character. In his dreams, we learn, he becomes a hero, "whether in the form of man or animal," or when he cannot sleep "he would be an animal; an indefinite animal in a snug den under the dripping boughs of a tree" (9). Lying in the shade of the blackjack trees, Chal's consciousness drifts freely across species lines, and he "was not a little Indian boy even then, but a coyote…" Although he is only mimicking the actions of the animal, for the young Chal, he is doing more than simply playing a role: "he was a coyote" (11). The full significance of Chal's bond with this particular canine will be more fully explored later in this essay, but for now it serves as evidence that the young Chal does not respect the strict boundaries of species as expected by his schoolteachers. He frequently talks with birds and other animals of the Osage hills, holding "regular conversation with the old pinto" (65), his faithful pony who he will come to shun in favor of an automobile. It is not only other fauna with whom Chal communes, but flora too. The distinctive blackjack trees "assumed personality" for Chal, standing patiently "like old women talking of the glories of the past" (65). It is in and under these trees that Chal feels most free to explore his animal self, and as the novel (and white influence) progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that his Osage roots are bound up with those of the blackjacks.

17 While attending a predominantly white settler high school, Chal first begins to understand that his convivial relationship with his pinto is considered abnormal outside of Osage culture. He is too ashamed to tell anyone at the high school when he escapes to ride his pony, because people "didn't go out by themselves riding on the prairie, unless they were 'riding fence' or on some other business" (68). Chal soon learns that he needs an excuse ready in case any of his white friends should see him on his pinto, and so claims that he was checking on his father's cattle: "Cattle were practical, and looking after them a perfectly reasonable occupation during the weekend" (68–69). Riding his pony because he enjoys the physical and emotional sensation is not an acceptable way of relating to nonhuman animals in white society. The proper power relation must be established by the practical business of monitoring cattle, who represent not fellow living creatures but financial investment—livestock. As long as the pony and the cattle are performing a subservient function in the mechanics of industrial capitalism, such human–animal contact is permissible. Recalling his pony rides as a child, "when one's heartbeats are in rhythm with the pulse of the earth," Chal is still able to find that harmony within himself, "but during the last three years there

had been something else as well" (69). This creeping sense of disharmony with the nonhuman world around him represents the beginning of his gradual transition away from the Osage side of his heritage, symbolized by his inter-species connection to his favorite equine, and towards the colonial American identity symbolized by the automobile. As he enters the white space of the university, he learns that any sense of kinship with other animals is a sign of one's own primitivism.

18 As he and his childhood friends Running Elk and Sun-on-His-Wings wait to be inducted into a fraternity house, the other white members pull up in a "long car" (95) and greet them "with outstretched hands and faces covered in mechanical smiles" (96). From the outset, these "representatives of civilization" (100) are described in technological terms, and it is from this moment onwards that Chal makes the conscious decision that "he was going to be like other people" (103), or at least, like white people. With his newfound desire to imitate the white men at the university, Chal becomes progressively more frustrated not only with himself but also his Osage friends, Running Elk and Sun-on-His-Wings, "because they were so backward about taking up civilized ways of talking and acting" (112). Chal's experiences outside the urban space of the university now become fraught with potential humiliation, as he struggles to smother his feelings of unity with the nonhuman world around him in favor of enacting his superiority at all times. On one of his walks he unconsciously starts running, dodging between trees and ravines as he had done back home, before realizing with horror "that for the last few minutes he had been imagining himself a coyote" (133). A recurring canine figure throughout the novel, understanding the special significance of the coyote in traditional Osage culture opens a window into the authorial techniques Mathews uses to express Chal's inner turmoil. The coyote, as one who (in traditional stories) attempts to imitate others at great personal cost, embodies the contradictory identities that Chal must adopt in order to be accepted in white civilization—as a human (but not an animal), and a Native (but not an American).

19 Several of these traditional Osage stories featuring the coyote were collected by the first Indigenous professional ethnologist, Francis La Flesche (1857–1932), born on the Omaha Reservation where he grew up speaking both English and Omaha, "a language mutually intelligible with Osage" (Bailey 3). In "The Coyote and the Woodpecker," a coyote visits a red woodpecker and, impressed by his hospitality and red head feathers, invites the woodpecker to his own home in three days' time. When the woodpecker arrives, the coyote has attempted to mimic both the woodpecker's house and head plumage, placing a dead tree trunk inside and attaching a burning branch to the back of his head (both animals are gendered male in the translation). The coyote then proceeds to mimic the woodpecker's behavior by "pecking" the dead tree with his nose, but the flaming branch on his head sets fire to the tree, and then to the entirety of the house (which is made of grass). The woodpecker flies to safety, but the coyote burns to death. In attempting to imitate the woodpecker's looks and behavior, the coyote appears ridiculous before ultimately losing his life ("The Coyote and the Woodpecker" in Bailey 147–48).

20 A similar fate awaits the coyote in "The Coyote and the Fawn." In this story, a coyote is envious of the white spots on a fawn's fur. The fawn plays a trick on the coyote, telling him that he acquired his spots by sitting very close to a fire. The coyote proceeds to build a fire and lies with his back against it, waiting for the white spots to appear. But they never come, and instead the coyote's eyes pop out and he, too, burns to death.

Once again, in attempting to mimic the appearance of another, the coyote leaves himself vulnerable to manipulation and meets his demise ("The Coyote and the Fawn" in Bailey 148–50). The fact that the coyote desires *white* spots maps onto Chal's desire to imitate the white men at the university, as if by imitating their outward appearance and actions he can assimilate into white culture. Yet Chal has as much real chance of becoming white as the coyote has of gaining white spots, no matter how much of himself he sacrifices.

21 In his journalistic writings, Mathews commented on the Osage usage of coyotes in such traditional stories, stories that "depend on dignity made ridiculous as a basis for humor" (quoted in Ruoff 19). Far from an entirely negative symbolism, however, the importance of the coyote to the Osage is emphasized by Mathews in his weekly column entitled "Our Osage Hills," which ran in the Pawhuska *Daily Journal-Capital* between 1930 and 1931. Of all the animals native to the Osage, Mathews writes, the coyote has been the most successful in adapting to the arrival of Europeans to the land. Despite frequent attempts to remove the coyote, they have succeeded where other animals have failed in surviving the influence of white civilization—the prairie chicken, in contrast, "has not yet learned that death can spurt from an automobile" (J. J. Mathews and Snyder 161). Often a figure of vanity and humor in Osage tradition, the coyote nonetheless remained for Mathews "an admirable bandit who contributes something indispensable to the life of the Osage" (161). Thus, when Chal in *Sundown* feels himself becoming a coyote, Mathews is deliberately invoking both the threat of mimicking white "civilized" behavior at the university and a will to survive in the face of such civilization.

22 The more time he spends in the company of white people, the more Chal learns to hold his own urges in check, and to "assume that veneer which he believed to be civilization" (13). Yet, gradually, his dreams themselves begin to change, and he begins to believe in his own self-importance as a man of the world. Now, when "the desire to *play the role* of coyote" comes to him, he dismisses such desires with shame—"He was more civilized now and more knowing, and he was ashamed of his recent past" (152—my emphasis). No longer understood as *becoming* a coyote, Chal's desire is now to avoid *playing the role* of one. The distinction may appear small but it is significant. It indicates that Chal's understanding of species is becoming less fluid, and more rigid, moving away from a recognition of the commonality between animals and toward a more recognizably white, scientific model in which one can consciously simulate the behavior of another species, but any deeper connection is merely childish fantasy. Having discussed the ways in which exposure to white settler society unsettles Chal's inter-species connections in his move away from the so-called nation of horsemen, the following section will highlight the colonial response to seeing Indians behind the wheel, and what the arrival of automotive culture meant for the Osage environment.

3. Horse to Hearse

23 With the oil lease sales now reaching "hundreds of thousands of dollars," many new (white) faces have been attracted to Osage County since Chal first left, and it seems to him as though every other man was now "a lawyer, or an automobile salesman" (161). He now recognizes that he can no longer spend idle time with his ponies, as "[c]ars were the thing now" (162). Just because many of the Osage were buying cars does not,

however, mean that they were welcomed into the nation of mechanics. As Philip J. Deloria notes, Indigenous adoption of progressive technology was a long-term goal of the Christian civilizing mission, but it was assumed that this would not come to pass for a very long time, when presumably white civilization would have evolved to the extent that cars seemed as antiquated as horses. The expectation, Deloria explains, "was that Indians would make all the regular stops on the trail up from savagery, skipping none. In the early twentieth century, that meant animal-powered agriculture, the supposed next stop." For the Osage to seemingly take a shortcut and move straight from "savagery" to automobility was, for many white Americans who could not themselves afford such luxurious vehicles, evidence of "cheating nature" (P. Deloria 146). Rather than demonstrating Indigenous participation in modernity, and leading to a reconsideration of colonial "primitive" stereotypes, automobiles became sites of danger and derision for many Indigenous Americans.

24 It takes Chal some time to locate his old friend Running Elk after he returns home, finally finding him in hospital where he would be confined for several weeks, "having wrecked his very expensive roadster" (162). Purchasing lavish automobiles only to wreck them due to careless or drunk driving fuelled stereotypical characterizations of the Osage (and Indigenous Americans in general) as wasteful and technologically inept. As Deloria points out, that same white society "had often claimed to link progress, not only with technology, but with thrift," and thus the notion of Indians purchasing automobiles when, allegedly, they did not understand how to handle them, "was irrational waste." Buying an expensive car (a sign of success and evidence of financial savvy in modern America) turned the Indigenous motorist into something of a tragic joke, and, like "the selling of Manhattan Island for twenty-four dollars in beads and trinkets," was a sure sign of Indian inability (Deloria 144). Automobile salesmen would often treble or quadruple their prices when they saw Osage customers approaching, and the fact that these outrageous prices were usually paid without question was taken as evidence of Indian financial incompetence. As government agent W. J. Endecott reported, the "Indian who purchases a flivver is held to be a spendthrift or of unsound mind or of dishonest habit" (quoted in P. Deloria 145). It is in this sense that automobility, as a desirable component in national citizenship, was inherently exclusive—the Indian without a car is primitive, the Indian with a car is foolish.

25 Evidence of such a narrative framing can be found in the *New York Times*, in an article from 1917 which reports that the Osage named Wah-pah-sha-sah insisted on blowing a great deal of his newly acquired oil-lease profits on a certain expensive car, not realizing that it was a hearse. Wah-pah-sha-sah, reportedly "the richest member of the tribe, more than a millionaire," is clearly a threat to the balance of power when he enters Kansas City to buy his car, and thus needs to be very quickly taken down a peg by demonstrating his embarrassing lack of knowledge when it comes to selecting a machine. When evaluating the "automobile hearse," the Osage's criteria (according to the article) do not include any technical or mechanical specifications, but rather he focuses on flippant, superficial details such as the "fine curtains on its sides" and the "ample squatting room." After making his purchase, the article continues in its patronizing tone, Wah-pah-sha-sah then had to hire a chauffeur for one week "to teach him the mysteries of running a car," as if the inner workings of an automobile could only be conceived of by Indians in a mystical sense. As the Osage and his family drive around in the hearse, the "strange occupants" draw pitying laughter and derision

wherever they go, with people purportedly coming from neighboring towns to observe the spectacle. Eventually, Wah-pah-sha-sah is forced to accept the truth—"that the car with the comfortable squatting facilities was intended only for the dead." Even with this final humiliation, the article concludes by affirming that "he still does not yet quite understand" his *faux pas*, reassuring the white readers that although the Osage may have accidentally stumbled into a position of financial power, all the money in the world cannot make up for their lack of common sense, and an ultimately more primitive mind-set means that the advantages of luxury automobiles are entirely wasted on the Indian ("Rich Indian Picks Hearse Automobile" 87).

26 The irony of this article in relation to *Sundown* is that, for many of the Osage, whatever car they choose becomes a hearse in one way or another. After growing increasingly estranged from Running Elk, Chal learns of his death second-hand: "They said he was shot in the head and left lying in his car in the Big Hill country" (258), a fate not dissimilar to that of Chal's father. My conclusion will deal with the historical murder cases of Big Hill in greater detail, but given the vast income being generated by the oil extraction industry, some white settlers were willing to go to extreme lengths in order to gain control of Osage royalties. Stories of Indigenous financial and technological incompetence, like that of Wah-pah-sha-sah and the reports of government agents such as Endecott, were used to justify the assignation of white "guardians"—usually "local lawyers and business owners"—to any Osage deemed officially "incompetent," giving them total control over the Osage's finances and swindling them out of millions of dollars (McAuliffe 82).

27 For Chal, his powerful car becomes a hearse in a more symbolic sense, as his drunk-driving spree at the novel's dramatic climax represents the death of everything Chal once held dear, having sacrificed his inter-species connectivity for the white man's symbols of power and prosperity. Feeling compelled to move forwards, literally progressing but in fact going nowhere, Chal's "great car sped ahead and he was filled with a delightful madness. He passed the car ahead of him so fast that the driver almost lost control; almost drove his car into a ditch" (294). Narrowly avoiding killing another driver, Chal's rampage soon becomes deadly as he smashes through a flock of nighthawks who had settled on the road, killing "several of them as they flew up before the rush of his car" (295). Interposing between the human driver and the nonhuman world outside, the automobile has no regard for the birds, and the new car–human hybrid renders Chal capable of causing death.

28 As the car finally grinds to a halt, Chal unexpectedly recalls an English word which he associates with the civilized space of the university, and starts "repeating to himself, 'Extravaganza,' without reason" (296). If Challenge Windzer is unaware of the meaning of the word, John Joseph Mathews is not, and Chal's nightmarish attempt to engage with the exaggerated indulgences of white consumer culture is the very definition of extravagance: "an irrational excess, an absurdity" (*OED Online*). Unlike the white people Chal idolizes at the University, such as Jack Castle and Blo Daubeney, automobility does not instill a sense of power or authority in Chal, rather doubt and despair. For Jack Castle, who was "by far the richest man at the University" and owner of "the only car available to the fraternity," it is the smell and soft sound of his automobile which "gave him assurance" (95). For Blo Daubeney, the wealthy white girl who was Chal's unrequited love interest, automobiles convey a similar sense of assurance and safety, and merely "[t]hinking of cars" is enough to bring "a warmth... over her." Blo goes on

to define the aura of authority surrounding Jack Castle as "that thing that made you drive a great shiny car as though you were unconscious of the car…" (131). Jack Castle's self-assurance comes from the fact that, as a wealthy white man, driving a great shiny car is simply part of the natural order of things. For the mixed-heritage Chal, however, the destructive excesses of automobility only serve to confirm that he is *not* part of this group: that while he may drive a car, attend a university, fly aeroplanes, and occasionally date white women, the Osage side of his heritage ensures that he will never be seen as white.

29 As Chal sits, dejected, on the hood of the car, the nonhuman lifeforms of the Osage hills on which he has wreaked such havoc now begin to communicate with him again. Even in silence, Chal feels the presence of the blackjack trees, "standing there as though they were accusing him of something" (298). The "yapping of coyotes" in the distance reminds us of those in the traditional Osage stories, implying that Chal, too, has paid the price for pretending to be something he is not. But the animals surrounding Chal in the aftermath of his anticlimactic auto-binge serve more than a metaphorical purpose. Their reactions to him and his car as animals say much about the way the automobile has impacted human–animal relations, particularly for Chal who has always been conscious of the effects of his own presence amongst the other animals of the Osage hills. A curious steer stops near Chal and the automobile, "staring at that thing on the ground and that large red thing with the shiny eyes; that large thing covered with beads of dew and so out of harmony here" (299). Despite the suggestion that the steer considers the car to be another animal, there is no doubt that it does not belong to the same environment as the other creatures that can be heard around them. As birds and squirrels sound warning calls, Chal gradually becomes aware of the uncomfortable fact that it is not only the car but also *he* that is the perceived threat—he is indistinguishable from the automobile he drives. Chal perceives that his relationship with his automobile actively precludes his connection to the nonhuman world, as the other animals do not distinguish between driver and machine. Chal senses the presence of numerous bluejays around him: "He felt that they were accusing him of something and he became unreasonably angry. He got up, picked up the empty bottle and threw it into the branches of the tree, and there were many streaks of blue-and-white floating away, each screaming 'murder!'" (302).

30 The automobile has turned Chal into a dangerous object, and whether these birds are accusing him of something or not, this violent potential has been realized. His drunk-driving spree which kills sentient creatures and smashes indiscriminately through the sacred Osage blackjack trees is a mirror image of the thoughtless and mechanized violence inflicted upon Indigenous communities in American colonialism. Far from challenging such ideas, Chal's disregard for Osage spiritual connections actually serves a colonial purpose, while he is no closer to becoming an American subject.

4. Conclusion

31 As we learn in the final chapter of the novel, however, the true murderers are the white colonizers who moved into Osage communities, following the oil wealth, who found foul ways to acquire Osage oil money. The period 1921–1926, when Osage oil payments reached their zenith, was also an incredibly dark chapter of Osage history known as the "Reign of Terror," the subject of Martin Scorsese's film *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023),

adapted from the nonfiction book by David Grann. The Osage Reign of Terror saw over sixty of the original 2,229 recognized members of the Osage Nation murdered—nearly three percent of the population (McAuliffe 123). The so-called "guardians" mentioned earlier were entitled to receive their Osage ward's allotted land in the event that the Osage (and any close relations) died of unnatural causes. Guardians could also take out insurance on their ward, so that, should an accident befall the Osage, the white guardian would not be out of pocket. This created great financial incentive for Osage landholders to "disappear." Investigative journalist Dennis McAuliffe claims that "John Joseph Mathews had been too pained by the tribal transformation that took place during the big-money oil years to write about them" (McAuliffe 82). Whilst *Sundown* is clearly evidence to the contrary, the Osage murders were apparently too harrowing a subject for Mathews to develop in his novel, as they receive only the following acknowledgement in the final pages: "there was a great interest in the fact that a group of citizens in the Big Hill country had been killing Big Hills for several years with the object of accumulating several headrights into the hands of one Indian woman who was married to one of the group" (305). This, of course, goes some way to explaining the deaths of both Running Elk and Chal's father, deaths which raise surprisingly few eyebrows in the novel itself among the Osage population or the white authorities. The reality, sadly, was that the FBI only became involved in the case after one white man was murdered as part of a dispute over land inheritance, and even when they finally did enter the case, their involvement had to be funded by the Osage Nation (McAuliffe 123). As McAuliffe discovered in the official FBI report into the "Osage Indian Murders" (available at the FBI FOIA Reading Room in Washington, DC), few of the Osage guardians would risk getting their hands dirty when it came to murdering their ward. Why would they, when, as the report indicated, "the going rate to hire a poor white to kill a rich Osage is $500 and a used Roadster"? (McAuliffe 124). In *Killers of the Flower Moon*, it is only after Ernest Burkhart promises to throw in a "beautiful roadster" that Blackie Thompson agrees to murder the Osage Henry Roan (Scorsese). Recall in *Sundown* that Chal's father was not only killed, but his new car stolen, as if Osage premature transgression into automotive culture, or "cheating nature" in the words of Philip J. Deloria, was justification enough for white America to simply wipe them out of existence (P. Deloria 146).

32 One of the ironies of how negatively car culture treats Indigenous peoples is that the automobile, when stripped of its cultural symbolic baggage, was actually extremely beneficial to reservation life, helping isolated Indigenous communities travel across and between reservations. As Deloria notes, it is no coincidence that the "rise of the intertribal powwow circuit began at the same moment as Indian people were acquiring and using automobiles" (P. Deloria 153). However, there is more to automobility than the prefix *auto* implies. We see the shiny machine which grants (some of) us independence, but we do not see the social, political, and environmental consequences of oil extraction necessary for the continued production of petroleum, nor those of the steel and rubber industries essential for car production, nor the deforestation, land acquisition, and geographic racial and socio-economic violence behind road building, nor the "traffic regulations, parking arrangements, insurance, criminal justice systems, healthcare," not to mention the direct and indirect threat to all animal life (Böhm et al. 5).

33 The threat that such a "regime of automobility" (Böhm et al. 3) poses to Osage inter-species connections is recognized by Chal at multiple points throughout *Sundown*. Before he himself becomes a motorist, he realizes that in the years since the thousands of black oil derricks arrived in Osage County, he had not "heard the wild turkeys flying up to roost along the creek, and he could scarcely remember what the howl of a wolf was like" (64). Black mirrors of the blackjack trees, these derricks do not exist in any kind of harmony with the ecosystem, their drill holes sucking the earth dry while polluting the surrounding areas, making them increasingly unsuitable for animal habitation. The extent of the damage is confirmed when, towards the novel's close, a much-changed Chal attempts to return to the old creek where he used to swim as a child. Accompanied by his party of white "friends" who leach off his oil royalties, Chal drives off in search of a "beautiful spot in which to drink." Recalling how he "used to ride to a round hole of water with elms arching above it" on his pony, Chal suddenly experiences a deep nostalgic need to return to this place of natural beauty (250). When they finally stop the car, however, they notice that oil derricks now surround the area, "and from each a path of sterile brown earth led down to the creek, where oil and salt water had killed every blade of grass and exposed the glaring limestone. Some of the elms had been cut down, and the surface of the water had an iridescent scum on it" (250). While the automobile may promise a return to nature and offer a sense of communion with nonhuman animals, the fact remains that, in *Sundown*, the automobile itself is one of the greatest threats to such inter-species connections.

34 This goes some way to explaining why animal metaphors have remained prevalent features of automotive culture, from its earliest iterations to the present day. I have discussed elsewhere the incorporation of equine symbols into early automotive literature, and the veritable menagerie of animals in car brands is plain for all to see (Bowman). Not only does such branding offer a symbolic connection to the animal in question, but recreating the victims of automobility in an accessible form also creates a plausible deniability of its deadly consequences. As Deloria argues, Indigenous branding was used to similar effect:

> Indians, it seemed, possessed the community spirit lacking in the city, the spiritual center desired by those troubled by secular science, the reality so missing in a world of artifice.... Indians evoked a nostalgic past more authentic and often more desirable than the anxious present. By imagining such a past, projecting it onto the bodies of Indian people, and then devising means to appropriate that (now-Indian) past for themselves, white Americans sought reassurance: they might enjoy modernity while somehow escaping its destructive consequences. (P. Deloria 166)

35 As I have demonstrated through my analysis of *Sundown*, with reference to numerous other literary historical sources on early automobility and its representation of Indigenous people, emerging car culture brought with it the almost conscious separation between humans and other animals, with the automobile acting as a kind of screen intersecting between what is civilised and what is primitive. The so-called nation of mechanics which car advocates such as Ingersoll championed would replace a nation previously defined by an inter-species connection between human and equine—a nation of horsemen. As Chal's experience shows, however, the imagined symbiosis between human and machine is a poor substitute for actual human–animal relations, even if such machines are metaphorically rendered as animals. Symbolic representations of animals and animalised Indigenous Americans maintain one of the key paradoxes of automotive culture, in which it is possible for the car to be both the

cause of, and solution to, the ills of modern life.

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ABSTRACTS

In the early twentieth century, American national identity became increasingly associated with automobility and the move from "a nation of horsemen to a nation of mechanics," as automotive periodical *Horseless Age* described it. As well as advocating for the removal of horses from "civilized" society due to their anti-modern associations (a familiar colonialist solution), *Horseless Age* also encouraged nationalistic attachment to the automobile—the new hallmark of civilization. Up to this point, the (colonial) history of the automobile in the United States had Indigenous Americans positioned not in the driving seat but in the background, as primitive people who made up part of the scenery. However, as the present study demonstrates, John Joseph Mathews's novel *Sundown* (1934) complicates this notion by presenting Indigenous ownership and operation of automobiles following the Osage Oil Boom. *Sundown* follows the life of Osage American Chal Windzer, growing up in Osage County during the oil boom and struggling to balance his Indigenous roots with the desire to find routes into white settler culture. Drawing on a range of literary historical sources such as *Horseless Age*, Mathews's ecological writing, and traditional stories of the Osage, my reading of *Sundown* examines the inherent difficulties in separating the symbolism of the automobile from its material ecological consequences. In much the same way that animal symbols are co-opted in automotive branding, Indigenous identities are exploited in car culture to conjure up a nostalgic past in which the ecological and colonial violence of American Modernity is conveniently forgotten. I will argue that Mathews's Osage characters find themselves in a double-bind as they seek to refute stereotypes of technological primitivism whilst still maintaining and respecting Indigenous connections to the natural world.

INDEX

Keywords: John Joseph Mathews, animal studies, automobile, Indigenous literature, American literature, Osage

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