

**Public Witness Testimony**  
**Submitted to the Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Subcommittee Committee on**  
**Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Regarding FY 2018 Funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities**  
**Jennifer Johnson**

**(May 16, 2017)**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCollum and Members of the Subcommittee:

Estonko. Good morning. My name is Jennifer Johnson and I am a citizen of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma and a PhD student in the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma. I am here today to testify in support of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

I grew up in the rural community of Konawa, Oklahoma. It is a town so small, that it does not even have a stoplight. My community is nestled within the tribal boundaries of the Seminole Nation, a tribe with approximately 18,000 citizens, located in the south-central portion of the state. Although my community is small, it is rich in heritage.

Within my family, my grandmother was a monolingual speaker of the Maskoke language; she didn't speak English at all. My aunts and uncles were required to attend boarding schools in Oklahoma in which they acquired the English language. The generation that precedes me is bilingual in Maskoke and English. It is my generation that is not and it is a loss that I feel deeply today. When my generation was born, we were spoken to in English. Our parents didn't want us to struggle in school as they had. I can still remember my aunt telling me about how she was forced to stand with her nose in the middle of a circle on the wall because she been caught speaking Maskoke in school. School language policy directly affected my family's use of the Maskoke language.

As I grew up with my grandmother and extended family, I was fortunate to hear my grandmother's stories that conveyed a worldview that was uniquely Seminole. These stories transmitted knowledge that has been passed down through generations. When my grandmother passed away, I began to hear the language less and less.

My testimony today is to highlight the impact of the NEH-supported **Spoken Creek Documentation Project**, which is an endangered Muscogean language, originally spoken in the southeastern United States. It is now spoken by the Seminole and Muscogee Creek Nations in Oklahoma, and the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The project is part of the Documenting Endangered Languages program, a partnership between the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) to develop and advance knowledge concerning endangered human languages. The project builds on existing collaboration between the College of William and Mary and the Seminole Nation to provide the first documentation of spoken Creek (or Maskoke as we call it). The goal is to produce 24 hours of audiovisual recordings, transcriptions, and translations into English and train students in language documentation methods. The data will then be archived at the Sam Noble Museum of

Natural History at the University of Oklahoma and is currently made available online as it is completed. Much of the transcription and translation has been done by students, paired with fluent speakers, in Bacone College's Master-Apprentice program.

I first became involved with the Project, when our Principal Chief Leonard Harjo met with Dr. Jack Martin, a linguist from the College of William & Mary that has worked closely with our tribe to assess next steps in language planning. Chief Harjo noted that we were losing first language Maskoke speakers at an alarming rate and that critical action was needed to address the loss of our ancestral language. In collaboration with the Seminole Nation, Dr. Martin developed the NEH supported project and we have obtained audiovisual recordings that contain stories and information that is invaluable.

We have been fortunate to include a roundtable of military veterans as participants in the interviews. These veterans served in Bosnia, Korea, Vietnam and World War II. The stories and life lessons that they shared through our language is invaluable to the repository of knowledge of American history. We were reminded of the importance of the Maskoke language in service to the United States, when in November of 2013, our esteemed elder, the late Mr. Edmond Andrew Harjo was presented with the Congressional Gold Medal for his service as a Code Talker in World War II. The Maskoke language was one of a few Indigenous languages utilized as military code that could not be broken.

Within the Seminole Nation, I estimate there are approximately 200 first language fluent speakers remaining. Unlike other world languages, such as Spanish, Italian or French, the Maskoke language is only spoken in the United States. There is nowhere else in the world that you could travel to hear it spoken in its natural state. According to information from the 2010 U.S. Census, there were only 169 Indigenous languages still spoken and of that number, only 5.4% were spoken across all ages. However, it should be noted the 2010 Census figures do not give us a clear picture of what degree of fluency those languages are spoken. With the commencement of the next U.S. Census Survey in the next three years, I expect the numbers of Indigenous languages spoken will decrease significantly, as first language speakers have passed on. The work that we are doing today is important as Indigenous languages within the United States are unique to the heritage of our country, yet their very existence is fragile. I know that within my lifetime, I will bear witness to seeing the last of our first language speakers go, and this project has provided such vital assistance in not only documenting Maskoke language but also providing us with such a concise understanding of American history.

The information I've presented is dire, but I can testify to the positive correlations that this NEH supported project has had within my state. I have seen second language learners who are committed to the revitalization of Maskoke. These learners include a young teacher who goes to work each day teaching classes of Oklahoma high school students the Maskoke language in a local public school. Those students then achieve their World Language requirement by studying the language. School curricula has been developed to include the project videos. It is through these experiences, that I have found hope for our language.

This project is one of many that have been funded by support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Through its Documenting Endangered Languages (DEL) program, the

Endowment has been a leader in providing support to endangered languages around the world, especially indigenous languages and cultures that are unique to this country. Since 2004, NEH has provided nearly \$40 million in funding to these efforts.

To ensure that programs and projects such as these, vital to the heritage of the United States, I ask you to provide \$155 million for the National Endowment for the Humanities for Fiscal Year 2018. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Mvto.