SHIFTING THE LENS: REFRAMING AND RECLAIMING INDIGENOUS NARRATIVES IN THE AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

BRITNEY PAIGE HARRIS: Shifting the Lens: Reframing and Reclaiming Indigenous Narratives in the American Literary Tradition

(Under the direction of Patrick Erben)

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the role of violence, both physical and rhetorical, in shaping representations of Native identity in American literature and media. This project not only analyzes how settler-colonial narratives have framed Indigenous people as savage, vanishing, or victimized, but also explores how Native authors and artists challenge these portrayals through storytelling, irony, and subversion. To begin, I define violence within a settler-colonial framework, illustrating how it operates not only through physical force but also through cultural narratives that justify Indigenous erasure. After establishing this foundation, I investigate how early American literature constructs the master narrative of Indigenous inferiority, focusing on key texts that reinforce settler-colonial dominance. As the analysis progresses, I examine how Native writers of the Native American Renaissance respond to these narratives by reclaiming history, identity, and self-representation. Finally, I explore contemporary Indigenous counter-narratives in literature, film, and television, demonstrating how Native artists strategically utilize humor, irony, and storytelling to resist settler-colonial violence and assert cultural sovereignty, then analyzing cultural authenticity in media and popular culture. This thesis ultimately argues that Indigenous storytelling is not merely a response to violence but a method of actively resisting its ideological and rhetorical foundations.

By prioritizing Indigenous voices and challenging Eurocentric perspectives, this project contributes to a broader understanding of how narrative functions as both a site of oppression and a tool for reclamation, survival, and resistance.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my pawpaw. In my childhood, you took Justin, Calli, Austin, and I on countless adventures in the woods and boonies, but most importantly, you instilled in me the courage to embrace the *bigger* adventures of life. Your unwavering support and encouragement have been a constant source of strength throughout my academic journey. Your belief in me has opened doors and made every opportunity possible, and for this, I am forever grateful. I love you more than two Coca-Colas.

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INTRODUCTION

"I feel like there is so much that explains how Native folks were viewed then and now. … Their stories need to be told. … Where is their voice in all this?" (Francis, 39-40).

These words, from the 2019 graphic novel *Ghost River*, encapsulate the erasure and misrepresentation that have long shaped the American literary tradition. For centuries, Indigenous histories, perspectives, and experiences have been overwritten by settler-colonial narratives that frame Native people as violent, savage, or vanishing — stories that serve not only as justifications for colonial expansion but also as mechanisms of cultural erasure. This imposed narrative strips Indigenous communities of their agency, reducing them to figures of the past rather than acknowledging their continued existence, resistance, and survival. Yet, as *Ghost River* and other Indigenous works make clear, Native voices persist. Native writers, filmmakers, and storytellers have long challenged these portrayals, reclaiming their histories and identities through literature, film, television, and other media.

At the core of these settler-colonial narratives is violence — both literal and rhetorical. Violence has been a fundamental tool of control, exploitation, and forced assimilation, shaping the very foundation of America. From its inception, the United States was built on the dispossession and destruction of Indigenous peoples, a history written in the language of conquest. However, this legacy of violence is not confined to the past; it continues to reverberate in the ongoing struggles of Native communities today. Within settler-colonial contexts, violence functions on multiple levels — not only through physical aggression but also through the narratives that shape cultural memory, identity, and power. The question posed in *Ghost River* —

"Where is their voice in all this?" — highlights how rhetorical violence operates as a tool of erasure, reinforcing settler-colonial dominance by silencing Indigenous perspectives.

To understand how violence operates in American literature and media, we must recognize its function as both a physical force and a rhetorical instrument of power. Sociologist Sylvia Walby defines violence as a "social relationship" between victim and perpetrator, in which harm — whether physical, psychological, or cultural — is inflicted against the victim's will (32–33). In settler-colonial contexts, violence extends beyond acts of war, removal, and genocide; it infiltrates Eurocentric narratives and institutions, perpetuating oppression and erasure. As a rhetorical tool, violence sustains structural inequality by embedding conquest into law, literature, and culture. It is not merely a tactic but a foundational element of America's social fabric, where freedom and domination coexist as paradoxical ideals. The portrayal of Indigenous people as savage, vanishing, or victimized is not just a distortion but an act of violence in itself — one that shapes policies, laws, and cultural perceptions, ensuring the endurance of settler-colonial power.

The master narrative of American expansion reinforces this violent structure, framing colonization as an inevitable and justified process while depicting Native peoples as either obstacles to progress or relics of the past. Through law, literature, and media, this narrative has systematically erased Indigenous voices while justifying the historical and ongoing exploitation of Native lands and communities. This master narrative was constructed early in American literature through figures like Christopher Columbus, Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá, Theodore Roosevelt, Mary Rowlandson, and Increase Mather, who used religious rhetoric and sensationalized captivity narratives to portray Indigenous people as uncivilized savages, godless beings, or violent threats to Christian civilization. Such depictions legitimized colonial conquest

and contributed to cultural amnesia, shaping public memory in ways that persist today. Chapter One of this study explores settler-colonial texts and their rhetorical strategies, examining how settler-colonial texts established a foundation of fear and justification for Indigenous erasure. By analyzing early American literature's framing of Native people as savage, this chapter reveals how manipulative literary and religious discourse functioned as a tool of colonial violence.

While settler-colonial narratives have long sought to overwrite Indigenous histories, Native authors and artists have responded with acts of cultural resistance, using storytelling, rhetorical strategies, and subversion to challenge colonial myths and reclaim their histories. As Leslie Marmon Silko writes in *Ceremony*, storytelling is not merely an artistic practice but a means of survival: "They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death" (2). Chapter Two shifts the focus to Native resistance and the reclamation of narrative through the Native American Renaissance. I examine how early voices like William Apess, Charles Eastman, and Zitkala-Ša laid the groundwork for literary resistance, while later figures such as N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko expanded on these traditions. This chapter explores how storytelling functions as a form of memory, healing, and survival, particularly in *House Made of Dawn* and *Ceremony*, where Indigenous characters navigate trauma, cultural displacement, and the process of reweaving their identities.

Chapter Three brings the discussion into the contemporary moment, analyzing Indigenous counter-narratives in literature, film, and television. Texts such as Tommy Orange's *There There* and the FX series *Reservation Dogs* challenge stereotypical representations of Native identity, while Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* and the graphic novel *Ghost River* reclaim history through Indigenous-centered storytelling. This chapter also explores the role of

humor, irony, and satire in visual media like *Reservation Dogs* and the film *Smoke Signals*, demonstrating how Indigenous artists employ these techniques to subvert settler myths and assert their ongoing presence. Additionally, the chapter considers the evolving landscape of Native representation in popular media like the miniseries *Echo* and the video game *Thunderbird Strike*, highlighting the importance of authentic storytelling in dismantling colonial frameworks and ideologies. These counter-narratives also have profound implications for education, historical memory, and legal policy. The erasure of Indigenous perspectives in literature mirrors their exclusion from history books and political discourse, affecting everything from land rights cases to federal policies on tribal sovereignty. By foregrounding Indigenous storytelling, this research contributes to a broader conversation on narrative justice — on who gets to tell history and how these stories shape collective memory. In a time when Native communities continue to face systemic marginalization — whether through the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), ongoing battles over land and water rights, or the fight for meaningful representation in media — Indigenous storytelling remains a powerful form of resistance. Literature, film, and television are not just cultural artifacts but tools for reclaiming sovereignty, identity, and historical truth. Understanding these narratives is crucial not only for literary scholars but for policymakers, educators, and activists seeking to dismantle colonial frameworks and support Indigenous self-determination. Essentially, this thesis argues that Indigenous storytelling is not merely a response to violence but a method of resisting its ideological and rhetorical foundations. Reclaiming narrative space, both culturally and politically, is central to Indigenous survival. By prioritizing Indigenous voices and challenging Eurocentric perspectives, this project contributes to a broader understanding of how violence and resistance are intertwined

in Native American literature, offering new insights into the power of storytelling as a tool for healing and reclamation.

This research also considers how Native American literature and media do more than resist settler-colonial violence — they reshape it. By analyzing rhetorical strategies such as irony and humor, I will show how Native writers destabilize dominant narratives, effectively challenging historical injustices while providing a form of survival that reclaims space for Native people in the cultural, political, and social landscapes of the United States. Understanding how Indigenous writers and creators challenge colonial violence in literature and media has far-reaching implications for how contemporary issues of representation, identity, and social justice are (and ought to be) addressed. As Indigenous communities continue to fight for their cultural sovereignty and political rights, this work offers critical insights into the ongoing struggle to reclaim narrative space within a society that has long marginalized their voices. By focusing on the rhetorical strategies of humor, irony, and subversion, this thesis not only examines the literary methods that resist settler-colonial violence but also highlights how these strategies act as powerful tools of resistance amidst continued dispossession, environmental destruction, and systemic inequalities. Ultimately, this study advocates for the importance of authentic Indigenous voices in reshaping the cultural landscape, encouraging both scholars and the public to recognize the enduring relevance of Native American storytelling in the fight against erasure and exploitation.

CHAPTER I

Crafting the "Savage": The Master Narrative of Violence as Settler-Colonial Control

In America's history of settler colonialism, the "master narrative" framing inscribed into law, literature, and media has functioned as a powerful tool of control and conquest. America's early history is not merely a record of events but a carefully constructed story — a dominant, overarching framework shaped by those in power to justify their actions and maintain control. This narrative has been presented as a moral justification for the systematic violence, cultural erasure, and forced assimilation and displacement imposed upon Indigenous individuals and their communities.

Moreover, presenting settler actions as inevitable, morally justified, or necessary for the advancement of "civilization" allows the master narrative to distort and erase Indigenous perspectives. Within this framework, colonization is framed as a heroic mission, with settlers cast as bringers of progress and enlightenment, while Indigenous peoples are "othered" as obstacles to this mission, either through their perceived "savagery" or resistance to violent colonial forces (Akers, 71). Crucially, the master narrative portrays the violence perpetrated by white colonists against Indigenous communities as either unavoidable or benevolent efforts to subdue and assimilate Native peoples into colonial society under the guise of salvation.

By controlling how America's history is told, the master narrative legitimizes and normalizes the brutality inflicted upon Indigenous individuals, erasing the truth of colonial exploitation and genocide built within settler dominance. This framing conceals the true motives behind these actions: territorial expansion, resource exploitation, and the maintenance of settler dominance. Moreover, alternative accounts and Indigenous voices are systematically suppressed, ensuring

that mainstream discourse continues to uphold colonization as a righteous endeavor, also ensuring that it remains unchallenged.

The master narrative portrays Native peoples as inherently "savage," lawless, or primitive, requiring settler intervention to deliver them from their "savagery" and bring them into normal civilization. Therefore, acts of violence such as forced removals, massacres, and the fragmentation of cultural practices are seen as justified and essential to progress. Native resistance to land theft and settler encroachment is then reframed as aggression, thereby permitting brutal governmental responses like King Philip's War, the establishment of abusive Native American boarding schools, and the 1830 Indian Removal Act. King Philip's War (1675-1676), one of the bloodiest conflicts in American history, was perceived as a defensive war against Native American disloyalty, obscuring the colonial greed for land and resources that founded the conflict. Similarly, the 1830 Indian Removal Act resulted in the forced displacement of thousands of Native American individuals under the facade of promoting unity and conformity (Akers, 71). However, as Donna L. Akers clarifies, "Native peoples did not voluntarily cede their homelands and take themselves off to reservations devoid of water, game, trees, and fertile agricultural lands. Instead, the U.S. government set up a systematic process of obtaining these lands through sham treaties, procured through threats of annihilation, which it then falsely portrayed as mutually agreeable, legitimate diplomatic instruments between sovereign nations" (73). Akers's perspective reveals the deliberate deceit embedded within settler colonial policies. While treaties were framed as lawful and diplomatic, they were tools of coercion that masked the violence and dispossession inflicted upon Native peoples. By portraying forced removals as mutually agreed upon, the master narrative erased the reality of settler greed and systemic aggression, legitimizing these acts as necessary for "progress."

Moreover, the establishment of boarding schools like Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879 resulted in the state-authorized erasure of Indigenous culture and identity. The slogan "Kill the Indian, Save the Man," coined by U.S. military officer Richard Henry Pratt, represents the violent patronization in legal policies, presenting cultural destruction as a project of altruism.

Assimilation efforts were also characterized as benevolent, representing boarding schools, forced religious conversion, and suppression of Native languages as well-meaning attempts to integrate Indigenous peoples into "normal" American society. By portraying these acts as considerate, the narrative obscures the physical and psychological violence that occurred, such as the fragmentation of families and tribal bonds, abuse, and erasure of cultural identity (Brooks, 213). Governmental responses like King Philip's War were reduced to military conflicts and justified through fabricated claims of "mischievous plots" by Native peoples. They were nothing more than land grabs, rooted in white settlers' belief in their "rightful possession" of the land allegedly granted to them by divine authority (11). These narratives of righteousness served to delegitimize Indigenous humanity and sever their connections to land and kin, recasting any form of resistance as deviance or threat while perpetuating settler domination. This framing reveals a covert tactic in American settler-colonial rhetoric: the weaponization of moral authority to validate cultural and physical violence, thereby erasing Indigenous agency and severing the bonds central to Native identity.

To deepen the analysis of settler-colonialism's master narrative and its impact, this chapter will integrate both primary colonial texts and critical scholarly research. The primary texts, including Columbus's "Letter to Luis de Sant Angel," Villagra's *The History of New Mexico*, Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West*, Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, and Increase Mather's *A Brief History of the War with the Indians in New*

England, provide key examples of how colonial writers constructed Indigenous peoples as racially and morally inferior, framing them as obstacles to progress and divine order. These texts will be analyzed for their rhetorical strategies that legitimize colonial violence through religious, racial, and cultural binaries. While I acknowledge the risk of perpetuating the colonial gaze by exploring these settler-colonial works, I intend to use them strictly as lenses to examine how literary violence is crafted through deliberate rhetorical and literary techniques. To complement these primary sources, I will draw on critical works that interrogate the ideological forces at play in settler-colonial narratives. Key works, like Drew Lopenzina's *Red Ink*, along with the scholarship of Donna Akers and Tuck and Yang, that provide theoretical frameworks for decolonizing these master narratives, highlighting the ways in which settler-colonialism's violence is not merely historical but embedded in ongoing myths and systems. Additionally, works like Romney's "Settler Colonial Prehistories in Seventeenth-Century North America" and other research on colonial ideologies will deepen this chapter's analysis. This blend of historical sources and critical theory will provide a nuanced lens through which to examine the settler-colonial narrative, its justifications for violence, and its continued impact on Indigenous peoples. By focusing on both the colonial texts and the critical scholarship, the chapter will address how settler-colonialism uses rhetorical strategies to construct and perpetuate Indigenous peoples as "others," insidiously legitimizing their subjugation and erasure in the process.

Violence was a foundational tactic of settler-colonial expansion, facilitating land theft, forced removal, and cultural erasure. In this framework, physical violence refers to the direct, bodily harm inflicted on Indigenous peoples — manifested in forced displacements, massacres, and other overt acts of aggression, as seen during events like the Trail of Tears. Cultural violence, by contrast, encompasses the systemic efforts to undermine and eradicate Indigenous

cultural identities and practices. This is evident in policies such as the boarding school system, which sought to "kill the Indian and save the man" by erasing languages, traditions, and communal ties. Both forms of violence operated hand in hand, dehumanizing and disenfranchising Indigenous peoples to assert settler dominance. All state-sanctioned under the guise of "progress," this systematic exploitation perpetuates a master narrative that recasts these brutal measures as necessary steps in the advancement of civilization, while effectively silencing and erasing Indigenous resistance and humanity altogether

Erasing Witnesses: The Tactic of Cultural Amnesia

Literary violence has often been a deliberate strategy to erase Indigenous memory and agency, a process known as cultural amnesia. This tactic is central to settler-colonial narratives, systematically erasing Indigenous histories, voices, and resistance to legitimize violence and dispossession. Early colonial accounts, such as those of Christopher Columbus, exemplify how Native peoples were reduced to objects of conquest and labor – mere commodities, resources, or obstacles to be managed in the pursuit of expansion. What settler narratives like Columbus's letters represent is that the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, existential, and cosmological violence — one that is continuously reasserted through settler occupation (Tuck and Yang, 5). Therefore, settler colonialism is not a disjointed event but an ongoing structure aimed to erase Indigenous presence to secure settler claims to land. In this process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property, and Indigenous ways of knowing and relating to land are dismissed as pre-modern and backward (Tuck and Yang, 6). This structural erasure is evident in Columbus's 1493 letter, in which he writes, "They appeared to me to have no religion … I believe they would very easily become Christians" (2). This statement exemplifies cultural erasure by presenting Indigenous peoples as blank slates, ready to be

overwritten with European ideologies while ignoring their rich spiritual traditions (Lopenzina 7). By denying Indigenous agency and resilience, Columbus's rhetoric contributes to a distorted historical record – one that positions settlers as rightful inheritors of the land and absolves them of responsibility for the violence enacted against Native peoples. The notion that Indigenous people must be erased — physically, culturally, and legally — is a foundational mission of settler colonialism. This erasure occurs through direct violence but also more insidiously through settler narratives that redefine land as an exploitable resource while reducing Indigenous relationships to land to mere obstacles in the path of colonial expansion.

Columbus openly admits to using force, stating, "In the first isle I discovered, I took by force some of the natives, that from them we might gain some information" (3). Though vague, his admission underscores that violence was not an incidental consequence of exploration but a calculated method of control. By framing Indigenous individuals as mere instruments of knowledge, Columbus subordinates their agency and humanity to the ambitions of the colonizer. Lopenzina asserts that this a key tactic in the phenomenon of cultural amnesia: it not only distorts historical records but further dehumanizes Indigenous peoples, stripping them of their dignity and cultural identity and — in the process — effectively legitimizing the violence and dispossession inherent in colonial expansion (7). Columbus's account exemplifies this erasure by framing Indigenous peoples solely as a means to an end, ignoring their humanity and rich cultural and social structures. This selective witnessing lays the groundwork for narratives that justify further violence and dispossession under the guise of discovery and progress.

Settler narratives such as Columbus's reinforce a broader settler-colonial ideology in which the settler sees himself as the rightful dominator of both land and people. As scholars have argued, "The settler, if known by his actions and how he justifies them, sees himself as holding

dominion over the earth and its flora and fauna, as the anthropocentric normal, and as more developed, more human, more deserving than other groups or species. The settler is making a new 'home', and that home is rooted in a homesteading worldview where the wild land and wild people were made for his benefit" (Tuck and Yang, 6). This ideology positions the settler as natural and superior, while Indigenous peoples — and even the land itself — are framed as untamed, undeveloped, and in need of transformation to serve colonial expansion. As part of this worldview, Columbus's renaming of Indigenous lands further illustrates entitlement and erasure: "I have taken possession for their Highnesses … without opposition. To the first island I discovered I gave the name of San Salvador in commemoration of His Divine Majesty, who has wonderfully granted all this. The Indians call it Guanaham. The second I named the Island of Santa Maria de Concepcion; the third, Fernandina; the fourth, Isabella; the fifth, Juana; and thus to each one I gave a new name" (1). His assertion of "possession" is framed entirely from the perspective of European dominance, disregarding the preexisting relationships Indigenous communities had with the land.

Columbus's writing demonstrates the settler-colonial tendency to suppress Indigenous experiences, cultures, and rights in favor of advancing a manipulative European agenda. Susanah Shaw Romney expands on this by introducing the concept of "settler colonial prehistory," explaining that European settlers constructed narratives that positioned Indigenous peoples as relics of the past rather than as contemporaneous political and cultural entities (376). By reframing Native societies as primitive or even nonexistent before European arrival, settlers justified their own claims to land, recasting colonial violence as a necessary step in the progression of history (378). This manufactured narrative aligns with Columbus's rhetoric, which reduces Native peoples to an incidental presence, existing only in relation to European

conquest and governance. This dual erasure — of both physical presence and historical witness — allows settler societies to claim rightful inheritance of the land while delegitimizing Indigenous survival and resistance. Cultural amnesia is not accidental; it is a meticulously crafted strategy. By erasing Indigenous voices and histories, settler narratives recast violence as an inevitable, even necessary, component of "progress," thus perpetuating colonial control and the ongoing marginalization of Native peoples.

The "Savage" Enemy: Justification for Colonial Violence and Conquest

The term "savage" was a deliberate construction in settler-colonial rhetoric used to justify colonial violence and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. According to etymologist James Wedgewood in 1872, "savage" means "wild, untamed, [and] forest-bred" (555). Settler narratives labeled Indigenous peoples as "savage" to paint them as uncivilized obstacles to American progress, creating an "us versus them" dichotomy echoed in literary and political discourse at the time. This rhetoric framed settler expansion as a civilizing mission, legitimizing violent conquest and Indigenous dispossession.

This ideology was particularly emphasized in works like Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá's *The History of New Mexico* (1610) and Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* (1889). These texts serve as key examples of how the rhetoric of savagery evolved from early colonial justifications of conquest to the later celebration of settler expansion. Villagrà, a Spanish soldier and poet, wrote *The History of New Mexico* in 1610 as an epic poem detailing Juan de Oñate's expedition and the violent subjugation of the Acoma Pueblo. His work reflects the early European colonial mindset that framed Indigenous resistance as barbaric, thereby rationalizing extreme violence as a necessary measure for civilization. Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West*, although published nearly 300 years later in 1889, extends and amplifies this same ideology by

positioning white settlers as the rightful inheritors of the land and casting Native resistance as an impediment to American progress. Together, these texts demonstrate the continuity of settler-colonial narratives that dehumanized Indigenous people to validate their dispossession and extermination.

Villagrá's epic poem romanticizes Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate's expedition to expand Spanish dominion in New Mexico by seizing Acoma Pueblo and massacring its Indigenous community. As a Spanish soldier and chronicler, Villagrá sought to legitimize Spanish colonialism by depicting Native resistance as savage defiance against a rightful and divine conquest. His narrative frames colonial violence as a necessary moral endeavor, portraying Indigenous people as wild and subhuman. For instance, he dehumanizes the Native community by equating them to birds in a horrific monologue of gore: "Others remain with shattered limbs / ... their black beaks gaping and their bowels / pouring out from their torn bellies" (lines 80-85). Here, Indigenous people are faceless and voiceless, reduced to subjects of pain and suffering rather than autonomous individuals. By depicting the Acoma Pueblo as grotesquely dismembered creatures, Villagrá reinforces the notion that they are obstacles to be subdued rather than humans with legitimate claims to land and sovereignty. Similarly, in *The Winning of the West*, Theodore Roosevelt perpetuates the narrative of Indigenous inferiority, declaring the superiority of white settlers as "representatives of civilization" who "must dismiss with impatient contempt the plea that these continents should be reserved for the use of scattered savage tribes, whose life was but a few degrees less meaningless, squalid, and ferocious than that of the wild beasts with whom they held joint ownership" (4). By referring to Indigenous people as "scattered" and equating them to wild beasts, Roosevelt reinforces the idea that they lack true structure and civilization. This rhetorical strategy strips Indigenous communities of their

humanity, casting them as unworthy of both land and rights, thus justifying settler expansion and policies such as the 1830 Indian Removal Act and the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre.

The myth of the "savage" Native was a cornerstone of inflammatory settler-colonial rhetoric and literature, framing acts of Indigenous resistance as deviant, savage, and hostile. This archetype played a central role in settler narratives surrounding the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, where Colonel John Chivington and his 675-man militia attacked a peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho village. Settler accounts framed the massacre as a righteous victory over "savage" aggression, but Indigenous oral witness accounts revealed the truth: it was an unprovoked attack on noncombatants, including women, children, and elders, who had already surrendered and flown a white flag of peace. Even some American troops who witnessed the brutality recognized it as an atrocity. Sergeant Lucien Palmer recalled: "The bodies were horribly cut up, skulls broken in a good many; I judge they were broken in after they were killed, as they were shot besides. I do not think I saw any but what was scalped; saw fingers cut off [to take rings], saw several bodies with privates cut off, women as well as men" (Vasicek). Despite such firsthand testimonies, Theodore Roosevelt later described the Sand Creek Massacre as "as righteous and beneficial a deed as ever took place on the frontier." This contradiction underscores the deliberate dehumanization that fueled settler-colonial violence. By maintaining the rhetoric of savagery, settlers could view themselves as protectors of civilization while committing acts of genocide.

The rhetoric of savagery served as a powerful ideological tool in settler-colonial discourse, validating the forced removal, enslavement, and extermination of Indigenous peoples (Forbes, 20). Linking Villagrá's poetic glorification of conquest with Roosevelt's political rhetoric demonstrates the persistence of narratives that cast Indigenous people as obstacles to

progress. This “us versus them” rhetoric not only justified past acts of violence but also laid the foundation for ongoing policies aimed at erasing Indigenous identity and dispossessing Indigenous peoples. The continued presence of such rhetoric in American political discourse underscores its lasting impact on public perceptions of Indigenous peoples and their rights to land and sovereignty.

Beyond legitimizing physical violence, the savage myth underpinned assimilation policies, particularly the U.S. government’s push for boarding schools, where Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families to be indoctrinated into Western ways of life. Boarding schools were not just educational spaces; they were sites of cultural dehumanization, where Indigenous languages, spiritual practices, and cultural traditions were suppressed (Feir, 461). The term “savage” underpinned the justification for these schools, which aimed to “civilize” Native children through violent means. Richard Henry Pratt, who founded the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, epitomized this ideology when he declared, “In [the matter of] Indian civilization I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilization and when we get them under, holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked” (Pratt, 57). Pratt’s words reveal the settler-colonial mindset that framed cultural violence as a necessary step toward civilization. These institutions sought not only to educate but to erase Indigenous identity, severing ties between children and their communities (Feir, 461). The forced removal of children from their families and their cultural traditions was framed as a moral duty to protect their future. However, the reality of these institutions often involved the exploitation of children for labor and the imposition of Western norms. The boarding schools subjected children to harsh living conditions, forced labor, and cultural suppression. As Arnold Krupat’s *Changed Forever* recounts, children like George Lee endured inadequate conditions and minimal education (34).

They were also stripped of traditional symbols of their cultural identity, such as hairstyles. For instance, Hopi survivor Albert Yava reflected on the significance of his traditional hairstyle: "Our traditional hairstyle ... symbolized rain, you might say fertility" (35). The forced cutting of hair, a symbolic erasure of spiritual and cultural identity, exemplified the broader settler-colonial agenda that deemed Indigenous ways of life as inherently "savage" and in need of civilization.

From Villagrá's poetic glorification of conquest to Roosevelt's political rhetoric, the framing of Indigenous people as primitive obstacles sustained settler-colonial violence across centuries. Through literature, policy, and public rhetoric, settlers reinforced the notion that Native peoples were either to be eradicated or assimilated. The emphasis on "civilizing" Indigenous people under the guise of moral reform obscured the true nature of settler-colonial violence. Rather than being a benevolent act of progress, this ideology justified forced displacement, cultural erasure, and economic exploitation, reinforcing the settler-colonial agenda of domination and control.

The Godless Captor: Mary Rowlandson and the Othering of Indigenous Peoples

Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), serves as a powerful example of how colonial writers portrayed Indigenous people as morally inferior and positioned them as cultural "others." Through her account of being captured by the Narragansett and Wampanoag peoples during King Philip's War, Rowlandson frames her captors as morally depraved, godless "savages" whose actions and beliefs are antithetical to the Puritan way of life ("The First Remove"). The narrative is not just an account of physical captivity but a spiritual testimony that elevates the settler experience as a model of piety and virtue while casting the Indigenous peoples as morally corrupt.

Rowlandson structures her account around a series of twenty "removes" that reinforce the colonial binary of savagery versus civilization. She portrays her captors as nomadic and primitive, immediately contrasting the "civilized" colonists, who faced attacks in their homes. However, this stark distinction between captor and captive is complicated by their shared dependence on food and shelter. As Bridget Bennett observes, "both have need of key elements that frequently define a home: protection and nourishment," which destabilizes Rowlandson's otherwise rigid moral distinctions between captor and captive (341). Despite her insistence on their savagery, her captors repeatedly show her kindness – an ambivalence she struggles to reconcile. For instance, in the nineteenth remove, Rowlandson writes that an Indigenous couple fed her "five or six" times, despite being strangers she had never met before ("The Nineteenth Remove"). Yet, she juxtaposes this generosity with the husband's violent past, noting that he had killed two Englishmen and kept their blood-stained clothes in the wigwam where she was eating ("The Nineteenth Remove"). While she acknowledges her captors' generosity, she frames their kindness as an anomaly, reinforcing their supposed moral inferiority rather than challenging her preconceived notions.

Rowlandson repeatedly emphasizes the religious contrast between herself and her captors. Early in her narrative, Rowlandson describes the Indigenous people as "inhumane creatures," labeling them as godless and spiritually corrupt ("The Second Remove"'). This portrayal is central to her depiction of Native Americans: they are not simply hostile or aggressive, but they are fundamentally immoral. For Rowlandson, the violence and suffering she endures during her captivity are portrayed as a test from God, one that ultimately reaffirms the righteousness of her Christian faith. In contrast, the Native peoples are positioned as enemies of God; Rowlandson writes, "God showed His power over the heathen in this, as He did over the

hungry lions when Daniel was cast into the den ("The Twentieth Remove"). Her captors' way of life is presented as devoid of Christian values, with Rowlandson's repeated references to their lack of religious understanding reinforcing the perception that they are fundamentally inferior.

Even when Indigenous figures display hospitality, Rowlandson frames their actions within a moral and religious lens that underscores her own superiority. For instance, she recounts a moment when King Philip, a gracious host, "go[es] out of his way to be gracious, to show his consideration for this special guest" (Dimock, 348). King Phillips invites her to sit and offers her tobacco, an act of kindness that she ultimately rejects. She refuses the offer, writing:

> Then I went to see King Philip, he bade me come in and sit down and asked me whether I would smoke (a usual compliment nowadays among saints and sinners) but this no way suited me. For though I had formerly used Tobacco, yet I had left it ever since I was first taken. It seems to be a bait, the devil lays to make men lose their precious time: I remember with shame, how formerly, when I had taken two or three pipes, I was presently ready for another, such a bewitching thing it is. But I thank God, he has now given me power over it; surely there are many who may be better employed than to lie sucking a stinking Tobacco-pipe. ("The Eighth Remove")

While this passage acknowledges Philip's civility, Rowlandson reframes the moment as a test of her spiritual discipline. Tobacco becomes symbolic of temptation and moral corruption, allowing her to contrast her own moral restraint with the supposed corruption of both her captors and even some of her fellow colonists. As Bridget Bennett observes, Rowlandson's captivity narrative consistently reinforces "the ideological portrayal of Indigenous peoples as fundamentally savage" (341). Even acts of generosity, such as Philip's offer of hospitality, are positioned within

a religiosity that upholds the Puritan moral order, ensuring that any moment of cultural overlap does not unsettle the broader colonial narrative of Indigenous inferiority.

In her narrative, Rowlandson further invokes religious imagery to underline the divide between Puritan settlers and Native peoples. She frequently alludes to her experiences with scripture, presenting her ability to recite Bible verses as a sign of spiritual superiority. For instance, she recounts how, "I thought I could as well have died. … As soon as I had the opportunity, I took my Bible to read, and that quieting Scripture came to my hand, 'Be still and know that I am God.' … Which stilled my spirit for the present ("The Nineteenth Remove"). By relying on scripture for strength, she positions herself within a divine framework, while her captors are depicted as uninterested in religion and spiritually lost, requiring conversion for salvation. Rowlandson's presented dichotomy of "uncivilized heathen" versus "righteous Christian" reinforces the Puritans' moral superiority, portraying them as suffering at the hands of godless Indigenous peoples. This religious framework casts the Puritans as righteous victims, chosen by God to endure suffering for a higher moral purpose. Rowlandson sees her captivity as a test of faith, a divine trial that ultimately reaffirms the righteousness of her Christian beliefs. She writes, "God was with me in a wonderful manner, carrying me along, and bearing up my spirit ("The Second Remove"). Rowlandson portrays herself not just as a captive, but as a symbol of divine providence, whose suffering serves a higher, spiritual goal. In contrast, the Indigenous peoples are depicted as obstacles to this divine plan, their very existence presenting a moral challenge to the Puritan settlers.

The portrayal of Native Americans as "heathens" who must be converted or eradicated reflects a central aspect of colonial ideology. Rowlandson's narrative serves as a tool of justification for colonial violence, while also promoting a sense of moral and cultural superiority

among settlers. The Native peoples are framed as a profound spiritual threat to the Puritan way of life. This narrative of religious superiority contributes to the broader colonial discourse, where the conversion and subjugation of Indigenous peoples were viewed as a moral duty of Christian civilization. Therefore, Rowlandson's captivity narrative reinforces the ideological boundaries between settlers and Indigenous peoples, positioning Native Americans as the ultimate "other," both a physical and spiritual threat that must be overcome for the preservation of Christian order.

"Instruments of Satan": Increase Mather and the Threat of the "Other"

Colonial writers like Increase Mather constructed Indigenous existence and resistance not only as a physical threat to Puritan society but also as a spiritual one. In *A Brief History of the War with the Indians in New England* (1676), Mather frames King Philip's War as a divine test, interpreting the conflict as a punishment from God meant to strengthen the Puritans' faith. Mather suggests that it is a gift from God, allowing the Puritans to deliver judgment upon "sinful" people, portraying the Native uprisings as a trial of moral virtue rather than a natural response to colonial aggression (Lopenzina, 160). By framing the Indigenous peoples as instruments of Satan, Mather constructs their resistance as both a spiritual and physical challenge to the Puritans' moral order, positioning colonial violence as divinely justified and necessary for their salvation.

Mather's moral framework extends beyond warfare to include the conversion of Indigenous peoples to Christianity, reinforcing the belief that their spiritual salvation was dependent on complete assimilation into Puritan religious structures. He praises missionaries who, through learning Indigenous languages and translating scripture, became "happy Instruments of winning Souls," framing them as the moral agents tasked with saving Native souls from eternal damnation (5). In this framing, Indigenous people are portrayed as "blind

Barbarians," in need of salvation through religious conversion (6). Mather's rhetoric is clear: violence, whether in the form of warfare or forced conversion, is justified as a means of delivering "savages" from the evil of their so-called barbarity. This moral imperative is echoed by Robert Gray, who writes that "Oh, how happy were that man which could reduce this people from brutishness to civility, to religion, to Christianity, to the saving of their souls!" (Gray, 6). Like Mather, Gray frames the subjugation of Indigenous peoples as a religious duty, equating their existence with moral depravity and positioning violence as a necessary step in their salvation. This reflects a broader colonial ideology in which the "civilizing" mission of the Puritans was framed as not only necessary but divinely ordained. To save the "savage," Puritans argued, was to restore moral order, and to fail in this duty would be a moral failing.

The rhetoric of savagery went hand-in-hand with demonization in constructing colonial violence as morally justified. Colonial writers strategically "remembered" or "forgot" violent incidents depending on their narrative purposes, using them to cast Native peoples as inherently barbaric while framing colonial aggression as righteous and necessary (Smolenski and Humphrey 19). Smolenski and Humphrey argue that "what matters is how storytellers employ incidents of violence to cultivate a common identity. … To serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as our own" (19). This selective framing allowed colonial writers to manipulate acts of violence, either amplifying or erasing them, to create a narrative that positioned violence against Indigenous peoples as a necessary and moral act for the greater good – delivering them from the evils of their "savage" ways.

Mather's moral rhetoric framed Native resistance as a spiritual battle, portraying King Philip as "a professed enemy to Christ and His Gospel" and Native leaders as agents of Satan whose defiance threatened the Puritans' divine mission (12). By labeling Indigenous resistance

as a spiritual and moral threat, Mather justified colonial violence as the fulfillment of God's will, a divine mission to deliver the "savage" from the evil of their rebellion. This framework not only sanctified violence but framed the expansion of settler colonialism as part of a divine plan to redeem Native peoples, transforming territorial conquest into a holy war for the salvation of their souls (Lopenzina, 141). Beyond this theological justification, colonial writers like Gray positioned Native societies as inherently lawless and violent, painting them as incapable of moral governance[1]. Gray's argument that war against "barbarous and savage people" was justified as long as it aimed to "reclaime and reduce those savages from their barbarous kinde of life" reflects the widespread belief that Indigenous peoples needed to be saved from their "savage" nature (3). In denying Indigenous governance and social systems, colonial writers effectively erased the complexity of Native societies, positioning violence as a necessary tool to civilize them and deliver them from their inherent depravity. In this context, Mather's and Gray's rhetoric aligns with the broader settler-colonial strategy of framing Native peoples as spiritually corrupt and morally dangerous. Colonial violence, then, was not just a means of conquest; it was a moral imperative, a necessary act to "deliver" Native peoples from their "savage" state and bring them into the fold of "civilized" Christianity. The rhetoric of savagery served as a justification for both physical violence and cultural erasure, reducing Native peoples to a caricature of moral depravity in need of Puritan guidance. Increase Mather and his contemporaries used the rhetoric of "delivering" Indigenous peoples from their perceived savagery as a justification for colonial violence. By framing Indigenous resistance as a spiritual

[1] Indigenous communities were not devoid of law or governance. The Powhatan civilization, for example, had a complex and highly functional political system — one that arguably operated more effectively than the "disorderly Jamestown colony" (Lopenzina 141). The refusal of colonial writers to acknowledge these systems as legitimate reveals the hypocrisy of their perspectives. Their own colonial agenda blinded them to the sophistication and efficiency of Native governance, even as their own settlements often struggled with disorder and instability.

threat and portraying Native peoples as incapable of salvation without complete assimilation, Mather and others positioned violence as both a moral duty and a divine right. This rhetoric not only sanctified colonial expansion but framed it as a holy mission to rescue the "savage" from evil, ensuring the moral superiority of settler-colonial rule.

Settler colonial narratives justify physical and cultural violence by framing it as a necessary civilizing mission, casting Indigenous peoples as savage, violent, or inferior to authorize their displacement, subjugation, and erasure. By this definition, Native resistance to colonization efforts is viewed as uncivilized betrayal, reinforcing the belief that colonizers are harbingers of order and progress. Therefore, this framing violence as a civilizing mission reveals that violence does not just include physical force but also structural and cultural harm due to its manifestation in policies like forced removals, cultural assimilation, and restrictive legal policies that seek to suppress Indigenous sovereignty. By controlling the narrative and disregarding Indigenous perspectives, settler colonial systems perpetuate control over land, resources, and Indigenous identities, effacing the violent realities of colonization while justifying their actions as generous or inevitable.

While this analysis provides an overview of the rhetoric employed to justify settler-colonial violence, the focus of this thesis is not on the misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples. Instead, the analysis shifts toward how Native peoples have redefined their own narratives through self-representation. Today, this master narrative persists in contemporary media portrayals that depict Native peoples as relics of the past or as marginalized figures devoid of agency. Released in 1995, Disney's *Pocahontas* romanticizes colonization and presents a historical Native figure as part of a mythical, obsolete era. It overlooks the ongoing struggles of Native peoples and reinforces stereotypes of Indigenous women as noble savages or passive

figures under colonization. While companies like Disney have since placed warnings regarding stereotypical depictions and slurs against Indigenous people, like in the 1953 film *Peter Pan*, there is no warning message displayed in *Pocahontas* despite calls and petitions for one to encourage media literacy and address the film's (and Disney's) stereotypical mistakes. The absence of a critical framework surrounding the film prevents audiences from recognizing its role in perpetuating settler colonial stereotypes. To confront its contributions in upholding the master narrative, media companies like Disney must take responsibility for how Indigenous communities are portrayed and provide opportunities for viewers to critically engage with these histories and portrayals.

The emergence of Indigenous-authored works provides a critical counter-narrative for the master narrative perpetuated by settler colonialism. These works not only expose the realities of violence enacted on Indigenous communities but also reframe Native identity, agency, and resistance. By reclaiming and recentering Indigenous perspectives, these texts powerfully challenge the pervasive notions of inferiority and savagery inscribed by settler colonial rhetoric. They assert the resilience of the Indigenous community and retool the language of violence from one of trauma and pain to one focusing on the possibilities of healing, survival, and sovereignty. Therefore, Indigenous counter-narratives resist the master narrative that continues to marginalize them while offering paths toward reclamation, resistance, and resilience.

In the following chapter, I will shift from analyzing settler-colonial narratives to focusing on the counter-narratives written by Indigenous authors and their reclamation of Indigenous voices. This chapter will explore how Native writers directly challenge the hegemonic framing of violence. I will explore how, despite rhetorical strategies utilized in settler-colonial rhetoric, literature, and legal policies as a justification for settler-colonial policies, Indigenous

perspectives and literature reclaim storytelling as an act of resistance in response to colonial violence. By focusing on key works from the Native American Renaissance, such as those by N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko, this chapter will explore how Indigenous authors respond to colonial violence through specific narrative strategies that emphasize cultural survival and solidarity. These texts demonstrate how storytelling functions as a tool of resistance, allowing Indigenous communities to assert their sovereignty, preserve their traditions, and challenge the threats of erasure imposed by settler-colonial frameworks. Additionally, I will examine the use of literary techniques like irony, metaphor, and oral traditions that complicate and subvert the Eurocentric narrative and the ideologies it expresses. By reclaiming storytelling as an act of resistance rather than resignation, Indigenous authors not only expose the truth of historical and cultural violence but also decolonize the American narrative, presenting a vision of growth for Native communities.

CHAPTER II

Writing Against Erasure: Storytelling in the Native American Renaissance

Storytelling possesses an inherent transformative power in Indigenous literature, allowing communities to preserve their histories, challenge dominant narratives, and assert identity in the face of erasure. More than just a means of cultural survival, storytelling functions as a powerful strategy of resistance against settler-colonial rhetoric, countering both cultural and physical violence. Native-American storytelling began in orality, with stories passed down through generations. This chapter examines how Indigenous authors masterfully employed storytelling not only to reclaim Native identity but also as an antidote to the violent erasures and distortions imposed by settler narratives. The Native American Renaissance saw a deliberate expansion of these tactics, as writers like N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko built upon the rhetorical and literary strategies of earlier Indigenous writers such as William Apess, Charles Eastman, and Zitkala-Ša. By recentering Indigenous perspectives and voices, these authors expose the omissions and biases in settler-colonial accounts while forging narratives of survivance, healing, and resistance. Coined by Gerald Vizenor, *survivance* encompasses both survival and resistance, rejecting victimhood in favor of Indigenous presence, agency, and cultural continuity (vii). Apess, Eastman, and Zitkala-Ša's works demonstrate survivance, not simply critiquing the ideological underpinnings of settler violence, but actively dismantling these narratives, replacing them with literary forms that reaffirm Native sovereignty. By recentering Indigenous perspectives and voices, these authors shed light on the cultural, historical, and

emotional dimensions of violence experienced by Native communities, exposing the omissions and biases in settler-colonial perspectives while offering pathways toward Indigenous resistance.

The term "Native American Renaissance" was popularized by Kenneth Lincoln in 1983, indicating the literary and cultural movement beginning in the late 1960s that saw a resurgence of Native-written works in American literature. More than just a historical period, this movement represents a pivotal moment in Indigenous literary expression; the movement was marked by a conscious effort to reclaim and reaffirm Native histories, identities, and sovereignty. What makes the Native American Renaissance distinct as a literary movement is its fusion of oral traditions with contemporary literary forms, its emphasis on Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews, and its role in reshaping the American literary canon by centering Native voices. Unlike earlier works by or about Indigenous peoples that were often filtered through non-Native perspectives, literature from this movement foregrounds Native agency, storytelling as resistance, and the survival of cultural memory. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, along with the rise of militant Native American activism — most notably the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968 — created a cultural and political landscape in which Native writers could challenge dominant narratives and assert Indigenous perspectives that had long been marginalized (Bonnie, 214-216). In his book *Native American Renaissance,* Lincoln highlights the significance of this era, emphasizing how Indigenous authors used storytelling, poetry, and fiction to reclaim cultural sovereignty, resist stereotypes, and address the enduring legacies of dispossession and violence. Lincoln describes the profound relationship between storytelling and cultural sovereignty, writing, "Art is not on the decorative edges of Indian cultures, but alive at the functional heart: in blankets that warm bodies, potteries that store food, songs that gather power, stories that bond people, ceremonies that heal, [and] disciplines that strengthen spirits" (12). Here, Lincoln

emphasizes how Indigenous art and storytelling are not merely marginal but are vital and integral to daily life and survival. Therefore, Native authors like Momaday and Silko actively utilize storytelling to resist stereotypes and reinforce cultural identity. Lincoln also asserts, “Literatures [...] do not separate from the daily contexts of people’s lives: the spoken, sung, and danced language binds the people as the living text of tribal life” (16). In other words, Native American literature is inexplicably intertwined with the lived experiences, histories, and identities of Indigenous communities. This emphasizes the interconnectedness of language and storytelling in ensuring cultural continuity while subverting and confronting Eurocentric master narratives.

Native American resistance writing has long served as a powerful medium for challenging colonial narratives and asserting Indigenous sovereignty. Contending with the realities of forced displacement, erasure, violence, and cultural trauma, the storytelling tradition is an act of reclamation and defiance against settler-colonial ideologies. When we read Native American literature, we often encounter works whose authors have ingeniously adopted the conventions of Western written literature for the purposes of oral storytelling. And so, throughout the Native American Renaissance, Indigenous authors like Momaday and Silko were at the cutting edge of genre-breaking formal conventions as they melded together Native traditions with Western literary conventions to serve the objectives of oral storytelling in their written literature. Although the well-known Native American Renaissance emerged as a defining literary movement in the 1960s and 1970s, it is crucial to acknowledge the earlier Indigenous authors who paved the way by challenging settler-colonial narratives and resisting assimilation through their writings. William Apess, Charles Eastman, and Zitkala-Ša were instrumental in shaping Indigenous resistance literature, employing settler literary conventions to expose the

hypocrisies of colonialism, using appeals to morality, irony, and historical critique to reclaim Native voices and dismantle settler myths from within.

Early Voices of Native Resistance, Apess, Eastman, and Zitkala-Ša

Apess, a Pequot minister and writer, transformed the language of Christian doctrine into a tool of resistance, forcing white audiences to confront their moral contradictions. William Apess, a Pequot minister and writer, transformed the written word into a tool of Indigenous resistance. Born into poverty and subjected to abuse, indentured servitude, and the lasting effects of colonial dispossession, Apess's early life reflected the broader struggles of the Pequot people in early 19th-century New England, where many were forced into indentured labor or treated as wards of the state. Despite these hardships, he overcame personal battles with alcoholism and emerged as a powerful voice for Indigenous rights. His 1829 autobiography, *A Son of the Forest*, is now recognized as a groundbreaking work for its direct confrontation of the injustices faced by Indigenous people, blending personal experience with critiques of settler-colonial policies and Christian-Puritan hypocrisy.

Apess, like other early Native American writers, faced a paradox: he had to use the language and literary forms of the settler-colonial system — English and written literacy — to challenge that very system. He reworked these tools of colonial power into platforms for advocacy and critique, transforming writing from an instrument of conquest into a means of resistance. In his speech *Eulogy on King Philip*, Apess exposes the contradictions of white Christian "civilization," declaring, "Let the children of the Pilgrims blush while the son of the forest drops a tear [...] For be it remembered [that] although the gospel is said to be glad tidings to all people, yet we poor Indians never have found those who brought it [to be] messengers of mercy, but contrawise" (2). Here, Apess directly calls out the hypocrisy of white settlers who

claimed to bring Christianity and civilization while simultaneously waging war, committing atrocities, and oppressing Native peoples. He forces his audience to reckon with the moral failures of their so-called benevolence, turning the religious and moral language of colonizers against them. Through historical critique, he dismantles the moral superiority claimed by white settlers, reframing the narrative to expose their hypocrisy and challenge their self-assumed righteousness.

Building on this strategy, William Apess strategically adopted settler literary conventions to amplify his voice in a predominantly white literary and political space. According to Randall Moon's "William Apess and Writing White," Apess masterfully utilized irony and rhetorical subversion to critique the hypocrisies of settler-colonial Christianity and governance (46-48). By doing so, Apess revealed how Indigenous writers could repurpose colonial tools to resist and reclaim their agency. He accomplishes this is by wielding the Bible — an authority that settlers themselves recognized — to condemn their actions. In his 1833 essay "An Indian's Looking Glass for the White Man," Apess writes, "We are to be judged by one God, who will show no favor to outward appearance" (1). Here, he directly confronts white Christians with their own religious doctrine, making it impossible for them to justify racial prejudice through faith. He further underscores the moral and theological failures of settler society when he asks, "[H]ow are you to love your neighbors as yourself? Is it to cheat them? Is it to wrong them in any way? Now to cheat them out of their rights is robbery" (2). By invoking Christian teachings on love and justice, Apess forces white settlers to see that their participation in displacement, racial discrimination, and dehumanization is not just unethical but fundamentally incompatible with their own professed beliefs.

In addition to his appeals to Biblical morality, Apess employed emotional rhetoric to expose the trauma inflicted on Native American communities under settler colonialism. Apess was writing in the early 19th century, during a time when the United States government was aggressively implementing removal policies that led to the forced relocation of thousands of Native Americans, most notably through the Indian Removal Act of 1830. These policies resulted in widespread dispossession and death. Apess himself, a Pequot, experienced the marginalization of his people, even as he embraced Christianity as part of his ministry, often being excluded by white Protestant communities due to his Native background. He argues, "Can you charge the Indians with robbing a nation almost of their whole continent and murdering their women and children?" (2). This rhetorical question underscores the irony and offensive nature of white settlers upholding values such as life, liberty, and equality while permitting and perpetrating the mistreatment and deaths of thousands of Native Americans. By drawing attention to these contradictions, Apess exposes the settlers' denial of unalienable rights to those with different ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds, powerfully condemning their actions as both hypocritical and inhumane. Apess can be situated within a broader lineage of Indigenous writers who use their work to critique settler-colonial myths and assert Indigenous perspectives. His ability to blend irony, emotional appeal, and Biblical rhetoric precedes the evolving forms of Indigenous resistance writing while maintaining its central purpose: to challenge erasure and affirm the vitality of Native cultures.

Similarly, Zitkala-Ša and Charles Eastman confront the violence of assimilationist policies while demonstrating storytelling as a means of reclaiming Indigenous identity. Eastman, writing from the late 19th century through the early 20th century, was deeply influenced by the federal policies of the time, particularly the Dawes Act of 1887, which sought to dismantle tribal

landholdings and enforce individual land allotments. This policy was part of a broader effort to assimilate Native peoples into Euro-American culture, often at the expense of their communal landholding practices. Eastman, also known as Ohiyesa, was a Dakota physician and writer who furthered the resistance tradition by navigating the liminal space between Indigenous and Western cultural identities, which Erik Peterson refers to as a "negotiation between two worlds" (145). Spanning through the 1870s to the 1910s, his 1916 autobiography *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* chronicles his experiences of assimilation and offers a deeply personal account of cultural violence's psychological impact on Native individuals[2]. In the autobiography, he reflects on his transition from a traditional Dakota upbringing to becoming a physician educated in Western institutions. Early in the text, Eastman appears to embrace assimilation, repeatedly rejecting his upbringing in favor of Euro-American culture:

> [M]y eyes were opened intelligently to the greatness of Christian civilization, the ideal civilization, as it unfolded itself before my eyes. I saw it as the … blending of all languages and the gathering of all races under one religious faith ... I renounced finally my bow and arrows for the spade and the pen; I took off my soft moccasins and put on the heavy and clumsy but durable shoes. Every day of my life, I put into use every English word that I knew, and for the first time permitted myself to think and act as a white man. (57-58)

[2] During this period, two significant elements of federal genocidal policies against Native Americans included the Dawes Act of 1887, which authorized the division of communal lands and enforced the allotment system, severely disrupting Native communities (National Archives), and the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. The massacre violently suppressed the Lakota Sioux Ghost Dance movement, which sought to restore Native lands and bring about the spiritual revival of Indigenous communities. The U.S. government saw the movement as a threat, and in December 1890, soldiers opened fire on the Lakota people at Wounded Knee, resulting in the deaths of over 200 Lakota, including women and children. This massacre is considered one of the most violent acts of suppression against Native American resistance (Reimer).

Passages like this have led some reviewers to label Charles Eastman as a "sellout." However, such judgments overlook the precarious position he and other Natives faced when the book was written. As of 1916, American Indians were not considered citizens of the United States, nor did they have voting rights. Confinement on reservations that were stripped of sufficient game and fertile soil resulted in poverty and starvation (Peterson, 146). Therefore, in this context, Eastman's choices could be understood as survival strategies, as many Natives in his generation felt they had no choice but to learn English and obtain occupational skills. For example, in "My First School Days," he describes education as a tool for combating the abuse his people endured, referring to the English language, laws, and occupational skills as the "bows and arrows of the white man" that Natives needed to understand and obtain themselves (16).

Ultimately, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* reveals an evolution in Eastman's perspective on settler colonialism and the realities of what he and his Sioux community endured. While his initial tone seems to support assimilation, his later reflections demonstrate disillusionment with settler-colonial systems. He details the systemic neglect and suffering of his people, noting how disease, insufficient food, and broken promises fueled despair and anger (98-99, 116). By the time he becomes a reservation doctor, he blames much of the so-called "Indian uprising" (the Wounded Knee Massacre) on whites. He also collaborates with traditional medicine men in treating a sick child, which proves to be a spiritually rewarding experience (122-124). By the final pages, Eastman comes to the conclusion that American Christians do not practice what they preach, and while he calls himself an American, he renounces the "commerce, nationalism, [and] material efficiency" that has become a central part of Western life (187). Throughout the text, Eastman's subtle affirmations of Dakota culture challenge assimilationist narratives. In the book's opening, he highlights the values instilled through Native childrearing

practices — patience, self-control, public service, and spirituality — contradicting the prevalent belief that such lessons required removing children from their homes and placing them in boarding schools (177). In asserting these values, Eastman uses his autobiography as a platform to reclaim and celebrate Indigenous cultural practices. Eastman's writings embody the tension between assimilation and resistance, making his perspective invaluable for analyzing the effects of assimilation policies on Native communities. By detailing his journey, he reclaims agency in response to cultural genocide. While *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* grapples with the psychological toll of navigating Western institutions, it ultimately serves as a testament to the enduring strength of Indigenous identity and the power of storytelling as a means of resistance.

Zitkala-Ša's writings lay bare the psychological and cultural toll of forced assimilation, particularly through her autobiographical works detailing her time in missionary boarding schools as a Yankton Sioux member. a Yankton Sioux writer, musician, and activist, exposed the harsh realities of assimilation through her vivid accounts of life in boarding schools. The essays in her 1921 collection, *American Indian Stories,* highlight the personal and collective cultural trauma inflicted on Native children while asserting the power of Indigenous storytelling as a form of resistance and reclamation. According to Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, Zitkala Ša exhibited several markers of "otherness" in her work, including her Sioux language and culture, her Native American identity, and her gender. Yet, she resisted erasure by hegemonic white culture, employing "a language of accommodation that enacted a strategy of subversion and inversion in her autobiographies" (65). In her autobiographical essays, Zitkala Ša vividly recounts her time in boarding schools, where she was stripped of her language, culture, and identity. One particularly heartbreaking account describes the cutting of her hair, an act that symbolized the forced severing of her connection to her heritage. She writes:

> I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then, I lost my spirit. … And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish, I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do, for now, I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder. (55-56)

Through her poignant storytelling, Zitkala-Ša critiques the assimilationist agenda of settler colonial institutions, exposing their role in cultural genocide while also celebrating the resistance of Native people. Moreover, Zitkala-Ša's resistance to assimilation extended beyond her autobiographies to artistic endeavors in which she adopted the oppressor's language in musical form. This was shown in her groundbreaking 1913 work *The Sun Dance Opera*, the first Native American opera. This opera combined traditional Sioux melodies with Native American themes and activism (Hafen, 32). P. Jane Safen highlights Zitkala-Ša's storytelling as shown in the opera, explaining that *The Sun Dance Opera* "force[d] the songs of Native tradition into the mold of notation, harmonies, and meters of the music of Western civilization" (Hafen 35). Hafen notes that the "conventional elements of opera — arias, duets, and choruses — mingle with traditional chants of the Sun Dance" to celebrate the sacredness of Indigenous culture while subverting Western artistic norms (35-36). Through her multifaceted storytelling, Zitkala-Ša transformed her markers of "otherness" into sources of strength and resistance, reclaiming her identity and preserving the voice of her people against the erasure of hegemonic white culture. Her work not only critiques settler-colonial institutions but also helps advocate for broader systemic change.

Together, William Apess, Charles Eastman, and Zitkala-Ša challenged the erasure of Native voices, laying the groundwork for the Native American Renaissance by demonstrating

how literature could serve as a powerful tool of criticism, resistance, and cultural preservation. Through their autobiographical writings and essays, they engaged in direct critiques of settler-colonial oppression, asserted Indigenous identity, and used personal narratives as a means of political advocacy. Apess's explicit denunciation of Christian hypocrisy and racial injustice, Eastman's reconciliation of traditional Dakota values with Western education, and Zitkala-Ša's exposure of boarding school abuses all exemplify how early Native writers used literature to resist assimilationist narratives and reclaim Indigenous sovereignty. These foundational strategies — using irony, emotional rhetoric, storytelling, and reclaiming cultural practices — remain central to the ways Native writers continue to resist settler-colonial narratives. These nineteenth and twentieth century works formed a literary tradition that writers like Momaday and Silko would later expand upon, demonstrating Native American resistance writing as a tool for subversion, reclamation, and advocacy, linking early figures like Apess to broader Indigenous literary traditions that persist today.

Central to the Native American Renaissance are authors like N. Scott Momaday, whose 1968 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn* is often credited with initiating the Renaissance. His work is considered revolutionary due to his expert interweaving of oral traditions and contemporary storytelling to explore identity, belonging, and healing in Native American communities. In novels like her acclaimed 1977 work *Ceremony* and her 1981 collection *Storyteller*, Leslie Marmon Silko confronts colonial master narratives and reclaims Navajo and Laguna Pueblo narratives while emphasizing the interconnectedness of land, culture, and spirituality. Silko also employs humor and tragic irony to reveal the ongoing effects of cultural genocide, address cultural trauma, and reinforce resistance.

At its core, the Native American Renaissance is a project of resistance, challenging imposed narratives of progress, assimilation, and individual resilience that settlers have used to obscure the ongoing consequences of colonial violence. Through storytelling and poetry, Native authors reclaim cultural identity and reject constructs and tensions within settler-colonial discourse. A fundamental tension within settler-colonial discourse is the expectation that Indigenous communities heal from the wounds of physical and cultural violence as though healing were an inevitable and individualized process. Within this framework, Native suffering is acknowledged only insofar as it is followed by redemption — a settler-imposed path that demands that Native survival serve as proof of closure rather than as evidence of an ongoing struggle. Yet, settler-colonialism refuses to recognize its own role in perpetuating trauma, absolving itself of responsibility while placing the burden of recovery on Indigenous individuals. Therefore, the expectation of healing functions as another means of erasure: it insists that Native people move beyond their suffering without addressing the systemic forces that created and continue to sustain that suffering. The works of N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko refute this expectation, affirming Native sovereignty and demanding recognition of historical and ongoing colonial violence through storytelling, myth, and poetic strategies.

Mapping Memory, Belonging, and Storytelling in Momaday's House Made of Dawn

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* employs memory, belonging, and storytelling to emphasize the importance of reclaiming cultural identity in the face of colonial displacement. Abel, a Pueblo World War II veteran, embodies this struggle as he grapples with the dissonance between his traditional upbringing and the alienation of the modern world (Coulombe, 36). Written during the Vietnam War era — a conflict that once again recruited Native soldiers to fight on behalf of a colonial power — Momaday's novel engages with the ongoing impact of war

on Native communities. His protagonist, Pueblo veteran Abel, returns from World War II, a war allegedly fought for freedom yet waged by a nation that continued to deny Native sovereignty and civil rights. Abel's experience reflects a broader historical reality: Native soldiers fought for a country that sought to erase them, only to return to communities devastated by systemic neglect and assimilationist policies. The trauma Abel carries from war is compounded by the cultural dislocation imposed by settler-colonial violence, making his struggle symbolic of the ways Native identity is threatened both physically and psychologically. From the novel's opening, Abel's disconnection is palpable: "He had tried to pray, but he could not. He was numb; there was no sound, and he could feel nothing" (Momaday, 4). This moment underscores his fractured identity and spiritual paralysis, reflecting the weight of both historical and contemporary settler-colonial pressures. These forces place the burden of healing onto Indigenous individuals while failing to acknowledge or remedy the systemic conditions that necessitate it. Abel's alienation is further intensified by 1950s federal relocation and termination policies, which sought to sever Indigenous peoples from their lands and traditions under the guise of opportunity, all while actively eroding their cultural autonomy (Burt, 86). His struggle mirrors the broader Native experience — an ongoing battle to preserve heritage in a society that continuously jeopardizes both. The expectation for Abel to assimilate and function within settler society exposes the systemic disregard for the cultural wounds inflicted by settler colonialism.

Momaday powerfully critiques the expectation that Indigenous communities must heal from trauma without full recognition of the systemic violence inflicted upon them. Rather than depicting healing as a linear process or an inevitable outcome, he foregrounds memory and belonging as fundamental to redefining Indigenous identity amid cultural violence. *House Made of Dawn* presents memory as a double-edged sword: for Abel, the memories of war are

destructive, but at the same time, his return home also necessitates a confrontation with the cultural knowledge and traditions that remain integral to his identity. Storytelling emerges as a means of resistance — one that actively counters the violent ruptures of war and assimilation by preserving and reactivating Indigenous memory.

Through Abel's struggles, the novel underscores how settler-colonial structures demand that Native people reconcile their fractured identities on their own terms, while those same systems evade accountability for the trauma they inflict. Momaday illustrates Abel's search for identity and belonging through descriptions of place, particularly the Pueblo landscape. For Momaday, land is not merely a backdrop for personal growth but an active, shaping force in the characters' lives. As Lawrence J. Evers notes, the environment is integral to Indigenous identity, providing a source of belonging and connection (298). The novel emphasizes this dynamic relationship through its reverent portrayal of the land: "There were many colors on the hills, and the plain was bright with different-colored clays and sands. Red and blue and spotted horses grazed the plain, and there was a dark wilderness on the mountains beyond. The land was still and strong. It was beautiful all around" (Momaday, 7). Yet, Abel remains estranged from this landscape, his disconnection mirroring his cultural dislocation: "Abel was running. He was alone and running … Against the winter sky and the long, light landscape of the valley at dawn, he seemed to be standing still, very little and alone" (8). The contrast between the vast, steady land and Abel's solitary movement highlights the forced rupture between Indigenous identity and place as a result of settler-colonial violence. Momaday juxtaposes the communal and sacred nature of the pueblo with the destruction of war and the alienation of urban spaces like Los Angeles, where Abel is subjected to violence, racism, and disconnection. The city and the war

represent the destruction and fragmentation of Indigenous identity under colonial oppression and modernity.

The stark contrast between the Pueblo and the modern urban landscape of Los Angeles further emphasizes how settler structures exacerbate rather than alleviate Indigenous trauma. In the city, Abel encounters systemic cultural violence and disconnection, reinforcing the novel's critique of relocation policies and the broader settler expectation that Indigenous individuals should find ways to belong within a world that actively displaces them. His wartime flashback to a monstrous tank — "the machine" — symbolizes the relentless force of colonial destruction: "Then, through the falling leaves, he saw the machine. It rose up behind the hill, black and massive, looming there in front of the sun" (22). Here, settler modernity is presented as a force of erasure, one that demands Native people either assimilate or be crushed beneath its weight. The expectation that Abel simply endure and adapt mirrors the broader settler-colonial tendency to view Indigenous survival as proof of healing while ignoring the systems that perpetuate harm.

While settler frameworks present healing as an individual journey detached from the realities of settler-colonial violence, Momaday reframes it as a process rooted in memory, storytelling, and generational continuity. Memory in *House Made of Dawn* is not just a source of healing — it is also a site of pain, forcing Indigenous characters to confront the violence inflicted upon their people. Francisco, Abel's grandfather, carries the weight of cultural memory, embodying the burden of witnessing generational trauma. As *The Routledge Introduction to Native American Literature* states, "Oral storytelling is a central mode of cultural transmission in Native communities, ensuring that traditions and histories remain vital across generations" (Lopenzina 78). However, in a world shaped by settler-colonial destruction, storytelling does not erase suffering; it insists on remembering it. Francisco's gaze — "There was a certain sadness in

his eyes, but there was strength, too, and purpose" — reveals the emotional toll of carrying painful histories (87). His sadness speaks to the losses endured under settler violence, while his strength signals a refusal to let loss erase Indigenous identity. Through oral tradition, Francisco powerfully imparts Pueblo history to Abel, but his words also highlight the devastation wrought by displacement: "You see, a long time ago, we lived in a place, a house made of dawn. We were born in that place, and we are going to return there" (100). Longing for return underscores the forced severance of Indigenous peoples from their lands, and by positioning memory as both an inheritance and a wound, Momaday critiques settler-colonial systems that demand Native peoples navigate their trauma in isolation. Based on Momaday's contributions, memory, then, is a form of resistance against the erasure of Indigenous identities, as it allows for the persistence and transmission of cultural knowledge even while enduring modern displacement. Coulombe notes, "Native memory operates as a powerful resistance to cultural erasure, offering not only a link to the past but a way to contextualize and navigate the present" (45). Abel's struggle reveals that healing is not merely about reclaiming tradition but about confronting the violence embedded in that reclamation — violence that remains ongoing as settler society continues to obscure its role in Indigenous suffering.

At the same time, *House Made of Dawn* has been critiqued for its reliance on Western literary structures, particularly its modernist fragmentation, which some argue distances the reader from Indigenous oral traditions. While the novel centers on Abel's alienation and eventual reconnection to cultural knowledge, its emphasis on modernist storytelling techniques — shifting perspectives, nonlinear timelines, stream-of-consciousness narration — aligns with Western existentialist narratives, potentially framing Abel's struggle as an individual psychological crisis rather than emphasizing the communal dimensions of survival and resistance. Larry Landrum

asserts that Momaday's use of what he calls "shattered modernism" (767) disrupts traditional narrative structures to focus on racial and cultural representation, mirroring the fractured experiences of Indigenous displacement while resisting cultural erasure. That said, this critique does not diminish the novel's significance but instead opens broader discussions on how Native writers navigate settler-dominated literary spaces. Momaday's use of modernist techniques was likely a strategic choice that allowed Native literature to enter the mainstream literary canon while embedding Indigenous themes within a recognizable structure. However, later authors, such as Leslie Marmon Silko in *Ceremony* and Tommy Orange in *There There*, develop alternative narrative strategies that lean more explicitly into Indigenous storytelling forms, moving away from the psychological individualism that some see in *House Made of Dawn*. By embedding Abel's story within a larger framework of collective memory and resistance, *House Made of Dawn* dismantles settler-colonial expectations of healing from settler-colonial violence as a predetermined endpoint. Instead, Momaday presents a vision in which Indigenous survival is not synonymous with solution but rather with connection and the refusal to forget. Through its intricate portrayal of alienation, landscape, and storytelling, the novel critiques the settler state's unwillingness to acknowledge its own role in Indigenous suffering, positioning memory and cultural continuity as acts of defiance against the imposed burden of healing.

Reweaving Trauma: Storytelling, Healing, and Resistance in Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony

Just as *House Made of Dawn* resists settler-colonial expectations of healing without fully recognizing systemic violence, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* critiques imposed narratives of recovery that ignore the structural causes of Indigenous trauma. Like Abel, Tayo is a Native World War II veteran whose suffering is compounded by his dislocation from land and culture.

His trauma is not merely personal but deeply entangled with the violent histories of settler expansion, military exploitation, and cultural erasure (Rice, 116-117). However, whereas *House Made of Dawn* presents healing as an ongoing struggle that does not resolve into a neat conclusion, *Ceremony* offers an alternative antidote to violence — one that embraces storytelling and Indigenous knowledge as a means of reclaiming self and community.

Silko subverts settler-colonial expectations of healing as a linear or internal process by illustrating how trauma exists in cycles, deeply rooted in both personal experience and collective history. Tayo's mixed-race identity plays a crucial role in this struggle, as his existence in a liminal space — both Laguna Pueblo and white — leaves him feeling alienated from both his Indigenous community and white society. Unlike Abel in *House Made of Dawn*, whose alienation stems from his inability to reintegrate into his community post-war, Tayo's trauma is compounded by existential uncertainty — not only about where he belongs, but whether he has the right to belong at all. His internal conflict manifests through his survivor's guilt and self-hatred: "It didn't take Tayo long to see the accident of time and space: Rocky was the one who was alive … Rocky was there in the college game scores on the sports page of the Albuquerque Journal. It was him, Tayo, who had died, but somehow there had been a mistake with the corpses, and somehow his was unburied" (Silko, 25). Rocky, Tayo's cousin, serves as a symbolic contrast to him. While Tayo struggles with feelings of displacement due to his mixed identity, Rocky fully embraces assimilation into white American culture. He excels in school, plays football, and dreams of leaving the reservation, believing in the promises of American success and individualism. His death in World War II reinforces Tayo's sense of unbelonging — Tayo believes Rocky was the one meant to survive, as he represented an accepted path forward, while Tayo, caught between cultures, sees his own survival as a mistake. His fractured identity mirrors

his survivor's guilt, reinforcing the idea that he is neither fully alive nor fully recognized by any community.

Silko uses this internal crisis to challenge settler-colonial notions of healing as an individual, solitary process. Tayo's trauma cannot be resolved in isolation because his pain is inextricably linked to historical displacement and the imposition of rigid racial categories. His healing, then, is not about "overcoming" trauma in a linear way, but about reweaving himself into the collective fabric of Laguna traditions, memory, and storytelling — a process that acknowledges both personal and historical wounds as part of a larger whole. This cyclical nature of trauma is further emphasized through Silko's use of metaphor, tactile imagery, and repetition:

> "He could get no rest as long as the memories were tangled with the present, tangled up like colored threads … He could feel it inside his skull — the tension of little threads being pulled and how it was with tangled things, things tied together, and as he tried to pull them apart and rewind them into their places, they snagged and tangled even more. So Tayo had to sweat through those nights when thoughts became entangled; he had to sweat to think of something that wasn't unraveled or tied in knots to the past." (6)

Here, Silko illustrates trauma as an ongoing, embodied struggle rather than a problem to be solved through individual willpower. The metaphor of tangled threads captures how Tayo's memories are enmeshed with his present reality, resisting separation and reinforcing the cyclical nature of his pain. His trauma is not a singular event but a layered experience, continually knotting itself into his consciousness. Silko's use of tactile imagery — Tayo "feeling it inside his skull" and experiencing the "tension" of pulled threads — highlights the physical toll of psychological suffering, suggesting that trauma in the wake of settler-colonial violence is not merely mental but deeply somatic. Additionally, the repetition of words like "tangled" and

"knots" mirrors the looping, inescapable nature of trauma, reinforcing that Tayo cannot move forward without first confronting the threads of his past.

However, by framing healing as nonlinear and entangled rather than a straightforward path to recovery, Silko does more than challenge Western notions of trauma resolution — she also implicitly critiques the settler-colonial expectation that Indigenous people must always absorb historical and ongoing violence. Tayo's journey toward healing is not framed as a triumphant overcoming of trauma but as a process that requires storytelling and reconnection with Laguna traditions. This suggests that healing, while powerful, is not limitless — nor is it an obligation. Tayo himself underscores the limits of this expectation when he pleads to Navajo medicine man Betonie, "Look ... I've been sick and half the time I don't know if I'm still crazy or not. I don't know anything about ceremonies or these things you talk about. I don't know how long anything has been going on. I just need help" (115). Tayo's admission of uncertainty and his recognition of the need for communal support challenge the settler-colonial belief that Indigenous people must heal through sheer endurance. Moreover, his plea for help, rather than an expression of self-reliance, is a powerful acknowledgment of his pain, resisting the settler-colonial assumption that Indigenous communities have an endless capacity to heal without recognition of the cumulative trauma they endure.

In addition to Tayo's personal narrative, Silko weaves poetry and myth throughout the prose to emphasize the cyclical and collective nature of trauma and healing. These mythic interruptions disrupt the linear flow of the novel, demonstrating that Indigenous identity and healing are inseparable from cultural stories and communal memory (Freed, 219). One of the most significant of these is Betonie's *witchery* poem, which he delivers orally during Tayo's

ceremony; it reframes colonial violence as an act of destruction foretold and set into motion through storytelling itself:

Long time ago

in the beginning

there were no white people in this world,

there was nothing European.

……

Then it happened

These witch people got together

Some came from far far away

across oceans

across mountains.

……

[T]his witch said

Okay

go ahead

laugh if you want to

but as I tell the story

it will begin to happen.

……

Caves across the ocean

in caves of dark hills

white skin people

like the belly of a fish

covered with hair.

Then they grow away from the earth

then they grow away from the sun

then they grow away from the plants and animals.

They see no life when they look

they see only objects.

The world is a dead thing for them

the trees and rivers are not alive

the mountains and stones are not alive.

The deer and bear are objects

They see no life.

They fear

They fear the world

They destroy what they fear

They fear themselves.

……

They will carry objects which can shoot death faster than the eye can see.

They will kill the things they fear

……

Killing killing killing killing. (122-126)

Silko's infusion of myth and poetry into *Ceremony* serves as a deliberate strategy to counter settler-colonial narratives and assert the power of Indigenous storytelling. The witchery poem, in

particular, functions as both prophecy and historical account, blending traditional oral storytelling with poetic form to expose colonialism as a calculated, violent force rather than an inevitable progression of history. By framing the arrival of white settlers as an act of "witchery," Silko subverts Western narratives that justify colonization as a civilizing mission. Instead, she presents it as a deliberate act of destruction that fractures the natural balance of the world. The witch's statement — "as I tell the story, it will begin to happen" — reinforces the generative power of storytelling, positioning it as both a weapon of destruction and a tool of healing. This emphasis on narrative power reflects a core thematic strategy in *Ceremony*: storytelling as resistance. The repetition of "killing" at the poem's end underscores the relentlessness of colonial violence, not as a historical event but as an ongoing reality. The poem, then, is not simply an account of destruction but a counter-narrative that reframes Indigenous survival as an act of defiance against historical erasure.

The novel's use of poetry is not merely aesthetic but deeply functional. The witchery poem, for instance, is not an isolated interjection; it is part of a ceremonial structure that links Tayo's personal journey to the broader history of colonial violence. Betonie's recitation of the poem during Tayo's healing ceremony reinforces this connection, linking Tayo's personal suffering — his war trauma, displacement, and illness — to the larger structures of colonial violence. His struggles are not isolated, but rather symptomatic of a broader system that seeks to sever Indigenous people from their histories and identities (Rice, 129). Through this connection, Silko presents storytelling as a means of survival, a way to reveal hidden truths, preserve collective memory, and resist cultural fragmentation. Tayo's healing, then, is not an individual journey or personal recovery but about reconnecting with tradition and claiming his place within

the community, choosing to defy the settler-colonial pressures to assimilate, forget, or sever ties to his Indigenous identity.

Silko further challenges settler-colonial narratives by rejecting the expectation that Indigenous people must always rebuild, always recover, and always move forward. *Ceremony* acknowledges the weight of trauma, emphasizing that healing is not an infinite resource but a deeply rooted, cyclical process. Tayo's journey is not framed as a triumph over suffering, but rather as a return to the knowledge and traditions that colonialism seeks to erase (Freed, 220). In this way, Silko resists the settler-colonial impulse to define Indigenous identity solely through struggle and recovery, instead affirming the ongoing continuity of Native existence despite the violence inflicted upon it.

Silko refuses to frame healing as a process that erases the scars of violence; instead, she positions it as an act of integration. Healing does not mean forgetting; it means weaving together past, present, and future in a way that honors lived experience and refuses to sever trauma from memory. Storytelling becomes a key mechanism in this process, ensuring that Indigenous culture, knowledge, and history remain intact. As Diane Cousineau explains in *The Spiderweb as Text*, stories function as threads in a web, sustaining cultural memory by connecting generations (20). Just as the land is inextricable from Indigenous identity, so too are the stories that shape and reflect it. In this way, Silko's depiction of healing through storytelling serves as a direct counter to colonial violence, offering an antidote to erasure by ensuring that Indigenous voices and histories remain present.

Beyond Tayo's personal transformation, the novel's infusion of poetry and myth extends to its broader critique of colonial violence. The witchery poem's imagery — settlers invading the land and using weapons to kill everything they "fear" — mirrors the real-world consequences of

colonial expansion, industrialization, and war. By embedding this critique within an Indigenous oral tradition, Silko emphasizes that Native knowledge systems have long understood these dangers and contain the tools to resist them. The novel, like the poem, serves as both a warning and a call to action, urging Indigenous people to recognize the power of their stories in resisting erasure, reclaiming cultural traditions, and maintaining ties to the land.

Ultimately, Silko's infusion of myth and poetry is not just a stylistic choice but a foundational aspect of *Ceremony*'s resistance to settler-colonial narratives. By refusing to separate storytelling from lived experience, she reasserts the sovereignty of Indigenous worldviews and offers a vision of survival rooted in maintaining and recirculating collective memory and history (Rice, 122). The novel itself, much like the myths and poems within it, functions as a ceremony — an act of storytelling that reclaims history, reaffirms Indigenous identity, and ensures that the stories of survival and resistance will not be silenced.

In contrast to Momaday's novel, which leaves the trajectory of healing open-ended, *Ceremony* offers a more explicit roadmap — one that insists on cultural adaptation, storytelling, and collective responsibility. While both novels reject settler-colonial frameworks of healing, Silko's work provides a distinct counterpoint by asserting that trauma cannot be passively endured but must be actively reworked through ceremony and memory. Contemporary Indigenous authors have built upon Silko's foundation, further complicating representations of trauma and healing by resisting linear resolutions altogether. In this way, *Ceremony* remains a crucial intervention, not as a final answer, but as an opening for new forms of Indigenous storytelling that continue to challenge settler-colonial narratives.

The Native American Renaissance signified a powerful reclaiming of Indigenous voices and traditions through the art of storytelling. Native writers began to assert control over their

narratives, rejecting the reductive stereotypes of the past and offering a more complex and nuanced portrayal of Native experiences. Authors like N. Scott Momaday and Leslie Marmon Silko challenge settler-colonial ideologies, utilizing storytelling not merely as a means of artistic expression but as a form of cultural survival — a way of preserving Indigenous histories and asserting sovereignty over narratives that have been previously appropriated or erased by colonial forces. Through techniques like the interweaving of oral traditions, and the connection to Indigenous worldviews and spirituality, these authors show how cultural memory remains present and essential in shaping contemporary Indigenous identity. This period also paved the way for a new generation of Indigenous authors, whose works continue to challenge the dominant cultural narratives and resist the historical erasure of Native identities. Momaday's emphasis on memory and belonging and Silko's rejection of Western frameworks of healing highlight the importance of cultural memory in linking individuals, their communities, and the land itself. At the same time, their works do not shy away from the pain of historical and personal trauma. Instead, they confront it directly, showing how trauma reverberates across generations and reshapes identity. By refusing to frame healing as a linear or finite process, they emphasize that survival is not about erasing pain but about carrying it forward through storytelling and collective remembrance. This act of bearing witness becomes a rhetorical strategy to resist colonial fragmentation, ensuring that Indigenous narratives remain active and self-determined. Rather than offering closure, these authors demonstrate that Indigenous literature is an evolving conversation — one that acknowledges wounds, disrupts dominant cultural narratives, and reclaims the power of storytelling as an act of resistance against settler colonial violence.

Building on this exploration, my third chapter will turn to the evolving forms of counter-narrative in contemporary Indigenous literature and media. Works such as Tommy Orange's *There There* and Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman* engage with modern contexts of violence, displacement, and intergenerational trauma. These narratives demonstrate how the legacy of colonial violence is not confined to the past but continues to affect Native communities in deeply personal and systemic ways. Additionally, like their predecessors, Orange, Erdrich, and others utilize storytelling as an instrument for healing and resilience, recentering Indigenous perspectives in ways that challenge dominant narratives in modern contexts and settings. I will also explore the use of nontraditional mediums, such as graphic novels (*Ghost River*) and visual storytelling in films and television (*Smoke Signals*, *Reservation Dogs, and Echo*), to examine how these emerging forms also contribute to the ongoing dialogue of Indigenous survival and renewal. Together, these works highlight the transformative power of storytelling as a means of reclaiming agency and establishing the continuing influence of Indigenous voices in contemporary literature and other fields.

CHAPTER III

We're Still Here": Contemporary Indigenous Counter-Narratives in Literature, Film, and Television

This chapter explores how modern Indigenous creators in literature, film, and television engage with and subvert narratives that have historically marginalized, distorted, or erased Native voices, presenting emerging Indigenous-authored counter-narratives as a powerful mode of resistance against the master narrative of settler-colonial violence. Contemporary counter-narratives such as Tommy Orange's *There There*, Louise Erdrich's *The Night Watchman*, the groundbreaking television series *Reservation Dogs*, the influential film *Smoke Signals*, and the recent Disney+ show *Echo* exemplify how contemporary Native creators employ innovative strategies to challenge settler-colonial frameworks while reasserting cultural sovereignty and survivance.

In this chapter, I will utilize specific research, including studies on survivance and decolonial narrative strategies like Vizenor's work on survivance (*Manifest Manners*), Sean Teuton's work (*Red Land, Red Power: Grounding Knowledge in the American Indian Novel*) and Lyons' *Rhetorical Sovereignty*, research on Indigenous storytelling and oral traditions, Lyudmila Parts' analysis of polyphonic plot structures, Brygida Gasztold's exploration of urban Native experiences, John A. Grim's discussion of cultural identity and community survival, Michael Tlanusta Garrett's findings on the role of humor as a spiritual tradition and a vehicle for resistance, and works on visual media, film, and digital representation by Joanna Hearne, John A. Price, Elizabeth LaPensée's, among others, underscoring the complexity of Indigenous self-representation. These varied yet interconnected bodies of research, from decolonial literary

theory and Indigenous oral traditions to media criticism and narrative structure, allow me to effectively analyze the literary and rhetorical strategies that make these contemporary works effective in advancing Indigenous sovereignty and survivance. According to Gerald Vizenor, survivance involves actively preserving and expressing Indigenous agency, culture, and identity, resisting narratives of subjugation, erasure, and assimilation (vii). This concept informs several key strategies, including the use of polyphonic structures, which allow for diverse Native perspectives to coexist and disrupt colonial narratives; the reclamation of historical narratives, which centers Indigenous experiences often omitted from hegemonic histories; the integration of humor and irony, which subverts settler-colonial expectations; and the centering of humanity and authentic representation, which rejects stereotypes and highlights the complexity of Native identities. By focusing on how these strategies function to disrupt settler-colonial influence, block colonial expectations, and recenter Indigenous voices, this chapter demonstrates the transformative power of contemporary Indigenous counter-narratives. While a detailed analysis of each strategy will be reserved for the designated chapter sections, the main objective of this chapter is to highlight their effectiveness in resisting settler-colonial ideologies and asserting Indigenous cultural sovereignty.

Contemporary counter-narratives exemplify a collective effort to dismantle the settler-colonial master narrative of violence, which not only distorts Indigenous identity but also serves as a justification for systemic violence against Native communities, from forced removals and boarding schools to contemporary legal and social injustices. By reclaiming the right to tell their own stories, Indigenous authors and creators disrupt limiting depictions, exposing the ways in which violence — both physical and rhetorical — has been used to control, erase, and assimilate Native peoples. For example, polyphonic structures in works like *There There* and *Reservation*

Dogs reject singular, monolithic portrayals of Native life, instead revealing the multiple, intersecting experiences of Indigenous peoples and their continued resistance to colonial oppression. These creators also use humor and irony as tools for subverting settler myths; in *Smoke Signals*, for instance, laughter becomes an act of survival, pushing back against a narrative that either victimizes or villainizes Native people. Similarly, the visual media of *Smoke Signals* and *Echo* challenge cultural erasure and forced assimilation by centering Indigenous perspectives, illustrating how violence — whether historical or contemporary — is not a distant past but an ongoing structure that Native communities continue to resist. These works do not interpret historical violence as a fleeting phenomenon but as systemic and persistent, linking it to its roots in settler-colonial exploitation while exposing its enduring impact on Native lives today. At the same time, they interrogate intergenerational trauma and cultural loss while emphasizing themes of healing, cultural continuity, and self-determination. Close analysis of these contemporary works will allow me to amplify Native creators' articulation of counter-narratives that not only critique settler-colonial systems of oppression but also envision Indigenous futures rooted in survival, sovereignty, and community. By centering the rhetoric of violence — and the strategies of resistance against it — this chapter underscores the vital role of contemporary Native American literature and media in reframing and reclaiming Indigenous narratives when confronted with ongoing colonial violence.

Rewriting Native Identity and Survival in *There There* and *Reservation Dogs*

Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018) and FX's *Reservation Dogs* (2021-2023) employ polyphony as a narrative strategy to challenge settler-colonial myths, rewrite Native identity, and assert the resilience of Indigenous communities. By spotlighting multiple autonomous voices, these works dismantle the homogenizing stereotypes imposed by settler-colonial narratives,

which often reduce Indigenous peoples to static, one-dimensional figures. Instead, Tommy Orange's novel and the Sterlin Harjo's television series reclaim storytelling as a space for resistance and survivance, showcasing the diversity, complexity, and interconnectedness of Native experiences. While *There There* explores the urban realities of Native identity through intergenerational stories of trauma and survival, the television series *Reservation Dogs* centers on a rural reservation community, blending humor and tragedy to portray the struggles and aspirations of Native youth. Together, these narratives reveal how polyvocality reimagines modern Indigenous identity as dynamic, adaptive, and deeply rooted in collective memory and cultural persistence.

Polyphony, a narrative technique in which "distinct, autonomous voices coexist within a narrative structure," directly challenges the erasure and restricting monolithic stereotypes imposed by colonial systems (Parts, 609). Polyphonic structures incorporate multiple voices and perspectives that interact, contribute, and coexist without being reduced to a singular, authoritative viewpoint. The significance of polyphony in Indigenous counternarratives lies in its ability to reclaim storytelling as a space of resistance and survivance. By allowing multiple voices to maintain their autonomy, polyphonic narratives disrupt the hierarchical storytelling structures that are central to settler-colonial frameworks. This narrative technique, in turn, asserts Indigenous persistence and resilience, making space for the complexity and individuality of Native experiences that colonial narratives seek to homogenize.

In Indigenous counter-narratives like *There There* and *Reservation Dogs*, polyphony serves as a language of resistance against settler-colonial narratives by dismantling the singular, homogenized voice that settler-colonialism often imposes on Indigenous peoples. By presenting multiple, autonomous perspectives, these works reject the erasure and monolithic stereotypes

perpetuated by colonial systems, instead emphasizing the complexity and diversity of Native identities. In *There There*, Tommy Orange constructs a polyphonic narrative that interweaves the perspectives of twelve distinct characters, each navigating their own struggles and connections to Native identity in an urban setting. These narrators include Tony Loneman, a twenty-one-year-old grappling with fetal alcohol syndrome, a volatile temper, and a sense of alienation; Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield, shaped by her family's relocation during the Indian Relocation Act; and Dene Oxendene, who, in the midst of his own internal battle with addiction, uses storytelling to honor his uncle's memory. These interwoven chapters feature characters' individual struggles with identity within and outside the Native community. For example, Orange conveys this through fourteen-year-old Orvil Red Feather: "It's important that he dress like an Indian, dance like an Indian, even if it is an act, even if he feels like a fraud the whole time, because the only way to be Indian in this world is to look and act like an Indian. To be or not to be an Indian depends on it (122). His anxiety over performing Indigeneity reflects the pressures many Native individuals face in defining their identities within a culture that tries to reduce them to a singular, stereotypical form. By voicing these struggles across various voices, Orange actively refuses the colonial restrictions of Native identity showing how these characters resist by adapting and discovering identities of their own, dissociating colonial impulses to flatten identity into a predictable image (Gaztold 281).

The polyphony in *There There* is not merely a narrative technique but also a potent tool for confronting violence and trauma, culminating in the tragic massacre at the Big Oakland Powwow. Through its multiple perspectives, the novel amplifies the diverse experiences and struggles of Native individuals, and the brutal ending — where many characters converge in violence — forces a reckoning with the ongoing trauma inflicted by settler-colonialism, bringing

to light the layers of trauma and historical violence that continue to affect contemporary Indigenous life. In this way, many characters' tragic end is not passive suffering but a confrontation — they die not as victims, but as part of a collective struggle. This moment is deeply tied to the novel's broader themes of resistance and survivance. Despite the devastating violence, polyphony ensures that these characters are more than mere victims of a massacre; their stories, voices, and collective histories endure. Polyphony allows their lives to persist beyond the brutality of the moment, transforming the massacre into a narrative of survivance in its own right. The characters' voices stand as a testament to the importance of memory, community, and identity in resistance to violence.

While settler-colonial violence seeks to erase Indigenous peoples, *There There* uses its polyphonic structure to preserve the characters' voices, ensuring that their identities, stories, and experiences are not lost in the violence they endure. The intersection of multiple voices in this scene highlights how violence transcends generations, connecting not only the immediate trauma but also the broader history of displacement, dispossession, and loss. The massacre itself, though occurring within a Native community, is a consequence of systemic oppression and historical marginalization — with Native individuals, molded by these forces, enacting the violence. The reader does not only see the perspectives of the victims but also those of the perpetrators. Initially complicit in the plan to rob the powwow, Tony Loneman ultimately disrupts the cycle of violence rather than perpetuating it. In his final chapter, he shoots Charles, attempting to stop the carnage and reclaim a sense of agency over his own role in the unfolding tragedy (286-287). His decision complicates the binary of victim and perpetrator, reflecting how Native individuals are often forced into positions of violence by larger structural forces but can also resist and intervene. As he lays dying, Tony reflects on his childhood memories of playing with

Transformers, imagining Optimus Prime saying: “We were made to transform. If you get a chance to die, to save someone else, you take it. Every time” (290). In this moment, Tony embodies transformation; his final act of sacrifice becomes an act of redemption and defiance. His death is not merely another casualty of colonial violence. It is a deliberate act of protection, a final assertion of his agency and humanity. The polyphony in *There There* challenges the notion of trauma as a defining experience for Indigenous people. The tragic ending does not silence the characters; instead, it amplifies their voices and reinforces the novel’s central theme of survivance — the refusal to be erased. Even after the violence, these characters and their stories persist. While trauma is undeniably present in the novel, it is not the final word on their existence. Their voices carry beyond the massacre, asserting the importance of remembering, storytelling, and community. Through its use of polyphony, *There There* becomes an act of resistance — a declaration of the ongoing presence of Native voices in the wake of erasure and violence.

Similarly, *Reservation Dogs* employs a shifting narrative focus that alternates between the perspectives of its four protagonists — Bear, Elora, Willie Jack, and Cheese — while also delving into the lives of secondary characters within their reservation community. This strategy not only resists funneling the concept of identity into a singular Native protagonist but also reinforces the relational nature of Indigenous identity. Interconnectedness is at the core of Indigenous storytelling, with stories connecting people, land, and history. In the show, this manifests in episodes that spotlight various members of the reservation, demonstrating how individual experiences are always shaped by and in dialogue with the larger community, rooted in place and history (Simpson, 10). For example, in the episode “Come and Get Your Love,” for example, the focus shifts to Big, the reservation cop, who reflects on his role within the

community, offering a nuanced perspective that complicates the association of law enforcement with oppressive forces (Season 1 Episode 5). Through Big's perspective, the series challenges colonial narratives that depict Native communities as passive subjects of control, instead highlighting the ways individuals actively and strategically negotiate, resist, and heal within their communal roles. Throughout the series, characters of *Reservation Dogs*, like Bear, grapple with belonging and self-determination. In one scene, Bear's spirit guide, the humorous yet insightful, self-proclaimed warrior William Knifeman, challenges him, saying, "In my time, we gave everything. We died for our people. We died for our land. What are you gonna do? What are you gonna fight for?" (Season 1, Episode 1). By juxtaposing Bear's uncertainty with Knifeman's grand historical rhetoric, the show highlights the tensions between historical Indigenous resistance and the challenges faced by contemporary Native youth as they seek purpose and agency. Ultimately, both *There There* and *Reservation Dogs* reject singular narratives of Indigeneity by embracing polyvocality as a means of resistance. By amplifying diverse voices, these works push back against settler-colonial frameworks that seek to essentialize Native identity, instead asserting a dynamic, multifaceted vision of what it means to be Indigenous today.

Orange's polyphonic narrative structure serves to recontextualize historical and ongoing trauma as collective experiences that shape modern Indigenous identity. In *There There*, Orange presents the urban landscape as a central backdrop for these collective experiences, challenging settler-colonial narratives that typically confine Indigenous individuals to rural reservations. In the prologue, Orange employs a collective, intergenerational voice — using pronouns like *we* and *us* — to emphasize the shared historical and contemporary struggles of Indigenous people: "Getting us to cities was supposed to be the final, necessary step in our assimilation, absorption,

erasure, the completion of a five-hundred-year-old genocidal campaign. But the city made us new, and we made it ours. … We found one another … We did not move to cities to die" (9). Rather than presenting cities as spaces of assimilation or cultural loss (as settler-colonial narratives often do), Orange portrays them as places where Native people forge new identities, build communities, and reclaim space. The phrase "We did not move to cities to die" directly refutes the narrative of Indigenous disappearance, emphasizing that Native presence in urban areas is a successful and necessary act of survival and adaptation. According to Gasztold, the urban setting in *There There* challenges the perception of Native identity as stagnant or rural, demonstrating how the city "offers a space for the renewal of culture and the creation of new Indigenous identities" (283). In this way, Orange reimagines the city not as a site of assimilation, but as a space for cultural resistance and reinvention. Moreover, Teuton's idea that Indigenous storytelling is inherently relational, rooted in "communal voice" and "dialogic engagement," further complements this narrative approach, which radically resists colonial constructions of Native identity as monolithic (34). Orange's use of a collective voice in the prologue exemplifies this narrative approach because it establishes a structure in which individual experiences are not isolated but interconnected within a broader Indigenous history. While polyphony traditionally involves multiple independent voices coexisting within a narrative, the prologue's singular, communal voice functions as a foundational counter-narrative, uniting the perspectives that follow. By opening with this collective voice, Orange reinforces the idea that his characters' struggles are part of an ongoing Indigenous experience. In this way, he employs both polyphony (through the multiplicity of narrators in the main text) and communal narration (through the prologue's unified voice) to challenge settler-colonial narratives and assert Indigenous presence, resilience, and identity.

Much like *There There*, *Reservation Dogs* also blurs individual and collective experiences, resisting the idea that Native identity is singular or homogenous. Indeed, the series employs polyvocality that resists hegemonic narratives by presenting a decentralized narrative structure featuring multiple character perspectives, but beyond that, it employs this strategy through its blending of storytelling modes, incorporating elements of magical realism, spirituality, and oral tradition. As Joanna Hearne notes in her study of Indigenous film and television, Native visual storytelling often employs "narrative sovereignty" by integrating oral and visual traditions in ways that challenge Western cinematic conventions (57). The series exemplifies this by balancing moments of realism with surreal and spiritual elements, such as the appearances of spirit guides and apparitions of deceased ancestors, whose humor and wisdom serve as a bridge between past and present Indigenous resistance. By weaving these modes of storytelling together, *Reservation Dogs* mirrors the fluidity of Indigenous oral traditions, in which history, myth, and contemporary life coexist. In doing so, the series subverts the singularity of Native identity and reclaims and redefines Indigenous storytelling practices, displaying the power of narrative sovereignty to resist colonial frameworks and present a more nuanced vision of modern Native life and identity.

In *Reservation Dogs*, the series explores shared Indigenous challenges through multiple character perspectives, particularly through the impact of Daniel's suicide on the group. As the best friend of the main characters, Daniel's death reverberates throughout the community, underscoring the deep emotional and psychological toll of trauma that is often felt collectively within Indigenous communities. Each member of the group processes this loss in their own way, but the interconnectedness of their experiences highlights the collective nature of grief, loss, and survival amid systemic struggles. The series does not treat Daniel's death as an isolated event;

instead, it uses his suicide to illuminate the broader issues facing Indigenous youth, including feelings of hopelessness, alienation, and the weight of generational trauma. Elora says in one episode, “That’s why Daniel’s gone. This place killed him.” (season 1, episode 7). By providing multiple perspectives on Daniel’s death, *Reservation Dogs* challenges the notion that Indigenous experiences are homogenous, instead emphasizing how personal pain and healing are often bound up in the communal fabric (Findlay, 359). One particularly poignant moment that illustrates this collective grief and individual processing is the scene between Bear and Danny, Daniel’s father, on the roof (season 2, episode 3). In this intimate conversation, both characters reflect on Daniel’s death and how it has affected their lives. Bear, who has struggled with his own sense of loss and guilt, opens up about his feelings of responsibility, while Daniel’s father, in his grief, speaks about the impact on his family: “I don’t even know how long it’s been. I still can’t get over it. I got all these scenarios playing over in my head. Like how could I have changed? How could I have been a better father. Maybe he’d still be here, and I’d still have my family.” This moment provides a concrete example of how trauma, though deeply personal, is shared within the community. Their conversation is a quiet, reflective acknowledgment that grief is not only an internal process but also something that must be navigated together (Findlay, 359). It also highlights the difference in how each character has been shaped by Daniel’s death: Bear’s attempt to cope with his guilt contrasts with Daniel’s father’s bitter resignation. This scene exemplifies how *Reservation Dogs* depicts grief not just as a personal burden but as a communal one. The shared space of the roof is symbolic of the broader Indigenous community, where individual pain intersects with collective sorrow. This interaction challenges the idea that trauma and grief are solely personal experiences, instead emphasizing that healing — or the attempt to heal — happens in relation to others. By portraying grief in this way, the series underscores the

complexity of Indigenous emotional experiences, showing how each character's individual pain is bound to a larger narrative of survival, community, and healing.

By giving voice to multiple characters across generations, both *There There* and *Reservation Dogs* resist the settler-colonial tendency to generalize and contain Indigenous narratives, presenting them instead as dynamic, layered, and deeply interconnected. Each work's polyphonic structure creates a narrative mosaic, highlighting the intersections of personal and collective histories, and allowing readers to engage with the complexities of Indigenous identity – often marked by ambiguity, uncertainty, and confusion. These qualities accurately reflect modern and urban Native life, where familial and platonic bonds are fractured and renegotiated, and identities are fragile and uncertain. As Gasztold notes, this narrative pattern mirrors Native epistemology, where storytelling is viewed as a process in which individual stories interweave with larger, communal narratives (284). Through this technique, both works assert that no single voice can encapsulate the full spectrum of Indigenous existence, rejecting the totalizing authority of settler-colonial discourse. This resistance to monolithic portrayals of Native identity sets the stage for examining how Native communities, in *The Night Watchman* and *Ghost River*, challenge erasure and reclaim history, not just as a means of survival but as an act of healing. By re-centering Indigenous histories and experiences, these works confront colonial narratives, offering new pathways to understanding and reasserting Indigenous sovereignty.

Healing and Challenging Erasure: Reclaiming History in *The Night Watchman* and *Ghost River*

Textual and visual representation has long shaped the hegemonic narrative and perception of Native Americans in a majority-white world, often reinforcing settler-colonial myths of Indigenous disappearance, primitiveness, or inherent violence. I have previously

explored how these narratives function as tools of historical erasure, as an attempt to justify land dispossession, forced assimilation, and cultural destruction while silencing Indigenous perspectives and voices. Moreover, such erasure has also shaped real-world policies and acts of violence, from the 1763 Conestoga massacre, where ruthless settler pogroms which intended to eliminate tribal identity and remove Indigenous people from their sacred homeland under the guise of progress and assimilation. Yet at the same time, Native Americans have continuously recognized, challenged, and responded to their misrepresentation and erasure. Contemporary Indigenous literature and media actively reclaim history and promote healing by centering cultural traditions, storytelling, and lived experiences. These strategies allow Native authors and creators to actively disrupt the settler-colonial master narrative, asserting cultural sovereignty, fostering solidarity, and redefining historical memory on their own terms. In the 2020 novel *The Night Watchman*, Louise Erdrich features the experiences within a Native American community facing existential threats from government policies and the ongoing destructive legacy of colonialism. The novel revolves around the Chippewa Turtle Mountain tribe and their struggles against the United States government's Termination Act of 1953, which intended to eliminate tribal identity and remove them from their sacred homeland. This political and cultural crisis threatens the community's survival, consequently prompting them to unite in a fight for autonomy. Their collective struggle affirms that healing is not just an individual process but a communal endeavor, rooted in shared resistance and self-determination. In the 2019 graphic novel *Ghost River*, Lee Francis reclaims the historical narrative of the 1793 massacre of the Conestoga people by Scots-Irish frontiersmen. Rather than portraying Native people as passive victims or interpreting settler brutality as inevitable, Francis shifts focus away from the perpetrators and centers Indigenous perspectives, challenging the erasure of Indigenous agency

and survival. By shifting the focus toward Indigenous resilience, the novel resists historical silencing and affirms the power of remembrance in healing from historical trauma. Both texts dismantle settler-colonial narratives by exposing erasure as a tool of oppression, reimagining and deconstructing real-life events of historical physical and cultural violence. Through storytelling, *The Night Watchman* and *Ghost River* assert that healing and combatting erasure is an active, collective process, one that emerges from reclaiming history, resisting dispossession, and strengthening cultural bonds across generations.

Storytelling, as both a narrative and a rhetorical strategy, plays a fundamental role in contemporary Indigenous literature by resisting settler-colonial narratives and reclaiming historical memory. Storytelling, founded in oral traditions, serves as a vital link between the past, present, and future as it sustains cultural identity and shapes collective memory. Judy Iseke explains that storytelling helps sustain communities, validates their experiences, and encourages the sharing of knowledge. Iseke uses the metaphor "it's like we all get in the same canoe and we're all paddling together," to emphasize that oral traditions rely on the collective effort of storytellers and listeners to preserve history, reinforce identity, and pass knowledge across generations (565). Through this process, storytelling both sustains communities and strengthens survivance so that cultural memory and identity remain central to Indigenous life rather than being overshadowed by erasure and violence. This emphasis on oral tradition as both a mode of resistance and a means of strengthening communal identity is central to works such as *The Night Watchman* and *Ghost River*. In *The Night Watchman*, Erdrich does not recount history but foregrounds intergenerational knowledge to highlight the Turtle Mountain Chippewa's resistance to the Termination Act of 1953. Zhaanat, Patrice's mother and a respected cultural teacher, exemplifies the sacred role of an oral historian, cultural guide, and a keeper of cultural memory,

preserving and passing down ancestral traditions and wisdom: “Zhaanat was capable and shrewd. … Zhaanat’s real job was passing on what she knew. People came from distances, often camped around their house, in order to learn” (21). Zhaanat embodies the continuity of oral tradition, ensuring that cultural knowledge remains intact despite external threats of erasure. By recirculating these narratives, Indigenous communities not only preserve their histories but also promote healing by reinforcing tribal and familial connections and fostering a sense of safety and belonging, as displayed through the community’s reverence for Zhaanat’s gifts.

In one of the novel's key moments, Zhaanat and her cousin Gerald use traditional knowledge and methods to locate Vera, Zhaanat’s daughter and Patrice’s older sister, who has gone missing. Rather than relying solely on modern technology or outsider authority, they turn to culturally grounded practices — prayer, dreams, and the wisdom passed down through generations. Gerald’s dreams, which are tied to the spiritual and physical landscape of the Turtle Mountain community, serve as a form of cultural knowledge that transcends the violence of colonial erasure. This process of seeking Vera is an active reclamation of Native epistemologies, asserting that Indigenous ways of knowing are just as legitimate and effective as Western methods, if not more so in the context of their community’s specific needs. By engaging in this traditional search, Zhaanat and Gerald resist the forces of settler-colonial violence that attempt to undermine Indigenous self-determination, demonstrating the power of cultural survival and the persistence of Indigenous knowledge systems. More broadly, Indigenous literature operates in much the same way as oral traditions, preserving memory and fostering identity through storytelling. Therefore, *The Night Watchman* displays how intergenerational knowledge — passed down through individuals like Zhaanat — is not merely a tool for the past but a vital means of resisting erasure and ensuring survival in the present.

Ghost River also centers on storytelling tradition, challenging historical erasure by reclaiming the Indigenous perspective on the 1763 Conestoga massacre. Rather than centering on the tragic event itself, positioning Native people as passive victims, or presenting settler brutality as inevitable, the graphic novel opens with a vignette of a creation story:

> "In the beginning of our knowledge of time, the world was full of water. The first creature to rise from the depth of the water was Turtle. As Turtle raised its back up high to feel the warmth of the sun, all the water ran off its shell, so it became dry. This became the first Earth. … This is how we begin. It is an old story that is told. It is beautiful. And violent and difficult. It is told from the heart, carried on the current, and flows until the last sun forever sets." (Francis, 11-12)

By beginning with a creation story passed down through oral tradition, author Lee Francis immediately centers the Indigenous worldview before recounting historical violence. This act of storytelling reasserts Native presence and resilience, resisting the colonial tendency to frame Indigenous history as one of disappearance. Grounding historical trauma within cultural tradition, the graphic novel actively deconstructs settler-colonial frameworks and affirms the power of remembrance in healing. Bruce Ballenger notes that in oral storytelling traditions, memory functions as a "storage device" where cultural knowledge is preserved through stories that define identity and history (792). *Ghost River* embodies this practice by structuring its narrative around both historical events and oral traditions. By opening with a creation story, the novel foregrounds Indigenous ways of knowing and remembering, demonstrating how storytelling sustains cultural identity even in the face of brutality and attempted erasure. The act of remembering and retelling Native histories is, as Ballenger suggests, not just a means of preserving the past but a method of survival and reclamation (792). In reclaiming the narrative of

the Conestoga massacre, *Ghost River* resists settler-colonial distortions of history. Rather than allowing the event to be defined by the perspectives of its perpetrators, the novel prioritizes Indigenous voices, ensuring that their histories remain central. Through its use of Indigenous-centered narration, evocative visual storytelling, and the integration of oral histories, *Ghost River* privileges these Indigenous perspectives on tragedy and serves as a powerful act of narrative reclamation. The graphic novel rejects the detached, outsider perspective of settler histories and instead immerses the reader in the lived experiences and perspectives of the Conestoga people, affirming that memory and oral tradition are integral to resisting erasure and asserting cultural continuity.

Indigenous narratives promote survivance and navigate the trauma of historical violence, both physical and cultural, by reestablishing connections to land, culture, and community in the healing process. *The Night Watchman* illustrates how the Turtle Mountain community relies on one another, engaging in a collective fight against the termination bill. The characters in the novel come to realize that their survival depends on their ability to unite and fight for their future. Night watchman Thomas Wazhashk, deeply connected to his people, becomes a catalyst for organizing and mobilizing the community to resist termination. The chapter "Metal Blinds" featuring the judicial hearing doesn't center on just one character's perspective; instead, it highlights the collective experience of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribe. During the hearing, one speaker boldly declares, "We don't want anything to do with this bill. We are going to fight it down. That is how it stands" (Erdrich, 200). At the end of the hearing, "Thomas took a vote. For the bill — 0. Against the bill — 47," demonstrating how the tribe appropriates the procedural rules to assert their collective resistance (201-202). Moreover, some tribal members do not speak English, requiring another tribal member to translate for them, which further underscores the

multivocality of the delegation and the diversity of voices within the community. This act of translation ensures that all voices — regardless of language barriers — are heard, reinforcing the tribe's unified resistance. The inclusion of multiple voices underscores that resistance and survival are group-oriented endeavors, shaped by a myriad of experiences but united in a common cause. Asserting and emphasizing their needs and identities as a community fosters unity and a shared purpose, which are essential for survival. According to Grim, "community survival" involves confronting colonial forces and maintaining an all-inclusive commitment to preserving Indigenous culture and livelihood (365). Thus, the Turtle Mountain community's commitment to activism shows that survival is an active, ongoing effort to resist forces that seek to diminish Native sovereignty. As Vizenor argues, "Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry*"* (vii). The resistance against termination is not merely about survival but about actively asserting a continued presence, a refusal to be erased or absorbed by settler-colonial governance. In *The Night Watchman*, the community's sense of unity is central to the Turtle Mountain Chippewa's resistance, allowing them to heal from historical traumas and assert their right to exist on their own terms.

In *Ghost River*, Lee Francis employs visual storytelling to reconnect Indigenous people to land, culture, and solidarity. For instance, Francis utilizes an illustrated wampum belt motif; the use of the wampum belt throughout the graphic novel helps visualize Indigenous tragedy without spotlighting violence itself. For instance, during the scene featuring the 1763 massacre of the Conestoga people, indigenous individuals are transformed into the wampum beads of a torn wampum belt. This highlights not only the tragic loss of life but also the unpunished injustices of the white settlers, as the Paxton Boys are depicted as obscured and faceless (55). The separated beads all point away from one another, symbolizing the separation of Native Americans from

their culture, each other, and the entire tribal community as they were exploited, harmed, relocated, and forced to assimilate (58). The shattering of the wampum beads from the belt represents the stinging, destructive effects of erasure and violence, as the beads are in disarray and cannot be restrung (58-60). The symbolism displayed here simultaneously re-connects the Native people to a cherished relic of their own culture, a culture that has been jeopardized and exploited time and time again. Lee Francis deliberately returns to this Indigenous art form to show that even the difficult stories must be shared to keep the underrepresented Indigenous voice alive and circulating, and in this way, *Ghost River* is a form of combative storytelling.

Francis's choice to represent history through wampum ties into the larger Indigenous tradition of using wampum as a mnemonic and communicative device. As Angela M. Haas argues, wampum belts function as an early form of hypertext, extending "human memories of inherited knowledge through interconnected, nonlinear designs and associative storage and retrieval methods – long before the 'discovery' of Western hypertext" (85). By visually transforming the Conestoga massacre into a fractured wampum belt, *Ghost River* not only documents colonial violence but also engages in an Indigenous intellectual tradition that preserves history in ways that challenge Western linear narratives. Francis deliberately reclaims wampum as a tool of Indigenous storytelling, ensuring that the tragic past is neither erased nor defined solely by violence. To conclude his graphic novel, Francis transforms the Conestoga massacre into a single dark-colored bead surrounded by white wampum with the only text on the panel reading, "History is complicated. Violence is simple" (61-63). Through the reclamation of wampum and the fragmentation done by historical violence, Francis exemplifies how Indigenous storytelling strategies rewrite history while avoiding centering violence, instead preserving and

amplifying the multifaceted, collective memory that empowers Indigenous people to reclaim their identity and resilience beyond colonial harm.

Ghost River masterfully presents the importance of remembering and memorializing through storytelling: "History is like the river. It meanders, wanders, shows us where we came from and where we can go. … The stories we tell of the Conestoga are the stories of the river and wind … They are stories that give us understanding of how a people lived and endured. Our ancestors knew this from the long-ago time. … They knew of the twists and turns ahead. Of the celebrations and sorrows to follow" (62-65). Just as a river is shaped by natural forces, history is shaped by human experiences, choices, and external influences, making it is ever-changing and fluid. This imagery connects to Indigenous conceptions of land and time, often cyclical rather than linear, emphasizing continuity, renewal, and adaptation. Furthermore, invoking the stories of the Conestoga and the elements of nature reinforces the importance of regenerative storytelling in preserving Indigenous histories. Storytelling is not just about remembering the past; it is an active process that carries knowledge forward through time and shapes the future. The phrase "their stories give us understanding of how a people lived and endured" powerfully shifts the focus away from loss and to survival, from tragedy to strength (63). Rather than centering on trauma, it highlights resilience and endurance, underscoring how Native peoples have navigated history's challenges while maintaining their cultural identities. By acknowledging both sorrow and celebration and reaffirming their wisdom, connection to land, and survivance, this Indigenous perspective resists the colonial tendency to portray Native people as relics of the past, portraying them primarily through their trauma. It asserts that Indigenous peoples are active agents in shaping their own histories, grounding in the strength and wisdom of their ancestors. The descendants of the massacred Conestoga people vow to

always remember and tell their ancestors' stories. They reflect, "Perhaps it is in the blood memory. The laughter medicine. The silence of remembering … Perhaps it is in all these things that we do together as we hold the stories of our ancient peoples close in our hearts" (69). The final page presents the trees of the Indigenous burial ground, with the Conestoga ancestors standing between them, towering above the reader. Phrases like "the blood of memory" and "the silence of remembering" emphasize the importance of regenerating and amplifying silenced voices (69). This final illustration powerfully represents how keeping Indigenous stories alive transforms their narratives into something larger than themselves. Rather than being depicted solely as passive objects of violence and exploitation, Francis portrays the Conestoga as wistful and sublime. Through the power of generational storytelling, Native culture, and Native stories become so pervasive that they can inundate colonial hostility and Indigenous tragedy, ensuring their continued presence and resilience.

While *Ghost River* presents an indirect portrayal of violence through imagery, *The Night Watchman* similarly uses implication over graphic description, allowing for a layered understanding of violence without sensationalizing it. Erdrich in *The Night Watchman* never explicitly describes what happens to Vera. Patrice tracks down her sister's last known address, she arrives at an abandoned apartment and encounters a horrifying scene. The gruesome imagery of the place itself — the chains and the dead dog — powerfully symbolizes the brutal realities of violence against Indigenous women: "All was too still. Death was in the house. … She entered the first room, where she found the dog. It was at the end of a chain bolted into the wall. … Patrice got up and quickly opened the doors to the next rooms. In each one, a filthy mat, a gnarled blanket, sometimes shit, the smell of piss, a chain bolted into the wall and at the end of each chain an empty dog collar … Strips of an old sheet. Dried blood" (146-147). Erdrich

prioritizes implication over direct description, not showing the violence in graphic detail but instead conveying it through the horror of the setting. By doing so, Erdrich critiques the dehumanizing effects of settler-colonial violence, particularly the ways in which the suffering of Native women has been historically ignored or silenced. Vera's fate, though never fully described, becomes a poignant symbol of the invisibility and marginalization of Indigenous women within colonial structures. Patrice's search, as well as the absence of explicit violence, emphasizes the enduring trauma these women face — both individually and collectively — while underscoring the broader cultural and historical forces that render their pain invisible. The image of Vera's abandonment, and the chilling implications of her disappearance, resonate with the contemporary crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) and the lack of recognition surrounding the violence and trafficking that these women experience. Erdrich's refusal to sensationalize the violence forces readers to confront the horrific implications of Vera's disappearance and, by extension, the broader violence experienced by Native women.

Both *The Night Watchman* and *Ghost River* demonstrate that reclaiming history is essential to healing from the wounds of erasure. By exposing the realities of cultural and historical violence, these works counter settler-colonial narratives and assert Indigenous perspectives, ensuring that the stories of Native communities are told on their own terms. In doing so, they reaffirm that healing and resistance emerge from reclaiming history – whether through intergenerational storytelling or the preservation of cultural memory – ultimately strengthening cultural bonds and fostering solidarity across generations and communities. Contemporary Indigenous literature not only preserves cultural identity but also actively challenges colonial structures, centering Native voices in their own histories. In a world where the dominant narrative is the colonial one, *Ghost River* demonstrates that difficult stories can be

told without replicating colonial frameworks or romanticizing tragedy, asserting that Indigenous voices must not be silenced or forgotten. Likewise, *The Night Watchman* highlights the power of collective action and storytelling in affirming cultural sovereignty. These narratives do more than remember — they regenerate, ensuring that Indigenous histories, voices, and perspectives remain vital and central. Works like *Ghost River* and *The Night Watchman* reject the notion that Native stories are relics of the past; instead, they affirm storytelling as a regenerative act – one that resists erasure, asserts cultural sovereignty, and envisions Indigenous futures. Their narratives assert that survival is an ongoing act of reclaiming space, history, and identity, at the very core of survivance. This sets the stage/lays the foundation for the next section, which will explore how survivance is enacted through humor and irony, subverting settler expectations, challenging dominant narratives, and offering different ways of engaging with history, memory, and identity.

Laughter as Indigenous Medicine: Subverting Settler Myths Through Satire, Humor, and Irony

Since the invention of cinema, Native Americans have been misrepresented in nearly every way imaginable — depicted as bloodthirsty savages, noble warriors, wise elders, or lazy drunks, along with countless other stereotypes. Across more than 4,000 films, Hollywood has shaped and distorted Native identity, reducing Indigenous peoples to stereotypes that erase their depth, culture, and humanity. Classic Westerns, blockbuster films, and even children's cartoons have long reinforced these misconceptions, with American cinema largely serving Euro-American audiences and narratives. As a result, for many non-Native viewers, film and television became the primary, if not the only, source of information about Indigenous peoples, further entrenching these distorted portrayals. As Richard Price explains, these depictions "were created as entertainment, but they cumulatively built a separate reality about Native cultures. The

belief that there is an essence of general truth about Indians in these portrayals is pervasive and persistent in modern North America, with Price commenting, “They are ... difficult stereotypes to correct” (154). The enduring influence of these representations has made it challenging to undo the damage, as they have become deeply embedded in mainstream consciousness. A pivotal shift occurred in 1998 with the release of *Smoke Signals*, the first widely distributed film directed, written, and acted by Native Americans. Chris Eyre’s adaptation of Sherman Alexie’s work reclaims Indigenous storytelling by infusing the narrative with humor and irony, subverting dominant stereotypes to recenter Native humanity. The road-trip film follows two Coeur d’Alene men, Victor and Thomas, as they journey to retrieve the ashes of Victor’s estranged father, exploring themes of identity, trauma, and community. In contrast to Hollywood’s long history of reducing Native characters to one-dimensional tropes, *Smoke Signals* foregrounds Indigenous agency, self-representation, and humanity.

Humor and irony are central to narrative and cultural reclamation. In the framework of survivance, humor is not merely a coping mechanism but a form of cultural and narrative sovereignty. In Native communities, “laughing it up” is nothing new, as it can be found in many forms: stories, anecdotes, simple teasing, songs, dance, art, and so forth. In Native communities, humor is perceived as “as integral a part of life as eating,” due to its power in both communication and “as a way of surviving in a sometimes difficult world” (Garrett, et al. 196). Expressions of happiness through joy and laughter disrupt settler-colonial expectations, reclaim agency, and reaffirm the persistence of Native identity, hence why visual modes of storytelling have served as fertile ground for these strategies of survivance. *Smoke Signals* and later works like *Reservation Dogs* exemplify how Indigenous media challenges hegemonic structures through satire, irony, and self-representation. These visual storytelling modes not only push back

against harmful portrayals but also assert the complexity, resilience, and humor inherent in contemporary Native life.

The humor in *Smoke Signals* serves as a direct confrontation of settler-colonial tropes and stereotypes. Joanna Hearne argues that the film is particularly revolutionary in how it not only authentically presents contemporary Native life but also "speaks back to the tropes of victimization and narratives of Indian spectrality by envisioning Native consumption of commodity entertainment" (268). The film directly critiques Hollywood's historical exclusion of Native people from modernity and the irony of Indigenous audiences consuming genres that have consistently misrepresented them. This is encapsulated in Thomas's wry observation: "The only thing more pathetic than Indians on TV is Indians watching Indians on TV."

Beyond its metatextual critique, the film's humor emerges most notably in the dynamic between its two protagonists, Victor and Thomas. Victor, brooding and tough, contrasts sharply with Thomas, an eccentric and talkative storyteller. Their contrasting personalities not only subvert monolithic depictions of Native identity but also highlight the diversity within Native communities. Rather than reducing them to their Indigeneity alone, the film allows them to be fully realized characters shaped as much by personal experience as by cultural heritage. In doing so, *Smoke Signals* challenges essentialist notions of Native identity. Thomas, in particular, disrupts stereotypes of the "noble savage" and the stoic warrior. Unlike Victor's free-flowing hair, Thomas wears his neatly braided, often mocked by Victor alongside his oversized glasses and formal suits. In one scene, Victor critiques Thomas's demeanor, telling him, "You're always trying to sound like a damn medicine man or something… Don't you even know how to be a real Indian?" Thomas simply responds, "I guess not." Victor then attempts to instruct him on how to "look like a warrior," demanding that he "get stoic" and "look mean" in order to command

respect (00:34:02-00:34:56). This exchange satirizes the romanticized image of the silent, brooding Native figure popularized by Western films, exposing it as a performance rather than an inherent trait. It also underscores how decades of misrepresentation have shaped Native Americans' perceptions of their own identity. Similarly, *Reservation Dogs* humorously deconstructs settler-colonial expectations. The show's dark comedy emerges in moments like the "Land Back" graffiti scene, where an elderly white couple discusses Indigenous sovereignty with complete obliviousness: "I reckon the Indians did it. But I don't understand. They mean the whole damn thing back? Well, they got the casinos." The irony here underscores the ongoing disconnect between white perceptions and Indigenous realities.

The show's humor thrives on the absurd situations its main characters find themselves in, particularly when they subvert stereotypes. A prime example is the opening scene of *Reservation Dogs*, where Bear and his friends attempt to steal a chip truck (season 1, episode 1). This moment plays on the classic "heist" trope, typically associated with skilled, rebellious criminals, but here, it completely undercuts expectations of Native criminality. Rather than executing a slick, strategic plan, the group's attempt is clumsy and chaotic — hardly the work of hardened thieves. The scene initially sets up the heist as a dramatic act of rebellion, reinforced by a hard rock guitar riff that typically signals a high-stakes crime. However, this expectation is immediately undercut by the reality of their struggle: the truck is unlocked, the keys are in the ignition, and yet they barely manage to drive off without fumbling. The comedy builds further in their interactions, particularly between Bear and Elora. As they speed away, Bear earnestly warns, "Put your seatbelt on." Elora scoffs, "Seatbelt? We're stealing a fucking chip truck!" Their banter escalates as Bear insists, "What do you mean it's not cool? Like, what if we crash right now and smash through the windshield? Would that be cool?" Elora rolls her eyes: "I'm

just saying, it doesn't scream badass if we have to fucking buckle up before jacking a car." Bear corrects her, "Truck." All the while, a bystander with a cup of coffee watches in utter bewilderment, squinting as the scene unfolds. This deadpan reaction, paired with the sheer mundanity of Bear and Elora's conversation during their supposed "crime," transforms the moment into near slapstick, emphasizing the ridiculousness of their attempted rebellion. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes of Native delinquency, the scene humorously dismantles them. The group is not engaged in some grand outlaw act — they are stealing a truck full of snacks, and they cannot even take themselves seriously while doing it. This comedic framing critiques the expectation that Native youth must fit into the mold of either the tragic victim or the defiant warrior. Instead, *Reservation Dogs* presents them as resourceful yet flawed, navigating a world that continues to marginalize them — but doing so with humor, irreverence, and camaraderie.

Reservation Dogs uses humor to highlight the cultural awkwardness and forced politeness often expected in cross-cultural interactions. When Elora and Jackie, on their road trip, end up staying at a well-meaning but clueless white woman's house (*Season 2, Episode 2*), they are served a questionable-looking dish: "spaghetti taco casserole." This moment plays into the familiar trope of "white people food" being bland or unappetizing, exaggerated here to absurdity. The woman proudly presents her creation: "That is my famous spaghetti taco casserole. Flavors of old Italy with a little of that south-of-the-border kick. Mind if I pray?" As she launches into a long-winded prayer, Elora and Jackie exchange looks, silently negotiating who will hold the woman's hand. When she finally finishes, she exclaims: "Gosh, did y'all feel that? I felt the energy, uh, it was like the air was vibrating almost. I don't even know what that was. That was kind of spooky." The girls remain silent, clearly waiting for her cue to start eating. She finally adds, "I put so much sour cream in there you would not believe. Now eat up. It's *so* good." The

humor in this scene stems from Elora and Jackie's barely concealed reactions — Elora, in particular, looks utterly repulsed but forces herself to be polite and thank her for dinner. The contrast between their visible discomfort and the woman's oblivious enthusiasm makes the moment both cringeworthy and hilarious. But beyond just being an awkward dinner scene, this moment also critiques settler hospitality — how white generosity often comes with an expectation of gratitude or conformity. The woman likely sees herself as a benevolent host, yet Elora and Jackie's quiet resistance, expressed through subtle expressions and hesitant body language, challenges that narrative. The humor here is not just in the gross-looking food; it emerges from the larger social dynamic of Indigenous characters navigating, enduring, and subtly pushing back against white expectations — all while trying to keep a straight face.

Both *Smoke Signals* and *Reservation Dogs* use tragic irony to highlight the tension between colonial expectations and lived Indigenous experience. In *Smoke Signals*, Victor and Thomas are on a bus when a white woman praises them for "celebrating Independence Day." Thomas, ever the storyteller, responds with exaggerated enthusiasm: "Yeah, we celebrate each Fourth of July with a big feast. We fry up some potatoes, make some big frybread, and then we shoot off bottle rockets and scream, 'It's a good day to be Indigenous!'" (00:34:30). His humor exposes the irony of Native people being expected to celebrate a holiday marking their colonization. As Mihelich argues, *Smoke Signals* "challenges hegemonic representations of American Indians" by using humor to subvert dominant narratives and "articulate a contemporary Indian identity" (131). This humor, rooted in Indigenous storytelling traditions, serves as both resistance and reclamation. As Mihelich argues, *Smoke Signals* "challenges hegemonic representations of American Indians" by using humor to subvert dominant narratives

and “articulate a contemporary Indian identity” (131). This humor, rooted in Indigenous storytelling traditions, serves as both resistance and reclamation.

Similarly, *Reservation Dogs* subverts settler-colonial narratives about Indigenous spirituality and identity, particularly the mainstream media trope of Indigenous spirits or ancestors as wise, stoic, and deeply mystical figures who deliver profound messages. William Knifeman completely upends this trope. When he first appears to Bear as his spirit guide, he introduces himself as a warrior at the Battle of Little Bighorn — only to admit that he never actually fought, as his horse tripped in a gopher hole and crushed him (Season 1, Episode 1). He then laments: “Now I’m meant to travel the spirit world, find lost souls like you. The spirit world … it’s cold. My nipples are always hard. I’m always hungry.” Rather than offering deep wisdom, Knifeman is awkward, self-pitying, and oddly relatable. His absurd narration demystifies and reclaims Indigenous representation, turning the romanticized warrior-spirit into a humorous, flawed character. This subversion continues in Season 2, Episode 3, when Knifeman appears to Bear in a porta-potty, calling, “Aho, young warrior!” Bear, visibly annoyed, responds: “Man, I’m in the bathroom. Some things are sacred.” Knifeman, undeterred, agrees: “Aho, yeah, you’re right. This is a very sacred place. … Back in the day, our greatest warriors would sometimes develop their greatest battle strategies in places like this. We had a big trench, and we’d all line up, pop a squat together, look at each other, and talk about the battle incoming as we pooped.” Bear, disgusted, shuts him down, saying, “Man, I don’t want to hear this.” By turning the archetypal spirit guide into an awkward and long-winded figure who appears in the least dignified moments, *Reservation Dogs* dismantles the expectation that Indigenous spirits must always be solemn and wise. Instead, Knifeman’s character reflects the humor and irreverence present in real Indigenous storytelling traditions, reinforcing the idea that Indigenous identity is

not bound by settler-imposed narratives of nobility and tragedy. Further reinforcing humor's power to critique, Thomas's storytelling in *Smoke Signals* — such as his retelling of Arlene's Magical Frybread story, a humorous parody of the Biblical loaves and fishes miracle (44:40–46:30) — playfully reclaims Indigenous perspectives while challenging Western narrative traditions. These moments dismantle the expectation that Native people exist solely as solemn figures burdened by tragedy. Instead, humor affirms Indigenous presence and agency in contemporary media.

Several comedic moments in *Smoke Signals* serve as pointed critiques of settler-colonial attitudes. In a flashback to Victor's childhood, his father jokes, "I'm feeling extra magical today, like I could make anything disappear … wave my hand and poof! White people are gone, back to where they belong" (00:10:30). While humorous, the joke subverts a phrase historically weaponized against Indigenous and other marginalized groups, turning it into a sharp critique of settler-colonial displacement. By flipping the script, the film exposes the irony of a narrative that casts Native people as trespassers in their own lands. *Reservation Dogs* similarly uses humor to dismantle settler-colonial narratives, particularly in a scene involving Rita, Bear's mother, and her fleeting romance with a wealthy white doctor. The morning after their night together, Rita notices a Confederate flag tattoo on his arm, setting off a series of increasingly absurd revelations. As they talk, she learns that the land he inherited rightfully belongs to Native people, an irony that underscores ongoing settler entitlement. His ignorance escalates as he begins to fetishize her Indigeneity, reducing her to an exoticized fantasy rather than a person. At this moment, the scene transforms into a surreal reenactment of colonial history: the doctor suddenly appears in full settler attire, being served by Native people in traditional clothing. The exaggerated visual shift makes explicit the lingering power dynamics at play, revealing his

outward charm as a thin veil over deeply ingrained colonial attitudes. Rita, horrified, silently slips away as he cluelessly asks, “Was it my tattoo?” Both *Smoke Signals* and *Reservation Dogs* use humor not only to critique settler-colonial attitudes but also to reclaim Indigenous agency in storytelling. By exposing the absurdity of these colonial legacies, whether through ironic reversals or surreal visual satire, their humor resists imposed narratives while asserting Indigenous self-representation.

Through their use of humor, *Smoke Signals* and *Reservation Dogs* disrupt the expectation that Indigenous stories must be defined by suffering and solemnity. Instead, they highlight the facets of Native expression, where humor operates as both a means of critique and a way to reinforce cultural bonds. As Mihelich argues, Native filmmakers and storytellers “contest dominant images and offer a counter-discourse that reclaims Native identity” (133). By blending satire, irony, and self-representation, these works push back against settler-colonial narratives, asserting that Indigenous storytelling is not static or monolithic but continuously evolving to reflect contemporary realities. This growing presence of authentic Native representation is further evident in recent works like the Disney + miniseries *Echo*, which, despite existing within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, foregrounds an Indigenous protagonist and incorporates cultural specificity into its storytelling. Shows like *Reservation Dogs* and *Echo* signal a broader transformation in media, where Native voices are actively shaping their own narratives rather than being confined to outdated stereotypes. As Indigenous-led films and television continue to gain momentum, they expand public understanding of Native identity, proving that Indigenous storytelling is not only a means of survival but a powerful form of self-determination, creative expression, and cultural continuity.

Telling Their Stories and Moving Forward: Navigating Authentic Representation in Popular Culture and Media

The previous sections have established the significance of authentic representation of Native Americans in literature, film, and television, tracing its evolution from historically inadequate portrayals to the present, where Indigenous actors and storytellers are increasingly shaping their own narratives and centering their perspectives. More recently, this shift has extended beyond traditional media into other forms of popular culture, displaying a broader transformation in how Indigenous identities are represented. However, this progress remains uneven, often constrained by systemic industry barriers and lingering settler-colonial biases. This can be seen in the 2024 Disney+ miniseries *Echo*, which marked a milestone in Indigenous representation within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As the first Native-led Marvel production, *Echo* has been praised for its commitment to Indigenous storytelling, including its employment of Indigenous actors, directors, and an all-Native writers' room ("Inside Echo"). While these advancements represent evident progress, the series also exemplifies the complexities and limitations that persist in mainstream Indigenous representation. Issues such as the privileging of certain tribal identities over others, cross-tribal casting, and the decision to film in Georgia rather than Oklahoma – the Choctaw location – reveal the persistent struggles of Native creatives in reclaiming their narratives from settler-colonial frameworks. This section critically examines *Echo* as both a milestone and a case study in the ongoing effort to achieve truly authentic Indigenous representation in media.

Echo follows Maya Lopez's return to her hometown in Oklahoma, where she reconnects with her Choctaw identity while navigating a complex history of violence and survival. The show's production, notably led by Indigenous creatives such as director Sydney Freeland

(Navajo), represents a departure from Hollywood's longstanding reliance on non-Native perspectives in telling Indigenous stories ("Inside Echo"). Unlike past media that perpetuated stereotypes, *Echo* integrates elements of Choctaw culture – including language, traditions, and historical practices such as stickball – offering a more nuanced representation. According to the Choctaw Nation, Marvel Studios' collaboration with Choctaw historians and cultural experts reflects a "desire to be part of the future of Native American representation in Hollywood."

Moreover, *Echo* plays a significant role in increasing Native visibility in mainstream media. According to a 2021 report by UCLA, less than 1% of TV series regulars are Native American, underscoring the stark underrepresentation of Indigenous actors (Hunt and Ramón 12). This lack of representation extends beyond television; IllumiNative, a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing the Native presence in media, indicates that Native representation in film and entertainment is nearly invisible, making up just 0.04% of all media, with even fewer Native writers and directors (IllumiNative). *Echo* addresses this gap by showcasing Native talent on Disney's huge platform. By centering Alaqua Cox and featuring established Native actors like Zahn McClarnon and Tantoo Cardinal, *Echo* helps address this disparity. Additionally, Indigenous-led projects like *Echo* generate economic and creative opportunities for Native filmmakers and writers, fostering industry shifts that can inspire future generations of Indigenous storytellers.

Despite these achievements, *Echo* also reveals the limitations of Indigenous representation in Hollywood. One significant concern is the exclusion of Cherokee and Muscogee Creek perspectives, as the series was filmed in Georgia, on Cherokee and Muscogee ancestral homeland. This decision was likely driven by Georgia's generous tax incentives for the film industry, which have made the state a major hub for production. However, it also reflects a

broader trend in media wherein Indigenous diversity is flattened into a singular narrative, often privileging one tribe's experience over others. Such choices, whether due to budget constraints, creative decisions, or external pressures, highlight the continued struggle for truly inclusive Indigenous storytelling. The decision to film *Echo* in Georgia rather than Oklahoma further complicates its authenticity; location plays a crucial role in cultural representation, as landscapes, architecture, and community spaces are integral to Indigenous identities (Simpson, 16). By shifting the setting away from Oklahoma, the production dilutes the specificity of the Choctaw experience it seeks to portray. This practice is not uncommon in Hollywood but raises questions about the industry's commitment to accuracy when depicting Native stories.

Another critical issue is the practice of cross-tribal casting. While *Echo* represents progress compared to past Hollywood tendencies to cast non-Native actors in Indigenous roles, it still raises concerns about specificity in representation. Historically, Indigenous identities have been homogenized in media, with Native actors cast in roles that do not align with their own tribal affiliations. A notable example is Zahn McClarnon, a Lakota actor, who has portrayed a variety of Native characters from different tribal backgrounds. In *Echo*, he plays Henry, a Choctaw elder, while in *Reservation Dogs*, he portrays Officer Big, whose tribal identity is not explicitly stated but exists within a predominantly Muscogee Creek and Seminole narrative. Additionally, in *Dark Winds* (AMC), he plays Joe Leaphorn, a Navajo Tribal Police officer. While McClarnon's success reflects the growing presence of Native actors in mainstream media, his frequent casting across different tribal identities underscores how Hollywood often prioritizes recognizable Indigenous actors over culturally specific representation. While cross-tribal casting expands opportunities for Indigenous actors and enhances visibility by featuring seasoned performers on screen, it also risks reinforcing a homogenized Indian narrative that obscures

specific cultural distinctions. Addressing this issue requires advocating for more precise casting practices and expanding opportunities for Native actors to play roles that reflect their own heritage.

Beyond film and television, Indigenous creators are actively reshaping representation across various forms of media, including video games. Elizabeth LaPensée's 2017 indie game *Thunderbird Strike* exemplifies this expansion, demonstrating how digital media can serve as a platform for Indigenous storytelling and activism. *Thunderbird Strike* integrates Anishinaabe Woodlands-style art with interactive gameplay that critiques the environmental destruction caused by oil pipelines. The game allows players to control a thunderbird, a powerful figure in Anishinaabe and Michif traditions, to protect Turtle Island from encroaching industrial threats. Rather than being centered around a battle between good and evil, *Thunderbird Strike* is centered around maintaining balance between all things, land, water, and all connected life, with the gameplay involving gathering lightning and striking tank trucks and oil refineries. LaPensée herself describes her intent in creating the game as an act of both aesthetic and legal survivance, explaining that the gameplay "reflects the hope that lands, waters, and all life on the island thrive, despite damage by oil operations" (29). Notably, the only text that appears besides the title and game instructions is a sign reading "No Pipelines on Indigenous Land," which clearly underscores the game's call to action. The game's very existence sparked controversy, with oil lobbyists and government officials attempting to shut the game down with accusations that it promotes "eco-terrorism," or acts of violence against people or property enacted to encourage environmental change (30). However, these accusations reflect ongoing settler-colonial anxieties over Indigenous agency and land rights. The overwhelmingly positive reception among

Indigenous and non-Indigenous players alike underscores the power of digital storytelling as a means of cultural reclamation.

As *Echo* and *Thunderbird Strike* illustrate, Indigenous representation in media has made significant strides, yet challenges remain. Hollywood continues to struggle with inclusivity, authenticity, and regional specificity, while Indigenous creators in emerging media spaces face external pressures that seek to suppress their voices. Moving forward, meaningful representation must extend beyond mere visibility; it requires structural changes in the industry that empower Indigenous storytellers to depict their cultures on their own terms. The case of *Echo* serves as both a milestone and a reminder of the ongoing work needed to dismantle Hollywood's legacy of misrepresentation. By advocating for greater inclusion of diverse Indigenous voices, pushing for casting accuracy, and ensuring regional authenticity, the industry can take meaningful steps toward decolonizing its narratives. Meanwhile, Indigenous artists like LaPensée demonstrate that the fight for representation is not confined to traditional media. As Native creatives continue to reclaim their stories across literature, film, television, art, and video games, they challenge the limitations imposed by settler-colonial frameworks and affirm the resilience of Indigenous storytelling in all its forms.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the role of violence in Native American literature is not just this thesis's objective – it is a crucial step in dismantling settler-colonial narratives and amplifying Indigenous voices. The stories we tell and the perspectives we center shape how history is remembered, how injustice is confronted, and how cultural identity is reclaimed. Moving forward, it is essential to recognize the enduring influence of colonial frameworks on contemporary discourse, legal policies, and representations of Native communities in popular culture and media. Literature and media do more than expose historical and ongoing violence – they reveal opportunities for healing, solidarity, resistance, and sovereignty. By strategically and masterfully using humor, irony, survivance, and alternative narrative structures, Indigenous storytelling actively disrupts dominant perspectives and reframes Native histories and identities on their own terms. This calls for a shift beyond passive acknowledgment of past injustices toward active recognition of Indigenous presence, agency, and sovereignty today.

However, the impact of this reframing extends beyond literature and media. Centering not just Indigenous narratives but also perspectives and voices can lead to real change and can radically influence policy decisions, educational curriculum, and public perceptions. As we continue to confront the legacies of colonialism, we must ask: Whose voices shape our understanding of history? Whose histories are being preserved, and whose are being erased? What can non-Indigenous people do to challenge the dominant narratives they have inherited? How can they support Indigenous communities in reclaiming their histories, cultures, and rights? Are they listening to Indigenous voices, reading Indigenous-authored works, and advocating for

Indigenous sovereignty beyond the classroom or the page? Creating a more accurate and inclusive historical framework requires more than inclusion and representation; it requires a fundamental rethinking of how Native histories are told and who gets to tell them. Honoring these voices means not only listening but actively challenging erasure, advocating for justice, and committing to the ongoing work of decolonization. Literature and media provide one powerful means of resistance, but true change requires honest and active engagement at every level – academic, political, and cultural. Now, here are the questions we must ask *ourselves*: How will we move beyond recognition and toward action? How will we ensure that Indigenous voices shape the narratives of both the past and the future? These are not rhetorical questions; they are calls to action.

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