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**Identity Construction in Selected Native American Novels
(Konstrukcija identiteta u odabranim romanima američkih
starosjedilaca)**

Diploma Thesis

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Contents

I. Introduction	1
I.1. Overview of the Paper	1
I.2. Native American Literature and Criticism	2
I.3. Terminology	4
II. <i>Ceremony</i>	6
II.1. About the Author and the Novel	6
I.2. Native Americans and the Second World War	7
II.3. Mixed-Blood Identity Struggles	14
II.4. Culture: Storytelling, Community, and the Role of Women	20
III. <i>Reservation Blues</i>	29
III.1. About the Author and the Novel	29
III.2. Living Conditions on Native American Reservations	30
III.3. Health, Alcoholism, and Violence	36
III.4. Cultural Conflicts and the Position of Women	41
IV. <i>There There</i>	48
IV.1. About the Author and the Novel	48
IV.2. Native American Urban Experience	49
IV.3. Same Problems, Different Setting: Alcohol Abuse and Juvenile Delinquency	53
IV.4. Native American Culture and Spirituality in Urban Settings	58
V. Conclusion	63
Works Cited	65

I. Introduction

I.1. Overview of the Paper

The objective of this thesis is to examine Native American identity¹ construction on the example of three novels written by Native Americans: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1996), and Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018). Apart from the Introduction and Conclusion, the thesis is divided into other three segments dedicated to the discussion of each novel.

The *Ceremony* chapter will consist of five sections. In the first section, the author and her work, including the novel with a brief summary, will be introduced. The second section will delve into the involvement of Native Americans in the Second World War and its repercussions on Native American population in the form of PTSD and alcoholism. The third section will deal with hybridity and (non-) belonging. The fourth section will focus on the cultural clashes, the position of women, magical realism and its significance.

The chapter on *Reservation Blues* will follow a similar pattern. Its introductory section will look into the author's biography and the novel itself. The second section of this chapter will be devoted to the discussion of living conditions of Native Americans, mainly poverty and employment prospects inside and outside the reservation. Alcoholism and violence will be presented in the third section of this chapter, while the fourth section will deal with religious and cultural conflicts and women's involvement in these conflicts.

The chapter dedicated to the novel *There There* will be divided into five sections. The first section, as is the case with the other two novels, will present the author and the novel. Subsequently, one of the sections will tackle the issue of "urban Indian experience". The third

¹The terms "Native American" and "identity" will be elaborated upon hereinafter.

section will look into substance abuse and violence while the last section will examine powwow and storytelling in urban settings.

The Conclusion will provide a reflection on the novels, the aim of the paper, and Native American literature and identity in general.

I.2. Native American Literature and Criticism

The notion of Native American literary canon has been a challenging and controversial matter from 1950s to 2000s. Leading scholars in Native American studies have addressed the following issues: What is Native American literature and canon? What can be classified as Native American Literature? What is the basis for the classification? Who has the right to make these classifications and decisions? Although the aforementioned debates are thought-challenging, their scope is much broader than this diploma paper can cover. Hence, only the general consensus reached on the classification of Native American literature will be mentioned.

Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo and Sioux Native American literary critic whose work focuses on the matrifocality of Native American communities and whose work I was partly led by in this paper, proposes two major categories of Native American literature in her study *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*² (1986). The first category, termed traditional literature, encompasses ceremonial and popular varieties. Ceremonial varieties refer to canonical works, whereas the term popular varieties applies to appropriations of canonical works told during social gatherings. Contemporary works or genre literature is assigned to the second category of Native American literature. Its further division includes “the classic western categories of poetry, short fiction, the novel, and drama, with the addition of autobiography, as-told-to narrative, and mixed genre works” (18). Both categories are of

²Hereinafter referred to as *The Sacred Hoop*.

importance to this paper since the novels under discussion interlock traditional literature in the form of storytelling and genre literature to address narratives whose protagonists

are in some sense bicultural and must deal with the effects of colonization and an attendant sense of loss of self, each is also a participant in a ritual tradition that gives their individual lives shape and significance. (Allen 114)

The period after the Second World War has seen the flourishing of genre literature in the United States ignited by the 1950s Civil Rights movement and “termination era”. During the “termination era”, the US Congress passed a series of resolutions seeking to relocate indigenous communities and abolish the tribal organization to enable Native American assimilation into the mainstream. Native American community leaders and activists reacted in a number of ways from demonstrations, the formation of Red Power groups, the seizure of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay (1969-1971) and Wounded Knee on Pine Ridge Reservation (1973), to national broadcast appeals. Native American scholars and academics have also responded to these events in their writing “calling for more attention to the political and economic threats to indigenous people, land, and sovereignty” (Coulombe 34-35).

In 1983, Native American scholar Kenneth Lincoln designated the literary output of the above-mentioned period as “Native American Renaissance”. N. Scott Momaday’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* is considered to be the pioneer literary work during this period. Other notable Native Americans writers include Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), Louise Erdrich (Chippewa), Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d’Alene), Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), and James Welch (Blackfeet) (Gamber 551-562). In terms of critical theory development, apart from Paula Gunn Allen, it is noteworthy to mention the work of Arnold Krupat, whose ideas are helpful for the analysis of Native American identity.

Krupat's study *A Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (1989) traces the development of Native American canon, a matter often overlooked and neglected. Furthermore, in his book *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture* (1996), Krupat argues that postcolonial theory and criticism are not applicable to a larger extent to Native American literature since "there is not yet a 'post' to the colonial status of the Native Americans" (30). In other words, Krupat acknowledges the existence of internal colonialism which has been relegating Native Americans, as US citizens, to the inferior position. However, the paper will not rely solely on studies by Krupat and Allen but a number of secondary sources that will assist my close reading of the selected novels.

I.3. Terminology

Among a number of terms, such as "Indian American" and "Native", the term "Native American" has been opted for as the most acceptable and non-discriminatory to be used in the paper due a set of reasons. As argued by Deborah Madsen, "Indian American" is a term strongly associated to the "discovery" of the Americas. Although "Native" is "a mode of self-identification that names relationships with family, clan, tribe" in tribal terms, it is a derogatory racial term in settler-colonial idiom, thus not fit to be used on its own (35). Madsen further suggests that "Native American" helps both identify the geographical location of these peoples and point out to

a number of key contexts: the ongoing colonized conditions that influence the identities and lifeways of indigenous Americans; the conflictual dynamic that underlies the history of relations between Native American peoples and, initially, the colonies that became the United States. (38)

As explained above, the term Native American subsumes a number of identity frameworks. For the sake of further discussion, it is crucial to define the term identity. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary offers several definitions of identity: (a) “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual”, (b) “the relation established by psychological identification”, (c) “the condition of being the same with something described or asserted”, (d) “sameness of essential or generic character in different instances”, (e) “sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing” (“Identity”). Similarly, Peter Burke and Jan Stets hold that identity is “the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (3).

With regards to Native American identity, Jace Weaver refers to four criteria according to which people might consider themselves as Native Americans: “(1) the tribe’s or Native community’s judgment, (2) the Amer-European community’s judgment, (3) the federal government’s (or, in some cases, a state’s) judgment, or (4) self-identification” (4). All four criteria have several subsets or requirements, which will be considered in the discussion hereinafter. Referring to W. I. Thomas, Burke and Stets propose that (shared) situations in which people find themselves also form a part of one’s identity (13-14). Therefore, the discussion of Native American identity in this paper will mostly revolve around problems that have been shaping Native American identity in individual novels.

II. *Ceremony*

II.1. About the Author and the Novel

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1948. Silko's line of descent is often traced to her great-grandparents, Marie Anaya Marmon, a Laguna woman, and Robert Marmon, a white man who came from Ohio and was accepted in the community. Silko grew up surrounded by storytellers who the imagination of Silko and her sisters. The importance of the storytelling tradition or cultural mediation would later be reflected in Silko's works. Further to this, "the Laguna landscape that functions as setting, and sometimes even character, in much of her work" (Nelson 2005: 245-246), as will be seen in the analysis of this aspect in Silko's novel *Ceremony*.

Silko's interest in literary writing began in elementary school when she started writing short stories. It gained impetus during her studies with the publication of the short story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" in 1969. Silko's subsequent undertakings included moving to Ketchikan, Alaska with her husband John Silko and her two sons, one of which was from her previous marriage. While in Alaska, Silko started writing her novel *Ceremony*. Silko reported she was deeply affected by being away from Laguna while writing *Ceremony*: "When I was writing *Ceremony*, I was so terribly devastated by being away from Laguna country that the writing was my way of re-making that place, the Laguna country, for myself" (qtd. in Nelson 2005: 247-249). The previous quote shows direct influence of the Laguna landscape on the identity and the mental processes of the author herself.

In Silko's oeuvre, it is the novel *Ceremony* (1977) that was shaped to a great extent by the Laguna storytelling tradition and ceremonial practices. The novel follows Tayo, a mixed-blood Laguna Pueblo, after his return from the Second World War to the reservation. Tayo is diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which causes flashbacks that enable the reader to

track Tayo's life before and during the war. (Inter-)tribal medicine and healing ceremonies serve as a backdrop to Tayo's recovery. Silko also weaves stories of traditional divine beings, such as Ts'its'tsi'nako or Thought Woman, considered to be the driving force of life, that serve as a mode through which Tayo comes to terms with his mixed-blood identity. The novel also portrays intra-tribal relationships as well as (non-)belonging inside and outside the reservation.

I.2. Native Americans and the Second World War

One of the often neglected facts about the US involvement in the Second World War is Native American contribution to the US military. As with many people(s) around the globe, the Second World War took its toll on the Native American population both directly and indirectly. On September 20, 1940, the US Congress passed a draft law or compulsory registration for the US armed forces that included Native Americans. Despite the fact that many Native American communities objected to their participation in several aspects, for example the centuries-long marginalization or the idea of separation from the whites in the armed force, the US government authorized the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to help with the registration on reservations. Some figures show that the Navajo reservation solely had 125 registration posts while on the Rosebud Sioux reservation BIA recruited English-speaking Native Americans to translate the draft regulations into the Lakota language. By March 1941, the Bureau reported to have registered 7,500 Native Americans ready for the army (Bernstein 22-35). Although the estimates vary in such data, it is recorded that about 25,000 Native Americans served the country: "21,767 in the army, 1,910 in the navy, 874 in the marines, and 121 in the Coast Guard" (Bernstein 40). Some of the greatest contributions include the Navajo Code Talkers who helped establish the secrecy of communication via certain codes during the war with Japan and the Bataan Death March after the Battle of Bataan in 1942. The only available statistics, claimed to be incomplete and erroneous,

show that over 550 Native Americans died during the war whereas 700 were wounded, which corresponds to 5percent of the overall Native American force (Bernstein48-61). Silko's novel *Ceremony* makes mention of the BIA recruiting:

“Anyone can fight for America,” he began, giving special emphasis to “America,” “even you boys. In a time of need, anyone can fight for her.” [...] He looked disgusted then, as though he were almost ready to leave. But he went on with his speech. “Now I know you boys love America as much as we do, but this is your big chance to show it!” (Silko 48)

Most Native Americans felt that their involvement in the war would put an end to the marginalization they have been facing for centuries. The lack of recognition after the war had a profoundly negative impact on the identity of Native American communities. They felt exploited and discarded on collective and individual levels. Most war veterans struggled while coming to terms with what their respective place and role in the society is, both of which are the main determinants of a person's identity. The post-war experiences of Native Americans testify to Weaver's argument that Native American identity is determined to a great extent by “the Amer-European community's judgment” (4).

As Tayo explains in the novel, all that the Native American soldiers got from the war were cash disability checks and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The narrative of the novel opens with a PTSD example, a nightmare filled with flashbacks to Tayo's war experiences:

That memory would unwind into the last day when they had sat together, oiling their rifles in the jungle of some nameless Pacific island. While they used up the last of the oil in Rocky's pack, they talked about the deer that Rocky had hunted, and the corporal next to them shook his head, and kept saying he had dreamed the Japs would get them that day. The humid air turned into sweat that had run down the corporal's face while he repeated his dream to them. That was the first time Tayo had realized that the man's skin was not

much different from his own. The skin. He saw the skin of the corpses again and again, in ditches on either side of the long muddy road—skin that was stretched shiny and dark over bloated hands; even white men were darker after death. There was no difference when they were swollen and covered with flies. [...]When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave with their hands on their heads, Tayo could not pull the trigger. (Silko 19-20)

It is evident from the excerpt that at one point Tayo realizes there is a common bond of humanity between him and the white corporal as well as between him and the bodies of the dead Japanese soldiers. In this way, Tayo unconsciously comments on the futility of racism and war. He is probably torn between two facts. On the one hand, he is fighting for his country even though he is marginalized in it. On the other hand, he is fighting against the Japanese against whom the WASP U.S. society holds a number of prejudices almost in the same manner as towards Tayo's people. Both of the aforementioned conundrums create identity issues.

The excerpt above is also suggestive of one of the PTSD symptoms referred to as “intrusive” group. The symptom includes “recurrent and distressing recollections”, “flashbacks, thoughts, nightmares, dreams”, “phobias about specific daily routines, events, or objects”, and “feelings of guilt for having survived”. The primary daily routine that Tayo has problems with is sleep and is tightly related to the PTSD “physical” group of symptoms which also includes “hypervigilance”, “exaggerated startle response”, or “feelings of nervousness” (Kinchin 45). Whenever he falls asleep, the images of the war haunt him, and he is restless upon waking up. It is indiscernible whether reality or the past in the shape of dreams has a more deleterious effect on Tayo. He is often troubled by the light and apprehensive of any sound that might be reminiscent of shooting or crushing. The following excerpt portrays how sounds that appear simple and undisturbing to healthy people affect Tayo's mind:

The tall soldier looked at him curiously. He pushed Tayo out of the way, into the ditch running full of muddy water. He pulled the blanket over Rocky as if he were already dead, and then he jabbed the rifle butt into the muddy blanket. Tayo never heard the sound, because he was screaming. Later on, he regretted that he had not listened, because it became an uncertainty, loose inside his head, wandering into his imagination, so that any hollow crushing sound he heard—children smashing gourds along the irrigation ditch or a truck tire running over a piece of dry wood—any of these sounds took him back to that moment. (Silko 38)

The quote above relates the death of Tayo's cousin Rocky who was, as the narrative shows, the family's beloved son. The awareness of the previously mentioned fact coupled with the traumatic event causes survivor's guilt, another symptom of PTSD. After returning from the war, Tayo's already problematic relationship with Auntie, his maternal aunt, deteriorates. Feeling guilty that he survived the war instead of his cousin Rocky, Tayo often shamefully averts his gaze from Auntie. During one of his flashbacks, Tayo relives the moment when he and Rocky pleaded with Auntie to let them enroll in the army:

“I'll bring him back safe,” Tayo said softly to her the night before they left. “You don't have to worry.” She looked up from her Bible, and he could see that she was waiting for something to happen; but he knew that she always hoped, that she always expected it to happen to him, not to Rocky. (Silko 53)

Tayo's war experiences and lack of acceptance inside and outside the community makes Tayo feel that Rocky's death is better than his current life and position. Other physical symptoms that Tayo displays include chronic vomiting. Tayo vomits each time something reminds him of the war. The aforementioned implies that the war violated his psyche and perturbed his self-identification which had already been problematic. For example, on his return to the reservation

Tayo sees a group of Japanese women with their babies at the train depot and passes out. When he comes to, Tayo asks some people if the Japanese are out of internment camps, which the US government forced them into to diminish any possible threat during the war. He poses the question as if he cannot differentiate between the reality or the end of the war and his past during the war. According to David Kinchin,

during a flashback the survivor loses the ability to distinguish between the past and the present as events merge into a single horrific trauma [...] When the flashback subsides they will need a period of time to readjust to where they are. (47)

The presence of the Japanese women and children dramatically alternates with Rocky's absence and he vomits:

The swelling was pushing against his throat, and he leaned against the brick wall and vomited into the big garbage can. The smell of his own vomit and the rotting garbage filled his head, and he retched until his stomach heaved in frantic dry spasms. He could still see the face of the little boy, looking back at him, smiling, and he tried to vomit that image from his head because it was Rocky's smiling face from a long time before, when they were little kids together. (Silko 25)

For Tayo, the act of vomiting serves to erase the past events he is burdened by, as described in one instance: he tries "to vomit out everything—all the past, all his life" (Silko 103). The quote points to Tayo's troublesome understanding of his existence in the world generated by different factors, which is directly linked to his sense of identity.

In addition to vomiting, other modes of repressing the past include binge drinking and alcoholism since "[l]iquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats" (Silko 36). As explained in the Preface to *Ceremony*, Silko's initial idea for this novel was to present a character named Harley, a war

veteran who struggles with alcoholism in a comic manner. Silko changed her outlook when she realized that

Harley's desperate thirst for alcohol [...] didn't seem so funny after all, and [she] realized [she] wanted to better understand what happened to the war veterans, many of whom were survivors of the Battan [*sic*] Death March, cousins and relatives of [hers] who returned from the war and stayed drunk the rest of their lives. (Silko 12)

Similarly, Tayo, traumatized, unemployed, and aimless, goes on binges with Harley, LeRoy, and Emo. During their time together they mostly stroll down the memory lane and retell their sexual escapades with white women, which served as their vengeance to the oppression by the white men. Whilst alcohol may function as an escape from the reality of their post-war lives, it causes even more violence. During one of their binges, Emo boasts with a string of teeth taken from the dead bodies of Japanese soldiers as his war trophy:

The teeth sucked up the light, and darkness closed around Tayo with an ambush of voices in English and Japanese. He clenched his hands around the bottle until he felt a sharp snap. It was too late then. It tore loose. The little Japanese boy was smiling in the L.A. depot; darkness came like night fog and someone was bending over a small body. (Silko 47)

The light, as well as Emo's insults, serves as a trigger to Tayo and he stabs Emo in the belly with a broken bottle. Nevertheless, the violence between the two of them does not end here. By the end of the novel, Emo makes a deal with Harley, LeRoy, and Pinkie to lure Tayo to an old mine to kill him. After Harley fails to deliver Tayo to them, Emo skins him alive both to punish him and to tempt Tayo to come out. This act of violence might be misinterpreted as an identity stereotype and behavioral pattern of Native Americans, as portrayed in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*. During this unfortunate event, Tayo hides in an old mine. While there, Tayo

contemplates how the US government exploited the reservation land for testing nuclear weapon such as the nuclear bomb at the Trinity Site and uranium extraction during the Second World War:

When years before they had first come to the people living on the Cebolleta land grant, they had not said what kind of mineral it was. They were driving U.S. Government cars, and they paid the land grant association five thousand dollars not to ask questions about the test holes they were drilling [...] Early in the spring of 1943, the mine began to flood with water from subterranean springs. They hauled in big pumps and compressors on flat-bed trucks from Albuquerque [...] But later in the summer the mine flooded again, and this time no pumps or compressors were sent. They had enough of what they needed, and the mine was closed, but the barbed-wire fences and the guards remained until August 1945. By then they had other sources of uranium, and it was not top secret any more. Big gray vans came and hauled the machinery away. They left behind only the barbed-wire fences, the watchman's shack, and the hole in the earth. (Silko 145-146)

Historical records corroborate the exploitation of land on reservations mentioned in the novel. Nuclear testing and uranium extraction in the American Southwest began in the 1940s and was conducted at the junction of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado known as Four Corners area. The region is also known as the Grants Uranium Belt due to its abundance in uranium which amounts to "two-thirds of US uranium deposits". Many of the testing sites are nowadays used as nuclear waste dumps that have been one of the causes of poor health in Native American population (Matsunaga 68). The treatment of Laguna Pueblo land before, during, and after the Second World War has had repercussions for the minds of its people. In her analysis of territory and identity in Silko's *Ceremony*, Karen Piper highlights several historical facts that have influenced Silko's writing of this novel. It has been reported in 1977 that all Laguna wells were

exposed to radiation, including the main river on this reservation, Rio Paguete. The main tribal buildings and road system were made of the radioactive waste. Consequently, the whole area was identified as a “National Sacrifice Area” to ensure the continuation of waste dumping. Piper relies on some of Silko’s childhood memories, which refer to uranium extraction from sacred sites and its impact on the feelings of Laguna Pueblo community, to conclude that the community responded by incorporating these events into their stories. In *Ceremony*, the destruction of the Laguna land is not used for further conflicts but integrated in Tayo’s ceremony to mark the actualization of his self-awareness (483-484). Piper’s argument is substantiated by Patricia Clark Smith’s explanation that

[t]he land is not just a collection of objects you do things *to*, nor is it merely a place you do things *in*, a stage-set for human action. Rather, it is a multitude of entities who possess intelligence and personality. These entities are active participants with human beings in life processes. (qtd. in Piper 486)

It is near the mine that Tayo realizes he is near the end of his ceremony: “He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told” (Silko 147). Tayo’s war experiences are only one part of his story and identity that is reconciled at this moment. The other part included his status of a mixed-blood that the next section will look into.

II.3. Mixed-Blood Identity Struggles

The complex relationships of Native American communities emanate from multiple contexts. The first point to be taken into consideration is the number of recognized tribes along two major axes: federal government/state recognition and tribal recognition. According to the last available data provided by Martha Saenz on the official webpage of National Conference of State

Legislatures (NCSL), there are 547 federally recognized tribes in the U.S., including Alaska Native peoples. There is also a number of tribes recognized by states and not by the federal government. In contrast, federally recognized tribes may be state-recognized. One of the greatest issues in the aforementioned difference is that federally recognized tribes are eligible for receiving benefits from BIA while state-recognized tribes are not. The second point to be taken into account refers to the criteria for tribal enrollment (Saenz, "Federal and State Recognized Tribes"). The written tribal constitution and membership qualification was encouraged by the Wheeler-Howard Act also known as the Indian Reorganization Act (1934). Not all Native American tribes have a written constitution; tribes like the Pueblo of Taos perpetuate "traditional form of Government". Tribes generally retain their right for tribal membership criteria. In addition, members of federally recognized tribes are issued a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) from BIA. CDIB identifies the degree of Native American blood or blood quantum. The average blood quantum that determines one's tribal eligibility is one-fourth degree of Native American blood. The quantum of blood is usually determined on the basis of ancestry (Thornton 77).

Internal disputes on eligibility are not infrequent as exemplified in *Ceremony* through Tayo. He is a mixed-blood through his Native American mother and the unknown white father. Tayo's case is not rare. According to Jennifer Brown and Theresa Schenck, the term "half-breed" appeared in the 1760s to refer to children of Native American-white ancestry. Mixed-bloods have not "formed a separate people, and most generally lived with their Indian maternal relatives". Even though mixed-blood Native Americans often resided with their maternal relatives, they were not always fully accepted which had a great reflection in their sense of belonging(329), as is the case with Tayo. From early childhood, Auntie reminded Tayo of his mother's act, i.e. what she saw as a disgrace to the family:

“They’re not brothers,” she’d say, “that’s Laura’s boy. You know the one.” She had a way of saying it, a tone of voice which bitterly told the story, and the disgrace she and the family had suffered. The things Laura had done weren’t easily forgotten by the people, but she could maintain a distance between Rocky, who was her pride, and this other, unwanted child. If nobody else ever knew about this distance, she and Tayo did. (Silko 48)

It must have been difficult for Tayo not only to be left to his up-to-then unknown relatives but to undergo constant exclusion at a time when he starts developing understanding of himself as an individual entity in the world that belongs somewhere. According to Donald Fixico, group acceptance and orientation

helped to define identity and role for each person. This gave overall purpose to life. Beyond extended families, each person belonged to a clan or society making Indian life systematic and complex. Belonging to a community, clan/society, and extended family provided security and safety for everyone—child, teenager, adult, and elder. (2006: 4)

In one of her interviews, Silko commented on the importance of community acceptance for identity development: “Community is tremendously important. That’s where a person’s identity has to come from, not from racial blood quantum levels.” (qtd. in Weaver 132). Tayo is aware that he could not report Auntie’s emotional bullying to other members of the family since she did it only when they were left alone:

It was a private understanding between the two of them. When Josiah or old Grandma or Robert was there, the agreement was suspended, and she pretended to treat him the same as she treated Rocky, but they both knew it was only temporary. When she was alone with the boys, she kept Rocky close to her; while she kneaded the bread, she gave Rocky little pieces of dough to play with; while she darned socks, she gave him scraps of cloth and a

needle and thread to play with. She was careful that Rocky did not share these things with Tayo, that they kept a distance between themselves and him. But she would not let Tayo go outside or play in another room alone. She wanted him close enough to feel excluded, to be aware of the distance between them. (Silko 49)

Despite the fact that Auntie's behavior is reprehensible to a certain extent, her resentment of Tayo who, for her, was a reminder of her sister's betrayal of Native Americans, should not be seen as purely whimsical. It could be that Auntie is aware of what the historical Patricia Nelson terms "the subversive effects of blood-quantum policy":

Set the blood quantum at one-quarter, hold to it as a rigid definition of Indians, let intermarriage proceed as it had for centuries, and eventually Indians will be defined out of existence. When that happens, the federal government will be freed of its persistent 'Indian problem'. (qtd. in Cheyfitz 25)

Ryan Schmidt argues that while it is true that the existence of full-blooded Native Americans is jeopardized by interracial marriages, it should be noted that this is an inevitable process due to globalization and various types of assimilation. Schmidt states that currently "over 60 percent of all American Indians are married to non-Indians, which has certain implications pertaining to group membership (as established by blood quantum), heritage, and identity" (6). An implication of Schmidt's attitude could be that even individuals with relatively small degrees of Native American blood should not be ostracized by the community in order to prevent the decline and extirpation of Native American peoples (6). Furthermore, the concept of mixed-blood identities in this novel is complicated once Auntie's behavior is taken into consideration.

Auntie is an example of cultural mixed-bloodedness or, to use Homi Bhabha's terminology, hybridity.³ She regularly goes to church and reads from the Bible. In other words, she adopts and practices the religion of the colonizer/oppressor while at the same time criticizing Tayo for being partly white. Moreover, her son Rocky seems to disregard Laguna Pueblo beliefs as mere superstitions, noticeable in the beginning of the novel when Tayo recalls their deer hunt. After they kill the deer Rocky wants to butcher it without honoring the deer as is the custom. He also ignores Tayo's insistence on covering the deer's head. An important implication of Rocky's behavior is whether full-bloodedness makes one a Native American even in the presence of situations when one ignores the main tenets of Native American life and beliefs. At one point Auntie contests Grandma's appeal to invite a medicine man over to help Tayo: "Oh, I don't know, Mama. You know how they are. You know what people will say if we ask for a medicine man to help him. Someone will say it's not right. They'll say, 'Don't do it. He's not full blood anyway.'" (Silko 33).

Similar behavior can be found in the character of Emo. Emo passes scathing remarks concerning Tayo's parentage, for example: "You drink like an Indian, and you're crazy like one too—but you aren't shit, white trash. You love Japs the way your mother loved to screw white men" (Silko 47). While criticizing the colonizer through Tayo, Emo assumes the colonizer's attitude and violence by carrying the teeth of dead Japanese soldiers and boasting about it in a sadistic manner. By contrast, the whites do not criticize the Tayo's hybridity. Instead, they feel triumphant about it:

He remembered how the white men who were building the new highway through Laguna had pointed at him. They had elbowed each other and winked. He never forgot that, and

³In his collection of essays titled *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha discusses the amalgamation of colonizer-colonized polarities caused by the process of colonization. Hybridity, according to Bhabha, may refer to biological and ethnic hybridity.

finally, years later, he understood what it was about white men and Indian women: the disgrace of Indian women who went with them. (Silko 44)

Nonetheless, there are people who accept and encourage Tayo, including Grandma, Josiah, Robert and other characters of mixed ancestry. Prompted by Tayo's green eyes, Betonie, a Navajo medicine man who helps Tayo recover, tells Tayo the story of his ancestry. Betonie's grandfather Descheeny was a Navajo and his grandmother was a Mexican woman found by Navajo hunters. When they found her,

[s]he held her mouth tight, teeth clenched under her thin lips, and she stared at them with hazel green eyes that had a peculiar night shine of a wolf or bobcat. The wind came out of the trees and blew her loose hair wildly around her wide brown face. Their confidence was caught in the wind; they were chilled as they looked at her. (Silko 91)

The hunters were scared of the shine in her green eyes. Betonie inherits her green eyes and people from Gallup are afraid of him too. The green eyes symbolize hybridity and the inevitable change that comes with it. Night Swan, Uncle Josiah's Mexican lover and former "cantina dancer with eyes like a cat" (Silko 60), tells Tayo that most people are afraid of change:

They think that if their children have the same color of skin, the same color of eyes, that nothing is changing." She laughed softly. "They are fools. They blame us, the ones who look different. That way they don't have to think about what has happened inside themselves. (Silko 67)

Night Swan's grain of wisdom is applicable to Auntie and her elevation of Rocky above Tayo in regards to Native American identity.

Hybrid identities extend to animals, namely cows. Uncle Josiah buys a Mexican breed of cows from Night Swan's cousin. Josiah's intention is to breed them with the Hereford cows they have. Josiah thinks the community needs to adjust to the weather conditions if it wants to thrive:

“See, I’m not going to make the mistake other guys made, buying those Hereford, white-face cattle. If it’s going to be a drought these next few years, then we need some special breed of cattle.” (Silko 54). Tayo remembers Josiah’s words during his observation of the mixed-breed calves:

They still ran like antelope in the big corral, bawling to escape the men with ropes. But Josiah said they would grow up heavy and covered with meat like Herefords, but tough too, like the Mexican cows, able to withstand hard winters and many dry years. That was his plan. (Silko 57)

Peter G. Beidler maintains that the route of the cattle southward and back is analogous to Tayo’s identity plight and its relation to nature:

They trust their own instincts, drift to the south, and survive by their own native and natural abilities. By the end of the novel Tayo has learned his lesson from them. He finds his own water, avoids the trap Emo lays for him, and survives while others perish, others who, like Harley and Leroy, are farther from nature than he is. It is no accident, incidentally, that the cattle are crossbreeds which, like Tayo, seem to combine the best features of two strains. (21-22)

In other words, all the mixed-bloods mentioned in the novel are able to endure the difficulties since they combine the best of both ‘bloods’ and of cultures too which is the topic of the next section.

II.4. Culture: Storytelling, Community, and the Role of Women

One of the most critical issues in Silko’s *Ceremony* has been her extensive use of oral storytelling and its translation to English. According to Craig Womack (Creek-Cherokee), it is an unwritten rule within Native American communities that storytelling should not be available to

the outsiders and should not be recorded in writing. Womack argues that translation can never fully transfer the meaning in Native American stories:

[T]he translation problem assumes that Native stories are problematic, that they should always remain the same, to deviate as little as possible from their correct original version. Stories have a correct cultural context and meaning, and translation always messes that up. The irony here is that stories supposedly retain their integrity by remaining authentically Indian, whereas in assimilation, the point is to erase Indianness". (qtd. in Coulombe 58)

In Joseph Coulombe's words, Silko "violates one custom in order to follow another; that is, her use of the stories corresponds to an oral tradition that embodies change and improvisation" (58). Gloria Bird (Spokane) commends Silko's use of storytelling which for her signifies Silko's repudiation of colonial binarities: "to speak of colonization only in those terms is to stay within the realm of creating boundaries between us and them, to stay locked into a static system with no resolution" (qtd. in Coulombe 68). Silko herself expresses the idea "that good literature has to be accessible. It's incredibly narcissistic to be otherwise. Artists can't work with a chip on their shoulders" (qtd. in Coulombe 64).

The very first pages of *Ceremony* indicate how integral storytelling is for the community's cultural identity and the development of the narrative. Silko presents the story of Ts'its'tsi'nako or Thought-Woman who is credited with the creation of the Universe:

Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, is sitting in her room and whatever she thinks about appears. / She thought of her sisters, Nau'ts'ity'i and I'tcts'ity'i, and together they created the Universe this, / world and the four worlds below. / Thought-Woman, the spider, named things and as she named them they appeared. / She is sitting in her room thinking of a story now, / I'm telling you the story she is thinking. / Ceremony, / I will tell you

something about stories, / [he said] / 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. / You don't have anything if you don't have the stories. [...] / And in the belly of this story the rituals and the ceremony are still growing. / What She Said: / The only cure / I know / is a good ceremony, / that's what she said. (Silko 17)

Ceremony is central to the development of this narrative and healing from both physical and psychical wounds. After the white-man's medicine fails to cure Tayo, Grandma sends for a medicine man named Ku'oosh to help Tayo. The idea proves to be futile because despite Ku'oosh's efforts, Tayo is not healed. Traditional chants and ceremonies do not work, as Ku'oosh himself remarks: "There are some things we can't cure like we used to" (Silko 35). Ku'oosh directs Grandma to Betonie, a mixed-blooded medicine man who merges Native American rituals with the modern ones, first exemplified with the interior of his hogan. The place is filled with herbs and newspapers, the first usually associated with Native Americans and the latter with the white man. However, Tayo becomes aware by the end of the novel that such fusion is inevitable for his existence and mixed-blooded identity. In his article about the identity webs in *Ceremony*, Louis Owens explains that

[at]t the core of *Ceremony* is the author's attempt to find a particular strength within what has almost universally been treated as the "tragic" fact of mixedblood existence. The central lesson of this novel is that through the dynamism, adaptability, and syncretism inherent in Native American cultures, both individuals and the cultures within which individuals find significance and identity are able to survive, grow, and evade the deadly traps of stasis and sterility. (91-92)

Owens's focal point is the adaptation of Tayo's identity to the communal identity in order to surmount obstacles that have had a negative effect on Tayo's identity. Laguna Pueblo identity

depends to a great extent on the land and nature as Silko mentioned in a letter to James Wright: “You pointed out a very important dimension of the land and the Pueblo people’s relation to the land when you said it was as if the land was telling stories in the novel” (qtd. in Nelson 2002: 139). Tayo’s ceremony occurs in the nature. Betonie takes him to the Chuska Mountains. Once there, Betonie draws a mountain range in the sand to mark the trail that Tayo needs to follow on his journey of self-awareness:

The old man painted a dark mountain range beside the farthest hoop, the next, closer, he painted blue, and moving toward him, he knelt and made the yellow mountains; and in front of him, Betonie painted the white mountain range. (Silko 88)

According to Robert Nelson, Mount Taylor on the north and Pa’to’ch on the south encompass the Laguna land that Tayo must visit to find the spirit or energy needed for his identity reconciliation. The area is recognized as a sacred site or spirit mountain known as Tse-pi’na. Ts’eh, the woman Tayo meets there and becomes her lover, might be interpreted as a shortened version of Tse-pi’na or Ts’its’tsi’nako. Hence, Ts’eh is the embodiment of the restorative energy Tayo needs. Nelson further draws attention to Tayo’s perception of Ts’eh’s body as a landscape during their lovemaking, thus implying that Tayo merges with the nature and life energy through Ts’eh (2002: 142-157). In her essay “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination”, Silko explains the inextricability of Laguna Pueblo people from the land:

The narratives linked with prominent features of the landscape between Paguate and Laguna delineate the complexities of the relationship which human beings must maintain with the surrounding natural world if they hope to survive in this place. Thus the journey was an interior process of the imagination, a growing awareness that being human is somehow different from all other life-animal, plant, and inanimate. Yet we are all from

the same source: the awareness never deteriorated into Cartesian duality cutting off the human from the natural world. (1986: 112)

The necessity of coexistence between the man and nature is Tayo's ultimate cognition. In like manner, Allen asserts that Tayo's healing is a result of understanding "that his being is within and outside him, that it includes his mother, Night Swan, Ts'eh, Josiah, the spotted cattle, winter, hope, love, and the starry universe of Betonie's ceremony" (168).

Boundaries between the real and unreal are blurred in Tayo's interaction with Ts'eh, as well as in other occurrences in the novel. By way of explanation, Silko uses magical realism⁴ to present the life and ceremony of her mixed-blooded protagonist. Maggie Ann Bowers proposes that writers emerging from ethnically marginalized groups use "magical realism in order to express their own personal interpretations of their cross-cultural contexts in the face of domination by European American culture" (80). Bowers's suggestion applies to Tayo's position in the interstice of two cultures but also the idea that he needs ceremony due to his war experiences. Bowers stresses that magic in magical realism is not "the magic as it is found in a magic show" but "refers to any extraordinary occurrence and particularly to anything spiritual or unaccountable by rational science" (19). Therefore, magical realism and ceremonial cycles are inseparable. According to Allen,

[...] major ceremonial cycles include origin and creation, migration, celebration of new laws, and commemoration of legendary or mythic occurrences. Each serves to hold the society together, create harmony, restore balance, ensure prosperity and unity, and establish right relations within the social and natural world. (105)

⁴ Although magical realism deserves further consideration in terms of origins and manifestations in literature, its breadth is much larger than this section/paper can cover. Therefore, references to magical realism will be minimized for the sake of space and focus of the paper.

The major mythical figure in *Ceremony* is Thought-Woman presented in the introductory quote of this section. Allen explains that the relevance of Thought-Woman is recognized in “social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition”. Allen’s point is that Thought-Woman is the force that keeps the connection between people, i.e. interconnection, circular motion of life or sacred hoop and universe (26). The novel also makes reference to Spider Woman, Reed Woman, and Corn Woman, all of whom appear in separate stories during Tayo’s healing ceremony, his attempts to track Josiah’s cattle, and to invoke rain. Although the stories are separate, the entity mentioned is the same throughout the stories:

Old Spider Woman is one name for this quintessential spirit, and Serpent Woman is another. Corn Woman is one aspect of her, and Earth Woman is another, and what they together have made is called Creation, Earth, creatures, plants, and light. At the center of all is Woman, and no thing is sacred (cooked, ripe, as the Keres Indians of Laguna Pueblo say it) without her blessing, her thinking. (Allen 28)

Apart from spiritual beliefs, Allen’s explanation above alludes to the gynocracy of Native American communities. Contrary to popular beliefs, traditional Native American lives were directed by “self-defining, assertive, decisive women” and “nurturing, pacifist, and passive males (as defined by western minds)” (Allen 17). Silko’s childhood experiences, described in the preface to the novel, confirm such social arrangement: “My childhood was spent in the Pueblo matriarchy, where women owned property, and children belonged to the mother’s clan” (Silko14). Silko translated her experience of growing up in a matriarchal society in *Ceremony* through the character of Auntie.

A great part of Tayo’s life centers around his hybridity that he is often reminded of by Auntie. Noticeably, other characters in the family, including Josiah, Auntie’s husband Robert, and Grandma, do not object to his parentage. The passivity of these characters in this aspect helps

isolate Auntie's importance as the matriarch and her influence on the formation of Tayo's identity. Her relationship to her husband is illustrative of her matrifocality:

Tayo realized then that as long as Josiah and Rocky had been alive, he had never known Robert except as a quiet man in the house that belonged to old Grandma and Auntie. When Auntie and old Grandma and Josiah used to argue over how many lambs should be sold, or when Auntie and old Grandma scolded Josiah for the scandal of his Mexican girl friend, Robert sat quietly. He had cultivated this deafness for as many years as he had been married to Auntie. (Silko 32)

Additionally, the passage places emphasis on the matrilocality of Native American communities. Matrilocality refers to the custom which dictates that women bring their husbands to their mother's residence. Further descriptions indicate that Robert never took great part in Rocky's upbringing. Even when Rocky started neglecting the "old-time ways", Auntie turned a blind eye to his behavior:

After their first year at boarding school in Albuquerque, Tayo saw how Rocky deliberately avoided the old-time ways. Old Grandma shook her head at him, but he called it superstition, and he opened his textbooks to show her. But Auntie never scolded him, and she never let Robert or Josiah talk to him either. She wanted him to be a success. She could see what white people wanted in an Indian, and she believed this way was his only chance. She saw it as her only chance too, after all the village gossip about their family. (Silko 41)

It seems that Auntie's long-time preoccupation with the village gossip caused by Tayo's mother, or Little Sister Laura, casts a shadow over another prominent feature of Native American communities concerning female sexuality. Allen mentions that traditional Native American communities' sexual lifestyle was, in contemporary terms, rather progressive until it was stopped

by the colonizer. Allen's studies show that woman-centered societies "include free and easy sexuality and wide latitude in personal style" (17). This is relatable to Little Sister's behavior and the scene in which Auntie saw Little Sister walking naked outside: "Right as the sun came up, she walked under that big cottonwood tree, and I could see her clearly: she had no clothes on. Nothing. She was completely naked except for her high-heel shoes" (Silko 51). Auntie identifies Little Sister as an immoral person and argues that the white people led Little Sister astray. Nevertheless, Auntie is unaware that her Christian beliefs, introduced and imposed by the colonizer, prevent her from understanding and accepting Little Sister's behavior. In line with Allen's studies, the assumption is that Little Sister's conduct is representative of sexually free woman-centered communities and that it would not be condemned in traditional Native American communities. It can be hypothesized that the sexually-free demeanor in women-centered Native American communities became hybrid with the arrival of the colonizer.

Night Swan, whose tribal identification is unknown, is another character illustrative of sexually-free individuals in Native American communities. Night Swan is described as a sexually promiscuous cantina dancer who is primarily related to Josiah and then to Tayo. She is also the one who advises Tayo not to be afraid of his hybridity. Robert Nelson holds that Night Swan's words are imbued with mysticism and resemble those of Ts'eh, arguing that she is an older version of Ts'eh (2002: 149). In the same vein, Allen suggests:

We know that she is associated with Ts'eh by her circumstances and the colors with which she surrounds herself. Many signs indicate that she is associated with the ceremony of which Tayo was an integral (through unknowing) part: the color of her eyes, her implication in the matter of the spotted (half-breed) cattle, Auntie's dislike of her, and her mysterious words to Tayo when he leaves her. [...] The encounter with Night Swan sets

the seal of Tayo's destiny in those moments. Through her body the love that Ts'eh bears for him is transmitted. (170)

Allen's interpretation points to matrifocality of Native American societies and its influence on the perception of nature and land as feminine, as indicated earlier in equalizing Ts'eh with the land. Allen relates the connection of all the symbols mentioned in the passage above with "womanness" and "the universal feminine principle of creation: Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought Woman, Grandmother Spider, Old Spider Woman". In other words, Thought-Woman's manifestation is miscellaneous (167-172). Allen further asserts that the omnipresence of the genatrix spirit helps Silko "build toward comprehensive significance in her novel, as do traditional storytellers" (136). One of the purposes of traditional storytelling is to define identity whereby the story "possesses power and it comes alive as an entity of power" (2006:41). If Silko is observed as a traditional storyteller, it follows that the reader is the listener who takes part in Tayo's identity search.

III. *Reservation Blues*

III.1. About the Author and the Novel

Sherman Alexie⁵ (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene) was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation located in the state of Washington. He studied first at Gonzaga University and then transferred to Washington State University in Pullman where he obtained a degree in American studies in 1994. While studying at Washington State University, Alexie attracted attention due to his refusal to attend a course entitled Indians in American History. He is also known as the first member of his community to have obtained a college degree (Otfinoski 99).

Alexie began writing while he was at college and in 1991 had his first poetry collection, *The Business of Fancydancing*, published. Alexie turned to fiction writing and produced some of his most acclaimed works: a short story collection titled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), *Reservation Blues* (1995), *Indian Killer* (1996), *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), all of which won a number of awards.

Alexie's literary endeavors put emphasis on Native American daily life without any tendency to incorporate nature. As Alexie stated, "I want my literature to concern the daily lives of Indians. I think most Native American literature is so obsessed with nature that I don't think it has any useful purpose". Alexie's literary output is characterized by extensive and direct humor that he uses to advocate some of the contemporary Native American struggles. He has often been criticized for his portrayal of Native American life in terms of poverty, violence, alcoholism and other types of addiction, all of which have mistakenly become an identity marker for Native Americans (Johansen 9). Alexie responded to the criticism in an interview for Identity Theory:

⁵The author's official web page does not offer much personal information and places more emphasis on his literary output.

“You know, as an artist, it’s not my job to fit in; it’s not my job to belong. I’m not a social worker; I’m not a therapist. . . . I’m not here to make people feel good” (qtd. in Johansen 9).

Reservation Blues (1995) follows a group of Native Americans: Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Junior Polatkin, Victor Joseph, Chess Warm Water, and Checkers Warm Water. Their lives are permeated with poverty, violence, and alcoholism. These conditions are attributed to the colonization process which, as Alexie argues, has never stopped but has taken a different shape which is recognized as internal colonization. The novel is teeming with references to historical figures, such as Christopher Columbus, and Philip Sheridan, but also events, such as early wars between the colonizers and Native Americans. The purpose of the references is to create a cause-and-effect analogy between the past and the present. Influenced by Robert Johnson, a popular American jazz singer and guitarist who is also one of the characters in the novel, the group starts a band named Coyote Springs in order to better their lives. However, this attempt provides the basis for their further subjugation and identity struggles inside and outside the reservation. According to Daniel Grassian, the novel “straddles the lines between ethnicities, cultures, time frames, religions, gender perspectives, and literary genres” (79). In addition, the novel presents a number of references to the general living conditions on Native American reservations. The living conditions on the reservation are important for understanding how identity of these peoples is shaped, which is to be discussed in the section that follows.

III.2. Living Conditions on Native American Reservations

Several years before Alexie’s *Reservation Blues* was published, in 1989, the poverty rate for Native American communities was 27 percent (Trosper, “American Indian Poverty”) while the national poverty rate was 13.5 percent (Duffin, “Poverty Rate”). The latest available twenty-first century statistics confirm that indigenous inhabitants in the US have the greatest poverty

rates in comparison to other ethnic groups. For example, in 2017, 25.4 percent of Native Americans fell below the poverty line which was 12.3 percent (“Basic Statistics”). According to US Census data, even though the national poverty rate in 2018 was reduced to 11.8 percent, the poverty rates among Native Americans remained 25.4 percent (“The Population of Poverty USA”). Although 2019 statistics are unavailable, it does not diminish the fact that poverty rates for Native Americans have been significantly high and quite stagnant. These rates have had a considerable impact on Native American sense of identity, as Alexie pointed out in an interview: “Well, we have no economic, political, or social power. We have no power to change our lives. We are powerless” (Nygren 279-280).

A number of experts traced the origins of the poor living standards of indigenous communities. Gary Anders, a professor of economics and Native American studies, suggests that “federal government’s policies toward Native Americans conform to a clearly colonial pattern, and that these policies are strongly related to Indian underdevelopment today” (qtd. in Arneil 7). James Tully, a political theorist, recognizes the aforementioned occurrences as internal colonialism, which he defines as “the appropriation of the land, resources, and jurisdiction of the indigenous peoples, not only for the sake of resettlement and exploitation but for territorial foundation of the dominant society itself” (qtd. in Arneil 7). Land ownership is one of the greatest hindrances for Native Americans. It draws origins from nineteenth century regulations and hints at the fact that not much has changed over the course of centuries (“Native American Lands”). It confirms that Euroamerican perception of the land is at great odds with that of Native Americans, as discussed in the second chapter of this paper. All the aforementioned aspects are behind the underdeveloped socio-economic prospects on the reservations, such as employment. According to Weaver, “over half of all Natives are unemployed. On some reservations, unemployment runs as high as 85-90 percent. Health statistics chronically rank Natives at or near

the bottom” (11). The main characters in the novel are unemployed and disillusioned with how they are treated, which makes them question their relevance on an individual and communal level. Apart from creating poverty, unemployment leads to a number of health issues, primarily hunger and undernourishment. Alexie makes a relation between hunger and dependency in “The Reservation’s Ten Commandments as Given by the United States of America to the Spokane Indians” in which the fourth commandment says:

Remember the first of each month by keeping it holy. The rest of the month you shall go hungry, but the first day of each month is a tribute to me, and you shall receive welfare checks and commodity food in exchange for your continued dependence. (Alexie 217)

The same is also shown through the life stories of some characters. When Thomas Builds-the-Fire refuses to divulge the name of the guitar he got from Robert Johnson, Victor pulls him into a headlock. Thomas Builds-the-Fire later interprets Victor’s violent behavior as a consequence of childhood memories related to poverty:

These little wars were intimate affairs for those who dreamed in childhood of fishing for salmon but woke up as adults to shop at the Trading Post and stand in line for U.S.D.A. commodity food instead. They savagely, repeatedly, opened up cans of commodities and wept over the rancid meat, forced to eat what stray dogs ignored. (Alexie 19)

The starvation that Victor and most Native Americans underwent as children had a profound impact on their minds and identity development. According to Roni Berger, childhood trauma found in children “who have grown up in the context of continuous danger, maltreatment, and dysfunctional care-giving system” is referred to as developmental trauma disorder (DTD) (108). In Victor’s case, the care-giving system is the government which has taken a paternalistic attitude and failed. Although Victor is not officially diagnosed with DTD, a common behavior of children, and subsequently adults, who have DTD is similar in almost all aspects to Victor’s.

Some of DTD manifestations recognized in Victor include: anxiety, aggression toward others, few relationships which are most often problematic, and frequent temper tantrums. Most importantly, DTD causes “the loss of a sense of security, safety, and identity” (Berger 108-109). Victor’s DTD is related to the Native American collective trauma inflicted by perpetrators such as Christopher Columbus, General Phillip Sheridan, General George Wright, and George Armstrong, all of whom are referenced in the novel as trauma inflictors. Furthermore, the socio-economic occurrences mentioned earlier have deprived many Native Americans of their hopes and dreams. Junior, for example,

figured that Freud and Jung must have been reservation Indians, because dreams decided everything for Indians, too. Junior based all of his decisions on his dreams and visions, which created a lot of problems. When awake, he could never stomach the peanut butter and onion sandwiches that tasted so great in his dreams, but Junior always expected his visions to come true. (Alexie 25-26)

According to Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs for identity formation, individuals cannot reach self-realization and feelings of self-accomplishment which are at the top of the pyramid before their basic physiological needs, food and shelter, are fulfilled (King 3-5). Housing on the reservations is another set of problems that Native Americans face even today. Thomas Builds-the-Fire frequently ponders on the state of the house he is living in:

Thomas thought about all the dreams that were murdered here, and the bones buried quickly just inches below the surface, all waiting to break through the foundations of those government houses built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Thomas still lived in the government HUD house where he had grown up. It was a huge house by reservation standards, with two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and living room and two more bedrooms and a bathroom in the basement. However, the house had

never really been finished because the Bureau of Indian Affairs cut off the building money halfway through construction. The water pipes froze every winter, and windows warped in the hot summer heat. During his childhood, Thomas had slept in the half-finished basement, with two blankets for walls and one blanket for his bed. (Alexie 10)

Identity questions posed in such situations would refer to what one might have done to be treated this way or whether the person is deserving of a decent life, especially taking into consideration the problematic relationship with indigeneity. According to a report by National Congress of American Indians, it has been estimated that 40 percent of houses are substandard while one-third of the houses is overcrowded. Sewage is another issue as a great number of houses are not connected to sewage systems, while 16 percent do not have plumbing system. Moreover, 50 percent of houses lack phone services (“Housing & Infrastructure”). *Reservation Blues* presents this aspect of poverty on the reservations in the character of Chess Warm Water, a Flathead, with whom Thomas Builds-the-Fire falls in love: “How do you fall in love with a woman who grew up without electricity and running water, who grew up in such poverty that other poor Indians called her family poor?” (Alexie 91). The statistics and the novel’s portrayal of this matter lend support to what Arnold Krupat termed “politically sustained subalternity” (30). Similarly, Eric Cheyfitz recognized that the living conditions on the reservation violate UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which proposes that indigenous peoples should have the right to sovereignty and to basic life commodities (Madsen 192-200).

The neglect of Native American reservations is also emphasized in the very opening of the novel. When Robert Johnson arrives on the reservation, everyone wonders why he would come there because “[i]n the one hundred and eleven years since the creation of the Spokane Indian Reservation in 1881, not one person, Indian or otherwise, had ever arrived there by accident” (Alexie 3). Daniel Grassian holds that Native American reservations bear strong

resemblance to the late nineteenth century African-American communities (87). Soon after Robert Johnson gives Thomas Builds-the-Fire his guitar, Thomas starts a band, Coyote Springs, together with Victor, Junior, and Chess and Checkers. Philip Sheridan and George Wright, music agents who work for Cavalry Record in Seattle, hear about Coyote Springs and come to the reservation to offer a record deal to Coyote Springs. The band flies to Seattle and experiences a series of unpleasant events. They fly in the economy class while Wright and Sheridan fly in the first class. Apart from poverty, this situation is resonant of second-class citizenship that Native Americans are relegated to. At the airport people stare at the group because “[t]hey worried those loud dark-skinned people might be hijackers. Coyote Springs did their best not to look middle eastern” (Alexie 303). This is a hazardous situation for their identities as they are not only being defined by others, mainly whites, but are trying not to look as they do. They unconsciously want to conform to other people’s views of them in order to minimize any possible conflict. On the other hand, the feelings of superiority that perpetuate the legitimacy of subjugation and control over Native Americans are illustrated in the scene when Mr. Armstrong, the CEO of Cavalry Records, makes a remark that “[t]hey look Indian” (Alexie 309). Assuming a superior position, Mr. Armstrong assumes the right to decide whether the group is Native American or not. These attitudes are redolent of Columbus’s erroneous definition of Native Americans as Indians. Another similar situation occurs when Chess and Thomas visit a pub in New York while looking for Victor and Joseph. The waitress there asks them if they are “Indians” from India. Chess and Thomas reply that they are “[b]ows-and-arrows Indians. Cowboys-and-Indians Indians” (Alexie 332). Once again, they have to define themselves according to the colonizer’s standards which boil down to savage and stereotypical representations of Native Americans. The waitress invites her colleague to take a look at Chess and Thomas as if they are something exotic. The other waitress’s reaction is: “Oh, I ain’t seen none of those around for a long time. I saw a few in a book

once. You sure there are still Indians around at all?" (Alexie 332). She comments on the extermination of Native Americans in a languid manner. The perception of Native Americans by the waitresses and Mr. Armstrong evinces the position of Native Americans outside the reservation. Extreme caution must be taken when discussing Native American status outside the reservations since a number of them have managed to obtain good jobs, as presented in Tommy Orange's *There There*. However, this does not lessen the problems they are facing inside and outside the reservation as U.S. citizens, which place them into different and undesired molds.

III.3. Health, Alcoholism, and Violence

Two years after *Reservation Blues* was published, Weaver studied the health, substance abuse, and violence statistics of Native Americans. Weaver's findings reveal that Native Americans are the bottom of the ladder in this aspect. For example, life expectancies are extremely low. The male life span is estimated to be forty-four years while females are said to live approximately up to forty-seven years of age. Weaver further claims that these statistics have remained the same for thirty years (11). According to the Indian Health Service (IHS), Native Americans live 5.5 years less in comparison to the rest of the U.S. population. IHS states that most deaths are caused by "chronic liver disease and cirrhosis, diabetes mellitus, unintentional injuries, assault/homicide, intentional self-harm/suicide, and chronic lower respiratory diseases" ("Disparities"). The aforementioned causes of death create an inextricable link between health, alcoholism, and violence. As presented in the novel, more often than not these hindrances create a chain reaction. All the main protagonists saw their parents die at an early age which imprinted traumas into their young minds. Parents who remained alive are presented as binge drinkers, as is the case with Thomas's father who is unconscious most of the time:

Way back when, my father was an active alcoholic only about three months of every year. He was a binge drinker, you know? Completely drunk for three days straight, a week, a month, then he jumped back on the wagon again. Sober, he was a good man, a good father, so all the drinking had to be forgiven, enit? (Alexie 134)

A study by Kate McLean and Moin Syed on narrative identity and identity development in ethnic groups, which argues that identity is formed and developed as individuals internalize the events around them and base their purpose in life on them, is useful in analyzing situations such as Thomas's. McLean and Syed propose that parents help shape their children's identity by providing support and guidance: "During childhood, these parenting behaviors encourage positive parent-child relationships and identification processes helpful for developing a consistent set of values and behaviors". McLean and Syed also argue that children at early stages of their life and even in adolescence emulate the behavior of their parents (438). It could be hypothesized that this is one of the reasons why these children resort to heavy drinking as adults. Prior to analyzing the drinking problems of these characters, it is important to mention some of the physical consequences in children whose parents are binge drinkers. The novel references the mental health issues of Michael White Hawk, the nephew of the Spokane Tribal Council Chairman named David Walks Along:

Michael's mother had died of cirrhosis when he was just two years old, and he'd never even known his father. [...]His mother's drinking had done obvious damage to Michael in the womb. He had those vaguely Asian eyes and the flat face that alcohol babies always had on reservations. (Alexie 51-2)

As mentioned by Weaver, incidence of liver cirrhosis in Native American population is eighteen times greater than the national average while infant mortality doubles the national average (11).

However, alcohol abuse is not the only root of infant mortality in these communities. The Warm Water sisters mention they had a baby brother who died due to IHS neglect:

“Yeah, we had a baby brother, Bobby. We called him Backgammon.” “What happened to him?” Thomas asked. “You know,” Chess said, “those winters were always awful back then. Ain’t no IHS doctor going to come driving through the snowdrifts and ice to save some Indian kid who was half dead anyway. I don’t know. We feel less pain when we’re little, enit? Bobby was always a sick baby, born coughing in the middle of a bad winter and died coughing in the middle of a worse winter.” (Alexie 85)

Annie Belcourt, a Native American researcher in clinical psychology, reports that IHS has been underfunded for decades since the federal government covers only 54% the services. The IHS facilities are often too far away from the reservations. Belcourt says that while she was pregnant she had travel for four hours to reach the nearest IHS facility “for prenatal visits for my children and nearly lost one child due to lack of access to proper medical care”. In addition, most of the employees are non-Native which leads to a number of conflicts and various types of discrimination (“Native Americans are Fighting”). According to McLead and Syed, reactions to discrimination, especially in adolescents and young adults, might lead to the formation of negative identities (298-300). This happens to the Warm Water’s father, who, feeling helpless after the death of his son, starts drinking and the girls are left to fend for themselves. As was the case with Silko’s Tayo, characters in Alexie’s novel feel hopeless and powerless; hence alcohol is a way to evade reality.

As noted earlier, most children whose parents were alcoholics also become alcoholics. Nancy Lurie interprets that this phenomenon is “a) not necessarily dysfunctional from a native viewpoint, b) a way for the individual and community to identify as Indian, particularly for mixed-breeds, and c) a form of protest against white Americans and middle-class” (qtd. in E.

Duran & B. Duran 115). On the other hand, Vine Deloria Jr., thinks that “young Indians were sold the notion by anthropologists that Indians live in two worlds; people who live in two worlds drink; therefore, to be real Indian they must drink” (qtd. in E. Duran & B. Duran 115). Stephen Evans’ interpretation of alcoholism in his article “‘Open Containers’: Sherman Alexie’s Drunken Indians” is similar to Lurie’s argument mentioned in “c)” above. Evans argues that alcohol is one of the coping mechanisms (61-63). In contrast, Gloria Bird’s reading of the novel in “The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*” implies that Alexie agreed with the above-quoted relations between identity and Native American alcohol use, thus contributing to the stereotyped identification of Native Americans (47-52). Nevertheless, my aim with the analysis of Alexie’s novel is neither to justify Alexie’s presentation of these problems nor to debunk the stereotypes but rather to point to their source. In line with Arnold Krupat’s arguments about internal colonialism, it is then no longer debatable as to who introduced alcohol but who is not undertaking any action to prevent its use and effects; in other words, to remedy the situation. Menno Boldt holds that “the problem is significantly attributable to cultural degeneration”—that process created by the compounded impact of genocide, colonialism, forced cultural and institutional assimilation, economic dependence, and racism” (qtd. in Weaver 11).

The chain reaction of alcohol use is also seen in frequent outbursts of violence. Apart from Victor and Junior, “two of the most accomplished bullies of recent Native American history” (Alexie 18), violence extends to other characters and other types, most notably domestic violence and sexual abuse. Junior, who is utterly disappointed by the inability to change his life, commits suicide: “He flipped the safety off, held his thumb against the trigger, and felt the slight tension. Junior squeezed the trigger” (Alexie 343), which concurs with the above-mentioned suicide rates in Native American communities. Victor, on the other hand, is said to have been sexually abused by a priest in a summer camp: “Victor looked up at the priest and smiled. The

priest smiled back, leaned over, and kissed Victor full and hard on the mouth” (Alexie 207). The priest, who should have been a figure to provide reassurance and security, abused Victor and shaped his personality. In line with DTD symptomatic behavior, Victor’s rage is a defense mechanism. Other cases of sexual abuse, closely tied to domestic violence, are related to Warm Water sisters. After the death of their baby brother, their father starts drinking and forcing himself onto their mother:

The sisters heard their father push at their mom, wanting it, but Linda rolled over and pretended to sleep. She slapped his hands. Luke fought and fought, but eventually he gave up if sober. If drunk, however, he forced himself on his wife. Sometimes, he came home from drinking and woke everybody with his needs. He fell on their mother while Chess and Checkers listened and waited for it to end. Sometimes their mother fought their father off, punched and kicked until he left her alone. (Alexie 94)

With regards to domestic violence and sexual abuse, Indian Law Resource Centre reports an alarmingly high number of sexual abuse cases: “[m]ore than 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence, and more than 1 in 2 have experienced sexual violence” (“Ending Violence”). It has also been observed that indigenous women are alarmed by the inadequate and inefficient reaction of the federal authorities to the above-mentioned cases of sexual abuse, which is a type of marginalization on the basis of race/ethnicity (“Ending Violence”). Apart from creating a life-long trauma for these women and triggering ontological questions, these events have a deleterious effect on the minds of children who witness them, as presented in Louise Erdrich’s *The Round House* (2012). Erdrich explores the effects of this trauma on women’s self-consciousness and subsequent relations with their closest family. Erdrich asserts that “[m]ore than 80 percent of sex crimes on reservations are committed by non-Indian men, who are immune from prosecution by tribal courts” (qtd. in “Sexual Assault”). Alexie draws

a similar parallel in the novel when Checkers is assaulted by Phil Sheridan. Alexie leaves this situation unresolved; it is not clear whether it is only a dream or not which could be an allusion to the failure of prosecution mentioned by Erdrich. Careful attention should be paid to the fact that the aim here is not to justify the doing of Native American men toward Native American women, but to highlight the importance of these traumas for Native American collective identity. These aspects of Native American daily life are recurrent, almost a never-ending and unresolved cycle.

III.4. Cultural Conflicts and the Position of Women

Similarly to Silko's *Ceremony*, Alexie's *Reservation Blues* relates religious and cultural conflicts as well as their hybridization. Instances of historical and cultural conflicts are presented through the use of doppelgangers. Karen Jorgensen's article "White Shadows: The Use of Doppelgangers in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*" discusses Alexie's doppelgangers as a symmetry of two opposing strands (25). Jorgensen explains the purpose of doubles by referring to C.F. Keppler's *The Literature of the Second Self*. According to Keppler, "Doubles...are ultimately projections of their creator, who through them expresses and attempts to deal with his own internal conflicts" (qtd. in Jorgensen 20). Jorgensen asserts that Alexie's internal conflicts lie in his presentation of "the dangers of greed and potential success in the popular music industry" (20). It is more plausible that Alexie's preoccupation or internal conflict refers to the objectives that these historical figures promulgate. In other words, the hostile and hustler-oriented industries, as Cavalry Records, remind of the historical events and extermination of Native Americans. The reinvention of historical events and figures is imbued with magical realism. Bowers points out that magical realism plays a crucial role in "breaking down the notion of an absolute truth, and a singular version of reality" (67). Therefore, the use of doppelgangers can be

interpreted as a mode of rebuking the remnants of colonialism in the contemporary society, i.e. internal colonialism.

Some of the cultural conflicts involving the above-mentioned characters have already been discussed; namely the marginalization of Native Americans outside the reservation. On the other hand, cultural antagonisms on the reservation mainly revolve around religion and its use. The *Ceremony* chapter discussed the significance of religion and spiritual beliefs for Native Americans as something integral to individual and collective identity and well-being. Vine Deloria Jr., *Standing Rock Sioux*, also wrote about the relation between identity and religion in his essay collection *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (1998). Deloria focuses on Native American understanding of the world as well as differences in religious beliefs between Native Americans and the colonizer. Similarly, Krupat argues that the understanding of religion was significantly changed during colonization. Krupat analyzes religion as a colonial weapon or “knowledge/power” relation in Foucauldian terms: “in relation to Indians, the will of God becomes translated into the law of nature, an evolutionary law that insists upon the accession of ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’” (143). Thomas mentions the Wounded Knee Massacre, in which the U.S. army killed hundreds of Sioux Native Americans (Lakota), in this context while telling a story to Chess:

We were both at Wounded Knee when the Ghost Dancers were slaughtered. We were slaughtered at Wounded Knee. I know there were whole different tribes there, no Spokanes or Flatheads, but we were still somehow there. There was a part of every Indian bleeding in the snow. All those soldiers killed us in the name of God, enit? They shouted ‘Jesus Christ’ as they ran swords through our bellies. Can you feel the pain still, late at night, when you’re trying to sleep, when you’re praying to a God whose name was used to justify the slaughter? (Alexie236)

Thomas's story shows how Native Americans identify along the lines of suffering in addition to tribal and blood quantum identification. His narrative explains that Native American identity was not altered and disturbed by physical genocide only but also by the cultural one. As stated by Bonnie Duran et al, cultural genocide represents "actions that threaten the integrity of and viability of social groups". An important repercussion of cultural genocide is "the soul wound" or intergenerational post-traumatic stress disorder influenced by historical trauma such as (cultural) genocide. Historical trauma is "characterized by incomplete mourning and resulting depression absorbed by children from birth onward". Historical trauma results in "depression, feelings of marginality and alienation, heightened psychosomatic symptoms, and identity confusion"(64).

Boarding school narratives, most notably Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* (1921), speak about cultural genocide conducted via forced language and religious acculturation. Boarding school experiences and their influence on the lives of Native Americans are also mentioned in *Reservation Blues*. Chess says that her father attended a boarding school: "He went to Catholic boarding school when he was little," Chess said. "Those nuns taught him to play piano. Ain't that funny? They'd teach him scales between beatings." (Alexie 86). Religion is viewed as a vindication of harsh treatment. This attitude contradicts the main religious tenets which argue for peace. The leading argument of the colonizer was to suppress what they deemed savage religious customs. *Reservation Blues* shows that even after religion was adopted by Native Americans, the colonizer's oppression did not stop. Furthermore, it made a more complex identity web for Native Americans. Checkers comments on this problematic relationship. She informs Father Arnold of her childhood memories and mentions she always wanted to be white "because Jesus was white and blond in all the pictures I ever saw of him" (Alexie 196). She feels unfit to be a Christian due to the hegemony that the white population holds over the representations of Jesus Christ. Father Arnold tells her that Jesus "probably had dark skin and

hair” (Alexie 197). Checkers replies that she never saw him represented in this way and still does not see Jesus painted with dark skin and hair. The issue at hand for Checkers is that the whites, in this case identified as the colonizer/oppressor, decide over religious matters. It is evident that being Christian and Native American is a pressing and delicate matter in these communities. In “Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity and Nationalism”, Simon Ortiz suggests that Christianity was adapted into Native American systems of belief and became integral part of it (Hopson 263). Ortiz’s argument is exemplified in the novel by the reactions of Christian Spokanes to the music of Coyote Springs: “The Christians don’t like your devil’s music. The traditionals don’t like your white man’s music” (Alexie 250). People on the reservation regard Coyote Springs’s music as the devil’s music, which disqualifies the band from their Native Americanness, without considering Christianity as something that would bar them from being Native American. The attitude shows how the colonizer’s religion became ossified as an element of Native American identity. Other examples of being Christian Native American apply to characters who are devout Catholics but insist on blood purity, resembling Auntie’s cultural hybridity.

In *Reservation Blues*, the insistence on blood purity becomes prominent after Betty and Veronica, two white women obsessed with Native American culture, come to the reservation to pursue Victor and Junior. Most women on the reservation “wanted to kick Betty and Veronica off the reservation, but the Indian men lined up every night to listen to the white women’s songs” (Alexie 56). Chess is irritated by their involvement with white women:

“And you know,” Chess said, “as traditional as it sounds, I think Indian men need Indian women. I think only Indian women can take care of Indian men. Jeez, we give birth to Indian men. We feed them. We hold them when they cry. Then they run off with white women. I’m sick of it.”[...]“Seriously, I think Junior and Victor are traitors,” Chess said.

“I really do. They keep running off with white women and pretty soon, ain’t no Indian women going to touch them. We Indian women talk to each other, you know? We have a network. They’re two of the last full-blood Indians on your reservation, enit? Jeez, Junior and Victor are betraying their DNA.” (Alexie 115)

Chess believes that Native American-white relations will disturb the full-blood lineage and lead to extinction. She speaks of Native American women as preservers of the community’s identity. Allen expresses a similar point of view by enlisting a number of roles that Native American women fulfill:

We are doing all we can: as mothers and grandmothers; as family members and tribal members; as professionals, workers, artists, shamans, leaders, chiefs, speakers, writers, and organizers, we daily demonstrate that we have no intention of disappearing, of being silent, or of quietly acquiescing in our extinction. (257)

It was pointed out earlier in the paper, by referring to Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, that the role of women in Native American communities is that of matriarchs. Although this role has been transfigured to a certain extent due to cultural assimilation, it did not vanish completely. Chess, for example, makes overt references to male-centered determination throughout her life:

All her life, she had been measured by men. Her father, her priest, her lovers, her employers, her God. Men decided where she would go, how she would talk, even what clothes she was supposed to wear. (Alexie 294)

Agitated by the objectification and rigid patriarchal values, Chess suggests to Thomas that they move off the reservation by the end of the novel. She behaves as a matriarch who directs the family. Chess’s decision-making is a type of self-redefinition caused by socio-political subjugation, as observed by Allen:

This self-redefinition among Indian women who intend that their former stature be restored has resulted from several political factors. The status of tribal women has seriously declined over the centuries of white dominance, as they have been all but voiceless in tribal decision-making bodies since reconstitution of the tribes through colonial fiat and U.S. law. But over the last thirty years women's sense of ourselves as a group with a stake in the distribution of power on the reservations, in jobs, and within the intertribal urban Indian communities has grown. (Allen 51)

Another woman figure in the novel that is also a matriarch is Big Mom “who fights especially for Indian women, [...], whose identity has become subverted in a male-dominated society” (Grassian 101). She is described as a spirit, a magical being in a similar manner as Ts'eh in *Ceremony*. It is Big Mom whom Robert Johnson, Marvin Gaye, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix come to see on the reservation. She is an omniscient and mother-like figure who can hear and see everything:

Now on a bright summer day, she watched a black man walk onto the Spokane Indian Reservation. She heard that black man talk to Thomas Builds-the-Fire. She watched Thomas give that black man a ride to the base of her mountain and smiled as the blue van shuddered to a stop. Big Mom sat in her rocking chair and waited to greet her latest visitor. (Alexie 14)

According to Grassian, Big Mom “symbolically represents the immortal spirit of the Spokane Reservation [...] a matriarchal, authentic Indian alternative to the paternalistic, white hegemony of Christianity” (86-100). Patrice Hollrah interprets Big Mom's presence in the novel as someone with “positive tribal knowledge that will help them survive” (129). As noted by Hollrah, Big Mom's importance is emphasized during Junior's funeral when she instructs Father Arnold that the two of them will do their part of the service respectively and make a good team in that way

(129-130). Big Mom is the one who reconciles cultural conflicts, which stresses the importance of women as cultural mediators and protectors.

IV. *There There*

IV.1. About the Author and the Novel

Tommy Orange (Cheyenne/Arapaho) was born in 1982 in Oakland to a Native American father and a white mother, hence a mixed-blood. He recently obtained his MFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts. Orange depicted his “urban Indian” experience in his debut novel *There There* (2018). Orange won the 2019 PEN/Hemingway Award and his book was nominated for several other awards including the Pulitzer Prize in 2019.

The novel deals with the lives of twelve urban Native Americans. The characters are connected through shorter individual stories (vignettes) and finally united at the Big Oakland powwow⁶. As Orange stated, the purpose of such a narrative is to present multiplicity of Native American experiences:

Coming from a community that felt voiceless in the larger scheme of things, as far as movies and literature, as far as representation goes, it felt like the right decision to have a whole bunch of voices come out, as opposed to one or two. (“Tommy Orange Tells”)

The main point of similarity between the characters includes individual and collective identity issues caused by socio-economic factors such as estrangement, alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency and many other which cannot be subsumed within the scope of this paper. Orange remarked in an interview that all their struggles are based on his own experience: “I wanted to have my characters struggle in the way I struggled, and the way I see other native people struggle, with identity and with authenticity” (qtd. in Alter 101). As mentioned by Orange, he took inspiration for the novel’s title from Gertrude Stein’s quote “There’s no there there” with which she referred to the change that took place in Oakland while she was not there. Orange

⁶ Powwow is a type of social gathering specific to a number of Native American communities. Powwow serves either to celebrate or carry out spiritual ceremonies. Powwows are usually organized as to have certain competitions and an award (money).

found meaning for Native American experience and communal identity in Stein's words in a sense of "what [USA] is now compared to what it was for [their] ancestors" ("Author Interview"). The importance of socio-historical changes is palpable throughout the narrative(s), particularly in how urban experience engenders Native American identity, which is to be examined in the following section.

IV.2. Native American Urban Experience

The Native American urban experience began with boarding schools and continued with the Second World War, as discussed previously. The chapter dealing with the novel *Ceremony* reflected on the involvement of Native Americans in the Second World War mainly on the battlefield. Native Americans also helped shape the war industry production by working in the factories outside their reservations. According to Donald Fixico, the official urbanization started in 1952 with relocation policies, which aimed to assimilate Native American peoples into the mainstream. Fixico draws two key points to explain the relocation policies of the U.S. government. On the one hand, Native Americans were seen as a workforce that would help recover the postwar economy. On the other hand, the reservations did not fully fulfill the colonial attitudes as "sites of social control" but contributed to the preservation of Native American culture to a certain extent. In other words, a shift in internal colonialism policies occurred from reservation to urbanization (2002: 386-387). In *There There* Orange makes a similar point about the assimilation policy: "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" (12). Fixico further argues that the process of urbanization generated the same problems that Native Americans struggle with on reservations, which implies that the setting was the only thing to have changed (2002: 387). The same problems, as well as the place change, caused even

greater identification problems for urban Native Americans. It is paradoxical that the indigenous population would not feel at home in other parts of the country since it is their country too. An analysis of the above-mentioned arguments provides two aspects of reasoning. It signifies that there are reasons why they feel unwanted in urban areas and that reservations to which they were confined became their identity markers. As Orange mentions,

I think having a strong identity as a human in general is an important thing, to feel like you belong in a certain type of community. For Native people who grew up in the city — and these are themes that work in other communities as well, but this is the one I'm from — just to hear your story or one similar to yours is powerful. It can feel really lonely to be Native but not read or see anything about being Native. It makes you feel like you don't belong, and when you don't feel like you belong anywhere, it creates a lot of problems. It makes it a lot harder to be a strong human being. (“A Q&A”)

The alienation from the land and community hinted at above is also discussed in the prologue to the novel:

Urban Indians feel at home walking in the shadow of a downtown building. We came to know the downtown Oakland skyline better than we did any sacred mountain range, the redwoods in the Oakland hills better than any other deep wild forest. We know the sound of the freeway better than we do rivers, the howl of distant trains better than wolf howls, we know the smell of gas and freshly wet concrete and burned rubber better than we do the smell of cedar or sage or even fry bread—which isn't traditional, like reservations aren't traditional, but nothing is original, everything comes from something that came before, which was once nothing. Everything is new and doomed. We ride buses, trains, and cars across, over, and under concrete plains. Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere. (Orange 14)

The question posed here refers to what makes one a Native American since it is impossible to fulfill all the identification points mentioned above. Does one have to live on the reservation to be Native American? Does one have to be enrolled/recognized in a particular tribe to be Native American? Does one have to fit into undesired molds and stereotypes to avoid being considered non-Native? Fixico dwells on such issues in his study titled *The Urban Indian Experience in America* (1991). Fixico discusses that the concept of self is complicated for urban Native Americans more than those who live on reservations since urban Native Americans straddle between the WASP culture into which they are half-assimilated and their community's culture that does not have any established definitions.

Orvil, one of the central characters in the novel, faces the above-mentioned problems. He wants to learn more about his Native American heritage but cannot find anyone who could transmit what he thinks to be the necessary formula for being a Native American. He tries to discover it on his own at first by dressing powwow regalia and trying to dance according to some instructions he found online:

And so what Orvil is, according to himself, standing in front of the mirror with his too-small-for-him stolen regalia, is dressed up like an Indian. In hides and ties, ribbons and feathers, boned breastplate, and hunched shoulders, he stands, weak in the knees, a fake, a copy, a boy playing dress-up. And yet there's something there, behind that stupid, glazed-over stare, the one he so often gives his brothers, that critical, cruel look, behind that, he can almost see it, which is why he keeps looking, keeps standing in front of the mirror. He's waiting for something true to appear before him—about him. 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 Indian depends on it. (Orange 98)

Orvil's word choice in depicting himself is crucial. Although there is a touch of irony in terms of imposed behavioral patterns of Native Americans, words "like an Indian", "a fake, a copy", "look and act like an Indian" also point to self-deprecation in terms of ethnic identity. McLean and Syed rely on two-dimensional model of ethnic identity formation proposed by Berry, Trimble, and Olmedo. The first dimension refers to identifying with the ethnic community which can create a weak or strong sense of identity while the second dimension signifies identification with the dominant culture whereby the identity can also be weak or strong. There are four possible identity outcomes of this model. The first type of identity is the alienated one which represents "weak ethnic and weak majority group identification". The second type is termed assimilated and displays "weak ethnic and strong majority identification". Separatist is the third type and is characterized by "strong ethnic and weak majority group identification". Integrated identity, the last identity type, is the one in which persons show "strong identification with both ethnic and majority group" (261). According to Orvil's story, he belongs to the alienated type. Some of Fixico's studies on the development of self-identification and self-evaluation have shown that a great number of Native American youth see themselves as inferior in relation to both the white-dominated society and their Native American community. Fixico further states that the issues at hand cause "serious psychiatric repercussions" (2000: 35-36). Orvil is struggling with imposed and stereotypical definitions of indigeneity. Fixico confirms that "ambiguous attempted interpretations enhance the identity crisis of Native Americans" (2000: 36). Orvil's grandmother is aware of such dangers and advises the following:

And anyway, anything you hear from me about your heritage does not make you more or less Indian. More or less a real Indian. Don't ever let anyone tell you what being Indian means. Too many of us died to get just a little bit of us here, right now, right in this

kitchen. You, me. Every part of our people that made it is precious. You're Indian because you're Indian because you're Indian. (Orange 96)

His grandmother rejects external definitions of Native American identity. Her vantage point is in accordance with Native American self-determination that came to rise in urban settings when Native Americans started mingling with other minority groups that were politically active. During the 1960s, Native Americans started forming their own social movements, such as American Indian Movement (AIM), which aimed to fight for Native American civil rights. The movements became known as Red Power movement and took on a radical spirit when groups took over BIA, Wounded Knee (South Dakota), and Alcatraz. The movement also produced a number of writings that speak for the Native American cause, most notably Vine Deloria Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969) (Fixico 2002: 388-389). The consequences of urbanization and Red Power movement are tightly linked in *There There*, as will be presented in the next section.

IV.3. Same Problems, Different Setting: Alcohol Abuse and Juvenile Delinquency

Troy R. Johnson's study *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island*⁷ (1996) gives a comprehensive account of the Alcatraz seizure. Johnson puts emphasis on the reasons which led to the end of invasion by referring to Tim Findley's 1970s articles about the occupation of Alcatraz. Findley, a white reporter who was on the island during the occupation, stated that leadership ideals deteriorated over time and shifted focus from the initial aims to power and money. The island became a quagmire of alcohol abuse and violence, partly resembling William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1969).

⁷ In full: *The Occupation of Alcatraz Island: Indian Self-Determination and the Rise of Indian Activism*.

A part of Orange's narrative is set in Alcatraz and depicts alcohol and sexual abuse. Jacquie Red Feather and Opal Viola Victoria Bear Shield lived at Alcatraz with their mother. When they asked their mother what they would do on the island, she responded:

We're going to be with our relatives. Indians of All Tribes. We're going over to where they built that prison. Gonna start from the inside of the cell, which is where we are now, Indian people, that's where they got us, even though they don't make it seem like they got us there. (Orange 48)

Her mother's words reflect the pan-tribal solidarity and ideas of constructing a new identity. She makes an analogy between a cell at Alcatraz and their current position, which points to the idea of internal colonialism or strictly controlled socio-economic conditions. Therefore, events that occurred at Alcatraz and those after it mirror the living conditions of urban Native Americans that have been shaping their identities for decades. It has been hypothesized earlier that Native Americans face the same and even more complex problems in urban settings. Surveys carried out by the National Urban Indian Family Coalition have shown that unemployment rates of urban Native Americans are 1.7 times greater in comparison to non-Native population living in the same areas. Another problematic set of issues includes homeownership and housing. It has been reported that homes of urban Native Americans are 1.8 times more likely to lack plumbing and other facilities ("Urban Indian America" 11). Similar conditions were experienced at Alcatraz, a place that now signifies Native American self-determination and a metaphor for their contemporary struggles. The occupants lived "[w]ithout running water, adequate sanitation facilities, and electricity" (Johnson 96). Health statistics for urban Native Americans are poor in comparison to other urban minorities. They have "126 higher rates of liver disease and cirrhosis – 178 percent higher rates of alcohol-related deaths" ("Urban Indian America" 11). As mentioned

previously, alcohol abuse and its consequences became common by the end of Alcatraz occupation.

Jacquie was raped at Alcatraz and became pregnant. She eventually gave up her daughter for adoption. This traumatic experience made a significantly negative impact on her identity and self-perception. During a conference of Alcoholic Anonymous (AA), Jacquie mentions that she started drinking while in Alcatraz: “We’d been on Alcatraz, me and my family, back during the occupation, in 1970. It all started for me there” (Orange 90). Her second daughter, Jamie, had fetal alcohol syndrome, became an addict, and eventually committed suicide leaving three boys behind. According to Russell M. Lawson, fetal alcohol syndrome is higher than average in Native American urban communities (250). Fetal alcohol syndrome results in physical and mental defects as illustrated by the character of Tony Loneman:

That thing on the front of your head, you’ll never see it, like you’ll never see your own eyeball with your own eyeball, like you’ll never smell what you smell like, but me, I know what my face looks like. I know what it means. My eyes droop like I’m fucked up, like I’m high, and my mouth hangs open all the time. There’s too much space between each of the parts of my face —eyes, nose, mouth, spread out like a drunk slapped it on reaching for another drink. People look at me then look away when they see I see them see me. [...] I’m twenty-one now, which means I can drink if I want. I don’t though. The way I see it, I got enough when I was a baby in my mom’s stomach. Getting drunk in there, a drunk fucking baby, not even a baby, a little fucking tadpole thing, hooked up to a cord, floating in a stomach. (Orange 25-26)

Tony’s sense of self is greatly disturbed by this syndrome. He says that he was bullied in kindergarten because of his appearance. His feelings of displacement and inappropriateness due to bullying have resulted in uncontrollable violent outbursts and yearning to prove himself

worthy. He is a drug dealer, a fact which compounds the consequences of the fetal syndrome to juvenile delinquency. Tony works for a man named Octavio who proposes that they rob the Big Oakland powwow. Tony soon becomes acquainted with the rest of the gang (Charles, Calvin, Carlos, Daniel), all of whom have specific family stories saturated with violence and suffering. They plan to rob the powwow by using 3-D printed guns. Their plan fails at the powwow when Carlos wants to take the bounty for himself. They start shooting at each other thus wounding and killing some powwow-goers. It is clear that juvenile delinquency has a domino effect.

A man, whom Jacquie meets at AA conference, says that he possessed a gun as a teenager. The gun was found by his brother who used it to commit suicide. Although the suicide rates are higher on reservations than in urban settings, urban Native Americans are at a greater risk of (attempted) suicide in comparison to the white population and non-white minorities (“Urban Indian Health Program”). The above-mentioned man gives his assessment of suicide in his community:

They’re making the decision that it’s better to be dead and gone than to be alive in what we have here, this life, the one we made for them, the one they’ve inherited. And we’re either involved and have a hand in each one of their deaths, just like I did with my brother, or we’re absent, which is still involvement, just like silence is not just silence but is not speaking up. I’m in suicide prevention now. I’ve had fifteen relatives commit suicide over the course of my life, not counting my brother. I had one community I was working with recently in South Dakota tell me they were grieved out. That was after experiencing seventeen suicides in their community in just eight months. (Orange 86)

The inheritance he mentions is related to the internalization of intergenerational trauma. According to Lisa M. Wexler and Joseph P. Gone, suicide in indigenous population is “the terminal outcome of historical oppression, current injustice, and ongoing social suffering”

(“Culturally Responsive Suicide”). Stuart Palmer and John A. Humphrey propose that suicidal attempts and suicidal acts are means to restore identity or construct a new one: “The completed suicidal act is in itself not infrequently a last attempt to gain identity. Individuals may believe firmly in that by their violent act they will create a new life, a new identity” (225). It can be concluded that the problems of urban Native Americans discussed so far do not differ greatly from those discussed in *Reservation Blues* or the living conditions on reservations. Violence against women is another parallel between reservation and urban Native American communities. Most of the families presented in Orange’s *There There* struggle with domestic violence. Blue, Jacquie’s daughter conceived in rape, is a victim of her husband Paul. One day, she decides to run away with the help of her colleague, Geraldine, who works as a substance abuse counselor. Geraldine tells her that she is not the problem just like other women whose husbands are abusive.

“I meet with a lotta women,” she says. “Trapped by violence. They have kids to think about. They can’t just leave, with the kids, no money, no relatives. I have to talk to these women about options. I have to talk them into going to shelters. I have to hear about when the men accidentally go too far.” (Orange 153)

Geraldine also blames socio-economic factors that prevent Native American population, in this case Native American women, from satisfying some of the basic life necessities. From Geraldine’s example, it is visible that urban Native American women are vehement about violence and discrimination against women. *Keeping the Campfires Going: Native Women’s Activism in Urban Communities* (2009), a collection of essays edited by Susan Applegate Krouse and Heather A. Howard, allocates much attention to the importance of avoiding pathologization of Native American identity on the basis of domestic violence and other social problems. The leading idea of the collection is in the merit of Native American women “in the shaping of identity and community in the city, in mobilizing resources to benefit their communities, and in

fighting the poverty and discrimination that too often afflict Indian peoples” (x). This leads to the inference that although Native American women are experiencing different traumas, matricentrality of Native American communities did not vanish even in urban areas. Susan Lobo discusses matricentrality in her essay “Urban Clan Mothers: Key Households in Cities”, included in the above-mentioned essays collection. According to Lobo, urban clan mothers are usually older women who are considered wise. Their houses are open to the members of their (non-) urban community. They “serve as teachers and counselors, or carry out spiritual responsibilities” (18). Octavio Gomez’s grandmother Josefina, a Native American from the area of New Mexico, is an urban clan mother. He goes to her house whenever he has problems with the rest of his family. During some of his tribulations, Josefina takes him on a ride near Castro Valley where she makes him rip off a bit of a badger’s fur. According to her story, badger’s fur is useful for making a personal medicine box that helps people come to peace with their being. Josefina fits into the description of urban clan mothers as respected elders who “carry out spiritual roles” (Lobo 18). Josefina’s role of urban clan mother is in “assuring the well-being of the community overall through the sharing and circulation of resources and knowledge”. Attention should be paid to entire phrase. It is clear that “urban” has been added to clan mothers, which signifies that clan mother is a traditional role “adapted to urban environment” (Lobo 18). Other aspects of Native American cultural identity that have been transformed in urban context are powwow and storytelling.

IV.4. Native American Culture and Spirituality in Urban Settings

Apart from the aforementioned Native American identity matters, Fixico claims that urbanization brought about another set of identification frames as Native Americans recreated their ties to reservations and the community, bonded at powwows, raised community centers, and

re-tribalized in this way (2002: 387). This type of self-redefinition is presented in Orange's narrative with the Big Oakland Powwow which is the climax of the narrative:

For powwows we come from all over the country. From reservations and cities, from rancherias, forts, pueblos, lagoons, and off-reservation trust lands.[...]To get to powwows we drive alone and in pairs on road trips; we caravan as families, piled in station wagons, vans, and in the backs of Ford Broncos....We made powwows because we needed a place to be together. Something intertribal, something old, something to make us money, something we could work toward, for our jewelry, our songs, our dances, our drum. We keep powwowing because there aren't very many places where we get to all be together, where we get to see and hear each other. (Orange 108)

The excerpt shows that powwow is perceived as a locus of belonging or something intangible that provides security. McClinton-Temple and Velie define "powwow" as an event that celebrates special occasions from Native American lives or seasonal anniversaries. Prior to the 1950s, a powwow was mostly informal, which is the reason why there are not many literary references to powwows in literature written before this period. More contemporary Native American authors including Sherman Alexie, Susan Power, Dank Crank, and Allison Adele Hedge Coke frequently incorporate powwows in their works. Alexie, for example, presents powwows as sites where clashes between the old and new ways occur (282). On the contrary, Coke portrays powwows as positive intersections of tradition and modernity in her poem "Sequinned", as presented by the following interpretation of the poem:

Here the intertwined ornaments of a dress are like the freeways and the bridges of New York; the feathers are erected as skyscrapers. The city, at first so distant from the traditional lifestyle, is now a component of contemporary Indian life. (McClinton-Temple & Velie 282)

Coke's vision of powwows points to cultural innovation. The idea of cultural innovation was proposed by Evelyn Joy Peters and Chris Andersen in their study of urban Native American life titled *Indigenous in the City: Contemporary Identities and Cultural Innovation* (2013) Peters and Andersen state that powwow has pan-tribal dimension to it. The places where powwows are held have specific spatial arrangement which is consecrated. This is a method through which they are able to connect to their ancestors. At the same time, it "serves to create contemporary bounded Native places" and is "a transitory manifestation of Native identity" (226-227). In *Native Hubs: Culture, Community, and Belonging in Silicon Valley and Beyond* (2007), Renya K. Ramirez analyzes powwow as a cultural hub which helps urban Native Americans keep ties with their community and a place of belonging that transcends inter-tribal differences. Urban Native American powwow-goers interviewed by Ramirez claim that powwows have spiritual functions in addition to being "places to renew one's Native culture, community, and identity". Hence, another function of the powwow is spiritual rejuvenation and subsequently self-determination which provides urban Native Americans with another identification axis (65). Ramirez also mentions that storytelling is "a process of "virtual" hub-making" which helps the transmission of cultural identity "that is not necessarily attached to a specific place" (111). Storytelling as a virtual hub is presented in *There There* in the stories of Dene Oxendene who records the life stories of urban Native Americans. His uncle Lucas is the one who came up with the idea of digital storytelling in order to examine whether Native Americanness is geographically-bound:

Anyway, I asked some Indian people who've lived in Oakland for a while and some that just got here not too long ago a two-part question, actually it's not a question, I tried to get them to tell me a story. I asked them to tell me a story about how they ended up in Oakland, or if they were born here, then I asked what it's been like living in Oakland. I told them the question is meant to be answered in story form, whatever that means to

them is okay, then I left the room. I decided to do it confessional style so it's almost like they're telling the story to themselves, or to anyone and everyone behind the lens.

(Orange 37)

Orange shows the transformative power of storytelling format and its effects. Lucas's idea is to enable a part of the urban Native American population to describe themselves arbitrarily as well as spontaneously and eventually assess their identity. As mentioned earlier, it may be argued that Lucas's aim is to examine Native American identity in terms of how the setting and experience condition it. In addition, the collected stories might later help them understand the fluidity of their identity. On the other hand, Dene wants to perpetuate culture and analyze identity, two inextricable concepts:

I want to put a camera in front of them, video, audio, I'll transcribe it while they talk if they want, let them write, every kind of story I can collect, let them tell their stories with no one else there, with no direction or manipulation or agenda. I want them to be able to say what they want. Let the content direct the vision. There are so many stories here. I know this means a lot of editing, a lot of watching, and a lot of listening, but that's just what our community needs considering how long it's been ignored, has remained invisible. I'm gonna set up a room down at the Indian Center. What I want to do is to pay the storytellers for their stories. Stories are invaluable, but to pay is to appreciate. And this is not just qualitative data collection. I want to bring something new to the vision of the Native experience as it's seen on the screen. We haven't seen the Urban Indian story.

(Orange 43)

On the one hand, Dene is aware of the difficulties that Native Americans experience as minority groups in urban areas. On the other hand, he knows that story sharing is important. He feels obliged to merge these two concepts and thus create a sense of belonging. As pointed out by

Karen Jarrat-Snider and Marianne O. Nielsen, urban Native American communities have a different structural organization than those that live on reservations but they do share similar social obligations. One such social obligations is “to contribute to the well-being of members” (181), which Dene does. Unlike stories that involve spirits as presented in Silko’s *Ceremony*, Dene’s stories are stories of ordinary people. Before recording, Dene instructs them to say their name, tribal belonging, talk about their experiences, and ultimately “give a picture of what it’s been like for [them] specifically, growing up in Oakland, as a Native person” (Orange 117). However, just like Tayo is merged with nature and finds self-acceptance through stories, these characters are merged with each other to come to terms with their experience and its influence on their identity.

V. Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis was to analyze identity construction on the example of three novels by Native American authors: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1995), and Tommy Orange's *There There* (2018). The novels were written over the course of two centuries thus showing a continuum of same or similar identity problems as well as a continuum in the Native American literary canon that deals with such issues. The leading argument was primarily influenced by a number of studies, mostly by Native Americans, that ascribe the shaping of Native American identity to the internal colonialism in the U.S. The interpretation of identity construction in the novels was also supported by corresponding statistics and broad-ranging identity theories.

The analysis of Silko's *Ceremony* shows the consequences of Native American involvement in the Second World War in terms of military force, natural resource exploitation, and the overall influence the aforementioned had on the self-perception of the indigenous population. The post-war struggles are intertwined with and exacerbated by intra-tribal ones. The main protagonist's plight is twofold since he has to find his place in the white-dominated society as a Native American and in his own community as a half-blood. Therefore, another set of identity issues is presented through hybridity which is not only biological but cultural too. An important identity marker shown in the analysis of cultural hybridity is matricentrality of indigenous communities that has been transformed to a certain degree with the arrival of the colonizer.

The influence of paternalistic policies is also visible in Alexie's *Reservation Blues*. The living conditions on reservations controlled by the government present some of the greatest hindrances for proper identity development in these communities. Furthermore, poor living conditions have affected the use of alcohol which in turn increased violence rates. According to the statistics used in the analysis, women are the group most susceptible to all types of violence. This verifies that

matricentrality mentioned in the discussion of *Ceremony* has been altered. However, the novel demonstrates that women have retained certain responsibilities as spiritual leaders and cultural identity preservers. *Reservation Blues* also shows that stereotypization of the above-mentioned problems has led to the internalization of the same problems as identity markers, which threatens Native American individual and collective identity.

Unlike *Reservation Blues* and *Ceremony* which deal mostly with reservation life from different prisms, Orange's *There There* provides a comprehensive account of Native American urban experience. The greatest identity issue of urban Native Americans is belonging conditioned by estrangement from the community. The complexity is enhanced by the marginalizing socio-economic occurrences as well as by substance abuse and violence rates, which are almost the same and/or worse than those on reservations. In addition, *There There* demonstrates how, in spite of prevailing issues, urban Native American communities have been transforming traditional identity markers, such as powwow and storytelling, into urban identity nuclei.

The final implication of the paper is that Native American identity is an erratic meeting point of different determinants. The fundamental identity tenets of Native American communities include tribal enrollment, federal recognition, and self-identification. The discussion has shown that the inconsistency and interdependency of these identification frames deems it impossible to isolate them individually, thus placing Native American identity in a constant flux.

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